How Labor Can Be Big Again

"Organizing Power: The Prospects for an American Labor Movement" by Margaret Levi, in *Perspectives on Politics* (Mar. 2003), American Political Science Assn., 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036–1206.

Can organized labor recover its political mojo? "Big Labor" was once feared and courted by politicians because it represented more than 33 percent of the nation's wage and salary workers. Today organized labor is often regarded as just another special-interest group, representing, Levi notes, "only 13.5 percent of all wage and salary workers" and "only nine percent of private-sector wage and salary workers." (Unions had their highest absolute number of members, 20.2 million, in 1978; by 2001, that number had declined to 16.3 million.) Nonetheless, she is hopeful about the future of unions and believes that they are vital to democracy.

Labor needs "to become once again a social movement," argues Levi, a political scientist at the University of Washington. "In order for organized labor to play its critical role as a countervailing power within the American political system, there must be intensified organizing, internal democratization, increased electoral and lobbying clout, and social-movement unions willing to mobilize with others and, if necessary, on the streets."

A study last year, commissioned by the AFL-CIO, found that there has been a surge of support for union representation since 1984, when no more than 35 percent of nonunionized workers wanted a union. Now, 50 percent do. To boost their rolls, Levi contends, unions must do more than try to improve members' paychecks, benefits, and working conditions. They must also encourage members to get involved in

EXCERPT

Old-Time Ambiguity

Opinions of the founding generation were scattered all across the spectrum on the question of the assistance government could give religion. Consider the Baptists, the most ardent separationists in the Founding Era. Some Baptists in Massachusetts and Maryland actually favored selective state financial subsidies for churches; others, while disapproving financial support, encouraged the state to print and distribute bibles; Virginia Baptists opposed both measures but were happy to accept public accommodations for church services. Presbyterians were divided over state financial assistance to churches, as were political leaders in virtually every state. Statesmen like George Washington changed their minds on the issue. James Madison participated intermittently in public religious acts for 30 years, i.e., in issuing religious proclamations, which in the privacy of retirement he deplored. Jefferson permitted church services to be held in federal office buildings but was accused of hypocrisy for doing so.

Confronted by opinions so diverse and problematic, the best scholarship can be of only limited assistance in supplying the "correct" answer about the framers' precise intentions regarding government assistance to religion—a painful conclusion for a supporter of the "jurisprudence of original intent." Yet, according to a Massachusetts commentator in 1780, the meaning of the term "establishment of religion" was even then "prodigiously obscure." If so, do today's judges not deserve a degree of sympathy as they try to tease out the intentions of the drafters and ratifiers of the First Amendment?

—James H. Hutson, chief of the manuscript division at the Library of Congress, and author of *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (1998), in *Claremont Review of Books* (Spring 2003)

"larger issues of democratization (within the union and within the larger polity), social justice, and economic equality. . . . Members pay dues and strike but are also expected to mobilize on behalf of causes beyond their own." Such "social-movement" unions, Levi maintains, "tend to be democratic and participatory."

Since their election in 1995, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney and his "New Voices" colleagues have been shaking up the labor union bureaucracy, says Levi. "Redefining its program through action," the AFL-CIO has gotten involved in campaigns against sweatshops and for "global justice" and a "living wage." About 80 cities and counties around the country have enacted "living wage" ordinances, obliging contractors to pay wages that are usually above the federal minimum.

Levi believes that the "fresh vitality" she detects in American unions has come none too soon. Unions "offer collective influence to those who lack individual clout in important political and economic domains," and, for that reason, they're "essential to a vigorous American democracy." If unions "mobilize as a social movement," she says, they'll be better able to get that message across.

Foreign Policy & Defense

Germany and Japan—and Iraq

"Occupational Hazards" by Douglas Porch, in *The National Interest* (Summer 2003), 1615 L St., N.W., Ste. 1230, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Some proponents of preventive war in Iraq suggested that postwar nation-building after the war would be a snap. Look at how the United States turned Germany and Japan into model democracies after World War II. But the task, in fact, wasn't so easy

No cheering: Japanese officials oversee an American-backed election during the 1950s.