

OPINION

A call for 'back to basics' unionism

BY MICHAEL GOODWIN

THE LABOR MOVEMENT is at a crossroads. How can unions rebuild from the current low-water mark of about 15% of the entire work force?

Unions are best-known for bargaining contracts, lobbying for legislation and participating in political campaigns. But when they were founded more than a century ago, they served other functions that continue to the present day. From the construction crafts to the maritime industry to the

performing arts, unions set standards for skilled work, develop education and training programs to prepare workers to meet those standards, refer skilled workers to employers with job openings, and collaborate with employers to promote quality products and services. Unions also pool their members' purchasing power, often working together with employers to offer benefits such as health care coverage and retirement income that workers can take with them from job to job.

By assuming this stabilizing, service-oriented role in the nation's industries, unions can become essential partners to business, labor and government and help them navigate a postrecession economy that will be a whole lot leaner and crueler than before the era of BlackBer-

rys and busted bubbles.

The Office and Professional Employees International Union has been successful in attracting new members by offering workers benefits that they want and need, at no additional cost, by paying benefits out of the union's general treasury. Using combined purchasing power, OPEIU provides every member access to the PerksCard national discount program, which offers discounts at major retailers, as well as union-provided towing/service calls through Nation Safe Drivers. In several selected cities, OPEIU members receive death benefits, disability benefits and discounts for medical and dental care, equipment and other purchases through Careington International. In Las Vegas, OPEIU and United Steelworkers

together represent more than 5,000 taxi drivers and provide membership benefits to all union drivers.

In New York City, the Hotel Trades Council provides training and credentialing for skilled positions in food preparation and food service, as well as in computer skills, boiler repair, plumbing, electrical work, air conditioning and refrigeration mechanics. In collaboration with the industry, medical coverage and health care services are provided, including a prescription drug plan, dental care, optical care, a pension plan, life insurance and accidental death and dismemberment benefits.

Such programs offer security and stability for employers, as well as employees. How often have employers complained that they can't find skilled workers? Or that they can't afford the cost of health care coverage for their employees? Or that they are afraid to invest in their best workers for fear that they'll go to work for their competitors? By providing industrywide training and benefit programs, unions can help quality companies to survive and thrive.

Because it draws on the best traditions of unions, guilds and worker associations of all kinds, I call this brand of worker organization "back-to-basics unionism." It can help unions find their footing in the new economy, facilitating employees and employers to work together in this new reality.

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