

Call of the Streets

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The best practitioners of the organizing craft combine white-hot passion, barely subdued anger, and quick intelligence with equal parts of clear vision and sparkling humor to produce a blend that with good fortune or pure persistence produces power from constant struggle. "Reviving Unions: A Call for Direct Action" indicates that Brother Lerner still has to be counted with the best of organizers fighting for the hearts, souls, and minds of institutional labor in our efforts to make all the dinosaurs dance against a date with extinction. Stephen Lerner's voice is currently among the loudest cries in the wilderness: It demands a hearing and a certain placement on any serious agenda focused on rebuilding an American labor movement.

The most stark contrast in the debate between John Sweeney and Tom Donahue at the AFL-CIO Convention in New York last fall was the exchange on whether the role of institutional labor was to "build bridges" or "block bridges." Donahue's position in favor of "bricks and mortar" unionism was strongly embedded in the memory of a different labor posture in American public life, where labor had power and the AFL-CIO was the instrument and arbiter of that power. John Sweeney, having led the Service Employees for 15 years from an ill-regarded janitors' union to a diverse and aggressive union of over one million members, had the same memory, but a different set of contemporary experiences. As a result, he stood at the junction between bread and butter unionism and social movement unionism, willing to both build bridges and block them if that was necessary to win labor a place in the future.

The punch that John Lewis of the Mine Workers threw at Bill Hutchinson of the Carpenters at another AFL convention more than 50 years ago was the opening event in the fight to build the great labor movement of the '30s. And many of us believe that John Sweeney's retort to Tom Donahue indicating his own willingness to block bridges to build a new strength for labor in the future is the clarion call for a new American labor movement.

But, as surely as John Sweeney spoke those words then, it was Stephen Lerner, more than any other organizer, who had created the campaign through the Justice for Janitors effort and the aggressive direct action tactics that had been the hallmark of those drives. Stephen Lerner may not have been the architect who built Tom Donahue's bridge on 14th Street in Washington, but he was the organizer who developed the tactic to block that bridge and have janitors and their supporters sit-down and accept arrest, tying up the District's vital traffic arteries for John Sweeney and the Service Employees.

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The symbols of these blocked bridges are now permeating the halls of labor. Linda Chavez-Thompson, the new executive vice-president of the AFL-CIO, never tires of telling about her first arrest, and the fact that she liked it. The march line has started to compete with the buffet line at International conventions.

Institutional labor is undergoing cultural and social change today, and Stephen Lerner is the single organizer perhaps most responsible for this emerging change. His "Call for Direct Action" is an argument for more, much more of the same. But embedded in Lerner's position is a frustration that reflects the current tactical success and emerging support for direct action. Some of us can remember when long hair made a political point, rather than a fashion statement. Lerner's frustration -- which emerges urgently from his article -- is caught in this same paradox: The tactic is gaining prominence, but is divorced completely from strategy.

In his conclusion, Lerner concedes the obvious when he says that "no one tactic can restore labor's power." Certainly our community organizing experience in ACORN, where we have worked to ensure that such tactics have never become stale, has also proven that point. Lerner argues for a program and strategy for rebuilding labor unions. I find no disagreement with his recommendations for going on the offensive, larger organizing drives, more membership activity, better bargaining, more resources, and useful politics, nor do I think that others will disagree. But they are not really a program. They are slogans that too many can mouth, without changing their conduct. Lerner's piece is inspiring and informed when he is pointing out our current powerlessness, advocating the efficacy of direct action and civil disobedience, and preaching the need to put the movement back into labor unions. But the muscle of his sermon makes the skeletal strategy seem spare.

A strategy that builds a new labor movement will also have to permeate the grassroots of institutional labor by changing local unions and the way we operate, organize, and fight. A changing culture of organizing and political action needs to increase the capacity and effectiveness of unions from the local level on up to the AFL-CIO. If we are to organize industries on a regional and national basis, we need a real program that restructures jurisdiction, reallocates resources, and creates real power at all links in the chain. To implement a different program for labor and a strategy to build real power for lower income and working people, we need lots of quiet labor in the vineyards. We will read about the victories of a new labor movement as often in obituaries, as testaments to decades of needed work and struggle, as in front page new stories. There is lots of room for hard work -- day in, day out -- in building power for working people. Though lacking the soaring romanticism of grand marches and mass arrests, this is work we badly need now in a program to reform labor.

Lerner's tactics, campaigns, and vision should play a vital role in the future for labor, as they have over the last decade. When the chips are down and victory is lying in the streets waiting to be seized with raw courage, will, and conviction, I can think of no organizer I would rather have by my side than my brother, Stephen Lerner, putting the pieces together to win.

Lerner's "Call to Direct Action" will be one of the stones we will all need to cobble together in a comprehensive strategy and program to rebuild our unions and our movement. For some of us, though, and I would submit for labor unions in general, we have to be able to both make the big plays and play big everyday.

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