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## Multiculturalism in Building the Union

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## Multiculturalism in Building the Union

### Abstract

[Excerpt] The trade union movement has always been the strongest when it has built upon diversity and woven from that diversity a grand mosaic — embracing different cultures and traditions in the name of that one great notion of solidarity. Our strength has always been in our diversity and solidarity has always been our motto.

### Keywords

ACTWU, multiculturalism, diversity, union organizing, trade unions



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# Multiculturalism in Building the Union

■ *Jack Sheinkman*

The trade union movement has always been the strongest when it has built upon diversity and woven from that diversity a grand mosaic—embracing different cultures and traditions in the name of that one great notion of solidarity. Our strength has always been in our diversity and solidarity has always been our motto.

As President of the Amalgamated, I represent a union built on the dreams and aspirations of immigrants. The faces and the nations represented in our unions today may be different, but the hopes of our members and their families are identical.

I like to think of ACTWU as a mini United Nations. An increasing number of our union's members come from the Caribbean, South and Central America, from Southeast Asia—and more recently, new immigrants have joined our ranks from the troubled lands in Eastern Europe. We also have among our ranks Afro-American workers, white textile and apparel workers in the rural South, and others from the urban centers whose ancestors were immigrants from Europe several decades ago. A majority of our members are women—and women of color are the fastest growing segment of our union family.

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■ *Jack Sheinkman is President of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). These remarks were originally made before New York labor leaders in a forum sponsored by Cornell Univ. Labor Studies Program/NYSSILR in October 1992.*

We've had negotiating teams with 10 members and 10 languages. Yet even when our workers may not be able to converse in the same language, they share the same goals. Our job as union leaders is to foster the similarities by respecting the differences. This is the way to make our union strong—and to make the union movement a welcoming venue for new workers and for the workers of the future.

To do this, our union has had to re-examine itself critically, experiment with new strategies, programs and practices as part of a long and complicated process of cultural and organizational change designed to transform challenges into growth opportunities.

Our union has always had as its mission the merging of diverse cultures. From the old ACWA, which was an amalgam of immigrants from Eastern, Southern, and Central Europe—to the TWUA, which included a large number of Southern white and Afro-American workers—our union always sought to break down the barriers of differences through mutual respect.

Today, because of the concentration of Asian and Latino workers, we concentrate on issues of critical importance to these workers. One example of this is the pressing issue of immigration policy. It is estimated that as much as 39% of the apparel industry's entire workforce now consists of undocumented Asian and Latino immigrants. Partly as a response to these changing demographics—and more importantly, because it is a matter of civil and human rights—ACTWU had adopted a policy calling for the repeal of employer sanctions contained in the U.S. immigration laws. In fact, ACTWU, along with the ILGWU, are the only two AFL-CIO unions to oppose employer sanctions for hiring undocumented workers. This is an important step in shaping a strategy to increase and improve both the organizing and representation of this growing immigrant workforce.

Our union has always stood for international worker solidarity, but recently we have increased our international activities to assist workers in developing countries to organize themselves.

An example of this is the union-to-union work we've done between ACTWU and SACTWU, the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union, the third largest union in COSATU, South Africa's labor federation. We've brought workers and leaders from SACTWU to meet with our union leaders, members and staff across the country. We've shared information about how to build the union with everything from organizing campaigns to corporate campaigns to public relations. This has been an invigorating experience for both unions—and it has strengthened both unions. I might add that this strategy also helps us plan campaigns which

are international in scope when we are fighting in the global marketplace where multinationals are the name of the game.

Another example of this is the work ACTWU has done on behalf of workers' rights and human rights in Central America. Recently, you have heard about the news which the National Labor Committee broke about USAID funding in the Caribbean Basin—siphoning off millions of dollars in American taxpayer monies to pay American corporations to relocate in free trade zones in Central America, where workers are abused and underpaid. ACTWU was the lead union in this probe—our aim is twofold: one is to promote job training and investment here in the U.S. Two is to make sure that American dollars don't go to abuse workers in the Third World. Further, many of our workers have family members still in their mother country, in Honduras or El Salvador. We want to make certain that these workers are not laboring under dangerous and oppressive conditions, just as much as we want to ensure jobs for our workers in the U.S.

The only way in which the union movement can grow in an ever-changing climate is by fostering a sense of "ownership" among each and every union member. The union belongs to the members—that is the most basic and fundamental principle of democratic trade unionism.

Second, the union is an amalgam of the cultural diversity of the membership and the union promotes this diversity in a spirit of mutual support and respect. This means that there must be avenues of opportunity opened to all members—at all levels of the union.

We must give our members the tools with which to build the union. These tools include basic literacy and multi-lingual training. We must expand internal educational efforts to introduce members to the cultural background of their union brothers and sisters. We must use the union movement as a way to eradicate bigotry and racism.

If the union is seen in an inclusive manner, more members will seek to get active in the union's internal life. A union, my friends, must be a living organism. Our unions are rich in history, but they must also be rich in the present—and even richer in the promise of the future.

The union is an agent of social change. The union is a mini United Nations. These are the models we need to promote if we are to grow. The union movement can show the way in a multi-cultural America and in an ever-shrinking world. We must show the way. ■