

Interview with John Beck "Labor in the 21st Century."

4-6-00

Marquette, MI

Transcription date: September 11, 2000

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A lot of the tools I am going to talk about, the big question why haven't we used them by now? Maybe we should start using them more if we already have done it. So what are we looking at to become that labor movement of the 21st century? To become a viable movement of the 21st century, the union must mind its P's and Q's. Those of you who are too young to know what that phrase means, it means to do it right. So tonight I am going to review the current state of the labor movement, in its future relation to 10 peas, and 4 cues. So we will understand those P's and Q's before we will get out of here tonight.

So the first p that we have got that faces us in the labor movement in the terms of the 21st century is predicament. 1998 the number of people joining unions increased by 50%. That was the good news. The bad news was that. However the overall percentage organized declined to less than 14%. Again in 1999, we increased by a large number. Again, the strength of the labor market meant that the amount of union members was diluted, and therefore actual union density decreased. A little less than 14% is the lowest it has recently been since the passage of the Wagner Act of 1935. So those of us in the organized labor in the room are quite aware of the steady decline that we have seen. The height of over 35 percent in 1945 and the merger of the AFL/CIO in 1955. We have seen a steady decline since the merger of 1955 year by year to the point where it is now. Freeman and Medoff are strong pro-union authors of the book, "What do the unions do?" Today in a recent publication, Freeman still maintains the single unit density in the United States as possible. We will fall below 10 % organized in the United States. It raises the question of viability and vitality of the American labor movement if we fall below that level. What is the level in which you snuff out a candle? How low do we go before it becomes untenable before it becomes one of us? Industrial workers are now organized virtually one in 10. Only 1 in 10 workers in industry are organized. It is only the public sector, which is 35% organized at this point that has strength. The public sector is only organized state by state. You have seen what happened here in Michigan with the teacher's right to bargain. Naturally, the growing presence of right-wing legislature across the nation means that those public sector workers are very much at risk. Having only gained the right to collective bargaining. Starting with President Kennedy's executive order beginning in 1961. A recent AFL/CIO study included that from 1984 to 1997, in the 30 fastest growing sectors for employment, service, finance childcare among them. A worker only has a one in 20 chance of immunization. On the other side, among the top 8 industries currently losing jobs in America in auto, steel and rubber, 4/5 of the 2.1 million jobs lost in that period. Now according to AFL/CIO 40% of union members are not registered to vote. Of those registered only 60% vote in regular elections, compared by the way of 49% overall. You new members are voting more than the average. But frankly, still a disappointing 40% of those that could vote as registered voters are not, and still that large percent of union members are not even registered. Making it a little darker. Entry-level wages for high school graduates have declined steadily since 1979. 28% less for men and 18% less for women. Growing disparity between the

very rich and the very poor and the working poor continues. Now good news is, continued to gain higher compensation so for example of raw compensation in 1997, was 36% higher for union workers than it was for non-union workers and in wages alone it was 23% higher in 1997. The union premium, this is often called, is still very, very important. If you still hold all other possible factors constant such as region, occupation, etc. the actual union wage premium is 15 percent overall so if you hold everything constant and try to really get it to the real numbers about 16% for men and 13% for woman. However, one of the biggest, good things continuing to work out is that blacks and Hispanics make up dramatically better in union jobs than in non-union jobs which makes them still one of the largest groups for the strong potency to join unions because of the fact that they can see it in their own communities in terms of the effect. In spite of eight years of democratic and total White house, labor laws reforms still have not been instituted nor has the pendulum swung back far enough to erase the disastrous demand to dismantle the labor rights under the Reagan and Bush years. For 12 years for the first time in history of the National Labor Relations Board under the Reagan and then under Bush the right wing managed to dominate the NLRB so strongly that they have virtually made it look like a left-wing coup if you even try to get back to the middle of the range of what would constitute proper labor law understanding. And it has been an up hill battle because naturally the one thing that is needed for the Labor Board to enforce its dictum is to have friendly judges who are willing to uphold the NLRB. And right-wing republican nomination of judges has left it impossible to get some things upheld in terms of board rulings. Now workers are seeking to organize and then be fairly bargained with, but when they successfully gain unionization like the Pinks Local Lumber in town are constantly facing employers who use the weak nature and penalties of US Labor Law to frustrate the workers that have returned. Election violations, worker firings, and bargaining and bad faith allows employers like Sawyer to prove that 3 wrongs can make them mighty, and certainly does not make them right.

The 2nd p and q is panorama. Part of the promise of the 21st Century is that labor very brightly on the part of President John Sweeney and others, in various international unions and various associations, will continue to build on its record in the last few years of tapping the potential of women, blacks, and Hispanics who have a higher dispensation and higher disposition toward unionization. We can make diversity pay for us by making our unions more reflective of our members and our potential members. Hispanics have added 90,000 new members to the Los Angeles Central Labor Council across a variety of unions. And that is of a total of 800,000 members of that labor council. So there's no question that the diversity of our nation has to be reflective of the diversity of our labor movement. The work force of the 21st Century will continue to be more and more female and more popular by the Vietnamese, Chinese, Arabic, Cuban, Haitian, Nigerian, and Turks among others. In effect we now at the first part of the 21st Century have something that looks not unlike the first part of the 20th Century. When all of our urban centers were complete with people organizing unions and in the case of the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, during the Lawrence Strike in 1912 they would have up to 14 different speakers simultaneously on the roster all speaking in their own language speaking to the workers in front of them so that they could keep them in solidarity. On my recent trips over the last 3 years to South Africa the interesting thing now that South Africa is coming out of the dark ages happens to have an unionization rate of 40%. Unions in South Africa serve as top ministers

in the government and went straight from the leadership of Hisatu to some of the highest ranking Cabinet posts under Nelson Mandella, and now under Tabo Imbekki, and when I would talk to my South African students about American labor law, their jaws would drop. They would say, "You can't be serious. How can you fire people just for smiling or not have just cause in relationship to the people working in non-union environment." International solidarity with workers in Poland or South Africa, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, or the West is another part of that panorama because some of the most high profile strikes that we have won in the Labor movement in a period of the last 10 years, the best example being a recent work on the steel strike at Ravenswood Aluminum by Tom Jervich and Kate Bronsenbrunner point out that if it wasn't for the international solidarity across the globe that they would not have beat Ravenswood one of the worst anti-union employers that the steel workers faced during the 80s and 90s. So solidarity across borders is part of that panorama.

The third p out of our P's and Q's is performance. Now labor performance at the bargaining table is absolutely key to gaining new members. An increasing emphasis in my old union, Hase, a form of paper workers, along with many other of the internationals that are part of AFL/CIO is on organizing to bargain and bargaining to organize. Linking up the organizing job of getting new members to make sure you are supporting those people who are bargaining by targeting organizing targets who add to your bargaining strength of key employers, and on the other side bargaining to organize, demanding at the table the trial agreements and other kinds of clauses that have the outcome of being able to fold people into our unions without huge fire fights between people who we should have perfectly good relationship with based on the fact that we have been bargaining with them for decades and decades. So for example, great victories have been going on for the last 5 years at Detroit Edison who hammered out a neutrality agreement between the utility workers and the company, utility workers have folded in 3-4 different units now 200-300 workers at a time across Detroit Edison not only having now the actual workers who maintain the lines, but they have gotten all of the customer complaint department and all the other clerical workers across Edison are now folded in under the neutrality agreement that the company has with the utility workers. Similarly, at Sparrow Hospital out of their relationship with the Michigan Nurses Association and their relationship with Blue Cross Blue Shield and with Michigan AFL/CIO as part of an overall health coalition in Lansing, has managed to tomorrow have a non-contestable action involving the UAW for all remaining non-union workers at Sparrow Hospital who could be unionized under the act. Now organizing drives among the high-wage, high skill sectors also reveal a bright spot so for example the fact that the AMA has now signed on enough doctors today more than ever before very few of us work for ourselves. We are always working for someone else. And even those people who thought themselves immune, who thought themselves not needing organization and collective bargaining, are now turning to it. Look not only at doctors at AMA, but look at the recent Boeing engineer's strike that ended up with an absolute win for the engineers out on the west coast. Now those new high-wage, high skill sectors will anchor labor power in new places where it has never been before. Now not unlike higher education where we have had people wear yeshiva now regarded as bosses or supervisors, we are going to look at that in relation to professional workers who might choose to organize, but frankly it is one of those places that says lets take that to the legislative arena along with everything else in terms of changes in labor laws.

Now the 4th p is an interesting one, productivity. Union workers have been stronger productivity contributors than their non-union counterparts. As much as we often hear the old saw that union workers are not as productive as non-union workers because the fact that non-union workers work at totally the hand of the boss, the truth of the matter is that union workers know how to do it better, their organized and they can do it better, and they have been stronger productivity contributors than the non-union counterparts for a number of years. A recent book that I would point to you if you're interested in this whole concept of the wonderful book by Paula Bruce on Unions and Economic Competitiveness published by the Economic Policy Institute. Now unionized workplaces as she points out have been far better in the successful implementation of workplace innovations, quality programs, flexibility and team programs are far more successful in unionized environments than they are in non-unionized environments. It is absolutely imperative that unionized workers work to build the economic workplace stronger, even if we must overcome mis-management to do it. Why? Because many of the places in which our people work are in small towns in places like the UP where there aren't a lot of other good union jobs if those workplaces were to close, so we must work as strongly as we can at unions. To re-examine our own goals, strategies, and to ensure that we successfully anchor good unionized workplaces in our community. It makes our jobs extremely important, but it's also our job to help manage the place, as well as ensure that people are well protective of grievances and collective bargaining.

The 5th p is proficiency. The building trades have lead the way for years as organizations in showing that skill is the union's edge, and that expanded opportunities for education and skill building can help us then to insure that we have union market. For example, education and skill building can be anything from the ongoing interesting building trades programs for continuing education, not only the original apprenticeship programs, but the ongoing national masonry institutes joint program between the bricklayers and the brick mason contractors to try to increase skill and find new building materials and other things. It's a fascinating idea. I think that it is a real leader. NMU's labor studies program is another way people can gain skill and proficiency which makes union and workers to be able to help their work places succeed better and also naturally, through labor studies, find better ways to represent and advance the interest of the members. Skills and education that are the key to keeping that market edge and to the previous p that I said, productivity, we must make ourselves workers to be able to make our workplaces continually better. I know, and many of you have probably felt the same, that the greatest compliment that the worker can make for another worker is not only that he or she is a fine union brother or sister but also that that person is a good worker. Good workers have always been the basis of good unions in that fashion.

The sixth p, and again this one comes to us from our friends in the trades, is portability. Portability very well may be the largest single issue for us in the labor movement in this part of the 21st century. Portability is the issue. What makes it the issue? Most workers in the 21st century will not retire after working for one employer their entire life. The amount of job changes is increasing every few years in terms of the amount of average job increases that someone will face in their lifetime. The current number is well over 10, I believe it is 13 on average job changes that a worker will face in their life if they were to start work today. Therefore, we must find ways,

like the trades had with Pat Hartley Truss, or what higher education has done with ? . to be able to say that you can take your benefits with you. So that we are not in any way, penalizing people for changing jobs that are not necessarily by choice nor should we be limiting the effects of the workers. So we should have benefits that follow the worker and we should find some way of not necessarily fighting against that trend toward portability because frankly it is what many of us are going to face in our lives. I would not stand up and say that we should stand up only for portability because that can be looked at as downplaying, coming out more for 401 k's rather than defined benefit plans. It begins to strike at the heart of collectivism that many of us have stood for. Unless I said the following thing, which is that I also believe that unions must be much more active in following the workers so wherever those workers go the union is ready to support them organizationally. Associate member programs have been in place now for some time this idea that you can sign up and be an individual member of an international union and that you can have benefits such as cheap credit cards or access to disability insurance and other kinds of things. They're coming along but they are not coming along fast enough probably because we need change in both attitude and in law. What do we need in terms of change in attitude? We have to begin to look at what is happening with workers and not assume, like labor laws assume, that what you organize is ?. The National Labor Relations Act is put together in such a way that you organize the place not the people so that you forever worry about the place even as its workplace shrinks and the workforce goes elsewhere. As long as we keep the hollow ground we are standing on we the workplace believe we are strong. In reality, we are weaker and weaker because we are controlling less and less of the overall workforce. If while we watched many of those plant closures going on... if we had done more than simply negotiate settlement agreements, sending people on their way with the best severance that we could... if while we were watching places lay off and downsize and we followed those people with union cards saying "we will support you organizationally. We will try to unionize wherever you get work even if it is a tough uphill battle. We believe we must extend and roll the union on," I think that we would have a better attitude. However, law continues to demand that we organize. Until we get some substantial changes, along with some of the ones I already mentioned in labor law, it is going to be very tough to run the proper kind of associate member or general membership programs that we should. Which raises the 7th p.

The 7th p is politics. Continuing work is needed in getting working people generally, and union members specifically, to register and vote. The emphasis must be on pocketbook issues like lagging wages and skyrocketing CEO pay, for example. We could have another p for pissed off because many people are mad about social inequality around things like CEO pay. Just the concept of "do you want to marry a millionaire?" We need to focus on pocketbook issues and extension of union rights. It must be worked out so that union voters are given enough information and encouragement that they aid their unions by voting for union endorsed candidates. Much has been said up here at the UP Labor Council on conference with Frank Garrison, among others, that people are too easily lead toward issues like abortion, guns, or other things, and pass by pocketbook issues and worker rights issues and instead end up voting for people who have fairly awful records on worker rights or union issues. 39% of union members who voted in a 1994 mid-term election cast votes for Republicans. Perhaps some of them were labor endorsed, but I assume it was a very small amount, so the fact that that large of a minority

within our own ranks are crossing against their own unions wishes to vote for Republican candidates.

Let me mention some of the things that have to change about labor law, which makes legislation, and changing our politics to focus so strongly on worker rights. Workers today in America can be fired and what they get if they are brought back after a couple years of haggling is only whatever wages they would have made minus what they made in the meantime. Which means there is no penalty for employers from firing workers. If management decides not to bargain in good faith normally the only thing that happens is we post a notice saying "You nasty employer don't do that again." It goes up on a bulletin board but does not stop them from frustrating bargaining. Many of the other kinds of things that go on within organizing drives, all you need to understand is even though our percentages continue to climb, that through the use of scabs in strike situations or through firings of workers in organizing situations, bosses are continually playing on the fear and uncertainty that workers have in the current environment about ever keeping a job like the one they have right now. You don't have to fire them all; you only have to fire one. You don't have to scab all mills across the entire industry; you only have to scab one. It dampens the expectations, which has led us to the kind of situation we are in today. There is one last political note that I would be remised if I did not mention. Here in Michigan, the 200 election is about who will redraw all of the districts under reapportionment with the new census figures. There are two important parts of that. One is the legislature and the other is the Supreme Court, both of which happen to be in the control of the republicans. You can be sure that districts are not going to be put together in such a way that they favor in any way many of the current democrats.