

A New Insurgency Can Only Arise Outside the Progressive and Labor Establishment

By Stephen Lerner

We live in a dangerous time when large corporations and the super-rich are restructuring the nation's economy. There is a crisis for most Americans, but not for the elites who dominate the political economy of the country. Unfortunately, organized labor can be as much of an obstacle as it is a solution to mounting a movement for social justice that might reverse this trend and offer hope for the future.

Unions have the money, members, and capacity to organize, build, and fuel a movement designed to challenge the power of the corporate elite. But despite the fact that thousands of dedicated members, leaders, and staff have worked their hearts out to rebuild the labor movement, unions are just big enough—and just connected enough to the political and economic power structure—to be constrained from leading the kinds of activities that are needed.

Campaigns challenging corporate power can't be held in check by institutions with too much to lose. Unions with hundreds of millions in assets and collective bargaining agreements covering millions of workers won't risk their treasuries and contracts by engaging in large-scale sit-ins, occupations, and other forms of non-violent civil disobedience that must inevitably overcome court injunctions and political pressures.

This isn't an abstract or theoretical problem; we are already living it every day:

In city after city, a project labor agreement—or a collective bargaining agreement covering a small percentage of a corporation's total workforce—can make a union want to veto any demonstrations and actions that might upset its relationship with a particular employer.

A recent demonstration in the Northeast—against corporations that damage the economy by not paying taxes—ended up taking place in an isolated area, where nobody could see it, because a number of unions feared that a more visible site would offend an employer.

In Ohio, a set of unions actively worked against a recent multi-state mobilization at a JP Morgan Chase shareholder meeting. The unions said the planned demonstrations seemed “too anti-corporate,” with the potential to turn off independents and buoy conservative fundraising efforts. They feared all of this would undercut the passage of a ballot initiative to regain bargaining rights for public employees.

And what was so anti-corporate? In the case of the Ohio demonstrations it was the demand that JP Morgan and other big banks stop foreclosures, pay their fair share in taxes, and renegotiate toxic loans that are bankrupting cities and states. These issues are critical to building a broader movement that engages tens of millions of people from across the political spectrum. Instead of seeing this as an opportunity to connect efforts to destroy public employee unions with the

broader economic problems caused by the Big Banks (and the resulting loss of jobs and revenue in Ohio), the unions unnecessarily chose a narrow path that weakens them in the short and long term.

If our goal is to offend no one, we're in danger of doing next to nothing. It is understandable that unions don't want to risk their own relationships with certain employers or politicians. But that shouldn't restrain a broader effort to hold those corporations and politicians accountable. Unions continue to act as though they represent 30 percent of the private sector workforce and that bargaining for those workers drives wages for the whole economy. Decisions are made based on how to protect the 7 percent of private sector workers who are unionized (instead of the 93 percent of private sector workers who aren't in unions). The last thirty years prove that this strategy doesn't make sense for the remaining unionized workers or the overwhelming majority of workers who aren't in unions.

As the stakes are raised and the intensity of campaigns increases, these problems will be magnified. The solution isn't to try to defy institutional gravity by convincing people to do something they aren't willing to do. Instead, we need a different model. We need to develop a movement-based organizational model that taps into and builds on union resources—both financial and organizational—but denies unions' "veto power" over campaign activities. Unions should support, help set up, launch, finance, and ultimately engage directly in campaigns based on their comfort level—but they shouldn't have the ability to control or shut down activity because of legal risk or pressure from an employer or politician.

If our strategy is to turn the tables so workers and regular people feel more secure, hopeful, and powerful—and so the elite feels less sure of its control over the country's politics and the economy—we can't tamp down momentum when someone wins a victory or gets pressured to back off. As a practical matter, if unions cede control and are not able to exercise veto rights, they are able to resist political and employer pressure. Taking it a step further, if unions have contributed money in advance to community organizations, they lose the ability to shut down activity later. Far from being a threat to winning smaller fights and victories, open-ended escalating activity that can't be shut down is exactly what will force powerful corporate interests to make real concessions. This doesn't mean individual unions or organizations shouldn't make settlements that arise in the context of bigger battles; they just can't shut down the broader fight.

With the SEIU's 2006 janitors' strike in Houston, we built incredible momentum—a Houston-based mini-movement—by tapping into issues that went way beyond the specificities of the strike. We won the strike because it was seen as part of a bigger fight that scared the hell out of Houston's business elite. If we had taken it a step further—engaging and supporting other organizations with the capacity to expand the fight beyond janitors—the movement would have grown (instead of having dissipated) when the strike settled.

So what sort of movement-based model might address these issues? What does recent activity suggest about how to take advantage of the resources that only labor can offer, without allowing those resources to restrain the civil disobedience, radicalism, and creativity necessary to challenge the corporate elite?

One example is what happened in Madison, where the work of the teaching assistants and students was critical to launching, sustaining, and expanding the campaign. Along with community groups, they led the occupation of the state capitol building, which helped define and propel the campaign. The student and community activity inspired unions to take bold actions that probably never would have been launched if the decisions had been made at a traditional labor coalition table.

A movement-based model should welcome the energy, creativity, and nimbleness of existing and emerging social justice groups, newly activated students, as well as people and organizations steeped in non-violent direct action. While it is not yet clear when (or from where) the organizations and people that can potentially lead and drive such a movement will emerge, we do know that more people, communities, and organizations have been impacted and politically marginalized by the reorganization of the economy than at any time in recent history.

We need to take a leap of faith. During past surges of activity in the civil rights, peace, women's, environmental, and gay rights movements, new leaders, formations, and organizations emerged, accomplishing things that previously seemed impossible. By avoiding the pitfalls that stifle the creation of movements, we can help generate conditions that increase the likelihood of new activists, leaders, and organizations propelling us forward.

Protesters spearheaded more than eighty street blockings, lobby occupations, flash mobs, and other creative activities in the days leading up to the twenty-thousand-person May 12th New York City march to Make Big Banks and Millionaires Pay. This has led to discussions, among a number of unions, about the potential of engaging both their members and the public around a different set of tactics organized to address a broader set of issues.

Instead of a one-day march, corporate players—including all the major banks, the Koch brothers, and key private equity and hedge fund operators—were confronted by angry citizens on a daily basis. The march broke other patterns as well. Groups gathered in ten different locations, according to their focus on a particular constituency or sector damaged by economic reorganization (i.e., there were groups centered around students, housing, transportation, human services, education, people facing foreclosure, the unemployed, and those at risk of losing health care and other critical services). We saw this march as something bigger than a labor rally—it painted a big picture about who is responsible for the economic crises our families face.

Instead of listening to hours of speeches, each group hosted a teach-in before taking to the streets and converging into one giant march that shut down much of the Wall Street area. Organizers combined the mass turnout of union members with the direct-action approaches—i.e., lobby occupations and street blockings—that had been used earlier in the week. This series of marches and actions offers a window into how to think about a movement model of activism that builds on, but isn't limited to, what unions are comfortable with, while creating conditions that expand their comfort zone.

The Make Big Banks and Millionaires Pay approach illustrates that there may be three concrete

ways to resolve the contradiction of “We can’t do it with unions and we can’t do it without them”:

Prolonging protest. We need to commit ourselves to the idea that intensive escalating activities—designed to challenge and disrupt unfair corporate abuses of power—are needed. These activities shouldn’t be limited to one-day marches or rallies—they must go on for weeks, growing in size and intensity like the protests in Madison.

Weeks of creative direct action and activities. Just as unions escalate from one-day symbolic strikes to longer strikes that have a real impact, so must we expand from one-day marches and demonstrations to weeks of creative direct action and activities. There are two potentially overlapping ways to do this. The first is to build these kinds of longer and more involved protests around students and community groups that have the energy and willingness to take time off from their day-to-day lives to engage in more intense activity (which includes the risk of getting arrested). Secondly, unions must revive (and reinvent) the strike. Strikes consistently bring thousands of people together in full-time action mode. During Justice for Janitors strikes (i.e., in Boston in 2002 and in Miami in 2006) workers became full-time activists and organizers. Instead of just picketing, the strikers led escalating actions with a creative intensity that disrupted the status quo and led to political crises for building owners and their political friends. Imagine combining traditional, short-term strikes with larger-scale, ongoing community mobilization efforts that continued (and escalated) activities on broader issues even as the strike settled.

Labor support without control. Unions need to help finance and launch these kinds of activities with the explicit agreement that they won’t control or call them off because of outside pressures. There are national and local organizations with bases that can move thousands of people; but they lack the financial resources to do so on a sustained basis.

Teamwork

Unions need to explore creative ways for their members to organize, mobilize around, and engage in these activities. While it will be unnerving for many unions to allow and encourage other organizations to engage and mobilize their members, this is a key ingredient to scaling up activism. Unions could encourage their members to join partner-community organizations, with the intent of sharing membership lists and enabling community groups to recruit and mobilize union members. Many community-based organizations fighting local battles like foreclosure are not tied to collective bargaining relationships—so they’re in a stronger position to organize and lead the escalating activities that are needed to challenge corporate economic and political power.

The mass mobilizations we’ve witnessed in Wisconsin, Ohio, on Wall Street, and across the country can’t just be a flash in the pan. Ordinary Americans understand that the economy is rigged against them. They are angry, and ready to mobilize and engage in ways we haven’t seen in generations. Unions can help make this happen, and their greatest contribution may be to support—not control—a new wave of direct action and mass activity. Only then can we rebalance power and start winning again.

New Labor Forum, Fall 2011.