

OUR COLLECTIVE CONSCIENCE

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Labor cannot stand still. It must not retreat. It must go on, or go under.
—Harry Bridges

I see this young woman again and again. Her name is Andrea. She is listening as her father shares stories from his workday. His work is done in a grocery store meat room and freezer, the team of people working together to complete necessary tasks: break down a side of beef, cut, grind, wrap, package, and fill the case. The additional work her father has taken on as union steward is woven through the stories. She hears the satisfaction and, at times, the hardship, this work brings him. Sometimes she is 16 years old, at her first real job, bagging groceries at Chicago Market; listening to and supporting Amelia, her cashier, as she pleasantly greets her customers, bringing a smile to those who have had a hard day; must hurry home to cook dinner, care for a sick child, or prepare for a holiday. Other times, I see Andrea as a cashier, trained by Amelia to display her graceful energy, even when her feet hurt. This Andrea is worried about her grades, paying her bills, or her dad driving to pick her up from work after his own long workday. Later she is in college, studying hard while she works part-time to help with expenses. She understands the importance of education; “college” was her parent’s mantra throughout her school years. She will be the first family

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member to graduate from college. Another time, I see her talking to workers about the value of a union job, shopping to feed her own family, and eventually managing union benefit plans. Her children grow into young adults, and she contemplates their futures. Mostly, I see her in the mirror.

When I consider the topic of work and workers in New York State, I naturally think of it within the context of organized labor, since I have worked as a member of, and on behalf of, the labor movement for more than 37 years. I think of the role organized labor has played in the American economy and how unions use our influence to advance all workers.

The literal blood, sweat, and tears of workers laid the foundation for the formation and early growth of labor unions. As organized labor grew in numbers, so did labor's influence. When this influence became strong enough to have an impact on elections, politicians took notice. Democrats began to partner with the labor movement to align their agendas with the interests of workers, hoping to garner labor's support during elections. The culture promoted a coming together of all—corporations and workers alike—to help America prosper. Building the American economy as a world power was our focus, and the foundation for doing so was the creation of an environment that encouraged meaningful job creation and a productive, responsible workforce. With a prosperous American economy as a common goal, elected officials, corporations, and labor worked together to establish legislative initiatives that: (1) incited corporations to create meaningful jobs; (2) developed social programs to assist and uplift workers; and (3) promoted a harmonious relationship between companies and workers. Prosper and grow we did.

Success brought new challenges. As our economy grew, America became a world leader. As companies and workers prospered, a shift in perspective began. With prosperity came a sense of entitlement and complacency. Organized labor worked hard on behalf of its existing members to maintain a standard of living that had been secured over many years. Although some organizing of non-union workers still occurs, the urgency to grow in numbers is not as fierce

as it was in earlier days. Many labor leaders believed that taking care of their own members would be a beacon that would draw in non-union workers. With limited resources and the ever-increasing attacks on workers' rights, organized labor fell into a pattern of fighting for worker protections through legislation, which was a benefit for all workers, but did little to promote real growth of unions. Many workers believed that they did not need to unionize, because the government afforded them rights and protections. An "I've got mine" mentality took precedence over helping everyone succeed. Corporations capitalized on this change in environment and promoted a "me" culture, encouraging workers to put their self-interests above those of their coworkers. As this new culture of "selfism" took hold, collectivism became something to be avoided. Accusations of socialism intimidated many. A societal shift occurred, where individualism became the principle. We stopped believing that "it takes a village" and, instead, decided that each should take care of his/her own. Although the labor movement continued to have political and economic influence, this influence was diminished by a continued reduction in the number of unionized workers. This shift took place in corporate America as well, with corporate responsibility to its workers and society taking a back seat to increased profitability and shareholder returns. The result of this cultural shift is a diminishing middle class, with America's wealth now concentrated in just one percent of the population, and more families in poverty than ever before.

I have seniority in the labor movement, and with that comes a heightened sense of insight and responsibility for my, and our, legacy. I ask myself and others, what exactly is the labor movement's role in America and New York State's economy today? A shift in culture is needed to restore the American economy and the standard of living of working families. The labor movement can, and must, facilitate a shift in consciousness by developing and implementing programs focused on collectivism. We must work with elected officials and companies to pass new legislation and strengthen enforcement of existing laws that support and uplift workers and their families. We must develop programs that promote job creation. And

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we must break down barriers within the labor movement to facilitate a platform in which diverse unions can support and build a culture of collectivism among union members that spills over to the unorganized workforce. Let the change begin.

My parents were first- and second-generation Italian-Americans, my father the second eldest of eight children and my mother the youngest of seven. Growing up through World War II and the post-war recovery, they experienced the economic hardships of those times, as well as the boom of the 1950s. My grandfather, a crane operator, worked hard to support his family, but, as was common, additional income was needed to keep the household running. My grandmother was kept busy raising children. The money brought in by a job overshadowed the value of an education, and so my father left school to join the world of work. From this point forward, his education was obtained through on-the-job training and lessons learned through the experience of work and family. My mother's parents were hardworking immigrants—my grandfather a railroad worker, my grandmother a factory worker. Much younger than her siblings, my mother spent a great deal of time on her own while my grandparents worked. My mother's artistic talent earned her a college scholarship. Today, many parents would be proud of this accomplishment. At that time, my grandfather saw little value in a college degree, let alone an art degree. The value was in a job that provided immediate income, especially for a woman who would likely get married and raise a family. My parents were married in 1960, when they were 21. I am the eldest of their four children.

I was born into organized labor. My father, Joe, was an active union member and steward. Stories about his work and his union colored our lives with a deep understanding that the true value of work and workers is amplified and secured by union membership. One of my father's stories, repeated often, involved his younger self, when he was 17 years old and working in a meat packinghouse. It was back-breaking, messy, potentially hazardous work. A coworker introduced himself as the union steward, and took the time to explain why union dues were coming out of his paycheck and what it meant

to work as part of a union. My dad didn't think much more about it, aside from thinking he sure could use that dues money in his pocket. A few months later, this same steward asked to see my dad's paystub. The steward took a look, told my dad that he was due a pay increase as part of the wage progression in his union contract, and promised to take care of it with management. The following week, the raise and back-money owed was in my dad's paycheck. This was a defining moment for my dad: a clear demonstration of the value provided by a union contract, a good union steward, and a union job. When he was laid off from this job, his mission was to secure another job, a union job, in the meat industry.

In 1961, shortly after I was born, my father was laid off from Gold Medal Packing. With the responsibility of a wife and baby, he realized that he needed a sustainable job, a career. Of course, it needed to be union. Every day he walked to the nearby Chicago Markets, a unionized grocery store, and asked whether there were any openings for meat cutters. His persistence paid off five weeks later. The meat department manager was waiting for my father's daily visit and was happy to tell him that the Market had an apprentice meat cutter position open. My father's daily visits were testimony to his reliability as an employee. He advanced from apprentice to journeyman: a respectable career, a union trade. Within a few years, he decided to run for the position of union steward, and was elected by his coworkers. He rewarded their trust in him by conscientiously representing them in grievance meetings and contract negotiations. Recognized as a solid steward and worker activist, he was later nominated and elected to serve on his union's executive board, and then as union staff and an officer. He took pride in his work and in his union. He appreciated that his union job enabled him to support our family, allowed my mom to stay at home to care for us, and provided family healthcare benefits. He was steadfast in his beliefs, and always stood firmly on the side of workers and his union.

My dad passed away in 2003, but his beliefs are reflected in my own each and every day. Thanks to my dad's union pension, union retiree healthcare, and Social Security benefits, my mom is able to

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maintain the home they shared and is financially self-sufficient.

I became a union member in 1977, working at the same grocery store where my father worked. Amelia took responsibility for me. As a seasoned cashier, she guided me to be focused on the customer, and as a union member, she mentored me. In effect, she saw me as a customer, one whom she served. She took a 16-year-old girl under her wing and taught her—me—how to work. In return, I helped Amelia. She succeeded when I bagged fast and conscientiously, so she could pay attention to the next customer. The company won when we treated customers well and they made Chicago Markets their preferred grocer. Today, a 16-year-old girl might be left adrift, and her company would be complaining that high schools are not preparing students for the workforce and that young boys and girls do not have the soft skills needed to succeed. I did not have those skills either. Amelia mentored me, trained me, helped me gain confidence, and showed me what a good worker is. She exhibited shared responsibility, helping me develop into a stronger partner within the union, a partner with the company, and with our community. We all won because Amelia did not have a self-oriented perspective. The union fought for salary and benefits. We had sound leadership from our union steward, my dad. Our union contract united us as a team, a multigenerational team. Despite our age difference, we became friends. I eventually lost touch with Amelia, but more than 30 years later, we bumped into each other and shared the warmth that was built around mutual respect. She talked about life since retiring in 1993 and I explained that I now worked for the union's benefit funds. At that moment, I realized that our lives still intersect. The pension check she receives each month from the union's pension fund has my signature on it.

Another woman stands out: Maude, who worked at General Hospital of Saranac Lake. We met after I finished college and was working as an organizer for my union. In 1985, I came advocating for these hospital workers to join our union. Our challenge was to bring together a diverse group of workers—dietary, housekeeping, clerical, LPNs, lab technicians, maintenance, nursing assistants—and

organize them for union representation. Maude came into the process midway. The energy in the room shifted when she walked in. Although we had not met until that day, many workers had mentioned her name. I paid attention. She brought some skepticism, and I could see that everyone listened as she spoke. She wasn't the highest-ranking employee but was definitely a community leader and asked critical questions. She understood what we wanted to accomplish, and agreed it might be worth the risk to strive for a union. She also knew that such battles in small towns had local consequences. Her questions focused on the future. She wanted to know what would happen if the workers voted for the union and then developed buyer's remorse. "How do we get you out of here?" she asked. This was a crucial moment for a young organizer. Understanding that this was a pivotal moment, and that establishing trust was paramount, I explained the decertification process step by step. I told her that if we didn't do right by her, we would deserve to be expelled. She believed me, and trusted that we had the workers' interests at heart. She was willing to take the risk. Maude was a community thought leader. If she hadn't trusted me, they would not have moved forward.

Worker empowerment and collectivism are the essence of union organizing. As an organizer, my job was to build a relationship between the union and potential members. The foundation of this relationship is trust. Developing this relationship only occurs through strengthening the relationships between workers to encourage collectivism. Achieving union representation is a result of the worker empowerment that comes from knowing "we are not one, but many." Maude and I became close friends as we worked together to gain union representation for the hospital workers. We became family in the years to follow when I served as union representative for these workers, guiding them through contract negotiations and the resolution of hundreds of grievances. Our relationship continued after I moved on to other positions within the union and Maude served on the union's executive board. When Maude retired, our regular contact lessened, but our connection did not. In June 2012, I was passing through Maude's hometown and felt compelled to visit her.

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She was sitting on her back porch when I pulled into her driveway. She watched as I walked toward her, and her expression was one of pure delight when I said her name. Despite her declining health, she still possessed that unmistakable intelligent sparkle in her warm eyes. A long embrace opened the visit. We shared updates on our children, her grandchildren, and other people we both knew. We reminisced about old times—becoming acquainted as organizing partners, growing a friendship, and working together as union sisters. Soon after this visit, Maude passed away. At her memorial service, I spent time with her family. They all knew of me from Maude’s union stories, and embraced me as one of their own. Our connection lives on.

My father, Amelia, and Maude represent who I am and want to be. At this stage of my career, I no longer bag groceries, organize stores and hospitals, or run education and training programs. I am the union’s benefits director. I have fiduciary responsibilities. There are a lot of numbers in my job, dollar signs, laws, rules, regulations, and reports. There is one primary responsibility: Amelia, Maude, and tens of thousands of workers and retirees and their families. Unions are a community, dedicated to past, present, and future workers; to their companies, communities, and nation. My name is on those benefits checks. I must protect the rights of those who came before me, of my generation, and of those who will follow.

I also play a significant role in the broader labor movement. As a union leader and mother of two, I understand the child care challenges that working families face. Parents need to know that their children are safe and well cared for, so that they can give their best at work. They also need to be able to pay for this care. I felt compelled to work with a coalition of unions, child care advocates, and parents to lobby for funding of a facilitated child care enrollment program in New York State. Many working families earned just enough to disqualify them from receiving subsidies to offset the cost of child care. Others had difficulty completing and navigating the complicated application process. Still others were not even aware that financial help was available. The resulting program addressed all of these issues by providing subsidies according to increased income eligibil-

ity guidelines, establishing a facilitated enrollment program to assist with application completion and streamline the review and approval process, and developing a community outreach program to educate families about the subsidies.

This child care program is just one of the programs administered by the Workforce Development Institute (WDI), which is a statewide organization that manages programs beneficial to New York State's working families. As a WDI board member, I have witnessed the impact of its programs, which includes hard and soft skills training for incumbent workers, workforce intelligence gathering, research related to "green" jobs, support of apprentice programs, and small-business assistance. WDI has created a space where the world of work can be examined and nurtured, and where possibilities are explored in order to provide workers, companies, elected officials, and the labor movement a future of substantive work and a sustainable future.

In addition to supporting workers through the WDI, I represent labor by supporting the work of the Capital District Area Labor Federation (CDALF). In 2000, the national American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) implemented the New Alliance, which created regional labor federations to increase worker mobilization and labor movement recognition in local areas. The New York State AFL-CIO was the first state Federation to implement the New Alliance program and my union president appointed me to serve on the board of the CDALF. As one of its founding members, I worked with other local labor leaders to break down the barriers between local unions and bring affiliates together as one movement: private sector, public sector, building trades, teachers and professors, retail food workers, healthcare workers, hotel and restaurant workers, painters, postal workers, plumbers, firefighters, truck drivers, police, bricklayers, state workers, federal workers, city and village workers. We built trust amongst affiliates, organized, and began identifying ourselves as The Labor Movement. We were empowered by our commonalities and inspired by our differences. As a movement, we are a whole that is much greater and stronger than our individual parts. The CDALF continues to expand its influence

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for the betterment of working families by forging alliances between affiliates and community partners, by raising the consciousness of elected officials, and broadening the labor movement's vision on and impact. This work has only just begun.

Like Maude, I am also a thought leader. I have benefited from mentors who have provided opportunities and guidance. I listen to others and learn. Labor leaders also listen to me. In that light, I stand up for a consciousness shift, away from individualism and toward a collective strategy. I know that collective action produces good contracts. I see the benefits every day when pension checks are sent to our retirees, healthcare claims are paid on behalf of workers and their families, college scholarships are awarded to union members or their children, or life insurance benefits are provided to beneficiaries. I experience a broken heart each time one of our workers is laid off, injured, or has to have their child hospitalized. I mourn every member who dies. I celebrate when one is promoted, when their child graduates from college, when I hear about a marriage, the birth of a child, and retirement with a decent pension. I think of John Donne: "No man is an island ... Every man is a piece of the continent ... any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind"

With this essay I speak out about individual unions and organized labor's mission and the opportunities and responsibilities to advocate for all workers, not just ourselves. We must protect our own and advocate for members' rights and working conditions. Each union must do outreach and organize. But this is not enough. Collectivism is as American as apple pie. I think of Benjamin Franklin's comment at the signing of the Declaration of Independence: "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." union leadership must re-educate our members to appreciate our own history and promote collective responsibility for all workers, not just members. We understand that without strong and prosperous companies, there are no decent wages and benefits. A country whose economy tolerates Walmart and full-time employees needing food stamps and dependent on emergency room healthcare is rotting from within. I recommend that discussions of collectivism be brought into union

meetings, and be included in our newsletters and, on our websites, so they become part of all political endorsement interviews.

Like many of today's politicians running election campaigns, labor has made a conscious effort to retreat to the middle, where the gray serves as cover. Where what one stands for, believes in, and represents can shift, a bit to the right or to the left, depending on the winds of change. At one time this strategy may have had some value, especially within a political climate that views workers as relevant and labor as an economic partner. But this is not our current climate.

Today, the middle is a dangerous place to be. Workers need solid footing. An understanding of the current economic and political environment as it relates to them, their families, and their communities. This understanding will not come from politicians or corporate America, but it can and should come from the labor movement. To provide solid footing and foster this understanding, labor needs to step out of the middle. Labor must stand squarely on the side of working families and their communities, and do so in a manner that gains workers' trust and promotes collectivism. This is not about the labor movement saving workers—it is about empowering workers to take collective action to save their fellow workers.

Unions must lead by example. Much like the experience of those hospital workers empowered to organize so many years ago, I implore labor leaders to put individual differences aside and work together towards common goals that benefit all workers. Work collectively to break down the barriers that isolate workers and foster recognition of our interdependence. Labor must recognize all workers as belonging before workers will commit to join.