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"The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend"

Labor and Independent Politics

Joel Rogers

MY FAVORITE pro-union bumper sticker — admittedly, a small universe from which to cull favorites — identifies labor unions as “the folks who brought you the weekend.” The weekend, the eight-hour day, a minimum wage, and too many now-taken-for-granted job protections and social-insurance programs to count. The “folks” (a.k.a. organizations) that did not just pursue a particularistic “contracts are us”/“I’m all right Jack” politics of the organized, but an inclusive “he’s not heavy, he’s my brother” politics directed to the broadly disorganized working class. The “collection [a.k.a. movement] of many that spoke for all” — from a moral center, a clear sense of everyday if unrealized values, and a confidence in the practical imperative of realizing those values that inspired.

After a long dark night, such a movement may again be dawning. The “new voices” leadership team of John Sweeney, Rich Trumka, and Linda Chavez-Thompson — which ran for office because, in Sweeney’s words, “organized labor is the only voice of American workers and their families, and because the silence [under Lane Kirkland] was deafening” — is making good on campaign promises to increase labor’s organizing expenditures; upgrade its public rela-

tions, program, and political work; build the capacity of regional bodies (state federations, central labor councils); do aggressive outreach — reflected in, among other things, the composition of executive bodies — to minorities and women; and remake the federation's own organization, starting with the appointment of younger, smarter, more aggressive unionists to top staff positions. Labor is moving again, showing some muscle, and feeling better about itself than it has in years.

For all the good news, however, the bad news is that it may all be coming too late. Labor may be gaining new friends, but some of its old ones — like those in a Democratic administration resolutely ambivalent about the worth of unions — are increasingly unreliable. Public opinion is vaguely supportive but unconvinced that labor has the answers to what ails it. And labor's real power in the economy is drastically diminished — with private sector union density now down to the pre-New Deal level of only 10 percent, and strikes at their lowest level in fifty years — with no obvious way to increase it. Just to maintain present density levels, labor needs 300,000 new members a year; to bump present levels up one point — and union density is down about twenty points from its 1950s levels — it needs a million a year. Nobody's seen anything like those numbers since the 1930s, and the organization of today's economy is very different.

So labor appears ready for change, but it faces a political and organizing climate quite different from the past. It needs a coherent institutional strategy — attuned to its present organization and weakness, promising organizing and political gains, promising little immediate help from government, informed by underlying changes in the structure of the economy, capable of getting to scale — for self-revival. And it needs a way, consistent with that strategy, to present itself to the broader public — to reclaim its role as the moral conscience of the nation, to capture and harness the support of the disorganized many for whom it also needs to speak. Labor needs, in short, a new organizing strategy and a new mass politics. Above all, perhaps, it needs to recognize that the two are not independent, that they require each other for success.

Getting Started: A Role in the Economy

Ask the average person what constructive role unions play in the economy, and you'll get laughter, hostility, or a blank stare. This is the first thing that has to change. Unions advance, big-time, only when they do things that not only visibly benefit members or potential members, but benefit the broader society as well — and thereby gain the social cachet and political support they need, in this capitalist world, to defend and grow worker organization. Typically this means solving some big problem in the economy — a problem beyond the power or interest of individual firms to solve on their own, however much the solution might contribute to a dynamic capitalism.

In the New Deal and postwar era, the problem was effective demand. Operating in an essentially closed national economy, where the state relied on fiscal and monetary policy to regulate the macroeconomy, unions demanded and got wage and benefit increases for their members and other workers — partly extracted from firms directly, partly extracted through the state. By delivering solid and rising wage floors, they boosted aggregate demand. That gave firms markets for sales and reasons to renew investment. And that, in turn, increased productivity and lowered the costs of mass-consumption goods, which was good for everyone. The alchemy of Keynesian economics translated worker interests into general interests, with unions as (male, pale, stale, stolid, but still) magicians.

What is the equivalent contribution in today's world, in which Keynesianism is qualified by international capital flows and product competition? Without overstating that qualification (and thus understating the need for demand stimulus) it will likely come as much by changing the competitive strategies of firms, and all that flows from that, as changing the general structure of demand.

There are essentially only two ways firms can respond to today's increased competition. A "low-road" response competes by reducing costs — typically beginning with the cost of fixed and well-paid labor — and compliance with social regulation. Generalized, it is associated with wage stagnation, rising inequality, job insecurity,

sweated workers, poisonous labor relations, and degraded natural environments — the current situation in the United States. A “high-road” response, by contrast, competes by increasing quality — with higher wages supported by customer willingness to pay for that quality. Generalized, it is associated with more skilled workers, higher productivity, higher pay, better labor relations, reduced environmental damage, and greater commitment by firms to the health and stability of surrounding human communities (needed to attract and keep skilled workers and managers).

Firms can make money on either road, but social gains are obviously made only on one, and that road is not widely traveled in the United States. Nor will it be, and we know this, too, if firms are left to their own devices. The reason is that transition to the high road is costly, and staying on it requires a variety of supports — advanced educational and training systems, skill standards and credentialing, integrated labor market services and clear signals on advancement to participants, advanced physical infrastructure promoting dense development, deliberate efforts to upgrade firms and otherwise diffuse “best practice,” and, throughout, barriers to low-road defection — that no individual firm can supply on its own. Choosing the high road thus requires a broader social choice to build those supports — a choice that we as a society have failed to make.

Labor’s role in the economy, in a nutshell, is to publicize, force, and enable that choice — to close off the low road, help to pave the high road, and enable workers and firms stuck on the first to travel the other. The role requires both a dense and encompassing presence in the economy and political power in the state, which is why the role is uniquely labor’s to perform. No other social agent comes close to having the wherewithal for both. But labor’s performing this role requires that it break with past routines.

Getting Organized

For starters, labor must change its organizing tactics and its assumed role in economic governance. On these matters, the “traditional unionism” of the postwar period was broadly defined by:

Just service, in majority settings: “Provide members with good wages and benefits, and the unorganized will join up.” Effectively, this was the theory of union growth that trade union leadership offered in the postwar period. With the exception of a 1960s’ explosion in the public sector, organizing expenditures as a percentage of total revenues stagnated or declined throughout the period. And what organizing that did go on was usually done on a “hot shop” basis, with the goal of achieving majority status in those shops. Majority status was seen as necessary to the economics of servicing, contract enforcement, and the protections offered only “exclusive bargaining representatives” that had demonstrated such status. Where organizing failed to achieve majority support within a limited time, it was generally abandoned. Where organizing succeeded, dues and contracts kicked in, and members were generally demobilized, pending the next contract dispute.

Staying clear of production control: Encouraged by law and their own organizational sense, with rare exceptions (in particular, the building trades) unions steered clear of making demands on issues lying at the “core of entrepreneurial control.” They reacted to firm decisions on training, technology, investment, relocation, product strategy, and work organization. They did not typically seek to take responsibility for steering the firm’s product strategy or organizing the inputs necessary to preferred strategies. Since they were in a weaker position than the employer, such assumption of responsibility was seen as promising only responsibility, never power, and blurring the distinctions between “us” and “them” critical to maintaining solidarity in the unit. Needless to say, the prospect of changing entire industry strategies was considered even more daunting and unattractive as a task.

Centered on specific sites, and not coordinated: Despite lead agreements, pattern bargaining, and the sectoral jurisdictions of the CIO, collective-bargaining agreements were generally negotiated on a firm-by-firm, often plant-by-plant, basis. Contract administration was highly decentralized, with wide variation in agreements across sites. Within regional labor markets (outside prevailing wage laws

for the building trades) little effort was made to generalize wage or benefit norms beyond organized employers. Efforts at multi-union bargaining or organizing were infrequent; murderous jurisdictional disputes were not; and in labor's own structure the internationals fully dominated central labor bodies (state federations and central labor councils), in a "silos of solidarity" model. Finally, again at the regional labor market level, if relations among unions were not close, relations between labor and community organizations were close to nonexistent. There was, of course, "community service," but this was largely confined to charitable works; it did not extend to coordination on political and organizing programs.

For those fortunate enough already to be in unions, or employed in those few sectors dominated by them, this traditional model of unionism worked passably well — in a relatively closed economy, dominated by large and spatially concentrated firms, generally featuring "Taylorist" forms of work organization, occupied by un- or semiskilled labor, composed overwhelmingly of men. But it is obviously disastrous for membership growth, and holds little promise in today's economy — with lower average firm size, more dispersed production, a working class not "readymade" but repeatedly "unmade" through greater educational opportunity, work heterogeneity, and spatial dispersion, composed increasingly of minorities and women, in firms subject to stiffer competition, and policy-makers hostile to union presence or utterly confused about the vital contribution organized workers can make to a productive economy.

Specifically, the service model proves hopelessly expensive and does not produce active and engaged memberships; the two conditions together inhibit organizing, which requires a vast increase of expenditures on paid organizers and recruitment and mobilization of the existing base. Particularly in large units, the preoccupation with majority status imposes too demanding a condition of success, and slows the needed coordination across sites, sectors, regions, and even different branches of large, national, but decentralized employers. It also carries enormous opportunity costs for membership growth. In virtually all workplaces, some significant percentage of workers — typically, about 30 percent — wish now to

belong to unions; not letting them do so throws away potential labor strength. Economic restructuring has meanwhile made investment, relocation, technology, and training decisive for member well-being, the defense and advance of which requires that unions be as deeply involved in "baking" the pie as in carving it up.

As a general matter, then, this traditional model needs to be turned on its head — a fact recognized widely within progressive labor, and broadly supported by the new national leadership. Such inversion means:

Everything-that-moves organizing: Locally based organizing staffs and member organizers are a cheaper and more effective way to organize than parachuting international representatives in for hot-shop campaigns. Labor needs to make the development of *in situ* organizing capacity — among rank-and-file members, stewards, local unions — its goal, building on the one signal strength labor still has: the loyalty of its own people. With such built-in capacity more or less permanently in place, the logic of majority-only organizing and short-time cycles on achieving it — mistaken in any case, given the need for expansive reach — additionally fails. It becomes possible to contemplate truly long-term and large-scale campaigns and, within them, clearer focus on the real goal of organizing — which is not to get to contract *per se* but to build the union presence in the workplace. Employees in units still lacking majority status would be given the full rights and responsibilities of other union members, and accreted to the organizing machine of which they are one extension. Reciprocally, the job of "organizer" would become less "parachutist" and more "member of the community" — an on-the-scene full-time union activist.

Seeking to control the terms of production: In the supply-side kingdom, the bourgeoisie is king, but only if the serfs let him be. Operating across firms as well as within them, a union movement seriously interested in affecting the design and utilization of human capital systems, technology, and work organization could, in fact, do so. Power in these areas, moreover, could be bargained for power in decisions farther back in the production chain — investment, new

technology, and product strategy. And especially in the United States, where employer associations are weak, coordination across firms to supply the needed infrastructure for high-road production and service is something that unions are uniquely positioned to provide. Imagine, then, a labor movement that did provide those inputs (from effective training systems to modernization services and the worker input necessary to upgrading), that offered itself in this way as an ally in production — but only to employers prepared to share power in decision-making and comply with specified wage and production norms. Imagine this sort of deal cut not only with lead firms but with their primary and secondary suppliers as well: that, indeed, union support of lead firms was conditioned on their assistance in generalizing such norms to suppliers.

Spatial and sectoral coordination: To shift strategies and wage and benefit conditions in large industries, those industries need to be organized, and growing variation across firms increasingly recommends that organization really be “wall to wall.” Frequently, this simply cannot be done by a single union. Imagine, then, a labor movement that recognizes this fact, and devises joint organizing strategies for sectors; instead of policing existing jurisdictional boundaries, central bodies would monitor their deliberate mutual transgression. Recruited members could be divided up by unions on any number of imaginable justified bases, or thrown into a new pool jointly administered by those contributing to it. And note the tie from organizing to economic restructuring and back. With critical mass provided by pooled resources, organizing campaigns are the natural complement and support to regional skills standards and other aspects of high-riding — especially in metropolitan labor markets — not least because they can foreclose the low-wage restructuring strategy that otherwise frustrates the high-road transition. Reciprocally, labor’s active role in shaping labor market administration — in defining job standards and the terms of job advancement, in providing or helping govern the provision of training and other services — provides a natural source of attraction for new members.

Targeted on the metro regions that provide labor’s chief area of remaining strength — and thus the natural leverage points for scarce organizing resources — such a new model of organizing would begin to redefine labor’s role in the economy as it increased its numbers.

Getting Political

But even redirected organizing energies, expended on a massively greater scale than in the recent past, will in the short term touch only a limited number of people. They will not bring labor back as a generally recognized force for good in the society. Nor will they do much directly to change the background “rules of the game” — the public policy supports to low-riding and anti-unionism — that labor needs to change to bring itself to scale. The United States spends approximately \$30 billion annually on “economic development” activity, for example, virtually all indifferent if not hostile to the sorts of development that labor needs. No number of new credit card deals to get resources for organizing can match that. Labor needs to be shaping such policies, redirecting such cash, from inside the state.

For both reasons, then — to build its presence in the society, and to provide direct support for its new organizing — labor needs a political strategy. And labor needs to recognize (as it began to in Labor ’96), that strategy needs to be more sophisticated and directive than just waiting for the Democrats to endorse someone and then writing the candidate a check. At present, the relationship between labor and the Democratic Party is an abusive relationship; the way to end abuse in a relationship — whether the relationship itself is ended or not — is to develop the ability to leave it. And at present, the general public knows little of what labor — as distinct from the Democrats — stands for, and thus is ill prepared to stand with it. Labor, in short, needs an *independent, values-based* electoral strategy.

Were such a strategy articulated, it would certainly find a market. Along the way to making American politics ugly, cynical, and vapid,

a generation of economic decline and failed government response has also generated enormous implicit support for labor's signature issues — imposing some values on the economy once more, and building a democracy strong and supple and informed enough to enforce them under real-world competitive conditions. The public would like to see some standards imposed on corporate behavior, and it certainly would like to have public (not necessarily governmental) institutions manifestly competent to solve manifest problems. Labor is uniquely qualified to author a politics satisfying these demands. Its core interests are in line with the general public; it commands the most obvious resources (organized people) needed to reconstruct a democratic public administration; and among progressive forces it stands alone in its capacity to carry the message.

Even when it has recognized these things, however, labor has historically held back from taking leadership in such a politics out of fear of doing harm. Knowing the Democrats to be unstable allies at best, it has not wanted to advantage the Republicans. And not being able to afford saying a flat “goodbye” to the Democratic Party, for generations labor — and, with labor, the rest of the progressive community — has concluded that it could not be independent of them either, at least not in the electoral arenas where such independence would be visible to the mass public.

But this conclusion, however long-standing, seems vastly premature. If they wanted to, labor and other progressive groups could find the elements of a progressive independent politics — a simple attractive message, a practical program reflecting its values, trained personnel to run campaigns and ballot initiatives, and some ongoing organization whose support and sanction could keep candidates honest and members of the new electoral formation in touch. And it could do so while strengthening progressive elements now inside the Democratic Party and not advantaging the Republicans.

On message: American political opinion is conventionally mapped on a liberal-conservative axis running from hypertolerant big-government do-gooders at one end to hard-nosed but heartless free-marketeers (joined by some ungodly fundamentalists) at the other. Labor and other progressives are conventionally defined, and

accept their definition, as the left wing of this axis, as the all-time redistributionist social liberals, unconcerned with contribution or social order. The definition ensures defeat by ensuring defensiveness about failed policies and cultural distance from the mass public. It should be self-consciously and explicitly rejected in favor of a politics anchored in commitment to democracy, fairness, and contribution. The real fight today isn't between left and right, but bottom and top, between favoring corporate accountability and a stronger democracy (the majority) and those opposed to both (the tiny rich minority and their apologists). Labor should define itself as speaking for that majority, in those terms, not cleaning up after liberals and protesting from the sidelines.

On program: One thing the right does well is work hard in areas of joint concern, not waiting for the resolution of all conflicts before moving forcefully where there are none. Labor and other progressives should do the same, articulating a practical, majoritarian program for democratic and economic renewal out of what virtually all of them already believe. Reform tax and industrial policy to close off low-roading and promote high-wage, low-waste domestic investment and firm organization. This means massive increases in the minimum wage, higher environmental standards for firms, and effective modernization and training services to give workers and firms stuck on the low road the ability to walk the high one. Revitalize our metropolitan economies as model regions of such advanced production — taking advantage of the natural economic benefits of cities now obscured by our endless subsidies to sprawl. Make “equal opportunity” real by wedding it to resources — declaring a “Bill of Rights for America's Children” that provides them all with a “starting even” package of day care, health insurance, safety, recreation, and very advanced high-quality education. Declare America a “lifelong learning” society, first by fundamentally reforming primary education — getting its funding off local property taxes, imposing high standards on teachers and students, and providing links to work for those who don't go on to college — and second by ensuring lifelong learning opportunities for adults through individual training accounts paid off through future earnings. Restore govern-

ment accountability — beginning with serious campaign-finance reform (free media for candidates, limitations on contributions, “people’s PACs” bundling those contributions, tax credits for the citizens making them). Strengthen the organizing rights of workers and consumers and communities — while explicitly assigning them a greater role in devising and administering “public” programs for economic upgrading and community renewal. Complete some semblance of a modern welfare state through single-payer health insurance. Simplify and integrate our tax system to tax both private and especially social income on a progressive basis, with social income taxed progressively enough to achieve scale targeting of those who really need. Declare the peace dividend paid for many times against an enemy that no longer exists. Declare the environmental dividend in energy and other savings that mass application of current technologies would permit. Forge a new internationalism centered on “leveling up” international worker rights and wages.

What is distinctive about this program, apart from the fact that virtually all progressives adore it, is that a majority of the public also supports *all* of its planks, and neither major party is systematically moving to implement *any* of them. Talk about an opening!

On elections: Recruiting from its own and allied ranks, labor could and should train thousands of fellow citizens in campaign work — as candidates, campaign workers, precinct leaders, signature gatherers for ballot-initiative petitions, and more — with the training covering both nuts-and-bolts skills (how to run a meeting, how to knock on a door, how to target a precinct, how to write a press release, how to do list management, how to talk in public) and the general ambitions and programmatic emphasis of the independent electoral movement.

It can then start with the widest and most accessible target: the tens of thousands of local nonpartisan offices that dominate the American electoral landscape and generally feature similar sets of issues. Imagine a training academy for x thousand people recruited (heavily from labor’s own ranks) to run for school boards, city councils, and county boards, where they learn about regional industrial policy, metropolitan taxation schemes, effective school reform,

sensible land use, best responses to federal cutbacks, and all the rest that they will have to deal with or could deal out after getting into office. Imagine model legislation, speeches, talking points, op-eds, and other supports turned over to these future candidates *en masse*. And imagine running them for local office, with these supports and a sophisticated local targeting and get-out-the-vote operation also supplied by labor and its allies, on condition that they adhere to the program or face a new opponent next time. The New Party has been running candidates principally in these sorts of races over the past few years. Operating with almost no resources, we’ve elected two thirds of the some two hundred candidates we’ve put up. If it’s clear that we can win with our values intact, why not take the effort to scale?

In partisan races, labor should of course continue to issue report cards on available electoral choices, giving voters instruction on whom they should vote for if they share its values. But also, depending on the strength of its local organization, it should enter Democratic primaries with its own or allied candidates, or — assuming New Party success in its current effort to restore cross-nomination rights nationally — cross-nominate its favored major party candidate on its own ballot line, or run its own people on those lines where it thinks it can win. Again and throughout, the culture of the effort could be to “do no harm” and not let the perfect become the enemy of the good. Intent on expanding its capacity to win, where it and its allies don’t have that yet, labor should indeed generally support the lesser of the available “evils.” Throughout, it should advertise its new electoral efforts as what they are — value-based building, not spoilage.

Labor should also use state and municipal ballot initiatives and referenda to frame debate and to change policies that corrupt legislatures won’t. Ballot initiatives on campaign-finance reform in term-limited states where thousands of seats open up in the next few years, turning their plan to obliterate incumbent Democrats into an opportunity for progressives. More “living wage” campaigns banning public grants or government service contracts to employers paying poverty wages, or increasing the minimum wage directly.

“Children first, prison last” initiatives on state spending. “Take you out of the ball game” initiatives directed at stadium owners getting public subsidies, declaring that if they threaten to move, we’ll simply seize their assets. “Maximum wage” initiatives declaring that no firm should receive public subsidies or expense executive salaries if its CEO makes a certain amount more than its entry-level workers.

Assert the people’s voice. Change the rules of the game. Show labor’s values and its base. Have some fun along the way. All at relatively low cost.

On organization: Eventually this should be a mass-membership organization with a national executive consisting of representatives of organizations providing some stated measure of ongoing support, itself gradually joined by elected representatives from states where we achieve a specified significant level of membership. But it could begin simply as a coalition, with list-sharing and other coordination on joint projects. It should not, however, be another “one letterhead, one vote” coalition. Power should be proportionate to contribution — in members, money, or some other recognizable currency. Any alternative would not be democratic and would fail for want of commitment by those with something real to offer.

And who might the different allies be? Along with labor itself, anyone and everyone who agrees to work together on these terms. New Party, Citizen Action, ACORN, Greenpeace, Clean Water Action, U.S. Public Interest Research Group, NAACP, NOW. A range of people obviously big enough to stand for something, and for once standing together in the electoral space where the mass public can find them.

A formation like this — an electoral alliance of progressive forces in the country, a progressive version of the Christian Coalition and GOPAC — would not solve all the problems of labor or of other progressives. But it would begin to give some organizational coherence and punch to what are now largely wasted assets — millions of such progressive votes, and the millions of votes of those who agree with this simple progressive program even if they’d never call themselves “progressives.” It would permit labor to take some power and show that its values work — in sustainable development, school

reform, campaign finance — particularly in those metropolitan areas where its new-model organizing would be concentrated and is in need of precisely this sort of support. It would vastly increase the supply of trained operatives and potential future candidates. It would, by making electoral activity real, force improvements in program thinking and message. Not to be slighted, by giving ongoing life and purpose to some shared activity among labor and its many potential allies, it would vastly improve their relations with one another and cement their programmatic alliance. And, most obvious (and irrespective of final decisions about long-range strategies on minor-party building), it would send a powerful wake-up call to Democrats.

Above all, however, such an effort would simply broadcast, in arenas where the message could be heard and acted on, that “labor was back” with a constructive program of broad appeal and manifest general benefit. What that would mean for labor — in terms of public visibility and esteem and associated reduced organizing costs — is an unqualified good. What it would mean for currently disorganized progressive forces is that they would finally have some visible focus and concrete means of coordination. What it would mean for the country is that business’s domination of American public life would finally be questioned again — by the same folks whose concern with basic human happiness should be manifest from all sorts of gifts they’ve brought in the past.