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July 9, 2010

Restoring a Hallowed Vision

By BOB HERBERT

“We’re going to show that there is a different day in America — that working people are sick and tired of the bosses getting million-dollar bonuses and the workers getting the short end of the stick.”

— Bob King

In April 1968, the same month that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed in Memphis, where he had gone to support striking sanitation workers, the president of the powerful auto workers’ union, Walter Reuther, traveled to Memphis to give the strikers critically needed financial support.

The sanitation workers were black. In his biography of Reuther, Nelson Lichtenstein noted that the check he handed over to the strikers was the largest outside contribution that they would receive. Some officials at the United Automobile Workers headquarters in Detroit were taken aback. “But Reuther forged ahead,” Lichtenstein wrote, “offering an impassioned defense of interracial solidarity.”

Three-thousand delegates to the U.A.W. convention later that year heard Reuther say: “We laid \$50,000 on the line to demonstrate we meant business. Who helped *us* back in 1936 and 1937 when we were being beaten up and shot at, when our offices and our cars were being blown up by the

gangsters hired by the corporations?

“Who helped us? The coal miners ... the clothing workers ... as long as I am identified with the leadership of this great union, we are going to extend a hand of solidarity to every group of workers who are struggling for justice.”

Reuther believed that solidarity and a commitment to social and economic justice was the very essence of the union movement. If you want to hear a heartfelt restatement of those beliefs for the early 21st century, a period in which the union movement is in great distress and the living standards of working people have seriously declined, listen to the soft-spoken new president of the U.A.W., Bob King.

“My view of the labor movement today,” he said in an interview, “is that we got too focused on our contracts and our own membership and forgot that the only way, ultimately, that we protect our members and workers in general is by fighting for justice for everybody.”

The fundamental issue is that “every human being deserves dignity and a decent standard of living,” he said, “and the whole point of the labor movement is to help make that happen.”

In Mr. King’s view, the fight to organize workers and improve their wages and benefits is important, but it’s part of a much broader effort to improve the lives of individuals and families throughout the country and beyond. He is a believer in cooperative efforts and shared sacrifice, and is unabashedly idealistic as he outlines what can only be described as a new activism on labor’s part.

He promised his members last month that the U.A.W. would be marching and campaigning and organizing — for jobs, for a moratorium on home foreclosures, for civil and human rights and against the mistreatment of immigrants, and for peace.

“The Tea Party has been more vocal than we’ve been,” he said. “There is something wrong with that picture.”

This is not the way that prominent leaders in any segment of our society have spoken for a long time.

The pragmatists and cynics, who have gotten a stranglehold on the culture, will scoff. But the pragmatists and cynics, with their hubris and half-baked ideologies, have handed all the wealth of the nation to a favored few and left the rest of the society a ragged mess.

It's no accident that the great progressive successes of the labor movement, the civil rights movement, a variety of other social justice movements, and the emergence of a vast and thriving middle class all converged in the early post-World War II decades.

But the counterattack from the right, with its assaults on labor, its outlandishly regressive tax policies, its slavish devotion to corporate power and its divide-and-conquer strategies on racial and ethnic issues all combined to halt the remarkable advances of ordinary working people.

All you have to do now is look around at what the right has wrought.

Bob King has a vision that draws upon the lessons of that postwar period, starting with the basic right of workers to organize if they wish without being terrorized by employers. It was the fact that workers were organized in the auto and other manufacturing industries that sparked the creation of a large middle class in America. Those well-paying union jobs allowed working families to buy a home, to put their children through school, to build better lives.

The wages from those jobs fueled the consumer demand that powered America's economic success.

Even as he looks toward the future, Mr. King is trying to remind us of what went right in the past.

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