



A Union of Professionals

Joining Voices

Inclusive Strategies for Labor's Renewal

Executive Summary

A strong, effective American labor movement is vital to realizing the goals and dreams of working families and the middle class. By reasserting its role as the leading voice for the needs and aspirations of all working families, the AFL-CIO will strengthen its power to advocate for the workplace needs of all current, and future, union members.

Even with innovative initiatives to expand the labor movement's reach to working Americans, the movement as a whole has been unable to reverse the slide of union membership and representation. Sixty years ago, union membership stood at over 35 percent of the workforce; today, just 12 percent of all workers (8 percent in private sector employment) belong to unions.

Unless unions grow at an unprecedented pace and scale, organized labor will continue to be marginalized and viewed as a narrow special interest. The labor movement must refocus its attention on its core values to re-establish the AFL-CIO as "the people's lobby."

Our agenda must include more than securing a union shop, removing obstacles to organizing and stiffer employer fines. We must speak immediately, consistently and *convincingly* to the values and interests of all working families—union members or not. These include:

- Full employment and fair compensation
- Dignified work and dignified retirement
- Healthcare and leisure
- Quality universal public education and child care
- Civil rights and economic opportunity
- Decent housing and quality public services
- Participation in the structure, processes and quality of work
- International solidarity for universal labor rights as a human right

The Organizing Imperative

Transforming labor's vision for a peaceful, free world and a secure, just and more equal society requires transforming the way unions operate, because how we operate determines how unions are perceived. New strategies and ideas should be explored. These include:

- Organizing workers in traditional and nontraditional venues and occupations at the same time that we defend the jobs, rights and benefits of current union members.
- Finding new ways for unions to cooperate rather than compete and focusing our combined energies and resources on building critical mass along occupational, industrial, geographic and corporate lines.

- Experimenting with various organizational models that speak to the needs and interests of heretofore unorganized professional and technical workers, workers who are denied collective bargaining rights under current law, part-time and contingent employees, independent contractors, and associations of solo and small group practitioners.

Union Democracy

Strategies for change, however, must also advance the values embedded in any democratic organization that is committed to representing the interests of workers. Fundamental to this notion is that:

- **Workplace democracy counts.** Workers aren't commodities or inert molecules to be traded, rearranged or reassembled into organizational units of larger but ultimately hollow critical mass. Unions represent the collective views of the workers. Unions aren't corporations and shouldn't adopt their vocabulary, self-aggrandizing strategies or zero-sum values.
- **The strong are obligated to help the weak.** The organized must reach out to the unorganized without the expectation of narrow institutional gain. Growing a single union at the expense of many doesn't necessarily increase labor's power.
- **Cooperation, not competition, will advance labor's agenda.** Provisions in the AFL-CIO constitution such as Article XXI, strategic campaign registration, and changes in Article XX have failed to promote large-scale, movement-wide growth. These approaches have promoted rather than deterred interunion competition.
- **Not every structural or operational model works for every group of workers all the time or in the same way.** Labor's future depends on reaching out meaningfully to unorganized professional and technical personnel as well as to immigrant and low-wage workers. Current legal frameworks for organizing do not work, so we must find ways to change or work around them.

Recommendations for Change

1. Restructure the AFL-CIO for a more streamlined governance and administration. The number of members on the AFL-CIO executive council should be reduced substantially; there should be less presentation and scripting, more deliberation and debate at AFL-CIO meetings. The AFL-CIO's functions should be limited to and concentrated in six key areas: public policy and legislative advocacy; political mobilization; international labor solidarity; support for organizing; jurisdictional coordination; and programmatic support and coordination for state and local bodies.

2. Upgrade the capacity of subordinate AFL-CIO bodies. Affiliation with state and local central labor bodies should be mandatory via international union per capita payments. Programmatic and operational standards should be established by the AFL-CIO executive council and operational funds should be allocated on a formula basis or in accordance with strategic plans. Coordination between and among central and state bodies should be required.

3. Refocus the AFL-CIO's organizing mission from interunion competition to cooperation. There should be less attention to excluding unions from organizing and more effort put into promoting large-scale, strategic, well-funded multiunion initiatives among sparsely unionized occupations, industries, employers or sectors of the country.

4. Establish Industry/Occupation Labor Centers to promote cooperation. These centers would coordinate multiunion cooperative organizing, support recruitment and training of organizers,

establish employment and collective bargaining standards, and coordinate with sister Industry/Occupation Labor Centers and the AFL-CIO at the national, state and local levels. The centers would establish and enforce standards for participation, resource commitment and adherence to group decisions. International unions would be expected to lay their organizing cards on the table. The centers would help promote large-scale campaigns along industry, occupational, employer or geographic lines. Unions would participate on a voluntary basis, although incentives could include tying AFL-CIO assistance and Article XX or XXI protections for new organizing in certain industries or occupations to participation in the centers. The centers could also serve as the venue for promoting union mergers and consolidations.

5. Expand organizing initiatives beyond collective bargaining. Labor should intensify and help coordinate efforts to reach out to workers in nontraditional employment who may not be eligible for collective bargaining. This could include experimenting with new forms of organization and representation, including expansion of the AFL-CIO's Working America program, and identifying strategically significant occupations, industries and employers for maximizing labor's potential impact on the economy and prospects for organizing.

6. Engage in solidarity organizing. The AFL-CIO can play a significant strategic and operational role in marshaling financial and staff commitments for long-term, movement-wide efforts to support existing unions (or coalitions of unions) in large-scale, significant campaigns. The AFL-CIO also can coordinate support for establishing start-up unions, in certain instances, where there is a need for flexibility and unconventional tactics.

If labor is to regain the strength and influence necessary to advocate effectively for our members and advance a comprehensive agenda for all working people and their families, we need to move from an organizing culture of internal competition to one of unprecedented cooperation.