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Ron Carey Responds

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Abstract
[Excerpt] "A New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?" hits the nail on the head when it says that any hope of reviving the labor movement depends on change at the grassroots, not just in Washington, D.C. In the past five years, we in the Teamsters union have been facing the same challenge that now confronts the AFL-CIO: how to turn the labor bureaucracy into a labor movement again. The reforms we are making—while far from complete—confirm Brecher and Costello's argument that rankand- file involvement and new community coalitions are key to rebuilding labor's strength.

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Ron Carey Responds

"A New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?" hits the nail on the head when it says that any hope of reviving the labor movement depends on change at the grassroots, not just in Washington, D.C. In the past five years, we in the Teamsters union have been facing the same challenge that now confronts the AFL-CIO: how to turn the labor bureaucracy into a labor movement again. The reforms we are making—while far from complete—confirm Brecher and Costello's argument that rank-and-file involvement and new community coalitions are key to rebuilding labor's strength.

Much of the discussion about change at the AFL-CIO has focused on how much money is spent on organizing or political action. Will it be $10 million or $20 million? Will it be one-fifth of the budget or one-third?

Certainly, the Teamster experience suggests that a shift in AFL-CIO budget priorities is an important first step toward broader reform. Since the first top Teamsters leaders directly elected by the membership took office in 1992, we have shifted about 60 staff positions from bureaucratic functions to organizing and campaigns that fight for good jobs, wages, pensions, and health care. We've cut millions of dollars in extra salaries and pensions for officials and used the savings to fight for better contracts, and the results have proven the benefits of this approach.

But the change the labor movement needs is more fundamental than a redistribution of money. Recognizing that we will never have enough money to match employers, we must change the way we do our work. Our strength will always be in our numbers. We have to organize and use that power.

Throughout their article, Brecher and Costello rightly emphasize the need for a new "culture which values and promotes rank-and-file initiative." One way to promote this initiative is through the pages of the union press. In the Teamster's magazine that goes to all 1.4 million Teamster families and 400,000 retirees, we eliminated the President's Column on the inside front cover and replaced it with two pages of letters to the editor, including letters of criticism and dissent.

■ *Ron Carey is the first Teamsters president directly elected by the membership.*

As Brecher and Costello note, "The prevailing image of organized labor is a bureaucracy that primarily represents the special interests of its officials and a privileged sector of the workforce." One way the Teamsters are combating that image is through our new Human Rights Commission, which conducts special conferences and produces materials to encourage more women and minorities to take an active part in the union. Its theme is "A Strong Union Involves Everyone," reflecting the need to include groups who have been left out in the past—without suggesting to white male workers that they are now going to be considered less important.

Rank-and-file involvement also needs to be the focus of labor education. The Teamsters began a new program that has trained local education coordinators at more than 150 local unions. Our goal is to build ongoing local education programs that provide members with the skills, confidence, and information that they need to become activists on the job, in the union, and in their community.

To encourage workers to become more active in the labor movement, unions have to be able to show that getting involved gets *results*, and in this day and age that means a greater effort to build community support. The new AFL-CIO should forge stronger relationships with other citizens' organizations, and encourage central labor councils and local unions to build ties with the community. In dozens of fights with employers over wages, health care, pensions, and working conditions, Teamster members and their families now go beyond just walking around with picket signs and actually reach out to the community.

Members in New England worked with Church Women United to stop a fishpacking company from forcing older workers out of their jobs. At Disney World, the local union worked with groups such as the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and the NAACP to stop the Dolphin Hotel from discriminating against workers based on their native language.

Grassroots involvement and building coalitions will also be crucial in revitalizing labor's political action programs, where our primary focus must not be on promoting particular candidates but on pressuring all politicians to serve working people. Even though we lost the battle over NAFTA, many of the tactics the Teamsters and other unions employed should be expanded in future campaigns. For example, we worked closely with the independent Mexican labor federation, the Authentic Workers Front (Frente Autentico de Trabajo, or FAT), to bring speakers to work sites, shopping centers, county fairs, and other public places. We also organized joint events with environmentalists, local fair trade and Jobs with Justice coalitions, and other community groups. More recently, we've used grassroots coalition protests to temporarily delay a part of NAFTA that would allow corporations to hire truck drivers from Mexico—who are paid as little as $7 per day—to transport freight throughout the U.S.

Worker involvement is also key to turning the AFL-CIO's organizing program around. While the Teamsters union now has five times as many organizers as the union had under its past leadership, it was our shift to a "worker-to-worker" organizing approach that enabled us to reverse 16 years of membership decline. We have trained thousands of members to be volunteer organizers and meet unorganized workers at coffee shops, in their neighborhoods, or other places in the community. No one has more credibility in explaining how the union works to an unorganized worker than a rank-and-file member.

Using this method, we are succeeding where past officials failed in organizing workers at Overnite, the largest non-union company in the part of the freight hauling industry where thousands of Teamsters work. We have already won elections in 17 cities, and the National Labor Relations Board is seeking an order requiring Overnite to bargain with us in 17 additional locations.

Beyond organizing, the labor movement must also emphasize membership involvement in dealing with the issue of labor-management "cooperation" programs, a major problem that is not addressed in "A New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?" In the past few years, the AFL-CIO actively touted new "partnerships" with management, but that view did not represent a consensus within the labor move-

ment—because there isn't one.

At the Teamsters, we're dealing with the issue right now at our largest employer, United Parcel Service, where we represent 170,000 workers. UPS initiated a "Team Concept" program last year—quietly, local by local, without negotiating with the international union. At first, the promise of "partnership" and "empowerment" was appealing to many members, and the union faced a difficult challenge in educating its membership about the potential dangers of the program. But this challenge has actually turned out to be an opportunity to rebuild the union at the shop floor level.

We're conducting workshops for stewards and other interested members about the differing goals of workers and management and the importance of building union strength to fight for workers' interest. We're distributing information about how, in the name of Team Concept, management is choosing junior rank-and-filers to supervise more senior workers, members are being given confidential personnel information about other workers, and new job duties have been added without negotiations over workloads and compensation. We've provided to every UPS steward a video—called "Actions Speak Louder Than Words" —that shows what Team Concept means in practice and asks why a company that claims to be interested in "teamwork" is systematically violating workers' rights.

As a result of our training, UPS workers in some locations are refusing to take part in Team Concept and are raising tough questions in "team" meetings where the program is already in place. But our message is not "Just Say No" to cooperation with management. We're actively organizing members to demand that the company "cooperate" by abiding by contract provisions on seniority, subcontracting, and health and safety, and dropping its attacks in Congress on OSHA and other worker rights. Our workplace campaign calls for teamwork based on collective bargaining with all its safeguards, including the right of our members to determine what to negotiate and to enforce agreed upon rights.

Developing an effective response to divide-and-conquer Team Concept programs requires an active, open debate within the labor movement. The election of new officers for the AFL-CIO should help open the door to that debate—just as it has provoked new discussion about the way unions deal with politicians, organize new workers, and build links with others in the community. It's up to all of us to take advantage of the new possibilities for change—and to develop new programs and approaches that are based on workers' involvement at the grassroots. ■