

Live Better Together

A Proposal to Colleagues and Allies of SEIU

June 9, 2014

THE NATURE OF THE MOMENT

Since the beginning of this year, all of us who care about unions and working people have witnessed a few glimmers of hope – in the form of ongoing, widespread publicity and global awareness of the plight of fast food workers; the initial wins in SeaTac and Seattle for a \$15 minimum wage; and in California an agreement to form a strategic partnership between the union and the hospital industry to reform Medi-Cal and build a new labor relations paradigm. These steps forward have occurred amid a generally deteriorating environment for the economic prospects of ordinary Americans. Our predicament is clearly daunting, but we still have good reason to believe a new and better future is possible.

While our prospects for ongoing, sustained success and relevance are still uncertain, it seems safe to assume that a new and better future for workers generally, and for SEIU and our allies specifically, will look, feel and be very different from the status quo. Unions are dying and workers by the tens of millions are experiencing a declining standard of living that has now entered a fifth decade as a sustained feature of American life.

The magnitude of these two trends, de-unionization and a declining real standard of living for a majority of Americans, and what will be required to reverse them, is simply monumental. In fact, the financial effect of these trends, as actually experienced by wage earners, is properly measured in the trillions of dollars. It is a truism that people who are serious about making needed change and addressing these basic realities and what they imply for the health and stability of a democratic society, must be prepared to offer solutions on a scale that is commensurate with the objective nature of the problem.

Yet, most unions, SEIU included, and allied organizations still spend most of our time, energy and resources working for solutions that do not come close to offering a realistic chance of creating platforms and offering solutions that are proportionate to our economic predicament.

What fast food, Seattle minimum wage, and California hospitals have in common is that they show we can act on scale and experience success if we set out to do so. They also teach us that appeals to the common good around the injustice and inequality built into our economy have a wide audience and offer more and better opportunities to think about the potential for workers, unions, worker organizations and social and economic justice than we have had in some time.

They also teach us that timing and circumstances matter, and there is a fine line between success and failure. As Keith Kelleher recently said, in reference to the 77-vote win on the SeaTac ballot measure, organizing for change is “a game of inches.” When a moment arrives, when an opportunity presents itself, we have to both recognize it and be prepared to fully capitalize on it. Or, as George Clooney’s character says in the film *Ocean’s Eleven*, “The house takes you, unless when that perfect hand comes along, you bet big and then you take the house.”

Opportunities are fleeting. What is possible today may not be possible in the not-so-distant future, given the pace of change and the unpredictability of events. This paper is an effort to make the case that we are at a version of our own *Ocean’s Eleven* moment. We can beat the house. But, in order to do so, we need to move fast, bet big and have a great story to tell.

THE NATURE OF CHANGE

In our country, change and innovation are commonly identified with the Silicon Valley and its distinctive language. It is commonplace to hear about “disruption,” “scalability,” “So-Lo-Mo,” “incubators,” and “accelerators,” to name a few. The digital revolution and the modern American labor movement are both post-war phenomena. In the 60 years, since 1955, it has taken American unions to go from representing 35 percent of all workers to the present day figure of less than 11 percent, Silicon Valley has given us Hewlett-Packard, Intel, Cisco, Apple, Google, Facebook as well as Commodore, MySpace, Compaq, Gateway, fax machines, Palm Pilots and Blackberries. The point is obvious. Unions in America are both structured and operated in ways that are virtually indistinguishable from 60 years ago, while simultaneously the tech sector is thriving, growing, changing and evolving at an astonishing, relentless pace while literally changing and affecting the lives of billions of people in ways that were unknown in 1995, let alone 1955.

It is a testament to the importance of the social mission of unions that we have managed to survive a 60-year stretch with minimal innovation, dynamism and change, and with virtually none of the imperatives of scalability, innovation and relevance that drive the most successful and dynamic parts of the largest and richest economy in the history of the world.

The iPhone is on its sixth generation in less than 10 years. Microsoft Windows has been offered in more than 30 versions in twenty years. Meanwhile, the American labor movement has, for all intents and purposes, been stuck on Unions 1.0 since 1955. Simply put, we have to bring innovation to our organizations and answer three basic questions:

1. What is our mission?
2. Why and how is it relevant?

3. How do we scale it?

Otherwise we will deserve to join the ranks of Commodore, MySpace and Blackberry.

THE NATURE OF THE MISSION

The core mission of unions is, or should be, to raise the standard of living for union members specifically and workers and wage earners generally. At the height of our power and influence in the 1950s, unions undeniably succeeded at this mission. The largest and most important sectors of the American manufacturing economy – auto, steel, rubber, construction, mining, transportation and related sectors – were the core of the American labor movement. As unions in these industries raised the standard of living for their members, standards also rose for the rest of the workforce because of the centrality and importance of the unionized sectors. In other words, unions effectively served the “common good” just by improving the economic fortunes of their various memberships. Unfortunately, the relationship between the interests of union members and the common good is not intrinsic, but rather reflects a set of circumstances and conditions that proved to be unique in time.

The world changed and unions didn’t, and what was “normal” in the 1950s through the 1970s ceased to be true in the 1980s and beyond. In the 1970s, real wages began to stagnate and then decline, first for workers generally and ultimately for union members across the economy. The simple truth is that in most instances unions no longer are able to achieve our core mission for ourselves, and we have long lost the ability to affect the standard of living for the public generally. As our decline and failure have unfolded and grown, we have essentially undergone a de facto change in our mission – whether conscious or unconscious is immaterial – from organizations that were about the common standard of living for all workers to organizations that are overwhelmingly dominated by concern over rights-on-the-job for union members alone. Our failure and inability to deliver a better economic life for broad portions of the population forced us inward to become increasingly preoccupied with the “rights” of members who had lost the power to raise their own standard of living. We no longer speak to the “common good,” but essentially to our own narrow interests that the general population increasingly views with hostility. We have become “rights-on-the-job” organizations as opposed to “standard-of-living” organizations and we have lost the moral high ground in the public’s mind. No example better illustrates this reality than the ongoing and enormously successful attack on the pensions of unionized public employees, who are routinely and successfully portrayed as a coddled, special interest that takes from the majority to secure its own needs.

If we are to be successful in the future – and be able to answer the three questions posed above – we would do well to:

1. Recommit and refocus on the mission of raising the standard of living for all workers;
2. Recognize it is relevant (and we will not be unless we can do something about it) because the objective reality is that a majority of American workers are facing a declining, real standard of living; and

Seek out those venues and platforms that provide concrete opportunities to act at a scale that is proportional to the problem.

THE NATURE OF OUR IDENTITY

At our best, American unions have been, and should again be, genuine “worker’s organizations” that act in the “common good” to raise the standard of living for a majority of workers and wage earners in the country. This is accomplished by building power, on scale, so that ordinary people get regular opportunities to engage in activity that offers a fair and reasonable chance to successfully improve their lives.

In the last 60 years, the power of working people has declined dramatically while corporate power and income inequality have reached historic, unprecedented levels. When a majority of the population has no expectation or reasonable ability to improve its lot, cynicism rises about the nature of the system, and so it does not seem coincidental that cynicism, suspicion and hostility toward democratic institutions are also at record levels. After all, the experience of millions is that our economy and society are, in fact, largely a rigged game where the vast majority of regular people have few, if any, effective avenues to live better.

At our best, unions have offered workers a positive, affirmative vision for a better life that is grounded in fairness, shared prosperity, a sense of community and an inclusive future that enhances the common good. As we have declined, we increasingly define ourselves in reactionary, negative terms; we are against takeaways, we are against greedy employers, we are against subcontracting and on and on. But what are we for?

Cynicism doesn’t scale as well as “hope, growth and opportunity.” Success is more likely to come from efforts that are positive, affirmative, hopeful and rooted squarely in the pursuit of the common good. Acting on scale is the only way to speak directly to the majority. Figuring out how to give millions of people fair, reasonable and regular opportunities to directly improve their lives – to improve their standard of living – is a large undertaking.

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

If the purpose of workers organizations is to raise the standard of living for a majority of workers and wage earners, then it is self-evident that the current

structure and resource allocation of unions, including SEIU, is problematic. Simply put, we allocate the overwhelming portion of our resources to efforts that do not operate on a large enough scale. Collective bargaining and traditional day-to-day representation, as now practiced, consume the vast majority of our resources and afford no real prospect whatsoever of reversing the decline in members' standard of living, let alone that of workers broadly. Yet, we are obviously an organization that depends on contracts with employers as the foundation of our power (however diminished) and resources (however increasingly threatened). Reconciling the imperative to raise the standard of living in the broad sense and speak to the common good with the need to defend, and hopefully improve, our base of power and resources, requires a reformulation for how and in what context we bargain. A solution should be at scale, be positive and hopeful, speak to the common good and offer a real opportunity to change what is possible by changing the environment, the context and thereby what is possible for workers to achieve.

Again, the three recent examples of fast food, Seattle minimum wage and California hospitals provide lessons to build on.

LIVE BETTER TOGETHER – CHAPTER ONE

In November 2016, America will elect its next president. Nothing focuses the attention of our country more completely, or for a longer time, than a national election in a presidential year.

It is within our ability to ensure that the 2016 national election is conducted in a context where voters in 24 states, with a combined population of 145 million, also get to decide whether to institute a \$15 minimum wage. We can literally say to millions of working people, "For the first time ever, in this election, you have the power to vote yourself a raise, or a family member, or a neighbor or friend. You don't have to rely on politicians, you can take matters into your own hands."

It is also within our ability to ensure that such an effort not be a one-off, election-year gimmick. Instead, 2016 could represent the first project of a new, national undertaking – *Live Better Together* – to bring to voters in ballot initiative states, every two years, a compelling, fundamental opportunity to raise their standard of living by voting for a proposition that is compatible with the values of fairness, shared prosperity, community, inclusion and the common good. Direct democracy, regularly exercised by voters through non-partisan measures aimed directly at issues of "kitchen table economics," offers the largest possible scale of participation and influence available in our country. It is also possible to include major cities that permit ballot initiatives, even if they are not in one of the 24 ballot measure states.

Regular proposals on the ballot in at least 24 states would allow workers organizations and our allies to do the following:

1. Set the national terms of debate around economic justice;

2. Create a regular focal point for political activity, on scale, that speaks to the needs of working people, not the personalities of candidates, and increases our turnout in national elections in key states like Ohio and Michigan;
3. Provide millions of people who have become cynical and lost faith with a reason to act that has a crystal clear payoff;
4. Dramatically and positively alter the context in which all unions bargain for current members;
5. Build and sustain new worker organizations in all fifty states (that are compatible with traditional unions but open to everyone) to address standard of living issues through a mechanism other than collective bargaining;
6. Create legislative opportunities around the common issue in the 26 states that do not have ballot initiatives;
7. Force our adversaries to play defense on issues of our choosing for stakes that measure hundreds of billions of dollars every two years;
8. Reclaim the moral high ground by appealing to the best traditions of American democracy as a way to speak to the common good;
9. Re-instill the idea that what individuals do matters, and even if the system is unbalanced, majorities of voters are decisive; and
10. Re-establish unions as institutions that raise standards of living and speak directly to the common good.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Obviously, as we have seen in the Fight for 15, achieving widespread adoption of a \$15 minimum wage would represent a watershed moment for workers and wage earners in America that would create excitement, enthusiasm and hope. Still, it is important to note that an inexhaustible list of issues lend themselves to the *Live Better Together* undertaking. Strategic and tactical questions around issue selection, priorities, organizational design and governance depend on all kinds of factors and do not need to be discussed here other than to note that a national direct action, non-partisan, political organization focused on kitchen-table economics would be a huge and complicated effort.

For now, what seems most important is that (to return to our imperatives and questions) such an organization would obviously function and act on a huge scale. Its mission would be clear – to raise the standard of living for workers and wage earners generally – and its relevance would be obvious, given that a majority of workers are experiencing a declining standard of living. Finally, it is well within our ability to undertake such an effort from a funding and logistical perspective, thereby ensuring that we give millions of people a regular opportunity to take action to improve their lives in concrete ways.

Specifically, the cost of qualifying ballot measures in all 24 states is \$25 million, which is a bargain given what could be accomplished. It is also true, that the campaigns themselves, aside from ballot qualification, would require significant funding. Still, it seems safe to conclude that for \$250 million every two years (which is far less than what American unions alone contribute in a presidential year), we could create a force with the resources to win and immense potential to energize voters, build organization, reshape political life and win specific, important victories.

In future years, we could move measures to address consumer debt, student debt, retirement security, the cost of healthcare or anything else that makes sense. The choice would be ours. If we are prepared to create an effort and organizations driven by the common good in economic terms, committed to unity of action and willing to raise the resources necessary both through organizational contributions and small-donor contributions from millions of potential members who would be willing to support such an endeavor, then all things are literally possible.

A WORD ABOUT UNION ORGANIZING

If we consider the future of worker organizations to be one in which collective bargaining will still play a role – workers can build upon the gains of organizations like *Live Better Together* and others – in concert with other scaled efforts to raise the standard of living of Americans. It is worth noting that access to the ballot in 24 states and thousands of localities is compatible with, and complementary to, a national effort to build a direct, political action superstructure of activity that is non-negotiable and premised on unity of action and shared commitment across states. National and local unions would be able to take advantage of a climate of increased civic participation and raised expectations and decide for themselves whether to pursue scaled efforts at organizing using the ballot as a way to engage an industry in ways that make sense.

In the case of both *Live Better Together* and union organizing scenarios, our ability to choose to scale our activity is enhanced and rests with us. We get to decide where, when and how. We can take the lead if we want to, and the same three imperative tests still make sense and can be applied.

IN SUMMARY

Fast food, Seattle and California hospitals teach us that scale matters. Big, outrageous, captivating goals matter. Timing matters. Circumstances matter. Luck matters. But nothing matters, or can happen, unless we are on the field swinging for the fences.

SEIU could galvanize such an effort by declaring its willingness to contribute \$25 million per year, \$50 million per cycle, to the overall goal of \$250 million every two years to build something like *Live Better Together*.

Additionally, SEIU has within its capacity the ability to quickly identify those opportunities for organizing in the tens, or hundreds, or thousands of workers that are in fact possible if we can think big enough and identify the resources to support those opportunities. A strong argument can be made that it is a very short path from the California Hospital Association to the American Hospital Association.

Finally, and again, like Danny Ocean Says, “the house takes you, unless when that perfect hand comes along you bet big, then you take the house.” In 2016 we can decide to deal ourselves into the game of a lifetime.

Dave Regan