

UNIONS ARE BAD

BUT WITHOUT THEM IT'S WORSE

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

"Labor is prior to, and independent of capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration."
~ABRAHAM LINCOLN

"If I went to work in a factory the first thing I'd do would be to join a union."
~FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT

I was president for three years of a small company union that is affiliated with a much larger parent union. I represented a membership that is generally inactive and unhappy they must pay union dues on salaries barely above minimum wage, which the union has not been very successful raising. Last year the rank and file rejected a contract in which they lost benefits and received no wage raises in exchange (nor cost of living). They accepted a second offering that did not raise wages but at least retained the earlier lost benefits. Of course management awarded itself rather generous raises and benefits.

I wrote a letter to the wage slaves I represented admitting the union side of the table had poorly negotiated the most recent contract and suggested they vote it down:

"We gave away hardwon benefits hoping to raise wages at every level to compensate for the lack of cost of living adjustments, which did not occur... This year's contract talks demonstrated the power meager funding gives an employer (which) spawns an iron fist and managerial power is almost supreme as it dictates allocations of what it claims are sparse resources, and employee wages and rights are hammered as a result.... Some of you believe the union is just another bureaucracy that takes money out of your paychecks. Most of you rarely attend union meetings or participate in decisions that affect you, yet the union is your opportunity to have a voice and a measure of power over your working lives, the more so the more you participate. You can choose to vote down this contract and demand we get you a better deal than we have, which we cannot guarantee unless you show management that you are actively involved to increase the union's strength and potency. Of much greater importance is that you take the power the union offers you to determine your working future."

My presidency ended ignominiously. The union did to me what I thought the company would do. It fired me. I had become a liability and probably also a pest. The parent union, which has had problems of thievery and embezzlement among its upper levels of leadership (including a local treasurer who kited checks) dismissed me for being behind in dues. My *Catch 22* was that I had not paid dues because I was not regularly working for the reason my company wished to be rid of me as a result of my union activities and to decertify the union entirely. I am unable to provide tangible evidence of this but my suspicion has historic legitimacy. Few if any of the original union organizers remain with the company and one way or another it has got rid of its union presidents; only one continues to work in the company, my predecessor who was promoted to management and turned viciously anti-union. The company spread poison among its employees about the union, claiming it prevents them from receiving wage raises the company would be willing to give, and promising "scabs" promotion if they succeed in ruining the little support the union has.

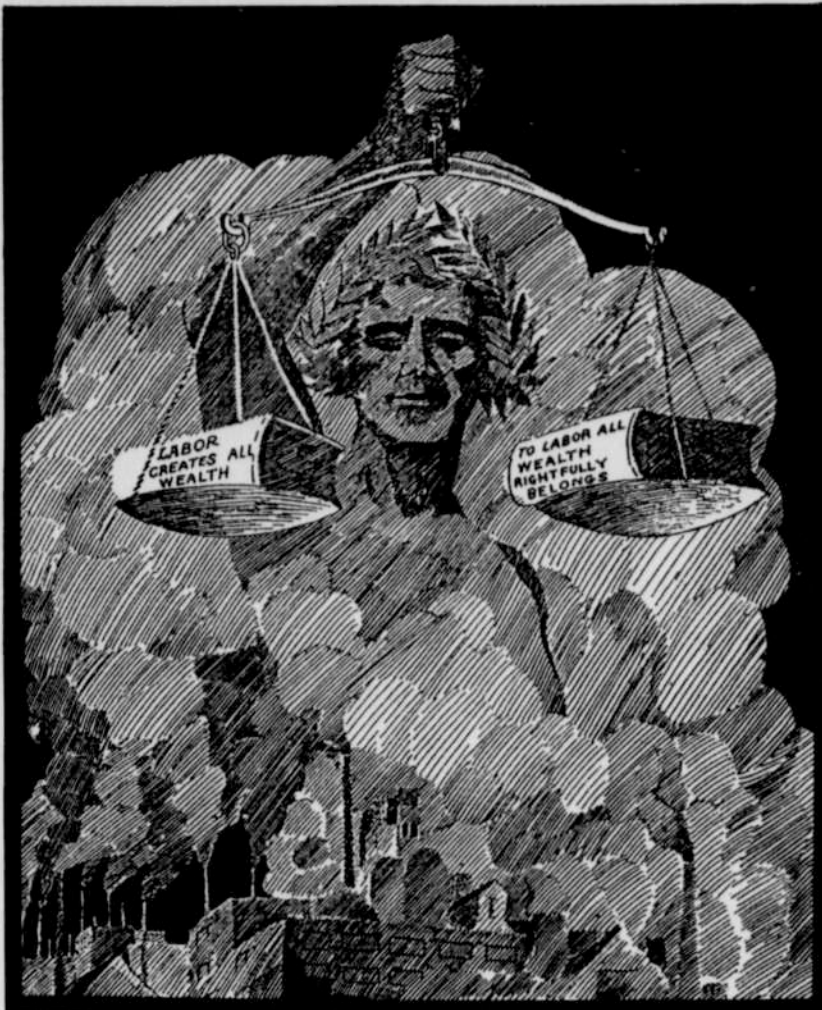
I continued as president at the request of the parent union after my downsizing from the company (I remained 'on call' though I was seldom called) because no one was found to replace me. I agreed to stay on until elections could be held, which meant a candidate from my company needed to be persuaded to campaign for my job as president. I was elected three times by less than 10% of the rank and file, which no one pretended was in support of my performance but simply to keep the position filled. I was primarily a caretaker instead of a vigorous activist or organizer, though I tried many times in many ways to exhort members to do more than bitch about paying dues.

The dues problem might have been my undoing with the parent union. I incessantly and increasingly shrilly harped on lowering my company union's dues. We were paid the least, making barely subsistence wages, yet our dues were equal those paid three times as much. I argued for progressive dues rates but union solidarity among the general membership stopped at that point. One union official said progressive rates would put the burden on those paid the most. At present the burden falls on those paid the least.

(My other major problems with both company and union were an almost dyslexic inattention to paperwork and procedure, the elemental gods of bureaucracy, and my interpretations of the union contract were much broader than its letter.)

My response to being sacked by the union was, in the words of a woman who was betrayed by the communist party (which anti-labor people consider the source and inspiration of unions), "I was upset, depressed and disillusioned." I anticipated the company doing something like that but not the union. ("You didn't expect it?" asked a longtime political activist. "My friends #@% me more often than enemies," he said.) I characterized my presidency as a tightrope act above two snakepits, the company and parent union, and felt I was snagged in a Darwinian swamp of bureaucratic savagery.

My little union signifies much that beleaguers unions these days: after more than a decade of savage union busting and massive layoffs begun during the Reagan years they are at their weakest since the 1950s when they were bloated and corrupt, and notoriously indifferent of their rank and file. Although grievously weakened and suffering a tremendous loss of political power it is possible that claims the labor movement is dead are exaggerated and that labor might actually be reviving for that, as the man says, "Unions are bad, but without them it's worse." That perception is all too apparent these days when tens of thousands of workers lose their jobs while corporate profits are up (U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich recently criticized high profit companies for "laying off their workers to pump up their stock price"), the discrepancy in wages and benefits between management and labor is obscene, and the people who have jobs are required to produce more for less pay with little or no job security.



INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

The power of American labor unions as a force to represent and protect the rights of workers in American industry has faded over the past decades. This erosion of social and political equity of people who produce the gross national products of the American market is due in part to an increasing global economy and to international competition and ease of capital flight. Union strike power is vulnerable to diversified megacorporations, especially in highly automated industries, and is virtually powerless to halt overseas relocations. Union busting has decimated some of the country's largest and formerly strongest unions. Labor law has failed to protect workers and government acts as a tool for the company. Corporations breach labor laws and are not held accountable. Union strikers are arrested and heavily fined. The bitter assault by government and industry has crippled union power to such an extent that unions are unable to gain significant wage raises or protect the jobs of hundreds of thousands who are sacrifices to company mismanagement, downsizing, or divestiture as a result of incessant corporate takeover/mergers.

The American labor movement succumbed to its own success and the long savored vengeance of the bosses it temporarily trumped. The power labor gained, which for decades was immense, was bitterly won and carelessly lost. When the Reagan administration chose to attack in the early '80s by breaking a strike by aircraft controllers and forever banned the strikers from government work, it was aware the labor movement was weak and unable to resist a savage campaign of union busting.

Unions were by then little more than huge bureaucracies that had lost contact with their rank and file. Their leaders were raised to social levels (with salaries plus perks) equal to executives of similar ranks. Dissent was usually squelched within the locals while union and corporate officials colluded on the same class level. For members of most unions mandatory dues were (and remain) a tax on their wages at the same time they were denied meaningful or coherent representation.

The corporate class bitterly resented the labor movement's power and exacted cruel revenge throughout the Reagan/Bush years, attacking the unions in their shops like wolves circling downed beasts. The older industrial unions were ripped apart. Thousands of workers were forced to take huge paycuts and the loss of medical and insurance benefits to keep their jobs in industries that were crippled, dismantled or sold off. Many thousands more were laid off when plants closed or relocated to the third world. Communities that depended on smokestack or sold-off industries paid huge ransoms to keep them operating or to attract newer ones. Top echelons of corporations dismantled their subsidiaries to protect their headquarters bastions from corporate raiders in the meantime feeding on each other in a frenzy of takeovers. Their unions gutted and powerless to protect them, American workers were pawns and generally losers in the bloody corporate wars, disinherited at the same time American corporations employed foreign labor to make their products at cheaper cost.



The new realities of world commerce aggravates the problem affecting American labor. American corporations subsidize cheaper labor and manufacturing costs in third world nations by ordering finished products from them instead of producing domestically, which adds not only to imbalance of trade but shrinks the number of jobs for American workers. Real work shifts overseas where the only competition is in degrading wages and increasing production, especially among young women reminiscent of U.S. sweatshops in the early part of the century and more recently in the Pacific Southwest. As the American working force shrinks the power of the already weakened unions is further eroded. Workers in need of work accept lowpaying and non-union jobs and lose their rights and protection. Or they don't work at all.

Trotsky was right when he said that labor must be universal instead of national because corporate industry is global. Jobs are cut in the U.S. and exported to third world countries with nonexistent or harassed labor movements. Violations of international workers' rights are used for competitive advantage by U.S. corporations that are searching the world for impoverished countries with low wage workers, even employing slave and prison labor while engaging in destroying labor movements and imprisoning or murdering labor leaders.

Unions once were, in the words of Kurt Vonnegut, admirable instruments for extorting something like economic justice from employers. But labor is badly wounded and its history is treated like pornography. Strikes are crippled with injunctions and workers are denied government aid while on strike. Union busting has frightened union leaders into painful compromises and binding agreements are torn up by management.

The legal framework of the labor movement needs radical change. Political solutions in which workers' rights and union democracy in its broadest sense are guaranteed are necessary. A generous concept of labor democracy would give workers more rights, both in collective bargaining and law, and would allow them a voice in investment policy and in such matters as layoffs, plant shutdowns, takeovers and selection of top management. (Labor Secretary Reich wants the tax code revised to credit companies that avoid layoffs in profitable times and give employees a stake in company policy as well as good medical coverage and broad retraining opportunities.) Workers' rights should be manifested in various ways that would prohibit employer interference in their decisions about organizational representation, which should include unions with only a minority of workers, and mandate collective bargaining that leads to solid contracts.

Radical changes in labor law must obviously be accompanied with wide involvement of women, blacks, Asian- and Latin-Americans (plus physically handicapped and mentally retarded workers), and should focus on a social crusade framed as an extension of American democracy instead of pressure group whining. A special effort should be made to recreate a social justice movement like civil rights in the 1960s. Such a sharply defined crusade would be an initial stage in educating, and mobilizing union members. The next objective would be for these members to spread labor's gospel as far as possible in schools, churches, civic meetings, political caucuses. To bring strong political support into the labor movement more workers need to be organized and be willing to risk arrest and endure longstanding picketlines like striking auto mechanics (who lost three years ago in Astoria, Oregon).

Rebirth of the labor movement requires enfranchising women and minorities, the rise of vigorous new leaders untainted by corruption, reversing the decline and increased costs of education, and most importantly, collective action and collective bargaining to halt labor's collapse in postindustrial America. Reestablishment of a union culture in the United States and radical reform of union laws must be a primary goal for the good reason that labor and production are at the heart of economic and political health and survival. "Labor is the only voice for the American worker and its silence is deafening," says new AFL-CIO leader John Sweeney.

Labor is not quite on its deathbed. The strike at General Motors' Dayton (Ohio) plant which affected thousands of union people across the nation in March (workers protested GM's contracting out their jobs) and the AFL-CIO's intense political drive this year to elect candidates in local, state and federal elections who are favorable to labor (with a \$35 million war chest) have created a backlash by what Sweeney calls "the Republican Party and its big business and billionaire backers." He says that "the biggest smear (and) disinformation campaign in the history of American politics" is corporate America's response to labor's "grassroots and political program." (The U.S. Chamber of Commerce intends to "fight labor district by district.")

The bottom line is representing the rank and file. There is a tendency in unions as in management and any other group for power to flow to the top and for elected union officers to form a clique of sorts that distances itself from the rank and file, exacerbated by contact with paid union officials whose business is generally with local union leadership instead of the membership. It does not matter whether a union officer likes or despises the rank and file; they pay dues to be adequately and fairly represented whether they are active or a bunch of deadheads grousing about union dues extracted from their paychecks. And regardless if only three or four participate in elections, attend meetings and act active, a union's job is to represent them all.

The first permanent national labor organization in the United States, the International Typographical Union, acknowledged at its first convention in 1850:

"It is useless for us to disguise from ourselves the fact that, under the present arrangement of things, there exists a perpetual antagonism between Labor and Capital...one side striving to sell their labor for as much and the other striving to buy it for as little as they can."

That seemingly perpetual polarity has not changed.

"Perhaps most of you are vague or do not particularly respond to what our ancestors considered necessary fundamentals for maintaining personal and political liberty, but erosions of them will eventually ruin your lives," I wrote in my letter to my former rank and file. "Democracy is always in flux between those who wish to protect and enlarge it and those who reduce and confine it. We are in a period of severe (decline) of the personal and political rights of people who work for a living, which makes it imperative we understand what is at stake on the job and in the democracy at large."