

Bright future for unions?

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The conventional wisdom currently says that unions are anachronistic holdovers from an earlier industrial era. If they ever had any value (and perhaps they never did), it is gone in the brave new world of global, entrepreneurial capitalism. Unions will die a slow death. Or else, they should be killed off. They have no positive role to play in the free-spirited world of tomorrow.

Such is the conventional wisdom.

In the face of this, some unions, or union leaders, are merely digging in, holding on, refusing to budge, and willing to die out like dinosaurs, if the good old days cannot be made to return again.

This is understandable. Rapacious, shortsighted, individualistic, global capitalism does seem to be the only ideological game in town. "Transform yourself into a greedy, self-centered global entrepreneur, or die," is the loudest voice I hear wherever in the world I go.

It just emerged again here last week in the recommendations of the Hawaii Economic Revitalization Task Force. According to one headline in Sunday's full-court press, the members of the task force, including apparently your own illustrious leader, went from cynicism, to unanimity, to euphoria. Euphoria, yet! With such delirium, it must be true.

Oh, there may still be some Green, New Age, or indigenous Hawaiian voices crying in the wilderness, offering hope of a better, more caring, and communal day, but those voices are made to appear increasingly marginalized and old-fashioned.

Old-fashioned! That is the main thing these guys want to get you to believe: that unions, or concerns about workers generally, are old-fashioned. To be with it, you have to forget workers and turn everyone into a self-centered, endlessly wheeling and dealing, private entrepreneur.

Yet, in spite of this--perhaps because of this--I am here today as a futurist to tell you that there are other possible futures for unions. For more details that I can share today, I recommend that you consider the work of Drexel University futurist, Arthur Shostak, if you have not done so already. Shostak has developed very plausible visions of a future in which revived and revised strong unions will exist over the 21st Century.

Shostak does not assume that global capitalism will go away any time soon, and he does believe that human labor will still be needed for the foreseeable future. He also argues that unions can and should mimic some of the lean, mean, adaptive,

networked, focused forms which some businesses espouse (while also linking together with other unions in order effectively to deal with the global transnational megacorporations which are also emerging as well).

Indeed, I believe it is wrong to assume, as so many business gurus are prophesying, that the most important feature of capitalist structures in the 21st Century will be small, flexible, temporary electronic-cottage firms of one or two people. There will be many such small firms in the future, I am sure, but the monopolistic logic of capitalism is obviously operating now, and will continue to dominate, so that any successful small firm will either be gobbled up by larger ones or itself gobble up larger ones.

Hence the dominant feature of the future in this regard, in Hawaii and everywhere else, is towards a world in the 21st Century controlled by a small number of gigantic, diversified, global corporations. Thus, strong, unified, if flexible and networked, unions will still be needed to advance the interests of ordinary people in such a globalized political-economy.

But if there can be a bright future for unions generally--if we will need unions in the 21st Century like never before--what is the future of unions of governmental employees?

Here, the immediate future looks exceedingly grim as governments everywhere continue irresponsibly to self-destruct in the face of exponentially rising needs for communal infrastructure and services. Privatization seems to be an unstoppable global trend found everywhere.

You know how, every once in a while, some new kind of flu bug arises in some part of the world and then sweeps across the globe, infecting millions and killing tens of thousands, with only a few people staying somehow immune and healthy? Well, over the years I have concluded that many ideas and fads are also like the flu. They arise somewhere with no clear point of origin, then spread wildly, swiftly infecting millions of people everywhere so that even sensible people begin saying and doing the stupidest things: firing employees, cutting services, and bad-mouthing government workers for no good reason, simply because they are infected by the anti-government bug and just can't help themselves.

As the world eagerly dismantles governments in the name of free market efficiency, we are captured by a sick ideology as weird, powerful, untried and wrong as the Marxist ideology that Lenin brought to Russia in 1917, infecting that country, and spreading the Red disease worldwide until suddenly, and for no apparent reason, it all died out, everywhere, in 1989 and 90. The Red Plague abruptly and peacefully came to an end. The Evil Empire, with all its evil emperors everywhere, limply sank to its knees and melted away.

But only to give way to the Blue Plague, a new global disease of even more frightening proportions.

Will it take 70 years of similar suffering before the virulent ideology of free market capitalism is revealed to be equally deadly and empty of life and hope? It may be so, as I look around this community and listen to what so many well-meaning people are saying, advocating, and doing, with such passion and euphoria. Strange. And sick.

Now, it is certainly the case that in the face of such an ideological plague, governmental unions need to become healthy, flexible, efficient, networked, aware, and not be, and not appear to be, stuck in the nostalgic past of big government.

But I am absolutely convinced that the current capitalist ideology is not sustainable, nor do I think the forms and structures which that ideology has created are sustainable.

It is not the case that vigorous capitalism triumphed over diseased communism. Rather, it is the case that neither is a healthy, sustainable way to live, but that communism succumbed first. Capitalism in its current form will also fail because it is based on myths and lies, and not on care or sustainable futures.

While there certainly is a necessary and proper role for free markets, the production of needed goods and the provision of vital services, diligent labor, and honest advertising, capitalism as it is now organized is none of these things.

It is based on false assumptions about human motivations and preferences (forcing everyone to become greedy and self-centered); false measures of success (such as the GNP or stock market indexes); false premises about the proper role of government (eagerly privatizing decisions and profits while duplicitously socializing losses and damages); and, most dangerously of all, our present economic ideology is concerned only with the immediate pleasures of the here and now, acknowledging no responsibility for the impact of current economic activities on future generations, or on the torn and tattered Earth upon which future generations will be forced to try to eke out a living.

When, or rather, as capitalism collapses from its own indulgences and excesses, there will be an urgent need for many kinds of local, community-oriented, helping and caring organizations, such as religious congregations, neighborhood centers, credit unions, local security units such as the National Guard, and labor unions.

While unions must become more flexible and fluid to deal with the present global economic madness, unions also need to retain their communal roots in solidarity, equity, justice, and mutual care.

Of course, as a futurist, I still believe that the long-range future is away from the need or even the possibility of any kind of full employment, or anything even vaguely approaching full employment.

As I have said many times before, human labor, mental as well as manual, is barely needed now, in point of fact, and will rapidly diminish because of automation, artificial intelligence, and the effortless yet sustainable abundance that nanotechnology will bring over the 21st Century. Unions need to be future-oriented in that respect as well.

The need for human labor is minuscule now, and most jobs are created merely to keep as many people off the streets as possible--not because their labor is needed, but so they can be credit-worthy consumers. Given our global material abundance and overcapacity, what we need now more than anything are consumers, not laborers, but we lack the imagination and will to create a system which accepts and deals fairly with this fact.

Future pressures in this regard will be overwhelming, and we will either respond to them before or after the collapse of our present obsolete economic system.

Thus I conclude that unions need to have three legs to stand on now.

One leg must be firmly rooted in the communal past, enabling unions to continue to do what they were originally set up to do--to ensure that workers receive good pay and other benefits for their labor; have reasonable assurance that if they work well they will continue to be employed in meaningful jobs and at decent wages; and to see that their workplaces are safe and congenial. This is still a vital leg upon which unions must stand. But that is a rapidly shrinking leg, and it should be allowed, indeed made, to shrink quickly, but humanely.

The second leg is the one which can dance to the contemporary tunes of global capitalism. Unions must recognize that most of the new jobs in the future will be temporary, fluid, global, and increasingly intellectual and symbolic. This leg of unionism should make it one of its highest priorities to guarantee that all persons--and not just a privileged few--are fully educated and motivated to live in this dynamic and knowledge-based world--a very different world from the past.

Unions must also strive to protect the interests of workers in such a world by being themselves truly open, democratic, participatory, fluid, networked, intellectual, aware, and global (and no longer hierarchical, authoritarian, anti-intellectual, bigoted, and parochial, as too many unions still are now).

And the third leg of unionism must be set in the future, helping workers of all kinds prepare eagerly for a world without work, but still a world of material abundance, peaceful interaction, and deep cultural and spiritual, individual and communal, identity and meaning.

It is not only unions which need to have these three legs to stand on. All institutions need them. But I do not see any organization which is able to stand on these three legs now except for unions:

Governments are in confusion, disarray and, often, deserved contempt as they cravenly give in to the forces of individual greed and privilege.

Business (as currently organized--it need not be this way) has no soul, and no ability to care about anything beyond its immediate fantasies and desires.

Education doesn't have a clue, paralyzed between the past and the future.

Only unions are built on care, equity, and solidarity.

For unions, or any institutions in the present, to learn also to be intelligent, flexible, fair, and future-oriented is difficult, but it is necessary, and it is possible, I believe. Or at least, so I hope!