**Lessons for Labor Day 2018: Solidarity Works!**

It has been the worst of times and the best of times for the American Labor Movement in 2018.

Economic inequality has continued to spiral out of control as policy coming out of Washington, DC designed to tilt the scales in favor of the rich and corporations weakened the rights of working Americans at every turn. At the Supreme Court level, anti-labor justices joined the assault against labor and undermined public sector unions’ rights to collect dues.  This, combined with a tax bill that radically redistributed wealth upward and paved the way for new austerity measures aimed at gutting Social Security and Medicare, had some pundits sounding the death knell for unions and the legacy of the New Deal.

But in the midst of all this dire news, a funny thing happened: workers fought back in the unlikeliest of places.  West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma were hit by massive teacher strikes and huge protests demanding higher pay for educators, better conditions for students, and an end to the underfunding of public education.

They shocked the world and won.

In response to the Supreme Court decision aimed at diminishing the ranks and resources of public sector unions, labor activists across the country went back to basics, expanded their organizing efforts, and turned an existential threat to the union movement into an opportunity to revitalize their memberships.

Most recently, just a couple of weeks ago in Missouri, the labor movement won a resounding electoral victory against an effort to gut collective bargaining.  There, as in the teachers’ strikes, workers were supported by a general public that even in more conservative regions is increasingly more supportive of unions, fair wages, quality education for all, and access to affordable healthcare.

So it seems that at a time when many Americans are afraid of losing ground, beleaguered unions, particularly those who chose to fight rather than lie down, have come to be seen as the answer for what ails us.  By standing together, maybe ordinary people can win back some of the power that they’ve lost over the last several decades.

The only political mechanism American workers have ever had to address the economic and political power imbalance in our society is the labor movement and that is why most Americans should care about its fate, whether they are in a union or not.

Unions may not always be able to do everything for their members, but as part of the last 12% of American workers covered by collective bargaining agreements, union members have been able to hold the line better than most.  Hence the survival and revival of the American labor movement and/or some aligned movement for economic justice are the last best hopes for the American dream.

Perhaps that’s why after the big win in Missouri, the *New York Times*editorial board argued that that victory “and the popular support for teacher strikes in red states show that unions have the wind at their backs for the first time in a long while. That is welcome news for long-suffering American workers.”

As Robert Reich points out clearly in *Inequality for All*, unions were a significant part of the building of the American middle class.  This was true because of their capacity to bargain for a better economic future for their members and their ability to influence our politics and give workers a real voice in our system.

The consequence of this is that average Americans were able to make that system work for them, whether that was by instituting programs like the GI Bill, Social Security, providing affordable access to higher education, or one of the many other key policies that led to what Reich calls the “great compression” of the middle twentieth century when inequality fell and the standards of living for American workers dramatically improved.

With the drop in union density over the last thirty years has come a record level of inequality, reduced political power for American workers, and a renewed assault on many of the rights in the workplace that we had come to take for granted.  But with an emergence of the red state teacher strike wave, new organizing, and wins like the defeat of the anti-union “Right to Work” (for less) in the Show Me State, there may be signs of light emerging from the darkness.

The shared concerns that drove the teachers’ strikes were centered around working-class bread and butter issues: decent pay, adequate benefits, support for the public sector that serves everyone, and workers having some autonomy over their lives.  Perhaps, if we can learn to talk about class again in a manner that encourages people to feel connected to each other across other differences, we can start building the bridges that will help form the kind of grand coalition of ordinary folks that can win a better future.

Solidarity is the only antidote to the hate and division that has been used to successfully build power on the Right. To build solidarity you need “big tent issues” that allow people to recognize what connects their interests with those of their neighbors.

This is the key lesson of the strikes and of American labor history as a whole: when working people can find common cause across differences, they win.  When they allow themselves to be divided, they lose. That’s why bosses and undemocratic leaders of all kinds hate solidarity.

The plague of economic inequality is not a technical issue in need of technocratic “solutions.”  It is one of the grand moral dilemmas of our age—how do we live together in a way that provides fairness and dignity for all?  The simple answer lies in putting working people’s issues first rather than the desires of Wall Street and the billionaire class.

The neoliberal hegemony of the last 30 years, with its unquestioned love of one market under God, inequality be damned, has been a net loser for the majority of working Americans.  If we offer more of the same, anti-egalitarian forces will continue to win by cynically stoking the anger born out of conditions they have created.  If, on the other hand, we seize the day and pivot to a politics of solidarity, there may just be a light at the end of the dark tunnel in which we are presently lost.

As members and/or supporters of the labor movement, we are the keepers of the flame.  This Labor Day let’s all commit to sticking with the union, keeping the fire of solidarity burning, and building for a better future for ourselves, our families, and our communities.

In Solidarity,

Jim Miller, Political Action VP

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