

MOST AMERICANS REMAIN BLISSFULLY UNAWARE...ARE YOU?

By every available measure, union members are better-clothed, better-fed, better-paid, and better-housed than non-union workers with comparable jobs. They enjoy better and fuller access to health-care and prescription drugs. They have safer and more dignified workplaces and a great deal more recourse when employers violate the most basic standards of justice and equity. But the real success story is not what labor unions have won for the 12.9 percent of the workforce that they comprise, but what-through the expenditure of real blood, sweat, and tears-they have been able to gain for the millions of Americans who do not belong to them. For it is through the daily tribulations of their members, sometimes through the loss of actual lives and limbs, that unions set the bar for what others take for granted in the workplace.

Yet most Americans remain blissfully unaware of the gargantuan debt they owe the labor movement. They are indifferent to-or worse yet contemptuous of-organized labor, often without the most rudimentary knowledge of what it is unions do. Once a year, on Labor Day, Americans will take the weekend holiday and grill out.

And politicians-even the conservatives who are most opposed to the basic values that unions stand for-will spew meaningless platitudes about the dignity of work in America, and then return on Tuesday to their usual program of decimating safety standards and workplace regulations so that companies can increase their bottom line. For pure charade, Labor Day has come to rival January's Martin Luther King Day.

Far too many Americans take this approach to organized labor. A majority of the MBA students I have taught can enumerate with child-like glee the Christmas list of goodies that awaits them once they go out and take a real job: sick pay, overtime pay, vacation pay, health insurance, disability insurance, good wages, safety standards, pension benefits, prescription drug coverage, and more-without ever once realizing that it is unions to whom they owe a massive thank you for setting the industrial standard. Instead, they believe that an all-powerful and beneficent employer is responsible for willingly 'giving' these things to them. And so the fable is brought full circle-replete with employer as Santa Claus.

But such stunning naivete is not the result of mere ignorance or even serendipity. It is the fruit of a disciplined, organized, and well-financed campaign by conservatives throughout the country to browbeat, denigrate, and disparage organized labor. It is an effort that has been especially acute in the American South-in places like Alabama-where the region sold its soul and its public purse after the Civil War to attract outside capital to build an industrialized economy. Corporate welfare in the form of land grants, low or non-existent taxation, anemic educational spending and social services, and police, military, and judicial repression of organized labor became the tragic norm in the South-along with the inculcation of a vague but deeply felt repugnance at the very idea of unions. While both political parties have pushed free-trade policies that bite into union rolls, it is conservatives who take the lead in building the obstacles that cut the most deeply. Membership is down 369,000 workers (from 13.3 percent of the workforce) in just the past year-accelerating a 20-year slide in union membership. Things are particularly bad in the private sector, where only 8.2 percent of workers belong to unions now-representing another dramatic decline. Because Alabama is more industrialized than its neighbors, its membership figures parallel the national average rather than a lower southern figure.

Many have criticized the Bush Administration for waging a shortsighted, misguided, duplicitous, and fatally flawed war against 'terror' in Iraq-and they are on solid ground in that assessment. But no one can say a word against the other war the administration has been prosecuting, for they have fought it with frightening efficiency, steely resolve, a bottomless well of innovation, and limitless funding. The only problem is that it has been waged against working Americans-in unions and without. To say the Bush Administration's record on labor has been appalling is to give it too much credit.

The White House and its Republican allies in Congress have tried to eviscerate safety and ergonomics standards, undermine the concept of overtime, privatize Social Security, and expand NAFTA to 34 Central and South American countries without worker and environmental protections. They narrowly failed to pass a National Right-to-Work law that would have trumped state laws and allowed nonunion workers to enjoy the same rights, privileges, wages, conditions, and representation of union workers in organized workplaces-but without paying a penny in dues. The administration annihilated the collective bargaining rights of 230,000 federal employees in Homeland and Transportation Security while proposing the shifting of 850,000 federal jobs to mostly nonunion companies, destroying the right of postal workers to bargain, and opposing the Davis-Bacon law of prevailing wages as 'wasteful' and 'fraudulent.' The 3-2 Republican majority on the National Labor Relations Board has announced plans to review the 70 year-old 'card check' procedure that allows workers to quickly and fairly indicate their preference for a union, and reversed a 2000 decision that ruled graduate teaching and research assistants were entitled to protection under federal labor law. The Republican Congress refused to extend the unemployment benefits of the more than 2 million Americans who have lost their jobs on Mr. Bush's watch at the same time the President proposed cutting funds for dislocated workers and job training. The administration's other policies are no less shocking: opposing limits on lead and arsenic levels in drinking water; running up the largest deficit (by far) in American history, a paralyzing burden that will be borne by the children of working Americans and theirs; cutting funding for education, Homeland Security, Head Start, nutrition programs for women, children, and infants, funding for children's hospitals by 30 percent, and the COPS program for extra police officers by 90 percent-all while passing historically large tax cuts that will funnel 50 percent of the windfall to Americans making over 1 million dollars a year; opposing a strong patient's bill of rights and prohibiting Americans from buying Canadian drugs that are 33 to 80 percent cheaper; advocating \$60 billion in tax breaks for companies that lay off workers and move jobs overseas while publicly praising the exportation of high-paying, unionized jobs and scrambling to figure out a way to classify hamburger-flipping as a 'production job' for purposes of employment statistics; giving HMOs \$46 million in taxpayer money, three times the amount conceded to prior to passage of the bill; lowering air pollution standards and opening up millions of national park acres to logging in the guise of Clean Skies and Healthy Forests initiatives; opposing fuel efficiency standards on SUVs; and an abundance of policies equally hostile to working Americans and their families.

Through the 1960s a good number of working-class and middle-class southerners made up the ranks of the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Councils, or acquiesced in their activities. In this way, many ordinary people satisfied the powerful urge to feel better than somebody about something. Since the civil rights movement, and the abolition of overt racism as a respectable past-time, many whites have gratified

the deeply-rooted urge to feel superior by embracing the 'new racism' of moral and religious chauvinism and judgment of their neighbors. It is a development that has not been lost on-or discouraged by-conservative political strategists anxious to swell the ranks of their voters. And it is for this reason that unions have so often found themselves on the receiving end of conservative offensives. Because it is labor unions, more than any other institution, that deliver votes, money, and workers to progressive (usually Democratic) candidates. More than this, unions represent the best chance for working Americans to stay focused on real, substantive issues when making up their minds how to vote rather than being distracted by emotional red-herrings or being taken in by the pseudo-populist nonsense of 'compassionate conservatism.'

Yet even the union firewall has been far from foolproof. The real tragedy that confronts us is that nearly 40 percent of all union households voted for George W. Bush in 2000. If the same percentage does so again, they might consider the quicker and easier route of accomplishing the same thing: taking a kitchen knife to their own throats. Working-class and even middle-class people in America might have their reasons for voting Republican, but it is a flight of fancy to call them rational.

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