

Remarks of
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Let me first express my belief that this conference and others like it are some of the most significant and important events that will occur in our union. We conduct many important seminars, forums and conferences at every level on issues relative to our operations, organizing, contract services, education and other functions. And they are all valuable to the role of the union and the needs of our members.

But for me, what's significant about this meeting is that the union recognized the need to identify and prepare leaders to carry this institution we have built into the future. Leaders with a solid understanding of yesterday, a sense of today, and a vision for tomorrow. Individuals – men and women from across the entire spectrum – whose circumstance has made leaders, some who chose this work as a career hoping to develop the skills to be leaders, and many whose natural talent and commitment led them to this movement and this union.

We are a different union today than we were when Arnold Zander and some courageous state employees embarked on this journey seventy or more years ago. We are different, our employers are different, and the environment in which we exist is different.

We don't make "widgets" or "gadgets" or anything else that can be sold for a profit. We provide those critical functions that deal with quality of life issues in our society. In spite of this key fact and critical difference, we are probably the least understood and least appreciated union within the family of unions.

There was a time when the general public valued the basic services we delivered: quality care for those placed in institutions, the peace of mind in knowing that our water was safe to drink and our food, safe to eat. Our schools were clean and our children were safe, our roads would be plowed in the winter and repaired in the summer, we would protect our environment from corporate abuse for the enjoyment of future generations. These services we have provided in the past and, as a key institution in our society, will continue to fight.

It is for all these reasons that those who would lead the institution we are building must come to this movement seeking more than just a paycheck.

Our biennial membership poll, done this past March, tells us that 72 percent of our leaders are 45 and over; 55 percent are over 50. Nearly one-quarter of our leaders are ages 55 to 59. The data also tell us that almost 40 percent of our leaders have worked for their present employer for 20 years or more. It's clear that within the next five to ten

years, the normal processes will leave a tremendous void in the leadership of our union – a void at every level. We must act now to prepare for that reality.

Our work and effort on the 21st Century Initiative was aimed at taking and making a clear-eyed analysis of what we are confronted with as a union and what our members are confronted with as workers in an environment of declining appreciation for what they do. We must change the debate about the value of services we deliver. If this debate is always services versus tax dollars, we will continually lose the argument.

You are in the process of developing and sharpening the skills necessary to defend our union and to protect and promote the interest of our members. In this effort, you have not forgotten and should never forget our reason for being.

You have demonstrated your recognition and understanding of this issue. You have done internal organizing within our locals and councils and you have done external organizing to bring new members into our movement. Many of you have done the educational and mobilization work to build the bridge between our union and the communities we serve.

The effectiveness of your work, and that of literally hundreds of thousands of young people, gave us and the world an opportunity for a new beginning. President Barack Obama would not be in the White House if not for the early commitment, dedication and hard work of legions of young people like yourselves.

Nowhere during the course of this struggle did I hear the narrow call for a nickel more an hour, but rather the broad-based call to lay a better foundation for a new society.

This simple fact, I believe, is a product of your determination to organize and mobilize around what could be, as opposed to what is. I believe your work helped many re-think their position on what is, giving them a sound rationale for voting their preferences rather than voting their prejudices.

This is what we've always been about, and you're carrying on a great tradition. The early founders and pioneers of our union, many of whom are actively engaged in our retiree movement, still fight for the issues that were important to them as workers and we value their contribution to our overall effort.

I know as young members that you, just like our founders, have your own set of unique issues. What is amazing is the incredible similarity of those issues:

- A strong and stable economy in which to earn a decent living.
- The ability to raise your families in a safe and secure environment.
- An education system that prepares you for the world of the future.
- Affordable health care and a secure retirement.
- Quality time to spend with your family or friends or by yourself, just cooling out and chillin'.

Our retirees are continuing to fight for these issues and they still fight for the principles that motivated them to join the union in the first place: fairness, equity, dignity and decency.

You bring new energy to this struggle about core principles. You must, however, expand the definitions of our core principles. Those definitions must extend to the millions of poor and working poor that Michael Harrington wrote about as he stirred the conscience of the nation in his book, *The Other America*.

Our definitions must extend to the millions of people who work every day, but still cannot lift themselves out of poverty.

Brothers and Sisters, we are the needed army to carry out the hopes and aspirations of Samuel Gompers in his response to the question, “What does Labor want?” We want more schoolhouses and fewer jails; more books and fewer arsenals; more learning and less vice; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge. In fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures.

As I look out across this audience of young trade union leaders, I don’t think it matters so much why you came. The fact of the matter is that you are here.

You may be from the school of pragmatism that argues that we should just fight for better wages and benefits and leave the rest of this stuff alone.

Or you might have a touch of Michael Harrington in you, and you see trade unions in a democratic society as a catalyst for empowerment and social change.

If we were to put the pragmatist and the idealist together, it is conceivable that we could build the social, political and economic force that could effectively achieve Gompers’ dream of what labor wants.

If we are headed in this direction, we must do some very specific things, things that are and should be the goals of this conference:

1. Make new/young members feel welcome and valued in the union.
2. Provide encouragement to young members who are in leadership positions.
3. Share knowledge and ideas about the critical role that unions should play in civil society.

As we witness every day at every level of government, in areas of key services, education, health care, the environment, energy – every area that is crucial to the future we are trying to build – there are great challenges.

The challenges that confront us do not allow us the luxury of opting out of the game. We must confront new challenges with new ideas, new creativity and new energy. That’s what I hope – what I know – we have in this room.

If this is true and we believe it, then our one million, six hundred thousand members are one of the great movements of our time. This fact has more importance than our chest-beating slogans or our mind-boggling definitions of our own self-induced sense of importance.

I would argue that for our one million, six hundred thousand members, the question becomes not just what are we doing for them but equally important, what are we doing with them.

We cannot delegate the responsibility for building the kind of society we seek either to our full-time adversaries or to our part-time allies. We must set the agenda and continue to build the power to make it a reality.

As President Obama said, we are the change we have been waiting for. You are the change we have been waiting for.