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## The Good, the Bad, the Ugly: A Lifetime with Labor

Vincent Emanuele  
vincent.emanuele333@gmail.com

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## The Good, the Bad, the Ugly: A Lifetime with Labor

### Abstract

The authors personal reflection on being raised in a union household and the way forward for labor in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, the War in Iraq, and the 2016 election.

### Keywords

Social Justice, Social Justice Unionism

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### Cover Page Footnote

Vincent Emanuele is a USMC combat veteran, writer and activist who lives and works in Michigan City, Indiana, where he co-manages a community space called P.A.R.C. (Politics Art Roots Culture). Vince hosts "Meditations and Molotovs" which airs every Monday @1:00pm(CT) on the Progressive Radio Network (prn.fm). He is also a member of Veterans for Peace and the National Writers Union.

## A Union Family

My history with organized labor is a personal history that truly spans the length of my life (32 years). My great grandfathers, both European immigrants—Italian on my father’s side, and Italian and Croatian on my mother’s side—organized with their local unions in Chicago during the 1930s. They benefited from the victories of the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. Subsequent strikes in 1922 and 1925 included many Italian immigrants who came before my great grandfathers.

Eventually, many more member of my extended family made the trip from the "Old Country" to the United States of America. Their journeys were dangerous, but fruitful. Many of them were able to escape the horrors of World War II and more specifically, at least for my Italian-American ancestors, fascism. Others, such as my dad's father, ended up fighting his former countrymen on his native soil during the “war to end all wars.”

My grandfather, as a child, was with my great grandfather, Angelo, during the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937, where the Chicago Police shot and killed 10 people (see Dennis, 2010, 2014). After Republic Steel refused to sign a union contract, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) called a strike, commonly known as the “Little Steel Strike” (see White, 2016).

A family friend, a man by the name of Stevie Borzon, used to tell a story about that day. According to Borzon, after the police stopped shooting, they proceeded to beat, harass, torture and taunt the union members who remained on the premises. Stevie happened to be one of those union members. As he told it, a Chicago cop pulled out his revolver, told Stevie to open his mouth, then stuck the barrel inside his throat and asked if he was a communist. Stevie, street smart enough to know when to fold a bad hand, denied any involvement or identification with communism.

To be honest, I doubt that was the first or last time Stevie had a gun stuck in his mouth. Knowing my father’s friends and the neighborhood in which they grew up, it’s not uncommon for someone from that ilk to be involved in extremely violent situations—union related or otherwise. But the lesson, at least for me, was always clear: the police, at the behest of their corporate and state managers, will unleash violence against workers who are simply demanding better wages and working conditions. That's an important lesson to learn as a young child. It's a lesson that remains with me today.

Further down the road, I became old enough to understand that my father, a union ironworker, didn't do what most of my friends’ dads did for a living; it dawned on me that my entire life had been colored by unionism in one form or another. Most of my extended family members were in unions. My mom's side of the family were all union members—pipe fitters, carpenters, steelworkers, etc. Even the females in the family, including my mom's sister who still works at the mill, had union jobs.

In hindsight, my family was very fortunate. And while my family's early experiences in the U.S. included ethnic segregation and bigotry, they overcame those dynamics because of their European ancestry. Unlike our black and brown neighbors, European-Americans had a much easier time assimilating and for a number of reasons (too many to mention here). That being said, it is quite clear that my brother, sister and I enjoyed a number of benefits because of the fact that our family had “union connections.”

My father, for instance, was never negatively impacted by larger macro-economic

phenomena. During both the 1973-1975 and the 1980 recessions, my father had ample work. In 1983, when most workers were hurting and/or underemployed, my father made over \$100,000. To be clear, on a subjective level, that's a good thing. Objectively speaking, my father's ability to weather economic storms came at a price, as neighborhood and political connections largely contributed to his successes.

In other words, my dad had work because my dad knew the right people. Here, my experience with organized labor is also largely colored by geography. My family, after all, grew up and raised me, at least for the early stages of my life, in Chicago's 10th Ward, otherwise known as "Fast Eddie's" ward. Eddie Vrdolyak, a back-room dealer and low-level crook, dominated the political scene on Chicago's South East Side for many decades. He was, as they put in the neighborhood, "Mobbed-up," meaning he had plenty connections to organized crime figures in the Chicagoland region.

By the time I was a teenager, my concept of organized labor was completely warped from my own life experiences. My dad, limited by a lack of education and growing up with criminals, had a very limited idea of what unionism was all about. His idea of organized labor included helping those who were close to the family, including many friends and neighbors, but that was about it. Yes, he believed that all workers deserved to be treated with dignity and respect, but he was only willing to fight for his own union.

He raised my siblings and I to always question authority and stick up for our friends, but we didn't grow up with a sense of internationalism or social justice unionism. In some ways, it's a shame because my father is a very charismatic person. He could've been one hell of a union organizer, and he might have had a chance if he didn't eventually get hurt on the job.

In 1995, he fell 30ft from a scaffolding that collapsed under its own weight. Turns out, the wood was rotted out. He broke his neck in three different places, shattered his shoulder, broke his hip, fractured his skull, smashed his ear drums, losing much of his hearing and fractured a number of other bones, including his wrist and ribs. At no other time in my short life had I understood the importance of being in a union as I did during that period in our family's history. Members of my father's local helped my family financially and emotionally. Once again, we were fortunate to have a support network whereas many families who experience workplace injuries do not.

There is, however, a dark side of union culture. Here, I'm thinking of the many union members who are addicted to drugs and alcohol, and whose family lives are in tatters from too many nights spent at the local pubs or in local strip clubs. Fortunately, my father was more interested in raising my brother and I than he was engaging in destructive behavior. But that wasn't the case for many of his coworkers. Too many of them ended up with broken marriages and abused bodies.

Working in the cold, night after night, week after week, year after year, is a back-breaking existence. Without a serious support network and/or high levels of individual discipline, union workers will often succumb to self-destructive patterns. Unfortunately, I've witnessed these things throughout my life as someone who grew up in a union family and in the Chicagoland region, a disproportionately union area.

By the time I entered high school, the thought of joining a union was the furthest thing from my mind. After all, I'm a child of the 1980s and '90s. We were told to graduate high school, go to college, and eventually everything would simply work itself out. By the time I left high school, the thought of going to college was the furthest thing from my mind. I spent my school years playing sports and getting good enough grades to continue playing sports. I wasn't

politicized or intellectually engaged.

Toward the end of my senior year, I fractured my wrist playing baseball. My idea was to attend a division two or three university, play ball for four years and hopefully figure out what I wanted to do with my life along the way. But the way things worked out, I didn't have a chance to play my senior year, and my wrist was in pretty bad shape, so I was left with two options: join a union, or go to war. I chose the latter.

## **The War in Iraq**

My choice to join the United States Marine Corps was not a particularly radical choice in my neck of the woods. Where I come from, union members and their families have paid a disproportionate price for Uncle Sam's imperial adventures. For example, in Chesterton, Indiana, where I graduated, in my senior class of 450 people, at least 40-50 were eventually deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan. Following in the footsteps of our Baby Boomer parents, the sons and daughters of steelworkers and pipe fitters found themselves preparing for yet another series of wars, this time in the Middle East as opposed to Southeast Asia, where our parents and grandparents killed Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians with impunity.

After 9/11, people throughout the US, including many union members, were swept up in a patriotic fervor. The Bush administration's rhetoric of "you're either with us, or against us," was the operating motto of the day. As Danny Schechter's film, *Weapons of Mass Deception* points out, radio stations self-censored and vapid patriotic displays were beamed all over the nation via cable news outlets. The news media, with few exceptions, served as a mouthpiece for the Bush administration, and pushed phony facts and even phonier narratives about terrorism, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and Osama bin-Laden.

Thankfully, antiwar activists provided an example of how to respond in the face of terror and militarism. Activists around the world took to the streets in what were the largest single-day demonstrations in history. Protests, marches, vigils, direct actions and various forms of civil disobedience followed. Central labor bodies, locals, and national unions passed resolutions against the war in Iraq. Indeed, the resolutions ranged from milquetoast denunciations to radical opposition to US imperialism and empire. Some estimates suggest such antiwar resolutions represented more than a quarter of all unionized workers in the US, though no exact total has been developed.

By the time I became involved with the antiwar movement, around 2007—through Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW)<sup>1</sup> — there was little union participation. Sure, local unions in Chicago would allow us to use their facilities to hold fundraisers and so forth, and while I appreciate those gestures of solidarity, ending the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required serious institutional resources, not simply donations. In other words, organized labor, with the exception of groups like US Labor Against the War (USLAW)<sup>2</sup> and various locals, provided absolutely no institutional help to antiwar activists. In some cases, such as my experiences organizing in Northwest Indiana, we were met with outright hostility from union members, including many union leaders.

In hindsight, progressive political movements missed a great opportunity during the Bush years, as we never built the sort of lasting relationships and institutional structures necessary to dismantle the US Empire.<sup>3</sup> In fact, I would argue that one of the major challenges we faced, and a challenge we still face, is the fact that most Americans simply do not view the U.S. as an empire. In other words, most people in the US do not understand that the US operates close to

1,000 military bases around the world. Further, most people living in the U.S. do not understand the history of U.S. military interventions, C.I.A. coups, economic warfare and cultural hegemony that makes the U.S. an empire. The antiwar movement didn't properly articulate what we were opposing during the Bush era. We should have been clearer: it wasn't just the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or the larger War on Terror that we were opposed to, but, rather, the entire US Empire—the bases, the deep state, the coups, the assassinations - and the military industrial complex that supports it.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, unions can play a significant role in hampering Uncle Sam's ability to make war. After all, some of the last remaining manufacturing jobs in the US are linked to the arms industry. Thus, workers in those industries could have a significant impact in antiwar struggles by holding strikes or stopping the production of goods and materials created for the sole purpose of killing people. To be clear, I don't expect people who work in the arms industry to sabotage equipment or go on strike simply because it's the right or moral thing to do. Antiwar activists must show workers in those industries how their own lives will benefit from opposing U.S. Empire, and why taking an international perspective is the only way forward.

That being said, I think that we can make headway with unions if we provide alternatives. Here, I think the challenge is the same as transitioning communities and industries away from fossil fuels. Without doubt, union workers will take different jobs if they are offered decent jobs. Right now, they are scared, particularly those working in the fossil fuel or arms industry sectors. They don't believe that good paying jobs will replace the ones they already have, and to a large degree, those concerns are completely accurate.

Antiwar activists would be wise to provide alternatives and a broader vision for union workers as union leaders have failed to do so. Connecting international labor struggles with international struggles for peace and justice is key to creating a new, and more effective, antiwar movement on a global scale. In the US, the challenges are nationalism, imperialism/empire, capitalism and racial segregation. The fact that unions are under constant attack, something I'll address in the next section, doesn't help the situation. Yet, organizations such as USLAW exist, and younger union members are energized by the Bernie Sanders campaign and the Fight for \$15 campaigns taking place across the U.S.

Will antiwar activists and rank and file union members learn important lessons and apply them to new actions in the Trump era? That remains to be seen. Right now, both the union and antiwar movements are at historic low points at a time when the world needs both to be as productive as possible.

## **The Tea Party and Right to Work**

Let's be very honest: the Tea Party exists because the Democratic Party and organized labor have failed to do their jobs. The Dems offer coastal elitism and the unions offer Fox News-style ideologies. The union demand to “Buy Made in America” is virtually indistinguishable from Trump's “Make America Great Again” campaign slogan. Once again, toxic nationalism has crippled the union movement and poisoned the minds of its members. Year after year, the unions told their members to “vote for the Democrats,” only to have many Democrats pass anti-worker and anti-union legislation.

Bill Clinton's support for North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), among many other neoliberal programs and policies, eventually caught up with the Democratic Party. Obama and Hillary Clinton's support for Trans

Pacific Partnership (TPP) drove a wedge in the party that it's still trying to mend, with little success I might add. The two nominal "leaders of the party," Clinton and Obama, remain tone-deaf when it comes to trade, economic populism and neoliberal economics, which is why Bernie Sanders' message resonated with so many millions. Since neither Obama nor Clinton are dumb, I can only assume that they are ideologically in favor of such positions as the evidence is overwhelmingly not in their favor when it comes to so-called "free trade agreements."

All that being said, if anything is clear in the post-Obama world, it's that the relationship between organized labor—at least rank and file members—and the Democratic Party is at an all-time-low. This is much like the party's popularity and power which, according to the data, suggests that the Dems are at a 70-year low in terms of their influence and power at both the state and federal levels. In short, the Democratic Party is dying and the union movement isn't far behind. In fact, the union movement's inability to disconnect itself from the Dems could prove fatal if current trends continue.

In 2011, the Wisconsin State legislature introduced a bill that would curtail collective bargaining rights for most public workers in the state. Interestingly, the momentum for what would become the largest protests in the history of Wisconsin did not come from the traditional union movement or its leadership—the initial occupation of the Wisconsin capitol building was started by graduate students who were members of the Teaching Assistant Association (American Federation of Teachers) from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Looking back, it's important to point this out as it's yet another example of the major unions being behind the curve. It took graduate students to do what union leaders should have done: namely, organize a radical protest in response to anti-union legislation. History will show it was rank and file members who ignited the protests, as John Nichols showed in his 2012 book, *Uprising: How Wisconsin Renewed the Politics of Protest, from Madison to Wall Street*.<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, more than 100,000 people would march on the streets of Wisconsin's "most progressive city," a moniker despised by the local activists who are all too willing to highlight the disproportionate arrest rates for black Wisconsinites, the systemic racial segregation rampant in the city, and other forms of racial and economic injustices. Nonetheless, it was pretty amazing to be a part of such a huge event. I remember the energy and the outrageous scene like it was yesterday: a sea of people, most wearing bright red; the chants in the capitol rotunda; and the hundreds of conversations I had with dozens of activists from around the US. Those experiences, from the standpoint of networking and relationships, are second to none.

Yet, in the end, we lost. Republican Governor Scott Walker's bill passed the legislature and the courts. Walker even survived a recall campaign, which brings me to my most important point: I'm not sure if I will ever again experience over 100,000 people marching in a Midwestern city, but if I don't, it's clear that a great opportunity was lost. In Wisconsin, we had radical energy and that energy was sucked-up and wasted in a failed recall effort. Once the major unions, MSNBC and the Dems showed up, the game was over. All of the grassroots energy we had was diverted into electoral activism. Turns out, that was the wrong move.

One would assume that the energy in the streets would eventually lead to electoral power, but that's not the case. In fact, it's been quite the opposite as states such as Wisconsin, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio have become even more controlled by the GOP since the 2011 Wisconsin protests. As I mentioned before, I don't think that means the protests were a complete failure, but we should also recognize the limitations of street protests and popular anger when it comes to electoral activism. We need to build the capacity and be sophisticated enough to simultaneously hold massive protests, build electoral power, and develop independent institutions. With regard

to Wisconsin, it didn't help that the Dems nominated Tom Barrett, the former centrist mayor from Milwaukee who failed to inspire those who previously took to the streets.

During the same period, Right to Work (RTW) legislation was proposed in my home state of Indiana. In many ways, the same routine played out: Democrats ran the opposition because the left lacked any serious organizational representation; hence the opposition to then Gov. Mitch Daniels (R) and the state legislature (dominated by Republicans) consisted of liberal activists, Democratic Party opportunists, and union members who had limited options in terms of activism. The results were predictable. That being said, important lessons should be learned from both our experiences in Wisconsin and Indiana.

While it's a shame what happened in Wisconsin and Indiana, those failures also provided great learning experiences, especially for those interested in building a genuinely independent labor movement based on a set of principles and ideas, not just a party name and affiliation through cronyism. Rank and file members and their supporters expressed their frustrations, but their concerns fell on deaf ears. We didn't have the power to properly oppose the GOP's reactionary agenda, and we didn't have the power to subvert the Dems.

What came later in the year surprised millions around the globe and allowed rank and file members an opportunity to articulate a different vision, and a different set of values and political practices. After many electoral failures, the left tried something new, and in many ways, something exciting. But like previous movements and events, the coming protests lacked the infrastructure necessary to take the movement to the next level. Once again, organized labor was left on the sideline as college students and leftwing organizers took the lead.

## **Occupy Wall Street**

Later that year, in September, 2011, one of the most important political events since the '68 generation took place in Zuccotti Park in New York City. The Occupy Wall Street movement was born. Its origins and who, exactly, came up with the idea, is still a bit muddy. The standard story goes something like this: *Adbusters*, a Canadian "alternative" magazine put out a call for people to gather on Wall Street to protest corporate influence and corruption, consumerism and the anti-democratic nature of modern capitalism. To their great surprise, thousands of people actually showed up.

Interestingly, Occupy Wall Street is rarely talked about in the same breath as the Wisconsin protests. We should also recall the Egyptian protests of Tahrir Square in 2011 (see Mason, 2012). Remember, those protests predate not only Occupy Wall Street, but also the Wisconsin protests. For the first time in a long time, activists in the US took their inspiration and cues from our international counterparts who were also struggling against very similar institutions and geopolitical-economic relations. There was, once again, a great moment of international solidarity among activists from the Arab Spring to Spain and New York.

Let's always remember that the mainstream media treated Occupy Wall Street as if it were some sort of joke, at best. At worst, they treated Occupy Wall Street as if it were a grave threat to the "American Way" of life. True, the anti-consumerist rhetoric of Occupy was at odds with the rhetoric of the Middle Class that was so prevalent in Madison, Wisconsin, but that anti-consumerist and admittedly more radical rhetoric struck a chord with the millennial generation who, after the stock market collapse of 2008, saw very little hope in our existing political and economic arrangements, and rightly so as our lives will be, and have already been, drastically different than our parents' experiences in the US.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Occupy was a repudiation of Obama and the union establishment insofar as it failed to capitalize on the situation in Madison. When Occupy started, the major unions were nowhere to be found. After Wisconsin, and after their defeats in Indiana, Michigan and Ohio, organized labor, instead of fighting back in a more radical and creative manner, retreated to the electoral efforts that doomed their movement in Madison. Obviously, lessons hadn't been learned. Here, unions made a grave mistake. After their failures in Madison, it was clear that their next steps should have included a more radical approach than simply trying to elect Democrats. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case.

If the union movement had a sense of class solidarity, they would've been the first political entities to back Occupy, but alas, they didn't, and they're paying the price for such failures. It's not that Occupy was perfect, or that the movement didn't have significant flaws (too many to name in this essay), but that it provided a space for radical discussion and an opportunity to show people a different form of politics, a more radical and creative form, shouldn't be ignored. Over the years, people have said to me, "Occupy was a total failure!" They've also asked, "What did Occupy actually accomplish?" Let me reply to both questions in the context of labor struggles.

First, Occupy was not a "failure." It is true that Occupy failed to articulate a set of demands and a coherent political platform, but is that really the failure of teenagers and people in their 20s who for the first time in their lives are actually getting involved with radical political movements? I don't think so. That failure falls on the laps of our so-called movement "leaders" and the many institutions, from unions and university groups, to non-profits and political parties, who failed to provide serious mentorship for those who needed it. This lack of serious mentorship was a key factor in why the Occupy Movement was unable to accomplish more than it did, which brings me to my second point.

Occupy accomplished a lot, but many of those accomplishments took a long time to materialize. In today's society, people want results and they want them immediately. If they can't see those results, it's assumed that their efforts were for nil. In some ways, I would argue that we didn't see the fruits of Occupy's labor until the Bernie Sanders campaign of 2016. Undoubtedly, Bernie Sanders' presidential run would not have existed without Occupy Wall Street. And speaking of accomplishments, let's not forget that many people, including myself, who participated in Occupy went on to do other things. I, for instance, ended up hosting a radio program. Others went on to organize with other organizations and movements, including many unions.

Put differently, it's difficult to say whether Occupy was a "success" or a "failure," and to be honest, I don't like the dichotomous framework. Most things, especially political events and movements, are not either "failures" or "successes"— they usually fall within a broad spectrum that exists in-between the two poles. Occupy is no different. The key, however, to understanding Occupy's limited short-term successes is based in a lack of support. In 2017, everyone wants to pretend as if they supported Bernie Sanders-style politics for their entire lives, but that's clearly not the case. Back in 2011, people were routinely told to "grow up" and to "stop acting so radical." Less than six years later, a presidential candidate was running for the White House on an almost identical platform.<sup>7</sup>

Much like the wars, Wisconsin and Occupy, the unions were behind the curve when it came to Sanders' presidential run. This time, organized labor's inability to find its backbone and its inability to organize around issues that matter, proved to be fatal as the world is now stuck with President Trump, as opposed to a potential President Sanders. Perhaps if unions were more

productive and visionary in 2011, they could have better set themselves up for 2016 when all the chips were on the line, but that wasn't the case: echoing Donald Rumsfeld's infamous comments about the war in Iraq, "We go to battle with the unions we have, not the unions we wish we had."

## **Unions and Elections**

Before I reflect on the Bernie Sanders campaign and organized labor, let's remember the all-too forgotten 2015 Chicago mayoral election between Rahm "Mayor 1%" Emanuel and Jesus "Chuy" Garcia. Unfortunately, the vast majority of unions in Chicago supported the neoliberal incumbent, Emanuel, over his more progressive challenger, Garcia. To be clear, this wasn't particularly surprising at the time, but it was more than frustrating for those of us who genuinely thought that we had a chance to get rid of Emanuel once and for all. In fact, I would argue that some of those divisions remain with progressive-left movements today.

Of course, Chicago has a long history of political corruption; it also has a long history of radical activism and militant unionism. Those days, at least for now, are long gone. The only union that has truly flexed its muscles in recent memory is the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), who backed Chuy over Rahm.<sup>8</sup> Without the CTU's support and organizational infrastructure, Rahm would have completely demolished Chuy as opposed to beating him. For that, the CTU should be applauded as their sister unions, for the most part, chose to support the neoliberal candidate, Emanuel.

My father's union, Ironworkers Local #1—Chicago—backed Emanuel for strictly selfish reasons. Emanuel had better connections with corporations and bankers, hence Local #1 assumed there would be more skyscrapers built under Emanuel than Garcia. To be clear, they were probably correct: Emanuel's interests are almost solely on the North Side and in the Downtown/Loop areas. His connections are good for building trades unions who rely on mega projects like skyscrapers to maintain their lifestyles and to support their families. This level of self-interest isn't uncommon in the modern union movement. Hell, many unions refuse to work with each other, not because of any major political differences, but because they can't see how their destinies are tied to their fellow union brothers and sisters' destinies, let alone non-unionized workers.

Here, once again, union leadership should be critiqued and condemned for their inability to educate and properly train their members. In other words, these are systemic problems, not individual problems. Yes, individual union members have a wide array of reactionary views, especially white union workers, but that's largely through no fault of their own. Union leadership is primarily to blame. The short-term interests of the unions and union leadership has crippled organized labor's ability to create international, racial, ethnic and gender solidarity. While unions in the U.S. have poured tens of millions, possibly hundreds of millions of dollars into failed electoral campaigns, their members have drifted further and further away from the Democratic Party.

After organized labor's defeat in the Chicago mayoral election, I assumed incorrectly that organized labor had learned its lesson, but it didn't. When Bernie Sanders announced his campaign for President of the US, the major unions were already mobilizing their resources for another neoliberal candidate, Hillary Clinton. It's clear that rank and file members largely preferred Sanders over Clinton, but once again, their leadership didn't agree and backed Hillary—and most union leaderships refused to poll their members before making their endorsements. At first, I could cut the unions some slack. In their view, it probably made more

sense, at least strategically speaking, to back Clinton. Sanders, a self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist, didn't stand a chance at winning the nomination when he first announced.

However, as time passed, and as it became more and more clear that Sanders did indeed have a shot at beating Clinton, the major unions once again failed to capitalize on a very important political development. Here, union leaders were far out of touch with their members, and that proved to be very true in November, 2016, when close to 50% of union members nationwide voted for Trump over the Democrat candidate. Those divisions remain. Whereas unions could have changed the course of history, they chose the safe route and backed the neoliberal candidate. Little did they know, but the so-called "safe choice" was actually a complete disaster.

It's hard to blame unions directly for the election of Trump, and because organized labor has received so much flak from the right, I stay away from publicly criticizing unions too much. However, the fact remains: with more union support for Sanders, it's hard to see how Clinton could have won the primary election. And most polls show that Sanders would have crushed Trump in the general election. The same was true in Chicago: because the unions in the city were unwilling to take a bold stand against neoliberalism, they were left with more neoliberalism. These were missed opportunities of the highest magnitude. Quite literally, the course of history could potentially have been changed for the better if unions were more organized—something to keep in mind as we struggle for economic justice under President Trump.

## **ENVIRONMENTALISM AND LABOR**

The most important issue that poses an existential threat to the entire human species is abrupt climate change and various forms of ecological devastation (see Scipes, 2017b). The forests, trees, plants, animals, insects, bacteria, air and water are being destroyed by industries around the globe. Right now, in the US, the major polluters and environmental bandits are energy companies and the agriculture industries who use more water than any other industry on the planet. That being said, plenty of industries pollute, and more often than not, at least historically speaking, union members and their families are the primary victims of industrial pollution.

Where I live, in Northwest Indiana, many people are still dependent on the energy sector for good paying jobs with benefits and the opportunity to actually retire, at least for now. In Whiting, Indiana, located at the southern tip of Lake Michigan, British Petroleum (BP) operates the largest refinery of tar sands in the entire Western Hemisphere. As one worker put it, BP is a "ticking time bomb." And with BP's track record, I have no reason to not believe him. That being said, the problem isn't what could potentially take place at the BP facilities, but what takes place every single day that is a primary concern. The future does not include tar sands. Yet, organized labor has said very little about the environmental impacts of refining the dirtiest and most energy consuming form of energy on the planet: tar sands from Alberta, Canada.

On a more practical level, the unions have also failed to lend even the most tacit support to local and regional environmentalists who have taken the lead on issues surrounding fresh drinking water, oil spills, environmental racism, or the ongoing lead crisis in East Chicago, where over 700 residents are being forced to move out of their homes due to extremely high levels of lead poisoning. The unions have played a very small role in helping those communities. In fact, some would argue that the unions haven't done much to help the people of East Chicago, and that's a shame because the current situation in East Chicago offers an opportunity to build a

serious and broad-based coalition of activists and organizers who don't regularly work with each other.

In May, 2016, 41 protesters were arrested during an international series of protests organized by 350.org. People around the planet worked in solidarity and with a similar message: we want a just transition away from fossil fuels. Here, once again, the unions were missing in action as they failed to not only support the event in a meaningful manner, but to even show up. Fortunately, plenty of rank and file members attended the events and actions that took place last year, but the union leadership, as usual, completely dropped the ball. Again, this isn't a petty political point, but, rather, a serious critique of the organizing practices within many unions.

Those of us who are organizing in towns, cities and regions whose population is disproportionately unionized must find ways to connect with the rank and file activists we see at local events. But that's easier said than done. If rank and file union members organized within their unions, even if that meant outside of the traditional union political structure, that would help those of us who want to organize more with unions because we would have an outlet to turn to. In other words, those of us who aren't members of industrial unions will have a difficult, if not impossible time trying to organize industrial sector union members without some internal structure.

We can help union members develop organizing skills and political knowledge, but we can't force them to organize within their own unions. While this topic may seem disconnected, the lack of communication between Black Lives Matter (BLM) and unions is also disheartening. The fact of the matter is that many white union members are racist. They also make a lot more money than their black and brown counterparts, even those who are unionized, so the reality of a white union worker, in many ways, is completely detached from, say, the reality of a black 22-year old living in Gary, Indiana, who's working multiple minimum wage jobs. It's not up to the minimum wage worker to reach out to the union worker who's making five times as much money—the onus is on those who are unionized. And I think those sort of relationships and organizing practices can be developed through a proper educational program that emphasizes long-term strategy over short-term self-interests.

We can see this in the Fight for \$15 campaign. Sure, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) has provided a decent amount of institutional support for the campaign, but not nearly enough. Here, maybe we shouldn't focus too much on SEIU and pose a question instead: where are the other unions? That's the real question. And one that's yet to be answered in a meaningful manner. As I mentioned before, unions in the US have dumped hundreds of millions of dollars into failed electoral campaigns, yet they spend very little on grassroots organizing efforts. If they do spend money on such efforts, it's only on the sort of efforts that they can control from the top-down.

Increased democracy within unions poses a serious threat to those who hold powerful positions within those institutions. The last thing many labor "leaders" want is an independent, educated and empowered rank and file union membership. Of course, it shouldn't be that way, but that is indeed the way it is. The power relations within unions are just as interesting as the power relations between unions and outside actors. How effectively rank and file union members can organize within their respective unions will dictate the future of the union movement, something I'll touch on in closing.

For the sake of this section, it's important to recognize that unions have been behind the curve when it comes to environmental devastation. To be fair, unions have fought hard and long battles to protect their workers from workplace pollution and toxicity, but they've done very little

to challenge the actual industries that produce horrible products for the environment that, to be honest, have virtually no future in our society in the context of climate change and environmental devastation.

While I think unions should do a better job reaching out to environmentalists, I would also suggest that environmentalists need to develop a series of alternatives. I think it would be a great help if environmental organizations could provide real-world alternatives and a just transition from fossil fuels to some limited form of “green energy.” That topic is far too complex and important to discuss in this essay, but I do think it’s something to keep in mind: namely, the fact that union workers would be more willing to oppose industrial projects if they were offered some viable alternatives. In the short term, that’s a major challenge. In the long term, I would argue it's a necessity.

Workers and environmentalists in Germany have done a decent job of creating “Red-Green” alliances. Without question, the context in Germany is much different from the context in the US, but I think some of those lessons could be applicable to our struggles. In order for this to happen, unions in the US must be better organized internally, because if they're not, it won't make much of a difference when environmentalists reach out. Again, the onus is on the union leadership as a whole. Unions must develop educational programs that can properly orient their members and explain the many dangers and threats we face as a species in the context of abrupt climate change, among other ecological crises.

There is simply no future for unions in the fossil fuel industry. Furthermore, I argue that there isn't much of a future in any industry that relies on the never-ending extraction of finite resources. In other words, there is simply no future in capitalism. While that statement may have been radical in past decades, I think more and more people around the globe, but especially in the US, are accepting that reality. For my generation (I'm a 32-year old Millennial), the future looks grim, both ecologically and economically speaking. It's going to be more and more difficult as the years pass along to convince younger people that there is a future in capitalism as the planet is being destroyed.

In this context, union leaders should take the lead, but they won't: it will be up to rank and file members to reform their unions. I have little faith in the existing union leadership. They lack vision and the ability to educate and mobilize large swaths of their members. Interacting with rank and file members is one of the most important things environmentalists could do to bring organized labor into the mix. In some places, such as San Francisco and Seattle, those bonds are being formed. But those are very specific areas, with very specific populations, demographics, histories, etc. The challenges we face in the Deep South, or the Rust Belt are much different. We must recognize those differences and challenges and act accordingly.

## **A Future Labor Movement**

Today, those of us living in the deindustrialized regions of the US are haunted by the ghosts of a brighter, more prosperous past. Yes, the pollution was horrible (and, in many ways, it still is). And yes, systemic racism plagued our communities (and yes, it still does), but at the end of the day, people had a sense that things were going to get better, at least economically speaking. Then, neoliberalism, automation and outsourcing destroyed those hopes. Today, the Rust Belt is filled with opioids, casinos, jails, failing schools, environmental racism and vacant buildings, as opposed to productive factories. The unions, like the government, had no adequate response to these processes. All that being said, it's time to think about what a future labor

movement could look like under our current circumstances.

In my thinking, people should get excited about the prospect of a new labor movement. It should be fun to think and talk about alternatives. I would argue that the left needs to do more thinking and talking about alternatives. Leftwing activists have a great idea of what we don't want, but outside of vague slogans, we rarely articulate what we do want. And let me be very clear: I'm not talking about small choices—I'm talking about huge choices. For instance, if we're going to live in a capitalist system, at least for the time being, how much do people truly have to work? After all, productivity is at an all-time high. We should fight for a 20-hour workweek. Then, we should fight for a 10-hour workweek. In some communities, and under certain circumstances, I would recommend a standard income, or a basic living wage salary.

If we're going to live in a capitalist system, can we at least nationalize essential services such as the energy sector? If not through traditional forms of nationalization, can local and regional groups publicly control such entities? Should our workplaces be structured in a hierarchical fashion, or can we radically restructure the ways in which decisions are made? Can we have true workplace democracy? And can we make those structures flexible enough to be changed over the years as new and younger activists get involved? Surely, their ideas about democracy, organizing, and sustainability will be much different from ours, or mine. How can we build organizations that can accommodate a wide range of leftwing views and organizational practices, strategies, and tactics?

Beyond reforms within a capitalist system, and thinking specifically about organized labor's role in future movements, how can we encourage union members and union structures to think about alternative economic systems, whether they be at the local, regional, national or international level? As I mentioned in the section concerning the environment, the scientific community is very clear: our time is running out. We have to stop burning fossil fuels; we cannot continue to overpopulate the globe; we cannot depend on an infinite growth economy on a planet with finite resources; and we have to challenge the US Empire, something the unions have failed to do in recent decades.

One of the main challenges activists face in the US is American Nationalism and American Exceptionalism. In other words, the idea that the nation-state of the U.S. is inherently better than its counterparts abroad. Nationalism, in many ways, is still a powerful force in modern society, particularly in the US, but also in other former colonial or neocolonial states such as France, Japan, Russia, the UK, etc. Arbitrary lines and jingoistic rhetoric still poison the airwaves, textbooks and minds of millions across the globe, but no more than in the US, where citizens fly flags year-round and engage in the most vapid displays of self-aggrandizing nationalism. Those living in the U.S. are indoctrinated at a very young age with very complex and potent forms of propaganda.

In this context, organized labor can provide a different vision, an international vision. However, it can't be based solely on one's position within the so-called "working-class." Those organizing at the international level must develop a series of values. Here, I recommend the book *Building Global Labor Solidarity in a Time of Accelerating Globalization*, edited by Professor Kim Scipes (2016). As Scipes and others have noted, those values should be flexible, and surely some of those values will be based in traditional Marxist terms and ideas, but we can't expect people in 2017 to gravitate toward an ideology and worldview that was developed in 1848 when the *Communist Manifesto* was written. We are currently living in a world in which our economic and political systems were developed in the Victorian era. Right now, people are contemplating potentially colonizing Mars, yet those living in the U.S. still endure a Senate. The original senate,

the Roman Senate, was created in 708BC.

What does this mean? Well, as one of my favorite philosophers, Slavoj Žižek, often says, “Humanity in today’s world can dream about anything—going to outer space, changing their gender, flying cars—except a new economic system.” Here, I’m also thinking of the science fiction writer, Ursula Le Guin, who said, “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.” The point, for me, is to always think big. Our job, as activists, organizers, educators, artists, musicians, and workers is to challenge ourselves and others to always think outside the box. Unfortunately, in today’s political climate, that’s looked down upon. But only in official circles. The more work I do locally, the more I’m reminded that we can never underestimate people.

If someone would have told me in early 2015 that Bernie Sanders would’ve had a shot at beating Hillary Clinton in the Democrat Party primary, I would’ve laughed in their face. Maybe I was too cynical. Obviously, I didn’t have my hand on the pulse of the country in which I live. There were a lot of mistakes I, and others on the left made prior to the Bernie movement. Now, the key for all of our movements is to learn from those mistakes and hopefully build a left with the knowledge and best practices of the past, but with the ability to prepare for the future. If the left can rebuild the labor movement by creating new institutions that are capable of addressing climate change/ecological devastation, U.S. Empire, systemic racism and patriarchy, while also challenging ideological concepts such as nationalism, who knows what the future may hold for our species?

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- 1 IVAW's web site is at [www.ivaw.org](http://www.ivaw.org) (accessed May 30, 2017).
  - 2 USLAW's web site is at <http://uslaboragainstar.org/> (accessed May 30, 2017).
  - 3 Kim Scipes has put the AFL-CIO's foreign policy into the context of the US Empire. See Scipes, 2010: xxiv-xxxi; see also Scipes, 2016: 26-36.
  - 4 Among many excellent books on the US Empire, see especially Blum (1986, 2005, 2014, 2015), and Johnson (2000, 2010).
  - 5 Nichols, 2012. Other good books on the Wisconsin Uprising of 2011 include Buhle and Buhle, eds., 2011, and Yates, ed., 2012. For a review of all three—initially published in 2012—see Scipes, 2017a.
  - 6 For arguably the most accessible account of the causes of the 2008-09 “Great Recession,” see the movie “The Big Short.” Michael Moore’s movie, “Capitalism: A Love Story,” focuses on the social consequences of the economic disaster.
  - 7 For an excellent, in-depth (critical) evaluation of Occupy Wall Street, see Smucker (2017). Smucker, a long-time radical activist, has written a very thoughtful, and thought-provoking analysis that every activist should read.
  - 8 *Substance News.net* covered many aspects of the election between Emanuel and Garcia. *Substance* is arguably the most pro-public education journal in the country from a pro-union standpoint, and the web site can be searched. George Schmidt, a former teacher and long-time activist, is the editor.