**Contesting the Dinosaur Image -
The Labor Movement's Search for a Future**

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Historical Foundation: the Servicing Model of Unionism

Fifty years ago under very different circumstances, U.S. union leaders made choices that shaped union strategy for the next half century. The Great Depression and World War II had provided the backdrop for rapid union growth. During the 1930's workers' passivity gave way to militance and collective action as they flocked to the industrial unions of the renegade Congress of Industrial Organizations. Union expansion was aided by a friendly federal government, which facilitated union organization with the Wagner Act of 1935 and then promoted collective bargaining during the War to assure industrial peace. In the ten years from 1935 to 1945, union membership exploded from three million to over fourteen million, from 13.2% of the workforce to 35.5% (U.S. Department of Commerce 1975:178).

In reaction, employers sought ways to restrict unions and to stabilize relations in order to reclaim authority in the workplace. A central part of this initiative was a political campaign which contributed to the election of a Republican Congress in 1946 and then culminated in the enactment of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947. The Taft-Hartley amendments to the Wagner Act placed strict limits on workers' organizing rights, on strikes and other forms of direct action, and on unions' mutual aid tactics, while enhancing the role of collective bargaining in part by buttressing the legal status of negotiated agreements.

The external environment helped shape and support the response of unions. After World War II, the U.S. entered a prolonged period of prosperity conducive to stability and bargaining power for unions willing to focus on the economic concerns of their members. Operating from a position of much greater strength than in the past, unions retained the job-consciousness which had dominated this country's labor movement throughout most of its history. This focus not only made sense in a period of prosperity, it also melded with the stability objectives of employers. Long-term collective bargaining agreements spelling out the details of the employment

relationship became the norm. This rule-based system worked for employers in part because state-of-the-art production management relied on industrial engineering to incorporate contract specifications into the scientific design of the workplace. Employers thereby affirmed their authority to make decisions regarding the organization of work, while unions retained the right to negotiate contractual limitations and protections for members.

The national union evolved into a service organization. The detailed rule-based nature of agreements combined with the increasingly legalistic grievance and arbitration system to enhance the importance of full-time union staff who developed expertise in these functions. Although some observers raised questions about the elitism of national union officials and/ or the metamorphosis of unions into business organizations, by and large the bureaucratic system was effective at delivering what the members wanted: steadily improving economic rewards and protection from arbitrary treatment on the job.

With the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, the key pieces of the labor movement's administrative puzzle were in place. By 1955 unions were firmly committed to an approach that has come to be known as the "servicing model" (AFL-CIO, 1988:6). The elected officials and field staff of national unions would focus on collective bargaining and contract enforcement. The AFL-CIO would coordinate political activity. The labor bureaucracy would concentrate on supporting these functions as efficiently as possible. Under the servicing model, active involvement of the members would not be necessary. Missing from this framework was any clear conception of how organizing would fit. For twenty-five years after merger, union membership continued to increase, but at a rate insufficient to keep up with the growth of the labor force.

The Decline of Organized Labor

By the 1955 merger, union membership had grown to seventeen million, but the share of the labor force had fallen slightly to 33%. The labor movement continued to expand at a slow pace, peaking at just over twenty-three million in the early 1970's and staying at that level through 1980. However, the unions' share of the workforce exhibited a slow decline over the same period, dropping below thirty percent in 1962 and standing at twenty-two percent in 1980 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1975:178; 1982:409). This slippage would have been greater except for the steady growth of public sector unionization during the 1960's and '70s.

The pace of decline accelerated after 1980 as unions suffered an absolute membership loss of nearly twenty-five percent over the next five years. Although the losses then slowed dramatically, the share of the workforce belonging to unions continued to slip. In 1995 union membership was 16.4 million, representing 14.9 percent of non-agricultural employees, but only 10.4 percent of private sector workers (Bureau of National Affairs, 1996a). Today unions have about as many members as in 1950, but represent only 9 percent of the private sector workforce, a lower share than in 1930 before the great expansion associated with the CIO and the Wagner Act. A review of the more prominent explanations of the decline should put into perspective the extraordinary challenge faced by the labor movement.

The twin recessions of 1980 and 1981-82 ushered in a period of concessions by unions. Once concessionary bargaining had taken hold, it proved difficult for unions to halt the trend because of persistent economic pressures. Most important was the arrival of the global economy, as the share of imports increased in a broad range of markets. The process was aided by trade liberalization promoted by both Republican and Democratic administrations. The external threat hastened shifts in the domestic economy as manufacturing firms abandoned old factories in the unionized "rust belt" for new facilities in the non-union "sun belt". The backdrop was a long-term trend in our economy away from production of goods to the production of services. As the

number of blue-collar manufacturing jobs dwindled, white-collar employment in the services expanded.

Even in many unionized industries where employment remained relatively stable, there were sea changes that would upset the status quo and threaten unions. Deregulation, first of airlines and trucking, then of telecommunication, and more recently of the utilities, paved the way for the entry of non-union competitors which took business away from established firms and reinforced pressures for concessionary bargaining. Unionized workers were increasingly concentrated in old plants, firms, and industries, that had a difficult time competing in the deregulated global economy.

There were other factors at work in addition to economic forces. In the 1970s, with unions already on the decline in the private sector, employers' strategies of resistance to unions became more sophisticated. In addition, open violations of the law increased dramatically and by 1980 the practice of firing union supporters to halt organizing momentum was commonplace (Weiler, 1991).

The full anti-union potential of the Taft-Hartley amendments was realized after President Reagan broke with his predecessors and appointed to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) management lawyers who were openly hostile to unionization. As the Reagan NLRB lent a sympathetic ear, employers were emboldened and acrimony during organizing drives reached new heights. Disregard for the law continued, but re-interpretation of the law was more important because it expanded the legally acceptable anti-union tactics available to employers (Hurd, 1994).

The Reagan NLRB's decisions contributed to the decline of unions in the bargaining arena as well. In essence, the employer's duty to bargain in good faith was reinterpreted to be a duty to meet for the purpose of bargaining. This and related changes allowed employers to avoid first contracts without committing unfair labor practices (Hurd, 1996). They also facilitated the employers' union-elimination strategy of hard bargaining to force a strike and then hiring "permanent replacements" for striking workers.

The impact of the Reagan NLRB would have been modest had employers not been poised to take advantage of this opportunity to weaken unions. As Kochan, Katz and McKersie remind us: "In choosing how to respond to both new business opportunities and/ or the need to lower costs, the deep-seated preference of American employers for operating without a union dominated managerial choices, except where pre-existing high levels of unionization constrained this option (Kochan, et al, 1994:12).

Two models of union avoidance unfolded. The "union substitution" model relied on the progressive techniques of human resource management (HRM) to offer workers some modicum of voice and an arguably more desirable work environment than existed in many unionized facilities. The "union suppression" model relied on aggressive anti-unionism especially during organizing campaigns (Kaufman, 1993:142). By 1980 unionized companies that wished to escape had begun to adopt these two options first developed by non-union firms.

The economic pressures that peaked in the 1980's provided the motive for unionized firms to change. Some chose to work with unions to modify the production system, adapting HRM techniques to the unionized setting. Others sought to impose new production systems either unilaterally, or during the concessionary bargaining of the period. Many followed the "greenfield" strategy, gradually replacing old unionized facilities and their rule based production with new non-union facilities organized along the lines of the HRM model. And a few firms joined their non-union counterparts to take advantage of the friendly NLRB and openly attacked unions to eliminate what they perceived as "the problem." The predominant pattern was for employers to tolerate unions where they were established, but to take whatever steps necessary to assure that existing non-union facilities and all new facilities operated without unions.

Unions carried with them two hidden liabilities. First, the focus on collective bargaining and the grievance and arbitration system had produced rigid rule based contracts, which created problems during an era when firms sought flexibility in order to react more quickly to economic change. This situation was exacerbated as unions

resisted proposals to move towards the HRM based systems of work organization. The second liability was the reliance on the servicing model and consequent neglect of the organizing function. Although inertia had assured natural membership growth early in the post World War II period, by 1980 that momentum was gone, at least in the private sector. The low level of organizing further complicated the problems for unions, which needed new members to counteract the loss of unionized jobs in many industries.

The reliance on the servicing model also may have contributed to labor's problems in a more subtle way. Over time, this strategic approach deadened the activism and commitment of members. As workers who participated in the excitement associated with the heyday of the CIO moved on and retired, they were replaced by others with no connection to organizing or to labor as a movement. They tended to view the union as a third party and to accept uncritically the expertise of the union representative in arbitrations and bargaining. The passivity of members which evolved should come as no surprise since under the servicing model the nerve of personal involvement had been severed long ago.

The Strategic Response to Crisis in the Kirkland Era

When labor leaders in the 1980s faced the triple threat of economic restructuring, the Reagan administration, and increasing employer hostility, they were stymied. As membership and revenues plummeted, national unions scrambled to keep their heads above water. In the early 1980s, serious consideration of any dramatic shift in strategy was out of the question for most unions as concern for institutional preservation prevailed. The difficulty in responding decisively can be traced in part to the symbiosis between the union bureaucracy and the internal political concerns of unions leaders. Because union officers at all levels must stand for election periodically, a premium is placed on satisfying members. The servicing model had done that for years. Also, most elected leaders had risen to their positions based on experience

gained within the context of this model. Similarly, the experts who staffed the union bureaucracy had gained their positions because of competence in functions related to servicing. Rather than considering serious change, the tendency for leaders and staff from Kirkland on down was to blame failures on external forces, to justify policies by past successes, and to avoid the difficult question of strategic transformation (Lawler, 1990:48-49).

In spite of this ingrained institutional rigidity, the external threat was so great that many leaders of national unions began to search tentatively for a way out of their predicament. In 1982, informal discussions gave way to formal action. The AFL-CIO Executive Council formed the Committee on the Evolution of Work. Under the chairmanship of AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Tom Donahue, this committee provided a forum for union presidents to consider the challenges and choices they faced. *The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions* (AFL-CIO, 1985b), the report issued by the committee in 1985, officially encouraged unions to experiment with new tactics and strategies.

Although labor may be faulted for a slow and/ or incomplete response, in fact most unions eventually altered or at least fine-tuned their strategies. Few made the choice merely to preserve the status quo. Consistent with the recommendations of *The Changing Situation*, a variety of courses were followed.

1. Improvements in Administrative Structure and Service Delivery: Faced with tight budgets, many national unions launched initiatives to improve administrative efficiency. The AFL-CIO's George Meany Center developed a program for trade union administrators and individual unions increased support for staff training. The search for administrative efficiency during a period of declining membership precipitated numerous mergers and affiliations. Unions began to engage in strategic planning, many for the first time.

In an effort to enhance labor's public image, the AFL-CIO introduced a marketing campaign with the theme, "Union Yes." In addition, the AFL-CIO

established the Union Privilege Benefits program, which offered direct, benefits such as low interest credit cards to members of affiliated unions. With the encouragement of the AFL-CIO, several unions established a new category of "associate members," who could take advantage of the benefits offered by Union Privilege and be non-voting members of the union even though they were not employed in a unionized workplace.

These administrative changes improved the effectiveness of unions in some ways, but none of them challenged the prevailing servicing model. Mergers seldom fulfilled their potential because concern for the logistics of bureaucratic integration overshadowed strategic considerations. Even strategic planning, as practiced by most unions, was limited to more clearly defining objectives rather than challenging those objectives.

2. Political Action: Ronald Reagan served as a convenient target because of his open hostility to unions. Since the AFL-CIO's leadership role is most clearly evident in the political arena, it is not surprising that the quest for a political solution to labor's plight proved to be irresistible. The attraction was particularly strong because unions had nearly succeeded in securing labor law reform in 1978 during the administration of Democratic President Jimmy Carter.

Starting with the endorsement of Walter Mondale for President in 1984 prior to the Democratic primaries (a break with tradition), the AFL-CIO stayed the course with dogged determination. Coordination of campaign contributions to Congressional races by the unions' political action committees became more sophisticated (Hurd and Sohl, 1992), and there were even a few modest successes on Capital Hill like plant closing legislation. Finally, in 1992, labor's patient commitment to a political solution seemed to pay off with the election of Bill Clinton. The new President promised to deal with labor's number one concern: labor law reform. The Commission on the Future of Labor Management Relations was appointed, with John Dunlop serving as chairperson. It would be difficult to overstate the degree of hope inspired in Lane Kirkland, the

leaders of national unions, and the AFL-CIO staff by the election of Bill Clinton and the subsequent appointment of the Dunlop Commission.

The labor movement's heightened reliance on political action may at first appear to signal a significant shift in strategy. However, the focus on lobbying, endorsements, and campaign contributions was well within the traditions of the AFL-CIO and consistent with the servicing model. The political solution, however, proved to be phantasmic. Any chance for significant union-friendly labor law reform was wiped out by the collapse of the Democratic Congress in the 1994 elections, two months before the release of the Dunlop Commission's recommendations, which were a major disappointment.

3. New Bargaining Strategies: After initial resistance to employer-designed schemes to reorganize work, unions adapted. They concluded that reorganization need not threaten the union as an institution so long as its role as bargaining agent was preserved. In 1994, the AFL-CIO Committee on the Evolution of Work confirmed the shift in labor's position with the release of a report, *The New American Workplace: a Labor Perspective* (AFL-CIO, 1994). Labor's acceptance of new forms of work organization was by no means universal, but the majority of labor leaders agreed to some form of joint decision making as desirable, or at least inevitable.

The support for labor-management partnerships is parallel in many ways to the post World War II experience with industrial engineering. Unions accommodated to management's view of the state-of-the-art in work organization and adopted new approaches to bargaining consistent with the new reality. The adaptation of unions to employer initiatives to reorganize work represents a break with the past to the extent that the rule based agreements of old are replaced by more flexible documents.

New bargaining strategies associated with labor-management partnerships and employee involvement programs carry with them a transformational aura. Upon careful inspection, however, it is clear that the transformation is in the superficial relationship between the union and the employer. Viewed from the perspective of the

union, the new relationship can be accommodated without a dramatic change in how it does business. The union's role as bargaining agent is preserved, and the servicing model survives.

4. New Sources of Power: With the decline in the effectiveness of the strike, many unions focused their attention on developing alternative sources of power. The most widely accepted technique came to be known as the "corporate campaign." Corporate research identifies lenders, investors, customers, suppliers, stockholders, and directors who might be influenced to apply pressure on the employer. Some campaigns reach out to government regulatory agencies, elected officials, or potential community allies who might be able to assist. The idea aims to match the union's strength against the employer's weakness. Whatever the source, the external pressure on the employer increases the cost of continued resistance and thereby makes settlement more attractive.

Although innovative, corporate campaigns do not necessarily conflict with the servicing model. The campaigns can be conducted by the national union's staff, with a prominent role for those who are experts in research and public relations. There is little need to involve local leaders or members. In practice, most corporate campaigns have been implemented only after traditional bargaining has failed and a traditional strike has collapsed or has been rejected by an apprehensive rank-and-file.

5. Renewed Interest in Organizing: Much of the discussion and recommendations in *The Changing Situation* dealt directly with some aspect of organizing. However, during a period of tight budgets, it was not easy for unions to fund major new initiatives. The importance of organizing was heralded in conference resolutions, speeches, and union newspapers, but the rhetoric did not translate readily into action.

Symbolic of the difficulties encountered, the campaign sponsored by the AFL-CIO Executive Council against Blue Cross/ Blue Shield failed. The campaign had been introduced with great fanfare in August 1985 by Lane Kirkland: "The Blue Cross/ Blue

Shield campaign is a new organizing model which... implements many of the recommendations from *The Changing Situation*" (AFL-CIO, 1985a). However, months of bureaucratic delays took their toll. By the time agreement was reached on which state Blue Cross/ Blue Shield plans would be assigned as a target for each of the eight participating unions, the company had implemented an effective anti-union program. Even without the delays, the campaign might have collapsed on its own since there was never any evidence that the employees desired union representation (Northrup, 1990).

In spite of difficulties and disappointments, the commitment to organizing did not fade. Burned by the Blue Cross-Blue Shield experience, and urged on by member unions that were encountering their own difficulties in the organizing arena, the AFL-CIO shifted its approach. In 1989 the Executive Council endorsed the creation of an independent entity, the Organizing Institute, "to enhance union organizing and to enhance the skills of union organizers." The Organizing Institute (OI) would report directly to Tom Donahue and would be funded largely by unions who chose to sponsor it and take advantage of the training it offered.

By 1995, over one thousand organizers had participated in its innovative training program. In addition to training organizers, the Institute aggressively pursued its charge "to advance union organizing." The organizing directors of the fifteen sponsoring unions met regularly to discuss their experiences. The Institute's Elected Leader Task Force brought together regional directors and presidents of large locals who had demonstrated commitment and success in the pursuit of aggressive organizing programs. Both of these forums promoted cross-cultivation and cooperation which has been rare in a labor movement where individual national unions tend to be very protective of their internal affairs. In conjunction with the sponsoring unions, the OI advanced the position that unions must be seen as vehicles for social and economic justice if they hope to survive.

Although the OI could play the role of catalyst, real strategic change can occur only within the national unions. The dozen unions associated with the OI

demonstrated renewed commitment to organizing in early 1990s that clearly transcended rhetoric and superficial gestures. With aggressive grassroots programs they led an effort to reestablish organizing as the central tenet of the labor movement and in the process struggled to break free from the constraints of the servicing model. Among all of the strategic responses to crisis during the Kirkland era, the shift in focus from servicing to organizing offered the greatest promise for the future.

Contesting the Dinosaur Image

In recent years, friends of labor have raised penetrating questions about the current and future state of the labor movement. For example, in his provocative book Which Side Are You On?, Thomas Geoghegan captured a popular image of unions with his depiction of "...a dumb, stupid mastodon of a thing, crawling off to Bal Harbour to die. (Geoghegan, 1992: 37)." Although there was ample basis for skepticism at the time of Geoghegan's observation, the actions by labor in response to crisis during the Kirkland years, as described, belie the image of a decrepit beast lumbering off to its burial ground. Indeed, Bal Harbour (the Florida beach retreat favored by the AFL-CIO Executive Council from the 1970s through the mid 90s) was the site for the unveiling of *The Changing Situation* in 1985 and the release of *The New American Workplace* in 1994. It is important to recognize the depth and breadth of labor's vigilance as it struggled to weather the storm. To his credit Tom Donahue led the search for new strategies, and to his credit Lane Kirkland encouraged the effort. Although concerns for institutional preservation may have inhibited creativity, the very fact that the AFL-CIO officially sanctioned the consideration of non-traditional alternatives was useful. However, the maneuvering and modest innovations neither solved labor's problems, nor set the movement on course for inevitable renaissance.

With the persistent difficulties labor's image slowly diminished. Once reviled and respected for its political influence and economic power, by 1995 the labor movement was widely viewed as an anachronism. *Being Heard*, a 1994 report

prepared for the AFL-CIO, used survey research and focus groups to assess public attitudes towards unions. In essence, the report's conclusion concurred with Geoghegan's observation, at least so far as labor's image is concerned: "Mostly unions are discussed as something no longer relevant, as symbolized in the frequently used shorthand 'They're dinosaurs.'" (Greer, et al, 1994:12).

The Structural Fix Temptation

The labor movement's response languished in part because it was driven by concern for institutional preservation. Associate memberships, union credit cards, political action, labor-management partnerships, and corporate campaigns, though innovative and testaments to labor's adaptability, did not challenge the institutional inertia which inhibited radical transformation. Labor's response was modest by design. The objective was to adapt, not to transform. The AFL-CIO and affiliated national unions sought a pragmatic structural fix.

The primacy afforded to institutional preservation unintentionally contributed to labor's dinosaur image. The objective of *Being Heard* was to help the AFL-CIO improve its "strategic communications" in order to improve this unflattering image. The result was a new advertising campaign, unveiled in 1995. In effect, the AFL-CIO under Lane Kirkland viewed the dinosaur image as a communications challenge.

The Elusive Organizing Model

While the Evolution of Work Committee sought top down answers to unions' problems, in some corners of the labor movement progressive leaders and staff members began to advocate change from the bottom up. The SEIU in the *Contract Campaign Manual* (SEIU, 1988) and the CWA in its *Mobilizing for the '90s* encouraged locals to conduct internal organizing in advance of each contract negotiations regardless of whether an external corporate campaign was deemed appropriate. The message to locals was that by activating members and applying pressure on the employer in the workplace, the union could increase bargaining leverage. The implicit

common thread was to apply internally a union building approach to mobilizing members that paralleled the OI's external organizing philosophy.

The connection among bottom up organizing, mobilization, and union revitalization was made explicit during a 1988 teleconference on internal organizing that was sponsored by the AFL-CIO and inspired by *The Changing Situation*. The message has lived on for more than a decade in "Numbers That Count," a summary of the teleconference published by the AFL-CIO, which has been used widely by labor educators for training on internal organizing. It was this manual that first described the "organizing model of unionism" and contrasted it to the servicing model (AFL-CIO, 1988). Under the organizing model, the role of the union is to help workers find collective solutions to their work-related concerns. Whether the local union is seeking recognition, negotiating a contract, or enforcing the contract, the organizing model suggests that the union's power can be enhanced by organization, activism and militance by members in the workplace. The most ardent missionaries for the organizing model have posited that mobilization of members ultimately will reduce their reliance on the union for servicing and representational functions and thereby free resources and staff for other pursuits (Banks and Metzgar, 1989).

Initial enthusiasm among adventuresome unionists for the organizing model ultimately has waned in the face of internal resistance. Officers and staff are comfortable with their traditional roles, and members have resisted efforts to reduce services and questioned expenditures of dues on external organizing. Even those unionists who view organizing as the top priority have struggled with the relationship between servicing and organizing. Some have argued that organizing success depends in part on the union's reputation in servicing; and yet the reality is that the only way to increase organizing on a significant scale is to shift resources away from servicing. Most important, mobilization has proven to be harder and more staff-intensive than traditional servicing. This has raised concerns about draining already limited resources away from organizing.

These barriers have led many unionists to conclude that the "organizing model" vs. "servicing model" debate is no longer productive. Upon reflection, the organizing model is not a fully developed construct that can be appropriately counterpoised to the entrenched servicing model. In particular, it fails to elucidate a clear path from servicing to external organizing. Unionists committed to organizing continue to criticize the servicing model, but have shifted their focus to building an "organizing culture," or promoting "transformation" to a new style of unionism that aims to increase market share, though its particulars are not yet clearly defined (Fletcher and Hurd, 1997; Fletcher and Hurd, 2001).

Organizing for the Future

Dissatisfaction with Lane Kirkland's risk averse management of the AFL-CIO grew as it became clear that the Clinton administration was not likely to expedite labor's renewal. Impatient with the federation's inertia and public image, several national union presidents began to discuss the need for new leadership. In the aftermath of the November 1994 election defeat of the Democratic Congress and the concomitant deathblow to labor's political agenda, the revolt went public.

When efforts to orchestrate a peaceful transfer of power failed, Kirkland's detractors announced that they would mount a challenge at the October 1995 AFL-CIO convention. John Sweeney, President of SEIU (the federation's fastest growing affiliate) headed the slate of challengers. When it became clear that he could not win Kirkland stepped aside and endorsed Donahue. In the first contested election for President of the AFL-CIO the debate centered on the role of the federation in organizing and the pace of change. At the convention, Sweeney was supported by enough union presidents to assure victory for his slate with 56 percent of the vote. The new officers assumed control on October 25, 1995.

A New Voice for American Workers

Sweeney based his campaign on a "New Voice" platform that promised to "rebuild the American labor movement." The first priority was to establish for the federation a leadership role in organizing. A new Organizing Department was created and the OI's program was expanded with the goal of recruiting and training 1000 new organizers within two years. The upshot of the primacy afforded to organizing was an effort to establish union growth as the top priority for the labor movement. In this regard, the federation's "Changing to Organize" program prevailed upon national and local unions to shift significant resources from servicing to external organizing. By attempting to establish organizing as the top priority the federation in effect signaled its intention to lead unions away from their dogged attachment to servicing.

Although there is no explicit commitment to the organizing model as an alternative mode of operation, the AFL-CIO has supplemented its organizing initiatives with programs that incorporate mobilization of union members. Labor's highly visible political campaigns in the three national elections since Sweeney became President, have featured an effort to build permanent grassroots organizations of politically active union members across the country. The renamed Department of Field Mobilization has focused on rejuvenating local Labor Councils through its Union Cities initiative, which has promoted member mobilization as the best hope for stimulating external organizing and reviving union political activism at the community level.

Ultimately, the New Voice blueprint called for returning to unions the type of economic and political power they wielded in the first quarter century after World War II. Part of the plan to recapture economic power was a new Center for Strategic Campaigns. This center has sought to coordinate corporate campaign activities, to promote inter-union solidarity, and to train union staff in the strategic deployment of corporate campaign tactics.

Under John Sweeney it is clear that starting in late 1995 the AFL-CIO began to contest the dinosaur image with new vigor. On the surface the components of the new initiatives look a lot like the plan spelled out in the *Changing Situation* in 1985. But

there have been two notable differences: the AFL-CIO has attempted to take a much more aggressive leadership role, and significant resources have been devoted to the effort. Whatever the end result, an immediate benefit of the flurry of activity has been increased visibility for unions. From a public relations perspective, the heightened activity of the AFL-CIO, and the willingness of Sweeney to criss-cross the country to appear in support of union causes have achieved a remarkable turn around in the amount and tone of news coverage afforded to the labor movement. Even after more than five years, though, it is still not clear whether substantive results will ever match the anticipation generated by the "New Voice" agenda.

The State of the Dinosaur, 2001

With unions representing only 9% of the private sector workforce, it is clear that to avoid being marginalized the labor movement must undertake radical transformation. John Sweeney and his progressive staff at the AFL-CIO have worked tirelessly for over five years to reposition the federation in order to lead the revitalization effort. Unfortunately, changes at the center are insufficient to assure metamorphosis throughout the movement. Because of the decentralized structure of labor in the U.S., the key to success lies in the national unions and their locals. Although with its new aggressiveness the AFL-CIO may serve as a catalyst, lasting change ultimately depends on elected leaders and staff, many of whom are wedded to the old model. The servicing magnet is powerful, especially at the local level. Freeing resources for organizing and other initiatives is no easy task.

In this context, the impact of the new Organizing Department has largely been limited to establishing organizing as a priority. The AFL-CIO Executive Council lent specificity to this objective in August 2000 when it set a formal target to organize 1,000,000 workers a year (AFL-CIO, 2001: 3). However, efforts to extend the federation's influence regarding organizing strategy and tactics have been largely rebuffed by affiliates determined to pursue their own agendas. Ultimately, the AFL-

CIO has chosen to back off, revising its organizing objectives to fit the reality. Its 1998 program summary spoke of "leading" the change to organize and "sponsoring strategic organizing campaigns" (AFL-CIO, 1998: 7). By contrast, the 2001 program emphasizes "helping affiliate unions" with organizing and "providing strategic research and other assistance" (AFL-CIO, 2001: 3).

Virtually all national union presidents have endorsed the organizing priority, with increased budgets and staff across the labor movement. A number of unions have been particularly aggressive, most notably the SEIU which now allocates 50% of its national budget to organizing and reported that it added 70,000 new members in 2000. There have been a number of highly visible victories by other unions as well, including a unit of 37,000 Puerto Rican education employees organized by the AFT and a successful CWA campaign to represent 9,500 USAirways passenger service professionals. But the AFL-CIO confirms that ten of its 66 affiliated unions account for 80% of the organizing. In spite of the increased efforts, unions are not recruiting enough new members to counteract losses due to closures and employment cuts in unionized workplaces, so that union membership fell by 200,000 last year (Greenhouse, 2001).

AFL-CIO efforts to enhance bargaining strength have fared no better, where the Corporate Affairs Department's efforts to influence national union strategy have not yet taken root. By contrast, the Field Mobilization Department has made substantial progress in its campaigns to revitalize Central Labor Councils, the multi-union local bodies of the AFL-CIO. Much of the success in building activism at the local level can be attributed to the department's Union Cities program which encourages labor councils to establish multi-faceted programs designed to build local coalitions, increase political influence, promote worker education and engage members in "street heat" events that lend support to local struggles (Lazarovici, 2001).

The most compelling evidence that some type of resurgence may be at hand comes from the political arena. In contrast to organizing, the Sweeney administration's

efforts to centralize control of political strategy have been supported broadly. This role is more consistent with the accepted function of the federation, and less threatening to national unions' traditional prerogatives. With the help of a roughly \$40 millions special combined contribution from the national unions in each of the three most recent election years (1996, 1998, 2000), the AFL-CIO has greatly expanded its grassroots mobilization effort. Networks of thousands of union volunteers have been set up in targeted Congressional districts across the country. In the 2000 election "AFL-CIO members handed out 14 million leaflets at worksites, mailed out 12 million pieces of campaign literature, and made 8 million phone calls" (Hoffman, 2000).

As a direct result of this activity, union member participation in elections has increased dramatically. In 1992, 19% of voters were from union households; by 2000 this had increased to 26%. Unions are widely credited with Al Gore's popular "victory" and his ability to carry several key states, including Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. The reduced, very thin Republican margin in the House of Representatives as well as the even split in the Senate would likely not have occurred without labor's field operation (Hoffman, 2000).

But the increased effectiveness of labor's political activities has not resulted in major improvements legislatively, and now there is a hostile President who opposes nearly every aspect of the union policy agenda. The promise for the future lies in the demonstrated ability to mobilize at the grassroots. But there are recent signs that national unions are breaking ranks and pursuing narrow self interest. The USWA joined with the steel industry to persuade the Bush administration to restrict imports, and even hinted at a possible endorsement for his reelection in 2004 (Murray). The UMWA has praised the president's energy policy, particularly his promotion of increased coal production (Greenhouse, 2001B). Other unions have reached comparable accommodations, but these two unions are particularly noteworthy because they have been strong supporters of John Sweeney.

Tie to these political defections the departure from the AFL-CIO of the Carpenters union in March 2001, and it appears that labor is moving dangerously towards fragmentation. On the other hand there are definite signs of strength in the political and organizing arenas, and unionization in the public sector remains strong with density over 38%. The story of labor's efforts at renewal is clearly unfinished. The dinosaur has been more active in the Sweeney era, but membership overall continues to dwindle and there are indications of trouble on the horizon. The struggle continues, and in spite of growing skepticism, extinction is not inevitable.

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