

# Organized labor reaching out to form new coalitions

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Peter Kuper / INX

The 1980s were the most disastrous decade for organized labor in America since the 1920s.

Union membership decreased by 20 percent. Today, less than 18 percent of American workers are union members — a smaller percentage than half a century ago. Unionized workers have taken pay cuts and given up workplace protections they struggled for generations to secure.

In a half-century that has seen American society and the world economy transformed, organized labor has changed less than any other major social institution.

But historically, the times of the labor movement's decline have also been the times of its transformation. The decline of unions in the 1870s laid the basis for the explosive growth of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s. The collapse of traditional craft unionism in the 1920s cleared the way for the emergence of the industrial unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s.

Today an ossified bureaucratic hierarchy continues to control organized labor at the top, but its power to perpetuate the movement's petrified strategy and structure has decayed. In the space opened up by its declining authority, grassroots labor activists are developing new approaches based on reaching out to community allies.

The usual media images of workers for the past quarter century have featured "hard hats" beating up peace demonstrators and "Reagan Democrats" abandoning traditional blue-collar loyalties in disgust at kooks and troublemakers from militant social movements.

Today we see a different reality: cooperation among grassroots union activists and activists from the women's, African-American, Latino, Asian-American, gay, lesbian, environmental, farm, senior, student, handicapped, peace, human rights, anti-intervention, citizen action, consumer and other movements.

This development has been unheralded at the national level — and little noted in the national media — because it is occurring at the grassroots. Here are some examples:

- When Nelson Mandela toured the United States this summer, many people were surprised to discover that his huge meetings and rallies were organized by local coalitions in which labor played a major role. Local labor-community coalitions, largely unnoted in the media, have been the primary force that has persuaded local and state governments and other institutions to divest from companies involved with South Africa — thus providing an important part of the pressure that forced the South African government to free Mandela and come to the bargaining table.

- Throughout the 1980s, employers demanded concessions and workers accepted them — or struck and lost. When the Pittston Coal Group last year demanded that miners abandon long-established

health protections and work on Sundays, the same result appeared inevitable. But instead of going it alone, the Pittston miners appealed for support from allies within and far beyond the labor movement.

Forty-six thousand miners in 11 states struck to support the Pittston workers. More than 30,000 supporters from labor, peace, religious and many other groups poured into the miners' encampment, dubbed "Camp Solidarity." A corporate campaign put pressure on other companies to disassociate themselves from Pittston. Local activists in Boston, for example, forced a vice president of the Shawmut Bank to resign because he also served on Pittston's board of directors. When miners non-violently occupied the company's key coal treatment plant, 5,000 supporters surrounded the facility to prevent their forceful removal.

The result: Early this year, Pittston negotiated a settlement described in the press as "a major victory" for the workers.

Labor-community coalitions are also playing a growing role in electoral politics.

In Connecticut, the Legislative Electoral Action Program has drawn together labor, women's, citizen action, environmental, minority, gay, lesbian, peace and other groups in a progressive coalition that in 1988 elected 35 of its 42 endorsed candidates to the state Legislature. Dozens of similar coalitions have been formed, ranging from the Dirigo Alliance in Maine to Pro-Pac in New Mexico.

Community-labor coalitions have also addressed community economic decline.

Western Connecticut's Naugatuck Valley Project, for example, has brought together labor, church, community and small-business organizations to help workers buy and run threatened factories, start new cooperative businesses and to put pressure on companies that are cutting jobs to get them to meet community needs. Similar coalitions have sprung up in the mid-West rustbelt, California and dozens of other locations.

During the 1980s, the gap between rich and poor grew astronomically, the "American Dream" became unachievable for most working people, the "greed ethic" became a national scandal and the established political forces in both parties regarded with an apathy bordering on contempt by much of the population.

In the 1990s, a born-again labor movement expressing the needs of working people in the workplace and in the rest of society — and working in cooperation with community allies — can play a crucial role in resuscitating not only our economic, but also our political and social, life.

Jeremy Brecher of West Cornwall and Tim Costello of Boston are co-editors of a new book, "Building Bridges: The Emerging Grassroots Coalition of Labor and Community."