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Unions determined to remake themselves

By John Wojcik & Mark Gruenberg



Unions in America are re-assessing themselves in a way they never have before.

The reassessment comes at a time when wages for the bottom 70 percent have been on a downward spiral since the Great Recession hit in 2007.

Only one of every nine workers nationwide is a union member and, in the private sector, only one in 14 hold union cards.

As the AFL-CIO prepares to open its convention in Los Angeles next week, the federation's president, Richard Trumka, is saying something few labor leaders have been willing to admit. He is saying that unions themselves are partly to blame for the fall off in their membership.

"I'll point the finger at us," he said at a special press event hosted by the Christian Science Monitor this week. "We did not keep pace with the change in the economy, with the political environment and with young people. Things are different than they were 30 or 40 years ago."

That was when unions represented at least one fourth of all private sector workers and had the clout to raise wages not just for their own members but for all workers.

"But some of the problem is external," Trumka said. He pointed to the attacks on labor by the

Republicans and he reminded the reporters that even the nation's highest court has jumped onto the anti-labor band wagon: "The Supreme Court says money is speech, and corporations should be allowed to work their will in political campaigns," he noted.

The plan to solve both the internal and external problems cited by Trumka involves restructuring the labor movement to bring in allies including previously unorganized workers and

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other progressive groups. Present at this year's AFL-CIO convention, in addition to unions, will be environmentalists, civil rights organizations, gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender groups, immigrant rights organizations, women's rights groups and organizations of young people.

Labor will continue fighting out its issue in the electoral arena.

Representatives of many of these groups attended AFL-CIO-sponsored "listening sessions" in the run-up to the convention - sessions that tackled the question of how to remake the labor movement.

"We're going to create a process where we can sit down and talk, and then not go our separate ways," Trumka said. "We are saying to them - both unionists and outside groups, 'tell us what we need to be, tell us what we need to change.'"

"One of the big reasons we need to change," said AFL-CIO counsel Craig Becker recently, "is that the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision opened the gates for a tsunami of corporate cash flooding into politics... If the court is saying corporations are people, then we need to counter that by fostering the organization of real people.

"The old model of unions and locals no longer fits in the era of Walmart, Manpower and McDonald's," Becker added. "Labor law hasn't changed quickly enough and labor unions haven't changed quickly enough to adapt. So now the labor movement has to be part of a social movement - a democracy movement."

Labor's plan to remake itself in no way means

it will abandon its current policy of fighting out its issues in the electoral arena. Plans are underway, in fact, to use the coming convention to help mobilize the full force of the unions and their allies for the 2014 mid-term elections.

Trumka told the reporters that unions will focus hard on governors' and state legislative races in the coming elections, particularly in those states where the governors and the lawmakers went on the attack against workers' rights. He singled out GOP Govs. Scott Walker (Wis.), Rick Snyder (Mich.) and John Kasich (Ohio). He said that unions would be on the move also in some states they have not previously dealt with, notably Texas. "It's a big state," Trumka said with a grin, adding, "It's the only state in the nation without fire codes - a threat to workers lives. And it's a majority-minority state, with the minorities denied a voice."

Trumka repeated labor's support for a path to citizenship.



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MLK confronted racism, materialism and militarism

By PW Editorial Board

After Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s historic and heroic 1967 "Beyond Vietnam" speech, where he opposed the U.S. war in Southeast Asia, he received a barrage of criticism from editorial boards, donors and even other civil rights leaders.

Ralph Bunche (who in 1950 became the first person of color to receive the Nobel Peace Prize) told the New York Times, "[King] should realize that his anti-U. S. in Vietnam crusade is bound to alienate many friends and supporters of the civil rights movement and greatly weaken it - an ironic twist for a civil rights leader."

King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference faced both financial and political repercussions for not "staying in their lane" and just sticking to "civil rights issues."

Today some have questioned the need for the peace movement to stand up for racial equity. How, they ask, does justice for Trayvon Martin, immigrant rights or ending racial profiling contribute to changing U.S. foreign policy?

They clearly have a lot to learn from the leg-

acy of Dr. King.

If peace activists can applaud the courage of Dr. King's linking the "the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism" in 1967, then why do they not see the need to do the same today?

Unfortunately, many in today's social justice movement have lost sight of the vital links between racial equity, economic justice and peace.

Just as racism and bigotry is part of a system of maintaining power and privilege, so is militarism and a foreign policy premised on the threat of military action and nuclear annihilation.

Racism is not an accident or a happenstance of history, and neither is militarism. It is also bound to maintaining the privilege of the 1 percent.

The brilliance of Dr. King's leadership is that he saw that segregation, militarism and racism prop up the system of the rich and powerful and is essential to their ability to maintain control. All must be confronted.

Many in today's social justice movement have lost sight of the vital links between racial equity, economic justice and peace.

Fast food workers march on corporate America

By Marilyn Bechtell

Fast food workers and their supporters in East Bay communities from Fremont to Richmond joined thousands of their coworkers in some 60 cities around the country Aug. 29, demanding living wages, decent benefits, regular schedules and the right to form a union without retaliation.

Marches and rallies throughout the day at fast food outlets including Burger King, Jack in the Box, KFC and others wound up with a 5 p.m. gathering of hundreds outside a McDonald's near the Oakland Coliseum, along the route to Oakland International Airport. There, strikers, allies from the union movement, community supporters and elected officials addressed the crowd.

U.S. Representative Barbara Lee, D-Calif., told the strikers, "You reflect what we're fighting for in Washington, D.C., and that is not just an increase in the minimum wage but a living wage. There's no way workers should have to work for minimum wage and still have to rely on food stamps, Section 8 and Medicaid."

Lee told the workers they have the backing of the 80-member Congressional Progressive Caucus, which she helps to lead. "I want you to know you have many members of Congress standing with you, wanting to see you achieve the goal of a living wage so you can take care of your families and live the American dream."

Among those addressing the rally was Con-



suelo, a worker at Jack-in-the-Box for eight years. "I used to be scared I'd be laid off, but I'm not scared anymore," she said. "I have a son - I can't support him on my pay. We're going to win \$15 and a union," she declared, underscoring the theme of the day's actions.

Also taking the mic was former Walmart worker Dominic Ware, fired by the retail giant after he joined OUR Walmart's campaign for a living wage and decent conditions for workers there.

"They could not silence me, and they cannot silence us, because we're sticking together to bring about change," Ware said. Reflecting on the 50th anniversary celebrations just days before, he told the crowd, "that was the March on Washington, this is the March on Corporate America!"

Also joining actions during the day were several area elected officials, including Oakland Mayor Jean Quan and City Council President Patricia Kernighan, and Alameda County Supervisor Richard Valle, who pledged his fellow supervisors' support for the fast food workers' demands.

**"They cannot
silence us."
- Dominic Ware**

Chicagoans demands elected school board

By John Bachtell

Hundreds of students, parents and community activists joined a rally and march Aug. 28 supporting a one-day Chicago school boycott to protest the destruction of public education.

"Today we light the match for an elected representative school board in the city of Chicago," said Jitu Brown, educational organizer for the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization (KOCO). "This is a national fight. We are not alone."

Chicago protesters demanded an end to school privatization, a moratorium on school closings, an elected school board to replace the one appointed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, dispersal of Tax Increment Financing Funds that have been looted from the schools, and passage of a financial transaction tax to increase funding.

"My three children and I am boycotting today because massive budget cuts are an attack on our children and our city," said Rosemary Vega. Her children previously attended Lafayette Elementary School, which had a renowned orchestra, but was closed along with 49 other schools. "Fifty years ago people marched for justice and freedom. Without justice you will not have freedom," she said.

Vega said the community rallied to save Lafayette but the Chicago Board of Education was deaf to their pleas. She and her family along with other parents and community activists occupied the school but were unable to save it.

"That experience convinced me we needed an elected school board," said Vega.

Huelga del salario mínimo

Por Alberto Ampuero

Las protestas por conseguir salarios más altos se extienden por Estados Unidos. Unas veces son protagonizadas por los empleados de Walmart. Otra por los trabajadores de McDonald's, Burger King y Wendy's, anunciando una nueva huelga nacional el 29 de agosto: "porque ya no pueden seguir manteniendo a sus familias con los salarios que reciben en la industria de comida rápida".

Piden un salario mínimo de 15 dólares por hora, más del doble de los actuales 7.25 que se pagan en la mayoría de las tiendas de comida rápida.

Son las voces de un problema que arrastra la mayor economía del mundo.

La situación no se debe a la actual recesión económica sino a una tendencia que se ha ido acentuando desde los últimos treinta años.

"Nuestras familias, comunidades y economía dependen de que los trabajadores ganen un salario justo", dice Nancy Salgado, que ha trabajado en un restaurante McDonald's en Chicago por diez años y gana el salario mínimo estatal en Illinois, que es de 8.25 dólares la hora, sin beneficios médicos ni de seguridad social.

Jonathan Westin, director de la asociación Fast Food Forward, que en julio pasado lanzó la huelga en Nueva York, dijo que los trabajadores también están luchando por el derecho a formar un sindicato que los represen-

te sin que haya represalias.

La iniciativa Fast Food Forward está encabezada por una amplia coalición de organizaciones comunitarias, de derechos civiles y sindicatos en Nueva York, donde se lanzó el esfuerzo más ambicioso hasta ahora para sindicalizar a trabajadores del sector de "comida rápida" en el país.

La iniciativa busca sindicalizar a trabajadores de Taco Bell, Burger King, McDonald's, Domino's Pizza y más en esta ciudad. Se calcula que unos 50 mil trabajadores están empleados en esa industria en Nueva York.

A la vez, la iniciativa afirma formar parte de la lucha a nivel nacional por trabajadores de salarios bajos en varios sectores, como los de Walmart, el mayor empleador privado del país.

El movimiento Fast Food Forward, que comenzó con una campaña local en Nueva York, ya se ha ampliado a otras partes del país.

Trabajadores de restaurantes de comida rápida como McDonald's, Burger King y Wendy's de Chicago, Nueva York, Saint Louis, Detroit, Milwaukee y Seattle, entre otras ciudades, irán a la huelga el 29 de agosto, a la que se espera se puedan sumar los empleados de tiendas como Macy's, Sears y Dollar Tree, que trabajan por el salario mínimo.

"Será una de las acciones de empleo más grandes", aseguran.

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