



AFL-CIO Central Labor Councils

Organizing for Social Justice

■ *Marilyn Sneiderman*

Movements start small and grow through struggle. They are born of rage and injustice, and built by winning victories. And each victory demonstrates that collective action is the first step to gaining the power to change our lives, our communities, our workplaces, and this country.

At no time in modern labor history has the need and urgency to rebuild our movement been greater. We live and experience the consequences of the corporate assault on workers every day. This assault must be met and turned back in thousands of communities throughout the land—turned back at the workplace, at the bargaining table, at non-union work sites, at the voting booth and, increasingly, in the streets.

We will start winning when we build on the mission statement of AFL-CIO central labor councils: **“To organize in the community to promote social justice on behalf of all working people.”** We will start winning when we unite and mobilize millions of our members. And we will overwhelm cynicism and despair with hope and excitement, when the sound of hundreds of thousands of marching feet drown out appeals to racism, sexism, and immigrant-bashing.

We have over 600 AFL-CIO central labor councils (CLCs) in the United States. Through these councils, we have a base in almost every

■ *Marilyn Sneiderman is the director of the Department of Field Mobilization of the AFL-CIO.*

community in the country. We can go on the offensive and define our work around organizing millions of new workers, winning better contracts, electing real allies of labor, and getting better laws passed. By building on the work of thousands of activists in labor councils all over the country we can reinvigorate the entire labor movement from the bottom up.

- Imagine if every council met a goal of being able to turn out one percent of their affiliates' members once a month to support some struggle in their community. In a 10,000 person council, that's a hundred people; in a 100,000 person council that's a thousand people. For 600 councils that's over 100,000 union activists working every month of every year.
- Imagine if every council could mobilize 10 percent of its affiliates' members once or twice a year. For 600 councils that could be over a million people.
- Imagine if every council were to train a minimum of ten member organizers who are available to take union leave and work as organizers on campaigns in their community. That would mean thousands of trained member-organizers ready to organize non-union workers in their own communities.
- Imagine if every council seized the initiative and built community coalitions where labor takes the lead to unite religious, community, and civil rights organizations in a broad fight for economic and social justice.

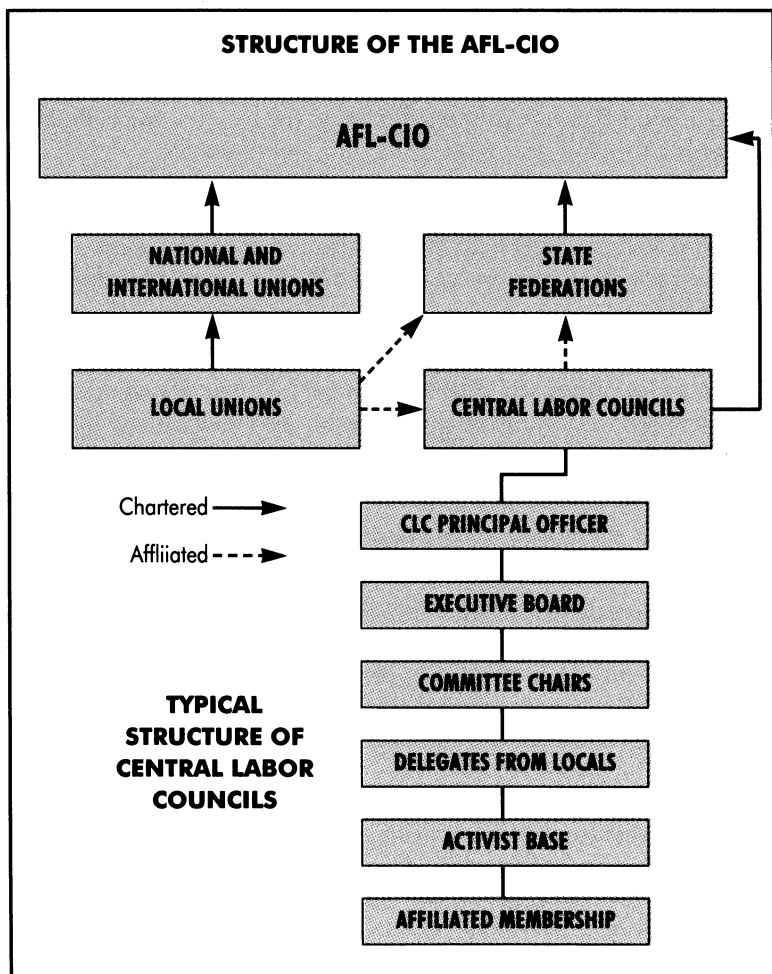
We have a rare and wonderful opportunity to reshape, rebuild, and re-energize ourselves to meet today's challenges. And the place where we can rebuild our power is our central labor councils and state federations. The CLC's and state federations can be both the foundation and the building blocks of our revitalized movement by calling on the strength of our members in every town, city, and state in the country.

WHAT STANDS IN OUR WAY?

There is no way we can be successful without strong, growing, and vibrant labor councils. Yet many central labor councils are barely surviving. It is a "Catch 22"—a vicious cycle. Everyone wants a strong labor movement with deep roots in their communities, and unions should be able to count on their CLC's to establish those roots. But the ability of most labor councils to build an extensive program is limited by

low levels of affiliation and a lack of resources. They lack money and volunteers because locals aren't affiliated. In turn, locals don't want to affiliate if their council's programs are limited. Unless we resolve this basic conflict, we will be unable to meet the challenges we face.

We need to make the work of central labor councils so important and essential that local unions feel it would be foolish not to affiliate. Individual local unions need to see that the decision not to affiliate makes them weaker at a time when we all need to build strength. Our members need to see and feel that they are part of a movement that transcends individual workplaces and unions. We must simultaneously activate our councils and increase affiliation of locals so we have the



resources that we need to get the job done.

Our movement can only thrive by building strong labor organizations with deep roots in the community. For individual workers and communities across this country, the central labor council must articulate a moral vision of what is right and wrong, and act upon it. Through this vision the labor movement can offer real solutions to the problems workers face in their day-to-day lives and in their communities.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

If we are to succeed, every local must affiliate with its labor council so we have the resources we need. If we are to use these resources wisely, every local needs to organize its members to actively participate in council activities. And in turn, councils must take advantage of the new commitment of union locals by offering a concrete program.

To support the work of councils around the country, the Federation is reorganizing and restructuring its staff and resources:

- The Federation has established an organizing department that will work hand in hand with the Department of Field Mobilization to lead the most massive organizing initiative in recent history.
- A Labor Council Advisory Committee, representing small, medium, and large councils from around the country, has been established to set priorities and direction for the field operations. As part of their work, committee members are personally surveying every council in the country.
- In Denver, Colorado, July 1996, the largest gathering of labor councils ever assembled worked on the planning and implementing of a national mobilization strategy and program.
- The Department of Field Mobilization will use the work of the Advisory Committee and conference to lead a national mobilization effort. That effort will unite and magnify the work of each council into one program that offers workers a real opportunity to start fighting back and winning.

The mission of the AFL-CIO central labor councils is to organize in the community to promote social justice on behalf of all working people. There has never been a greater opportunity or need for this important mission. Working people and their communities can neither survive nor win justice if they fight their battles alone. By uniting in support of growing and vibrant central labor councils, we can make their mission a reality. ■