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The Outlook for Organized Labor in American Politics

Despite some discouraging trends such as the declines in union density, there are several positive developments for organized labor. First, demographic changes in the United States provide potential for progressives to become a stronger force in American politics (Judis and Texeira 2002). These changes may foster a more favorable climate for unions. With rising numbers of Latino immigrants entering the United States, organized labor's overtures to welcome and embrace these workers could help future organizing

efforts. The AFL-CIO's reversal of its historic opposition to immigrant workers offers new potential for unions to replenish their diminishing ranks and to expand their political influence through the Latino community, as they have already done successfully in cities such as Los Angeles. The AFL-CIO's more inclusive philosophy has also extended to college students, environmentalists, and civil rights activists. Rather than acting as a divisive influence, as the AFL-CIO did in 1972 when it refused to join progressives in support of Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern, the AFL-CIO, beginning with its Project '96 campaign, has cooperated and formed alliances with other groups in the progressive community. New organizations, such as Americans Coming Together, Grassroots Democrats, and America Votes, are further evidence of these strengthened ties.

Of course, numerous obstacles remain for organized labor. The continuing decline of union membership as a percentage of the workforce is a problem. Expanding the union ranks, particularly in the southern United States where union density is lowest, must be a top priority for the AFL-CIO in coming years. In addition to the need for local unions to allocate at least 30 percent of their budgets to organizing, even more can and should be done. The AFL-CIO should also aggressively challenge "right-to-work" laws. Organizing campaigns are a tough sell to workers in these states because of the so-called "free rider" problem. Workers who choose not join the union still enjoy the benefits won by other union workers, but do so without the costs associated with union membership. However, organized labor can combat that problem by publicizing some of the advantages of joining a union. For example, a union worker's average hourly earnings is \$21.45, compared to \$16.96 for nonunion workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004a), and 89 percent of union workers receive medical care benefits, compared to 67 percent of nonunion workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2004b). The AFL-CIO certainly has plenty of ammunition to wage an effective campaign.

In addition, the AFL-CIO could improve its organizing success by borrowing from its own political strategies. The AFL-CIO's "people-powered politics" relies on member-to-member commu-

nications. The same model could be applied to organizing campaigns. Union members, rather than paid staff, should help carry the message to unorganized workers about the benefits of belonging to a union. Union workers best understand the fears that non-union workers face about joining a union because they once experienced the same anxieties.

Organized labor must also look to organize and expand workers' rights worldwide. In an era of economic globalism, where corporations routinely flee industrialized countries with worker protection laws and relocate in third-world nations to take advantage of the laissez-faire business environment, organized labor must become a global force of its own. Millions of workers continue to toil in slavlike conditions throughout the world, and desperately need a voice to fight for their interests. Fighting for workers' rights abroad is not only a moral imperative, but will also save union jobs in the United States and allow organized labor the opportunity to once again grow in size, enhancing its political power.

Of course, organizing more workers, particularly abroad, but even in the United States, will be a daunting challenge. While there is some evidence that union growth can occur quickly and in spurts, organizing is more likely to be a long-term strategy that will probably take decades to effect meaningful change. Unions have successfully enlisted several congressional Democrats to help their cause. In July 2002, Democratic Congressman James McGovern of Massachusetts sent a pointed letter to employees at the Saint-Gobain Abrasives factory, criticizing the company's efforts to thwart an organizing drive by the UAW. McGovern noted in the letter that "if it were me, I'd vote to unionize." Several days later, workers voted 406 to 386 in favor of unionizing, prompting organizer Richard Bensinger to comment, "we would not have won if he [McGovern] hadn't done it" (Moberg 2002, 19). Indeed, with Republicans in control of Congress, organized labor has focused less of its efforts on trying to win support for the reform of organizing laws, and instead has directed its energy into persuading members of Congress, particularly Democrats, to support organizing drives back in their home districts (Heberlig 1999, 175).

Organizing has indeed become the hot subject in the labor

movement. Sweeney has faced vocal criticism from within the labor movement about the need to consider even bolder steps to organize more workers. Andrew Stern, who heads the SEIU, helped form the New Unity Partnership in 2003. The NUP has proposed that the AFL-CIO combine its sixty affiliated unions into fifteen or twenty “megaunions,” to create a larger collective unit with greater bargaining power (Bernstein 2004). The AFL-CIO should seriously consider such sweeping proposals. If Sweeney ignores these calls or fails to rise to the challenge of organizing more workers, he may face a serious challenge to his leadership.

While organizing efforts unfold, unions will need to make the most of the members and the resources that they currently have. Many workers, blue- and white-collar alike, are frustrated and angry about the shrinking American paycheck and lack of job security. Labor leaders need to tap into that anger as a means to focus and mobilize working-class Americans to defend their interests, particularly in an era dominated by rampant and arrogant corporate greed, as exemplified by the Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia Communications, Tyco, and Global Crossing scandals of 2002. Sweeney’s “America Needs a Raise” campaign was a good beginning in this respect, and the AFL-CIO’s “Eye on Corporate America,” is another step in the right direction. Organized labor should continue these and similar efforts in the future.

In the electoral arena, organized labor should continue its commitment to grassroots political mobilization and issue advocacy advertisements. Both efforts have yielded significant results for organized labor in congressional elections. They have also helped maintain labor’s strong alliance with congressional Democrats.

Innovative leadership will also remain critical to the strength of the labor movement. While Salisbury’s “exchange theory” teaches that leaders need to provide benefits for their members in the form of material, solidary, or purposive benefits, and Olson points to the importance of leaders providing “selective benefits,” this study demonstrates the primary role that leaders can play in empowering rank-and-file members. As the example of John Sweeney and the AFL-CIO illustrates, when leaders make serious efforts to mobilize their membership, they can revitalize their organizations

and even counter the efforts of wealthier groups. Business regularly outspends all other groups, but it is not always successful because of its difficulties in organizing a unified front. Money does matter in politics, but as labor has demonstrated under Sweeney, groups with less money can often overcome financial disadvantages through well-organized grassroots efforts and better organization, strategy, and allocation of resources.

The results in this study also confirm the importance of campaign efforts in elections. Put simply, the campaign efforts of interest groups matter in elections. This may seem an obvious conclusion to real-life political practitioners, campaign managers, and candidates. However, it is a point worth reemphasizing to political scientists who for too long have downplayed the importance of campaign effects in elections. Indeed, the evidence in this book makes clear that without the campaign efforts of organized labor, many Democratic congressional candidates would have lost elections that they otherwise won. This is not to suggest that unions are completely responsible for the successes or failures of Democratic candidates. In fact, union efforts only matter in a small number of very competitive races. However, the campaign efforts of organized labor can make a difference in these marginal but critically important contests that can ultimately determine which party governs.

Thus, for unions to succeed and survive in the twenty-first century, the leadership of the AFL-CIO will need to avoid the complacency of the past. There is a great deal at stake. A labor movement that withers will likely trigger only greater disparities in the nation's distribution of wealth—a situation that is already quite grave. The average chief executive now earns between 300 to 400 times the salary of the average worker (Johnson 1999). A worker earning a typical annual salary of \$35,000 would need to work almost three millennia—roughly 2,857 years—to equal the compensation of a CEO earning \$100 million a year. Moreover, while working hours have fallen in nearly all industrial nations of the world, American workers have seen their work time increase, and now work more hours per year than workers in any other of the world's industrial nations. This means less time for parents to

spend with their children, less time for people to interact and socialize in their communities, and less time for people to devote to even a modicum of leisure.

Without a strong labor movement—particularly in the political arena—who or what will be left to defend the interests of workers against corporations and big business? Who or what will provide the collective voice of workers to express their concerns to government officials? As the leaders of the AFL-CIO set organized labor's course for the twenty-first century, their decisions will not only have consequences for the future of organized labor in American politics, but the type of society that evolves over the next century in the United States. As John Lewis once said, "the future of labor is the future of America."