AN INJURY TO ALL
Going Beyond Collective Bargaining as We Have Known It

The hope and optimism of the 2008 election is being derailed by economic meltdown and a legislative process seemingly incapable of producing real change. We entered 2010 with workers having lost trillions in income, homes, and retirement funds while the banks and corporations that crashed the economy continue to use taxpayer subsidies to further consolidate their economic control. The majority of union members are in the public sector at the very time when states are drowning in hundreds of billions of dollars of budget deficits. And if labor and other progressives don’t offer an alternative, there is a real danger of the right-wing capturing the growing populist anger and using it to attack government’s ability to limit corporate power, and regulate and repair the economy.

This is the time to offer a moral voice for those devastated by the economic crisis, and to have the courage and passion to liberate ourselves from the straitjacket of limited expectations. Unions, and their members, must join with communities long mired in poverty—and the tens of millions of people being forced out of the middle class—to imagine and articulate a vision of a better world, and to help lead the battle to win it. We have the opportunity to work with a growing group of potential allies to develop a plan and strategy to achieve that vision—but, to do so, we have to question and challenge long held assumptions and ideas.

The labor movement in the United States suffers from a version of “the Stockholm Syndrome.” We have been held hostage for so long by a messianic free market ideology that we have come to empathize with it and adopt the views of our “kidnappers.” We have been on the defensive and losing for so long that we have internalized the idea that the economic system we currently have is the only one possible, and that the only progress we can make is modest and incremental at best. Instead, we have no choice but to chart a fundamentally different course grounded in the idea that the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small economic elite and giant corporations is warping democracy and undermining the ability of the vast majority of the people in this country—including workers,
unions, and progressives—to organize, bargain, pass legislation, and make substantive change.

Although we missed an opportunity last year—offered by the economic collapse to organize against Wall Street, the banks, and giant multinational corporations—the ongoing economic crisis and recession continues to create the conditions to organize on a far grander scale. It is precisely in times of economic and political turmoil that movements have been born, and the radical redistribution of wealth and power becomes possible.

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Just as the economic collapse exposed the fundamental flaws of how our economic system is governed, it also exposed the failure of the labor movement’s approach to the economy and the shortcomings of our approaches to organizing and bargaining. In the post-World War II era, labor accepted that corporations managed their companies and the country’s economy. Corporations produced profits and jobs, and unions played the role of a very junior partner negotiating narrowly on issues of wages and benefits for unionized workers. Labor’s job was to negotiate for a “fair” share of an expanding economic pie for union workers and to leave the rest to corporate America. During bargaining, unions didn’t demand a role in determining how corporations managed companies, what products they made, or the quality of the services they provided. Nor did they consider the impact of their decisions on the health of specific communities or the overall economy. Unions accepted the cliché that what was good for business was good for America. While this produced real gains for unionized workers in the booming post-World War II industrial economy, it’s clear that this model doesn’t work; it is broken and it isn’t repairable.

Any effort to address this requires a common understanding of why the current model isn’t repairable—we have to figure out and develop a visionary and transformative way to replace it. For unions to play a role in reshaping how the economy is organized, we need to figure out how to make collective bargaining relevant, launch organizing campaigns that build movements that unite workers with the needs of their communities, and—in so doing—challenge the dominance of corporate power and money.

MAKING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING MATTER

We need to politicize, transform, and rescue collective bargaining from irrelevance by expanding its goals to address the issues that matter most to workers and to the country. Collective bargaining can’t only be about improving wages and grievance procedures for union members—it must also be a tool for fixing broken industries, creating economic opportunity, and altering the business practices that exploit communities and pollute the environment. Communities and allies must become invested in workers organizing into unions as a way to achieve their own self-interests.

Arguing that—in a moment of (perhaps) our greatest weakness—we should commit ourselves to expanding the scope of our demands
in union membership provided gains for union members, but also served as a tool to press for government regulation and programs to create a safety net for all Americans and address broader social problems. Similarly, the United Farm Workers and District 1199 (the hospital workers union that is now part of the SEIU) both grew as a result of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, while simultaneously empowering people of color in their workplaces and in their communities.

While we can’t predict when an organizing surge will take place, it will only happen if we launch large-scale organizing campaigns built around a moral and visionary message that puts union growth within the mission of a broader movement for social change.

LAUNCHING LARGE-SCALE ORGANIZING

FRUSTRATED BY LIMITED RESULTS, unions are currently doing less—not more—organizing, with very few large-scale organizing campaigns underway. Now is precisely the time for unions to launch large-scale organizing campaigns, even if there are not immediate membership gains. Throughout history, labor’s greatest growth and most significant impact has come when labor is part of a broader social movement. And this growth has come in dramatic spurts and surges when the energy and momentum of social movements created conditions that allowed workers to overcome the power of entrenched business and corporate interests.

The explosion of union growth starting in 1935 (see Table 1) occurred because unions were able to harness the mass discontent and militancy coming out of the Great Depression. The growth in union membership provided gains for union members, but also served as a tool to press for government regulation and programs to create a safety net for all Americans and address broader social problems. Similarly, the United Farm Workers and District 1199 (the hospital workers union that is now part of the SEIU) both grew as a result of the civil rights movements of the 1960s, while simultaneously empowering people of color in their workplaces and in their communities.

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| TABLE 1. UNION DENSITY, 1900-1975. |

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MAKING CORPORATE INFLUENCE POLITICALLY TOXIC

ONE OF THE HARDEST LESSONS OF 2009 has been that—despite all our efforts—Wall Street, the banks, and multinational corporations control the legislative agenda in Washington. The Supreme Court’s January 2010 Citizens United decision will further exacerbate this. Until we make corporate money and influence peddling toxic, it will not be possible to win legislative change that limits the power of Wall Street and corporations to manipulate the economy and tax system to their benefit. We need to force legislators to declare which side they are on—are they for the people and communities or for the corporate and banking interests that created the economic crisis we face? It must be politically toxic for politicians to accept tainted corporate money. This can best be done in support of, and as part of, large-scale organizing and bargaining campaigns that expose corporate abuse.

This isn’t about what we do on Election Day; this is what we do every day to punish and isolate specific politicians who take money from those that destroyed the economy and stole trillions in workers’ wealth. Later in this article, I will outline why the finance sector offers the opportunity to launch a campaign with the interrelated goals of organizing bank workers, making Wall Street money politically toxic, and helping to reform and regulate the finance industry. Campaigning in all three areas at once increases our ability to win those campaigns and build a broader movement for economic justice.

A HUGE MISSED OPPORTUNITY TO TRANSFORM THE AUTO INDUSTRY

LET’S GO BACK A YEAR AND A HALF when GM, Chrysler, and GMAC Financial Services went broke and asked for bailouts. The United Auto Workers (UAW) did what many would do—they decided to hunker down to try to salvage as much of their membership and their standards as possible. They lined up with the companies, supported the bailout, and didn’t offer a vision or concrete proposal about how to fix their broken sector of the economy. Instead of challenging the companies’ bad decisions and mismanagement as the real cause of the destruction of the industry, they fought to protect their existing members—a minority of all workers in the industry—and ended up aligned with companies that are hated and blamed for their own failure.

The results were predictable: huge concessions in standards, a loss of members, and the union blamed for the industry’s collapse. When the UAW accepted that union wages would decline and be pegged to nonunion transplant rates, one of the core reasons for workers to unionize was stripped away.

Imagine if, three years ago, the UAW had instead taken the lead in saying that the auto industry was broken; and imagine if the union had started organizing union and nonunion auto workers and environmentalists around a concrete program to fix it. When the crisis hit, what if the UAW had gone on the offense and asserted its role as the representative of all auto workers and the communities they live in, instead of fighting a defensive and ultimately losing battle to maintain the wages and benefits in the unionized part of the industry? The union could have argued against $100 billion going blindly to specific auto companies, and instead proposed that the funds finance the creation of an Auto Reconstruction Agency with full authority to restructure and refinance the industry.
It could have fought for a plan that joined union and nonunion auto workers with environmental and economic development groups around a program that called for rebuilding and recreating the industry at every level, to benefit economically struggling communities, the economic and environmental health of the country, and all workers (union and nonunion). Instead of playing defense, it could have led the call to rebuild the middle class by producing green cars in America. And if it spoke on behalf of all auto workers—and joined with communities and consumers—it would have positioned itself to reunite the industry by organizing and bargaining for all auto workers, including parts suppliers.

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As part of such a campaign, the union could have agreed to reopen all contracts if the companies would agree to negotiate over an entire package. Collective bargaining could have become the vehicle to negotiate for green cars, what type of cars would be manufactured and where, executive compensation, wages for outsourced workers, and how taxpayer bailout money would be used. The union's bargaining could have been an avenue to expand the manufacturing sector and strengthen the communities in which it operates, instead of just being a failing attempt to protect the declining number of unionized auto workers by keeping companies that plan to continue shrinking the workforce through outsourcing their business. In short, the union could have united with impacted communities and used the economic crisis—and the implosion of the Big Three—as a way to reorganize, retool, and reunite the auto sector.

There is no way of knowing if a strategy based on seizing the moment of crisis to demand and win transformational change would have worked. What we know is that following the traditional route produced a road to shrinking membership, lower standards, and overall decline.

Throughout the economy, where many industries—including health care, food processing, finance, and construction—are facing significant restructuring, unions face similar crises and opportunities. The question is whether we will take steps to be ready to take advantage of these moments.

CONNECTING COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TO THE COMMON GOOD

Expanding the goals and demands of organizing and collective bargaining is the key to winning individual campaigns, a stronger labor movement, and a more just society. It isn't a new idea to raise environmental and other community issues in campaigns, nor is it new to look for support from allies. What would be new is to develop partnerships with allies who view winning unionization as a critical piece of achieving their goals. One way to do this would be to add their demands to our collective bargaining demands and have our partners become part of the union's collective bargaining committee.
The ports campaign among truckers and construction’s Emerald Cities project are two examples of where this kind of work is beginning to happen. Food processing and banking are two more sectors where it is possible. And, as health care reform is implemented, the health care industry offers an incredible opportunity to make unionization and industry-wide bargaining central to achieving quality care.

**Reducing Air Pollution and Creating Stable Jobs**

The ports campaign has demonstrated that uniting neighborhoods, environmental groups, and drivers forced to work as independent “contractors” can create a campaign with the political support and moral authority to potentially restructure an industry, allow unionization, and address environmental damage caused by aging polluting trucks. Workers allied with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters—as well as groups like the Sierra Club, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), the American Lung Association, and other unions—formed a group called the Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports. The Coalition was united around the goal of changing how port trucking—currently a system that pollutes neighborhoods and drives working conditions to the lowest common denominator—was contracted. The campaign is about changing the entire system so that everyone—from workers to the surrounding community—benefits from the new system. It was only by expanding demands beyond unionization alone—linking worker organizing to restructuring the owner-operator system and cleaning up air pollution in neighborhoods—that a system previously considered unorganizable could be challenged and restructured.³

**Green Jobs and Urban Economic Development**

Construction unions, environmental groups, and economic justice and civil rights groups have joined together to create good-paying green construction jobs, working to retrofit and weatherize buildings in urban areas. This will allow workers to unionize, create opportunities for workers of color long excluded from construction unions, and raise standards in traditionally nonunion parts of the construction industry, while also creating more energy-efficient buildings. This approach is a radical departure for construction unions, which historically bargained narrowly for existing members and supported any unionized construction project without regard to its impact on surrounding communities. Success in organizing and bargaining differently in this sector could open the door to organizing residential and other nonunion sectors of the construction industry.

**Safe Food and Decent Jobs**

As mass food production increases and food safety scandals come to light, more people are growing concerned about how their food is grown and processed. Seventy-six million people are sickened—and five thousand are killed—every year by unsafe food. Imagine the moral power and public appeal of a campaign linking union representation with specific steps to save lives and improve food safety. What would happen if the UFCW, farm workers’ unions, and coalitions of food safety advocates (like the Food Safety Coalition) banded together to demand changes...
in food production and insure accountability by giving workers a voice in the process? The giant food companies that opposed the effort to unionize would be seen as fighting efforts to save lives and make food safe. Again, it is through making organizing and collective bargaining central to a safe food supply that we create conditions to win support for legislative and other changes that will help make worker organizing possible.

We could increase pay by $2.00 per hour and provide employer-paid health insurance for over 550,000 tellers with just 3.6 percent of the bonuses paid out to executives.

In all of these campaigns, there will be opposition from industry associations who lobby aggressively against regulation, increase government subsidies, and oppose efforts to reform their business practices. This makes targeting the politicians who carry their water both a necessity and an opportunity to challenge the political power of corporations.

PROTECTING CONSUMERS BY ORGANIZING WORKERS IN THE FINANCE INDUSTRY

Although we missed an opportunity in the auto industry, we can seize the opportunity created by the financial crisis to reform and restructure the central core of our economy, challenging the political power of financial corporations and organizing a completely nonunion sector of the economy.

There has never been a better time for unions to be part of a campaign to reform banking. Banks and Wall Street are hated by everyone—left, right, and center. They are rightly blamed for getting rich while crashing the economy and taking taxpayer bailouts, while continuing to award themselves huge bonuses. Wall Street and banks that were “too big to fail” are now bigger and more concentrated. There is a growing national movement calling for breaking up big banks, protecting consumers, and limiting executive compensation to reform, regulate, and restructure finance.

Banks represent the most extreme example of the unsustainable disparity between those on top and the rest of us. Nothing illustrates this better than the simple fact that we could increase pay by $2.00 per hour and provide employer-paid health insurance for over 550,000 tellers with just 3.6 percent of the bonuses paid out to executives.

The debate about how best to organize the labor movement has devolved into a battle over false choices: standards vs. growth, geographically-based vs. industry-based organizing, bottom-up vs. top-down.

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Increasingly, banks have forced workers to become “sales workers” who push products. Front-line bank workers—currently under extreme pressure to sell dangerous financial products—could be part of “regulation from below” if collective bargaining eliminated the current compensation system that is based on meeting sales quotas and pushing predatory financial products, credit cards, high-fee accounts, and loans onto consumers. This is already happening in Europe, where finance unions have demanded such changes, so bank workers’ pay isn’t based on meeting quotas.

By demonstrating the interrelationship between deregulation of the banks, banks’ abuse of their own workers and consumers, and the subsequent crash of the economy, we can develop a campaign that captures the imagination of an angry public, challenges the power of Wall Street, and leads to substantive fixes for the American economy.

**MOVING BEYOND THE DEBATE OF FAILED MODELS**

As private sector union density has continued to decline over the last twenty years, many of us have argued that hitting 5 percent private sector density is the tipping point for when unions will essentially become powerless. We are quickly approaching that 5 percent. If we don’t seize the opportunity of the current economic crisis to chart a radically different course—committing ourselves and our movement to organizing for transformative change—we will sink into a deserved abyss of irrelevance.

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3. The Coalition for Clean and Safe Ports—an alliance of labor, environmental, and community welfare groups—came together to encourage the port industry to address its impacts, particularly those related to truck traffic. According to Chuck Mack, National Director of the Teamsters’ Port Division, which heavily influenced the campaign, the coalition was motivated by a shared vision. “We realized, hey, there’s a series of interests among the stakeholders here,” he recalled. “We’ve got to look at the problems—security, safety, and air quality—as all linked together. The changes the [Long Beach] port has made provide a real benefit to our coalition members and the public.” See http://apolloalliance.org/new-apollo-program/los-angeles-ports-new-trade-is-clean-and-green.