...New AFL-CIO leaders embark on youth outreach

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ents, and more likely to have chronic health conditions — pensions and health care matter more.

On top of that, union seniority rules mean that more senior workers get first pick at choice assignments, while younger workers are first to be laid off, sometimes even getting "bumped" when the positions of more senior workers are eliminated.

Young members might rather have a raise than a pension increase, but union bargaining priorities are more influenced by members who show up to meetings. And when curious young people do show up to meetings, they may be put off by what they see as arcane customs and traditions, or procedures they don't understand.

That was the experience of Elvyss Argueta, 27-year-old employee of Transition Projects, when he attended a meeting of American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 88.

"I left after a few minutes," Argueta said. "They were using Roberts Rules (of Order). I didn't know Roberts Rules, and it wasn't explained."

Not every union contract gives the union a chance to orient new members, so it can take time before members learn on the job about the union. This can leave new members wondering why they pay union dues — at least until they have a problem at work and turn to a steward for protection.

There are exceptions. Shuler says building trades unions get deeper commitment from young members. Shuler was most recently executive assistant to International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) President Ed Hill.

"Most people think of the IBEW as a building trades union, but we represent seven industries, including utilities and telecom," Shuler said. "We're like a mini AFL-CIO."

Shuler said she could see the difference — young members from her union's building trades side were more likely to have a sense of union history and be aware of union benefits. In building trades unions, where the union tends to become part of a new member's identity. New members are trained at union-run training centers and work as apprentices alongside more experienced co-workers. Plus, building trades union members typically get work through the union hiring hall, and return there when the job ends. They know their long-term livelihood depends on their union maintaining market share in competition with employers that don't pay the same generous wages and benefits.

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As Bussel, 57, sees it, labor does have at least one selling point that appeals to the young: Young people are attracted to unions when it's part of the cause of economic justice for workers.

In the last 15 years, two cause-oriented AFL-CIO programs brought young people into the union movement as staff and allies. Union Summer, modeled on the Freedom Summer of the civil rights era, exposed college student activists to the labor movement as summer-long interns. And the Organizing Institute — which trained and placed union organizers — recruited on college campuses as well as among rank-and-file union members. Both programs have been suspended for funding reasons. To the extent that the AFL-CIO's community affiliate Working America employs large numbers of young door-to-door canvassers, it may have replaced those programs as a point of entry to the union movement for young workers attracted to the cause.

Trumka asked Shuler to take charge of a new youth outreach effort, starting with a workshop at the AFL-CIO's Pittsburgh convention. But judging by the most recent Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, getting young people into and involved in unions could be a considerable challenge. Just 5 percent of workers age 16 to 24 belong to unions, compared to 16 percent of workers age 45 to 54. And the highest rates of union membership are among workers 55 to 64 —16.6 percent. One explanation may be that once workers get union jobs, they stay in them. But there are other reasons that unionization is lowest among the young.

One, Bussel says, is a cultural gap, fed by labor's image.

"There's a perception that it's your grandfather's union movement," Bussel said, "that it's a bunch of old white guys. These things are stereotypic, but also there's truth in them."

America is becoming more ethnically diverse, and young people coming out of high school are much more likely to be black, Latino, or Asian than the generation nearest to retirement. Yet union leaders tend to be older, whiter, and maler than the workforce as a whole.

Secondly, unions have historically been concentrated in heavy industry and manufacturing — sectors that have had shrinking employment thanks to productivity improvements ... and competition with workers overseas. In industries with declining employment, there's less need to hire new workers, so the workforce ages in place.

On the other hand, the sectors that are growing in employment — hospitality, service, retail — are almost entirely nonunion. Unions have not tried or have not succeeded in organizing some the biggest employers of young workers — fast food franchises and big box retail chains.

In his 2001 book Youth at Work, sociologist Stuart Tannock argued that these industries constitute a separate "stop-gap" economy in which young workers from many different socio-economic classes are sucked into a kind of "lost decade." They may work 10 years at restaurants, coffee shops, or video stores without ever having health benefits or earning above $30,000 a year.

UNITE HERE Local 9 staffperson Eryn Slack, now 35, bounced around food service jobs for a decade and a half before landing her first union job in 2004 as a restaurant server at the Portland Hilton. The union, for her, meant health care and real job security.

"Seniority means a young worker knows that if they commit to a job they can make a career of it," Slack said. "That's a much more solid prospect than the idea that you'd be working at an employer and be no more secure in 10 years than you are now."

One unionized industry that employs large numbers of young people is grocery, and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which represents grocery workers, may be organized labor's youngest union: 34 percent of its nationwide membership is under 30. But young members are still much less likely to get involved. UFCW Local 555, headquartered in Tigard, offers new members $50 off their initiation fee if they attend an orientation session at the union hall. Communications representative Bill Pronovost said only a small percentage do so.

The ultimate in rejuvenation is to get young union members involved in their own workplace unions. Shuler points to one case where a union commitment to recruiting and nurturing young members appears to be paying off. It started in 2006, when three young members of Oregon AFSCME — Jaimie Sorenson, Matt Hilton, and Michael Hanna — attended their union's national convention in Chicago.

At a "town hall" style session, delegates were asked their age. Shocked that less than 3 percent were under 35, the three Portlanders conceived the idea of a youth group for AFSCME members, dubbed "Next Wave."

Sorenson, now 31, says they shopped the idea to local and national leaders, and found tremendous support. A grant from the national union enabled young AFSCME members to attend the statewide convention as observers. It worked, Sorenson recalls: Local meetings might elect experienced members as convention delegates, but as observers, newer members could get educated and catch union fever too. Next Wave has evolved into a combination informal social club, support group, and youth caucus. In Portland, members bond at bowling events and at monthly meet-ups called Thirsty Thursdays held at local pubs.

Oregon now has five Next Wave chapters, and a resolution at AFSCME's 2008 convention took Next Wave national. In June 2009, a Next Wave conference in Chicago attracted 600 participants from AFSCME locals nationwide.

Argueta, the young worker who walked out of the union meeting the year before, was persuaded to attend a Next Wave event by a union steward. That was 18 months ago. Now he's a steward, member of his workplace bargaining team, and Next Wave's statewide facilitator.

"I started to see the importance of the union as a social justice organization, not just for themselves but for all working people. And that really appealed to me."

IN MEMORIAM

Kenneth Gustav Weigel, a retired business manager and longest-serving member of Sheet Metal Workers Local 16, passed away Aug. 28. He was 91.

Weigel was born Oct. 24, 1918, in Portland. He graduated from Washington High School before entering the sheet metal trade in 1936. He became a union journeyman in 1940. He was hired as a full-time business agent in 1950 and worked in that capacity until 1970, when he was elected business manager/financial secretary. During that time, Weigel helped then-Business Manager Harold Halvorson set up Local 16's Health Trust in 1957, the first construction trade health trust west of the Mississippi. In 1961 Weigel also helped set up the Oregon Sheet Metal Workers Local Union Pension Trust. He also was deeply involved in apprenticeship training.

He served one term as business manager before returning to the trades. He retired in 1980. He is a past-president of Local 16's Retirees Club.

He married Ruth Marsh in 1939. They lived in the same home for 70 years, raising six children. I addition to his children, Weigel is survived by 15 grandchildren, 10 great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandchild.

Group wants to revitalize construction partnership

A group representing labor, management and owner/developers has taken steps to revitalize Partners in Construction Cooperation (PICC) in Oregon and Southwest Washington. A luncheon Sept. 10 drew nearly 50 participants.

As its title suggests, PICC is a "cooperation committee" open to all in the industry who finance, design, build, and use union construction projects. Cooperation among the craft unions is a key element of PICC. Regular "toolbox meetings" are held at which workers can openly share their thoughts and concerns. Owners and contractors draw on the experience of the workers to solve any problems.

The bottom line is to increase productivity, boost morale, reduce accidents, and eliminate grievances.

PICC was launched in 1987. Its showcase project in February 1988 was a 105-unit Powell Valley Retirement Center in Gresham. Other projects followed, including the ARCO Sealifts in 1989 and 1990, four James River mill projects, and Intel's research and development plant in Hillsboro.

"Powell Valley was the best project I ever did in my 35 years in the business," Brandt said at the luncheon. "It came in under budget and ahead of schedule."

Bob Alton, a retired project management engineer for James River Corp., incorporated PICC on all of his large projects. He said the process motivated workers, resulting in "increased productivity and very little rework. That makes a difference."

For all its success, PICC faded away in the mid-1990s as construction work increased and portions of the program were incorporated into project labor agreements. But PICC's non-profit status was maintained over the years by executive director Burton White. Taxes were filed each year on a small cash account that has sat untouched over the years.

"It's all still legal. We could start tomorrow if we want to," said Paul Stuckenschneider, a retired federal mediator who is helping in the effort to revitalize the program.

Stuckenschneider and White met with Ed Charles, executive director of Associated Wall and Ceiling Contractors, Scott Gardner of Gardner Financial Group, and Wally Mehrens, retired executive secretary-treasurer of the Columbia Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council. They are co-chairs of the new PICC, representing management, owners/operators, and labor.

The group decided to invite union leaders, contractor association officials, and signatory contractors to a luncheon to see if there was interest in PICC.

"This is the first step," Charles said. "Of course, it will require owners and developers getting on board to make it happen."

For more information about PICC, contact White at 503 590-3535.