

Renewing America's labor movement

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Across the country, people are clamoring to be heard. They want a voice.

These are people who work hard but never see their wages keep up. After a lifetime of work, they don't have a pension or savings for a secure retirement. They rack up debt so they and their children can get a higher education, which is more necessary now than ever before. People are searching for a way to transform an economic system that benefits the few over the many. They are searching for fairness, opportunity, justice and real change.

As circumstances change, our nation changes, our world changes—we too must change.

I believe that search can and should lead to the labor movement. At this week's Albert Shanker Institute conference, The American Labor Movement at a Crossroads: New Thinking, New Organizing, New Strategies, Labor Secretary Tom Perez reminded us: "The growth of the middle class was linked to a labor movement that was strong."

But we must re-envision and renew our labor movement to face the challenges of the 21st century, to be the voice that today's working people want and the robust engine our economy needs. Because, as we face a new global economy—one powered by technology and knowledge, where information travels at lightning speed—we can no longer operate as if we're in a factory. As circumstances change, our nation changes, our world changes—we too must change.

At the conference, we asked these hard questions: Are we flexible and forward-thinking enough to meet the demands of a 21st-century economy? Can our infrastructure adapt to meet the needs of new generations?

The ideas and strategies were promising. David Rolf, president of SEIU 775, challenged us to innovate: "We have to be willing to stand up and say no court is

going to stop workers from building power." Others emphasized the need to work with community. "It's no longer about garnering community alliances for workplace fights. We have to figure out how workplace fights are part of the broader community struggles," said Sarita Gupta, executive director of Jobs with Justice. At the same time, Tefere Gebre, AFL-CIO executive vice president, reminded us that "in order to build a movement, we have to keep workers at the center of our thinking; we need to empower workers to decide for themselves."

As our movement evolves, our values endure: Fairness. Opportunity. Democracy. Justice. These values guide all we do, pressing us to look beyond the four walls of the workplace to the broader community. When we believe in economic and educational justice and opportunity, and in democracy, voting rights and social justice, it inspires us to fight back and to work to ensure all communities have access to high-quality public services, starting with a high-quality public education with fair funding.

Look at New York state. There, we are fighting against a governor who has focused more on settling scores than addressing the funding gap between rich and poor school districts that has only grown under his watch. This past week, Moral Mondays' Rev. William Barber and I joined community activists for a rally for funding equity in New York's schools. If we believe that all children, regardless of their ZIP code, need and deserve a high-quality public education, then we must ensure all children have access to that opportunity—not just in rhetoric, but in reality.

Across the country, we are standing with community and building power through community. Community is labor's new density. People want a voice: Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter, the incredible show of solidarity last weekend in France. Standing on the steps of the Albany Statehouse reminded me of how protesters came together at the Wisconsin Statehouse.

But streaks of activism and moments of engagement are not the same as movements. Our challenge is to build new movements by building a new vision for collective action—and sustaining it.

People are hungry for these new movements, especially young people. For millennials, vast income inequality and crippling college debt are their norm. They want to change that. It's exciting to see that they are politically progressive and open to collective action, and that they insist that their voices be heard in workplace decisions. They know, as we do in labor, that when you have voice and agency, when you are treated like professionals, not only will you and your families do better, but so will the people you serve. It's a virtuous circle.

The renewal of the American labor movement is no small undertaking. Yet we know, from our history and from the power we see every day in working people coming together and speaking out, that we can do it. It will take some of the old and some of the new—and a whole lot of pushing forward with the grit, determination and dedication that makes the labor movement our country's best hope for a better future.



Weingarten attends a rally at the Albany Statehouse with the Rev. William Barber.

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