

NORTH COAST

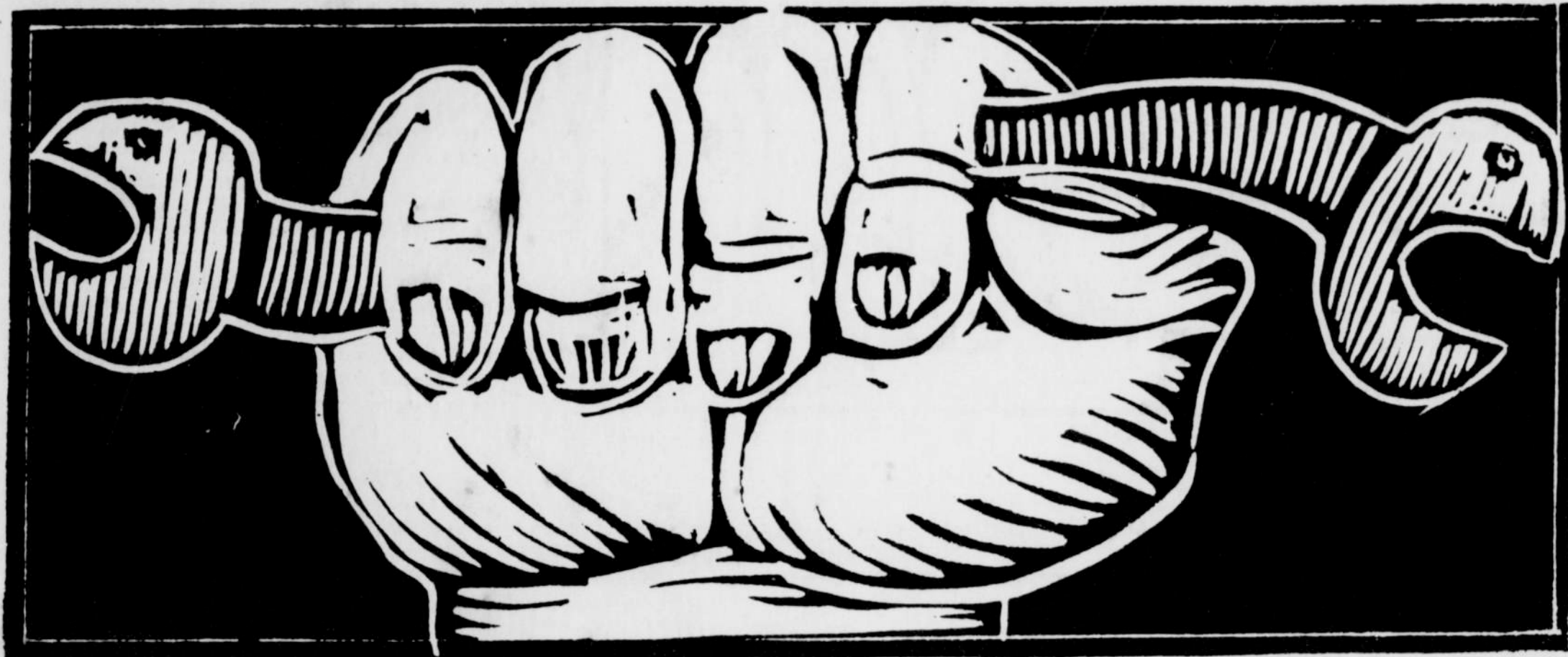


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In a dark time the eye begins to see
~Theodore Roethke

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FRANCES JETTER

LABOR'S LABOR LOST

Born to be slaves, and struggling to be lords.

~THOMAS MOORE

Labor Day means little more than a final three day holiday that ends the Silly Season. Once it celebrated working people but now that is a joke. Unions don't march on Labor Day anymore and the few who put on a show are merely window-dressing.

Andrew Levson wrote in *The Working Class Majority* that clichés about the USA as a classless society are "exposed as hollow by the simple fact that American workers must accept serious injury and even death as part of their daily reality." Every year 100,000 workers are killed or die of work related accidents or disease. Forty thousand are disabled and about 6 million are hurt at work. "Imagine the universal outcry that would occur if every year several corporate headquarters routinely collapsed, crushing 60 or 70 executives," Levson wrote. "Or suppose that all the banks were filled with noxious dust that constantly produced cancer in the managers, clerks and tellers. Finally, try to imagine the horror...if thousands of university professors were deafened every year or lost fingers, hands, sometimes eyes, while on their jobs."

The power of American labor unions as a force to represent and protect the rights and persons (as well as jobs) 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 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 Wall Street inspired takeovers and mergers.

The American labor movement succumbed to its own success and the long savored revenge of the bosses it temporarily trumped. The power labor gained was immense, was bitterly won and carelessly lost. When the Reagan administration chose to attack in the early 1980s by breaking a strike by aircraft controllers and forever banning 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 equal rank. 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 savage revenge throughout the Reagan/BushSr. years, attacking unions in their shops like wolves circling downed beasts. The older industrial unions were ripped apart. Thousands of workers were forced to take huge pay cuts 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 (of public money) 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 problems affecting American labor. American corporations subsidize cheaper labor and manufacturing costs in third world countries 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 20th 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.

Trotsky was right when he said that labor must be universal rather national because corporate industry is global. Jobs are cut in the USA and exported offshore 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 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 in selection of top management. The tax code should be 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 representations, 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 Hispanic 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 and endure longstanding picket lines like Astoria mechanics (who lost) several years ago in Astoria, Oregon.

Rebirth of a robust 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 post-industrial America. Reestablishment of a union culture in the United States and radical reforms 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.

As the man said, "Unions are bad, but without them it's worse." That perception is all too apparent when thousands of workers lose their jobs, 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.

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."

~MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

This article is dedicated to Juanita Huebner who is once again fighting for the Union.