

Even brighter futures for unions

"The Role of Labor Unions in the 21st Century"

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Almost ten years ago, I published a paper titled, "Bright future for unions." After surveying the scene for this little talk tonight, I have titled my talk, "Even brighter futures for unions."

Conventional wisdom has it that unions will get weaker and weaker and eventually vanish as the world transforms from an industrial society dependent on manual labor to an information society where most people are self-employed, self-reliant, flexible entrepreneurs who take care of themselves. While I will problematize that idea in a moment, even if that is the future, a strong argument can be made that new kinds of unions will be needed by those self-employed people to help them obtain and manage their health insurance, investments, pensions, and even conditions of work. Also, it is clear that even now not all people in the so-called "service sector" lead glamorous, up-scale, and self-directed lives. A lot of them provide menial services for others. It is certain their lot would be considerably better now, as well as in the future, if unions exist catering especially to their needs and preferences.

So, even in a global high-tech world, the futures of unions is bright, if unions will adapt to the changing situation, as some of them clearly have.

Unions have always been attacked by owners, capitalists, the media, and most academics in the US and elsewhere. However the major assault shaping the present occurred during and following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the eventual complete domination of the Republican Party by people who call themselves conservatives but who hold and express a combination of wildly radical economic and religious ideas without precedence in previous American history. They were and are anything but "conservative" though they have been able to misappropriate the label for their own purposes while very successfully transforming the word "liberal" (but strangely, not "neoliberal") into such a dirty word that no liberal politician dares use the label, utter the word, or be caught favoring policies that might be termed "liberal" (that is, "favoring freedom" which is what "liberal" means) such as expressing opposition to wars of aggression; alarm over public debt and the ever-growing income gap; concern about global warming; or support for unions.

If anyone is interested, I can tell you in considerable detail how certain right-wing futurists, led by Newt Gingrich, envisioned and created this situation. Whatever one might think of it substantively, it was masterful, and the true work of futuristic genius. At the same time, most liberal future-oriented politicians, such as Al Gore, were so cowed and dominated by the new "Republicans" that they refused to speak what they knew to be the truth about the war, the environment, and labor--which is why I view Gore's movie called "The inconvenient truth" with cynicism bordering on contempt. Similarly, several months ago, Bill Clinton declared that the world could be out of "recoverable oil" in 35-50 years--something, by his own admission, he well-knew when he was president, but would not act on in any way. So please do not think that I am making a partisan attack here. Democrats eagerly worked hand-in-till with Republicans to rob and deceive the American people.

But there are some signs that perhaps the neocons and neoliberals have finally mishandled things so profoundly that even the American public is beginning to worry about their future, as well they might since every policy of American governance over the past twenty-six years, fully supported by most "Democrats", has made the American future look not only gloomy but downright catastrophic.

So I firmly believe that the time is ripe for a renewal of liberal values again, meaning a focus not on selfish greed, empty wealth, and a mean-spirited, violence-loving form of Christianity, but on equity, fairness, sustainability, and nonviolence which once were as truly conservative values as they were liberal values, and should be used to unite our local and national communities with the global community once again.

I see unions playing a major role in the renewal of communities of fairness and care.

Of course it won't be easy and success is far from inevitable. Given our eager embrace of the freedom-stripping provisions the grotesquely named "the Patriot Act" and "Homeland Security Department"--I thought I had gone to sleep and awakened in Nazi Germany when I first heard the decidedly-unAmerican phrase "homeland security" for the first time--as well as the purposely humiliating intrusions of the Transportation Security Administration and all the other responses to the attacks of September 11,2001, it is clear we certainly are not "the land of the free and the home of the brave" but rather "the land of the easily-cowed and the home of those frightened into mindless obedience by the sight of our own shadow." So there is still a bright future for fascism in the US. Moreover the US federal courts at all levels are packed with young neo-cons who will do everything in their power, being free of any democratic accountability, to keep Americans afraid and disciplined. So even if popular sentiment changes in the\US, the courts might still be able to further the anti-liberal, anti-labor agenda.

Nonetheless, let me cast a broader net to my contention that there can be a bright future for unions.

It is often said that the future belongs to Asia, especially to China and India. Given certain heroic assumptions about our economic and environmental futures that I will get to in a minute, that is entirely likely, though I would add Islam to the mix and say the future belongs to Confucian, Hindic, and Islamic cultures. None of them--especially Islam--is wedded to the neoliberal nonsense that even the poorest American seems willing to buy (A recent poll showed that 77% of Americans believe they can become rich, even though their net and comparative incomes have never been lower, but are going lower still).

I take it as a possible harbinger of the future that WalMart has had to permit unions in its Chinese branches. China is after all a communist country, though in an extremely noncommunist way. There is at least the rhetoric of worker solidarity and the rule of the proletariat in China to bring forward if--indeed when--the global neoliberal bubble bursts, and solidarity is needed again.

India also is very well-known for resisting American-style rapacious capitalism in favor of a kind of homegrown socialism for many years, even though, it too, like China, appears to be buying into the neocon fantasy now.

And of course if there is any ideological and economic basis to the current conflict between Islam and the west, it certainly must be between debt-laden, resource-devouring, oil-depleting western consumerism on the one hand and debt-forbidding, resource-conserving, communal-sharing Islam on the other (overlooking for now Islam's crippling internal hatreds). In any event, Islam, India, and China have human, cultural, and natural resources for resilience that the west may have lost, unless a concerted effort is made soon by unions and others to rejuvenate them.

So if the future is moving towards Asia, the future of unions is moving there as well, and it looks bright indeed for unions and unity.

And even brighter when the global economic and environmental systems collapse, as they surely will, perhaps quite soon.

Ever since the collapse of communism in 1990, I have argued that capitalism did not defeat communism; rather communism, as an unsustainable and intolerable economic and human system, collapsed before neoliberal capitalism, an equally unsustainable and intolerable economic and human system, did. Now is our time.

America's economy is nothing but one gigantic Ponzi game--a pyramid scheme, which, like all such schemes, works very well for those who first got into the system *as long as the system grows*. So also, neoliberal capitalism knows only one thing--to keep the economy growing: to use more resources, produce more goods, build more hotels, bring in more tourists, enrich the rich and immiserate the poor, world without end.

But such growth will and must end, and when it does, the crash will pull down all our fantasies with it.

I was just reading an essay depicting the collapse of the American economy in the next few years in terms of the historical collapse of the Soviet Union, along with the Russian society and economy, in the 1990s. In 1990, a very stable and proud, if not very attractive, social system with many well-fed and healthy people living productive and meaningful lives suddenly collapsed, and still is a long way from recovery 15 years later. Murder, suicide, and death rates continue to zoom while fertility and life expectancy falls. There is no public health or public safety at all. Russia is as close to rightwing anarchy, terrorized by governmental/corporate mobs, as the world has recently seen. It certainly can be viewed as holding a mirror to our own future, though the possibility of bloody racial and cultural violence in America is even greater than in Russia.

I do not mean to end on a note of doom and gloom. Indeed, to the contrary, I am arguing that we need institutions and processes for unity and equity and nonviolence and sustainability now as never before, and I find them in the past and present, and I hope in the future of unions.

And, I might add, given where we are tonight, I find hope also in Catholic social justice as well. Whatever disagreements I might have about some aspects of Catholic public policy, Catholics--especially Catholic Bishops--are the ONLY religious group in the US that still sometimes speaks out against economic and military injustice. Well, now is the time to clear your throats and start talking.