

Dave Zirin: Has Anyone Done Less With More Than Michael Jordan?



Fight for the Whole Society

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Does it unite us? Does it make us stronger? Does it build our power? At the Chicago Teachers Union, we evaluate every policy and action proposal in terms of these three goals.

About the Author

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Karen GJ Lewis serves as president of the Chicago Teachers Union, representing 30,000 employees in the city's...

However, there is an important strategic issue to address if we are to strengthen the labor movement in the United States. While unions have been busy advocating for the rights of our members and institutions, we have made a mistake by forgetting to relate to and advocate for everyone else. Yes, unions must first be sure they are taking care of the basics, from contract enforcement to member services. However, to survive and grow, we must reposition ourselves and take our place in the public square. There are potential allies we need to listen to.

To overcome the challenges our movement faces, to grow our ranks and achieve benefits for the entire society, unions can pursue these strategies:

1. Invite representative community stakeholders to come inside, sit at the table and break bread with union members—especially people who belong to public employee unions. Discuss mutual concerns and plan joint activities to help build bridges of mutual trust. Establish open lines of communication. Get public input on the union's stance on public policies. Collaborate and work toward consensus.
2. Bring our union identity with us to the world of issues we care about, and vice versa. Union members are more than employees. They lead families. They are taxpayers who tackle issues in their community or place of worship. Some are political activists. Most vote.
3. Democratize unions. Increase opportunities for member involvement in union decision-making. Increase the number of members on union committees. The result will be more members who know how to advocate in and beyond the workplace for themselves and unionism.
4. Promote member education on public issues and political affairs. The Democratic Party has taken us for granted for too long. It is time for some self-reliance. Identify, train and support union members as candidates for elected public office.
5. Organize and train members for action. Support and encourage them to take the initiative in the workplace and in their communities.

Although anti-unionism is a global ailment, consider the achievements of our northern neighbor. In Canada, union density is reported in the 30 percent range among all workers, according to the latest head count. In the United States, it is at 11.3 percent and declining. Canadians recognize that when unions do well, the public does well. We have work to do.

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