

## **Student Questions for Labor Lecture by Dan Leahy on Monday, November 8, 2004**

Thanks very much for your questions. I've grouped them into common areas and I look forward to our discussion.

**What is the Labor movement? What should I know about the Labor Movement? As someone who is ignorant of the labor movement, what key things should I know? What should someone who knows nothing about the labor movement know about the movement?**

The labor movement refers to people who have identified themselves as “workers” and who have concluded that the solution to their problem is a collective solution and work to mobilize allies in a common struggle to change social, economic and governmental structures to the benefit of all workers.

The labor movement is sometimes contrasted with “organized labor” which refers to the official organizational structure of unions, such as the AFL-CIO, which is the national federation of unions in the U.S. and stands for the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations.

If you are a person who must work for a living, I think you should know that the labor movement has a rich history of workers' strategies and tactics to improve their position. In my estimation practically every problem that you will face as a young worker has been discussed before. Knowing labor history will allow you to imagine that you can act collectively to solve the problems you are faced with. Labor history, of course, in a capitalist society where owners' history is dominant, is hard to find, but well worth the effort.

I also think that as a citizen in a democracy you will not be able to understand that shape of your own society without knowing the history, successes and defeats of working people's efforts through unions to define American democracy.

Finally, I'd say the labor movement carries within it a set of values, which I call “community values” that are in sharp contrast to the “market values” of U.S capitalism. It is these community values that lead to “social solidarity” and the making of an enriched life

**Who are heralded as the main proponents of the labor movement in popular (well known) history? What led to the rise of labor unions?**

**What led to the rise of labor unions?** Although there were many different forms of unions with different goals, strategies and tactics, I would say it was the workers' inability to gain self respect and a living wage within market capitalism combined with an idea that things could be improved or changed completely through collective action.

I wish there was a popular "well known" history of the labor movement in the United States that heralded its main proponents. Unfortunately, our high school text books are generally a history of the owners of capital, not its creators; and even at the community college level there is rarely a labor history program or even a course.

Nevertheless, here is a list **of some of the main proponents of the labor movement that might be popularly known.**

Terrance Powderly, Leonora Barry and Frances Willard from the Knights of Labor. Samuel Gompers as the long time leader of the American Federation of Labor. Eugene Victor Debs, organizer of the American Railway Union and socialist candidate for President. Big Bill Hayward, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones and Margaret Sanger from the Industrial Workers of the World.

John L. Lewis as leader of the United Mine Workers of America and an organizer of the break away Congress of Industrial Organizations. The Reuther brothers, Walter, Victory and Roy associated with the rise of the Congress of Industrial Unions and primarily the United Auto Workers. A Philip Randolph who organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the first national union of black workers and who came up with the idea for the 1963 March on Washington. Harry Bridges leader of the rank and file controlled International Longshore and Warehouse Union.

Dave Beck and Jimmy Hoffa who built the Teamsters union into a national force based on their control of inter-state trucking in the late 50s and early 60s. George Meany, Lane Kirkland and John Sweeny, all Presidents of the AFL-CIO from 1955 to the present day. Jerry Wurf, as the leader who build AFSCME into the largest public sector union in the late 60s and early 70s.

Cesar Chavez and Delores Huerta, who like Wurf, linked up the California farm worker movement to the dynamics of the civil rights movement.

**How has the labor movement evolved throughout the past century? What events, what's its history and what are some key theories, philosophy behind it? How do workers become united in the labor movement? What is the most influential factor in the labor movement?**

**While various aspects of anarchist, socialist and communist social theory and philosophy** have been important to the labor movement, I'd describe the various philosophic strands of the 20<sup>th</sup> century labor movement as: cooperative, associational, syndicalist, social justice, collaborationist and public.

A cooperative society built on local government which provided infrastructure and cooperatives that organized production and distribution of the commonwealth was at the heart of the post civil war movement known as the Knights of Labor (KOL) which grew to be the largest national union in the 1880s.

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) at its founding core (1886) was about an associational idea of society in which civil society was based in workers guilds. These guilds not only controlled production through control of tools, but also shaped social life via rituals and codes of conduct.

In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) promoted a syndicalist model of society where workers would control the large industrial enterprises via direct democracy and these enterprises would be federated at the top to manage society.

In the mid 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Unions(CIO) promoted a vision of social justice which included not only unions that organized workers "wall to wall" or across skills in industrial enterprises, but also involved the federal government in programs to ensure a "level playing field" for both workers, the unemployed, disabled and elderly.

When the AFL and the CIO merged in 1955, they took a collaborationist position based on an assumed agreement between capital and labor in the post World War II cold war environment. Affiliated unions would be able to improve the position of their members at the bargaining table with

employers as long as they did not ask for wages from profits, try and bargain for more things than “wages and conditions”, did not enter the political arena as a separate labor party and supported US market expansion overseas.

As the public sector expanded to service the post World War II expansion, especially in the 1960s, public sector workers who were not covered by the Wagner Act and the consequent National Labor Relations Board bargaining service began to organize as workers or employees rather than continue to act as public “servants.” This organizing effort from the mid 1960s to the late 1970s brought more workers into the labor movement than at any previous moment in labor history and established the public sector as a significant contributor to the American workers “social wage.”

**I also wanted to respond to your question about events and also the request to walk through some specific movements such as the teachers or the farm workers.**

This is probably like the question of do you name names in thank yous or do you not mention anyone in case you might forget some key thank you. Nevertheless, here are some (of many) key events:

May 1<sup>st</sup> celebration as the commemoration of the American workers fight for the 8 hour day and its culmination in the May Day Massacre in Chicago and the hanging of some of the strike leaders such as Albert Parsons. This event is still celebrated throughout much of the world.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in NYC in 1911 where 146 young women leaped to their death when a fire broke out in their factory and the exit doors had been locked. This tragedy, which happened in a city with labor, progressive and feminists movements, initiated a whole series of labor reforms such as safety inspections, child labor laws and worker compensation laws.

The textile strikes in Lawrence Massachusetts (1912) and the silk workers strike (1913) in New Jersey led by the IWW where organizers proved an immigrant work force could be united on an industrial basis despite multiple language barriers. The IWW led strike in the Northwest woods in 1917 which won the 8 hour day and the first effective union of loggers.

The Seattle General Strike of February 1919 in which workers moved from the first stage of revolution (a general withdrawal of labor) to the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage, (the temporary replacement of leadership) and sparked a nationwide strike way demanding wages and union recognition in the post WWI environment. Nationally, over one-fifth of the workforce (4 million) struck in 1919.

The sit-down strikes of the mid 1930s against the large industrial giants like General Motors which demonstrated the capacity of workers to gain position on industrial capital and achieve union recognition and a contract. These strikes and their political power built the CIO and provided the foundation for the creation and legalization of FDR's social welfare state.

The post World War II strike wave, the largest in US labor history, and the subsequent attack on U.S. labor via the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, Truman's Loyalty Oath demand, the Attorney General's List (of subversive organizations) and the use of HUAC (the House Un-American Activities Committee). The compromise with labor from this ten year battle (1945-1955) led to the post World War II "social accord" or Deal.

The California farm workers strike, its grape boycott and long marches (340 miles in 25 days) in the early 1960s, led by Cesar Chavez, Delores Huerta and Larry Ltilong, demonstrated how a community organizing approach to immigrant labor and its merger with the themes of the civil rights movement could be successful.

The Memphis sanitation workers strike in 1968, its subsequent backing by AFSCME leader Jerry Wurf and its alignment with the civil rights movement with the presence and assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. created a potent movement for public sector workers to organize and become the leading segment of the labor movement by the late 1970s.

Public school teachers, bolstered by the women's movement of the 1970s and the success of AFSCME moved into collective bargaining and created the largest union in the United States, the independent National Education Association, followed in size by the American Federation of Teachers, an AFL-CIO affiliated union.

I think **workers get united** through collective struggle and through the experience of social solidarity which I think is the **most influential factor** in the labor movement.

**Is there one disparity between the radical view of the labor movement as an anarchist movement and the labor movement as something less than radical?**

There are certainly many anarchist theories and practices that have been a part of U.S. history and part of the labor movement's history from the utopian movements the 1890s to the syndicalist movement of the Wobblies (IWW) to the Catholic pacifists of the 30s and 40s to the counter cultural movement of the 60s.

But, if by disparity you mean difference, I would say the "radical" or "anarchist" feature of the labor movement is the promotion of the idea that the labor movement should be controlled by its "rank and file" as opposed to its paid staff or staff controlled officers.

**What about the state of labor during the period when women took over when men went to war? Was the transition from labor to home difficult? Was there resistance?**

I assume you are referring to the "Rosie the Riveter" period during World War II when the percentage of women expanded in the workforce and some women gained jobs in categories traditionally denied to them, like "Rosie."

During World War II, women's participation in the workforce jumped from 11 to 20 million with 5 million new to wage labor and some received an industrial (higher) wage. By 1944 one in five auto workers was a woman and women represented 20% of union membership. One union, the United Electrical Workers (UE) even won a case before the War Labor Board that required equal pay for equal work.

There is a great film that ends with women's return to "home" post World War II. It is called, "The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter" For an earlier look at women's roles in the auto strikes take a look at "With Babies and Banners," about the 1936-37 Flint, Michigan sit down strikes and the Women's Emergency Brigade. Perhaps all the films of the 1950s about US white family life was the enforcement of women's "return home." Nevertheless, women as usual remained in the labor force on a discriminatory basis. In 1950, 31% of all women were employed. In 1971, it was 42%. However they remained confined to certain job categories and after WWII were earning only 53% of a man's wage.

### **How do labor unions participate in politics and how do they influence both parties (emphasis on Nixon)?**

I'd like to answer this here, in the time period post WW II, since this is period where contemporary labor "participation in politics" was shaped.

Unlike many labor movements in the western "democracies" the U.S. labor movement does not have its own political party. The Canadian labor federation, the Canadian Labor Congress, for example, is an official part of the New Democratic Party. The AFL-CIO is not an official part of any political party.

Part of what I call the post World War II "Deal" between labor and capital was that the labor movement would not have its own party. This was symbolized by labor's enforcement of part of the Taft-Hartley law in 1947 that denied NLRB services to any union who refused to sign an affidavit saying none of its leaders were members of the Communist Party. Nine unions with 900,000 members who believed that the political beliefs of its members were none of the government's business and refused to sign the affidavit were expelled from the CIO in 1949.

Since this time, U.S. unions have shied away from the creation of an official labor party. Instead U.S. unions participate in politics, meaning electoral politics, in two main ways.

First, they organize PACs (Political Action Committees) to collect funds from union members that are separate from union dues. They then use these committees to endorse candidates and support the electoral campaigns of endorsed candidates. Second, they lobby legislatures and Congress to obtain legislation beneficial to labor union members or to stop legislation that might be injurious to their members.

US Labor union PACs are typically associated with the Democratic party and less so with the Republicans. They try to influence these parties via endorsement, funding and lobbying.

There is, however, a long tradition of attempts to create such a labor party. Parties such as the Progressive Party who ran Henry Wallace for President in 1948 had a substantial union base. The Citizens Party of the late 70s and early 80s also had a substantial union base. Today, there is a Labor Party which is party open only to union members based on the ideas of recently deceased Tony Mazzocchi and the funds of the OCAW union (now a part of PACE international). This party, however, is a non-electoral formation.

**I would like to know about the decline in union power/concessionary bargaining. Does the trend of concessionary bargaining have anything to do with the less-than-noble intentions of some possibly illegitimate (organized crime) union leaders?**

The “concessionary bargaining” period is generally associated with the coming to power of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and his breaking of the PATCO strike by air traffic controllers, a union which ironically had supported President Reagan’s election.

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, unions wishing to bargain with employers for increased wages and benefits were confronted by employers who either no longer wished to talk to them (lock outs) or who made such severe demands for wage and benefit give backs that they forced unions either to concede or wage a strike they were unable to enforce.

**Why were unions unable to defend themselves from these demands and therefore concede to the lowering of wages and benefits to their members? Why are unions becoming more and more ineffective?**

Corporate America was faced with the need to restructure during the 1970s in order to regain their profit rate and competitive edge against European and Japanese capital in global markets. With Reagan's political victory in 1980, corporations, led by the Business Roundtable simply decided they were no longer going to tolerate unions or their demands for more. By doing this, corporations were able to regain some of their profits and create a more "flexible" workforce.

Secondly, the majority U.S. unions had isolated themselves in the 1950s and 1960s from their own membership base by enforcing "business unionism." This type of unionism placed power in the hands of professional staffers who negotiated contracts for members rather than demonstrating power through membership mobilization. When the corporations no longer wanted to talk to the professional staffers, unions did not know how or perhaps they did not want to mobilize their members.

Third, the majority of U.S. unions in the 50s and 60s had also isolated themselves from and sometimes became direct opponents of powerful social movements – the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement and the women's movement. These social movements and their constituencies should have been labor's allies in any fight against corporate America, but often the sexism and racism of labor's official bodies made this impossible.

Fourth, and finally, I'd say official labor did not offer a direct challenge to U.S. capitalism and demand a separate social agenda that could inspire and mobilize all workers to create a different economy.

I don't believe the "concessionary bargaining" position of labor had much to do with organized crime interests inside labor unions which I believe to be extremely limited. I think concessionary bargaining had a great deal to do with the organized crime of corporate capitalism.

**Do unions help or hurt? What would be a situation where unions do not benefit the workers they are made to support? Why are some people (even workers) so against unions? Who is pro-union and who is anti-union? And Why? Why has the conservative population more and more pushed union breaking ideas and policies?**

Most of these questions seem to be about why unions are disliked by its own members, non-union workers and other portions of the U.S. population.

U.S. unions and the labor movement in general have within it the potential to challenge the unrestricted interests of U.S. capital, its corporate structures and its profit taking due to labor's history, position within the workforce and independent resources. For this reason alone, no part of corporate America's vast media empire will place a positive light on any of labor's pro-worker activities. This media bias against labor or its exclusion of labor from the media effects the entire U.S. population including labor's own members.

Besides those people who perceive their interests to be similar to those of the owners and managers of capital, there are also workers who oppose unions. They often oppose unions since bosses spend a good deal of time telling them that if they associate with unions, they will be fired. They become fearful for their jobs. Next time you are at work in your part time, non-union, low wage job mention a union and see what the reaction is.

**Who is pro-union?** I'd say those people who tend to be pro-union are union members or kids from union families who have experienced the benefits of union membership. Those people who want to be union members these days more than other segments of society are women and people of color.

I haven't found too many union members who oppose unions themselves despite the fact that they might have significant disagreements about how their union is run or oppose the positions it takes. If you get a chance, you should attend a union meeting where debate is taking place. It's one of the few places a regular working person can have voice and experience a democratic decision based on discussion.

**In terms of unions not benefiting workers they are made to support, I would say the most egregious recent example is asking workers to support Democratic party candidates who believe in and support free trade policies after the union has spent 10 years educating workers to the dangers of free trade.**

**How are unions currently being challenged and what are the prospects for further challenges under the current political climate?**

A labor union leader told me that difference between Kerry and Bush would be that Kerry would not help them, but let them live and Bush would kill them. I don't know of an arena in which labor is not being challenged by corporate power and these challenges should intensify under a second Bush administration.

The "level playing field" has already been vitiated by anti-union appointments to the National Labor Relations Board making it difficult to both organize unions via an NLRB process or gain balance and timely rulings from the Board on unfair labor practice charges.

The U.S. government's free trade policies (NAFTA, WTO & APEC) under both Democratic and Republican presidents over the past fifteen years have undercut labor's bargaining position in the US and facilitated the movement of both private and public sector jobs to low-wage markets in other nations. I assume a Bush administration will intensify efforts to get the WTO back on track, pass CAFTA and get the FTAA ratified and passed through Congress.

In addition, there will be a continuing effort to stamp out labor's ability to utilize political action contributions to effect electoral outcomes.

**What would you say the leading cause of outsourcing is? Unions, what? What opposition exists to outsourcing of jobs in the US?**

Unions represent about 10% of all workers in the private sector and about 40% of all public sector workers. This is one of the lowest union density rates in any Western democracy. So, I don't think the actual presence of unions is the cause of outsourcing.

I think the cause of outsourcing in the private sector is the effort to find cheaper labor to do the job for less. I think the function of the outsourcing in the public sector is a piece meal dismantling of the public sector itself, the unions within and the idea of a “public” with values and practices different than the market.

**Has there been or can there be a union of unemployed people who can demand jobs be brought back to the US and their neighborhoods?**

Yes, there certainly have been unions or organizations of the unemployed. The Seattle unemployment league of the early 1930s became a model for a nation wide movement that lasted well into the 1940s consisting of unemployment councils who fought for relief, against evictions, created cooperatives and fought for unemployment benefits.

I think the idea of an unemployed council for the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be particularly appropriate and I hope you and your colleagues organize one. Begin with reading your labor history.

**Can you explain what must be done to re-empower the labor movement more in depth? What needs to happen to rejuvenate the labor movement in the US? Because of the embedded limitations (under the law and internal) unions struggle under (501c5s), what new forms will the labor movement take? Seeing that bosses have gained such an upper hand, how will the worker/boss relationship change with the new labor movement?**

In order to re-empower and rejuvenate the labor movement and change the worker-boss relationship, I think several things need to happen.

First, unions need to announce that not one more dime of labor union funds, nor one more ounce of staff energy will be placed at the disposal of either the Democratic or Republican party candidates since both parties have proven to be against the interests of working people here at home and around the world.

Second, unions need to make an explicit rejection of the war policies of both these parties stating clearly that such policies are injurious to all workers and their families both here and overseas.

Third, unions should send delegates to the World Social Forum with the primary purpose of listening to and learning from the peoples of the world.

Fourth, unions should announce that they will send organizers and funds to supplement any social formation attempting to raise wages and benefits in a US controlled corporation operating overseas.

Fifth, unions need to implement a binding affirmative action program that guarantees the presence of elected union leaders who are women and people of color. White male union leaders need to step aside and act in advisory roles.

Sixth, after due consultation in the World Social Forum and with United Nations' General Assembly, unions should call for and organize a series of preparatory conferences throughout the next several years to construct a workers social agenda and new World Party aimed at challenging corporate control of global development here in the U.S. and overseas.