

UNIONIZING THE WHITE COLLAR WORKFORCE*By Jim Grossfeld*

"You need to be bar mitzvahed!" my London-born, Orthodox grandfather bellowed. I was taken aback. After all, even though I was 13, I'd been raised a suburban, ham-eating Jew whose only religious instruction was watching the Ten Commandments on TV.

"But I don't understand Hebrew," I answered. "It doesn't matter," he shot back, "just go up and say the bloody words!"

When I think about the relationship between labor leaders and their young, more upscale Democratic brethren I'm often reminded of that encounter. Like my grandfather, many in the labor movement hold firm to their Orthodox trade unionism and expect younger Democrats to honor it regardless. And, like me at 13, many of those Democrats see it as an empty ritual; something you do it to make the old guys happy. And that's a tragedy, because labor and Democrats could both gain if only more in the Party recognized that old time religion could speak to the needs of white-collar workers with uncertain careers. And it can. This is the principal finding of the recent Center for American Progress study of mine, "White Collar Perspectives on Workplace Issues."

The study, based on polling data and focus group research by Lake Research Partners, underscores the extent to which young technical and professional workers are as bewildered by the "new economy" as manufacturing workers have been for a generation. For them, Bill Clinton's 1993 prediction that they "will change jobs eight times in a lifetime" is an unquestioned fact of life. As one focus group participant put it: "Our parents, they were able to keep their old jobs for 25, 30 years. They were very secure, and if they wanted to move over to another job they pretty much could, but if you find yourself out of work at age 50 in this day and age and you need to change fields because your industry has been eliminated and you don't have training; no one will want to hire you."

"I've been actually pretty much covering three people's jobs," another worker said. "Two people are out on disability so I jumped in the spot where I'm covering three people's jobs. Then when they bring in the temp into the office I have to take time and train him, but I don't have the time because I'm covering three people's jobs!"

There was a time when more than a few of us would have cited comments like these as evidence of a nascent proletarianization—often justifiably so. For example, the California Nurses Association has been winning the support of some RNs with a message as militant as anything

to come out of the United Mine Workers. Yet, as unstable and stressful as their jobs have become, few white collar workers will tell you that they're being ground down under the boot heel of capitalism. Instead, they will say that instability and turmoil are unavoidable in today's economy. And employers? They're just doing what they have to do. In the words of another focus group member:

"Most owners want to maximize their investment out of every employee and they're going to push you beyond your limits until they can reach some sort of capacity that's going to support one more person or whatever. So there's that time frame in there that you're way over-worked and that's just a part of getting to the next level No it's not fair, but unfortunately the economics plays into that."

Long ago Seymour Martin Lipset described how white-collar workers see their interests as the same as management's. Notwithstanding the challenges they face today there's little reason to suggest that's changed. This is especially so in the attitudes many voice about unions. "Certainly at one point when the unions were formed they were very important," remarked one worker, adding: "I mean workers were horribly treated and not paid, you know? Child labor and all sorts of things. I think at that point the unions were very, very important. I think there are other avenues that are available, now that workers in general have a better voice in most situations, to address those same problems that don't necessarily have to involve a union."

It's not that U.S. workers share a deep-seated animus toward unions. To the contrary, by some measures public approval of unions is as high today as it's been in 40 years. Few Americans doubt that unions improve wages and working conditions. Yet, according to one 2005 Harris poll, 55 percent also believe unions stifle individual initiative and 60 percent agree that unions are more concerned with resisting change than helping to bring it about.

Of course, the labor movement has a huge stake in turning these attitudes around and more than a few believe the way to do it is to present unions as a movement that fights for social justice. In fact, a search of the AFL-CIO's website finds that the words "fight" or "fighting" appear almost 2,900 times: that's more than twice as frequently as the words turn up on the website of *The Boxing Times*. Don't get me wrong: being seen as standing up for worker rights isn't a bad thing. Efforts to organize janitors, hotel employees, farm laborers and other poverty-wage workers routinely win the sympathy of many technical and professional workers. But it hardly follows that those workers will then choose to unionize, too. Some white collar workers may want to join a struggle for justice on the job, but most just want to advance in their careers. Even if labor laws were made fair, many of these workers would still feel that unions have become eight-track tapes in an iPod economy.

Is all this to say that white-collar workers are ready to send unions to the Hefty bag of history? Not necessarily. In truth, white-collar workers do see the value in having some kind of workplace organization, just not the kind they think the labor movement is offering. When asked to describe the kind of group she would create for herself and her coworkers, one focus group member said it would promote “a safer workplace, better pay, opportunities for advancement, improving morale, bringing more revenue to our company, more training for the employees and more employee recognition.” Another said his would focus on employee recognition to help retain workers. A third added that she would have her group create child-care options for workers and join with employers to lower health-care costs. Another summed up the attitude of most when she said there needed to be an organization that would work to “create an environment where people want to come to work.”

It should not come as any surprise then that they sat up and took notice when they were presented with examples of existing unions who seem to be doing just that. Focus group members who had rolled their eyes at the mention of past union achievements were intrigued by case studies of unions joining forces with management to train employees for new tech jobs, working with employers to develop telecommuting policies, and creating a multi-employer pension funds for freelancers. They especially liked hearing how one union worked closely with an employer to turn a failing company around and make it competitive. In fact, they gave a thumbs up to every example of unions and management working together to help companies succeed.

To some, this may seem like labor-lite: less John L. Lewis than Stephen Covey, but whoever becomes its champion stands to make inroads with a new generation of young, career-oriented workers. Just ask the Republicans. “The times in which we live and work are changing dramatically,” George W. Bush told the 2004 Republican National Convention.

The workers of our parents' generation typically had one job, one skill, one career often with one company that provided health care and a pension... Many of our most fundamental systems -- the tax code, health coverage, pension plans, worker training -- were created for the world of yesterday, not tomorrow. We will transform these systems so that all citizens are equipped, prepared and thus truly free to make your own choices and pursue your own dreams.

Democrats and the labor movement should be able to do better than this. And they can. But not by recycling Bill Clinton's taking points or, for that matter, Henry Wallace's. Instead, Democrats ought to showcase new approaches to workplace organization – and the modern

labor laws that make them possible -- as part of a broader plan to help white-collar workers succeed in their careers. For their part, labor leaders need to recognize that few workers, particularly technical and professional employees, want to sign up to join a coalition of victims. Rather than insist that those workers conform to more orthodox approaches to unionism they need to create new structures (dare I say products?) designed to meet their needs. The CWA, SEIU and a few other unions get this. The rest need to.

What should Democrats and labor be saying to younger, white-collar workers? It would be the following:

- New technologies and globalization have changed how Americans work. What matters isn't what labor unions achieved in the past, it's how new unions can help employees — and employers — succeed now and in the future.
- That's why we are seeing the growth of new unions created by professionals who believe in being flexible and working together with management to make firms more competitive and profitable.
- These new unions provide a strong, respected voice so that employees can team up with management to solve tough problems, whether they're healthcare costs, overwhelming workloads, or the need for leading-edge training and opportunities for advancement.
- The new unions also understand that as more Americans work from home or as contractors and part-time employees, it's important that they have the resources they need to be successful, such as networking opportunities, ideas for better telecommuting and access to portable health insurance and pension benefits.

Apostasy? No doubt to some it is. But at a time when union membership is in a freefall labor needs a better strategy for organizing younger, white-collar workers than hoping they become class-conscious – and Democrats need to demonstrate that they care as much about helping them succeed in their careers as they do about stem cell research. It isn't enough to just go up and say the bloody words.

Jim Grossfeld is a veteran of more than 25 years of union organizing drives and contract campaigns. During the Clinton administration, he was a senior aide to U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy and, later, U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala. Grossfeld later served as Communications Director for U.S. House Democratic Whip David Bonior (D-MI) and as Director of Speechwriting and Editorial Services at the Center for American Progress in Washington. Based in Bethesda, Md., he is now a public affairs consultant for unions and non-profit groups and a frequent contributor to the *American Prospect* magazine.