



## Taking Unions Out of the Workplace

By Nelson Lichtenstein, Comment Is Free

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Despite all the high-profile sniping between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in advance of the Iowa primary, there seems a good chance - knock on wood - that the Democrats are going to win big in November 2008. But there is a historically consequential issue that remains entirely up for grabs. Will the Democratic party's presumptive electoral success merely represent a "throw the bums out" repudiation of Bush administration excesses? Or are we on the verge of a historic remobilization of American liberalism that will usher in a generation of progressive statecraft?

The answer may come from the ranks of American labour - not just the 12% of all working Americans who are now enrolled in unions, but the vastly larger segment of the working population who support universal healthcare, oppose the war in Iraq and want a voice in their workplace. While de-industrialization and management hostility have slashed union membership during the last three decades, pro-union sentiment has actually increased in the American heartland. More than half of all wage earners have told pollsters that they would like to join a union.

But since organization at the workplace has been blocked - none of Wal-Mart's 1.5 million US "associates" are covered by a union contract - the AFL-CIO has done the next best thing. Beginning in 2003 the labour group has begun quietly organizing hundreds of thousands of unaffiliated people into Working America, which the federation calls the "community affiliate" of the AFL-CIO. So when AFL-CIO organizers knock on a door in the working-class suburbs that ring old industrial cities like Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Minneapolis, an astonishing two out of three respondents sign up. They get a membership card, a connection to other Working America people in their neighborhood and a stream of union letters, leaflets, phone calls and emails appraising them of organized labor's political and economic outlook.

Nearly two million have signed up. In Ohio, a crucial swing state in recent presidential elections, Working America enrolls as many citizens as are now organized into the state's traditional trade unions. This is old-fashioned knock-on-the-door organizing, thus far focused on white, working-class households in the upper south and in the old rustbelt states.

These are not the kind of people likely to sign up for MoveOn.org or who read Daily Kos and the Nation magazine. Nearly two-thirds don't have a college degree,

one-third own a gun and two-fifths attend church at least weekly. Four out of five are white. None are currently in a union, although two out of five had parents who were.

In many ways, the AFL-CIO is reinventing a political wheel that once gave to union labor the kind of voice that made it the bedrock constituency for progressive politics during its mid-20th century heyday. In those days organized labor's political and economic influence did not rest merely upon its bargaining clout at the workplace. The unions had a host of allies, affiliates and auxiliaries that multiplied and extended labor's power.

The big industrial unions invented the mass membership Political Action Committee in the 1940s and put dozens of high-profile artists, film stars and writers in its leadership. In the 1950s more than a million women joined union-sponsored "ladies' auxiliaries" where they spent a lot more time defending the picket lines and organizing their precincts than playing Mahjong. And in the 1960s Caesar Chavez's United Farm Workers demonstrated that the union's boycott organization, often staffed by dedicated young volunteers, could do a lot more than keep grapes off supermarket shelves. When election time rolled around, the UFW could often put more organizers in the field, with more political impact, than much larger labor organizations, which had lost the knack for mobilizing even their own membership.

The AFL-CIO targets "working-class moderates," but after they become Working America members they soon transform themselves into Democratic stalwarts. Working America voter participation is 19 points higher than that of those not affiliated with the AFL-CIO. And their votes are dramatically more Democratic than they otherwise might have been. Overall, white men voted for Republican house candidates by nine percentage points more than they did for Democrats in the 2006 election. But white males who signed up with Working America voted Democratic by 44 percentage points, an astounding shift of 53 points. Likewise, married women in Working America voted Democratic in the 2006 elections by 44 percentage points more than those not enrolled in the AFL-CIO program.

The results of all this became apparent, first in the 2006 elections, where labor helped pull out the vote that ousted GOP congressmen in key heartland districts, and more recently in Kentucky, where more than 100,000 Working America enrollees were part of the well-mobilized labor vote that made Democrat Steve Beshear governor in a state that had long trended Republican.

Working America would seem to have an almost unlimited future. Director Karen Nussbaum thinks it could easily double its membership if the AFL-CIO began to target union-friendly states like California and New York. But the real political frontier for the organization lies in red-state America, where race and religion have for so long molded white working-class consciousness. If Working America can make inroads there, we'll have the makings of a political earthquake.

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