

White Collar Perspectives on Workplace Issues

How Progressives Can Make the Case for Unions



by Jim Grossfeld

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Last summer, I was asked to speak to a journalism class. I began by asking how many in the class were members of a union — none; how many had parents who were union members — none; how many had grandparents who were union members — none. I had to start from square one; no one even knew what a ‘contract’ was. They were very progressive as a group, but they had no sense of trade unionism. It was shocking.

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Linda Foley, President
The Newspaper Guild / Communications Workers of America
December 8, 2005

Today, experiences like the one described by Linda Foley are not the exception but the rule: Many well-educated Americans fail to appreciate the importance of unions in America's national life. Even those who describe themselves as liberal or progressive often see unions as a vehicle that promotes the interests of low-income workers with few skills, not people like themselves. Their attitude toward unions has not been of great concern to progressives — but it should be.

Abraham Lincoln once observed, “Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed.” At a time when the United States has both the most productive workforce in the world but the most unequal distribution of wealth of any industrial nation, collective bargaining remains the single most effective mechanism for enabling workers to enjoy the “fruit” of their labor. In this respect, unions are fundamental to guaranteeing that America is more than a wealthy nation; but also an inclusive one whose prosperity is shared and whose economy reflects American values.

Today we understand that a robust labor movement is not the product of progressive social change, but a precondition for it. For this reason, progressives share an obligation to help organized labor make its case, not only to young women and men like those described by Linda Foley, but to the millions of other well-educated, highly skilled workers who immediately preceded them and are now reshaping our nation's economic and political life. Their support for the labor movement will not only determine whether more technical and professional workers choose to have unions; it can also help generate the political strength necessary to protect the right of millions of other workers to make that choice, too.

The Center for American Progress funded this study to explore how progressives can most effectively promote unions to those Americans. Through original focus group research and analysis of existing data this study identifies and assesses the attitudes and beliefs which have undermined support for unions in the past and continue to pose an obstacle to promoting unions among white collar workers now. Using this same approach, this study explores how, faced with the uncertainties of today's workplace, white collar workers may be receptive to a “new” union message — and how progressives can help present it.

However, this report does not only speak to the question of how progressives should promote unions; but why. As Linda Foley's remarks suggest, many progressives are woefully unaware of the essential role the labor movement plays in promoting democratic values. In response this study presents a discussion of why unions are needed...and why progressives need to help unions grow.

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Why White-Collar Workers?

It is difficult to overstate the importance of highly skilled white-collar workers to both the American economy and the body politic. The number of Americans working in the professions and technical fields is enormous — and growing. In 1977, 13.9 million men and women had white-collar jobs; by 2004, that number had more than doubled. Over the course of the last 13 years alone, the number of jobs for computer engineers and scientists has increased by 112 percent. With such stunning growth it is little wonder that it is now estimated that, between 2002 and 2012, jobs in professional and technical fields will account for 30.3 percent of all U.S. employment growth.¹

The growing ranks of America's white-collar workforce not only reflects the transformation of the U.S. economy, it also portends profound changes in our nation's political life. But while this new class of younger, well-educated workers enthusiastically embraces diversity, tolerance and other pro-

gressive social values, its response to progressive economic policies — including strong unions — is far more ambivalent. In 2004, author Thomas Frank alluded to the growing political influence of these Americans when he chastised liberal elected officials for “standing rock solid on, say, the pro-choice position while making needless concessions on economic issues.”² Combining a generally liberal stance on issues such as abortion rights and gun control with a more conservative approach to economics may be anathema to dyed-in-the-wool progressives, but it does appeal to many “swing voters” who come from the ranks of America's highly skilled technical and professional workforce.

In the wake of the 2004 presidential election, political analysts John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira offered this profile of college-educated white-collar voters: “These people support environmental regulation and women's rights, vehemently reject the social strictures and anti-scientific attitudes of the religious right and favor tolerance and fairness in social policy. But, like many college-educated liberals, they are also fiscal conservatives.”³

Judis and Teixeira note that when the progressive group MoveOn invited its thousands of young, well-educated supporters to help select a television spot for placement on a major network, the supporters chose one addressing federal budget deficits. TV spots addressing health care, unemployment, poverty, trade and globalization — concerns that loom large on the progressive agenda — were not even among the finalists.

This paradox extends to white-collar attitudes about unions. There is no question that when unions point out the gross abuses of less-skilled workers performing low-wage jobs, they can, and often do, win the sympathy of white-collar workers. Past public support for the legendary United Farm Workers boycotts and current support for the Justice for Janitors campaign of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) is testament to the fact that Americans care deeply when they believe

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¹ Daniel Hecker, “Occupational Employment Projections to 2012,” U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Monthly Labor Review*, Vol. 127, No. 2, February 2004.

² Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, P. 242 (paper), New York, N.Y., Metropolitan/Owl Books, 2005

³ John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, “Movement Interruptus,” *The American Prospect Online*, Dec. 20, 2004.

that poor people are being treated unfairly. However, compassion has its limits. As conservatives have long demonstrated, middle-class support for anti-poverty initiatives can easily be undermined by identifying such measures with higher taxes. Even among those sympathetic to the poor, the perception of self-interest routinely trumps social consciousness.

To strengthen public support for the right to form unions progressives must help demonstrate that all Americans share a stake in the success of the labor movement. It is not enough for highly skilled workers to see unions as a solution to the problems of low-income workers; they must also regard unions as a sensible response to their own woes.

Rising Support and Lingering Doubts

To help identify the concerns of highly skilled workers and gauge their responses to pro-union messaging, the Center for American Progress commissioned the firm of Lake Research Partners to conduct a series of focus groups to explore the attitudes of white-collar workers toward collective action and workplace organization. A total of six focus groups were convened in August 2005 in Alexandria, Virginia; San Jose, California; and Denver, Colorado. These groups were composed of whites, Hispanics and African Americans of both sexes between the ages of 20 and 45. They included a cross section of technical and professional employees from a wide range of occupations and industries.

This research comes at a time when public support for unions has been growing. A February 2005 poll by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the AFL-CIO used a long-term trend question (developed by the Gallup organization) to gauge whether respondents approve or disapprove of unions. According to the Hart survey results, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of Americans expressed approval of unions while only 21 percent disapproved. This is among the highest approval ratings for unions in 40 years.⁴ The Hart survey also found that among all non-managerial workers polled, 53 percent said that they definitely or probably would vote in favor of union representation in their workplace, while 38 percent said they would not. Based on the Hart Research findings, the AFL-CIO estimates that, given an opportunity, 57 million U.S. workers would choose to have a union.

“The fact that support for union representation now equals or exceeds opposition is a significant — and counterintuitive — change from sentiment just a decade ago,” said Teixeira. Further evidence of public support for unions was revealed in an August 2005 Gallup survey in which a plurality of respondents (38 percent) said they wanted unions to have more, rather than less, influence in the country. This was the best showing for unions since Gallup began asking the question in 1999. This surge in support is already having a pronounced political impact, as demonstrated by the successful 2005 drive by California unions to defeat a series of conservative ballot initiatives sponsored by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.⁵

Yet Teixeira notes that while general approval of unions has risen, significant misgivings remain. Many of those surveyed, he said, may support unions in the abstract and are responding to the positive qualities they see in some form of workplace association. However, this support erodes when they discuss their feelings about unions as they perceive them today.

⁴ Interview with Ruy Teixeira, Sept. 26, 2005.

⁵ See Appendix: Union Power at the Ballot Box

Americans have always had a complex view of unions. A 1997 Gallup Poll found that 55 percent of those surveyed backed striking Teamsters in their dispute with the United Parcel Service (UPS). However, a 1981 Gallup Poll showed that 59 percent of the public approved of President Ronald Reagan's firing of striking air-traffic controllers. This discrepancy does not indicate a dramatic change in public attitudes toward unions, but it does point up a highly nuanced situation.

When Americans identify with the cause of union members, they rally to their side. This was the case when the Teamsters stood up to oppose the replacement of full-time, permanent positions at UPS with lower-paying, part-time jobs. Conversely, when the goals or tactics of unions seem injurious to citizens and consumers — as they plainly did during the air-traffic controllers' strike — the public stands with the employer. Had the leaders of the air-traffic controllers' union better communicated that their success would have significantly improved safety for air travelers, it is doubtful that President Reagan's decision would have enjoyed the depth of support it did.

Exploring White-Collar Attitudes

Assessing the attitudes of America's white-collar workers toward unions can be daunting. Using polling to draw firm conclusions is often hampered by the relatively small size of the survey samples. For example, those working in the largely female “helping professions,” such as social work, nursing and teaching, hold far more positive attitudes toward unions than those working in male-dominated fields, such as chemical engineering and computer science.⁶ Polling samples that do not reflect these and other distinctions among white-collar workers often lead to sharply different conclusions.

The categorization of workers as professional or technical employees — or even as management or non-management — has also grown increasingly imprecise as new information technologies and nontraditional employment arrangements continue to reconfigure jobs and workplaces. For example, an office secretary with a two-year degree from a community college may use his or her desktop computer to design brochures that would otherwise be created by a professional graphic artist. Similarly, a college graduate with a degree in electrical engineering may work at a call center until a position to his or her liking becomes available. Yet he or she may also be using a home computer to pursue opportunities as a freelance consultant, or even as an entrepreneur.

Given these factors, focus group research allows for a more comprehensive exploration of attitudes of technical and professional workers as a class. While surveys force people to choose a “yes” or “no” answer, focus groups allow participants to express their ambivalence — the “yes, but” response that can explain why the support for unions described in polling data has yet to fully express itself as enthusiasm and action.

⁶ The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that, in 2004, the percentage of workers employed in “professional and related occupations” who are union members was 18.2 percent, compared with the 12.5 percent rate of unionization for all U.S. wage and salary employees. However, unionization among professional employees is largely concentrated in two fields: education, training and library occupations, where the unionization rate is 37.6 percent; and community and social-services occupations, where the unionization rate is 17.4 percent. The next highest rate is 12.6 percent among workers employed in health care practitioner and technical operations. In each of the other professional occupations for which data is collected, the unionization rate was far below that of the U.S. workforce as a whole. These occupations and their respective unionization rate are: computer and mathematical occupations, 4.3 percent; architecture and engineering occupations, 8 percent; life, physical and social science occupations, 8.8 percent; legal occupations, 6.2 percent; arts, design, entertainment, sports and media occupations, 8.6 percent.

The Role of Unions in America's Economy

Progressives involved in electoral politics often see the labor movement as an ally capable of providing funds, volunteers and other resources. For their part, community activists understand the added clout that union support can provide in winning reforms from government and business. Yet both often lack a rudimentary understanding of labor's core mission: raising workers' living standards through collective bargaining. This understanding is fundamental to communicating the value of collective action to highly skilled workers.

In an era of economic globalization, unions and the collective bargaining process remain the most effective vehicles for workers to win economic security for themselves and their families. Regardless of how profitable their employers are, workers who are denied the opportunity to negotiate their wages, hours and working conditions lack any significant means to share in the profits they create. This is the case for the 87 percent of U.S. workers who have no union representation today.

The impact of a diminished labor movement may have been summed up best by University of California, Berkeley professor Harley Shaiken, who warned, "When unions decline, wages lag, inequality grows, workers at the bottom of the pay ladder suffer and an important part of the democratic society unravels."⁷ In 1953, at their peak, unions represented 32.5 percent of the workforce; today, only 12.5 percent of workers belong to unions. While some view this decline as a debacle for organized labor, it is a crisis affecting all U.S. workers and their families given that strong union contracts set a pay standard that nonunion employers feel compelled to follow. For example, a high school graduate whose workplace is not unionized, but whose industry is 25 percent unionized, is paid five percent more than similar workers in less unionized industries.⁸

However, the best measure of organized labor's declining strength isn't the diminishing share of the workforce it represents; it is the erosion of union density and market share within sectors of the economy. When union density within an industry grows and the market share of unionized employers expands, workers' earnings increase. In 1999 the United Food and Commercial Workers reported that in the poultry industry, then 30 percent unionized, workers' hourly wages averaged \$8.41 per hour. But in the red meat industry, where the union market share was twice as great, workers' hourly wages averaged \$10.⁹ Similarly, University of California, Irvine researcher Marlon Boarnet, together with UCLA's Randall Crane, determined that if Wal-Mart captured six to 18 percent of grocery sales in just the Bay Area grocery market by 2010, supermarket workers throughout the region would lose as much as \$677 million per year in wages and benefits as employers attempted to compete with the low-wage chain store.¹⁰

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⁷ Harley Shaiken, "The High Road to a Competitive Economy: A Labor Law Strategy," Center for American Progress, Washington, D.C., 2004.

⁸ Lawrence Mishel and Ross Eisenbrey, "Union declines hurt all workers?" Salt Lake Tribune, Dec. 12, 2005

⁹ "Meat Industry Average Hourly Wage," *Working America*, Summer 1999

¹⁰ *Wal-Mart: Rolling Back Workers' Wages, Rights, and the American Dream*, American Rights at Work, Washington, D.C., November 2005

The use of “low road” strategies by nonunion employers is not only prevalent in blue-collar settings. Highly skilled technical and professional workers are also the victims of declining union density. Even Reuters, the global news service, now uses low-wage journalists in India to perform some work previously done by its U.S. journalists, who are represented by the Newspaper Guild/Communications Workers of America. In the public sector, unionized employees, from teachers to accountants, are often at risk of losing their jobs through privatization to nonunion firms. In each instance, employers attempt to become more competitive through reduced labor costs, even if the outcome is a decline in the quality of professional services.

It is a tribute to the tenacity of the American labor movement that, despite these challenges, union members are still able to use the collective bargaining process to win significant advantages in wages and benefits over their nonunion counterparts. Today, the median weekly earnings of union members are 28 percent greater than they are for nonunion workers. Just as significantly, 92 percent of workers with unions have jobs that provide access to health insurance; only 68 percent of those lacking unions can say the same.¹¹

“Contrary to conservative dogma, unions have a pronouncedly beneficial impact on productivity.”

Contrary to conservative dogma, unions have a pronouncedly beneficial impact on productivity. Shaiken points out that unionized manufacturing plants are 22 percent more productive than nonunion factories. By

offering superior wages and benefits, unionized employers improve worker retention, thus reducing the time-consuming and costly process of hiring and training.¹² Additionally, unions provide an avenue for the open exchange of information and ideas between workers and management. This communication is vital to fostering productivity and innovation, and it cannot occur in workplaces where employees fear retribution. For this reason “quality circles” and other efforts to promote employee involvement are most effective when employers create them jointly with workers through unions. AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka remarked that, absent the presence of a union, labor-management cooperation will always be “akin to the ‘cooperative relationship’ of a child and a parent.”¹³

Successful collective bargaining relationships not only yield gains for workers and their employers; unions routinely negotiate innovative benefits and workplace practices that are “mainstreamed” as they are duplicated by other employers. For example, the case for the Family Medical Leave Act was buttressed by the success of union-negotiated contract protections enabling workers to take time off from their jobs to help ailing loved ones. In a similar vein, a successful 1981 effort by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) to win pay equity for women employed by the city of San Jose, California focused national attention on the systematic underpayment of workers in largely female occupations whose work was of “comparable worth” to that performed by workers in male-dominated fields.

¹¹ Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Union Members in 2004, Jan. 27, 2005; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey: Employee Benefits in Private Industry in the United States, March 2005; Economic Policy Institute; Employee Benefits Research Institute, May 2005.

¹² Shaiken

¹³ Interview with Richard Trumka, February 14, 2005.

The inability to successfully communicate the attributes of unions to the American public has long vexed the labor movement and its progressive allies. Many fault the influence of labor's traditional opponents on the right who claim unions are pursuing policies that will send America on a slippery slope toward socialism. Some conservatives see organized labor as an even more sinister force than that. In a 2003 fund-raising appeal for an anti-union organization, then-U.S. Rep. Thomas DeLay (R-Texas) called the American union movement "a clear and present danger to the security of the United States at home and the safety of our armed forces overseas."¹⁴

Yet if rancor toward the labor movement only took the form of ideological jeremiads from the right, the stereotypes of unions and those who lead them would not be as commonplace as they are today. In the 1950s, the image of organized labor suffered significant damage as attention was directed toward corrupt practices in the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) and the Teamsters. While liberal support for unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) remained constant, the disenchantment with labor corruption was clear in such liberal works as the film *On the Waterfront*, which won the Oscar for best picture and established a negative template for the media's depiction of unions that has remained remarkably constant.

What has changed is that when *On the Waterfront* was released, in 1954, unions represented about 35 percent of the U.S. workforce. These Americans had the opportunity to compare the media's representation of unions to their own experience. In much the same way as the media has helped shape people's opinions about other matters the public has little firsthand knowledge of, such as war and organized crime, it has also created the prism through which many Americans see working-class people and their unions.

Though the news media is often characterized by conservatives as a bastion of liberalism, the media's coverage of unions has often suggested class bias against workers. *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, who once covered the steel industry for *The Wall Street Journal*, described how this bias is reflected in reporting:

"Older, conservative labor leaders like George Meany of the AFL-CIO and I. W. Abel of the Steelworkers tend to be treated by the press with considerable suspicion. Meany, for example, is often characterized as 'cigar-smoking,' which would be a trivial detail were it not a sort of shorthand for 'boss.' Similarly, Abel's name is often preceded by phrases like '\$75,000-a-year Steelworkers chief,' which is presumably intended to mean 'overpaid.'"¹⁵

The historical predisposition of many in the media against workers and their unions continues to this day. For example, in a 2005 article in *The New York Times Magazine*, the writer described his visit to the headquarters of one union this way: "It was as if I had wandered into the industrial economy's version of Jurassic Park: 'Welcome to Laborland, U.S.A., and please be careful — there are actual union leaders wandering around.'"¹⁶

¹⁴ Letter from the Rep. Thomas DeLay on behalf of the National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Foundation (Jan. 8, 2003).

¹⁵ David Ignatius, "The Press in Love," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May-June 1977.

¹⁶ Matt Bai, "The New Boss," *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 30, 2005.

William Puette of the University of Hawaii, Manoa described the cumulative effect of these portrayals in his seminal 1992 book, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*. In 1989, Puette surveyed 462 Hawaii high school students to determine their basic impressions of unions. Ten different themes were raised: Unions are always going on strike; unions are too powerful; unions are corrupt; unions are greedy and selfish; unions are ruining the country; union leaders (bosses) are overpaid; union dues are too high; unions are undemocratic and un-American; unions protect bad workers; and unions are no longer needed.¹⁷ These are perceptions that linger to this day. For organized labor and its progressive allies, the cost has been staggering.

The War Against America's Unions

Public approval of President Reagan's firing of striking air-traffic controllers in 1981 led many in the business community to conclude that not only did the White House support a toughened stance against unions, but that the American public did, too. In the wake of the air-traffic controllers' strike, the firing of striking workers, a relatively rare occurrence until then, became commonplace. So did massive employer resistance to union organizing.

An analysis of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election campaigns in 1998 and 1999 by Cornell University professor Kate Bronfenbrenner revealed that private-sector employers illegally fired employees for union activity in at least one quarter of all efforts to join a union. And, after workers did successfully form a union, in one out of three instances employers refused to negotiate a contract.¹⁸ A more recent study, by the Center for Urban Economic Development at the University of Illinois, concluded that "falling union density is directly related to employers' near universal and systematic use of

legal and illegal tactics to stymie workers' union organizing." The report found that 82 percent hire high-priced consultants to fight union organizing drives and that 30 percent of employers fire pro-union workers.¹⁹

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Typical of the abuse suffered by employees was the experience of Nancy Schweikhard, a neonatal nurse at St. John's Regional Medical Center in Oxnard, Calif. Speaking before a Senate hearing in June 2002, Schweikhard described the bitter opposition she and her co-workers faced when they attempted to exercise their legal right to form a union in 1998. "We were subjected to one-on-one meetings with

our supervisors in which they pressured us to oppose the union," she said. "Imagine how powerful such a negative message is for nurses when it is coming from the person who sets your schedule and assignments, approves your time off, has the power to impose disciplinary action and has a say in whether you get a raise."²⁰

¹⁷ William Puette, *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*, Cornell University: ILR Press, 1992.

¹⁸ Kate Bronfenbrenner, *Uneasy Terrain: The Impact of Capital Mobility on Workers, Wages and Union Organizing*. U.S. Trade Deficit Review Commission, September 6, 2000

¹⁹ Chirag Mehta and Nik Theodore, *Undermining the Right to Organize: Employer Behavior During Union Representation Campaigns*, Urban Economic Development University of Illinois at Chicago; American Rights at Work, Washington, D.C., 2005.

²⁰ AFL-CIO

The stunning surge in employer lawlessness has been facilitated by an NLRB that has been hamstrung by conservative appointees. For example, in 2004, the conservative-dominated board overturned the *MB Sturgis* decision, which acknowledged that workers who perform the same job for a company under the same supervision as regular employees can share a “community of interests” even if they are employed through a temporary-services agency. Given that 26.6 percent of the U.S. workforce is now employed on a “nonstandard” basis, the NLRB’s reversal of *Sturgis* will have the effect of excluding an ever-growing share of the U.S. workforce from the protection of federal labor laws.²¹

This trend continued when, in October, 2006, the NLRB radically expanded the definition of “supervisor” to include nurses and other skilled workers who — even if it’s infrequent — assign work to other employees. Candice Owley, RN, the chair of the health care division of the American Federation of Teachers, described the NLRB’s action as “a road map for employers to exclude workers from a union.”

“Of the 1,222 ‘highest priority’ cases in 2003 in which an employer owed back pay to an employee, more than half took over 2,008 days to be resolved.”

However, even in those instances where the NLRB has determined that employers have violated the law, chronic understaffing has made effective enforcement virtually impossible. For example, of the NLRB’s 1,222 “highest priority cases” in 2003, those where an employer owed an employee back pay, more than half took over 2,008 days to be resolved.²²

EFCA: Restoring the Right to Organize

The labor movement’s response to abuses like those suffered by Schweikhard and other workers has been the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a proposal championed by Reps. George Miller (D-Calif.) and Peter King (R-N.Y.) and Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.). The EFCA would impose stiff penalties against employers that violate labor law and establish a process for newly organized workers to negotiate a first contract in a timely manner. Under the measure, workers could opt to follow the “voluntary recognition” method of organizing, where employees could choose union representation if a majority of workers sign cards indicating their support.

The EFCA’s advocates are mounting a broad grassroots campaign to press legislators to support the measure. As a result of this effort, the proposal has already gained the backing of 44 members of the Senate and almost half of the House of Representatives. EFCA backers understand that the closer their measure is to becoming law, the stiffer the opposition to the bill within the business community will become. For example, an organization calling itself the Center for Union Facts placed costly ads in major newspapers in an attempt to reinforce negative stereotypes of unions as outdated, undemocratic institutions led by corrupt leaders. Though it characterizes itself as an advocate for union members, the group is actually the creation of Richard Berman, a past official of the fiercely anti-union U.S. Chamber of Commerce²³ with ties to the tobacco industry.

²¹ Jim Grossfeld and John Podesta, “A Temporary Fix: A rapidly growing contingent workforce could benefit from labor and management partnerships, but the NLRB stands in the way,” *The American Prospect*, March 3, 2005.

²² “Thanks to the NLRB Workers Organize Unions at a Snail’s Pace,” *Eye on the NLRB*, American Rights at Work, April 2005.

²³ Amy Joyce, “Full-Page Ads Launch Anti-Union Drive,” *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 2006.

Not surprisingly, EFCA's opponents today played a key role in defeating a 1994 bid to win passage of legislation banning the firing of striking workers. Though the striker-replacement proposal had the support of President Clinton, a majority of the House of Representatives and 53 senators, sustained business opposition kept the bill's backers from garnering the 60 votes necessary to overcome a Senate filibuster mounted to stop it. Two of the senators siding with the conservatives were Arkansas' self-styled progressives, David Pryor and Dale Bumpers.

In the years since the death of the striker-replacement law, there is little evidence that support for unions among congressional Democrats has deepened, despite compelling evidence that union families are more essential than ever to their election. As a *National Journal* poll of Democratic legislators and other "insiders" reported, when asked which interest group Democrats in Congress would "buck more if the group weren't so powerful," 26 percent said labor unions. The figure climbs to 34 percent when "teachers' groups" are included. By contrast, the second-ranked "special interest" was abortion-rights groups, at 12 percent.²⁴ The less-than-heartfelt commitment of many Democratic legislators to organized labor is a cogent reminder that they are as likely to have doubts about the role of unions in today's economy as many of their white-collar constituents.

An Alliance Renewed

Progressives both within and outside the labor movement have always had a stake in working together to strengthen the rights of workers. However, relations between the two have often been strained. During the 1960s and 1970s a deep chasm also opened between many union leaders and non-labor liberals over support for the Vietnam War. Similarly, while many unions played a crucial role in winning civil rights legislation, the efforts of African Americans to gain entry to better paying jobs were often thwarted by racial discrimination in union apprenticeship programs and organized labor's ambivalence toward affirmative action initiatives.

"The conflicts that often drove a wedge between unions and liberals are part of the distant past."

However, the conflicts that often drove a wedge between unions and other liberals are part of the distant past. Faced with the growing power of conservative interests in the 1980s, both found common ground defending progressive social and economic policies from an unprecedented assault from the far right. The renewal of the alliance between unions and progressives outside the labor movement has enabled both

to work together on an array of issues which in the past would have been difficult, if not impossible. For example, many union and civil rights activists have joined forces to win improved wages and working conditions for immigrant workers. This effort, spearheaded by unions representing hotel, building-maintenance and other less-skilled workers is literally changing the face of the labor movement. Largely as a result of organizing gains among nonwhite immigrant workers, union density in California has increased over the course of the last 10 years, despite the collapse of the state's heavily unionized aerospace industry in the late 1980s and 1990s.

²⁴Bara Vaida and Peter Bell, "Insiders Poll," *The National Journal*, Nov. 11, 2005.

The Optimistic Worker

Paradoxically, even as union efforts to organize less-skilled workers has generated new visibility for the labor movement, it may also be reinforcing the belief among highly skilled technical and professional workers that unions, while a good thing for the poor and exploited, are still not particularly relevant to their own circumstances. In the words of a white female in Denver: “When you realize that people who are in retail are not making very much money, generally in those kinds of jobs I do want there to be a union. I do want somebody speaking out for them. But in the back of my head, I’m thinking that unions can overstep their boundaries.” Helping white-collar workers move past the “but” to recognize the added value that unions can offer is one of the most significant challenges facing the labor movement. It is also one that progressives can help them overcome.

What our focus group research tells us is that white-collar workers are fundamentally optimists. They like their jobs. They do not respond to the argot of struggle, but to the language of advancement. However, they do see a need for organizations that can help solve problems on the job, create new opportunities and advocate for their interests in the public square. But they also stress that unions, *as traditionally defined*, are not those organizations. In essence, white-collar workers believe that unions, as stereotyped, are appropriate for people with “jobs,” but unnecessary for people with “careers.”

The reticence toward conventional unions voiced by focus group participants had little to do with the actual record compiled by unions representing non-manual workers. As previously noted, union representation in fields such as teaching, nursing and social work is widespread, and it continues to expand at a rapid pace. Importantly, those highly skilled workers who do turn to unions do so less to win economic security than to protect their autonomy and, with it, the integrity of their professions. Their attitude may have been summed up best by former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, who, recalling her years as a unionized school teacher, remarked, “The strength that comes with having a union didn’t take away from my professionalism ... it added to it.”²⁵

All workers, regardless of their occupation, take pride in a job well done and look for opportunities to apply their skills and talents to solving difficult problems. Coal miners, for example, routinely make independent decisions with life or death implications. Workers at wastewater-treatment plants know that the health of whole cities depends on their judgment and expertise. Highly skilled technical and professional employees share this pride, along with the belief that their work should be intellectually satisfying and an expression of their values. This attitude was reflected in the words of one white female employed in Silicon Valley who said, “I do clinical research on medical devices, so when we do the research on a particular product and then later have it approved by the [Food

“Highly skilled technical and professional workers who turn to unions do so less to win economic security than to protect their autonomy and, with it, the integrity of their professions.”

“All workers, regardless of their occupation, take pride in a job well done and look for opportunities to apply their skills and talents to solving difficult problems.”

²⁵ Remarks of Donna E. Shalala before the Seventh National Nurses Congress of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Washington, D.C., May 3, 1999.

and Drug Administration] and see that it's actually saving lives or enhancing people's lives, it's very rewarding to know that you were involved in that."

In Denver, a Hispanic male echoed similar sentiments when he observed: "I work with high school students, so it's really good to see them come from very bad households and graduate from high school ... it's really good to know that I get to help them overcome their challenges."

But while focus group participants told us that they still find satisfaction in their work, many also describe being buffeted by economic upheavals they once believed they were immune to. Uncertain-

"Uncertainties that were once seen as a threat only to manufacturing workers now cause many white-collar workers to worry about their own future."

ties once seen as a threat only to manufacturing workers now cause many white-collar workers to worry about their own future. Describing the impact of restructuring and resultant job loss where she works, a white female in Silicon Valley spoke for many focus group participants when she remarked: "You see it happening in more industries, and it starts to happen in your own company. It's smaller, or in areas that are not generally related to what you're doing, but it's within your company, and you know that the thought is there, so it's definitely a concern."

The threat of losing jobs to restructuring is not the only specter haunting white-collar America. Some are concerned that the Internet has enabled employers to send their jobs "offshore" to highly educated but low-wage professionals sitting at computer keyboards in India and other countries. Others see a threat in employer outsourcing and a growing reliance on part-time or temporary contingent workers to do jobs previously performed by full-time, permanent employees.

"There's less job security," a white male in northern Virginia complained, adding, "Our parents, they were able to keep their old jobs for 25, 30 years. They were very secure, and if they wanted to move over to another job, they pretty much could. But if you find yourself out of work at age 50 in this day and age and you need to change fields because your industry has been eliminated and you don't have training, no one will want to hire you."

"I think a lot of people, you know, 30 years ago, could get a job that was relatively stable," a white male working in Silicon Valley adds. "Here I am, five years out of school, and I've had four jobs. It's not because I'm not good, because I've gotten praise from every single job I've been at. It's just the fact that the companies don't seem stable."

But even those who feel their jobs are more secure describe disturbing changes at their places of work. Typical of this was a workplace description offered by a white female in Silicon Valley: "Busy, overworked, understaffed; not enough people in the group to do all the work we need to do, so everyone's doing a lot of work and just running around like a chicken with a head cut off."

Yet as stressful as these and other practices may be, many white-collar workers see them as unavoidable in today's economy and are loath to blame management. Instead, they say the instability is due to forces beyond their employer's control. As one white male worker in northern Virginia said, "Most owners want to maximize their investment out of every employee, and they're going to push you beyond your limits until they can reach some sort of capacity that's going to support one more person or whatever. So there's that time frame in there that you're way overworked, and that's just a part of getting to the next level No, it's not fair, but unfortunately the economics plays into that."

The reluctance to hold employers accountable for workplace instability is largely a function of class identity. Unlike manual workers, white-collar workers, traditionally believe their interests are the same as management's.²⁶ As a result, not only are white-collar workers less likely to blame employers for conditions in the workplace; they are also more likely to side with employers than labor unions in disputes over these conditions.²⁷

The identification with an employer has also made white-collar workers particularly sensitive to claims that unions promote workplace conflict and advocate an adversarial, "us against them" relationship. Many progressive activists fail to appreciate this abhorrence of conflict with management.

"Well, they've divided everybody," one northern Virginia white male said of unions. "You've got employees against management, and really, to make it work, you've got to have everybody on the same team."

"To make it work, you've got to have everybody on the same team."

"There was a time when management was grossly taking advantage of the employees and they needed someone to step in and help them out," he said, adding, "but now that's not going to happen." Agreeing with him, another Northern Virginia white male commented, "They haven't evolved to really what they could do ... facilitate, solutions ... start facilitating instead of talking about these class troubles."

Nevertheless, when white-collar workers sense they are being disrespected and are treated unfairly, they come to see unions as a necessary "last resort." As noted earlier, this is particularly true when professionals sense that their autonomy is threatened and the quality of their work is being undermined.

At Boeing, the loss of independence led engineers there to recast their Society of Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace into an aggressive independent union, and then to merge with the AFL-CIO-affiliated International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE). Similarly, efforts by hospital operators to reduce skilled nursing care led the American Nurses Association to form a union of its own, the United American Nurses. Physicians and dentists, faced with the loss of their autonomy to HMOs, have even pressed the anything-but-militant American Medical Association and American Dental Association to engage in collective bargaining with the health-care industry.

But while threats to their decision-making power have made traditional unions more appealing to some technical and professional workers, more common is the attitude of one white female who told focus group members in Silicon Valley, "Certainly at one point when the unions were formed they were very important. I mean, workers were horribly treated and not paid, you know? Child labor and all sorts of things. I think at that point the unions were very, very important. I think there are other avenues that are available now that workers in general have a better voice in most situations to address those same problems that don't necessarily have to involve a union."

"Here I am, five years out of school, and I've had four jobs. It's not because I'm not good."

²⁶ Seymour Martin Lipset, Noah Meltz, *The Paradox of American Unionism*, pp.128-129, New York, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2004.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.129.

Unions vs. Associations: A Distinction Without Difference?

For many white-collar workers, the avenue of choice is the creation of an employee association. Surveys found that 43 percent of professionals would choose a union, but that 78 to 79 percent would back an association — even when it was performing many of the functions of a traditional labor union.²⁸ Though this suggests that forming an association over a union is a distinction without a difference, white-collar workers believe otherwise. At first glance, unions, they say, are adversarial, corrupt and/or inflexible and are better suited to blue-collar workers. In contrast, an employee association is accountable, flexible and contoured to respond to problems unique to a given workplace. No less important, they believe that an association, unlike a union, is more likely to work as a team with employers to keep firms strong and competitive.

“At a time when the ‘old rules’ governing the world of work no longer apply, progressives can demonstrate how new unions can be the vehicle to help workers protect their jobs and advance their careers.”

When asked to define the day-to-day work of the employee organization she would form, a white female in Silicon Valley said she believed in having one that would promote “a safer workplace, better pay, opportunities for advancement, improving morale, bringing more revenue to our company, more training for the employees and more employee recognition.” In Denver, a Hispanic male said his would focus on employee recognition to help retain workers. A white female in Denver added that she would have hers create child-care options for workers and join with employers to lower health-care costs. Another focus group participant, a white female in Silicon Valley, summed up the attitude of many when she said there needed to be an organization that would work to “create an environment where people want to come to work.”

The significance of the subtle distinctions drawn between unions and other organizations is important. To a great extent, these differences define how progressives need to discuss unions if they are to gain a hearing from these Americans, let alone their support.

Some focus group participants suggested that the term “union” has so many negative connotations that it should no longer be used. Progressives have an important role to play in challenging this belief: Rather than “disavowing unions in order to save them,” they can support labor leaders in demonstrating that what white-collar workers want in organizations already exists within today’s labor movement.

Working with the labor movement, progressives can buttress the message that new 21st-century unions can meet the needs of technical and professional workers in a changing global economy. At a time when the “old rules” governing the world of work no longer apply, progressives can demonstrate how new unions can be the vehicle to help workers protect their jobs and advance their careers. They can help them improve their skills on a continuing basis, foster the teamwork between employers and workers necessary to solve workplace problems, increase competitiveness and create new opportunities.

²⁸ Ibid., p.144.

Defining New Unions

The terms “new unionism” and “new union” are hardly new creations. When the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union merged in 1995, their leaders launched an advertising campaign announcing the creation of a new union, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees (UNITE).²⁹ In recent years, many labor leaders have also made a point of describing the need for a new unionism.

Yet our research also tells us that while the concept of a new union is appealing, white-collar workers remain skeptical and unsure whether such organizations exist or could even be created. For progressives, the challenge is not to convince these men and women that their interest in a “new kind of union” is misplaced. It is, instead, to demonstrate that the traits of the workplace organizations white collar workers want can already be found within today’s labor movement.

One early example of the appeal of the “new union” approach came in the 1980s when Working Women, a national grassroots organization promoting better treatment of women workers, joined forces with SEIU in a campaign to organize office workers. This effort led to the creation of a unique hybrid: SEIU Local 925, later District 925. By approaching women workers not as a traditional union but as a women’s advocacy group, SEIU District 925 succeeded in generating interest among workers who might otherwise be disinclined to join a union. The upshot is that over the 20 years of its existence, District 925 successfully organized thousands of office, technical and professional employees nationwide.

A more recent example of the appeal of new approaches is illustrated by the 2005 experience of Douglas Stewart, a systems analyst employed by an electric utility in Washington state.

“We were treated like we were cogs in a wheel,” Stewart told the *Wall Street Journal*. However, rather than join the “blue-collar, old-style” union that represented many of the utility’s other employees, Stewart and his co-workers chose to join WashTech, an affiliate of the CWA formed by white-collar contingent workers at Microsoft. *Unlike more traditional unions, WashTech describes itself as a “community of activists ... we help build economic security and fair working conditions through collective action, bargaining and legislative advocacy.”* What was the appeal of WashTech over more traditional unions? “We see ourselves as professionals,” Stuart said.³⁰

Much as Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once tried to explain what is obscene by saying, “I know it when I see it,” our research tells us that white-collar workers like Douglas Stewart can readily identify the traits of “new unions” when they are presented with examples of them. To isolate these characteristics, the focus groups were presented with a series of new union “success stories”

“The traits of the workplace organizations white collar workers want can already be found within today’s labor movement.”

“White-collar workers can readily identify the traits of ‘new unions’ when they are presented with examples of them.”

²⁹ UNITE and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union merged on July 8, 2004 forming UNITE HERE.

³⁰ Kris Maher, “The New Union Worker,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 27, 2005

— examples of activities by existing unions that seemed to reflect the values and priorities of highly skilled workers. The examples offered were as follows:

- ▶ **Harley-Davidson** chose not to follow the lead of manufacturers who went overseas for cheap labor. Instead, the company and its employees' union have worked together to help Harley-Davidson expand in the United States, stay competitive and achieve record revenues.
- ▶ Labor unions were successful in getting Congress to pass the **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)** to help families balance work and family. Unions would ultimately like to have the law expanded so employers would be required to provide paid leave for workers to take time for a new baby or a sick family member.
- ▶ When wrongdoing at **Enron** caused hundreds of innocent workers to lose their jobs, unions went to court on their behalf (the only organization to do so), even though none of the workers were union members. They won a partial settlement for the employees.
- ▶ To protect patient-care standards, an organization called the **California Nurses Association** succeeded in getting a state law passed to make sure hospitals didn't increase the ratio of nurses to patients.
- ▶ Writers usually work for a variety of employers over the course of their careers. As a result, they are at risk of having no pensions when they retire. To solve this problem, the **Writers Guild** created a pension fund that all employers pay into. Those professionals now receive pensions when they retire.
- ▶ When **IBM** changed the way it determines pensions, employees had many unanswered questions. A group of employees set up a Web site where workers could find factual information explaining the changes. The group (**Alliance@IBM**) now uses the Internet to provide information about personnel policies and a forum where employees freely discuss ideas to make IBM more competitive — and a better place to work.
- ▶ Faced with a shortage of staff with specialized technology skills, the **Verizon** company and the employees' organization, called the **CWA**, teamed up to solve the problem. The CWA now provides advanced training so employees have the skill sets Verizon needs. Verizon then places those men and women in higher-paying positions with greater responsibility. It is a win-win situation for both the company and the employees.
- ▶ After uncovering wage discrimination against women and African American workers by a state government, a group called the **American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees** went to court. As a result, women and African American employees won substantial wage increases and promotions.
- ▶ In Wichita, Kan., the **International Federation of Professional Technical Engineers** and **Boeing Aircraft** together developed a performance-review process that not only establishes employee goals but also spells out how Boeing will help employees achieve them. The federation also joined with Boeing to craft a policy to help workers who telecommute.

Focus Group Responses

The examples that impressed the focus groups the most were Harley-Davidson bucking the outsourcing trend, unions lobbying for the FMLA and unions standing up for nonunion Enron employees. Workers, particularly those with experience as contract employees, were also intrigued by the Writers Guild pension plan. The training agreement between Verizon and the CWA, the CNA's efforts on behalf of nurse-patient ratios and IFPTE's efforts at Boeing to craft an agreement on telecommuting also resonated particularly well.

Tellingly, the CWA's Alliance@IBM impressed participants less due to the activity it described than because it suggested that these activities were not the result of a union but of employees joining together. Characterizing unions as an outside third party has long been used to thwart organizing efforts. Clearly this perception can be as much an obstacle to new unions as it has long been to old ones. Representative responses to each of the examples offered include the following.

FMLA

Organized labor's effort to pass the FMLA stood out as relevant, important and surprising. What impressed the focus groups was that it showed unions working on behalf of all workers and that the union's goals seemed relevant in the new economy. Interestingly, it was also an example of how the union's size — and clout — was recognized as being to the workers' advantage:

"The thing that really surprised is that unions were out trying to expand FMLA."

—Hispanic male, Denver

"I think it's good that they put a leave time for families that have babies."

—White male, northern Virginia

"I didn't know that unions had a hand in bringing that to Congress' attention. I didn't know that. I was never aware of that."

—White female, Silicon Valley

Enron was also a powerful example of unions delivering for workers who were not their members. For many, the Enron example directly contradicts a negative stereotype of unions being too narrowly focused on their members' self-interests:

"I'm surprised that the unions want to go fight for somebody who is not part of their organization."

—White male, northern Virginia

"Well, first of all, even though none of them were union members, that means they believed in what they were fighting for, so they went and helped people that truly needed it."

—Hispanic male, Denver

"There's some self-serving interest there, but it also did show that, I guess, kind of in its purest form, that's what a union is meant to do: help employees."

—Hispanic male, Denver

"Organized labor's effort to pass the FMLA stood out as relevant, important and surprising. What impressed the focus groups was that it showed unions working on behalf of all workers."

Keeping Harley-Davidson Competitive

The Harley-Davidson case stood out to focus group members. This example worked to contradict their belief that union demands contribute to the larger problem of outsourcing by driving companies to seek cheaper labor abroad. Harley-Davidson is a strong example of a union working as a team with an employer to promote the long-term interests of each:

“With all the outsourcing going on, the union wins; it’s giving them options. Like I said, going over to XYZ country, try this way and, you know, work together and see how we keep manufacturing jobs by building these motorcycles in this country.”

—African American male, northern Virginia

“Harley-Davidson is a strong example of a union working as a team with an employer to promote the long-term interests of each.”

“It just seems like that’s the way things should be worked out: Have management and the union get together so that they come up with a good solution, and it works out. This is the way unions and management are supposed to work out.”

—White male, northern Virginia

“The Harley-Davidson statement [is] that they didn’t follow the manufacturers’ lead and go overseas for cheap labor. They were able to organize and create competitive environment and benefit the company here. I think it’s pretty exciting, and I didn’t realize that.”

—White female, Silicon Valley

Writers’ Guild Pensions

The Writers’ Guild example intrigued focus group members who have personal experience with the problems facing freelancers and other contingent employees:

“I found it interesting because I wished we had one for graphic arts The industry is increasing, and there’s more freelancers and more people doing it, well, virtually from their homes, and we don’t have backup. We don’t have anything protecting us if we do that.”

—White male, northern Virginia

“I’ve also done a lot of work as contracting, and that was the big problem with contracting ... lack of benefits and lack of pension.”

—White male Silicon Valley

Training – CWA

The Verizon-CWA example was relevant for several workers. It spoke directly to their concerns about reaching their career goals. They were pleased to hear of a company and union working together to create opportunities for advancement:

“I am surprised to see that they actually were able to, you know, offer more training for their employees because a lot of companies just, you know: ‘Bye, bye, you’re laid off.’ And they’re going overseas and hiring contractors for less money.”

—White female, Silicon Valley

“Well, I liked that they were actually doing something to train people so that they can move into these skilled positions.”

—White male, northern Virginia

“The Verizon-CWA one. I mean, I’m not exactly sure exactly what it all does, but this is something maybe our company could look at.”

—White female, Silicon Valley

Boeing – IFPTE

Examples of helping to foster policies like telecommuting and flex time stood out strongly as instances of a union offering innovative responses to current workplace concerns. These are important examples for professional workers who want to see unions speak to problems that affect them and their families:

“Well, I specifically liked the part about how they worked with Boeing to craft a policy to help workers who telecommute. I think that that’s something that a lot of businesses should start to sort of embrace. And you know, I think it’s one solution to a lot of the problems that we have in the country right now, like traffic problems and not spending enough time with your kids — a whole bunch of things.”

—White male, northern Virginia

Quality Nursing Care – CNA

Focus group members were clearly concerned with the diminishing quality of health care. They saw the nurses’ union as protecting everyone’s interest:

“It just seems very important that we have good health care and ... the patient-nurse or -doctor ratio is important to make health care, to have it on a high level. I don’t know who else [but the union], I guess, would be powerful enough to make a law like that.”

—White female, Denver

Focus group members were clearly concerned with the diminishing quality of health care.

Fighting Discrimination – AFSCME

The story about AFSCME challenging discrimination against African Americans drew little response from white workers. However, participants in the African American focus group in northern Virginia singled out this example as particularly important to them, underscoring the extent to which African Americans have personal experience with racism in the workplace:

“The workforce, the way it is, we won’t say discrimination is nonexistent. You know, first of all you’re a woman, and then you’re a black woman.”

—African American female, northern Virginia

Alliance@IBM, CWA

Focus group members responded positively to this example in part because of its reference to “a group of employees,” as opposed to a union or other organization. This characterization contributed to the belief that the workers were offering a constructive response to the employer’s failure:

“This one doesn’t seem like a union group coming in and forcing an issue. It seems like employees kind of getting together. It just seems different.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

“I underlined ‘a group of employees set up a Web site.’ Why didn’t IBM do that for their employees to begin with? I mean, that’s ridiculous that a group had to do that.”

—Hispanic male, Denver

The focus groups found the complete set of examples eye-opening, and it whetted their appetite to know more. In many instances, workers identified with the concerns the unions were addressing. However, while examples like these are clearly an important component of communicating to white-collar workers about unions, they need to be fleshed out with more details.

The Persuasiveness of Statistics

In addition to the examples cited above, focus groups were also presented with statistics describing the positive impact of unions. Unions frequently use these numbers to demonstrate the value of collective bargaining to American workers. However, they had a limited impact on focus group participants, who often voiced a sophisticated skepticism regarding all statistical information. The statistics presented to the focus group included the following:

- ▶ Seventy-five percent of union workers have health benefits while only 49 percent of nonunion workers have coverage.
- ▶ Union workers earn on average 27 percent more than nonunion workers per week.
- ▶ Hispanic workers with unions make 51 percent more than Hispanic workers without union representation. (Presented to one group)
- ▶ Eighty-two percent of union workers have life insurance compared to only 51 percent of nonunion workers. (Presented to two groups)
- ▶ Unionized women make 33 percent more than their nonunion counterparts.
- ▶ Workers with unions have 25 percent more paid vacation time than workers without unions. (Presented to four groups)
- ▶ Researchers found that manufacturers where employees have a union are 22 percent more productive than their nonunion counterparts. (Presented to four groups)
- ▶ Workers with unions are 54 percent more likely to have employer-provided pension plans. (Presented to four groups)

The statistics that most impressed the focus groups were those related to earnings, vacations and health care. However, as noted above, focus group members in some cases questioned the methodology used to arrive at findings that conflicted with their preexisting beliefs.

Focus Group Responses

Health Care

The relationship between union membership and health-insurance coverage came as a stunning surprise to focus group members:

“I didn’t realize how people outside of the unions were lacking in health care or life insurance, and I just think, in America, it’s sad that anybody does not have health care or life insurance, and I think that’s what affects me more than anything.”

—White male, northern Virginia

“Just the sheer number. I mean, 50 percent versus 75 percent. I mean, that’s a big thing in this country where a lot of people either don’t have or just can’t afford it, and you see that it’s, like, wow. It seems like they’re doing something.”

—African American male, northern Virginia

“I just didn’t realize that it hinged so much on being a union worker. I guess [there are] just a lot more people that work hourly and without benefits than I really had assumed.”

—White male, northern Virginia

Wage Differential

The wage differential is a pointed example of unions fighting for people’s real worth. Several Hispanic workers were impressed by the wage differential for Hispanics; they could see it relating to professional workers. But some focus group members challenged the validity of the claim of a union advantage in wages:

“I look at all the jobs that most of the Hispanics do, and they’re nonunion. So then I think about: OK, who could be in the union that’s Hispanic? And I start pulling out, well, there’s probably teachers, there’s probably nurses. And that was pretty impressive.”

—Hispanic male, Denver

“It’s obvious most union workers do have more health benefits than nonunion workers. Most of them have life insurance. They also talk about [how] unions tend to be with larger organizations, and there are going to be those better health benefits just because of the scale of workers involved with them.”

—White male, northern Virginia

“I was impressed with the numbers, but I don’t think it’s necessarily a good thing. Well, it’d be good for the individual workers, but it’s not good for the company and not good, long term, for the workers and the economy and everything that goes with it.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

Productivity

For the most part, focus group participants were not only unmoved by the claims of higher productivity in unionized workplaces, they also discounted them:

“It could be for a particular industry, particular part of the country.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

“No, I mean, really, just because they’re drawing a conclusion ... because they joined a union this happened. It doesn’t... the statement just doesn’t impart anything to me. I mean maybe they just had, you know, like, some changes in managers.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

While the statistics did spark discussion, few group members responded to the data in personal terms. Rather than saying that they need higher wages or improved health-care benefits where they work, they were more likely to speculate what the statistics meant for blue-collar workers or to discuss the validity of the statistics themselves.

Finding the Right Message

In addition to the examples and statistical data, the focus groups were presented with an array of messages about their jobs, workplaces and the possible role of unions within them. One message regarding the protection of professional standards was presented as a quotation from a nurse. The messages offered included the following:

Opportunities and Risks

The new global economy offers tremendous opportunities but also includes huge risks. In order to succeed, men and women must have the right skills or they will have fewer career options available to them and will have to struggle much harder to make ends meet. That's why it's more important for employees to work together and help one another to succeed.

Changing Jobs

It is now common for professionals to change jobs from time to time over the course of their careers. That's why new organizations are being formed to offer portable pensions and health benefits, as well as networking opportunities and access to advanced training.

Flexibility

A smart union is responsible and does what's best for everyone, not the few. When they're flexible and work together with employers, unions can be a good thing for professionals.

Stability

There is not much security or stability in today's economy. People are downsized; companies are bought out; jobs are shipped overseas; pensions are cut; health-care benefits and hours are changed. A union can help create greater stability by working to keep jobs here, working for policies that include portable pensions, flex time and affordable health-care benefits for all. Even if we change jobs or titles, we need to help families achieve more economic stability in the new economy.

Teamwork

In today's workplace, we all need to be part of the team to deal with tough global competition and tight budgets. A union or an employee association can help create a team and work with management as part of the team. We can work together to identify problems, work out solutions and be stronger all around.

Equality

A lot of progress has been made, but sometimes women and minorities still face discrimination at their jobs. They are paid less and often have less access to promotions. When that happens, it's important to have an organization that will stick up for them.

High Morale

High morale translates into high levels of productivity and competitive success. Because they have a voice at work, employees with a union contribute substantially to improving and reinforcing the productivity and competitiveness of business, according to researchers at the World Bank.

Success and Competitiveness

America's economic success has been based on more than competitive firms; it has also been fueled by employees having the ability to buy the products they produce. By expanding the buying power of their members, the wage increases won by unions contribute to our country's economic growth.

Professional Standards - Nurse Quotation

"Now that we have a union, it's an enormous change — we have a voice. We know as nurses what we need to be able to do to maintain high professional standards and provide the highest-quality patient care — that's what moved myself and my co-workers to organize to make change. There is always going to be conflict, but now there is a way to solve the conflict; there is a shared power."

Focus Group Responses

Opportunities and Risks

Speaking about the promise and perils of the new economy resonated with group participants. However, as in previous discussions, they also stressed the importance of working with management to meet common objectives:

"On the very last sentence you've got, 'That's why it's more important for employees to work together and help each other to succeed.' In the new global economy, no business can survive if management and employees don't work together. Management is missing from this statement completely, so how are you going to have a successful business if the employees are trying to work together without management?"

—African American male, northern Virginia

"And when did management not become employees?"

—African American male, northern Virginia

"Speaking about the promise and perils of the new economy resonated with group participants."

Changing Jobs

Participants identified with the idea of organizations geared toward meeting the needs of workers who change jobs periodically:

"That spoke to me, and that's me — you know, changing jobs, portable pension. I love the word 'organization' as opposed to 'union.' I know it's just semantics, but that was good. Networking opportunities. I mean, to me that's almost like a professional organization."

—White female, Denver

"It seems more about choice, networking opportunities."

—White male, Silicon Valley

"I thought it was positive the way they used organizations, and I thought that having a portable pension was an interesting idea."

—White male, Silicon Valley

“Portable pensions and health benefits sound great.”

—White male, northern Virginia

“It kind of pertains to maybe where I’m at and a lot of my friends are at It allows you to go out and do different things ... which I think is better. People staying in the same organization for, like, 20 years seems like it’s way in the dust, and now people are moving on after five or 10 years.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

Flexibility

Focus group members responded positively to the word “flexible.” However, the reference to a “smart union” did not resonate:

“It’s just a matter of everyone actually being flexible, then sure, it could work to everyone’s favor.”

—White female, Denver

“I think the word ‘flexible’ got to me for some reason. When I think of unions I just don’t think ‘flexible.’”

—White male, Silicon Valley

“I like the ‘work together with employers.’”

—White male, Silicon Valley

Stability

As evidenced by the strong, positive response to the Harley-Davidson example, focus group members see labor-management cooperation and “win-win” scenarios as crucial to job security. When detached from examples of success, though, focus group members gave little credence to the idea that unions could simultaneously improve the quality of workers’ lives and prevent jobs from being exported:

“How are they going to do all this? How are you going to keep jobs here and have flex time and health care? How are they going to manage to do all that? I don’t see.”

—White female, Silicon Valley

“If unions were doing this, then why are jobs being offshored now?”

—White female, Silicon Valley

Teamwork

Participants immediately understood the concept of employees working as a team with management. But some responded sarcastically to the term, if not the idea behind it:

“The team thing really stuck with me. I mean, it opened it up. It says, ‘Yeah, there’s tough global things going on, but if you stick together’”

—Hispanic female, Denver

“That whole team thing — I liked the general gist of it. I mean, for me, working in the global economy doesn’t. I don’t work in the global economy.”

—White woman, Denver

“Doesn’t it make you want to, like, grab your pom-poms and then say, ‘Be a part of the team?’”

—White female, Denver

Equality

Focus group members offering comments spoke more about the reality of discrimination than strategies to challenge it. Some found it patronizing to be told that they needed an organization to stand up for them:

“Some progress has been made, but I still believe that women and minorities — and me being a woman and a minority — I just feel they’re paid less. They’re always paid less.”

—Hispanic female, Denver

“I’ll tell you what bugged me the most. It says when that happens it’s important to have an organization that will stick up for them. I’m a minority woman. I don’t need an organization to stick up for me. I stick up for myself.”

—Hispanic female, Denver

High Morale

Focus group members saw a relationship between improved worker morale and competitiveness. However, not unlike their reaction to the productivity statistics they were presented with earlier, they dismissed the notion of any union contribution to competitiveness:

“I liked [that] high morale translates into high productivity, competitive success. But ... I think the connection that you need to be a union employee to have a voice at work — they’re making a stretch.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

“I don’t buy the connection.”

—White male, Silicon Valley

Success and Competitiveness

The focus groups conceded that the higher wages that unions won at the bargaining table contributed to economic growth in the past, but they say that this is no longer true in the global economy:

“We are outsourcing a lot of what we do. Even our services are being outsourced. You call a customer-service line and you’re talking to somebody in India. So this is no longer, I don’t feel, a completely accurate statement.”

—White female, Silicon Valley

“Oh, I think it’s pretty narrow as far as it’s very domestic. This statement doesn’t take into account the global aspect of things. And it actually reminded me of what Henry Ford did when he came out with the Model T and paid his workers \$5”

—White male, Silicon Valley

Professional Standards – Nurse Quotation

Though unattributed, the quotation of the nurse resonated strongly with many participants:

“Because it’s someone’s voice. Someone believes this, they’ve said it, so, I mean, I believe it to a certain extent, I guess. If I was a nurse, maybe, but it’s someone’s voice, so”

—Hispanic male, Denver

“One reason is, again, it’s a quote, so I’m hoping it’s a true quote by a real person stating there’s been an enormous change. Obviously there had been some huge problems to have an enormous change. I view it as a positive. We have a voice.”

—Hispanic female, Denver

Unions: What They Were, What They Can Be

Based on the responses from the focus groups in northern Virginia and Silicon Valley, a longer message was tested in Denver tying together the strongest themes. In its use of the term “new unions,” this message represents a distinct departure from both more traditional union messages and the subtle anti-union rhetoric often employed by traditional professional associations:

- ▶ **New technologies and globalization** have changed how Americans work. What matters isn’t what labor unions achieved in the past, it’s how new unions can help employees — and employers — succeed now and in the future.
- ▶ That’s why we are seeing the **growth of new unions created by professionals** who believe in being flexible and working together with management to make firms more competitive and profitable.
- ▶ These new unions **provide a strong, respected voice** so that employees can team up with management to solve tough problems, whether it’s health-care costs, overwhelming workloads, or the need for leading-edge training and opportunities for advancement.
- ▶ The new unions also understand that as more Americans work from home or as contractors and part-time employees, it’s important that they have the resources they need to be successful, such as networking opportunities, ideas for better telecommuting and access to portable health insurance and pension benefits.

Focus group participants liked the unambiguous references to change and the future. They also responded positively to references to flexibility and working together. Where previous messages about the value of traditional unions were often dismissed out of hand by white-collar workers, the same people were plainly intrigued by new union language and were willing to give it a hearing. They were also interested in learning more about how these organizations could be created and would operate on a day-to-day basis. Among the responses were the following:

“Because it seems like it’s actually following what’s really happening in the workplace. It’s not some pie in the sky. The workplace is really changing, and this is the way it’s changing, and these are the things that need to be looked into.”

—White female, Denver

“Employees and employers, flexible, working together. Employees can team up with management.”

—White female, Denver

“It’s not just money. It’s not just, you know – money. It has to do with networking, telecommuting.”

—White female, Denver

“I felt that that second paragraph kind of described me, you know, as a contract, part-time-type of employee, and it’s, like, oh, OK, well I never really even thought about the possibility of being part of a union”

—White female, Denver

“They touched on a lot of the points that are affecting a lot of people, you know, working from home. You know, more flexible work environment.”

—Hispanic male, Denver

Summary of Findings: Promoting New Unions

As we have described, our research revealed several strong themes for communicating with white-collar workers about new unions. For example, though they resent its hassles, workers accept that today's economy is unlike that of their parents' era, and they question the efficacy of any idea for solving workplace problems that seems rooted in the past. We learned that workers like the idea of affordable health care and other benefits, but they question whether these outcomes are even possible. We discovered that they respond to new ideas like telecommuting and flex time that could help contour their jobs to meet the demands of family life.

In essence, white-collar workers are deeply concerned about their diminishing economic security, yet they remain optimists who want the tools to advance their careers and reach their goals but do not want nor think they need to be "helped." In a similar vein, they do not want to hear messages that demonize management but instead respond positively to themes that reflect their strong desire for collegiality in the workplace. Rather than presenting messages that imply they are not doing a good job now because they don't have a union, progressives must stress that doing a good job and reaching one's full potential as a professional should not be so difficult and that union representation can make it easier.

Using these and other points gleaned from focus group participants, our research has identified eight distinct communications "challenges" that unions and their allies must address. These concerns and strategic responses are as follows:

- 1 Instability in the economy makes white-collar workers feel less tied to a job or even a career. *Highlight new unions as helping white-collar professionals maneuver in the new economy and ease some of the stress of continual change.*
- 2 White-collar workers have a strong sense of self and are worried about being swallowed up in a vast organization. *Describe an organization that is democratic and responsive to individuals. Provide details about how employees provide input and are listened to.*
- 3 Workers are worried about cuts to their health coverage but also skeptical that businesses can afford more. *Highlight partnerships between employers and organization members to lower health-care costs.*
- 4 Workers are feeling stressed in their work and family life. *Highlight how the organization is using innovative approaches to scheduling and creating other options to create more balance between work and family. Present the union as a force for opportunity and change that is better for employers and employees.*
- 5 Workers have concerns that unions are rigid and bureaucratic, stifling enterprise and individual initiative. *Offer compelling examples of individual success and professional growth achieved because the organization provided the tools and created the opportunity.*

"White-collar workers are deeply concerned about their diminishing economic security, yet remain optimists who want the tools to advance their careers and reach their goals."

- 6 Workers do not like confrontation and conflict. They want to work with management. *Provide examples demonstrating how new unions create new opportunities for working with management to solve problems.* (Note: Detailed examples of union “success stories,” including some described in this report, can be found in the September 2005 American Rights at Work publication “*The Labor Day List: Partnerships that Work.*”)
- 7 Workers believe that unions are narrowly focused on their own members and that they don’t want to help workers who aren’t members. *Describe the ongoing and intensive union campaigns in the legislative arena to win health care, retirement security and other reforms that benefit all workers.*
- 8 Workers believe that unions are for blue-collar workers, not technical and professional employees. *Offer examples of professions where unions are organized. Describe instances of unions and professional organizations working together on issues important to professionals.*

Conclusion: If Not Us, Who?

For progressives, the objective in discussing new unions is not to suggest that old unions are a spent force and have somehow outlived their usefulness. To the contrary: The new-union message is intended to spur Americans who might otherwise dismiss unions to re-evaluate them and, through this prism, consider the role that collective action could play in helping them achieve their career goals. This understanding is fundamental to mobilizing the support of white-collar workers for the EFCA and other measures to strengthen worker rights.

As noted at the outset, this research was not designed to aid union organizers, though much of it can. Instead, it was intended to help craft messages that can increase support for unions in the public square where the views of highly skilled white-collar Americans are dominant. Clearly, many of the attitudes presented by focus group members can be changed over the course of an effective union organizing drive. But for every white-collar worker who is exposed to one, many more are not. Progressives can ill-afford to allow those attitudes to go unchallenged.

By presenting an optimistic new picture of unions to white-collar women and men, progressives can help organized labor build the political strength required to win the fair and effective labor laws America desperately needs.

We have already seen how conservatives have appropriated elements of the new union message to promote policies that, if enacted, would undermine the cause of America’s workers. For example, in 1996 the platform of the Republican Party characterized a conservative attempt to weaken the federal ban on company unions as:

“a fight...to empower employers and employees to act as a team, rather than as adversaries, to advance their common interests.”

The “fight” the platform described was their effort to pass the Teamwork for Employees and Managers, or TEAM Act. This proposal would have weakened the legal prohibition against employer dominated unions. Organized labor waged an intense but unsuccessful campaign against the

measure in Congress. Had it not been for President Clinton's veto, the TEAM Act would have become law.³¹ Now that President Clinton is no longer in the White House, progressives do not have the luxury of allowing the right to commandeer the language of workers' dreams to transform America into a worker's nightmare.

Progressives share an obligation to offer white-collar workers a more compelling, optimistic vision of the American workplace than the fiction that the right will continue to offer. That means speaking out clearly and forcefully about risks and opportunities posed by the new economy to workers who do not think in terms of struggle but advancement.

And it means helping them understand that, old or new, unions make us strong.

³¹ Marc Cooper, "Is the Terminator in Free-Fall?" *The Nation*, Oct. 31, 2005.

The Language of New Unions

To effectively respond to the concerns our focus groups described, progressives must use language that, in and of itself, challenges the assumptions white-collar workers have of unions. Combative words and phrases only reinforce preexisting beliefs that unions foster workplace conflict. This is especially true of phrases that seem to dehumanize a member of management that workers know.

Similarly, descriptions that emphasize unions as separate entities rather than the workers themselves sustain the attitude — often exploited by anti-union employers — that unions are “outsiders” preventing employees and employers from working together. This is also fostered by the unnecessary use of terms that sound legalistic or bureaucratic.

A sample of words, phrases and alternatives to consider appears below:

Instead of Saying:

“Workers”

The workers “deserve” or “have a right to”

They “joined” the union

“Grievances”

“Higher” wages

“Job security”

“Fair”

“Labor-Management Cooperation”

“Exploited”

“Struggle”

“Contract”

“Contract talks”

“International union,” “local union,”
union “district,” union “joint council”

“Standing up,” “fighting back,”
“pushing back”

Employer “doesn’t care”

Try Saying:

“Staff,” “Employees”

The employees have “earned”

They “formed,” “started” or “created” a union

“Problems”

“Improved salaries”

“Careers with a future”

“Sensible,” “Responsible”

“Working together,” “teamwork”

“Misused,” “Abused,” Taken advantage of’

“Advance”

“Agreement”

“Meeting to reach an agreement”

“Union”

Having a “voice”

“Employer is behaving as if he/she doesn’t care”

APPENDIX

Union Power at the Ballot Box **Labor's Untold Story**

Paradoxically, while white-collar workers may voice angst over the impact a large union can have on their workplace, they see organized labor's institutional strength as an asset in the legislative arena — provided the issue at hand affects them. As demonstrated by focus group responses to examples of the Family and Medical Leave Act and, in the case of the California Nurses Association (CNA), patient-care protections, more muscular descriptions of unions are effective so long as the union is perceived to be protecting them against powerful opponents. This perception is what motivated the New York State Psychological Association, an organization with little interest in collective bargaining, to affiliate with the American Federation of Teachers in order to gain lobbying clout.

One of the most stirring examples of union strength seen as an asset by nonunion workers was the 2005 campaign to defeat a series of four ballot initiatives sponsored by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. The measures, which included initiatives to undercut job security for school teachers and reduce the ability of public-employee unions to raise political contributions from their members, were hailed by the onetime bodybuilder as fundamental to “reforming” California government and rolling back the power of “special interests.”

Over the course of the 2005 campaign, Schwarzenegger repeatedly lashed out at organized labor with references to “union bosses that run the state,” “big government unions” that “use members’ funds as a personal kitty,” and “union bosses [who] have too much power over members’ paychecks and too much power over our state.”³²

Rather than allow Schwarzenegger to define it as a collection of “special interests,” a consortium of unions launched an aggressive campaign against the governor’s proposals. Instead of allowing themselves to be defined as special interests, they presented themselves as nurses, teachers and other professionals standing up for California families. Fundamental to this effort were television ads produced by the Alliance for a Better California, the union-backed coalition battling Schwarzenegger. Typical of its ads was one featuring a school teacher:

³² Marc Cooper, “Is the Terminator in Free-Fall?” *The Nation*, Oct. 31, 2005.

Teacher: “Our schools lost \$2 billion this year when Gov. Schwarzenegger broke his promise to repay the money he took from education.

Now he wants to increase his power over schools with a plan that cuts another \$4 billion. So who does he blame? Me.

Announcer: Papers report the governor has a secret plan to create a ‘phenomenon of anger’ against teachers and other public workers ... blaming them for what’s wrong with California.

Teacher: Instead of working with the legislature to fix our schools, the governor’s looking for people to blame. People like me.”

By recognizing that the public supports powerful unions — when they are seen as advocating the public interest — labor swiftly outflanked Schwarzenegger and his conservative supporters. While the governor continued to rail against unions, his approval rating plummeted. Polling by the Survey and Policy Research Institute at San Jose State University demonstrated that over the course of three months, Schwarzenegger’s approval slipped from 49 percent to 41 percent, while his disapproval rose sharply from 38 percent to 50 percent. And while Schwarzenegger’s support was dropping, public support for unions surged. By a margin of 57 percent to 32 percent, Californians voiced overwhelming approval of unions. Fifty-six percent of voters even said they’d prefer for unions to have “as much or more influence as they have today.”

We said pretty clearly since the election that California voters sent a very strong signal that they’re not interested in bogus reforms,” said CNA spokesman Chuck Idelson. “What is needed now are genuine reforms that address the real problems that face Californians, including the corruption of our political system by wealthy corporations, the health-care crisis and the inequity of our budget, in which so much of the burden falls on low- and middle-income taxpayers.”³³

³³ Harrison Sheppard, “Unions to use ballot clout,” San Bernardino County Sun, Nov. 20, 2005.

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A former VISTA volunteer and community organizer, Jim Grossfeld's experience with the labor movement began in 1983 working on organizing drives for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in Ohio and California. In 1989 he joined the staff of the United Mine Workers of America where he served as the union's communications director and as its national spokesman. Grossfeld has been a consultant to other labor organizations including the American Federation of Teachers; Communications Workers of America; Retail, Wholesale, Department Store Union / United Food and Commercial Workers; and the AFL-CIO Department for Professional Employees.

During the Clinton administration, Grossfeld served as a senior aide to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy and, later, U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, working directly with each as chief speechwriter. He later served as communications director for U.S. House Democratic Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.) and as director of speechwriting and editorial services at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C.

Grossfeld is a frequent contributor to *The American Prospect* magazine and a member of the Executive Council of the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild / CWA. A native of Detroit, Grossfeld attended Michigan State University. He and his family live in Bethesda, Md.

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