

Radio Commentary

December 19, 2007

Despite the efforts of profit hungry global corporations and their political cronies to bust the union movement, organized labor is not ready to roll over and play dead.

The AFL-CIO recently hosted a global organizing meeting that could revitalize the labor movement. The meeting was held at the newly renovated National Labor College -- a symbolism not lost on attendees. It was the first international gathering of labor to identify new strategies to reverse labor's steady decline. With a sense of urgency and solidarity, leaders of United State's unions joined with two hundred representatives from sixty-four countries to analyze labors' plight and ask the jugular question: Is this the way it has to be?

They answered with a resounding No!

There's no doubt in my mind that they gave the right answer.

Here's why:

Membership in private sector union has been declining dramatically, while public sector unions are growing. We can do better. In the past two decades the percentage of workers in unions in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Japan, to name just a few, has dropped. In the United Kingdom and New Zealand it hasn't just dropped, it's plummeted.

Labor's decline hurts us all.

First, as collective bargaining coverage falls, income inequality grows. Just look at the United States. With only about twelve percent of the labor force organized, we have the greatest income inequality in the world. Not far behind are New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Income inequality means there are a lot more very wealthy and a lot more very poor. It means the middle class is disappearing. The opposite is true in countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Spain where union membership is almost universal. Imagine the United States without a middle class. What does this mean for you? What does it mean for the American dream?

Another by-product of labor's decline is the infant mortality rate. As bargaining coverage falls, infant mortality rises. The United States, the country with the smallest percentage of organized workers, leads the industrial world with seven infant deaths at birth per thousand, about twice as many as the unionized Swedes.

A third consequence of labor's demise is the inverse relationship between collective bargaining coverage and social spending as a percentage of national income. Social spending refers to government spending on education and other vital services, such as health care. The United States government spends about 18% of national income on these programs, placing our country at the bottom of the list. Once again, the U.K and New Zealand aren't far behind. At the other end, Sweden and Denmark boast of the world's best safety net where over ninety percent of national income goes to government social programs.

Knowing the need for change is one thing. Identifying ways to do it is another. At this conference a strong consensus emerged on what the key issues are. Let me give you a few examples.

1. Some 92% of representatives agreed that unions should target specific global corporations to organize.

2. An amazing 98% thought it important for labor to build alliances on the international level.
3. Finally, 85% want the global labor movement to create a common image and message, which could include a rebuttal of the neo conservative ideology of the market place.

The energy, enthusiasm and consensus on the issues that characterized the conference send a strong message to union busters around the world: Labor's heartbeat is strong. We're ready to fight!