**What Labor Movement?**

Mike Miller

**"R**eviving Unions" is addressed to a labor movement that doesn't exist; therein lies its major problem. Lerner describes the weakened state of unions and prescribes strategy and tactics for rebuilding. But who is to do it, and what will they have to give up?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| The industrial union movement of the 1930s and the Southern Civil Rights movement of the mid-'50s to the mid-'60s are major examples of how it happened in the past. Will John Sweeney be our era's John L. Lewis? Could there have been a John L. Lewis without thousands who were already organizing? Would the captains, sergeants, and privates who made organizing happen have been sustained without the moral vision and political culture provided by the organized left? Or if we shift the scene to the 1955-1964 period of the southern Civil Rights movement, where is the moral equivalent of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and its $10-a-week field secretaries who hunkered down in Black Belt counties in the Deep South for the long haul? They kept everyone else in The Movement from accepting the Kennedy-Johnson Administration's endless, meaningless compromises. And where are labor's current equivalents to the ministers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (let alone a Martin Luther King, Jr.!) who were willing to risk their churches being burned, time in jail, and their lives? |  | The process of a mass movement isinteractive. No single tactic,direct actionor other, willcreate sucha movement. |

Have the leaders to whom Lerner's call for direct action is addressed been too long junior partners in the corporate-dominated economy? Have they been too happy with first-name, "private line" phone access to Democratic Party politicians? Are they prepared to forego appointments to local, state, and national commissions, living executive lifestyles and hoping for a time when media might again call them "labor statesmen"? Some are. . . some do. But are they the majority of the new AFL-CIO Executive Council? Do they lead more than a few international unions? And in even the best of these unions, does the leadership want an organized membership capable of deliberating its future? (The distinction between "organizing" and "mobilizing" is blurred in Lerner's piece. This was the distinction between the SNCC and SCLC in the Deep South. In the former, the relationship within organizations between leaders and those they lead is one of continuous conversation and serious accountability. Leaders understand that part of their role is to develop new leaders and that the power of their organization increases as a result. The latter involves the occasional "turning out" of the troops for objectives decided on by full-timers at headquarters, with little rank and file discussion or debate.)

In both the '30s and the '55-'64 period, there were mass movements. They were not sudden, spontaneous occurrences. Rather, they built on years of base-building work done by often unknown organizers and activists. Visionary leaders arose because visionary possibilities were building beneath them, which they helped build. The process is interactive, with the Lewises and Kings sustaining and being sustained by what is below them -- at times pushing them to go further, at times being pulled by them to stay through hard moments. No single tactic, direct action or other, will create such a movement.

Lerner is to be taken seriously because he did it, at least in part. Justice for Janitors mobilized workers others said couldn't be reached. Lerner was its architect. He found the space within one international to do something very creative. The new AFL-CIO might provide space for others to act similarly. But the legacy of Justice for Janitors is not just the 35,000 workers who joined the union. It is also Los Angeles Local 399 where the newly organized janitors defeated the incumbent leadership responsible for their unionization. The Local wanted them as members, fought for a decent contract, and defended them on the job. It didn't welcome their full participation in the life of the union. The Local is now in trusteeship. What lesson will other leaders draw? The problem of participation is that it whets the appetite for more. Leaders who engage with and trust newly energized members take a risk. They may lose their positions even as they rebuild a labor movement. It remains to be seen whether the current crop will take these risks.

Originally published in the Summer 1996 issue of Boston Review