

## Labor Day, 2013 by John Reimann

I had high hopes when I saw the headline: “A Wish for Labor Day: Visionary Union Leaders.” Well, considering the source – a building contractor named Richard Pieper writing in the *Wall St. Journal* – not really. But one can always dream, right?

Pieper points out that the unions in the US have steadily lost ground for years. “Thirty-four years ago there were 21 million public and private union members, or roughly 24% of the workforce. Today, membership is about 14.4 million, or 11.3% of the workforce.” He cites AFL-CIO president Rich Trumka approvingly, when Trumka says that the present approach of the unions is “failing”. But what does Pieper mean by that?

### “Visionary”?

For starters, he castigates SEIU president Mary Kay Henry for calling for the unions to “help workers boost wages.” At least Henry calls for it in words. Instead, what Pieper says, is this: “Visionary leaders have an opportunity to help workers adapt successfully. For starters, they could help expand the economy by helping employers become more competitive.”

What does this mean?

### “Workers Must Compete”

In the real world, helping the employers compete means that the workers in the union sector must compete with the non-union workers, or the workers in another country, for who can make the most profits for their employer. This can only mean one thing: That the different sectors of workers compete for who will work faster and for less money. But this is the exact competition that unions were set up to oppose. If we don't, then we lose the entire purpose for having a union.

It should come as no surprise that a contractor writing in the *Wall St. Journal* should call for this. The problem is that the union leaders have accepted this approach. Back in 2011, for instance, there was a long and bitter strike of workers in the major grocery chains in Southern California, especially against Safeway. Management was trying to get wages down to the level of the big box stores – Wal Mart, etc. Workers bitterly resisted this, naturally, and because they felt so strongly the union leadership (UFCW) was forced to call a strike. The real situation, behind the scenes, however, was expressed by Steve Burd, Safeway CEO. He said: “*I think we have a set of objectives that we have to achieve in order to really be competitive.... I believe most of the union leaders understand that. They're just trying to come to the table and negotiate something that makes them look like they properly represented their employees.*” He spoke the truth.

### Union Leaders Accept Employers' View



UAW President Bob King speaking at Chamber of Commerce

This leadership is not alone. Carpenters President Doug McCarron has been one of the most open in accepting this philosophy. He has openly referred to the carpenters as a “product” to which the union has to “add value” in order to market it to the contractors. He gave a speech to a contractors' conference in which he said that in the case of a dispute, the contractor should be able to settle it since it's his money. “*We're serious about customer service,*” he said. His regional council in northern California had on its web site an appeal to the contractors that “*The bottom line is your company will profit from a partnership with the Northern California Carpenters.*”

The leadership of the United Auto Workers is supposed to be somehow “different.” More “progressive.” But here's what UAW President Bob King had to say when speaking at a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce (!): “*We need to join together.... The 21<sup>st</sup> century UAW seeks and expects a partnership with the employers based on mutual respect, trust and common goals. It embraces as our own the success of our employers.... I believe in working with management.... It is our mission to create the conditions that will enable our employers to compete and succeed.*”

### Failed Policy

The result is that US workers' have seen a steady decline in their real income. In 2012, for instance, the Wall St. Journal reported that family real income had been falling for four straight years and was at the same level as it was in 1995. Despite a decrease in official unemployment, the poverty rate had held steady.

Nor can the union leadership claim any great success in organizing the unorganized, as witnessed by the steady decline in union membership. After all, why should a worker struggle and risk her or his job to join a union that advocates exactly what the employers are doing already?

The vision that Pieper is advocating is the vision of the employers. That is to be expected; after all, he is one. What is so disastrous is that the union leaders have accepted this “vision”, this employers' point of view. Every year, they increasingly are fitting that description of Daniel DeLeon: “the labor lieutenants of capital”. That is increasingly their role within the unions.

### **The Choice We Face**

Those who are active in the unions at the local level, whether they be local officers, shop stewards or just rank and file activists, now are faced with a choice: They can either accept in principle this approach, or they can organize to oppose it – not just in words, but oppose it in deeds. They can go along, or they can organize an opposition. There is hardly any middle ground, if there is any at all.

This general perspective is being played out right here in the San Francisco Bay Area as this is being written.

### **Present Struggle**

The unions for workers for both the local bus line – A.C. Transit – and the local metro system – BART – are negotiating for new contracts. The leadership of the AC Transit union recently agreed to a contract that was rejected by the membership by a 2-1 margin. BART workers had actually gone out on strike, only to have the strike called off after a few days by the union leadership. They were subsequently hit with a 60-day “cooling off” period (a strike ban) by Governor Gerry Brown.

The main strategy that management and their politicians are employing is divide and conquer. Through their various outlets (the media, etc.) they are putting out the word that these workers are overpaid. “Why should they have company-paid health benefits and a company-paid pension, when so few workers have that? Why should they get a wage increase when they are already earning more than most workers? In the absence of a serious answer, these questions meet with a real response.

### **Program**

The only answer can be the following: That the unions for both these workers join together and organize a campaign with dual goals:

- **First is to vastly cut the fares for BART and AC Transit and, in the case of AC transit restore all the routes that have been eliminated over recent years. This should be linked with a campaign to roll back all cuts in *all* social services.**
- **Second is to fight for a \$20 per hour minimum wage or a \$5.00 per hour increase, whichever is greater, along with fully company-paid pension plans and company-paid health care insurance for all workers and their dependents.**



*BART workers on strike*

This should be fought for in deeds, not just words. The union leadership should mobilize its membership, along with their supporters, to leaflet the schools, work places and communities in a call for a rally

for these demands. This would be the first step. It would show, in action, that they are not only fighting for themselves; they are linking their fight with the needs of all workers.

### **Politics**

Workers also cannot avoid politics. At every turn of events, the state will intervene, just as it has done with the BART workers. A few Democrats may give verbal support to the workers, but they are merely the bait for the trap. They have no real power inside the Democratic Party. Unfortunately, the union leadership clings to the Democrats in the political realm just as they cling to the employers on the job.

There is an alternative. Recently, an independent socialist candidate won over a third of the vote for Seattle city council. Kshama Sawant will be in a runoff election with the long time Democratic incumbent.

Many people, especially young people, think the workers' movement should ignore elections entirely. This places us as perpetually protesting what others are doing rather than preparing the struggle to do it ourselves. Also, we can't ignore the role politicians play in propagandizing for the employers – for the capitalist class. The absence of worker representatives in office gives the employers – the capitalists – a complete monopoly in the political debate.

In campaigning for demands such as what are raised here, the need to break with the Democrats will be complemented by a vision of the alternative – workers' candidates committed to living on a workers' wage and fighting for workers' needs.

### **Will Union Leaders Do This?**

We need a sense of realism here. While members should press their leadership to take these steps, the possibility of that leadership doing so at the present is very slim indeed. On the other hand, there is a support group that is building. That group could also take up this campaign and, while helping press for the leadership to do so, that group could start organizing along those lines itself. That support group could start building for exactly such a rally and seek to get AC Transit and BART workers involved in building it.

### **Stakes Are High**

The stakes are high. On the one hand stands the commitment of the entire union leadership to maintaining their links with the employers on the job and with the employers' politicians – the Democratic Party – in politics. On the other hand stands the necessity of workers to start to organize to defeat this employers' offensive that has been gathering steam for several decades now. There is no way to even start to roll back this offensive without also taking on the union leadership. That is a bitter pill that is hard to swallow. But considering the prospects for future generations, that pill must be swallowed.

That is the real message that shines through the article by Richard Pieper.



*“General Strike” organized by Occupy Oakland in 2011; if Occupy could do it, so can labor*