



Lansing State Journal

F. Vincent Vernuccio: Unions must adapt to be successful

In order to revive the labor movement, unions need to go back to their original mission of representation in the workplace, only now putting the worker at the center of the movement. (Note the previous sentence said “worker,” not workers.) Unions must focus on tailoring their services to each individual worker, making freedom, choice and achievement paramount.

Most unions are still using an industrial era, one-size-fits-all model that is almost a century old. Their focus is on an adversarial approach, pitting employee against employer, and focusing more on special interest politics than representation.

This model leaves little room for cooperation and does not incentivize productivity or reward the best and brightest union workers through things like merit pay.

Unions need to bring their business model into the 21st century and provide specific services that workers may take as a whole or pick a la carte.

There are four areas where labor unions can succeed if they adapt.

- **Professional organizations.** Unions should act as the American Bar Association or other professional association. They should advocate for their members’ interests in the industry, serve as a resource for collaboration and provide social networking events.

- **Unions as trainers and voluntary certification agencies.** Many unions, such the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, already provide top quality training to their members. Unions should continue to provide training and apprenticeship programs (free of taxpayer dollars). As a complement, they can also act as voluntary certification agencies such as the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence.

Labor success in this area will show employers their members are some of the best in the business and show workers they will be more employable by going through union

training.

- **Unions as insurance.** Unions can provide malpractice insurance and other optional life, health and retirement benefits, such as defined-contribution plans, which workers can take with them from job to job and union to union.

- **Unions as representatives.** Representation is perhaps the most identifiable service unions provide their members. But it is time for them to realize that employees are unique. No matter how well or poorly an employee performs, they are generally under the same contract and have the same pay system. Unions should refocus on providing resources for individual contracts. Employees should be allowed to negotiate for themselves or join a collective contract; ideally there would be several to choose from.

Labor leaders from AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka to UAW President Bob King have acknowledged the old model of labor organizing is failing. King has openly said he wants to adapt the UAW to a more cooperative German model of “works council” unionization.

For all his talk, however, he is still trying to ruin the reputation of southern auto manufacturers so they will agree to take away the secret ballot from workers and make UAW unionization

easier.

Trumka has also stated that he wants to focus on organizing non-union workers into “worker centers.” While this is close to the concept of unionization for the 21st Century, worker centers miss the mark by focusing more on politics and intimidation of companies than on representation.

By putting individual workers first, catering to their needs, giving them choice and rewarding their productivity, the labor movement cannot only survive but thrive.

Written by F. Vincent Vernuccio is director of labor policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.