Rebuilding the Labor Movement

Saturday 18 December 2010

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Unions, as you might certainly expect, have been having a rough time during the current recession. How rough? Well, overall, union membership declined by a whopping 771,000 over the past year.

The number of workers in unions is still large - around 15 million. But that's only a little more than 12 percent of the country's workforce. There is one bright spot: more than one-third of public employees are in unions.

The figures for workers in private employment, however, show that only about 7 percent of the private sector workforce is unionized; that's the lowest percentage since 1900. That's right - the lowest percentage in 110 years.

Unions are fighting hard to reverse the downward trend, and although many outside the labor movement openly doubt - or at least wishfully think - that it can't be done, I think they're wrong. The doubters are forgetting that it's been done before - and it's been done in the face of obstacles that were at least as great as those confronted by union adherents today.

It began 75 years ago last month, in November of 1935, when eight affiliates of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) put together what soon became the independent Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Their aim was to mobilize the racially and ethnically mixed mass of generally unskilled workers in the steel, rubber, auto, meatpacking, and other basic industries.

The AFL had largely ignored the industrial workers in favor of skilled and semi-skilled white craftsmen who were organized into separate unions according to their trades - plumbing, printing, carpentry, and so forth - rather than by industry.

That kept most workers isolated from each other and enabled the industrial corporations that dominated the economy to unilaterally set pay and working conditions at the lowest possible levels.

The CIO leaders believed that workers could not make a decent living and that the labor movement could not grow - and, in fact, might not even survive - unless workers were brought together in tight solidarity across the industrial fields rather than through AFL's craft unionism.

The issues today are different, but the basic need for solidarity remains, as does the need to organize workers whatever their occupations.

That won't be easy with only about 12 percent of today's workforce in unions. But when the CIO began in 1935, less than 10 percent of the country's workers were in unions, and they faced a Great Depression that was much worse than today's Great Recession.
The labor movement hit rock bottom during the Depression of the 1930s, but, finally, unemployment became so widespread and pay and working conditions became so bad that large numbers of workers rebelled - most under the banners of the CIO.

President Franklin Roosevelt, fearing revolution, quickly pushed through Congress bills that in effect put the government behind the workers' attempts to organize. They were granted the legal right to organize and to strike - and to choose by majority votes unions to represent them in collective bargaining with their employers.

Millions of workers flocked to unions, CIO and AFL unions alike. Millions engaged in strikes and other militant actions to press their bargaining demands. Pay rose substantially. Workers won unheard of fringe benefits. Working hours were reduced without reductions in pay. Grievance procedures were instituted. Job security was greatly enhanced.

Most importantly, the living standards of ordinary Americans were raised. The United States at last had a true middle class.

As the CIO grew, so did the AFL. By the time the competing organizations merged in 1955 to form the AFL-CIO, one of every three US workers belonged to a union.

The vital, demanding and essential task of today's labor leaders is nothing less than to accomplish what their predecessors did when they formed the CIO three-quarters of a century ago - nothing less than to bring new life to the American labor movement.