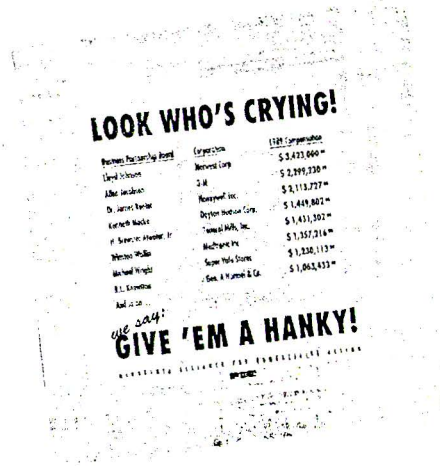
Building bridges

Coalitions with social-movement activists offer new hope for labor unions

THE USUAL MEDIA IMAGES OF WORKING PEOPLE'S POLITICAL VIEWS OVER the past quarter century have focused on reactionary "hard hats" beating up on peace demonstrators and narrow-minded "Reagan Democrats," disgusted with kooks and troublemakers from radical social movements, abandoning traditional blue-collar political loyalties. A closer look at the political sympathies of America's working class reveals a different reality: widespread cooperation between grass-roots union activists and activists from other movements—women's, environmental, minority, peace, and others.

This cooperation is proving to be an important means of renewing the labor movement and overcoming some of its widely recognized ills, such as its isolation from the growing female and minority segments of the work force, its lack of rank and file participation, and the public perception of organized labor as a special-interest group rather than as an advocate for the needs of all working people.



Unions and activists involved with Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action worked together to oppose social service cuts and tax breaks for the wealthy.

The separation of labor from other social movements has been a crucial obstacle to social change in the United States, making it easy for those who benefit from the status quo to divide and conquer any potential opposition. An alliance of labor and community movements would have considerable political clout because it would speak for the overwhelming majority of the population—a majority that is today largely excluded from political and economic decision making but if mobilized would represent an enormous social force.

Throughout the 1980s there was little effective national opposition to the right-wing corporate offensive spearheaded by the Reagan and Bush administrations. But facing up to the failure of their individual political strategies, activists from diverse movements began reaching out to one another.

The result is a new era of political bridge building: Once-isolated movements are now beginning to redefine themselves as part of an emerging alliance. Community-labor coalitions, such as the Naugatuck Valley Project in Connecticut and the Tri-State Conference on Steel in the Pittsburgh area, forced corporations to bargain with them over the closing or sale of plants and developed worker buyout plans as a way of preserving and developing the local economy.

At the same time, as the Democratic Party became less and less responsive to labor and other social movements, activists from a wide range of movements began running candidates from their own ranks, often challenging conservative Democrats as well as Republicans. Institutions such as the Legislative Electoral Action Project in Connecticut, Pro-Pac in New Mexico, the Minnesota Alliance for Progressive Action, and local Rainbow coalitions (spawned by Jesse Jackson's 1988 campaign) recruit and support candidates and keep them accountable after they're elected.

Community-labor coalitions differ from traditional ideological politics in that they do not demand agreement on a single party line. They depend instead on a political culture that recognizes how concerns will vary for different groups in the

coalition and accepts that at times it is necessary to agree to disagree. Catholic activists and feminists, for instance, may agree completely on dozens of issues yet find an irresolvable conflict on abortion rights. The experience of these coalitions shows that such conflicts can be bridged creatively in many but not all instances.

Suspicion and hostility rooted in past conflicts and long-standing prejudices also impede political bridge building. Baiting of groups within a community-labor alliance for their association with alien forces is not uncommon; at a recent coalition meeting that included gay rights activists, for example, a labor delegate demanded to know, "Why is our union making a coalition with 'life-style' groups?"

Some groups have been able to design specific political programs to help unify different groups. The New Haven Community–Labor Alliance in Connecticut, for example, developed and won a plan for cafeterias in local schools that united parents whose children would be fed and low-income communities for which the cafeterias would provide jobs. Activists in the peace movement and workers in military industries jointly supported the Minnesota Jobs with Peace campaign, which drafted a plan for converting the state's industries from military to peacetime production—demonstrating that even longtime antagonists can work together.

—Jeremy Brecher & Tim Costello
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