
WORKING PAPER SERIES

**COMMENTARY:
LET'S ORGANIZE, NOT CELEBRATE**

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United
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COMMENTARY: LET'S ORGANIZE, NOT CELEBRATE

For better or for worse, I'm an iconoclast by nature. So I hope you're not surprised when I tell you that I'm suspicious of rituals because they often replace the reality that gave birth to them in the first place. When that happens, the ritual becomes independent of the experience it's celebrating, and this sometimes becomes a substitute for the work we need to do. If you want to know what I mean, take a look at organized labors' treatment of "solidarity."

Solidarity is the concept that holds organized labor together. Remember the role of Solidarnosc in Poland a generation ago? Solidarnosc helped overthrow an empire. That says it all. The idea of solidarity is as fundamental to unions as air is to our lungs. Without solidarity organized labor would die. That's why unions celebrate the idea.

My union, United University Professions (UUP), is typical in its celebration of solidarity. Like many other unions, we open our annual meetings with the singing of that great labor hymn: Solidarity Forever. We love to proclaim the power of our mighty union! And singing Solidarity Forever makes us feel good. The song is just the beginning. Inevitably, sometime during the meetings our Solidarity Committee will recommend donating some funds to a worthwhile cause. This makes us feel even better.

And that's one of the problems facing the labor movement.

Celebrating our history and helping the oppressed are good things. But these rituals should never substitute for the real work of the union. That's why we need to take the concept of solidarity out of the realm of ritual and make it more concrete and real.

The labor movement is dying. Organized labor in the private sector is almost dead. Only about seven percent of private sector workers are organized. The public sector is under the gun too. Witness the viscous attacks by political extremists on our public schools and teachers unions. There's nothing abstract about what going on here: Organized labor has its back against the wall. Look at the issue of solidarity in terms of basic needs such as health care. A generation ago, labor unions negotiated good health care packages for their members. As organized labor grew and prospered, the number of people with decent health insurance grew with it. Health insurance was viewed as a human right.

Solidarity is not an abstract ritual. It's about bread-and-butter issues such as health care, decent salaries, and job security.

Nowadays, as organized labors' numbers decline, the percentage of the populace covered by health insurance drops too. Today those of us with good health coverage are seen as islands of privilege that society cannot afford anymore. Just last January President Bush went after what he dubbed gold-plated health insurance plans.

Let's get with it. Solidarity is not an abstract ritual. It's about bread and butter issues such as health care, decent salaries, and job security.

Organized labor needs to connect the idea of solidarity with the reality of tough issues. How do we do this? We can start by channeling our energies into growing the labor move-

ment. This means we need to stop bosses from intimidating workers who want to organize, a goal we can realize by convincing Congress to pass the Employee Free Choice Act. The EFCA penalizes employers for harassing workers who attempt to organize. In short, it creates a level playing field for unions. And how about boycotting virulently anti-labor companies such as Wal-Mart? Sounds good. But it's easier said than done. Let's face it, in many small towns Wal-Mart is the only place to shop. Besides, the box store's exploited labor goods are cheap. But solidarity is about results, not about feeling good. No one said the price of solidarity is easy.

The struggles we face are life threatening to the labor movement. It's nice to celebrate our past successes and feel good about labor's pantheon of heroes and heroines, but let's get past singing about them and start acting more like them. To paraphrase Joe Hill, don't celebrate — organize.