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In an epic time for workers, the labor movement is dying

by William Serrin



Members of the Laborers' International Union Local 89 wait outside their local union hall after placing their names on the job list in San Marcos, Calif., Nov. 7, 2008. (CNS/Reuters/Mike Blake)

Commentary

I know honesty is dangerous, but let's try it: I know it's Labor Day and time for salutes to American labor and workers. But the American labor movement is dead or dying, take your pick, and American workers have, in the main, little power, often none. And the thing is, nobody -- well, almost nobody -- cares or, at the least, pretends what I say is untrue or exaggerated.

Reader, it's not.

Take union membership. Way down -- a figure almost too sad to look up. But I did: 12 percent of the American work force, give or take, substantially less in the private sector, where labor power historically has been. In 1955, at the height of the labor movement, it was 35 percent. If labor were a business -- actually, it is, in a substantial manner, but that's another matter -- it probably would be in bankruptcy. Probably eligible for stimulus money.

Analysis: Labor today

Then look at labor leadership, which may be an oxymoron, such as left-wing democrat or, say, intellectual conservative. The labor guys -- and they're mostly guys -- have lost most if not all the energy and dedication they may have had 30 or 40 years when they entered the movement. The guys -- and the few women -- have gotten worn down long ago, been bought off, or realized it's no use. It's like the head of the building trades some reporters, including your writer, were interviewing some years ago. "How's organizing in the building trades doing?" a reporter asked. The building trades man was flummoxed. "You can't organize in the building trades," the head of the building trades said and went back to his breakfast.

Go to any labor conclave and you will see what I mean: folks sitting around bored to tears or ignoring or running roughshod over the rank-and-file and traducing and otherwise putting the knife to the throats of rump candidates. It's been going on for years. Many of the best people I have known in the labor movement are people who have tried and they got beaten back, if not beaten up. But they hang on, out of hope, or maybe, being a bit older now, because they can't afford to give up their jobs. Or they have drifted off to other things.

Then there are the feuds, such as that between the Hatfields and McCoys, or such as those in the Mafia, when the guys go to the mattresses, and with about the same amount of good sense that fostered them and with the same stupid result. I refer here to such contretemps as those involving the Service Employees International Union, sometimes portrayed by a fawning labor reporter or two as one of the best American unions, and its own members in California, and between the SEIU and UNITE Here, the remnants of the storied hotel and garment workers unions.

Those fights -- labor versions of going to the mattresses -- have accomplished a lot, right?

Then there are labor's enemies, many in number. Here we can include business leaders and their lackeys, most politicians, including many Democrats, although the Democrats are sneaky and sharp, professing loyalty to the labor movement and its men and women and taking labor campaign money and telling labor conclaves how much they love working men and women but willing to abandon labor and workers in almost any vote on a labor bill or position, such as single-payer medical plans, labor organizing, NAFTA, immigration, and the like.

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Then there's the labor press, or, rather, the lack of it. If there are lower-regarded folks in what remain of America's newsrooms than labor reporters I'd like to know who they are, those who have not taken buyouts or gone blogging or to nongovernmental organizations. Maybe reporters who cover real estate.

As I said to an editor the other day as we talked about labor journalism, what has happened to us?

The problem is that this is an epic time, as important a time, or close to it, I think, as those times I have referenced above. Workers are losing their jobs; families are being decimated; working-class communities -- in some place working-class cities, my old town of Detroit, is only one example -- are in

shambles.

Then there is all the international stuff, for which there is no room here.

In journalistic vocabulary, this is a great story. But it is not being covered, or is being hardly covered or covered badly, often by journalists who have no understanding of workers or the working-class communities they are occasionally dispatched to cover, certainly no sympathy for the workers and members of their families and the devastated community. (By what journalism rule are journalists to have no sympathy for the people and communities they cover and to write sympathetically about whom and what they cover?)

Of course, this would require recognition by reporters and editors of the times in which we live, commitment, and travel often to places unattractive to many reporters and editors. This is tough in times of retraction, confusion in the newsroom, reduced newsroom budgets, for reporters who do not like to leave the newsroom. Trust me: You will not get good reporting on labor and work -- or the lack of it -- in America by dispatching reporters from the business desk.

Some events are on the horizon that will receive attention, among them John J. Sweeney stepping down as president of the AFL-CIO, no doubt to be replaced by Richard Trumka, now AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer.

Folks, don't waste time thinking about the matter. I personally journeyed to Columbia University in 1995, 14 years ago, to listen to the canonization of Sweeney -- and Trumka. Nothing happened, except talk. The Sweeney Mob was just like the Lane Kirkland Mob or the George Meany Mob. They didn't even go to the mattresses.

Now Trumka is poised to become AFL-CIO president, a job he has sought, and dutifully bided his time to obtain, for more than a quarter century, after a brief sojourn into the mines so he could qualify for the presidency of the United Mine Workers of America.

Reader, trust me: It won't matter.

One mob replacing another. That's all.

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