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Unintended, but Sound Advice

By Bob Herbert

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Damon Winter/The New York Times
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In Lewis Powell's now-famous memo to America's business community, which felt beleaguered in the political environment of 1971, the future Supreme Court justice stressed the importance of organizing.

"Strength lies in organization," he wrote, "in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and national organizations."

Powell's memo points to the reason why there is such an effort now not just to extract concessions from public employee unions to help balance state budgets, but to actually crush those unions, to deprive them once and for all of the crucial and fundamental right to bargain collectively.

When you talk to the workers who are hurting most in this epic downturn, they are overwhelmingly out there on their own. No one has their back. The corporate community and the politicians who do their bidding know better than anyone else that workers who are not organized are most often helpless. They have no leverage. They cannot demand raises or health and retirement benefits or paid vacations or sick leave. They cannot negotiate shorter hours or better working conditions. It's the boss's way or the highway.

It's not just pocketbook issues but the dignity of American workers that is at stake in the confrontations in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere. These confrontations are about so much more than the right of public employees to bargain collectively, as important as that is. This most recent assault on labor is part of an anti-worker movement that has been on the march for decades. Jobs have been shipped overseas. Workers have been denied their rightful share of productivity gains. Wages have been depressed and benefits in many, many instances have disappeared.

It's true that states are facing serious fiscal problems, crises in some cases, but a much bigger threat to America as we've known it is the increasing inability of hard-working men and women to earn enough to maintain a middle class standard of living, even as the corporate sector is thriving. The economic lives of the poor and an ever-widening portion of the middle class have become maddeningly insecure as the wealth of the society has been funneled, increasingly and unconscionably, to those at the top.

There was no net job creation during the first 10 years of the 21st century, and median incomes fell during that period, an abysmal record unmatched by any similar period in the modern post-World War II era.

I have long believed that virtually all workers should be organized, whether they were actually in a union or not. The man or woman who goes home after a long shift with barely enough to pay bills and nothing put away for an emergency, and who knows that he or she could be terminated at any moment for any

reason, is subject to a permanent state of anxiety. There should be someone, some group or organization, to turn to for advice and support.

Unemployed workers who show up fully qualified to apply for a job only to be told that the prospective employer will not even consider someone who is already out of work should not have to feel that there is absolutely no alternative, that it is impossible to fight back. American workers should not be treated as if they don't matter.

Working America is a pro-worker advocacy organization affiliated with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. that has signed up millions of nonunion members in an effort to increase the organized reach of workers. Much more organizing, on myriad fronts, is desperately needed.

Millions of Americans throughout the country are facing extreme economic hardship. The Community Service Society in New York City does an annual survey of low-income residents. Twenty-seven percent of respondents to its most recent survey said they had lost a job; 26 percent had had their hours, wages or tips reduced; 23 percent said they had often skipped meals because they did not have enough money to buy food; and 26 percent said they had been unable to fill a needed prescription because of a lack of money or insurance.

One of the saddest things I've read in The New York Times recently was [a comment](#) by Richard Freeman, a Harvard economist, who said that he views the current hostility toward unions by members of the general public as a sign of the erosion of the aspirational nature that has for so long characterized Americans. "It shows a hopelessness," he said. "It used to be, 'You have something I don't have; I'll go to my employer to get it, too. Now I don't see any chance of getting it. I don't want to be the lowest one on the totem pole, so I don't want you to have it either.'"

Lewis Powell's advice to the corporate community in 1971 is — though he certainly never intended it to be — the best advice I can think of for workers today who are fighting to hold off the tide of lower living standards. It is not a struggle that can possibly be won alone.