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# Labor Coalition: Good Union Jobs Can Be Green.

**W**hat if we could take bold steps to create thousands of good union jobs that also help save the environment? That's the proposal of a New York State coalition of unions and environmentalists. Building trades, energy and transport workers' unions have banded together to address the dual problems of inequality and climate change across New York State—and they're winning.

Without public policy that protects workers' livelihoods as part of protecting the environment, many workers have to choose between good jobs or a healthy environment—a growing concern in New York State, and elsewhere. Climate change has hit New York hard. There was Superstorm Sandy as well as Hurricane Irene, unprecedented snowstorms, and more recently, Lake Ontario flooding, all of which have devastated communities across the state.

To ensure cleanup and prevention jobs are good ones, Climate Jobs NY (CJNY), a union-driven campaign, is promoting a pro-worker, pro-union, good-climate program in New York State. CJNY has already won: an increase in funding for solar and energy efficiency work in public buildings; a Project Labor Agreement requirement for the work; labor representatives on a statewide Just Transition working group; and a prevailing wage requirement for the state's renewable energy solicitations. But CJNY has bigger ambitions: a plan to construct high-speed rail, develop a robust offshore wind industry in New York, and put solar on as many public buildings as possible.

"This initiative represents the best hope for protecting my members," says Utility Workers Local 1-2 President James Slevin, while simultaneously "ensuring new energy jobs are good union jobs, and addressing climate change."

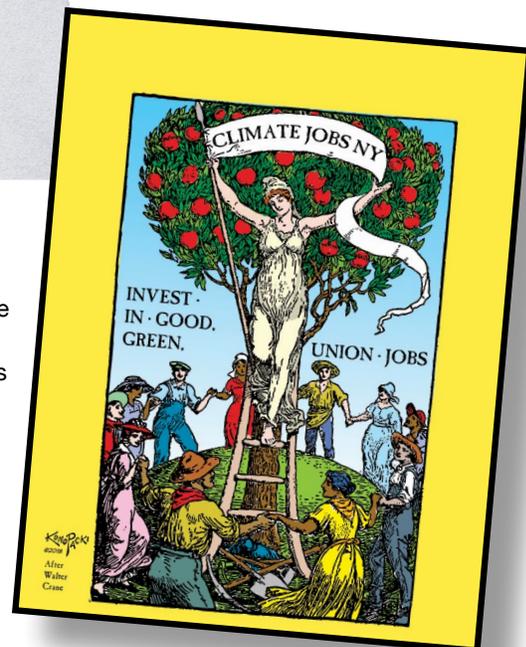
The campaign grew from the Cornell University's Worker Institute, where professor Lara Skinner headed up an initiative on addressing both the inequality and the climate crisis. "All New York State workers and residents face both," Skinner told us. The Climate Jobs NY campaign shows that 'jobs versus the environment' is a false choice, she added.

She, and the others involved with the Labor Leading on Climate Initiative, began by asking questions. "We started with the people who do the work of building our buildings, moving New Yorkers around, and powering both. We knew by starting with them, we'd find solutions that the usual debate leaves out," she said.

For example, the battle over the proposed construction of the Keystone XL pipeline bitterly divided unions. Some politicians and corporations like to stoke those divisions, offering environmental exploitation as the only possible engine of good jobs. President Trump's campaign bluster about bringing coal mining back to West Virginia is just one example of this.

After Superstorm Sandy, Skinner launched a four-year process of figuring out a pro-worker, pro-union environmental agenda. The slow-and-steady approach included a lot of meetings, trainings, and a research report. It paid off. Unions created the CJNY campaign and now champion what's known as a "just transition" to a more equal economy and one that respects environmental limits. "Unless we're talking about good jobs and a good environment, the conversation just doesn't go anywhere productive," said Skinner.

That's why CJNY calls for a just transition for workers who lose their jobs due to climate protection policies. Without public policy that protects workers' livelihoods as part of protecting the environment, many workers feel the need



to cheer environmentally harmful job creation.

But Christopher Erikson, Business Manager of IBEW Local 3, points in another direction. "We need an energy transition to clean energy and we need to do it so we protect the good union jobs of those who construct, operate, and maintain power plants in this country," he said.

Skinner agreed. "Jobs in the clean energy sector are growing—solar and wind installers are among the fastest growing jobs in the US right now," she said. "If labor isn't involved, there's a good chance these won't be union jobs."

—Shaun Richman, who contributes regularly to Steward Update and unionist.com as well as In These Times and other outlets.

*Editor's note: Are you interested in developing a Climate Jobs program in your city or state? More information about the New York State specifics is available at [www.unionist.com](http://www.unionist.com) and Lara Skinner invites inquiries from stewards, local union officers, and others about how the Worker Institute research and approach might be useful in your state or province. Email her at [lara.skinner@cornell.edu](mailto:lara.skinner@cornell.edu).*

# Five Ideas for Positivity in Your Relationship with Your Supervisor

**1 RIGHT IS RIGHT, NO MATTER WHERE YOU FIND IT!** Always start from this point. Either of you may be right. If not 100%, then maybe 50-50 or some other ratio. So, immediately acknowledge that possibility. Doing this builds credibility which leads to trust and trust is the grease that keeps the relationship machine moving. Just because you're sitting across from each other or saying something the other dislikes, doesn't want to hear or can't agree with, doesn't automatically make either of you wrong.

And speaking of who might be right, always first try to prove the other person right. If you can't, then they might have a problem. On the other hand, if you can prove them right then perhaps you need to reevaluate things.

**2 TREAT EACH OTHER AS TEAMMATES/PARTNERS TRYING TO SOLVE THE SAME PROBLEM.** Someone once described the infighting between the AFL and the CIO before they joined forces as "two brothers having a fist fight in a house burning down around them." Simply put, we have more in common with the other person than we might realize and sometimes our mutual and/or long-term survival depends on it and is much greater than any of our other differences. So, at the end of the day we're better off helping instead of hurting each other. Tomorrow's another day and paybacks are both negative and a hard cycle to break. So, it's always best not to get started.

**3 YOU ARE EQUAL.** Stewards (when acting in that role) and supervisors are equal because the traditional employer-employee relationship is suspended under a law commonly called the "equality rule." This applies whenever a steward acts in their representational capacity. But such things as threatening or causing physical harm, or using ethnic slurs, are not acceptable behavior for a steward or management and not protected under the equality rule. Treat each other as equals and expect—and insist on—the same in return.

**4 SMILES, YES. FROWNS, NO.** Keep your sense of humor close. I once co-mediated a neighbor-to-neighbor community dispute with a federal mediator. Seems one neighbor was throwing garbage into the other's back yard. When the Dumpee party asked where the Dumper neighbor was, because the start time to begin the mediation had passed the federal mediator replied with a straight face, "Probably at home throwing garbage into your back yard." The Dumpee broke out in laughter. That's when the federal mediator turned to me and said, "We're about 15 minutes from a settlement and only because I type slowly." Why? I asked. "Because he can laugh about it." A sense of humor helps keep perspective, especially if you can laugh at yourself. So never pass up a chance to inject some humor into the situation but never, ever at another person's expense or hurt feelings. If you know that your audience can have a sense of humor, consider using that tool when appropriate to smooth the way to a reasonable discussion.

**5 BE NICE.** At all times treat everyone as you would like to be treated, regardless of how they are acting. You are representing your union (not your emotions in the moment) and always expected to act professionally for the sake, and on behalf of, the entire membership. Whatever they might have said or done, reacting negatively in the moment is probably not as important as the union's long-term goal of maintaining a positive relationship that benefits the membership. Remember, everyone is having a hard day!

*—Bob Oberstein. The writer has been a professor at Ottawa University, Phoenix, Arizona, where he taught arbitration and labor/employment law and related subjects. He has also served as an arbitrator, mediator and fact-finder.*

## Happy Labor Day

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# CALIFORNIA'S LABOR HISTORY HAS LESSONS FOR TODAY'S SILICON VALLEY ECONOMY EVERYWHERE

**I**n *From Mission to Microchip: A History of the California Labor Movement*, I try to present a usable, accessible history of the California labor movement, highlighting the lessons that have allowed union density and power to remain considerably higher in the Golden State than elsewhere in much of the country. *From Mission to Microchip* challenges the standard California “Come here, get rich” narrative, dominant since the Gold Rush, instead telling the stories of the mostly unsung working people and their institutions that have made California what it is.

Labor history is a window onto the myriad possibilities for action that we often forget—or never heard about—today. To force violent and recalcitrant employers to pay attention to community needs, California workers actually shut down entire cities, not once but twice (San Francisco in 1934 and Oakland in 1946). The first lawsuit filed by a woman for equal pay for equal work was that of educator Kate Kennedy, a member of the Knights of Labor, in the 1880s. The first union in California's fields was not Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta's United Farm Workers, but the Japanese-Mexican Labor Alliance, formed in Oxnard's beet fields in 1903 by immigrant workers who didn't speak each other's languages.

What, you might ask, does all this have to do with workplace struggles today? After all, San Francisco's docks during the Great Depression or even the sprawling Southern California aerospace/defense industrial complex of the late twentieth century don't much resemble the hi-tech gig-labor world of Amazon and Apple, Uber and Lyft in the services-based economy of today.

But in crucial respects, they do. One of the few private sector industrial unions still standing strong is the West Coast's International Longshore and Warehouse Union, which in the 1930s organized the

casual manual labor force on the docks and crafted a union-run hiring hall that still dispatches workers today to their highly automated workplaces.

The union also created a model automation agreement in 1960 allowing employers to move forward with labor-saving and world-changing technology (containerization) while sharing the economic benefits with the work force. Web platforms like Uber or Taskrabbit are ways that employers, not workers, organize and control work. It may not be enough for workers in these new industries to know about how workers reorganized their unsatisfactory work lives into more equitable arrangements in the past in order to accomplish the same thing today. But without awareness that such changes are possible, they are far less likely to occur.

Shiny Silicon Valley inventions and superrich tech titans may grab the news, but recent labor-led political campaigns have reversed decades of conservative anti-tax, small government policies that harm working people. “Tax the rich” ballot measures in the last couple of statewide general election cycles have stemmed the destruction of the public sector so prevalent in other states. Immigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries initially produced a toxic and divisive xenophobia that prevented working people from recognizing their common interests. Today, though, it is the solidarity that unions have built with immigrant workers in the workplace and at the ballot box that has made California an epicenter of resistance to Trumpism.

These things happened. We would be even farther down the road toward destruction of unions and our fragile democracy today than we are, had it not been for the risky and often astoundingly courageous achievements of the worker activists who came before us. I've told their stories as a necessary corrective to

the pervasive cynicism about both history and collective action by working people peddled by right-wing billionaires and their poodle politicians and media outlets.

Stewards are indispensable links between union leadership and the members, and it should come as no surprise that they played key roles in many of the struggles outlined in *From Mission to Microchip*. Pete Beltran, leader of United Auto Workers Local 645 in Van Nuys in the 1980s, fought to keep a GM plant open when the corporation wanted to close it. He served as chief steward before he became president of the 5,000 member local. His connections all over the giant car factory, painstakingly built through his work as steward, not only became the base for his successful run for union office. When the union had to wage an all-out war to prevent GM from closing the still-profitable plant, the skills he had honed as a steward came in handy in constructing a broad coalition outside the plant with civil rights groups, faith groups, other unions, students, and political organizations in the community.

“We need to look to other activists and shop stewards outside of our immediate circle for support,” said David Harlan, UNITE HERE Local 2 shop steward. “The labor leaders in your book were not isolated. They built coalitions and relationships with other organizations and movements. For me, the book was an inspiration to not give up or get discouraged. It showed others just like me as a role model and an example.” Harlan added that the “book also makes it clear that workers cannot become complacent, lest we lose what we have fought for. Whether you are a nurse, firefighter, teacher, or laborer—we are only as good as our last fight.”

—Fred Glass was communications director for the California Federation of Teachers for 28 years and currently teaches labor history at City College of San Francisco. Readers of this publication can take a 30% discount on *From Mission to Microchip* at [ucpress.edu](http://ucpress.edu) by entering 16M4197 at checkout.

Even before the *Janus* decision, anti-unionism continued apace in both the US and Canada. To challenge it, union stewards need both new strategies and new attitudes so that solidarity will rule in every workplace.

To do so, stewards must think of themselves as organizers, not grievance processors. In most unions, stewards carefully prepare each grievance, meet as a small group with management, appeal it and eventually take the case to arbitration. This costs the union tens of thousands of dollars, and it risks putting important workplace issues in the hands of a totally disinterested individual arbitrator.

### STRATEGY FAIL

Put plainly, this strategy has failed. As the anti-union movement racks up more wins, expanding “open shop” laws, more unhappy members drop out.

As a result, our unions’ existence is at stake. With most grievances, the members—and non-members—never get involved, so the union loses both power over management and the opportunity to show the non-members how important the union is, 24/7/365. Now, instead of expecting Someone Else to defend the contract, everyone is asked to become active participants—to be the union. And stewards are the ones to ask, and agitate, motivate, and, yes, organize this change.

### NEW GOAL

Becoming an organizer also requires different strategies than grievance processing. Because the goal is to involve all our members, and reach out to the non-members, how-to-juice-participation becomes a question we ask of every decision we make and every grievance we file. In fact, even using the words “strategy” and “grievances” in the same sentence shows a clear break from the old routine of filing grievances.

### HOW TO GET STARTED

- Think organizationally. As you plan the grievance, also calculate how your members—and non-members—can get involved. As the non-members become active, they are way-y-y more likely to join.
- Prowl your workplace. Ask members what problems they want the union to deal with so you can find new, energizing issues.

# Organizing with Grievances

- Create a communications network that includes every member. Options include: personal e-mail, text, an app, a secret Facebook group or even Twitter. The point is for union stewards and members—and prospective members—to be in touch. Pass on information about all workplace issues, not just about official grievances.
- Share experiences. One reason that stewards in a local should meet every month is to create joint strategies and to see how our boss is dealing with the union. In unions with many work locations, stewards sometimes think that their supervisor has a nasty streak but when stewards get together, they find that it is a carefully plotted management strategy.
- Expand union visibility, both inside the workplace and in your community—make sure all your members wear union insignia at work—buttons, jerseys, even hair ribbons.
- Learn from stewards who work in Right to Work environments. (Unionist.com has some examples.)
- Finally, it is just a great and healthy union-building exercise to challenge management’s authority. Anytime. Anywhere.
- Showcase solidarity: When you and your members pick an issue, make sure it builds solidarity, not something divisive

within the union. For example, pitting younger workers versus older over seniority perks, or anything that splits people along race, gender, immigration or geographical lines.

### KEEP HOPING

Finally, as any steward in an open shop can tell us, it is often discouraging to have to deal with the free riders, but don’t lose hope. Just look at the numbers from the teachers strike in Arizona in April. There are 90,000 certified teachers in the state of Arizona but only about 20,000 (22%) were union members of the Arizona Education Association. When it came time to vote on a strike, however, 57,000 (63%) filled out a ballot and a huge majority of the teachers risked discipline by walking out of their schools. With some strong activity, participation in the union tripled! Build it and they will come. In fact, a great first-step assignment is to ask each of your co-workers what they know about the #Red4Ed movement (you can share the last *Steward Update* with them, if they need an introduction).

—Bill Barry is a retired organizer and labor educator and the author of the new book *Don’t Trump on Us: Making Our Unions Great Again*, from which this article was adapted. It is available at [www.unionist.com](http://www.unionist.com).

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