HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF HOW LABOR CHANGES ON KEY ISSUES

These five case studies reveal how labor has changed positions on important public policy issues such as civil rights, the Iraq war, single payer health care, globalization, and immigration. Each case sheds light on different strategic approaches.

1. Civil Rights

Many American unions had a long history as whites-only organizations; others long tolerated segregated locals; others had substantial black membership and a tradition of opposition to discrimination. When the AFL and the CIO merged in 1955, these forces came into sub rosa collision. Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly approached the AFL-CIO for an alliance, but won no support at the top. Leaders of the former CIO industrial unions, however, were convinced that civil rights had to be addressed in the workplace and in society at large. UAW president Walter Reuther served as a visible public spokesperson for this view. The former CIO unions used the Industrial Union Department (IUD), which they had created at the time of the merger as an autonomous entity where they deposited the CIO treasury and progressive ideology, to support civil rights.

The industrial unions backed state civil rights laws. Walter Reuther and Martin Luther King, Jr., led a 200,000-strong civil rights march through the streets of Detroit. While the AFL-CIO executive council refused to support the 1963 March on Washington, King worked on organizing it out of the UAW national headquarters. The AFL-CIO ultimately supported the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

These industrial unions, working through the Industrial Union Department, AFL-CIO, also helped establish the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) and supported it with financial contributions and shared staff and office space. The executive council of the IUD became the place where union leadership strategized about how to advance labor’s position on civil rights.

In this case, an institutionalized group of unions within the house of labor essentially pursued its own policy different from, but tolerated by, the top national leadership of the AFL-CIO.
2. Trade and Globalization

In the aftermath of World War II, 40 percent of the world’s goods were produced by American workers in the United States and American unions generally supported "free trade" policies that promoted American exports to the rest of the world. As other countries become competitive in particular industries, individual unions, starting with textile and garment workers, followed by the steel and auto workers, shifted over to advocate protection against foreign competition. This divided the labor movement between those who gained and those who lost from increased trade; it was largely ineffective in halting the erosion of American manufacturing; and it made organized labor easy to portray as a reactionary special interest.

The proposals for a new international trade regime embodied in what became NAFTA and the WTO required the labor movement to reposition itself on trade-related issues. Instead of simply opposing trade deals as a threat to particular union jobs, it developed a broad critique of corporate-led globalization as a "race to the bottom" that threatened environmental protection, consumer protection, and democracy itself. It proposed as an alternative not a return to economic nationalism, but a different kind of global economy designed with a floor of universal labor and environmental rights and standards. This made it possible to form new alliances with consumer, community, and above all environmental movements.

This alternative approach to globalization percolated upwards from a variety of initiatives in the later 1980s. Groups like the National Labor Committee for Human Rights in El Salvador (which evolved into a well-known anti-sweatshop group), which included both rank-and-file activists and many national union presidents, forced open debate on labor support for US policy in Central America. The building of more than 1,700 plants by US companies in the maquiladora region of Mexico brought the issues of globalization right to the doorstep of US unions, while showing that established union strategies could not protect US jobs or wages. As the US government negotiated the NAFTA agreement to institutionalize unregulated commerce throughout the continent, opposition sprang up among environmental, consumer, citizens, farm, urban, and many other sectors, convened primarily by the Citizen's Trade Campaign. These groups represented a crucial set of allies for labor – but also meant that labor had to support the concerns of a wide range of allies, including environmentalists. The result was a highly decentralized, highly diverse campaign against NAFTA in which unions and allies worked together closely at a local level while organized labor used its political muscle nationally.

While the struggle against NAFTA was ultimately lost, it laid the groundwork for a deepening understanding of and engagement with issues of globalization. One outcome was the decision of the AFL-CIO to commit major resources to the mass demonstrations that halted the formative meeting of the
World Trade Organization in Seattle on November 30, 1999. While subsequent policies have varied from time to time and from union to union, this basic orientation has remained, and has formed the basis for the labor-environmental coalition that has emerged around global warming and green jobs.

3. Immigration

Although the American labor movement has largely been composed for much of its history of immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, organized labor throughout its history has generally supported restriction of immigration. In the midst of the largest wave of mass immigration in history, a perception of labor as "anti-immigrant" served as a powerful deterrent to the recruitment of immigrants into the labor movement.

By the 1980s, immigrant workers formed an important part of the workforce in industries throughout the country. Local coalitions between immigrant communities and organized labor became critical aspects of organizing drives and strikes. Growing numbers of union members and leaders were themselves immigrants.

According to immigrant labor rights advocate David Bacon, in the late 1990s “a movement began in labor’s activist base, seeking to change the AFL-CIO position on immigration. It spread from the Alameda County Central Labor Council to councils and unions throughout the country.” Patient work by labor and immigrant-rights activists “convinced the garment, electrical and service employees unions and the California Labor Federation to call for the repeal of employer sanctions and related anti-immigrant worker legislation.”

At the October, 1999 convention of the AFL-CIO, unions representing janitors, garment workers, hotel workers, and restaurant workers argued that the labor movement needed to embrace immigrant causes in order to survive. The issue was deferred to the Executive Council. At this point John Wilhelm, president of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees, made it a personal crusade to convert the AFL-CIO leadership to supporting immigrant rights. He visited top union leaders one by one to persuade them to change their position. In the wake of his efforts, the February, 2000 Executive Council meeting unexpectedly voted for repeal of the employer sanctions provision in immigration law and for a general amnesty for most illegal immigrants.

4. Iraq War

The American labor movement has, with some exceptions, generally been a supporter of U.S. wars. The AFL-CIO was notable as a continuing supporter of
5. Single Payer, Universal Health Care

American trade unions negotiate health benefits with their employers and in many cases provide health services through union-affiliated clinics and other providers. They have not in general been supporters of government programs that would compete with these sources of provision; in particular they have not supported a single-payer healthcare system. For many years, unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the AFL-CIO itself actively opposed a single-payer healthcare system.

A decade or so ago, a nurse and union organizer in Kentucky named Kay Tillow organized Unions for Single Payer Health Care to support John Conyers’ HR 676 single payer bill. Her strategy was to provide information and encouragement...
for labor organizations from the most grassroots level up to pass resolutions supporting the bill.

The results have been phenomenal. As of February 4, 2012, HR 676 has been endorsed by HR 676 has been endorsed by 585 union organizations in 49 states; 135 Central Labor Councils and Area Labor Federations; 39 state AFL-CIO’s; and 22 international/national unions.

In 2009, the AFL-CIO national convention endorsed single payer health care. “The experience of Medicare (and of nearly every other industrialized country) shows the most cost-effective and equitable way to provide quality healthcare is through a single-payer system. Our nation should provide a single high standard of comprehensive care for all.”

**Conclusions**

The bottom line is that the American labor movement’s policies can and do change in fundamental ways, but only over time and through concerted effort. Major change in labor movement policy usually occur in the context of major social changes that affect the daily life of workers and the institutional position of unions. They also involve the threat that unions will be isolated if they do not change. They therefore involve renegotiation of relations with other social groups---formation of new and breaking of old alliances.

The emergence of a new wave of activism, illustrated by 350.org and the Occupy Wall Street movements around the country, provide such a challenge for organized labor. LNS is actively working to promote convergence among labor, climate, and Occupy movements around common concerns and interests with climate and full-spectrum sustainability.

The specific process by which change occurs in the labor movement may be top-down, bottom-up, or in many cases a combination of the two. LNS’s strategy is based on moving simultaneously at several levels. We organize and support rank-and-file union members and local leaders to speak out on climate issues. We work with leaders and staff in many unions to develop constructive approaches to climate issues. We encourage national union leaders to step forward and take broader leadership on climate. And we seek to build an alliance of unions who will take a forthright stand on climate themselves and push the two labor federations to do so.