

Our Sad, Misunderstood Labor Unions

by DAVID MACARAY

“Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as the exploited proletariat, but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”—John Steinbeck

A union official I correspond with (the International Vice-President of a West Coast labor union) recently shared an interesting anecdote. He said that whenever he meets someone for the first time and they casually ask what he does for a living, he answers by saying he’s a “workers’ rights activist.”

Because people are, typically, intrigued by his reply and want to hear more, he goes on to explain that his job consists of doing things like making sure retired workers get their pensions, meeting with management to clear up wage or hours disputes, helping laid-off employees get unemployment benefits, representing employees who feel they’ve been unfairly reprimanded, and discussing with company officials such on-the-job issues as bullying and sexual harassment.

Almost invariably, people express their approval of what he does for a living. They respond by saying things like, “Wow, what a cool job,” or “I didn’t even know jobs like that existed,” or “Hey, we need more people doing stuff like that.” But when he ends the conversation by telling them he works for a labor union, he gets a totally different response.

People are stunned. They appear shocked or confused. According to this fellow, some people actually exhibit hostility at hearing he’s a union officer, believing they’ve been unfairly tricked into momentarily respecting a person they would otherwise have nothing but contempt for. Such is the warped perception of labor unions.

When I was a rep, I used a slightly different approach with union-haters. After listening to their tiresome litany of complaints (i.e., unions are corrupt, they go on strike too much, their economic gains are eaten up by monthly dues, they’re undemocratic, etc.), I would respond with this: “Say what you will about unions, but name another institution that’s solely dedicated to the welfare of working people. Name me one. Just one.” Of course, no one could name any because there aren’t any.

Not the President of the United States, not the Congress, not the Church, not the Chamber of Commerce, not Facebook, not the American Legion, the Elks or the Moose, not charities or philanthropic groups. Only us. The only institution solely dedicated

to the welfare of working people are labor unions. And if you can’t understand that, you can’t understand anything.

As for “complaints,” they were rebutted by a simple appeal to reality. Regarding corruption, we’re confusing unions of today with New Jersey Teamster locals, circa 1959. But if it’s “corruption” that pulls our chain, then look no further than Wall Street, because we could take all the money embezzled by every dirty union officer from 1959 onward, add it all up, and it would be a tiny fraction of the money Wall Street scams us for every hour.

Union dues are misunderstood as well. Across the board, they probably average about \$50-60 a month, which is a pittance compared to what a union contract provides us. As for strikes, unfortunately, they occur so rarely these days, they’re practically a non-factor. And as for being “undemocratic,” that’s an outright lie. If the government were as wildly democratic as your typical labor union, we wouldn’t be using the Electoral College.

Still, even after we made what we considered a pretty decent case for the role of labor unions, most people remained unconvinced. They continued to cling to their deep-seated negative perceptions. Somewhere along the way, organized labor has failed to define itself. Somewhere along the way, it has lost its ability to reach the masses.

Granted, part of that can be blamed on the propaganda being disseminated by right-wing conservatives, and part of it can be blamed on the loss of America’s manufacturing base. But a large part of it is the fault of organized labor itself for not knowing how (or being unwilling) to promote its virtues. When you’re the only institution solely dedicated to the welfare of working folks, you need to make people realize it.

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