



## The State of the Unions

by Paul Garver

This issue of *Democratic Left* is a special report on the issues and priorities confronting organized labor at the end of 2010. The context is the collapse of hope for any legislated reform of labor law that would make it less difficult for unions to organize large numbers of new members in the private sector.

Most of these articles had their inception prior to the November 2010 elections. However, the negative but rather predictable results of that election do not greatly affect their contents. The issues and priorities set forth are not limited to a single electoral cycle, but concern the essential tasks that must be confronted over a span of many years. Despite its shrinking numbers in the private sector and the current wave of attacks on its public sector members, organized labor remains a crucial linchpin of any broadly based progressive movement in the U.S. As such everyone on the U.S. Left has a vital interest in its survival and growth.

Three co-editors of DSA's labor blog Talking Union (Duane Campbell, Stuart Elliot and Paul Garver) assembled the contents of this issue. Stuart Elliot is managing editor of this issue. Most contributors can regularly be read in Talking Union, either because they contribute directly to the blog or because they agree to have their articles originally appearing elsewhere to be posted there. Some articles have been abridged here for reasons of space.

Several articles focus on the challenges of creating an effective progressive coalition among unions and community groups that can build a wider movement to put pressure on American politics from the Left.

Stuart Elliot's "Ten Things We Liked about Labor in 2010" reminds us that despite the trials and tribulations facing workers and unions, positive developments and creative new ideas are constantly emerging.

Amy Dean's "New Blueprint for Change" demonstrates the need for progressive organizing to be grounded at the local level and not to be bound to the electoral cycle. As an innovative leader of the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council, she helped develop the political strategy she advocates.

Amanda Tattersall's "Four Ideas for Strengthening the One Nation Working Together Coalition" is based on her new book, *Power in Coalition*. It lays out useful principles for building effective coalitions of unions and community organizations that would create a real infrastructure for One Nation Working Together.

Tattersall draws lessons from union and community struggles in Canada and Australia as well as in the U.S., reminding us that ours is an international struggle.

Paul Garver's "How Chinese Workers are Opening the Way for Union Reform" shows how the wave of successful strikes in the Chinese auto parts industry coupled with more generalized widespread unrest among young migrant workers in China has shaken Chinese society, and opened up new possibilities for institutional union reform that could



lay the basis for a common struggle against transnational corporations.

David Bacon's "Equality and Rights for All Workers: The Key to Organizing Unions" demonstrates how the self-organization of immigrant workers who come to the USA with a different sense of their rights is revitalizing the labor movement here. Although organized labor has adopted more progressive policies and positions on immigration, it faces a difficult opposition, some in its own ranks, from those who favor a more protectionist position. Neither federation has yet found effective ways to work with the immigrant rights community in a sustained manner.

Thomas Jackson in "Martin Luther King, Economic Justice, Workers' Rights, and Economic Democracy" reminds us how the struggles for racial justice and workers' rights are integrally joined at the hip, as Martin Luther King personified towards the end of his life. The One Nation

Working Together rally in October visually demonstrated that this alliance still has great potential.

Duane Campbell's review of "Waiting for Superman" describes the assault on teachers' unions that is an integral part of the right-wing agenda to destroy quality public education.

Taken together, these articles sketch out a road map for a U.S. labor movement that is more inclusive in its membership and goals, more combative politically, and more oriented towards ongoing struggle than continued dependency on a Democratic Party that takes labor's support for granted. As Nelson Lichtenstein suggested in a recent talk to the AFL-CIO Executive Council, labor should become a "less reliable" ally for Democrats. That entails building up the organizational capacity for autonomous action by labor and its coalition partners independent of the electoral cycle. ■

## Ten Things We Liked About the Labor Movement in 2010

By Stuart Elliott

**1. NEW LEADERSHIP IN SEIU AND UAW.** We welcome the elections of Mary Kay Henry and Bob King to the presidency of the SEIU and UAW, respectively. The election of a woman to the top role in the nation's largest union illustrates the growing role of women in the leadership of the labor movement. Under the new leaders SEIU quickly settled its debilitating raid on UNITE HERE, and both SEIU and UAW mobilized their memberships for the One Nation Working Together rally in Washington.

**2. THE ONE NATION WORKING TOGETHER RALLY:** Numerous unions mobilized their East Coast memberships to participate in the October 2 rally in Washington, D.C. The result was a solid tribute to the racial and cultural diversity of the U.S. labor movement.

**3. LABOURSTART,** the international labor news and campaigning site, is run on a shoestring and powered by nearly 800 volunteer correspondents. Every day the site publishes links to labor news in 23 different languages, and its news feeds appear on more than 800 union websites. It conducts e-mail campaigns in eight different languages. It can be found at <http://www.labourstart.org>.

In 2010, LabourStart held its first public international solidarity conference in Hamilton, Canada. The conference attracted over 200 participants from more than 28 countries, including national union presidents, representatives of Global Union Federations, local union officers, staffers and grassroots activists. We also like UnionBook, a LabourStart project to create an ad-free, non-corporate alternative to Facebook.

**4. LABOR BLOGS AND MAGAZINES:** Among the growing universe of labor blogs, two of our favorites are

the AFL-CIO Now Blog <http://blog.aflcio.org/> and Working In These Times, <http://www.inthesetimes.com/working/>. Labor Notes and The American Prospect, which published an excellent special report on labor globalism, provide commentary from different points of view on the Left.

**5. ORGANIZING THE UNEMPLOYED:** As unemployment rose to 10 percent, several organizations had the foresight to realize that the job crisis was not going to go away quickly. The International Association of Machinists launched UCubed. Working America and the AFL-CIO set up the Unemployment Lifeline. Jobs with Justice in Portland, Chicago and a number of other cities began projects to organize the unemployed. Interfaith Worker Justice and the National Employment Law Project are also working with churches and immigrants. The grassroots Unemployed Workers Action Group has taken up the banner for the 99ers, using on-line tools, work with mainstream media, and an August Wall Street demonstration.

**6. LABOR-BLOGOSPHERE ALLIANCE:** Unions were heavily involved in Netroots Nation, the annual in-person conference organized by leading progressive bloggers. The AFL-CIO and SEIU are major sponsors. They had exhibit booths along with AFSCME, AFT, Laborers, UFCW, and Working America.

Most keynote sessions included a speaker from labor, including AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. The SEIU's Eliso Medina was a major speaker on immigration. Most blocks of issue workshops included a labor theme – from the need to restore the manufacturing sector to organizing young workers.

Many grassroots unionists either came on their own or got their locals to send them, not an easy task when union budgets are strained. One of us met an ironworker from Chicago, a bricklayer from Las Vegas, SEIU members from Ohio and Las Vegas, an IBEW member from Baltimore, and a whole variety of folks from California.

**7. OUTREACH TO YOUNG WORKERS:** AFL-CIO Secretary Liz Shuler, the youngest national officer in the history of the labor federation, has spearheaded an exciting outreach to young workers. She has encouraged and listened to the Young Trade Unionists in Baltimore, Young Workers United in the Bay area, and the Student Labor Action Project. She moderated a panel on young workers at the 2010 Netroots Nation. In June, 400 young people gathered at the Next Up conference, the AFL-CIO's first-ever Young Workers Summit, developed a game plan for the future that focuses on making sure young union leaders and activists are taken seriously and their ideas are heard at all levels of the labor movement. The young workers also called for:

- Organizing a Next Up constituency group.
- Holding a national youth summit each year.
- Opening up seats for the Next Up generation on national, state federation and central local body boards.

**8. STUDENTS:** Students Against Sweatshops launched a campaign that forced Nike to pay \$1.5 million severance to workers in Honduran subcontractors. The Coalition of



Paul Segal

Immokalee Workers, with the support of students, won important victories for Florida tomato pickers. In the Dominican Republic Knights Apparel opened up a unionized factory paying workers a living wage, making Alta Gracia apparel for American campus shops. Tying it all together is the continuing excellent work of the Student Labor Action Project.

**9. LABOR IN THE 2010 ELECTIONS:** While several parts of the Democratic Party coalition stayed home on Election Day, labor's efforts to limit Republican gains and to make jobs the number one issue was substantial and made a difference in several key races.

According to the AFL-CIO, 200,000 union members volunteered in Labor 2010. They distributed 19.4 million fliers while talking with workers at the job site They made

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*Democratic Socialists of America share a vision of a humane international social order based on equitable distribution of resources, meaningful work, a healthy environment, sustainable growth, gender and racial equality, and non-oppressive relationships. Equality, solidarity, and democracy can only be achieved through international political and social cooperation aimed at ensuring that economic institutions benefit all people. We are dedicated to building truly international social movements – of unionists, environmentalists, feminists, and people of color – which together can elevate global justice over brutalizing global competition.*

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millions of phone calls and knocked on 8.5 million doors. And Working America, the AFL-CIO community affiliate, also worked in more than 80 electoral races around the country, knocking on nearly 800,000 doors and making half a million phone calls.

“I couldn’t be prouder of what we all did together,” AFL-CIO President Trumka said.

SEIU and other unions outside the AFL-CIO carried out parallel mobilizations.

The labor-aligned Working Families Party successfully expanded its fusion, cross-endorsing strategy from New York to Connecticut and Oregon, providing the margin of victory for Connecticut Governor and several other key races.

**10. CHINESE WORKERS:** Young migrant workers carried out a series of strikes in the auto parts industry in China, winning significant wage increases and agreement to demands for the election of local union officers. Their disciplined and strategic actions forced the state-controlled Chinese trade union bureaucracy and governmental authorities to propose substantive reforms in labor practices. (See article by Paul Garver in this issue for more) ■

*Stuart Elliott is editor of Talking Union, <http://talkingunion.wordpress.com/> the blog of the DSA Labor Group. These stories and more were originally featured on the blog.*

## **A New Blueprint for Change**

**A revived progressive program must be built year-round, at the local level.**

By Amy Dean

**T**he finger pointing and soul searching has begun. Most of this post-mortem discussion is focusing on a narrow period of time, asking what went wrong with the Obama administration during the president’s first two years in office. The real problem the country is facing, however, is better considered over the span of two decades.

In 1992, as in 2008, Americans elected a Democratic president after a long period of Republican rule. And like President Barack Obama, Bill Clinton created high expectations for change. Yet those who put a Democratic administration and congressional majority into office ended up seeing too little difference between the two major parties – especially on core issues of economic justice. Just as Clinton, once in office, proposed a failed, corporate-friendly healthcare plan, reneged on his vows that NAFTA would include serious protections for labor and the environment, and did not even consider labor’s demand for strikebreaker replacement legislation, Obama has too often embraced Washington horse-trading. Apparently believing that appeals to moderation and pre-compromised policy stances can substitute for political vision, he abandoned the public option in healthcare, made no moves to advance legislation that would expand the role of labor in the economy, and did not promote government spending significant enough to address the needs of people hit hard by the economic downturn.

Like the midterm elections of 1994, the November 2, 2010 midterms have provided a wake-up call for Democrats who should have learned long ago that they cannot defeat the right with a watered-down version of the right’s own positions.

This strategy has succeeded only in opening a vast gulf in American political life. On one side are Democrats in

Washington who believe they are cutting the best deals they can for their constituencies. On the other are those working- and middle-class people who actually make up this base and who have grown ever more disenchanted with the policies their elected representatives have delivered.

It would be easy to merely lament this divide and stop there. Yet two key developments are taking place that make the present moment different from the early 1990s and that provide important building blocks for bridging this gap: First, in the past decade organized labor and other progressive movements have built political machinery for running electoral campaigns that is more effective and coordinated than ever before. Second, progressives are finding their voices at the local and state levels, scoring victories that demonstrate how policy can be changed in ways that concretely benefit working and middle-class communities. Together, these two developments can serve as the foundation of a revived progressive political program.



Amy Dean

### **New election machinery**

The labor movement is the institution on the left investing by far the greatest resources in political organizing – and its outreach goes far beyond union members alone. Hence, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of unions’ existing political programs is central to considering prospects of a

wider progressive effort. In the latter half of the '90s, labor started to invest heavily in political campaigning.

In the 1998 midterms, unions spent just over \$100 million on electoral efforts, according to the Wall Street Journal and the Center for Responsive Politics. By the 2006 midterms, when Democrats scored a sweeping victory at both state and national levels, labor invested well over twice that – a total of \$271 million between direct contributions to candidates and election-related advocacy. Unions and their political action committees spent \$450 million during the 2008 election cycle, when Obama was vying for the White House.

Not only did progressive movements spend more time and treasure on political campaigning, they overhauled their techniques for running effective field campaigns. Using new technology and hard-won experience in the “ground game,” they developed ways to make better use of voter file technology, more efficiently recruit activists to run campaigns, create savvy messaging for candidates, and ultimately turn out sympathetic voters on election day.

The establishment of this type of nuts-and-bolts political infrastructure was one of the things that made possible the Democratic surge at the polls in 2008. Yet Democrats make a mistake when they rely on electoral machinery that is powered from Washington. Two pitfalls in particular – the Democratic establishment’s neglect of the base between election cycles and its centralization of political strategy – contributed to this year’s midterm debacle, in which Republicans took control of the House and made major gains in the Senate.

A most dramatic example of the collapse of organizing efforts between electoral cycles is that of America Coming Together (ACT), an aggressive labor-based advocacy and get-out-the-vote operation led by Steve Rosenthal, former political director of the AFL-CIO, during the 2004 election cycle. With major financial supporters including George Soros, Peter Lewis and the Service Employees union (SEIU), ACT had 78 field offices spread throughout 12 swing states; it mobilized more than 50,000 people to canvass on Election Day. Yet despite an effort to keep the group intact after the elections, it folded completely within months. Its funders did not have a vision that extended beyond the drama of a big election year. “In an ideal world,” says Rosenthal today, “we’d have a progressive campaign that works year-round to create policy change and then gears up for election work. Unfortunately, right now, there is no permanent funding mechanism for progressive infrastructure, and without it, it’s very difficult to sustain operations.”

The absence of ongoing progressive mobilization also contributes to a lack of accountability on the part of elected officials. Joan Fitz-Gerald, president of the get-out-the-vote coalition America Votes, puts it this way: “A lot of people think an election cycle is about putting someone in office and then taking off their training wheels,

sending them off and hoping that they do the right thing. Well, democracy is not a spectator sport. You have to be present for it. That means being a part of a permanent infrastructure that advocates.”

In addition to a lack of organizing between election cycles, much of the electoral machinery meant to mobilize the Democratic base runs campaigns from the top down. Organizing for America (OFA) was supposed to be a reincarnation of Obama for America – Obama’s famously grassroots and Internet-savvy campaign. Yet many activists who tried to remain engaged with the group found that they were asked to do little more than carry water for the administration’s initiatives, with priorities and talking points shipped in from Washington.

### **Long-term, year-round**

Even while lowest-common-denominator deal making carries the day in our nation’s capital, progressives are finding their voice at the state and local levels. By creating robust political programs that keep politicians engaged with social movement constituencies, these local progressives are providing a model of how to win even in difficult times when national top-of-the-ticket candidates fail to inspire large numbers of voters.

I saw this in San Jose, where I worked as head of the AFL-CIO’s South Bay Labor Council (SBLC) from 1993 to 2003. This once-fractured organization has spent nearly two decades rebuilding its political program, and its long-term investment has resulted in an operation that runs year-round. Not only do area unions come together as a coordinated force, but they also work closely with community-based organizations and interfaith groups. They see their role not as endorsing the least-bad option among candidates, but rather developing their own policy proposals and finding candidates who will champion them.

Given that the labor movement has union locals in some 650 U.S. communities, spread through every state in the union, this network is a logical place to invest in creating lasting political structure. Local affiliates already contribute funds to their unions’ national political programs. Some may see field offices open in their communities during intense pre-election periods. Yet very few of them retain the capacity to run their own program. Lacking this, local endorsements become pro forma, with Democrats who are not true champions for working people treating the labor movement like an ATM. Rather than entering primary battles as a unified movement to secure candidates committed to making progressive constituencies partners in governing, unions’ endorsements are often disconnected from any larger vision.

### **Empower the base**

Strides forward at the local level, combined with the potentials of a more sophisticated national political

machinery, give hope for moving beyond the impasse that has plagued progressives in the electoral realm during the past two decades.

As with Jesse Jackson 20 years earlier, progressives organized in 2008 around Barack Obama as a charismatic leader. Yet the effort left behind little in terms of lasting structure that could allow delivery on promised changes. Groups reinventing politics at local, metropolitan, and state levels take a different tack. These groups insist that elected officials see their role as helping grassroots movements successfully mobilize and push forward their demands on an ongoing basis.

Progressives would be wise to take this message to heart. Unless candidates and local groups alike are continually expanding the political space and generating

the political will for reform, the difference between the next Democratic administration and this one will be just as little as the difference between Obama and Clinton. And unless the local base begins to lead and national politicians follow, 1994 and 2010 will only be two dates within a much larger litany of setbacks. ■

*Amy Dean is co-author, with David Reynolds, of A New New Deal: How Regional Activism Will Reshape the American Labor Movement (The New Century Foundation, 2009). Dean's roots are in the American labor movement, where she served for almost 20 years. From 1993 to 2003 Dean served as president and CEO of the South Bay AFL-CIO Labor Council. Her work has been featured in The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, The Economist and other publications.*

## Four Ideas for Strengthening the One Nation Working Together Coalition

By Amanda Tattersall

It's difficult times for progressives in the United States with Tea Party reaction, state budget deficits, escalating foreclosures and unemployment. So it is an inspiring step to see a multitude of over 170 organizations coming together in the One Nation Working Together coalition to demand the change that was voted for in 2008. [This network mobilized an estimated 175,000 people to a mass rally in Washington on October 2, 2010 –The editors]

But like all coalitions between different community-based organizations, there is the question of if and how it can work to build change for the long haul – through the November elections, and for years and decades to come. If the history behind the Tea Party movement teaches us anything, a sustained effort is needed to build a progressive movement for change.

In a new book, *Power in Coalition*, I identify a series of strategies for building strong coalitions. These lessons are built from the experiences of three long-term coalitions in the US, Canada and Australia, as well as my experience as a union and community organizer. These ideas may prove useful as this new progressive network begins to build up steam. I have pulled out four lessons that may guide how One Nation Working Together can build a sustained progressive coalition capable of social change.

### 1. Less is more: be explicit about who you want at the table, 'cause big is not always better

Perhaps controversially, and certainly against much conventional wisdom, I found that smaller coalitions tend to be more powerful long term than larger ones.

A smaller number of organizations who share a greater commonality of values or interest in an issue, and have a higher degree of commitment to engage their membership

and resources, are better placed to work together for the long-term than a very broad and diverse network that only has a lowest common denominator of common interests and commitment holding it together.

But coalitions have to be fit for a purpose – and the purpose of One Nation Working Together is to coordinate the breadth of progressive voices to speak about an alternative vision for America that counters the current right wing drumbeat. It makes sense that its initial formation is broad based and that its first public demonstration is about expressing that diverse unity of purpose.

But if it is to successfully help coordinate policy agendas nationally it may need to identify more complex ways of working than just having a seat for every group at the table. Collectively, broad issue priorities could be identified. But cultivating strategy for specific policies like the Employee Free Choice Act, housing and foreclosures, financial regulation, withdrawing troops from Afghanistan and Iraq, or clean jobs, is probably best done by parts of the whole. For instance, smaller coalitions of interested groups could work on specific issues in the name of One Nation Working Together, rather than this work being organized by the whole.

However, working out which issues get prioritized and worked on will also take some solid relationship building between the parties. Often coalitions get stuck when organizations focus first on their own narrow needs – such



Amanda Tattersall

as around a particular issue – rather than recognizing how their long-term interests are met by building progressive power more broadly. Pursuing issues that have political opportunities or openings – such as around education reform – might prove the most potent for all progressives. Wins here may create momentum for other issues later on.

The grassroots collaborative in Chicago who waged the big-box living wage fight in 2005-6 provides us with a guide for how to make this work. It brought together a relatively small network of organizations – just 10 – but each had the ability to turn out their membership base. They also had a commitment to building solid relationships, and actually spent considerable time in breakfast meetings getting to know each other relationally before developing a common agenda.

When it came to working on issues, the foundation of strong relationships and trust allowed the coalition to let a power analysis and scrutiny of strategic opportunities drive its priorities, rather than just being directed by an organization's concern for particular issues. So over time the coalition willingly moved from subjects like an amnesty for undocumented workers to state budget issues to living wages, not just because these issues were always rigidly the number one for each organization, but because they were the most strategically likely to be won at the time. There was a give and take – and a recognition that winning on one strategic issue, even if it wasn't your issue, might make it easier to win on your issue in the future.

Indeed, a base of solid relationships is critical to sustaining long term coalitions ....

## **2. “Working Together” on building relationships as well as working on politics and the issues**

One Nation Working Together is in a unique position to potentially cultivate stronger relationships across its diverse network at the same time as it works on the issues.

Every organizer I know is always “crazy busy” with the latest campaign or issue. But there is a difference between working hard and smart. We sometimes need to sharpen our sword – and build more resources and power in our networks – as well as working with what we have.

Building deeper relationships among people we work with, but don't know well, is one way to sharpen that sword. Progressives spend a lot of time asking people to do things, or planning how to do stuff together, rather than really knowing why we are all doing this in the first place. But knowing why we do what we do – sharing the story behind our commitment – and lifting that up to be central in how we work together, can help stimulate our long-term dedication as well as help us collectively focus on what is important (like being stronger together) rather than just promoting our own organization's needs.

Key to this is coalition staff who can act as bridge builders. The staff employed by both the Canadian and Chicago coalitions actively built this relational culture.

They helped organizations that had very distinctive ways of working to build an understanding across their differences. They negotiated tensions. They identified gaps in their networks and sought to build new relationships. In Chicago, staff helped cultivate a culture at meetings where it wasn't all business talk – where time was intentionally spent getting to know each other better.

Relationship building can feel unproductive when the challenges and threats are so immediate. But relationship building is critical to building power. And strong relationships are a catalyst for creative policies, strategies and tactics.

Indeed, I found repeatedly that a base of strong relationships helped coalitions successfully pursue agenda-setting policies ...

## **3. Pursuing agenda-setting demands rather than just saying no**

When attacked by shrinking budgets, unemployment and reactionary racism, it is often easiest to mount campaigns that “say no”: to war, no to racism, no to education cuts. These campaigns have their place in fighting the conservative slide.

But, as organizers we need to be conscious of the limits of “no” campaigns. These campaigns still dance on the terrain of the person we are saying no to. They rarely are able to set an agenda for the kind of economy or society that works for us.

One Nation Working Together has begun with this positive vision in mind. The spirit of coming together to campaign for the change that we voted for seeks to be agenda setting. However, one of our challenges is that this “change” was never really defined – rather it was aspirational but not driven by specific policies. The coalition is seeking to take that energy and build a new economic and social vision, one where people and their needs are at the center, not just the interests of profit and practices of competition.

For future work, a disciplined commitment to positive, agenda-setting, issue-based campaigns will be critical. And, progressives have already shown a capacity to initiate new policies, having won a new agenda on health care and crafted new agendas around employee free choice.

The importance of positive campaigns is reinforced by the lessons in *Power in Coalition*. I found that coalitions that pursued new demands – like campaigns for reduced school class sizes for young children or living wages – were the most successful at shifting the political climate to be more supportive of progressive issues. In contrast, “no” campaigns were easily wedged by political leaders. For instance, in Canada, there were built-in limits to how a campaign against privatization could set a new direction for the health care system. In the media and public mind, there was a popular recognition that the health care system was in crisis and needed changing, and while the coalition was able to voice their opposition to negative reforms, they

did not provide their own vision for the kind of reforms they would like. It made it difficult to sustain public support for their campaign, and allowed their opposition to get the upper hand.

#### **4. Make the coalition work inside and outside of Washington DC**

To build and move an agenda, successful coalitions frequently need to take action at multiple scales – across the nation, the state, the city and in our neighborhoods.

For example, in 2001-2 the Ontario Health Coalition built a multi-scaled coalition around health care – where a set of provincial organizations came together in Toronto, and then supported the building of dozens of local health care coalitions in regional cities like Kingston, Niagara and Thunder Bay. The health care movement was able to reach across the diverse geography of the province because activists, organizations and leaders located in different towns and cities anchored the coalition.

The coalition was most successful when local town and neighborhood coalitions had some autonomy to determine how they ran the campaign – and could structure activity based on their local idiosyncrasies and strengths. They were weaker when they were told what to do by leaders in Toronto. The coalition as a whole was at its best when the local groups had enough control to mix local campaigns, such as a campaign around a specific hospital privatization, with a broader provincial agenda around health care.

One Nation Working Together is working with different cities and states to mobilize for October 2. But beyond the October demonstration, how this coalition can build and sustain a national movement through local activity, and how local local-cum-national relationships are managed will be critical for the coalition to sustain its network and agenda.

One possibility is that the One Nation Working Together provides a broad umbrella narrative that is connected to local issue-based campaigns and actions. This is like what happened with the 2005-7 Your Rights at Work campaign in Australia. This was an extraordinarily effective campaign built around industrial relations leading up to the 2007 federal election. In this campaign individual union contract or organizing campaigns were defined as being

about “Your Rights at Work.” This fed bottom-up energy into a nationally consistent agenda because Your Rights at Work became tied to specific and meaningful local struggles, as well as a broader national political agenda. Of course, the national campaign still had key national demands and messages, but they became concrete when linked to specific local campaigns. Building a narrative within which local campaigns can operate helps to counter a risk, which is that One Nation Working Together could be reduced to just a slogan that does not have public policy content beyond an electoral strategy, rather than being used to build a consensus around common agendas.

Successful multi-scaled coalitions also provide space for local city- and state-based coalitions to feed-up strategies to the national scale. The Ontario Health Coalition managed this by providing the local groups with a seat at the table. The coalition’s Administrative Committee not only included province-wide organizations but also many of the most active local groups – so they could have their discrete needs and ideas voiced as part of the broader strategy.

Again, post-October, it could prove useful to provide a seat at the table for the network of state- and city-based One Nation Working Together groups to participate in developing the coalition’s national, and more local, strategies.

It is a very important period for progressive politics in America, and it is the time for different organizations at a local, state and national level to cultivate stronger relationships. As it was put by Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change, at one of One Nation Working Together’s early meetings, “Raise your hand if you can push your part of the agenda all by yourself.”

We need collaboration, but we need to collaborate powerfully. I hope some of these lessons may be helpful in thinking through how to sustain powerful coalitions and build a new progressive economic and social agenda. ■

*Amanda Tattersall, an Australian union and community organizer, recently authored Power in Coalition. This article has appeared in slightly different forms on the AFL-CIO blog and on Talking Union.*

## **Motl Zelmanowicz 1915-2010**

As Democratic Left went to press, we learned of the passing of Motl Zelmanowicz, a DSA Vice-Chair and veteran socialist activist and internationalist. The next issue of DL will have a longer appreciation of Motl’s life and his passionate contributions to DSA and socialist internationalism.



# Class struggles in China

By Paul Garver

Two contrasting images portray the faces of Chinese workers in 2010. One image captures the despair of the score of young workers who leaped to their deaths from high-rise dormitories at giant factory complexes in Shenzhen where Taiwanese-owned Foxconn Technology assembles electronic products for Apple and other transnational companies. A more hopeful image features triumphant Honda auto parts assembly workers celebrating a wave of successful strikes for higher wages and the right to elect their own union officers.

Since China now leads the world in manufacturing for export, the struggles of Chinese workers to organize are crucial both for the well-being of huge numbers of human beings in China, and for the ability of workers in the rest of the world to end the race to the bottom. Not only within China but globally, workers have a vital interest in the success of organizing in China.

The events at Foxconn and Honda triggered an enormous reaction in China, on the internet, in the media, and even within the organs of the Chinese Communist Party. Awareness spread throughout China that hundreds of millions of “migrant” workers who had resettled from rural areas into the burgeoning industrial districts of coastal China would no longer accept their exclusion from the rapidly developing economy and society. Some government and Party officials, grasping that the timid bureaucrats of its tightly-controlled “trade union movement” lacked all credibility with young workers and had little capacity to channel their militancy in safe directions, urged the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) to reform itself to become a stronger advocate for the interests of workers.

In Guangdong Province, the crucible of industrial expansion in southern China, a few reforming provincial and municipal labor officials, with the support of key Party and government leaders, not only sought to win the trust of striking workers, but proposed significant institutional reforms that would strengthen the role of workers in collective bargaining and in choosing local union officers. This proposal was at least delayed by frenzied lobbying by Hong Kong business associations, who threatened a massive exodus from the province if the measures were enacted. While some cautious reforms within the union federations may go forward in any event, it appears that the push-back by employer groups has frightened local government authorities and strengthened Party hard-liners who fear, above all, the rise of an autonomous workers’ movement that might challenge the Party’s monopoly of power.

Since striking workers have limited their demands to wage increases and to reform of local union structures, even unsanctioned initiatives have generally been tolerated, particularly at foreign-owned enterprises. There is widespread belief among academic, media and Party elites that inequality has gone too far and that higher wages for workers would benefit Chinese society as a whole. However, the limits to official toleration became evident when labor activist Zhao Dongmin was sentenced to three years in prison for organizing a demonstration outside a trade union office in Xi’an and trying to organize a workers’ rights group that would monitor the restructuring of state-owned enterprises.

Substantial reform of the labor institutions in China will go forward only as part of an overall process of democratization in China. One encouraging sign is the support that academics and students in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan have extended to Chinese workers through increasingly thorough research depicting the plight of workers in various factories – excessive overtime, dangerous working conditions, etc. Another is that the internet, though subject to periodic attempts at censorship, has functioned quite effectively as a tool for communication among workers and students. And over the last couple of years, serious and often critical interchanges among labor academics and researchers, labor activists and officials have multiplied, both inside China and overseas. In October, Sun Yat-Sen University of Guangzhou and the U. Cal Berkeley Labor Center set up an International Center for Joint Labor Research and held an unofficial labor relations seminar in Guangzhou with broad participation from China, Hong Kong and overseas. Chinese labor reformers and academics now regularly visit the USA and Europe to learn about how



collective bargaining and union institutions function (or do not function so well).

Chairman Chen Weiguang of the Guangzhou municipal trade union federation proposed in a recent visit to the USA that Chinese unions ally with local manufacturers to demand higher prices from transnational companies sourcing their electronic supply chains from China. Chen asked the San Francisco Labor Council to help put pressure on Apple to pay Foxconn a bit more for its iPads so that it could raise wages in Shenzhen. And SACOM, the Hong Kong-based NGO that supports organizing efforts for electronics assembly workers, has joined a LabourStart campaign protesting Foxconn abuses of workers in India.

These promising steps do not yet constitute a basis for genuine and mutual international labor solidarity. Political and institutional structures differ too much, and growing trade tensions between China and the USA threaten to cause tensions among unions as well. For example, the Section 301 petition by the United Steelworkers (USW) against China's green technology practices as violating WTO rules puzzles Chinese reformers, for whom measures promoting the development of green technology industries in China seem self-evidently proper. Why does the USA not simply develop its own industrial policies

promoting green technology rather than "bashing China"? From the standpoint of the USW, the petition's objective is to jump start a commitment to a "green" pro-industrial policy in the USA like that proposed by the Apollo Alliance. By signing an agreement with two Chinese companies encouraging them to develop unionized wind farm production in the USA, the USW demonstrates that its policy is not per se "anti-Chinese."

Chinese and foreign unions do have common interests in confronting the abuses of transnational capital, and with patience and determination will learn to pursue that collaboration. The best practical way that American and other foreign unionists at all levels can encourage union reform in China is to take every opportunity to support training Chinese workers and union staff in collective bargaining and in developing worker representation structures. In reality, the growing consciousness and militancy of Chinese workers are the key determinants of how far union reforms in China can go.

*DSA NPC member Paul Garver is a former consultant for the International Union of Foodworkers and for SEIU. He has written numerous articles on labor organizing in China that have appeared in Talking Union, DSA's labor blog.*

## Equality and Rights for All Workers: The Key to Organizing Unions

By David Bacon

When I was a union organizer, I had an experience that dramatized for me the importance of the cultural and historical traditions that immigrants from Mexico bring with them when they come to the United States and how they affect the way people organize. I was working for the United Electrical Workers, one of the most progressive U.S. unions. We were contacted by workers at a huge sweatshop, Cal Spas. Unhappy with low wages and abusive conditions, they began to organize a union. Then the head of the workers' organizing committee was beaten up in the middle of the street in front of the plant. It was an obvious effort to scare the workers and make them stop organizing.

That night, the workers' committee met and discussed what should be done. Many had no legal immigration status. They had no resources, or even food at home in some cases, because their wages were so low. Yet most people wanted to strike.

But they did have one big question. They wanted to know if a strike was legal. I told them that strikes under

those circumstances in the United States were legal, and they decided that this would be their course of action. The next day, they held a big rally at lunchtime in front of the plant. The committee got up on the back of a flatbed truck and made speeches about the beating and intimidation. At the end of the rally, the committee asked the workers not to go back to work. Hundreds of workers set up picket lines, and the strike was on.



The next morning, however, there were dozens of people at the plant office, applying for jobs. The company spent a day signing them up. The following morning, the police arrived in a massive show of force. Escorted by the cops, these new workers crossed the picket lines and went to work.

The strike committee turned to me. One worker, in a tone that indicated he thought I had lied to them, said that I had promised the strike would be legal. I said it was, and they pointed to the strikebreakers. How can it be legal, they asked, if there are people going in to work?

### **Different concepts of rights**

The difference in understanding is crucial. They meant one thing when they said legal, and I meant another. In Mexico, during a legal strike, workers can put red and black flags across the doors into the plant, and the company must remain closed until the strike is over. No one can legally go in to work. The problem, of course, is that it is very difficult for most workers to get legal status for independent unions and strikes. In the United States, unions do not have to be registered with the government, and anyone can form one. But there is little real legal protection for unions, and they have few rights. A company can legally break a strike, just as Cal Spas did.

Behind these differences are different conceptions of rights. In the United States, property rights are paramount, and they overrule labor rights. Immigration law overrules labor rights, too. The Supreme Court held in the *Sure-Tan* and *Hoffman* decisions that companies found guilty of firing undocumented workers for union activity have no obligation for reinstatement or back pay.

In Mexico, the legal and political traditions of the 1910 revolution still mean something. Labor has important legal and social rights, at least on paper, and the state is supposed to honor and uphold them. Unfortunately, those rights often remain on paper, unenforced in real life.

There is a right to strike, but in practice, independent and democratic unions are repressed. At worst, the government uses police and even military force to break unions and strikes, as it did with the Mexican Electrical Workers (SME) and the miners in Cananea this past year. This often creates a deep cynicism among immigrant workers from Mexico about the connection between unions and the state. When Cal Spas strikers saw strikebreakers escorted into the plant by police across our lines, some of them concluded that the union had lied, and was selling out the strike. That suspicion ended only after they elected a strike committee to control the strike.

### **Workers, not victims**

For the last two decades, U.S. unions have become much more interested in organizing and fighting for the rights of immigrant workers.

Today U.S. unions represent about 12 percent of the workforce. They have to organize 400,000 workers a year just to stay in the same place. If they want to grow from 12 to 13 percent — just one percentage point — they have to organize 800,000 workers a year. In the last few years there is sometimes a slight increase, but more often slippage. When union density declines, wages drop and the political power to challenge large corporations and the powerful institutions of our society drops, too. Low union membership means no single-payer health insurance. It is not a difficult equation to understand.

But while this decline is taking place, immigrants have clearly been fighting to organize. In California, a majority of union drives over the last decade have been at least partly based among immigrants. These include not only campaigns initiated by unions, but also many spontaneous strikes and organizing projects initiated by immigrant workers themselves.

This upsurge is partly due to demographics. The workforce is changing in many industries. Immigrant workers make up an increasing percentage of the workforce in building services, healthcare, manufacturing, food processing, construction, and hospitality. Some industries have always had a largely immigrant workforce — agriculture, garment, electronics, and others.

These are industries built on exploitation, and the rate of exploitation is getting higher. In Los Angeles's garment industry, for instance, the inflation-adjusted wage level has fallen every year since 1986, while at the same time, jobs were moved offshore. This also happened in residential construction, where union representation was lost in the 1950s, until thousands of immigrant drywallers and framers struck for a year in 1992 and the trend began to reverse.

Changing demographics and increased exploitation are not just happening in Los Angeles and California. This change is going on everywhere, including states that historically haven't had many Latino or Asian immigrants.

There is a track record of self-organization among immigrants — of worker-initiated job actions and of community support for them. Undocumented immigrants are not a threat; they are a source of strength for the labor movement. Many immigrant workers don't have to be told what unions are, or even, in many cases, how to organize, despite the fact that they may be unfamiliar with U.S. labor laws and rights. They have something to offer labor besides just a chance to grow.

In the Philippines, for instance, workers set up tents and live at the plant gate when they go on strike. No police harassment can chase them away. That kind of militancy helped Filipinos to organize unions in the isolated Alaska fish canneries and the fields of California and the Northwest from the 1930s through the 1950s. The great grape strike of 1965, when the United Farm Workers was born, was started by that generation of Filipino labor activists.

In Mexico and El Salvador, despite harassment and sometimes bloody repression, the law still prohibits companies from operating and hiring strikebreakers during a legal strike. That experience often gives workers from these countries a greater expectation of their labor rights. This expectation is good for U.S. unions and communities. It helps workers raise their sights, so they do not continue to take strikebreaking for granted and treat it as a normal state of affairs. These cultural expectations place a higher value on labor rights than on private property rights – an expectation that would benefit U.S. workers as a whole.

While those Cal Spas strikers might have been initially suspicious of the union, their expectation about their right to strike was actually much higher than among most U.S. workers. Many union organizers have learned to appeal to similar expectations as a way of convincing immigrant workers to start getting organized.

Immigrant communities are often very supportive of working-class struggles, and workers themselves have a tradition of mutual support. Strikes in the barrio often become struggles of a whole community against a big employer.

To reach out successfully to immigrant workers, there must be a strategic alliance between unions and immigrant communities. Organizing is not as simple as going out to a plant gate with membership cards and leaflets and signing up workers. It's a long-term

struggle that requires real organization among workers themselves, a plan for battling the employer to really change conditions in the workplace, and a sustained effort to create real community support and alliances, in the way that Jobs with Justice chapters often organize their Workers' Rights Boards.

Many immigrant communities are already well-organized. Among Mexicans and Filipinos, associations of people from the same town back home are very common. In the 1992 drywall strike in southern California, workers, many of whom came from a few towns in central Mexico, shut down residential construction from Santa Barbara to the Mexican border. They found places to live and food for each other, using those town and family relationships. Town associations also played a big role in organizing the huge immigrant rights marches, from the one hundred thousand-person march against California's Proposition 187 in 1995 to the million-strong marches of 2006.

Immigrant rights coalitions are natural allies for the labor movement, because some of the most fundamental rights denied immigrants are their rights as workers.

*David Bacon is author of How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants and a reporter and documentary photographer whose work has appeared in such publications as The Nation, The American Prospect, The Progressive, and the San Francisco Chronicle.*

## **Martin Luther King, Economic Justice, Workers' Rights, and Multiracial Democracy**

by Thomas Jackson

**A**lmost 40 years ago, a united black community in Memphis stepped forward to support 1,300 municipal sanitation workers as they demanded higher wages, union recognition, and respect for black personhood embodied in the slogan "I Am a Man!" Memphis's black women organized tenant and welfare unions, discovering pervasive hunger among the city's poor and black children. They demanded rights to food and medical care from a city and medical establishment blind to their existence. That same month, March 1968, 100 grassroots organizations met in Atlanta to support Martin Luther King's dream of a poor people's march on Washington. They pressed concrete demands for economic justice under the slogan "Jobs or Income Now!" King celebrated the "determination by poor people of all colors" to win their human rights. "Established powers of rich America have deliberately exploited poor people by isolating them in ethnic, nationality, religious and racial groups," the delegates declared.

So when King came to Memphis to support the strike, a local labor and community struggle became intertwined with his dream of mobilizing a national coalition strong enough to reorient national priorities from imperial war in Vietnam to domestic reconstruction, especially in America's riot-torn cities. To non-poor Americans, King called for a "revolution of values," a move from self-seeking to service, from property rights to human rights.

King's assassination – and the urban revolts that followed – led to a local Memphis settlement that furthered the cause of public employee unionism. The Poor People's March nonviolently won small concessions in the national food stamp program. But reporters covered the bickering and squalor in the poor people's tent city, rather than the movement's detailed demands for waging a real war on poverty. Marchers wanted guaranteed public employment when the private sector failed, a raise in the federal minimum wage, a national income floor for all families, and a national commitment to reconstruct cities blighted by corporate

disinvestment and white flight. And they wanted poor people's representation in urban renewal and social service programs that had customarily benefited only businesses or the middle class. King's dreams reverberated back in the movements that had risen him up.

It is widely believed that King's deep dedication to workers' rights and international human rights came late in life, when cities burned, Vietnamese villagers fled American napalm, and King faced stone-throwing Nazis in Chicago's white working-class inner suburbs. But King began his public ministry in Montgomery in 1956, dreaming of "a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes." He demanded that imperial nations give up their power and privileges over oppressed and colonized peoples struggling against "segregation, political domination, and economic exploitation" — whether they were in South Africa or South Alabama

King's commitments to economic justice and workers' rights are becoming more widely appreciated today as we continue to confront all of the unresolved challenges King confronted in his day.

Around 1964, King announced that the movement had moved "beyond civil rights." Constitutional rights to free assembly, equality in voting, and access to public accommodations had marched forward with little cost to the nation, he said. Human rights — to dignified work at decent wages, income support, and decent housing for all Americans — would cost the nation billions of dollars. In other speeches, however, King recognized that human rights and civil rights were bound up with each other, part of a "Worldwide Human Rights Revolution." The practical experience of building a movement had already made these connections. In Montgomery's struggle to desegregate bus seating, for example, King heralded the American "right to protest for right," but discovered that it was inseparable from the human rights to work and eat. Why? Hundreds of African Americans were fired or evicted or denied public aid for expressing themselves politically, and King was intimately involved in campaigns for their material relief. This pattern continued throughout the 1960s. The southern struggle for rights became a struggle against poverty long before Lyndon Johnson's wars in Vietnam and on poverty.

Similarly, in New York City in 1959, King joined A. Philip Randolph and Malcolm X in supporting the white, black and Puerto Rican hospital workers of New York's newly organized Local 1199. Over 3,000 hospital workers — laundry workers, cafeteria workers, janitors and orderlies — struck seven New York private hospitals. At the bottom of the new service economy, they were legally barred from collective bargaining; excluded from minimum wage protections and unemployment compensation; and denied the medical insurance that might give them access to the hospitals where they worked. Harlem's black community rallied to their defense. King cheered a struggle that transcended "a fight for union rights" and had become a multiracial "fight for human rights."

King's commitments to economic justice and workers' rights are becoming more widely appreciated today as we continue to confront all of the unresolved challenges King confronted in his day. Joblessness is still pervasive under the official unemployment statistics, and wages remain too low to lift millions of people out of poverty. Conservative politicians and globalizing corporations have relentlessly chipped away at union rights and workplace safety. Tattered safety nets have become even shoddier for poor people who are not capable of earning. Forty-seven million Americans are, medically, second-class citizens. Unequal landscapes of wealth and opportunity in housing and schools still make the words "American apartheid" a dirty but accurate epithet. And again, in a different part of the world, our military wages a war of empire cloaked in robes of democratic idealism. On the right, complacent religious leaders preach family morality and personal responsibility, while neglecting our collective moral commitments to materially supporting "the least of these." But across the country too, citizens are uncovering stones of hope and finding new democratic determination. We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go, as King would say. Lost ground and shattered dreams are bearable, he would have preached, as we continue the struggles for multiracial democracy, economic justice, and human dignity that were begun long ago, under even more challenging circumstances than we face today.

*Thomas F. Jackson is Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, and author of the prizewinning From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice" (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). For more about this important book, we recommend Maurice Isserman's review in the Summer 2007 issue of Dissent. This essay originally appeared on the website of Interfaith Worker Justice and appears here with permission of IWJ and Thomas Jackson.*

## Seeking National Director

Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) seeks a National Director. The Director works with DSA's elected leadership, staff and activists. Fundraising ability is essential, as are superior written and oral communication skills. Women and people of color are strongly encouraged to apply. Salary and benefits are competitive for progressive, non-profit work. Send a cover letter, resume, and a list of three references to [dsadirectorsearch@gmail.com](mailto:dsadirectorsearch@gmail.com). Deadline is March 1, 2011.

# Facts are “Superman’s” Kryptonite

By Duane Campbell

This fall, commentary on the documentary film “Waiting for Superman” dominated the talk shows, public forums and press. Its message? Public schools are failing, the teachers unions are to blame and charter schools are the answer to the problems of public schools. “Waiting for Superman” is not simply a film about schools, it is part of a wider, sophisticated assault on unions and particularly public sector unions. For example, in the November 2010 gubernatorial election in California, Republican candidate Meg Whitman extended the criticism of the teachers union and made it a major issue in her \$160 million dollar self-financed campaign. The film and the Whitman campaign illustrate how corporate funding produces a political narrative to advance a neoliberal educational agenda. The corporations and the foundations involved are distinct, but their efforts to shape the dialogue through large-scale funding of research and programming in the name of “reform” amounts to a relatively unified attack on public education.

“Waiting for Superman” fits nicely into a strategy of corporate takeover of education policy and reflects its success in framing the language and issues of school reform. The film and the general assault on teachers’ unions is a part of a media-savvy campaign by pro-charter groups such as Democrats for Education Reform and the groups that Diane Ravitch in her new book *Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010) calls the “Billionaire Boys’ Club,” – the Gates, Olin, Bradley and Broad foundations among others.

There are several specific criticisms of the facts and the framing in the film on the web. Ira Shor, for example, says “it benefits the hedge fund billionaires now bankrolling charter schools and conservative politicians” on the site <http://www.notwaitingforsuperman.org/>.

Ravitch, an historian of American education and formerly a prominent conservative critic of efforts toward multicultural school reform, criticizes the film as propaganda. She cites its focus on charter schools in spite of a substantial body of evidence demonstrating that charter schools do not have a consistent record of producing better achievement than do public schools. (see *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 11, 2010) Ravitch argues that “Waiting for Superman” is a masterpiece of propaganda that blames unions for the many problems of public schools, including state and local budget crises and alleged problems recruiting and keeping quality teachers.

The film features two glaring anti-union claims that are no longer accurate. It claims that the teachers’ union leadership in Washington, D.C. would not allow the union contract proposed by former schools chief Michele Rhee to come to a membership vote because it included hefty pay raises for those teachers choosing to give up tenure. Since the film was made, the members voted on the contract and

it passed. Rhee got the contract she wanted – which the film claims couldn’t be done because of union obstruction. In September, Rhee left her position as chancellor of the city’s schools after the primary election defeat of her patron, Mayor Adrian Fenty.

The film also advances a claim that incompetent teachers are difficult to remove from teaching by citing the extreme case of New York City’s Reassignment Centers, popularly known as “rubber rooms.” The story is compelling, but rubber rooms no longer exist. They were eliminated last year in an agreement between the union and Mayor Michael Bloomberg. The city agreed it would speed up arbitrations while giving the suspended teachers real out-of-classroom work instead of placing them in a limbo that the filmmakers claim protected incompetent teachers.

Not only is the film inaccurate but it also distorts the necessary discussion about school reform by developing only one side of the debate – that of the corporate foundations and their well-funded spokespersons. David Guggenheim, the film’s director and producer, decries the teachers’ unions as a special interest while promoting the views of unaccountable private foundations and corporate interests through spokespersons such as Michele Rhee, *Time* columnist Joel Klein, Harlem Children’s Zone founder Geoffrey Canada, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. The one-sided view they promote is augmented with testimonials by media personalities including Oprah Winfrey and “Meet the Press” moderator David Gregory. Several of the sponsoring foundations’ declared interests are to shrink the public sector – including public schools – and to spend less money on tax-supported institutions.

A repeated line from the film narrator holds that “reform experts agree,” when in fact they do not. The film recognizes only the neoliberal vision of “reform” and does not acknowledge the viewpoint of thousands of teachers and civil-rights activists working in the trenches for substantive school reform for decades.

Randy Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, (AFT) is portrayed as the film’s villain in strategically edited and de-contextualized clips. The neoliberals and their media allies oppose her precisely because of her public statements in support of teachers, such as this one made at the July 2010 AFT convention:

“Never before have I seen so few attack so many, so harshly, for doing so much – often with so little [in tangible support].”

I don’t know if I should call the people attacking us, quote, “reformers,” as they like to be known – or “performers,” which might be more accurate, because many of them seem more interested in engaging in political theater than constructive conversation. So I’ll just call them the “blame-the-teacher crowd,” and even

though many of them have set their sights on all public institutions, I will focus on the institution that has gotten the most abuse – public education.

The blame-the-teacher crowd would have Americans believe that there is only one choice when it comes to public education: either you're for students, or you're for teachers.

That is a bogus choice.

When a school is good for the kids, it's also good for the teachers, and vice versa.

While Michele Rhee and the well-funded charter advocates masquerade as a reform movement, teachers, union leaders, and civil rights activists seeking equity-based reforms have not been able to break through the foundation-funded consensus and media punditry. The truth is there is not a consensus on what is valuable or effective public school reform and there is not a consensus on the effectiveness of charters.

I urge readers to see the film to be aware of its deft use of deception and misinformation and to use the film as entrée into the debates about the nature of schools and schooling in the U.S. We need a well-informed dialogue on the quality of public schools in our society and how we could improve them rather than hearing from only one side of the debate. An excellent alternative to the corporate-promoted view of schools in general is the book *Why Schools? Reclaiming Education for Us All* by Mike Rose. Policy alternatives to the blame-the-teacher crowd are also demonstrated in the excellent "Broader, Bolder Approach" found at <http://www.boldapproach.org>.

If you are interested in following the money, I urge you to read "The Ultimate Superpower: Subsidized Dollars Drive Waiting for Superman Agenda" (October 20, 2010) at <http://www.notwaitingforsuperman.org> As the film clearly illustrates, many schools serving urban and impoverished students need adequate funding and fundamental change. As I argue in my book, *Choosing Democracy: A Practical Guide to Multicultural Education*, these schools do not open the doors and offer civic and economic opportunity for all. They usually do not promote equality. Instead, they recycle inequality. The high school drop-out rates alone demonstrate that urban schools prepare less than 50 percent of their students for entrance into the economy and society. We cannot build a safe, just, and prosperous society when we leave so many young people behind.

Among our tasks as progressives is to amplify the voices of parents and teachers in the school reform debates leading up to the Congressional attempt to re-authorize No Child Left Behind and the Obama Administration's Race to the Top in a Republican-controlled Congress this spring. Activist resources for this effort can be found at the Fair Test website: <http://www.fairtest.org/fact+sheets/k-12>. ■

*Duane Campbell is a co-editor of Talking Union, a professor (emeritus) of bilingual/multicultural education at California State University Sacramento and chair of the Sacramento Local of DSA. His most recent book is Choosing Democracy: A Practical Guide to Multicultural Education. (4th. edition. Allyn and Bacon.) He is a long time activist in the California Faculty Association (SEIU and NEA).*

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