Letter to the Editor, *New Labor Forum*

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**Abstract**
[Excerpt] Bill Fletcher and Rick Hurd have shined a critical light on a vital issue facing the labor movement. They have asked, but not yet answered, how the AFL-CIO’s “Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize” program will help us build vibrant and democratic unions committed to inclusion and ready to grapple with the tough issues of race and gender. If their essay provides an excuse for some unions to avoid the challenge of organizing while debating these issues, it would be most unfortunate. But if their piece provokes a more serious and candid dialogue about external organizing and internal transformation, Fletcher and Hurd will have once again made an important contribution to revitalizing the labor movement.

**Keywords**
labor movement, labor organizing, AFL-CIO, labor unions

**Disciplines**
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**Comments**

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To the Editor:

Whenever Bill Fletcher and Rick Hurd team up to critically examine vital issues facing the labor movement, they sharpen much-needed debate about union renewal. "Is Organizing Enough?" (New Labor Forum issue #6) is no exception. They are right to argue that the AFL-CIO's focus on quantitative growth risks belittling the challenge of qualitative change, especially in relation to issues of race, gender, and inclusion. It is also true that external organizing does not necessarily lead to internal transformation. But the value of their contribution would be enhanced by greater attention to the dialectical relationship between quantitative and qualitative change, as well as between external organizing and internal transformation.

First, it is more important for labor activists to ask, "Is there enough organizing?" than, "Is organizing enough?" With all the talk about growth, the labor movement has begun to master the rhetoric, but not yet the reality, of mass organizing, which is the only way to restore labor's power and beat back capital's unrelenting assault on the working class. Union organizing has not even approached the scale needed to definitively reverse the long-term trend of declining density. Numbers do matter. For example, in the building trades, we have increased membership by nearly 300,000 since 1996 through organizing and recruitment and have raised union density in three of the last four years. But we have had only a modest impact on density, nudging it up from 18 percent to just over 19 percent. To increase construction union density to 25 percent by 200—let alone the 40 percent we enjoyed in the 1970s or the 80 percent of the 1950s—the building trades would have to organize a half million new members, more than we added to our ranks in the last four (best) years of growth in recent memory. Quantitative change can become qualitative change only when unions organize millions, not just thousands, of new members.

Second, internal transformation cannot take place in a vacuum. In many sectors of the American economy, union density is so low and union power is so marginal that negotiating decent contracts, servicing our current base, and transforming union culture are virtually impossible. The labor movement cannot reinvent union culture without restoring union power through organizing. That probably won't happen outside the context of a broader social movement with a coherent and compelling vision of societal transformation. The AFL-CIO's efforts to engage environmentalists, human rights activists, community leaders, students, and other progressive social forces are essential steps toward building that kind of movement. What is needed is greater clarity of change and a growing realization that vision.

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Third, "Organizing for Change,
Changing to Organize!" means that in-
ternal transformation is both a precondition
and a potential consequence of external
organizing. Few local unions experience
meaningful success in external organiz-
ing without engaging in some degree of
internal change. That has certainly been
the case in the building trades, one of the
most conservative sectors of the labor
movement and one that many critics
mistakenly believed was impervious to
progressive change. Once building trades
unions grasped that we would never
again do 80 percent of the work unless
and until we represented 80 percent of
the workers (so many of whom are peo-
dle of color), we were forced to confront
decades of exclusionary practices.
Through a remarkably effective program
called COMET—Construction Organizing
Membership Education Training—we
have reached more than 200,000 rank-
and-file members and helped them
understand why embracing inclusion is
both the right thing to do and the only
way to rebuild union strength. Have we
overcome the racism that has infected
many segments of the building trades?
Of course not. But advancing an organiz-
ing agenda enabled us to at least initiate
a discussion about race, ethnicity, and
inclusion. (Because there are so few
women employed in construction's
nonunion sector, organizing does not
currently force us to deal with the issue
of gender exclusion.)

A genuine commitment to construc-
tion organizing has not only raised basic
questions of inclusion but also, in some
cases sparked a fundamental reevaluation
of union structure and staffing. For ex-
ample, the carpenters union has undergone
a dramatic restructuring to create large
regional councils that more closely con-
form to the actual structure of the con-
struction industry. This internal change
enables the union to more effectively
organize regional and national contrac-
tors operating in the regional and nation-
al markets that now characterize our
industry. Whatever advocates of union
democracy may say about this internal
transformation, the union has consciously
recruited an increasingly diverse staff
committed to organizing workers regard-
less of race, gender, or immigrant status.

While Fletcher and Hurd are certain-
ly right to argue that external organizing
does not necessarily produce internal
transformation, it is hard to imagine a
local union that has managed mean-
ful internal change without also (and
perhaps first) confronting the challenge
of external organizing. Moreover, the
skills and spirit that sustain effective
external organizing are precisely those
needed to generate the kind of internal
union culture that Fletcher and Hurd cel-
brate. It is not a coincidence that one of
the labor movement's most successful
external organizing unions, SEIU, recently
ran an enormously effective internal
mobilization in Los Angeles, Chicago,
New York City, and elsewhere to negoti-
ate new contracts for its Building
Services Division. Would that have been
possible without the Justice for Janitors organizing campaigns that preceded these contract fights?

Fourth, given Fletcher and Hurd's focus on quantitative versus qualitative change in the labor movement, their research is ironically weakened by a tension between quantitative and qualitative methods. They examine too few cases—only about thirty local unions—to offer us a rigorous quantitative analysis. As a result, their construct of "three paths" followed by locals ostensibly committed to organizing seems somewhat contrived. They do not dig deep enough in any single case to produce a rich and nuanced picture of how external organizing and internal transformation play out in the real world; that is precisely the kind of picture qualitative research can render. As a result, their evidence is often reduced to anecdotes and occasional platitudes that add little to the discussion of race, gender, and inclusion. For example, any local leader—from the most progressive to the most reactionary—might say, "The member is the most important aspect of what we do. We are there for them, not them for us" (p. 65). How is that common rhetoric reflected in the reality of internal union life?

Bill Fletcher and Rick Hurd have shined a critical light on a vital issue facing the labor movement. They have asked, but not yet answered, how the AFL-CIO's "Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize" program will help us build vibrant and democratic unions committed to inclusion and ready to grapple with the tough issues of race and gender. If their essay provides an excuse for some unions to avoid the challenge of organizing while debating these issues, it would be most unfortunate. But if their piece provokes a more serious and candid dialogue about external organizing and internal transformation, Fletcher and Hurd will have once again made an important contribution to revitalizing the labor movement.

—Jeff Grabelsky
Organizing Director, AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department

I want to thank Fletcher and Hurd (New Labor Forum Issue #6 "Is Organizing Enough?") for their continued work on the subject of local union transformation. I believe that if the union movement is going to carry out its historical mission of being an engine of democracy, local union transformation is essential. Not only are 70 percent of the union movement's resources tied up in local unions, but also it is at the local union level that workers and communities regularly interact with the union movement. I believe that a particular strength of Fletcher and Hurd's work is the recognition that the shift from business unionism to movement unionism involves a cultural shift in the labor movement—one involving structural changes from the top down.

"Organizing for the best long-term potential of our existing unions into age-old movements and coalescing union's potential for inclusiveness. I also applaud and Hurd's assertion of the need to focusing on members who increase the possibilities for a dynamic membership by adding energy outside of traditional parameters. However, research to support increasing for inclusion, increasing union density.

I am also highly concerned that our dependence solely on staff and local union vehicles such as "support for the rank and file" and "leadership support from the rank and file" can lead us to underestimate the power of enlightened action: Often, internal local union struggles rooted in ideological conflict are the purpose of local