

CLOSING ADDRESS

CLYDE SUMMERS

I had thought that I might summarize the conference. That, however, would make me like the man who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions. Rather than do that, I intend to mount an untried horse and ride off into the distance—I hope not into the sunset, but toward where there may be a dawning.

I want to suggest that we look in a direction which has not been discussed to obtain a perspective which may be useful for the future. I have no doubt that the immediate problem of the labor movement is to survive. I hope, however, that in the process of surviving, it will extend organization and collective bargaining. Even more important, I hope it will deepen and enrich collective bargaining by obtaining more participation in the decisions of management. The purpose of survival is to make more real the ideals on which the Wagner Act was based nearly fifty years ago—to provide for workers a measure of individual dignity and industrial democracy. Nothing which I have to say should be viewed as detracting from those goals, which I think are fundamental.

During the last two days we have not once mentioned the most dramatic, and perhaps the most telling, event in the labor movement during the last five years. It is an event which, if it were not so painfully real, would be an allegory of the problems, the fundamental flaws, and the clouded future of the labor movement. This event was the air traffic controllers' strike.

The air controllers' strike was a triple-layered tragedy. We need to recognize and examine all three layers not just because they are relevant to the air controllers but also because they are symbolic and revealing of the problems of the whole labor movement.

The first and most obvious tragedy is that for the first time since the Pullman strike nearly a hundred years ago, we saw a union destroyed by the federal government. Our government, supposedly committed to collective bargaining, with a multitude of avenues open to achieve reconciliation, set as its goal, not just to defeat the strike, but to destroy the union. And it succeeded; the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) is now dead, and there is no reincarnation of it.

Beneath this first layer of tragedy is a second and more serious tragedy. While the federal government was destroying the union, the rest of the labor movement stood by and let it die. Other unions had the capacity to reinforce the air controllers' strike in many ways. They may not have been able to win the strike, but they could have saved the union. Instead, they stood by, made pious declarations, but did nothing, and let the union die. They seemed not to know "for whom the bell tolls." Three months later when another government in another country destroyed another union, American unions made vigorous protests, but this was scarce penance for their failure

to respond to their own government's destruction of one of their own unions.

The third layer of the tragedy is, in my view, the most fundamental and significant. PATCO died because there was no solidarity shown by the labor movement. But there was no solidarity because the air controllers themselves had shown no solidarity. PATCO proceeded in a way which has all too often been the approach of American unions—each union seeks the maximum of its own self-interest with little concern about other unions or other workers.

The air controllers supported Ronald Reagan, well knowing the dangers that his election would create for the labor movement, but with the hope that his election would serve their self-interest. They entered into the strike with no consultation with other unions, because it was only their self-interests they were seeking. They made demands for a level of salary and benefits so far above that of the rest of the labor movement that it was extremely difficult to mobilize the strength of the labor movement on their behalf.

PATCO died because the air controllers relied entirely on their self-sufficiency and pursued solely their self-interests. They deprived themselves of any claims for solidarity because they showed no solidarity. In this PATCO was no different, except perhaps in degree, from most other American unions. The fundamental flaw, the fundamental problem, of the American labor movement is, in my view, that there is little solidarity; and there is so little solidarity because there is so much self-interest.

There are, I believe, certain useful lessons to be learned from the triple-layered tragedy of the air controller's strike. The first lesson is that the labor movement today lives in a very hostile environment—perhaps even more hostile than unions recognize. The hostility of the federal government to PATCO in this situation is but a symptom of a basic hostility that runs through most of management and through large proportions of the population.

We ought to have no illusions about the underlying attitudes of most American employers concerning unions; very few genuinely accept collective bargaining. For most, it is a hair shirt which they are compelled to wear, but which they will take off at the first chance.

For example, the Labor Reform Act of 1978 was a modest effort to curb employer antiunion activities, and provide effective sanctions for violations, thereby enabling employees to form unions where they did not exist and to extend collective bargaining. When this legislation was before Congress, employers who had been bargaining with unions for thirty or forty years, and who had so-called stable relationships appeared in Congress and urged rejection, even though it would not have touched their established bargaining relationships and would only have required other employers to do what they had been doing for years. Most American employers are fundamentally opposed to collective bargaining, and American unions now have to survive in what is largely a hostile environment.

The second lesson from the air controllers' strike is that if the union movement is to become a labor movement it must rely on solidarity, and solidarity other than within itself. I have serious doubts that American trade unions can prosper, grow, and become the social force they should be without solidarity, not only among themselves, but among a much broader class than is now encompassed by their membership.

There are only twenty million union members in a work force of one hundred million. If unions are to have the political and social strength which they need, they must have a much larger constituency; it must extend beyond the bounds of union membership. By constituency, I mean those who look to unions to articulate and defend their political and social interests. I am persuaded that unions that seek their own self-interest and think of themselves as self-sufficient, run a serious risk that in the long run they will share in some measure the fate of the air controllers. When they need help, they will get no support from those who are not union members because they have confined their concern to union members. They will find no solidarity, because they have shown no solidarity with those who, in the long run, have common interests.

One of the fundamental problems, I believe, is that labor unions must view themselves as part of a labor movement—a movement which views itself as having a constituency much broader than union membership. This raises the question: What should be their constituency? They cannot attempt to speak for everyone, not even all employees. I doubt that doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers, or even college professors need be embraced in the labor movement. But there are certain categories of people who should be recognized as a part of the labor movement's natural constituency.

The first constituency which needs to be accepted by the labor movement as a part of its responsibility and with whom there should be a sense of solidarity is the working poor—those people whose wages are not enough to provide a decent standard of living. The labor movement's first concern should be for these people; this group must be a part of its constituency.

A second constituency should be all those people working in deadening and routine work, who are being constantly pressed into tighter and more tedious patterns of work with less and less meaning—bookkeepers, key punch operators, file clerks, typists, bank clerks, insurance clerks, and a multitude of others whose work may be physically clean but personally empty. They must be given a sense of personal dignity and individual worth, a sense of participation in meaningful activity.

These are two large constituencies, now scarcely touched by unions, and with whom there is no solidarity. There are other categories, which I will not attempt to describe, for my purpose is not to define the constituency. My purpose is to emphasize that there are these groups presently outside the union movement but with whom there must be solidarity, not because they are union members but because they are, in the context of our modern society, a part of the labor class. They must be accepted by unions

as a part of the constituency for which the union movement accepts responsibility and with which the union movement expresses solidarity, so that it will have a claim on their solidarity.

Now comes the most difficult question, How is the union movement to express solidarity with these groups outside the union movement? What are unions to do? One step, of course, is to exert the maximum effort to organize these groups, to devote more resources to bringing unionization to them. In that context, I am troubled by unions spending millions of dollars to organize employees in DuPont or other corporations where employees are already receiving significantly more than median income in overall earnings and benefits, while starving organizational efforts to organize the working poor and the low-paid who, in our days, are the oppressed of society.

Organizational expenditures should express the union's solidarity with its larger constituency. If unions are to have claims on the support of other workers, they must be seen, not as seeking to organize workers in order to increase the size of the union, but as seeking to organize those who have special need for organizational strength. When the union tries to organize DuPont, what does it have to offer? Is the union giving the employees something they desperately need? What is their need as compared with textile workers, garment workers, employees in fast food chains, clerical workers and a multitude of others?

Unions ought not to stop with efforts to extend organization. Collective bargaining is not the only device for protecting the interests of workers. Other avenues which lead toward the larger goal should also be pursued. Unions have, to be sure, sought protective legislation, social security, and other measures which aid both union and nonunion workers, but their broad concern should be more explicit and articulate.

For example, collective bargaining policies can hurt the working poor. Unions in many industries have negotiated very good pension plans—a major contribution to those who enjoy the benefits. But the negotiation of pension plans has, in some degree, had the effect of reducing the demand and support for Social Security. The richness of negotiated plans has widened the gulf between union members and the working poor. Unions have negotiated medical plans with comprehensive coverage, filling a genuine need, but what have they done for the working poor? Negotiated plans have created a system of private insurance which has had the effect of increasing the cost of medical care to the point where it is beyond the reach of the working poor and many others. At the same time, negotiated plans have taken the edge off union demands for a comprehensive system of medical care which would cover everyone. Because their members are satisfied, unions lose their concern for others.

Pensions and medical plans are not the only areas in which unions have negotiated benefits for their own members with little or no concern for the impact on others, and particularly on those who should be considered as a part of the labor movement, and with whom the union should express

solidarity. There is no need here to elaborate the examples; they are visible to all who have eyes and are willing to see.

Let me suggest briefly two other tentative ideas which point in the direction where I believe hope lies. Unions made a great contribution to all workers in pressing for passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. It has comprehensive coverage, blanketing all industries and potentially reaching all safety and health hazards. But passage of the Act was only the beginning; the continuing problem is enforcement. For practical purposes the Act can be enforced only by workers at the workplace; no army of inspectors will ever be adequate. The unions can create the necessary enforcement structures at the workplace, using the process of bargaining and the procedures of grievances and arbitration to give daily reality to the substance of the Act. Some unions have made great contributions here—to those covered by collective agreements, the industrial elite.

But what of the millions who have no unions? What about their safety and health? What workplace structure is to be created for them? The Department of Labor has proposed a set of regulations for creating safety committees inside workshops which would be applicable where there are no unions. These proposals, not surprisingly, have serious defects which nearly guarantee that the safety committees will be inadequate. If the union movement's response is that these proposals are not relevant to them, because they provide for safety committees through collective bargaining, then the unions deserve to risk the fate of PATCO. If unions have nothing to say about how to create safety committees in nonunion workshops, then the union movement has no claim on the solidarity of those who have the same needs but are outside collective bargaining.

The monotony and meaninglessness of most modern work requires that people have vacations to escape the deadening routine. Unions have rightly negotiated for vacations in their collective bargaining agreements. But non-union workers also need vacations. What concern have unions shown for them? It would not be beyond our imagination to borrow from what other countries have done and provide statutory vacations so that everyone will have an annual break from their daily work. Unions should also press for notices of termination, severance pay and protection against dismissals. Why should unions who insist that the collective agreement prohibit unjust discharge be indifferent, or even hostile, to providing equivalent protection to all workers by statute? Why are unions not actively pressing for such legislation?

Union membership is only a fragment of the work force, and it is becoming a smaller and smaller fragment. If unions are to survive and to serve their social purpose, if they are to learn the lessons of PATCO, they must have a larger constituency. They can obtain a larger constituency only by accepting responsibility for those presently beyond collective bargaining and by speaking for their needs through means other than collective bargaining. Unions can create a labor movement with solidarity only if they go

beyond their self-interests and press for changes which meet the needs of the larger constituency. This, it seems to me, is the only avenue which holds promise for the future.

Having said all this, I recognize that unions may be institutionally incapable of such a turning. Frankly, I fear that what I propose may be unreal, that it cannot or will not be done. When I imagine a meeting of the AFL-CIO Council on the shores of Miami, I ask myself, Will those union presidents, and the layer of union officers below them, and the layer of paid staff below them—will those men, and a very few women, be prepared and willing to do this? Will they look beyond their parochial institutional interests and accept responsibility for manifesting solidarity with what in our day is the working class? I do not feel hopeful. Perhaps all I have said may be considered as meaningless because it is hopeless. But however hopeless it may seem, it still needs to be said because it needs to be done. The present need is not to ask what can be done, but to see what must be done.