



FRANCES JETTER

WE NEED A LABOR MOVEMENT

BY HARRY JOHNSON

Workers of the World unite! This used to be a rallying cry heard all over the Northwest, in logging camps, fields and mines. Does the Wobbly idea of One Big Union have any relevance in the post-modern, union-decline '90s?

What if the AFL-CIO began to organize and worked with individual unions to boost their membership, trained organizers, provided money? What if many unions started organizing drives providing support to a movement as a whole? What if our national consciousness were raised about unions, and unions' consciousness were raised about all workers? What if we began to see and say that all workers count, that there is a brotherhood of labor where an attack on one would be seen as an attack on us all? What if all workers in a city would raise hell, during an organizing drive so that a bunch of motel maids or janitors could win the right to belong to a union and to bargain their way to a decent life? What if union members controlled their unions and their pension funds by voting directly for local and international officers and for leadership of the AFL-CIO? What if companies knew that if they pushed their workers into a strike, all workers would refuse to deal with them and police unions would instruct their members not to take sides in labor disputes? What if, like in France, much of the country got shut down any time the government started to attack the workers or the poor? What power! Harry Bridges said once that if American workers wanted universal single-payer health insurance, they could get it in a week just by staying home.

What if the Oregon AFL-CIO sent a team of organizers into Clatsop County to organize every unorganized shop, business, farm, temp agency, fish plant or government program? They could hand over the signed up union whichever locals fit, and still have a big local of workers who wouldn't have a union to attach to, which would be kind of an "all other" community union. Eventually these community union locals could hook up into a statewide union that could affiliate with the Service Employees International Union, probably the most progressive union in the country.

I know, it's expensive to fund organizing drives and to service members once they gain representation. There are grievances, benefits, contract negotiations, etc., and dealing with small employers is time demanding. Maybe we could bargain down to a 35 or 32 hour work week and get member activists to devote some Fridays to union work, to political work, to community services.

Think of the power of having 50% of the workers in an area, in a state, organized. How about 80%? Thrilling isn't it? The Tiernans, Hemstreets and Mabons would have to get real jobs and stop making a living attacking us. Candidates would have to work on our issues instead of a corporate agenda. A labor endorsement would mean something; they couldn't win without it. The Democratic Party would come back to us, or we'd form our own. The strength of a union versus individuals in dealing with and making demands for a fair shake from companies is, or should be, fairly obvious. The strength of organized labor versus independent unions in dealing with international corporations and the government should be even more obvious.

The Union Summer idea of John Sweeney, new head of the AFL-CIO, was modeled after the Mississippi Summer of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. It plans to bring thousands of college students into organizing training schools and into real organizing efforts. The problem is that each stays only a few weeks. It is a good idea, but too little.

What if the Oregon AFL-CIO worked with Central Labor Councils in half a dozen counties to have summer organizing drives? They could send 3 professional organizers and 15 trained students (or any number) to blitz the county with organizing drives. The students could be housed in union members' homes and the Labor Councils could arrange transport and logistics. The pros could come early and lay the groundwork and stay after to count up the signed union cards. The idealist kids would be drawn to the idea of a "movement". Some would want to stay on, or work weekends to make the drive succeed.

A few successes would enable us to impact the legislature (some say the legislature is too impacted now) to get pro-labor legislation passed. For instance, Oregon could pass a law similar to several Canadian Provinces, which would allow for union certification if a majority of workers signed cards without having to wait for an election, thus reducing considerably the time for employers to intimidate, threaten or fire union supporters. Oregon could also pass a law ordering binding arbitration for initial contracts to speed the process.

Kids as well as long-time unionists would blossom after a success or two. Social action of the next decade should be for workplace justice for all workers, which includes women, minorities, temps, minimum wage and unemployed and disabled workers. The phrase "working poor" should be erased from our national vocabulary.

Labor lawyer Thomas Geohagen says in *The American Prospect*, Summer 1995 issue, that we should amend the Civil Rights Act to include as a civil right the right to join a union without being fired or permanently replaced. The remedies available to union members would be the same as those available to women, minorities or handicapped citizens, which are prompt and effective, such as immediate temporary restraining orders — union members have to wait 3 or 4 years for an appeals court to grant them one — punitive damages, paid legal fees and jury trials. Current unfair labor practice remedies are so weak or slow in coming that employers violate them with impunity.

John Sweeney and the AFL-CIO have a slogan, "America Needs A Raise." It makes a nifty sound bite, but they should be saying (and doing), America needs to get organized into strong unions to prevent the collapse of American workers' wages to Third World levels, and to counterbalance the power of greedy multinational corporations. Workers and the public should have a say in corporate decision making. I believe that strong unions are the only answer.

"Don't mourn. Organize!"