

# 1 **Building a Larger, Stronger Movement of America's Workers**

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**O**nly by increasing our numbers can organized workers protect and strengthen living standards for America's working families and achieve our mission of economic and social justice. We must reverse the long decline in union membership as a percentage of the private-sector workforce.

Over the past six years, the AFL-CIO and its affiliate unions have undertaken an aggressive program to do just that. Many national and local unions have made profound changes in their structures and resource allocation. By devoting more energy and resources to organizing and by engaging our community, religious and political allies in defending the freedom of workers to form and join unions, we've increased the number of workers joining our unions every year.

But these increases have only slowed, not stopped, the decline of organized workers as a percentage of the private-sector workforce. We have not increased organizing enough yet to keep pace with the growth in the American economy or to offset the loss of industrial jobs to other countries and counter other economic shifts.

The decline in our membership strength has an adverse impact on our movement, our members and our unions in our workplaces, in collective bargaining and in the political arena. To speak with a strong voice in our industries and sectors, enforce our contracts and take collective action as well as to make political and legislative gains on the issues that affect working families' lives, we must regain our strength in relative and absolute terms.

In 1999, the AFL-CIO Executive Council launched an ongoing campaign—the Voice@Work campaign—to generate community and political support for workers trying to form or join unions and to expose anti-union, anti-worker employer strategies. In August 2000, the Executive Council put forth a four-point program to further encourage organizing and set a goal of bringing 1 million members a year into our unions, with each union agreeing to set targets and develop plans to tackle its share of the goal. And in July 2001, the Executive Council moved to further link politics to organizing and place

organizing at the center of the union movement's political agenda. Increasingly, unions are organizing together and supporting each other's organizing. And more and more unions are committing to greater investments in organizing.

Clearly, the steps we've taken have had a considerable impact. Just as clearly, our efforts have not been enough.

Rebuilding our membership strength is a large and complicated task. Unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO have about 13 million members, roughly the same number we had when our merger took place in 1955. But the numbers are deceiving, because in the years that followed, the U.S. workforce almost doubled and the union movement declined from an historic unionization high of 35 percent to our current low of 13.5 percent (9 percent in the private sector).

The reasons for the decline are many. Our economy changed from industrial-based to information-based, and our efforts to help workers organize failed to keep up with either the jobs or the workers. Globalization and the unchecked advent of free trade moved millions of union jobs overseas. Some unions did not maintain their organizing programs as they focused all their resources on protecting their current members. Private-sector employers merged and consolidated, grew bigger and began using their enormous financial resources to manipulate labor laws and to intimidate, harass and discharge workers trying to form or join unions. While membership growth has been steady in the public sector, government employers—especially in the Sun Belt—have resisted efforts to legalize collective bargaining, and governments nationwide have downsized their workforces. And conservative political voices have been able to maintain unchecked a steady drumbeat of anti-union propaganda that has further spoiled the climate for organizing.

Importantly, there are still many, many workers who would like to form or join unions. Independent polls show 30 million to 40 million nonunion workers say they would join a union where they work if they had the chance. A recent study showed if private-sector workers were able to form or join unions with no interference or retribution, union membership would triple to more than 50 million, and nearly half of private-sector workers would be union members.

We know what we need to do. To help workers freely exercise their desire to join our unions and build a bigger, stronger union movement on behalf of all working men and women, we must dramatically escalate our organizing efforts based on three building blocks:

1. We must invest more of our resources.
2. We must use more of our power and influence.
3. And we must change the environment for organizing.

## **Investing More Resources**

Large-scale organizing requires large-scale commitment, so we must devote more resources to organizing, develop and expand our organizing programs and involve more of our members in organizing. These changes must be made by every union, one by one.

We must devote the funds necessary to get the job done. Every union should devote at least 30 percent of its budget to organizing. Some are already spending a far greater portion of their budgets on organizing, generally with excellent results. Others are moving in the right direction. When all unions get to this level of financial commitment, we will have laid the foundation to transform the American workplace.

We must develop and expand our organizing programs by recruiting, hiring and training dedicated staff—energetic organizers who wake up every day thinking about helping workers join unions. Those organizers must include women, people of color, immigrants and young workers, because our workforce is increasingly diverse. The AFL-CIO must increase its assistance in recruiting and training organizers through the Organizing Institute and Union Summer. And the AFL-CIO's Organizing Department must increase its work with unions interested in creating, expanding or rethinking their organizing programs.

Most important, we must harness the energy and enthusiasm of our members by involving them more deeply as volunteer organizers. We cannot meet our ambitious and necessary goals through the efforts of paid staff alone—and no one understands the benefits of union membership better than union members.

## **Using Our Power and Expertise**

To meet our goals we cannot organize reactively, limiting ourselves to helping whatever groups of workers knock on our door. We must develop innovative and sophisticated strategies designed to utilize our assets and people power to increase the scale and pace of our organizing efforts and maximize chances for success.

We must increase our efforts to “bargain to organize” by taking advantage of existing collective bargaining agreements to secure new organizing rights at a wide range of facilities over which employers have influence. We must determine where the economy is growing and how our industries are changing and design organizing strategies aimed at concentrations of potential members.

We must seek more alternatives to the slow and unfair election processes administered by the National Labor Relations Board and the National Mediation Board. We must develop and employ more and more tools to induce employers to participate in alternative methods for workers to decide on unionization.

We must make new commitments to working together across union lines, supporting organizing campaigns with solidarity and unselfish participation the way we support each other in strikes, political campaigns and grassroots lobbying efforts. We must join together in more multiunion organizing efforts and increase cooperation between AFL-CIO unions. And we must improve the capabilities of our state and local AFL-CIO bodies through full affiliation, so we can call on them to play a more active role in supporting organizing.

## **Changing the Organizing Environment**

The AFL-CIO Voice@Work campaign—which was launched in response to the epidemic of employer interference with the freedom of workers to choose a union—has demonstrated that with community and political support, workers can expose and overcome anti-union, anti-worker tactics and win elections as well as first contracts.

Now we must expand and refine the Voice@Work campaign, not only to win organizing campaigns in the short term but also to lay the groundwork for a longer-term effort to change and strengthen the rules protecting workers who are trying to organize, whether in the private or the public sector.

We must increase outreach efforts to involve community, civil rights and religious allies in demanding that employers obey labor laws and live up to basic community standards of human and employee relations. We must expand our work in coalition with allies on such issues as immigrant and civil rights in order to aid and assist massive numbers of the unorganized workers who are most interested in unionization.

We must link organizing and politics inextricably together in multiple ways:

- By involving elected officials in organizing campaigns to educate them about why workers want unions and the problems they encounter when they try to join and form them.
- By asking them to express support publicly for workers and condemn employer violations of laws and community standards.
- By encouraging elected officials at all levels of government to institute legal and regulatory changes, such as banning the use of public monies for employer “persuasion” during organizing campaigns.
- And by calling upon members of Congress and state and local legislative bodies to begin to act to reform our outdated labor laws so workers can freely choose to join and form unions.

When we educate and engage elected officials so they understand the importance of unions to workers' lives as well as the obstacles employers erect to organizing, they will play a stronger role in helping our unions organize and grow. And when our unions grow, we can elect more pro-working family elected officials to help pass policies and laws, including labor law reform, that improve workers' lives; build a bigger, stronger labor movement; and give America's workers a genuine voice in their country.

## **Our Commitment**

A larger, more powerful movement of America's workers is essential to a prosperous, sustainable economy and a society where working men and women are respected and have a real voice. But we cannot build a bigger, stronger labor movement without making significant commitments and then living up to those commitments.

- We therefore pledge as individuals, as local and national unions and as a movement to make assisting workers who want to form or join unions our top priority.
- We will devote more resources—at least 30 percent of our budgets—to organizing and bring the full financial and human resources of the labor movement to bear in order to help bring justice to America's workers.
- We will develop comprehensive organizing programs that utilize innovative strategies and take full advantage of our strengths and relationships.
- We will increase cooperation between our unions, support each other's efforts and strengthen state and local labor movements so they can play a more vital role in organizing and in guaranteeing workers a Voice@Work.
- We will shine a steady light on employer violations of the right of workers to make a free choice to form or join unions, and we will involve political, religious and community allies who share our commitment to social and economic justice to guarantee a Voice@Work to working women and men.
- We will link politics and organizing together by involving and educating public officials and insisting they not only condemn employer violations of workers' rights but also actively support workers who want to organize. And we must demand they rewrite our nation's laws to give meaningful and immediate protection to workers' rights and human rights amidst the reality of the 21st century workplace.