

SOLIDARITY

by Scott
Molloy

THE HEROIC TRADITION

The American labor movement is in crisis. There are many complex reasons for this, but the most fashionable explanation heard in union quarters is the political ascendancy of the right wing in the United States. Ronald Reagan and the Moral Majority, so the argument goes, are responsible for the enfeeblement and defensive posture of organized labor.

The forces of political reaction have always been with us. When labor uses its strength and pursues a bold sense of mission, the right wing is confined to the shadows of American history. As long ago as the 1830s the Workingmens Parties unfurled a broad banner of reform and won the support of the nation's emerging urban population. These early struggles culminated in the 1930s when the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organized millions for dignity under union contracts. They demanded a new deal for American labor and in the process became the champion of the American people—much as Solidarity represents the aspirations of the Polish people today. In other periods, like the “Roaring twenties” and the McCarthy era, labor was weak, so conservatives operated in the light of day. Today is no different.

There is a simple lesson here: our enemy's strength comes mainly from our weakness. The crisis in the American labor movement comes from inside

labor itself more than from an outside force. It is an internal sickness that has spawned an external disease as well.

I don't have all the answers to this problem, although it is easy enough to compile a shopping list of needed reforms. I would rather suggest a simple formula without which any changes will be retarded and incomplete.

The backbone of our unions has always been the rank and file activist—the Jimmy Higgins' of this world. Who was Jimmy Higgins? He was a mythical figure created by the old Socialist Party and popularized by the author Upton Sinclair. Jimmy Higgins, so the legend goes, volunteered his time and idealism to the labor movement and no task was too big or too small. He represented generations of progressive men and women who toiled unselfishly for a better world for workers.

Today, Jimmy Higgins has, for the most part, abandoned the labor movement, the shop floor, and the political battleground. Where has he gone? To join a host of fraternal, social, civic, religious, and ethnic groups—organizations which, despite any shortcomings, have provided a measure of idealism, fraternity, and sorority so lacking in our unions today. Jimmy Higgins is now a religious activist, a member of the Elks, Masons, Sons of Italy, the NAACP, the National Organization for Women, or a rod and gun club.

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photo/courtesy of Local 35, Federation of University Employees AFL-CIO.

Why has Jimmy Higgins abandoned us? The American labor movement over the last several decades has organized almost exclusively around bread and butter issues. Our leaders and members have bought the corporate philosophy of narrow self-interest and the “me generation.” “Looking out for number one” has replaced “An injury to one is an injury to all” as our battle cry.

To the generation who grew up in the turbulent 1960s, organized labor was no longer the champion of the American people as it had been for their parents. To many youthful eyes labor had become part of the establishment and part of the problem. With a few significant exceptions, unions backed the Vietnam War, waffled on civil rights and women’s liberation, and seemed to prefer economic growth regardless of the cost to the environment.

Labor has lost its soul and the social conscience that attracted thousands to our principles and broad

concerns. We have lost our first line of defense, the men and women who defended labor as their own—not for fame, recognition, or reward—but for pride, justice, and a sense of working class solidarity. Ironically, our members spend forty hours a week at a plant or job site earning their bread and butter but must go elsewhere to find a cause or to earn the measure of idealism that unions once provided. People do respond to struggles and issues which are bigger than their own day-to-day existence. When we reinject organized labor with that spirit once again we will have a movement and Jimmy Higgins will come home.

Too many labor leaders and even many rank and file activists still try to organize exclusively around bread and butter issues in a union shop. Our time would be better spent in this period creating a new labor culture that reaches out to the rank and file as workers and as members of a larger community of interests. We should publish local union newspapers, conduct labor studies programs in our union halls, establish spouses’ auxiliaries, initiate grass roots political organizing and host social activities for the members that bring families together.

If we do these things, we won’t have to play up to selfish, cynical concerns—our work will succeed if we organize on a day-to-day basis instead of starting from scratch every two or three years at contract time. We will have an ongoing union which can mobilize members to win the things we need. *Disorganized unions may have to temporarily step to the side, reorganize and reform, and then come back reinvigorated to fight another day.*



We must overcome the negative self-image that most workers have of themselves from the news media. In my own union several years ago our members voted whether to keep the traditional Ralph Kramden-style bus drivers' uniform or switch to a fancy blue blazer ensemble. Our members overwhelmingly chose the bulky and uncomfortable blazers. They did not want to look like blue collar workers.

My father, who was a cop for twenty years, used to tell me stories about his adventures on the police force. What I never heard, until after I became a union activist, was how my dad organized a textile factory after World War II. He never thought that was important! Therein lies the tragedy of labor for our generation. Labor history, union pride, and workers' experience sit at the back of the bus unnoticed.

My wife, a union bricklayer, approaches her work like an artist approaching a canvas. Unfortunately, too many of her co-workers do not respect the skills they possess nor appreciate the work they do. We need to build pride in our crafts and work.

At the Solidarity Day march in Washington, D.C. a few years ago, a member of my union, a big, burly former Marine with many backward political ideas, was able to sum up the spirit of the day and the latent class solidarity which still lies just beneath the surface. As thousands of marchers passed by, he muttered, "These are my people; I had to be here with them."

Today, unfortunately, our unions have become social service agencies. The rank and file pay dues, contribute little else, and expect the staff to do all the

work. Union leaders, by and large, encourage this arrangement in return for internal tranquility, peace on the job, and reelection. It makes no sense at this point to blame either the members or the labor leadership. Rather, we need to understand how far we have fallen since the time Phil Murray, former CIO president, wrote:

"The kind of labor movement we want is not committed to a nickel in the pay envelope philosophy. We are building a labor movement, not to patch up the world so men can starve less often, but a labor movement that will remake the world so that working people will get the benefit of their labor."



Today, we are a defensive, reactive movement. We are forever, it seems, fending off attacks. Runaway shops, we react. Wage cuts, we react. Political attacks, we react. Take-backs and give-aways, we react. You don't have to be a champion boxer to know that a defense-only strategy is a prelude to going down for the long count.

The time to prepare an offense is now. To borrow a phrase from the football gridiron, the best defense is a good offense. We need new tactics, strategies, and concepts. We need to reach out to our environmentalists, and liberal church groups—and not on a selfish, how-can-they-help-us basis. And we must start at the lowest level. Run good candidates for shop steward and worry about changing the international union later. We're better off working in our locals, city labor councils, and state bodies. It takes more time and is not so glamorous, but the foundation will be firm. Politically we should do the same. Push community and labor candidates for city



council, ward committees, and state representatives.
Set up union political clubs in our neighborhoods.
Mobilize our retirees.

There is a rocky road ahead. PATCO, Greyhound, Phelps Dodge and a dozen other signposts announce the slow, ragged retreat of a once-proud movement as a half century of progressive labor legislation unravels. There is a cold wind blowing across America, but it is not the first.

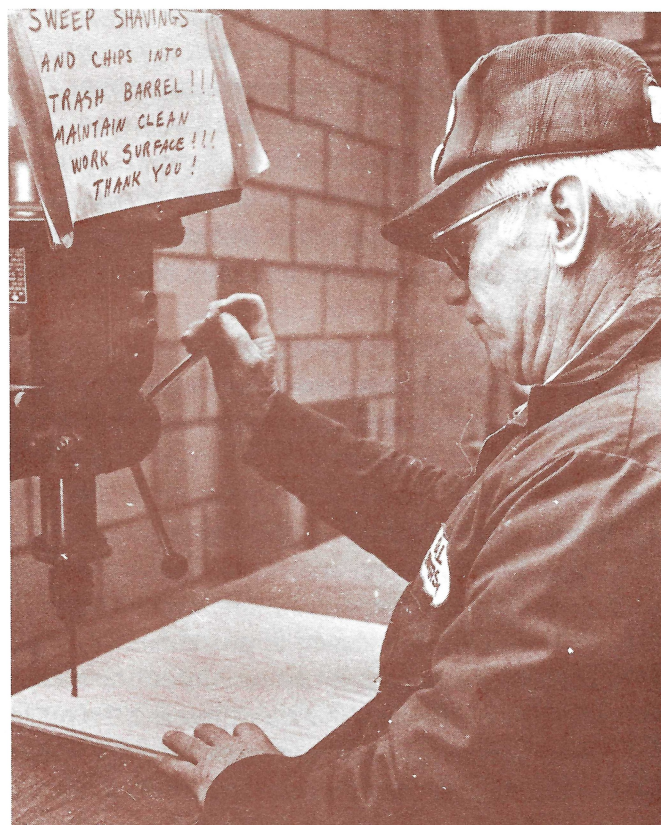
Almost a century ago, a group of labor activists in Chicago were framed for murder because of their efforts to achieve the eight hour day. They Haymarket Martyrs, as they were called, were eventually hanged, but not before they had their say in court. Before a prejudiced judge, a packed jury, and a hostile media, these labor pioneers fought back. August Spies, one of the defendants, turned the tables on his accusers:

"If you think by hanging us you can stamp out the labor movement—the movement from which the downtrodden millions who toil in want and misery expect salvation—if this is your opinion, then hang us. Here you will tread upon a spark, but there and there behind you and in front of you everywhere, flames blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out."

There were times when the flame was a dying ember protected only by the long skirts of Mother Jones and hundreds of other labor heroines. Times when only the sacrifice of a Eugene Debs in prison kept the spark ablaze. Times when it took the march of labor's unknown soldiers in the CIO to blow the embers back into a fire.

Brothers and Sisters, whether we like it or not, we are the keepers of that flame. We are the inheritors of that tradition, the guardians of labor's past, and more importantly, the vanguard of our future.

Do not despair. We will revive and enrich our labor culture, reinstall pride in our unions, and



photo/courtesy of Local 35, Federation of University Employees AFL-CIO.

reestablish a sense of class solidarity whatever shape that may take in an ever-changing world. This new spirit will not by itself solve our problems, but must serve as a catalyst.

If the flames of August Spies seem like a dying ember today, remember my friends, a single spark can still start a prairie fire.

[Scott Molloy has been a bus driver, the head of the transit workers union in Providence, Rhode Island, and a Vice President of the Providence Central Labor Council and Executive Board Member of the Rhode Island State AFL-CIO. He has also helped write and edit many publications on Rhode Island labor history. This pamphlet is based on a speech to a conference of labor activists.]

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