INCLUSIVE, EXPANSIVE, DARING:
A PRESCRIPTION FROM THE PAST FOR TODAY'S LABOR MOVEMENT

Steve Babson spoke to more than 250 Detroit-area union members on August 26, 2009 at IBEW Local 58, as part of the Michigan Labor History Society's Labor Day Mobilization Luncheon. Steve is a former member of the staff at Wayne State University's Labor Studies Center and is an active member of the American Federation of Teachers Local 6075. He is the author of the book "Working Detroit," and of a forthcoming book about labor and civil liberties lawyer Ernest Goodman, "Crossing the Color Line."

What can we learn from the labor movement's response to past moments of economic crisis? That is certainly a relevant question today.

With massive unemployment --15 to 16 percent in Michigan and at least 30 percent in Detroit – we're in the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. Factories are shuttered, homes are in foreclosure, cities and states are in financial crisis, schools are closing, public services are being cut, and outsourcing and wage cuts are hitting workers.

These are indeed hard times, and any lessons we can learn from the past are welcome. But it's a tricky business if we assume that history repeats itself. I'm more inclined to agree with Mark Twain, who said, "History doesn't repeat itself; at best, it sometimes rhymes."

While we can learn from the past, we have to live in a present that follows no script. The challenge is to recognize when precedents are still relevant and when they are not; when to rely on past practice and when to think outside the box.

I'll highlight three ways that the labor movement confronted economic crises in the past that can guide us in the present. In these and other cases, we succeeded because we were more inclusive, more expansive, and more daring.

Divide and Conquer

Let's look, first, at the organizing picture here in the 1920s. A good place to start is with the AFL's Waiters Union at the Detroit Athletic Club some ninety years ago during the severe economic depression that followed World War I. It was a time when the DAC, like virtually every business in Detroit, was non-union. The DAC was a whites-only club. It limited membership to men and to Christians – there were no women or Jewish or African American members, and no black workers except in the laundry and janitorial jobs in the back of the house. The high-class job of waiter, the job that came with the starched collar and dress-jacket uniform, was reserved for whites.

This was the world of American apartheid, and the Waiters Union, like many in the AFL, internalized these prejudices and aspired to organize whites and men only, meanwhile ignoring "low-class" restaurants where women worked. It shared all these prejudices with the boss. The boss, however, had another, more important, prejudice – the bottom line. And because in 1921 even rich people were spending less money at the club, the profit-conscious manager of a non-union club had a simple solution: cut wages.

So here was the union's opportunity. The majority of waiters at the DAC walked out on strike. The union assured the strikers that high-class waiters in the city wouldn't cross the picket line to take their jobs. And they were right – white waiters did stay away. But you know how this ends. While the union had counted on racial solidarity with the white boss, the boss was a practical man and promptly trained a crew of African American

waiters to break the strike. It turned out that blacks could be high-class waiters, too. And why wouldn't African Americans be strikebreakers under these conditions? The union had stiff-armed them by mimicking the boss's racism, and it was obvious that the only way blacks could enter good jobs reserved for whites was as strikebreakers.

This cycle was repeated over and over with the same hard lesson for labor: if you don't organize all workers, the ones you choose to exclude will be organized – by the boss.

Some unions had figured this out long before – the Knights of Labor in the 1870s, the United Mine Workers in the 1890s, and the Industrial Workers of the World in the early 1900s. But it took another labor rebellion in the 1930s to really turn the corner. That's when the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1935 opened its ranks to African Americans, to women, to the less skilled, and to immigrants and their children. That's when we started to become a movement of *all* workers.

The 1930s Bring a New Inclusiveness

The positive, practical results were evident in the union organizing drives at Chrysler and Ford. Both these companies had turned to a cynical use of the race card, trying to divide and conquer workers. Chrysler openly tried to recruit African Americans as strikebreakers in 1939 and Ford tried it again in 1941 hoping to provoke a race riot. But Ford failed, as Chrysler had, because the new unions born in the 1930s had opened their ranks to all, had pledged to support equal pay and protection for black as well as white workers, and had built links to the black community, winning the trust of young African Americans, who began to see the union as fighting for their future, not just for whites. And so race-based strikebreaking failed in 1939 and 1941. The UAW would go on to support desegregation of workplaces in World War II, while fighting the hate strikes and the Klan inside the plants.

This history should be a point of pride for working people, because however imperfect and halting the CIO's support for black-white unity – and however slow the AFL was to catch up – these were the first majority-white organizations in U.S. history to open their ranks to African Americans. It wasn't the corporate world, it wasn't the religious world, or sports, or professions, or academia – it was the labor movement that led the way. And that included the old Waiters Union as well. Twenty years after defeat at the DAC, it was now the Waiters and Waitresses Union and its membership was black and white, as were the picket lines in 1941 when the union won recognition and collective bargaining at the DAC.

This is a lesson that very much rhymes with today, particularly regarding undocumented immigrant workers, about which considerable prejudice continues. At the moment we start looking at a worker's birth certificate or skin color or passport to decide whether or not they are "worthy" of union protection, then we are no longer a labor movement; we become a special interest. And when we are nothing more than a special interest, we lose.

This may be the most potent lesson: that we need to become *in practice* the inclusive movement that we claim to be *in principle.*

That labor rebellion of the 1930s exhibited two other lessons we can take to heart.

From the Workplace to the Community

First, we need not only a more inclusive movement, but also a far more expansive one – one that extends well beyond the workplace. In 1932, unemployment in Detroit peaked at over 50 percent. Many potential union members were no longer in the workplace. And so the labor movement knew it had to follow them into the community, because that's where workers were suffering. There was no unemployment insurance before the

New Deal. There was no regulation of banks to protect savings. There was no Social Security, no Medicare, no safety net. Indeed, in the winter of 1933, there were roughly a hundred evictions a day of people from their homes.

For all these reasons the movement came to define itself in class terms. We were not just separate groups of employees in workplaces focused on collective bargaining, but we were becoming a movement of all workers – blue-collar and white-collar – as well as of small-business people who lived and worked in the community. And that meant we had to be more than just organized labor. We had to become a movement of many allied groups. We joined in organizing eviction blockings when people lost their homes. We organized tenant unions and rent strikes when landlords turned the screws. We organized meat boycotts when markets raised their prices. We organized worker clinics when families had no alternative health care. And we expanded into radio broadcasting, food co-ops, and mutual benefit societies.

Above all, we organized political action to fight for all these things in the public arena. This expansive movement, encompassing workers in the community as well as the workplace, had its practical dimension. It meant that when employers went into the community to enlist the unemployed as strikebreakers, we were already there and more often than not, the unemployed refused to collaborate with the bosses. The most famous example of this was the Toledo AutoLite strike of 1934. The unemployed showed up at the gate, as management had asked, but they joined the union's picket line and stood their ground even as the National Guard opened fire.

By then, many in the growing labor movement had learned that if you don't become more inclusive and mobilize everyone in the workplace, and if you don't become more expansive and mobilize workers in the community, then the employers and the right wing *will* – and you'll watch the excluded take your jobs.

Beyond Proper Channels

Finally, this understanding was combined with the last element of the three lessons we learned in past moments of crisis: we had to become more daring. That need stemmed from the dangers of relying solely on proper channels to win justice.

In a capitalist society, justice for workers is difficult to find in "proper channels." It was a dead end in 1936 and 1937, when workers had the legal right to organize, but in practice *had no rights* as far as most judges were concerned.

The right to organize was guaranteed under the National Labor Relations Act, also passed in 1935,
But workers had rights in name only because employers simply ignored the law.

Because employers simply ignored the law: boy, that rhymes, doesn't it?

Today, employers pay the fines for violating the law as a business expense. And that, of course, is why we have to toughen the law with EFCA, the Employee Free Choice Act.

Back in the 1930s, corporate leaders assumed the National Labor Relations Act would be overturned as unconstitutional, arguing that it was a violation of their property rights, which, they felt, were far more important than human rights. And for them, defending property rights meant sending spies into the workplace, threatening pro-union workers, firing them, refusing to recognize the pro-union majority, getting police to arrest leaders if they struck, and, as a last resort, calling on the National Guard to shoot a few dozen pickets as if the law didn't exist for working people.

And in a way, it really didn't: within months of passage of the Act, judges had granted 40 injunctions brought by corporate lawyers. The National Labor Relations Board wasn't even allowed to meet, while these cases made their way to the Supreme Court.

So workers had a choice: use "proper channels," which often meant prolonged litigation in front of hostile judges, which would likely end, as before, in defeat for workers. *Or* they could do something daring. And that's what the militant minority did. While the majority of union workers supported organizing, most held back from other, more militant actions, understandably afraid of being fired, or beaten on picket lines, or worse. It was the militant minority that had to galvanize these more fearful workmates.

And they did so, with sit-down strikes, about as daring as you can get.

Not just the famous Flint sit-down where a militant minority of 1,500 out of 50,000 shut down production (similar to what one woman, Rosa Parks, would do to galvanize the civil rights movement much later with her one-woman sit-down on segregated buses). But the success of that daring tactic inspired a wave of 500 sit-down strikes across the country. If the judges wouldn't enforce the law commanding employers to recognize and bargain in good faith with unions, the sitdowners would. It was a kind of citizens' arrest of corporate lawbreakers. "Obey the law," the sitdowners said, "and we'll give you back the factory."

Their daring not only galvanized the larger movement, but when the smoke had cleared, lo and behold, the judges changed their minds and the Supreme Court upheld the National Labor Relations Act. As distasteful as they saw it, they decided it was preferable to the alternative where workers would defend their rights by taking control of the wealth they had produced.

Taking a Page from History

Employers and judges were afraid of that kind of daring in the 1930s, and they were afraid of it last year when workers at the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago, also facing the lawless behavior of their employer – an employer who had robbed them of their livelihood and severance pay— decided that "proper channels" alone would not serve justice. And so they borrowed a page from our history with their heroic sit-down strike. If they had relied only on "proper channels" to win their rights, we wouldn't even know of their struggle.

But when these workers, most of them, by the way, immigrants and the children of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, showed that daring, the future President of the U.S. had to take notice and applaud their courage. And the plant has stayed open with a new owner who has recognized the union and hired the sitdowners to resume production.

That lesson rhymes with any historical era: the daring deed is what galvanizes a movement. It doesn't have to be a sit-down, and maybe it can't often be something so drastic. But something daring, nevertheless, can galvanize workers and bring about change. Take, for example, the time when Ford in the 1930s imposed a ban on union leafleting in Dearborn's streets, with the help of the courts and police. Yes, the union filed court challenges, but these took three years of litigation. In the meantime, what could the union do? It sent thousands of supporters into the streets to deliberately break this unconstitutional law in a massive campaign of civil disobedience. Nearly 1,000 were arrested in these repeated challenges to bad law, including the father of our current Congressman, John Conyers, and the then-President of the UAW, R.J. Thomas, who lost track of how many times he was arrested and how many days he spent in jail.

Daring in Vision

Now, daring doesn't just have to mean militant action; it can also mean a vision: a vision of an alternative world that is as daring as the actions to win it. It can mean daring to say we want more than just a seat at the table as junior partners to capital. After all, we made the table and we need to say that labor is the source of wealth, and that in a just world, labor rather than capital should be privileged. We make things—they turn them into derivatives. I'm not sure what a derivative is, except that it's "derived" from our work. We make the cars, we make the blueprints for the cars, we make the computer programs that drive the machines, we make the meals in restaurants, we make the beds in the hotels, we prepare the lesson plans in the schools, and we make people feel better at the clinic. As the labor hymn puts it, "without our brain and muscle, not a single wheel would turn."

And it was that same understanding that labor produces all wealth that motivated the most active union organizers in the 1930s. The Reuther brothers, in fact, considered themselves democratic socialists. Walter was fired for campaigning for Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party candidate for president. By 1938, he had left the Socialist Party and become something a little more familiar – a kind of social democrat who called for a mixed economy, not free-market capitalism, but fair and regulated markets, when they work, and public investment, when they don't.

And Reuther was by no means the exception. A broad current of anti-capitalist thinking flowed in the 1930s. And why not? Capitalism had failed. You'd have to be a damn fool to keep praising its virtues when unemployment was 25 percent or more, and when modern factories were shuttered and closed not because they couldn't make things, but because they couldn't make enough profit. You'd have to be a fool to praise capitalism when the entire banking system collapsed, destroying life savings, or when people were starving even as farmland lay unused.

Hunger can radicalize a lot of people. The stomach speaks louder than any keynoter on Labor Day. Hunger drove millions to question capitalism. My favorite radical of the bunch was Floyd Olson of Minnesota. A former longshoreman and member of the IWW, Olson ran for governor with labor support in 1932, calling for a "cooperative commonwealth." He ran as a candidate of the Farmer-Labor Party, and won in a landslide.

What did Floyd Olson mean by "cooperative commonwealth?" His program said that if businessmen closed factories because they couldn't make enough profit, then the state should rent or buy the plant, hire the unemployed, and make things of use. This structure could be aided by publicly owned banks to provide low-cost loans to small business as well as worker-owned co-ops.

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Olson, who was elected to three terms on that platform, died in office of cancer. Today, Minnesota's new senator, Al Franken, is listed as a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, a legacy of that time when labor and populist leaders were calling for a cooperative commonwealth. Such visionaries were elected governors in Minnesota and Wisconsin and, out in California, Upton Sinclair doubled the Democratic Party vote as he ran for governor on the same platform of production for use, not for profit.

So whether you call it social democracy or democratic socialism or the cooperative commonwealth, or laborism, it was these daring ideas that galvanized and motivated people to act, because they had a vision of a better world centered on the working-class majority.

And that rhymes in any era where economic crisis produces mass layoffs and poverty.

Questioning Old Assumptions

Just last May, Business Week magazine cited a poll on public perceptions of socialism at a time when

the radical right claims that Barack Obama's policies are somehow akin to Stalinist Russia or even Nazi Germany. Of course, neither is true, nor is Obama a socialist. He certainly is a better friend to labor than his predecessor, but if he were a socialist he would nationalize the banks rather than gifting them billions.

Well, there may be a bigger constituency for the daring step than you think. People were asked which they prefer – capitalism or socialism – without defining either. Barely half, 53 percent, said capitalism. Twenty-seven percent were not sure. And 20 percent preferred socialism.

That doesn't mean that socialism is on the political agenda. But it does mean that people are questioning old assumptions, as they were in the 1930s. And we should give voice to those doubts. If capitalism has failed us, then we have to call for something more fundamental than bank bailouts and mortgage adjustments. We need to be daring in our vision of a future where human need ranks higher than the bottom line, where the public good trumps private greed.

I will close by saying a few words about the obvious differences between past and present moments of economic crisis for labor. The key difference for us in Detroit is that crisis is no long cyclical. For us, as long as free-market capitalism prevails, it is now a permanent crisis. We are not the city of the 1930s and 1940s, when Detroit was the "arsenal of democracy." We are now a corporate castoff, tossed aside after global capital and Wall Street skinned and gutted us. They scold us because we fought our way into the middle class, and that's no longer considered acceptable in the global economy. Now they have Mexico, where they can exploit workers at a fraction of our wages. Now they have China, which has a capitalist economy and a one-party dictatorship that outlaws independent unions. That's a capitalist's wet dream.

Cross-Border Solidarity

So by definition, we have to be more international in our perspective. We have to think about this larger world and what cross-border solidarity might mean. Because after NAFTA allowed the Jolly Green Giant and American agribusiness to stride across Mexico expelling farmers from the land, where to you think those campesinos go? They take the maquila jobs and then come here because the same work pays ten times more. They are victims of NAFTA too, and if we don't make alliances with them in Mexico, we have no business scolding them when they arrive here.

And that's why some truly visionary unions are now organizing on both sides of the border, with members in both countries – unions like the United Electrical Workers and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. It was those links that made UE so effective in mobilizing the Hispanic workforce at Republic Windows and Doors. They trusted a union that some of them had heard about before they got here.

We cannot only help these workers, but we can learn from them. We can learn from the VW workers now on strike in Puebla, Mexico – their fifth strike in ten years. We can learn from the thousands of workers in Argentina who seized the plant and fired the boss, as they called it, rather than accept a plant closing.

Closer to home, there is the example of the United Steelworkers, also a multinational union with members in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. You may remember when the union's president, Leo Gerard, a Canadian, toured Michigan this year to defend the jobs of U.S. workers in auto and steelmaking. His union supports workers around the world. When the Mexican mineworkers went on strike over health and safety, and when the government tried to break the strike by arresting their leader, the United Steelworkers gave sanctuary when he had to flee.

The Detroit Connections

This has a personal dimension as well. Some of you remember Mike Zielinski, who was at our side

during the newspaper strike in Detroit. He is now in Liberia, helping organize foundry and forge workers at Arcelor-Mittal, a global steel maker. Mike Leslie, who some of you remember from Wayne State's Labor School, is now in Nigeria working with oil and hotel workers as part of the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center. UAW Local 174, in Rory Gamble's Region 1A, has organized a "Whatever It Takes" committee and will send a delegation to Brownsville, Texas, on the Mexican border to see first hand what they can learn about conditions and, hopefully, find allies in what has to be a cross-border movement of solidarity. Right here in Detroit, the UFCW and a labor-community alliance is working to open worker/community owned grocery stores. Others are implementing the AFL-CIO declaration of 1997 calling for organizing immigrants and helping build the massive marches of immigrant workers that have energized that community.

We can do more. Union members can pack town-hall meetings and take back the initiative in the health care debate and push for real change – for single payer at best and public option at least. We need to be daring in these days, and do the things that Blue Dog Democrats don't know how to. I'm happy that the AFL-CIO has endorsed the U.S. Social Forum that will be held here in Detroit next June. The goal of the forum is to build unity around common goals of social justice, to build ties between organizations present at the event, and to help build a broader social justice movement. We can work with Jobs with Justice and with Centro Obrero, Welfare Rights, and environmental groups to make the Social Forum our bridge to the community.

We have all these opportunities today to explore ways in which we can be:

--More inclusive, drawing all workers into our movement.

--More expansive, moving beyond the workplace into the community, into the political arena, and into the global economy.

--And more daring in both our ideas and our actions.

Solidarity Forever!