

Wake-up call

Failed labor movement must rebuild itself as a successful voice for Washington's working families

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After several major unions left the AFL-CIO last month, some Washington state labor leaders have been telling themselves and the public that we don't have a problem.

Their rap goes "things here are fine, we all work together, our unions are growing, and we're doing great things in Olympia for working people."

Talk about being in denial.

The reality, obvious to most working people, if not to most labor leaders, is that the labor movement has utterly and completely failed Washington workers.

Let's consider a few facts:

- Real median household income in Washington state declined 11 percent between 1998 and 2003.
- The health insurance industry made more than \$800 million in profit in Washington last year while most workers are paying more to receive fewer benefits.
- Washington has the most regressive tax system in the country. The lowest-paid workers pay 17 percent of their income in state and local taxes while the wealthiest pay 3 percent.
- The cost of home ownership is quickly becoming out of reach for middle-class families. Median housing costs have increased 13 percent in the last year alone.
- Private-sector union density has declined substantially in Washington state – from 16.3 percent in 1998 to just 13 percent in 2004.
- A generation ago, it took only one income to support most middle-class families; today, it takes at least two.

Put simply, the lives of most workers are getting worse, and no one is doing anything about it.

A generation ago, workers knew who was on their side – unions and the Democratic Party. Today, more workers vote Republican than Democrat, and some haven't even heard of unions.

As fewer and fewer workers have any experience in a union, and existing unions have failed to keep pace with the changes in their industries, unions have lost the ability they once had to help lift workers up against the excesses of corporate greed.

The labor movement – once the only successful wealth distribution system under capitalism – has failed. Today workers rightfully doubt that unions – or any large institution – are fighting for them.

Washington workers should demand unions that are modern, 21st-century organizations – innovative and flexible, future-oriented, economically and strategically sophisticated, and in tune with the demands of today's work force and

today's economy. Specifically, unions should:

- Help union companies become and stay competitive. It doesn't help union members in the long term if their companies

are put at a competitive disadvantage with higher labor costs. Unions need to figure out how to organize whole economic sectors and lift up workers in those sectors, not simply conduct firm-by-firm organizing.

By equalizing labor costs within a sector, employers can then compete over quality, marketing strategy, access to capital, and business strategy, but lose the profit and market share incentives to hold down wages and benefits.

At the same time, rather than simply fighting to protect the tiny minority of employees who have frequent disciplinary or performance problems, unions should be figuring out how to add value and productivity to their employer's businesses.

In nursing homes, for example, empowering workers to participate in patient-care decisions and tapping their vast knowledge of conditions on the floors can help create improved quality, higher morale and lower turnover.

- Become the economically populist voice for all workers, not just the parochial voice for the narrow interests of unionized workers. Workers rallied to unions in the past because they saw unions as a voice for improvements in the lives of American workers generally, not just as special-interest institutions for a few.

Unions helped create a legacy of the 40-hour week, health benefits, civil rights and equal pay that lifted all workers up. By providing practical, credible public leadership to today's struggles for affordable health care, retirement security, better schools, affordable housing for working families, and – yes – lower taxes on overtaxed working families – unions can once again capture the imagination of workers.

- Stop acting like a subsidiary of the Democratic Party. The party of FDR and LBJ hasn't had many big new ideas in the last 40 years. I was born in the late 1960s; voters of my age and younger can't remember the last time government did something that was new, big and good. Democrats – once the party of working America – have helped facilitate the corporate takeover of our country while paying lip service to protecting yesterday's government programs.

Most American workers increasingly doubt there's any government program designed to help or protect them.

Workers deserve a labor movement that is equally critical of both major parties and which holds politicians of both parties accountable. Unions should unite against Democrats who fail to stand up for workers and mobilize Republican workers to elect pro-worker Republicans in primary elections. What if we had two pro-worker political parties, instead of none?

- Meet workers' needs on and off the job. Unions should do more than just bargain contracts – we need to take on the real-life everyday problems working families face away from the job as well. For example, unions can and should become a strong voice advocating for affordable homeownership and 21st-century classrooms.

- Help workers prepare for what's next. We need to provide education, training, career development and job mobility. In today's world, no one stays at the same job, the same employer, or even the same industry for their whole career. Unions should negotiate at the bargaining table and advocate in public policy to make themselves centers for career mobility, where workers can learn skills to prepare for their next role in an ever-changing job market.

Rather than simply celebrate on this Labor Day, we need to recognize the failure of the labor movement, see the disastrous impacts of that failure on working families and figure out how to rebuild the labor movement into a successful voice for working families.

American workers need a union movement that is vibrant, innovative and self-critical. The future of America's workers depends on us building a 21st-century union movement.

David Rolf is president of Service Employees International Union Local 775, which represents 28,000 home-care and nursing home workers in Washington. The SEIU is one of the national labor groups that pulled out of the AFL-CIO last month.

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