

BERNIE FIRESTONE AND US

These are remarks delivered by AFT Michigan President David Hecker at the Michigan Labor History Society annual meeting May 11, 2011. Hecker was a close friend and union brother of Bernie Firestone, and his talk was part of a program remembering Bernie's legacy to Detroit. Bernie died in 1989 at his old union hall at 1550 Howard St. in Detroit, where the MLHS meeting was held. The hall is now the Detroit training center for Operating Engineers Local 374.

If Bernie could see what was going on today, he would find:

--Income disparity that is as wide as it has ever been, and a distribution of wealth that is even worse;

--Tax policies that create and exacerbate the problem;

--A good first step towards national health care that some call the downfall of Western civilization if not a job-destroyer;

--Budget cuts used as excuses to undermine human rights, including a woman's right to choose; and

--People who claim that we cannot afford to pay for a quality education for every child, rebuild our cities, protect the environment, provide everyone with a good standard of living, but that we, of course, can always find the money when it means war.

About ten days ago my Dad passed away. He was a 100-percent union man. During my conversations with him over the past few months, when he would ask about my work, he would respond in disbelief that some Governors, like Walker in Wisconsin and Kasich in Ohio, were trying to wipe out public-sector collective bargaining.

That is the world Bernie would see today.

CHALLENGES IN MICHIGAN

Here in Michigan, we have been faced with proposed legislation that would include:

--"Right To Work;"

--Elimination of due-process (tenure) for teachers;

--Attacks on prevailing wage and project labor agreements;

--Prohibition of public-sector union leaders from working with school administration during the day to prevent and resolve problems;

--Elimination of the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration; and

--A budget proposal that slashes revenue-sharing to cities, resulting in fewer police and firefighters, cuts to school districts of between \$450 and \$750 per child, a 15-percent cut to community colleges, and a 20-percent cut to universities unless the university agrees to discriminate against GLBT community members; that cuts the Earned Income Tax Credit, and that taxes pensions.

All this is being done while reducing business taxes by 86 percent.

UAW President Bob King always says a budget is a moral document. This budget proposal says a good deal.

If Bernie could see what was happening today he would be hyped, and none of us would get a moment's rest.

THE STATE OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

But if Bernie saw the labor movement today—what would he say?

There's a current sound bite about education, one that we disagree with, that says that we don't need a school system – that we need a “series of schools.” If we applied that view to labor today it would be as accurate as it is wrong.

While it's true that with the attacks on labor, unions are working together much more than they have been – under the “We Are the People” banner, truthfully, we do not have a labor movement; we have a series of unions.

It is not just how low the unionization rate is -- although it is disgracefully low.

It is not just that we are split among AFL-CIO, Change to Win, and unaffiliated unions.

It is that our commitment to solidarity, our looking out for each other, our acting as one union although we are many---is not close to what it used to be. And it's not close to what it needs to be if we are to succeed.

Not enough of us have a vision of what the labor movement is really all about. When a member is suspended for three days while the punishment for what she did should have been a one-day suspension---well, of course, that's important to fight for. *But it is not all of what the labor movement is about.*

The labor movement, as disorganized as we are, as much as we do not have the financial resources we once did, is still the most organized and most important part of the progressive movement, working with others to transform society. The labor movement, in the words of Bernie's religion, is about *Tikun Olam*, Building a Better World.

Would it be *totally* different with Bernie—of course not.

Would it be *significantly* different—yes.

BERNIE: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Alice and I have three children. Our youngest, Gustavo, has the Hebrew name Eliahu Benyomin. The Benyomin is for Bernie.

Being the kind of left-wing, agitating, demonstrating people we are, Alice and I handed out a flier at Gustavo's 1999 naming ceremony. About Bernie we wrote:

"Bernie was the conscience of the labor movement. If there was a picket line he was there. If there was a rally he was there. And he was not just there. HE WAS THERE, undoubtedly belting out "We are the union, the mighty, mighty union."

"What really defined Bernie," we wrote, "was his genuine concern, his sincere love for everyday working people. There are so many people who Bernie touched. So many people who react with a huge smile and a story when his name is referenced. So many activists today who credit Bernie with showing them the way."

At the time of Bernie's death, Metro Detroit AFL-CO President Ed Scribner stated that the way to honor Bernie is "to ensure that when there is hunger we fight for food, when there is unemployment we fight for jobs, when there is sexism and racism we fight for equality, and when there is injustice we fight for justice."

The Michigan Labor Committee on Central America wrote: "Bernie had a world vision—end the arms race, no more Hiroshimas, an international labor solidarity that knows no borders. He pointed out how low wages in El Salvador were linked to runaway shops in the U.S. How union busting at home means trade-union repression abroad. That an injury to one an injury to all."

"His example of servanthood touched many farm workers as they organize for self-determination," noted the Michigan Farm Worker Ministry Coalition.

"The labor movement and humanity have been robbed of a champion," stated AFSCME Council 25.

The labor movement, specifically the Clothing and Textile Workers for whom Bernie worked, provided a paycheck. Paychecks are linked to jobs. But Bernie was not just doing a job. The labor movement, the peace movement, the civil rights movement, Friends of Belle Isle -- none of those were work as in a job: they were a passion, a philosophy, they were how you lead your life, by fighting for what is right.

Bernie taught us what being a trade-unionist is all about: to stand fast in good times or bad, to be on call for whatever task is needed, to live by a code--largely unspoken and not to be violated--of concern for the lives of men and women.

REBUILDING OUR MOVEMENT

So how do we use what Bernie stood for, what Bernie did, what Bernie taught us to rebuild our movement?

We do what Bernie did: we educate. We make the links for people, explaining why an injury to one is an injury to all, that this is truly class warfare. Race, gender, sexual orientation and identity are real issues, (Kobe Bryant calls a ref a “faggot” and is fined but not suspended because well, the playoffs are here. The Lakers are wiped out in four. Sweet!)

But while race and gender are real issues, they are often used by the bad guys to camouflage what is truly a class war. According to *Forbes* magazine, in 2010, the 400 richest people in America account for about 2.6 percent of the nation's private wealth. They are each worth over \$1 billion. Charles and David Koch are tied for fifth place, with \$21.5 billion apiece.

If we take the value of houses out of the equation, the median family in the U.S. has less than \$43,000 in wealth. Half of all U.S. families have less than that. For Black families, it's \$500 and for Latino families, \$400. I am not kidding.

WINNING THE CLASS WAR

How do we counter this class war?

We organize. Organize the unorganized. Organize the organized. Organize with the community. Organize when it directly benefits us and when it directly benefits another. We build true coalitions with community, real relationships. Not that we will see eye to eye with everyone on every issue, but we work to find that common ground and to move people to a more progressive position.

We seek solutions. We use our minds, not just what is left of our muscle. We stand steadfast against anti-worker, racist, sexist, anti-gay policies. But we also seek solutions to what are very real problems. Here's an out-of-the-box thought for too many: just because we have always done it a certain way does not mean it is the best way to do it.

Within labor, we get to know and understand each other. If we take one lesson away from Bernie, it's that we rely on each other – we break bread together. We extend ourselves to each other. Bernie and I weren't from the same affiliate. But we were from the same movement.

As someone who has worked in the Michigan labor movement for 28 years, and the movement in metro Detroit for 25 years, I cannot tell you how much our movement has sadly changed. Our relationships are not there as they once were. It makes a world of difference.

We, like Bernie, must nurture future leaders who are smart, hard working, have a vision, committed. We do not sacrifice our labor movement in the name of a political deal. It is not about us.

And we must never be above getting our hands dirty, as Bernie would often say and often did. And we never shy away from being a pain in the ass, as Bernie sometimes was, because you know, being a pain in the ass makes sure the job gets done.

On September 5, 1989, the day before his death. Bernie sent me a memo concerning the Labor Crisis Support Committee. He wrote:

“Check to see if any of these situations [on the last month’s agenda] should be removed. Also check Mary Krobach’s spelling; is it with an ‘H’ or a ‘K’?; we should also confirm the place before notice goes out. Check the agenda, confirm the meeting place.”

Check the agenda, confirm the meeting place. Never would have thought about doing those things. Thanks, Bernie.

And we should take a page out of Sandra Williams’ book, out of June Rostan’s book, the book of many others as well.

Today, many of us were once again at a Pulte shareholder meeting, pounding away at how that company treats working people and how they rip off seniors. June and others have been doing this for a while. We did not beat Pulte today. We will not beat them tomorrow or next week or next month.

But we will never, ever give up

We will never say, “I did enough.”

We will never say, “It’s someone else’s turn.”

We will never say, “This fight just isn’t worth it.”

In Bernie’s spirit we will fight until there is no fight left in us, then we will rest, and fight again.

And we will wage these fights because we know, as Bernie said so often and so accurately -- “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Thank you, Bernie.