Remarks of
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To
Labor and Employee Relations Association

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"New Models for Unions"

Before discussing some of the goals I see for my union, I’d like to begin by
telling you about my union. Hopefully, that insight will help you understand
why our visions are important to our union and to all of organized labor.

My union, the International Federation of Professional & Technical
Engineers was founded in 1918. At that time, groups of drafters and designers
working at all the US Naval shipyards organized themselves together by mail
into a national union. The union was chartered by the AF of L, and our original
charter was signed by Samuel Gompers, who gave our union exclusive
jurisdiction over “workers of knowledge.”

Today, my union represents scientists, engineers, and technicians at
Boeing, NASA, GE, Lockheed-Martin, and throughout the Defense Department
and many other similar employees working in private industry and for the
federal, state, and city government agencies, both in the US and in Canada. Here
in the Milwaukee area, we represent the technical workforce at Ladish Co. My
union also represents some IT specialists, economists, lawyers, judges,
optometrists, and architects. In terms of US and Canadian union members, these
people do not work in typical and traditional union jobs. So, while they
understand the need for collective bargaining and union representation, they do not necessarily want a typical and traditional union.

Ours is a decentralized, member-driven union. We represent some incredibly talented and well educated workers, who are quite capable of bargaining their own contracts and handling their own workplace issues. So, our locals operate as singularly autonomous organizations. This means we can operate with a small staff, which allows us to hold our costs down and keep our dues low. While we, at the national level, are occasionally asked to assist locals with bargaining and contract administration, we prefer to concentrate our efforts on leadership development, organizing, lobbying, and the coordination of efforts and strategies.

In union circles, we talk about the importance of having a voice on the job. My members recognize the importance of gaining this “voice” and see it as not only affording themselves effective representation, but also allowing them to play a role in their employers’ business decisions.

Our members are regularly engaged in discussions concerning the future plans affecting their individual jobs as well as more broadly ranged workplace issues. Toward this end, we have entered into formal partnership agreements with a number of companies and governments. Our members regularly assist in the recruitment of their future co-workers, planning and attending career fairs and university outreach programs. One of our locals has even established its own hiring hall for prospective engineering jobs.
My members’ jobs are continuously evolving. In fact, it’s more accurate to say today’s workplaces are experiencing continuous revolution, as many of the jobs my members do barely resemble the jobs they did a few short years ago. This continuous upheaval brings additional pressure on the union, not to resist change, but to address its impact.

The combined forces of globalization, technological advancements, and demographic shifts have created a perfect storm on today’s jobs. Union leaders are outraged by the devastating impact these factors have caused, and are busily engaged in pointing fingers at political leaders, at corporate executives, and at each other. Regardless of whom we choose to blame, American labor unions will need to adopt strategies that will address this situation in real and meaningful ways.

For guidance, we can look to some of our European counterparts. Unions such as Sif in Sweden, Amicus in Great Britain, and AG Metall in Germany, all of whom represent professional workers, have built interdependent relationships with private employers, government, and academia, in which all parties play vital roles in the development of their respective nations’ workforces. One seasoned labour leader from Britain explained to me, “We can’t compete with China on light manufacturing, which was once a mainstay for us. So, we are all working to find and build our own core of excellence, and we’ll produce the best people on the planet to do that work.” This sentiment is repeated by union leaders across Europe and Southeast Asia. In these parts of the world, unions have included life long learning as a fundamental service to their members. These efforts encompass broad educational programs from improving literacy
skills to learning the latest technological advancements to attaining advanced university degrees.

Here in the US, with the exception of the skilled crafts unions that have historically involved themselves with improving their members’ skills from apprenticeships onward, precious little attention is given by unions to improving the talents of our members. We occasionally negotiate tuition refund agreements and hope that our members will take advantage of these perks where they see fit. As to keeping pace with workplace improvements, our focus has been to expect our employers to train our members, but all too often, rather than provide the needed re-training, employers choose to either ship other skilled workers in or ship the work out.

An essential element of our “voice on the job” effort must include occupational development and life long learning. We’ve been successful in negotiating tuition refund agreements with our employers, and have established some more extensive occupational development programs, but these are not nearly enough to meet the future needs of our members.

In her book, “The 21st Century at Work,” Dr. Lynn Karoly of the Rand Corporation predicts the coming trends toward unstable employment caused by globalization, technology and demographics are not only alarming but unavoidable. However, she also writes, “Given the pace of technological change and the evolution the business world, skills developed early may become obsolete. The new model of workforce education and training is predicated on the need for continuous learning throughout the working life; a process of life
long learning, including training and retraining that continues well past initial entry into the labor market.”

Professors Frank Levy and Richard Murnane of Harvard co-authored “The New Division of Labor” in which they assert any jobs that don’t require independent decision making are programmable and therefore, susceptible to being tekked out of existence. They further instruct, “The job market is changing fast, and improving education is a slow and difficult process.... Nonetheless, over the long run, better education is the best tool we have to prepare the population for a rapidly changing job market.”

Speaking only of engineering graduates, last year, India graduated twice as many engineers as we did in the US. China graduated 3½ times as many. Japan with half of the population of the US, graduated twice as many engineers as we did last year. These figures are similar across most other professional fields. Clearly, we need to do more in the continuing education of our workforce, and I believe labor unions must play a key role in this effort.

If we, in organized labor, want to remain a viable force in representing workers into the foreseeable future, we must take the lead in tackling this challenge. This goes beyond organizing and negotiating contracts. This addresses the long term needs of our members, in fact of all workers, our consumer base, our economy and our nation. We, in labor, simply cannot stand idly by and wait for someone else to take action.

This also begins to address our need to revise our outdated model in representing today’s workforce.
Our present model was created early in the twentieth century in response to the massive communities of workers who once filled our nation’s factory floors. Throughout most of the twentieth century, unions dealt with employers that were rich and powerful, but who were established as solid, unmaneuverable foundations.

Today, we see most new businesses are small and midsized enterprises. Many of these companies are engaged in fiercely competitive industries. They are also extremely mobile and flexible, and often have highly specialized employees working at remote sites or from their homes. Our current model does not fit the needs of these workers. Add to this, the 25% of the professional and technical workforce that is self-employed, and for whom our model never made sense, and it’s no wonder labor's numbers are declining.

Historically, unions have concentrated their attention on improving wages and benefits. While these remain essential parts of our responsibility and are certainly important to all workers, unorganized workers are also interested in gaining a voice in the workplace and in building their careers. In short, we need to ensure the product and service we are offering is in line with our prospective customers’ needs. Further, our services to our members must be worker-based, not employer based.

By focusing our interests toward occupational development, we can work in partnership with small and midsize businesses, and add value to their enterprises; not just increase their labor costs.
Where applicable, we must also form and nurture strategic alliances with professional societies in carrying out this effort. Many of my union’s members belong to professional societies and subscribe to publications that feature their profession and their specific skills. These interests allow my members to focus on addressing current trends in their given fields and allow our members to network with other colleagues within their professions.

My union is not alone in addressing this challenge. Other unions, both traditionally blue and white collar, are undertaking similar work. But, we are only beginning.

Other nations in our global marketplace are competing with us, not on with their products, but with their people, and they’re investing heavily into improving their workers. We need to make similar strategic and sensible investments into our own workforce. If we can’t convince national lawmakers to take up this challenge, we’ll work with state and local politicians and academic and community leaders.

Continuous occupational development and life long learning is key ways to address the future needs of our members and potential members. This is a mission and a strategy that works and wins for all of us.