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Necessary Complements

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Stephen Lerner is a great organizer, a brilliant tactician, someone who proved the worth of aggressive organizing during the darkest days of labor defeatism, and a passionate and effective advocate for labor's revival as a social and moral force. For these reasons, and because his proposal for "Reviving Unions" contains so much good sense, one hesitates to criticize. And certainly no criticism should divert readers from accepting Lerner's "elementary truths" -- that democracy itself requires worker organization, and that a strong labor movement is the best hope for economic and social justice. Right now in America, those underappreciated truths are the effective beginning of wisdom and political progress. Anyone and everyone who cares about democracy or justice should see labor's fight as their own. Period.

Assuming recognition of these elementary truths, however, what are we to do about them? Lerner advises larger organizing budgets and drives, using more inventive and aggressive tactics, directed to regional or sectoral targets. He is distinctly less enthusiastic about strategies he describes as "cooperativist," or those open to "non-collective bargaining," or more overtly "political" approaches to improving labor's position. I agree with his positive prescription, but think it could be strengthened by more attention to targeting and the need for internal institutional reform. I also think that Lerner overstates, at risk to his own project, the limitations of alternative approaches. Some of what he dismisses is not alternative, but a necessary complement to the organizing he recommends.

On targeting, Lerner recalls us to the "everything that moves" organizing models of the past, when whole regions or industry sectors or clusters were taken as the targets of labor's energy, rather than stand-alone companies or plants. The difference in approach goes not only to scale, but the degree to which organizing reflects a strategic sense of employer behavior. As Lerner notes, the reason to target whole industries or regions is to "take wages out of competition" within them. Recognizing that "unions will fail if employers correctly believe that signing a contract is committing economic suicide," the aim is to make unionization simply another standard cost of doing business, falling on all competitors, who will then seek to compete on grounds other than anti-union animus. The working assumption here is that employers are indifferent between zero and full unionization; it's the intermediate case that drives them crazy.

With most of the world falling well short of full unionization, however, Lerner does not take the next step in this argument to tell us where, now, organizing resources should be expended. If the point is to take wages out of competition, then it follows that resources should be targeted to sectors, regions, even large employers that are already operating at higher-than-average levels of unionization -- where the distance to "wall-to-wall" is shorter, and existing worker organization

provides the muscle to get there. Unions should, for example, be targeting metropolitan regions - where union density has always been far higher than national averages -- before non-metro ones, and partially organized sectors before those where unions have no toehold. Everywhere they should hunt for the leverage points that can get them to critical mass. With labor finally unleashing significant resources for organizing, it is important to be clear on how they should be spent. The clock's run out on heroism. Now is the time for cold logic.

On institutional background, Lerner says next to nothing about the internal organization of the labor movement. But there are problems here that need to be addressed to get union organizing back to scale. Postwar unionism essentially operated on a "silos of solidarity" model, in which a weak national federation, and even weaker state and local bodies, were dominated by vertically integrated industrial unions with presumptively distinct jurisdictions. Organizing was seen primarily as the duty of international staff. State feds and central labor councils were seen as an appendage to the "real action" in the internationals themselves, which remained free to withhold support from those intermediate bodies.

It will take some change in internal culture and organizational routines to move from this world to one in which locals are organizing machines, spatial drives are coordinated by more powerful central bodies, internationals without power to organize "their people" in a region freely accede to their organization by others, and the national AFL-CIO and international unions coordinate attacks on national employers while moving the resources needed to build local capacity. Jurisdiction, for example, should become more of a "use it or lose it" proposition than an entitlement. The "fraternal" agreement to let internationals opt out of supporting central bodies while gaining the benefits of national federation presence should be jettisoned for a rule of "up-and-down" solidarity and contribution. And at each and every level of labor, shared resources should go only to those who grow the movement that produces them. Such changes will rattle many cages undisturbed by a simple call to organize.

On alternative strategies, again, I think Lerner misses. The traditional unionism against which he properly rebels was not only characterized by weak commitments to organizing. It also stayed clear of seeking direct influence in technology choice, product strategy, and human capital formation. It embraced a "contracts are us" model of worker power that ignored the many ways that power could be built in non-majority settings. And it practiced a "national Democrats or bust" electoral politics hostile to independent political action, even at the local level where such politics is most available and effective in improving the terms of organizing.

This too must pass if labor is to revive. I certainly agree with Lerner that cooperation without the power to set its terms is mindless, that "members only" unionism and other representation alternatives must show real benefits to workers to deserve support, and that politics without a base is no politics at all. Call these additional "elementary truths." Acknowledging them should not distract us from the work of building a labor movement that seeks real power in controlling the terms of production, not just distribution; that is able to build viable organization among workers not yet benefitting from union contracts; and that invests in electoral politics to advance its values, not some preordained party label.

