

## **WE ARE OUR BROTHERS' KEEPERS**

Pat Costello

In the course of my lifetime, expenditures—for food, clothing, housing, education, healthcare, transportation, and everything else for my family and me—have been paid for by wages provided and protected by a collectively bargained union contract. I have been truly blessed. This is my story....

Frank Collins was born in 1886 and died in 1980. He was my grandfather. I would like to share a story about my grandfather, and a very important lesson that he taught me as a young man. My grandfather was a retired pipefitter and was 94 years old when he taught me this lesson. This was one of many lessons that he taught me, as he was a very unusual and interesting man. He had a great sense of humor, and taught me that we should find the humor in our day-to-day lives.

A good example of this: He would have a yearly bet with his backyard neighbor about who could grow the biggest tomatoes. My grandfather would painstakingly cut out pictures of red, ripe tomatoes from magazines and tape them to his green tomatoes in just such a way that when his neighbor looked over the fence, it appeared that his tomatoes were already red and ripe, while the neighbor's were still green and growing. He was constantly doing things like that. Never a dull moment!

I rented an apartment from him while I was an apprentice electrician. After work, I would come home and we would sit on the

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porch, have a few beers, and he would ask about what happened on my jobsite. I think it was his way of staying connected to the construction industry. On this one day, I noticed that he was not chewing tobacco—a habit he had picked up when he was eight years old, and which continued every day his whole life. So I said, “Gramps, how come you’re not chewing tobacco?” to which he said, “It just didn’t taste good,” and that he just might quit! This was a shock; he had a chew in his mouth almost his whole life. He then went on to tell me that he wasn’t feeling all that great, and thought he would go to bed—it was 5:30 p.m.

The next day he did not feel much better when I went to work. When I came home, he said that I should take him to the hospital, as he was feeling worse. I put him in my car and started driving to the hospital. He stopped me as I backed out of the driveway and told me to go through downtown Utica—the long way to the hospital. I told him that the other way was shorter, but, as only a 94-year-old man can, he said, “Just be quiet and do what I tell you.” So we went the long way. We had just gotten downtown, when he said, “Slow down, I want to show you the building where I installed a boiler in the 1930s.” We then traveled only about 100 yards from that building, when he said, “I put a sprinkler system in that building.” Building after building, he made me either stop or slow down, as he described what work he had performed there. It was then that it dawned on me that this was his last ride in a car, and he wanted to share his life’s work with me. I cried most of that ride as we stopped at dozens of buildings. My grandfather died a few days later. I think about that ride often and share it with our young apprentices. How blessed is a man who can show his grandson, proudly, what he has accomplished in his life, and how blessed was I to have him explain it to me. The lesson: Whatever you choose to do with life, take pride in your work, do it to the very best of your ability, do it with laughter, and do it in a way that you would be proud to show your grandson or granddaughter on your last ride in a car.

My name is Pat Costello and I am 62 years old and, as my old friend Bernie Flaherty, from Cornell, would say, “The shadows of

my career are lengthening.” I have held various offices and titles for over 35 years in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). My perception of what a good labor leader looks like has changed over the span of my career. I will try to explain how my style and passion for representing working men and women was developed.

What has never changed in my mind is that, from the very first office I held as a member of the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC), I took the role of representing other workers as a distinct honor.

Like most of us, my thoughts on many issues were developed as a child, and were a learned reaction to what my parents believed. I was very blessed to have been raised, along with my sister Diane and my brother Dennis, by a very caring Irish family. It is important to mention that they were Irish because, as in most Irish families, my father thought he ran the show, but I learned at a very early age that it was my mother who was the glue, the engine that made our family function.

My father was a union pipefitter, and held many offices in his local union, including being elected president for 12 years. He was a very unapologetic, pro-labor, pro-worker, outspoken advocate for his members. He was as stubborn as any person I have ever met when it came to workers' rights and ways to benefit working families. So, at my dinner table, as a young boy I heard my dad talk about these issues daily.

I will give you two examples of my father's outlook. One had to do with the meat cutters union in our area. They went out on strike for some nine weeks when I was about eight years old. As with most families in the early '60s, we had a very small freezer on top of our refrigerator. When my dad heard about the butchers and meat cutters going on strike, he filled our freezer with meat, enough for about two meals. Yet, during the strike, we did not eat meat. I remember asking my parents why we couldn't have a cookout like our neighbors.

My dad and mom sat me down and explained that the unionized workers whom we bought our meat from were having problems with

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their owners. And that the workers had tried to bargain for more money and better working conditions. I remember them treating me (remember, only eight years old) like I was an adult when they explained the meat cutters' situation to me. I got it. We ate mac and cheese, grilled cheese, and other meatless meals for the duration of the strike. To this day, the best hamburger I ever had was the first one after they had settled their contract.

The second example is from when my dad's own union went out on strike, as there was a disagreement about their contract. There were a few issues that caused the stalemate, but the big one was an increase in the hourly rate. The two sides of this disagreement were a nickel apart! The strike lasted three months. Our family's reserve funds—our savings account—was depleted. My dad would tell me that, as important as the nickel per hour was, it was just as important that the contractors respected the work done by his members.

He looked at their inability to concede to the nickel raise as a sign of disrespect to the trade. As a side note, I recall our butcher helping us during the strike. He extended credit to my dad, who paid the bill after the strike concluded. Two lessons learned: We are all in this together; the plumber and the butcher, the teacher and the electrician, and the policeman and the nurse, and all of us working people need to help each other succeed; and management needs to respect the efforts and the work performed by its employees.

As I said earlier, my mother held our household together during the good and bad times. She was quiet but displayed every bit as much strength as my dad did. My respect for strong women can be attributed to my mother's quiet strength. My wife, Patricia Ann (McNally) Costello, has displayed all the attributes of my mother in running our household and in raising our four children, Kimberly, Lindsey, Ryan, and Kerry. So I have been in constant contact with strong, capable, and caring women my whole life. It is from that background that I have developed a real appreciation for what women can bring to the workplace—any workplace. I take great pride in the fact that more women are not only entering into the construction field, but are thriving in our industry. I have hated the phrase “non-traditional em-

ployees” my whole adult life, and am very happy that I do not hear that phrase much anymore.

Organized labor should be very proud—I know I am—of the fact that, on our worksites, women are paid equal to men when performing the same work. Our collective bargaining agreements do not have different pay for women and men. Women are not paid 70 cents on the dollar as they are in some non-union worksites. This should be a source of pride for us in the labor movement.

Early in my career, I witnessed what I would now call “the old school of labor leaders.” They were the table-bangers, the shouters, the kinds of people who had no problem telling the other side of the table to go to hell. As a young man, I thought that was the only way to accomplish anything of importance for our members. These leaders (my mentors) were, in my eyes, giants in our industry. They were responsible for great strides, not only in wages, but in worksite safety, and improvements in our fringe benefits, such as pension, annuity, and healthcare. They were what made the labor movement great. I started out just like them. It took me a while to notice that some of the tactics used by my mentors were no longer as effective as they had once been. While I have never, to this day, eliminated the ability, if needed, to tell the other side to “go to hell,” I rarely use it. This is in no way a sign of disrespect to those whom I have followed. Those leaders used what worked. They forged the benefits and working conditions that we enjoy today. We in organized labor will always be indebted to them.

I have changed the way I approach negotiations and represent workers over my career. Today, more than ever, I try to understand what the other side is proposing. I realize that there needs to be a profit margin for them to remain relevant in their industry. I then try to weigh their concerns with what our members need to remain in the middle class and to live their version of the American dream. Most times, the two sides, at the beginning of the process, are miles apart. I have always found that there is some middle-ground we can agree to. Once we establish that, we can chip away at our differences and ultimately reach an agreement that our members can ratify and

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management can agree to.

In my employment area, we have enjoyed a very good labor/management relationship with our contractor partners. “Partners” is the key word in that sentence. If they don’t prosper, my members do not work. I realize that now more than ever. However, they do not need to “over-prosper.” It is our role as labor leaders to make sure that our members receive their fair share of the profits. I think that we in the unionized building trades do a good job of making sure our members are justly compensated for their efforts.

It is, unfortunately, a different story for too many workers in other industries, where CBOs, CFOs, Boards of Directors, and others have seen astronomical increases in their compensation, while those on the shop floor have been left behind. This problem—pay inequity—has the potential to destroy the America that I grew up in. I think we would all agree that America was at its strongest and most vibrant when we had a prosperous and growing middle class. Those workers were the economic engine that made America the envy of the world.

To reverse the erosion of the middle class is what I see as labor’s major challenge. We need to help create an economy that rewards good employers who pay decent wages and benefits. We need to stop the practice of outsourcing our jobs overseas, as we race to the bottom. The list is long—from minimum wage, a fair immigration policy, card check, universal healthcare, fair trade policies, stronger worksite safety rules, pre-K education, veterans care, food issues, and on and on. All of these, and many more, are labor’s fight. If not us, who?

Those who have the benefit of collective bargaining need to help those less fortunate, and fight for their ability to either climb into, or remain, in the middle-class. We have an ever-growing number of working poor. Those who work 40 hours a week and still need to apply for food stamps. We have lost millions of young workers who simply cannot find meaningful work. They have lost hope—just about the worst thing that can happen to a worker. Somehow—together—we need to re-establish their hope that they can succeed. When workers lose their ability to dream of a better life for them-

selves and their families, we all suffer.

So, what can we do? The problems seem overwhelming. How can we make a difference? We start with one person at a time. In my trade, when we get a young man or woman out of the cycle of poverty and welfare, and enter them into our apprentice system, we are not only changing their life, but also the lives of their yet-to-be born children and grandchildren. We are giving them hope where they had none. We help them to dream of something better. When we accomplish this, it is truly the best feeling in the world. We can all help in some way. Each person needs to find their own way to give back, to pay it forward. If we rely on the government or big business to reverse this erosion of the middle-class, I think we will only be fooling ourselves. After all, they have contributed to the problem.

This brings me to labor's political involvement. For 40 years, I have worked on campaigns for candidates who said they had the best interests of working families at heart. I have been disappointed many times, as those for whom we worked so hard seemed to have forgotten those of us in the labor movement. For years, I have heard excuses like, "You don't know how hard it is to get this bill passed," or, "If I stand up for your proposal, I will pay the consequences —I may even lose my committee seat," or, "I voted against your position because I knew it wouldn't pass anyway, so why piss off my colleagues on a loser?" What we need is someone who believes in what we believe in. Who's not worried about what their colleagues might think. Who's more concerned with working people than with corporations. Someone like my father and my early mentors who were unapologetic supporters of anything that helped working men and women. Speaking of my father, he had a great line that I use today to describe a lifelong politician with no real-world (work) experience. He would say, "Look at the dumb bastard; he was born on third and thinks he has hit a triple." He also used this to describe rich kids who took over their dad's company after their father had worked his whole life to build it.

One of the things that I have learned about our elected officials is that we need to educate them with regard to our issues and con-

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cerns. To assume that they know our positions on various issues is a mistake. Trust me when I say that our enemies are in their ears telling them their positions, and if we do not make a genuine effort to explain our side, they will end up being against us. We need to ask things of them. Sometimes we assume that they will do the right thing without our asking them to get on board. Our not asking for something somehow translates to them assuming we do not have a position on the issue. They may not be as smart as we would like them to be, but it is our job to educate them at whatever level we can. I had my congressman once tell me that he was shocked at the low level of intelligence in the House of Representatives. He told me it is no Mensa convention when they get together.

Again, my dad would say “a bunch of dumb bastards who were born on third and thought that they had hit a triple.”

Another issue that I think we in the labor movement need to continually work on is the membership involvement in our movement. The apathy that I see is like a cancer eroding our ability to not only maintain what we have but also to increase our union density, and it will be the demise of our movement if we do not aggressively address it. During every election cycle, this apathy becomes an issue as we try to enlist volunteers to man phone banks, go door to door, and work on campaigns for our friends. My local union has developed a Membership Development Committee that meets quarterly to address any issue that may come up. We have put captains in place that have groups of 10 to 20 members in their cluster. It is a more modern version of the old “phone tree” system. We utilize Twitter, Facebook, instant messaging, and other technologies to get our message out. I think we do a pretty good job of soliciting volunteers but, as is the case for most local unions, I would like to see more involvement. This election cycle, I have witnessed a phone bank that we conducted for a labor-friendly congressional candidate where we had 25 members participate. As great as that was, the candidate stated he had never seen such a turnout from our union. I could not help thinking about what we could accomplish with 50, 100, 150 volunteers.

We must continue to increase the number of our members who



step up when needed. We must educate our young members on the importance of getting involved, and make them understand that elections have consequences. Their ability to make decent wages, with benefits, depends on their involvement. We need to educate our members so they can comfortably write a letter to the editor or speak publicly at legislative meetings and public forums in order to address labor's position on issues. We need, in some cases, to instill a sense of pride in their union membership. Too often, I see our members not defending their collectively bargained wages and benefits publicly when others blame the union movement for budget deficiencies, a failing economy, foreclosures . . . the list goes on and on, and our members do not speak out. They almost seem embarrassed by the wages they earn and the benefits that they enjoy. We need to start playing some offense and stop playing defense. It is not labor's fault that the economy is in the state that it is in. We need to stand up for collective bargaining and all its benefits. We need to expose Wall Street, the banks, poor trade agreements, greedy corporations, and the hundreds of other reasons that have led us to where we are today. It is not now, nor has it ever been, labor's fault. The real problem is not our wages and benefits—which we have earned through years of collective bargaining—but, rather, it is the fact that millions of workers are deprived of a place to bargain their conditions with their employers. All working men and women deserve a voice at the worksite. We should be visibly proud of what we have, and help other workers gain a voice.

As far as advice that I would give a younger member who may be interested in running for union office and representing their coworkers, I would offer the following: Take your role as a union official very seriously (because it is). The decisions you make have real-world ramifications on your members and their families. When a member is wronged, make it right—no matter the effort needed to correct it. No issue is too small to address when your member is in the right. When a member is in the wrong, you must have the courage to tell them they are wrong. Do not file worthless grievances or arbitrations on behalf of members who are in the wrong. Counsel

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your members who have violated their agreements and help them to see their shortcomings. Getting a member back on the right track through your counseling is every bit as important as defending the member who was treated unfairly by management. Never give a member the “bum’s rush” when they want to discuss a problem with you. There are times in our members’ lives when their union representative is the only person they feel they can come to in order to talk things out. It may not have anything to do with the contract; maybe all they need is someone who will listen. Do not turn your back on that member when they need you the most.

A few years ago, after the tragic suicide of one of our members, who was only 31 years old, I changed the closing section of our union meetings to read as follows:

“With the business of the present meeting being concluded, I declare this local union duly and legally closed until our next regular meeting, unless specifically called. Until our next meeting, please take care of each other and, remember, we are our Brothers’ Keepers. Thank you, Brothers and Sisters.”

I believe that all the other nuances that are needed to become an effective practitioner in representing workers can be learned. However, you must enter the field with a firm belief that “We are our Brothers’ Keepers.”