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Letter to the Editor, *New Labor Forum*

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Letter to the Editor, *New Labor Forum*

Abstract

[Excerpt] Bill Fletcher and Rick Hurd have shined a critical light on a vital issue facing the labor movement. They have asked, but not yet answered, how the AFL-CIO's "Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize" program will help us build vibrant and democratic unions committed to inclusion and ready to grapple with the tough issues of race and gender. If their essay provides an excuse for some unions to avoid the challenge of organizing while debating these issues, it would be most unfortunate. But if their piece provokes a more serious and candid dialogue about external organizing and internal transformation, Fletcher and Hurd will have once again made an important contribution to revitalizing the labor movement.

Keywords

labor movement, labor organizing, AFL-CIO, labor unions

Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Unions

Comments

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Letters

To the Editor:

Whenever Bill Fletcher and Rick Hurd team up to critically examine vital issues facing the labor movement, they sharpen much-needed debate about union renewal. "Is Organizing Enough?" (*New Labor Forum* issue #6) is no exception. They are right to argue that the AFL-CIO's focus on quantitative growth risks belittling the challenge of qualitative change, especially in relation to issues of race, gender, and inclusion. It is also true that external organizing does not necessarily lead to internal transformation. But the value of their contribution would be enhanced by greater attention to the dialectical relationship between quantitative and qualitative change, as well as between external organizing and internal transformation.

First, it is more important for labor activists to ask, "Is there enough organizing?" than, "Is organizing enough?" With all the talk about growth, the labor movement has begun to master the rhetoric, but not yet the reality, of mass organizing, which is the only way to restore labor's power and beat back capital's unrelenting assault on the working class. Union organizing has not even approached the scale needed to definitively reverse the long-term trend of declining density. Numbers do matter. For example, in the building trades, we have increased membership by nearly 300,000 since 1996 through organizing

and recruitment and have raised union density in three of the last four years. But we have had only a modest impact on density, nudging it up from 18 percent to just over 19 percent. To increase construction union density to 25 percent by 200—let alone the 40 percent we enjoyed in the 1970s or the 80 percent of the 1950s—the building trades would have to organize a half million new members, more than we added to our ranks in the last four (best) years of growth in recent memory. Quantitative change can become qualitative change only when unions organize *millions*, not just thousands, of new members.

Second, internal transformation cannot take place in a vacuum. In many sectors of the American economy, union density is so low and union power is so marginal that negotiating decent contracts, servicing our current base, and transforming union culture are virtually impossible. The labor movement cannot reinvent union culture without restoring union power through organizing. That probably won't happen outside the context of a broader social movement with a coherent and compelling vision of societal transformation. The AFL-CIO's efforts to engage environmentalists, human rights activists, community leaders, students, and other progressive social forces are essential steps toward building that kind of movement. What is

needed is greater clarity about our vision of change and a growing movement to realize that vision.

Third, "Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize!" means that internal transformation is both a precondition and a potential consequence of external organizing. Few local unions experience meaningful success in external organizing without engaging in some degree of internal change. That has certainly been the case in the building trades, one of the most conservative sectors of the labor movement and one that many critics mistakenly believed was impervious to progressive change. Once building trades unions grasped that we would never again do 80 percent of the work unless and until we represented 80 percent of the workers (so many of whom are people of color), we were forced to confront decades of exclusionary practices. Through a remarkably effective program called COMET—Construction Organizing Membership Education Training—we have reached more than 200,000 rank-and-file members and helped them understand why embracing inclusion is both the right thing to do and the only way to rebuild union strength. Have we overcome the racism that has infected many segments of the building trades? Of course not. But advancing an organizing agenda enabled us to at least initiate a discussion about race, ethnicity, and inclusion. (Because there are so few women employed in construction's nonunion sector, organizing does not currently force us to deal with the issue of gender exclusion.)

A genuine commitment to construction organizing has not only raised basic questions of inclusion but also, in some cases sparked a fundamental reevaluation of union structure and staffing. For example, the carpenters union has undergone a dramatic restructuring to create large regional councils that more closely conform to the actual structure of the construction industry. This internal change enables the union to more effectively organize regional and national contractors operating in the regional and national markets that now characterize our industry. Whatever advocates of union democracy may say about this internal transformation, the union has consciously recruited an increasingly diverse staff committed to organizing workers regardless of race, gender, or immigrant status.

While Fletcher and Hurd are certainly right to argue that external organizing does not necessarily produce internal transformation, it is hard to imagine a local union that has managed meaningful internal change without also (and perhaps first) confronting the challenge of external organizing. Moreover, the skills and spirit that sustain effective external organizing are precisely those needed to generate the kind of internal union culture that Fletcher and Hurd celebrate. It is not a coincidence that one of the labor movement's most successful external organizing unions, SEIU, recently ran an enormously effective internal mobilization in Los Angeles, Chicago, New York City, and elsewhere to negotiate new contracts for its Building Services Division. Would that have been



possible without the Justice for Janitors organizing campaigns that preceded these contract fights?

Fourth, given Fletcher and Hurd's focus on quantitative versus qualitative change in the labor movement, their research is ironically weakened by a tension between quantitative and qualitative methods. They examine too few cases—only about thirty local unions—to offer us a rigorous quantitative analysis. As a result, their construct of “three paths” followed by locals ostensibly committed to organizing seems somewhat contrived. They do not dig deep enough in any single case to produce a rich and nuanced picture of how external organizing and internal transformation play out in the real world; that is precisely the kind of picture qualitative research can render. As a result, their evidence is often reduced to anecdotes and occasional platitudes that add little to the discussion of race, gender, and inclusion. For example, any local leader—from the most progressive to the most reactionary—might say, “The member is the

most important aspect of what we do. We are there for them, not them for us” (p. 65). How is that common rhetoric reflected in the reality of internal union life?

Bill Fletcher and Rick Hurd have shined a critical light on a vital issue facing the labor movement. They have asked, but not yet answered, how the AFL-CIO's “Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize” program will help us build vibrant and democratic unions committed to inclusion and ready to grapple with the tough issues of race and gender. If their essay provides an excuse for some unions to avoid the challenge of organizing while debating these issues, it would be most unfortunate. But if their piece provokes a more serious and candid dialogue about external organizing and internal transformation, Fletcher and Hurd will have once again made an important contribution to revitalizing the labor movement.

—**Jeff Grabelsky**

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