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How Can Labor Be Saved?

Josh Eidelson February 13, 2013 | This article appeared in the March 4, 2013 edition of *The Nation*.

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Members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) gather in support of janitors on Tax Day in Los Angeles, California April 17, 2012. Reuters/Patrick T. Fallon

Vultures are circling American unions. One month after scoring a defensive victory in the November elections, organized labor suffered a once unimaginable body blow: the passage of “right to work” legislation in Michigan, the latest longtime labor stronghold to become the site of a devastating defeat. In January, the federal government announced that private sector unionization has fallen to a new historic low of 6.6 percent, down from more than one-third of the workforce a few generations back.

About the Author



Josh Eidelson

Josh Eidelson (josheidelson.com) is a Nation contributor and was a union organizer for five years. He covers...

The past two years have seen sparks of surprising vitality—from the mass uprising in Wisconsin, to the Chicago teachers’ walkout, to the strike wave now roiling Walmart. But the big picture is bleak: our fastest-growing industries are virtually union-free. Strikes by workers are losing ground to lockouts. Concessionary contracts are rampant. The government’s New Deal-era promise to protect the right to organize has become a cruel joke. In politics, as at the bargaining table, unions are mostly playing defense.

When labor declines, our economy and our politics tilt ever further

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Labor welcomed the proposal, but what it means for tipped workers remains unclear.

Josh Eidelson

toward the rich. The Democratic Party becomes even less accountable to the working class. Progressive coalitions are stripped of crucial infrastructure and grassroots firepower. Corporate power goes unchecked. Productivity gains flow to the 1 percent. And Americans become ever more subject to the whims of managers: coerced to donate to a boss's favorite candidate, forced to work while sick, or fired for defending an "ethnic" haircut on Facebook.

How can labor turn this dire situation around?

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Beethoven1

How can labor be saved? A depression, and that may be what it takes to turn the attention of the people of this country away from American Idol and shopping at Walmart to buy imported crap produced by sweat shop labor.

Lafayette

How Can Labor Be Saved?

Unions are having a mighty fit in most all developed countries. The wholesale departure of jobs to warmer Unit Labor Cost climates has left most of them in a dither. What do they do now?

Let's take a cold look at Labor Input Costs, which is the driving factor for downsizing un- and semi-skilled labor not only in the US but in Europe as well. See this info-graphic here.

Our average labor-costs (at \$35.53 an hour) are mid-stream between the EU and the Far East. This is an enviable position for the US, not such an enviable situation for the EU. Still, it is difficult to see how, in terms of old-technology manufacturing (read "building cars") the US can compete with Korea (at about half our labor costs).

So, maybe it should simply try to build the best cars it can and push the "Made in America" label. This effort is doing wonders for Australia, much closer to China both geographically and economically. Australians are willing to pay more for the same product and thus support Australian employment.

It seems we've become obsessed with the China Price. Personally, I am not obsessed but distressed at the patent lack of Chinese quality (Taiwan being a spectacular exception). If American consumers want to piss their hard earned dollars out the window to China, that is their business. But here in Europe, quality and not unit-price was always the most important attribute of a product or service.

I recall JK Galbraith's book "The Affluent Society", where he explained cogently that the reason America was importing at the time so many products from Europe was because of two factors – both quality and design (appearance). It is hard to beat that combination.

MY POINT

So, my point is this: Unions must go to bed with Corporations. No, not to make love but to make peace.

If I were the negotiating on behalf of a union, I would be asking for a bit of the prize. That is, rather than ratcheting up unit labor costs (that helps make products less competitive) in the bargaining, I'd ask for a share of the Net After-tax Profit. After all, if TopManagement can get its bonuses out of that pot, why not workers down the hierarchical structure?

In fact, I feel that it is this sort of "Wage Discrimination" that should be outlawed. It is as unfair as discriminating for sex, colour or religion. (After all, both the Shop Floor and the Top Floor contribute to the success of a company.)

Moreover, getting a share of the Net Sales Revenue pie carries the advantage that labor-costs does not contribute to total operating expenses that must be recuperated in the price of the product/service cost. One does benefit however from the company's success.

COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT

Seems fair to me ... but I can see the complaints already. "They'll never accept it, cuz it aint never been done!" They meaning TopManagement.

What have we got to lose, except market share? It is time we started thinking outside the box.

More importantly, perhaps America needs a total overhaul of its Labor Laws, within which it is made unlawful to discriminate wage-wise. (Amongst a great many other measures that America has never adopted to protect its workers.)

Btw, this is not to mean that we all share equally. It means that we all share equitably, meaning fairly. How that works out should be the heart of union and management negotiations. I'm sure that both sides could work it out to their mutual satisfaction.

Either that or the slope to manufacturing decline is both slippery and steep ...

Jack Tachspeyr

You're kidding, right Josh? Labor unions control the government in every large urban state in the U.S., along with pretty much every city and county. They "negotiate" wages and benefits that average TWICE what the average private sector worker can earn, then retire 10-15 years earlier than the average private sector worker, with pensions that average four times what they might have expected from social security. And they in in bed with the bankers, despite pretending they want to protect us all from them. Who do you think benefits when governments borrow more than they collect in taxes, thanks to their overpaid unionized workforce of public "servants"? Bankers who loan the money. Who do you think benefits when pension benefits are enhanced beyond any reasonable comparison to social security? Bankers who invest the money.

If unions want to have relevance, they can start by relinquishing their control of our government. Government unions should be illegal because the agenda of government unions - more pay, more members, more rules - have nothing to do with the public interest. They are destroying our ability to manage our government efficiently and conscientiously, they are destroying public faith in government, and they are bankrupting our government.

That's the rest of the story, Josh.

Fiscally_Responsible

Boy did you hit the nail on the head!

Lafayette

They "negotiate" wages and benefits that average TWICE what the average private sector worker can earn, then retire 10-15 years earlier than the average private sector worker, with pensions that average four times what they might have expected from social security.

Perhaps so, but clearly you are exaggerating the facts.

Besides, we all know what happened to BigAuto in Detroit as a result of unions incessantly bargaining for

higher Comp & Ben. It finally came begging to Uncle Sam.

One of America's real problems is Health Care benefits. Americans are obsessed with eating. Obesity is a pandemic in the US. And, so, we expect that Health Care should be there to help us when inevitably obesity is the cause of some major health problem. (And they are many, many maladies that issue from obesity. The body was not made to carry so much weight.)

We need, first, to stop the total cost of Health Care (which is skyrocketing) by adopting a Public Option that mandates cost-pricing. Then, we must put an accent upon Preventive Measures more so than just Remedial Healthcare.

An ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure, particularly in Health Care. And especially as regards ours, which is twice that of, for instance, most European healthcare total costs.

johnflagg

American Labor can be saved by the American Consumer. If you buy a product Made-In-China you are a communist supporter. It is that simple. The multi-nationalist corporations and the corporate controlled media keep a steady stream of brainwashing toward consumers. Why else would an out of work former washing machine manufacturer in Ohio think that Mitt Romney was his best chance at returning to the American Dream that was held in the 50's when import tariffs, high tax rates and strong collective bargaining was the norm.

Lafayette

If you buy a product Made-In-China you are a communist supporter. It is that simple

Puh-leeze. Enough of the anti-communist jig. It is soooooo 20th century.

China is about as communist as California, with an Income Disparity that matches ours.

Yes, China has become a plutocracy - just like ours. Have you seen the numbers regarding elite families who've made colossal fortunes in the past twenty-years since it came out from behind the Bamboo Curtain?

johnflagg

Sounds like you have it all figured out. I guess buying products Made In USA doesn't make a difference in your philosophy.

Beethoven1

The only solution I can see is for people on the left to stop voting for the democratic party and either start a new party or throw the bought off democrats in Washington out of power. The status quo democratic party doesn't represent it's constituents anymore.

Lafayette

Open your eyes. The American electorate voted Obama in again as PotUS, but did not vote the T-Party (T for Troglodyte) out of control of the HofR.

And which party in the HofR has been stonewalling ALL STIMULUS SPENDING proposals made by the Dems to get people back to work? One guess ...

And why did they stonewall the spending? Because they wanted high unemployment during the November elections in order to defeat Obama. Meaning that they incarcerated millions of American families in poverty because THEY wanted to take back the White House.

What crass disrespect for the American people, their fellow citizens!

If you want to reform the Democrat Party - and I do as well - then have a look at the Congressional Progressive Caucus *here*.

That caucus is almost entirely constituted of Dem-representatives. There is only one fearless Senate Republican in the caucus.

Moreover, there are currently 71 declared Progressives, including 68 voting Representatives - the former number meaning about 16% are "Progressives" . Imagine what we (read "Dems") could do if that number expanded to around 30/40%, and then more than half to become a sizable political force in the HofR.

That should be "our" (read "progressive") mission for the upcoming mid-term elections. The reforms that this country must undergo are enormous. The reign of individualist Republicanism is waning. Our time is now ... but not much can be done unless we carry with us the grassroots of America.

And that is a tough-task, because we have very little effective pedagogy regarding Progressive Values at that level. The Progressive Party at the last election was virtually non-existent. A third party is not viable in America due to gerrymandering and electoral funding rules. Just ask Ralph Nader ...

Which is why progressives, I submit, should work through the Dem organization to expand the number of **their representatives** in Congress.

Beethoven1

Ralph Nader gave up on the democratic party and said that basically things were going to have to get really bad before they'd get better.

I used to think like you until Obama was elected and continues to appoint foxes to guard the hen house. Obama's speeches are great....he sure can talk like a progressive or at least a liberal, but his appointments are far from liberal bordering conservative and very conservative. Bill Clinton took the democratic party hard to the right and Obama may have shifted the party even further to the right just so that he could win the election.

Why have a republican party when the democratic party is the new republican party that holds the business ideals and ethics of the old GOP? The new GOP has been taken over by the John Birchers of old now disguising themselves as the tea party, but they're the same insane group.

The lost party has been the party of the union, the workers, the middle class and poor people....the majority of this country. The majority has no party and no representation other than platitudes. Obama merely appeases those who voted for him and then continues on with the right wing policies W came up with and has added a few of his own. Though I thought he'd be better than Romney, I still see him for what he really is. Another republican posing as a democrat in the White House and nothing more.

Just watch, he'll sign a bill put forth by Congress cutting social security, medicare and medicaid in the end when the GOP House puts forward a bill cutting minimal loopholes in exchange for cuts to social safety net programs. He's done it already and will continue to do so.

Americans First politics last

This is easy. Labor can be saved by becoming part of the solution as opposed to being seen as a problem. Let me explain. Unions must evolve to become more than just workers dues, demands and contract extortion rackets.

Unions must become breeding grounds for worker retraining, education and worker support. Instead of using union dues to supplant strikes. union dues should provide job training, employee performance mentoring, child care and family work/life balance counseling.

We no longer live in a society of child labor or horrific working conditions. we live in an era of global competition where the performance of employees either brings jobs to our shores or outsources the jobs we need. No longer can unions threaten to strike without consequences. American worker productivity is unmatched the world over and with the coming energy boom the time is right to rethink things in a strategic manner. Many countries are already ahead in this area.

Those who run unions and manage union activities should not be enticed by the compensation, they should do it to make union members better employees. Where by the employee stands on his or her own performance merit, backed by strong union support programs that add value.

If done correctly and for the right reasons, modern unions should and must become welcome complimentary entities to the American workforce and the business community.

Dennis Smith

Get government workers and teachers out of unions and get the state budgets back in order.

Why is a 4 year term government agency suffering from a 10 year labor commitment. Labor contracts should be started over after each administration leaves office. That sounds fair to me.

merrill

What constitutes a labor union?

Great labor representation which brought to blue collar workers these fine assets which improve their quality of life.

- 40 hour weeks
- time and a half
- wage increases
- vacations
- Sick leave
- medical insurance
- maternity leave
- protection against discrimination

--- equality

This is union representation...who wants to lose job protections and benefits? and work for less money?

Right To Work = less wages for all workers not necessarily a right to work.

The nation needs to be educated about all of the above. It is re-education that is necessary because the this right wing GOP has been painting unions as evil for about 33 years. It's part of the rt wing Facist agenda to have workers wages reduced.

Dennis Smith

Right to work levels all the playing fields and allows substandard workers to be fired or transferred. If all the states were Right To Work we could have companies moving from one state to another and find their best environments. Also there would be additional safety for workers who did not want to contribute their wages to bribe a politician.

Beethoven1

Good, then you won't have any problem with letting someone take your job who's willing to work for less than what you're paid, right?

The Advocate Online

The most effective way would be to recognize labor the same way the rest of the world does, as a basic human right. Therefore, it should be protected under the Civil Rights Act of 1991. Labor is a civil rights issue. Always has been.

Geri49

I'm not sure that "labor" is "a basic human right," but I'm certain that workers should have basic civil rights at work.

What might happen if two basic provisions of our Bill of Rights were extended into the workplace--freedom of speech and freedom of assembly? Employees may or may not use these rights to organize for unions, but I wonder how necessary unions would be if employees could carry these rights into the workplace.

theshadowknows

I fully agree. And this should be a basis for the federal outlawing of right-to-work laws. But none of this legislation will amount to a hill of beans as long as we have a labor structure that is essential anti-labor. The entire broad working middle class should be unionized in some fashion not just a few elite craft unions and government workers. It is this Structural Problem promoted by the government controlled unions (and the AFL-CIO being in bed in many cases with corporate management and always with the CIA, which means the AFL-CIO is also fatally compromised) that is doing more to diminish unionism than any anti-labor moves by the right-wing. The labor movement needs to be re-born as a movement that organizes the entire middle class around labor issues that effect everyone.

Sadly, while the Republican party is committed to destroying unionism, the Democratic Party is committed to continuing the corruption of the AFL-CIO and the government unions. Neither party can do anything to help labor and they should both be opposed by any new, real labor movement. We need a party of labor and not two parties of management.

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