



University of Massachusetts Lowell Labor Extension Program

Labor Extension Bulletin

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Apathy Isn't the Real Problem

“My members are so apathetic. They don’t care about anyone but themselves and I can’t get them to do anything. They don’t want to be involved in the union, but if anything doesn’t go their way, watch out. They are so ready to blame ‘the union’.”

Sound familiar? How often have you heard, or even said, something like this about your fellow union members?

Getting our members active and involved is not only important but is essential as our struggles with management for better working conditions, better contracts and more of a say in the workplace are getting harder and harder. So what do we do about “apathy”?

Is it Apathy?

The first step towards solving any problem is to take a deeper look at it and make sure we understand the real problem. What is apathy? Where does it come from? And what are our members and co-workers really saying when they turn away from the union?

Look in a dictionary and you will see apathy defined as indifference, lack of concern, lack of interest. Simply put, apathy means that people just don’t care. But do you think that your members and co-workers don’t care about what is happening to them at work? Do you really think that they just don’t care about their wages, health insurance premiums, workload and stress levels, hours of work, job security and the quality of their work environment?

On the contrary, most workers care very much about what is happening in the world around them and in their workplaces – they can’t afford not to.

They care very much, but too often they feel that there is nothing they can do to make a difference. They feel powerless, and then they look at the union and wonder why it hasn’t “fixed” things.

Management is on the Offensive

Management is hard at work creating workplaces where workers feel powerless and where collective solutions seem unattainable. Increasingly workers are finding their lives controlled by the work system; by

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The Ground Truth

The Labor Extension Program has received a copy of a new film about the war in Iraq called “The Ground Truth” which is available for showing. **‘The Ground Truth’ hurts, but it’s necessary** is the headline of the Boston Globe’s review which goes on to say:

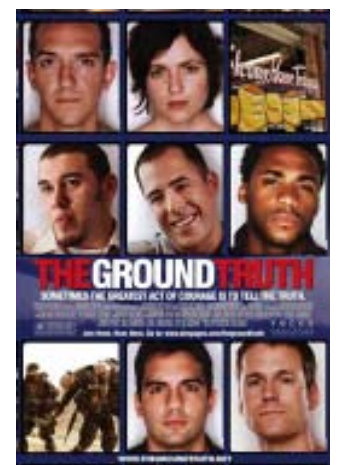
There are two moments in “The Ground Truth” when the film’s unforgiving spotlight suddenly shines out at the audience sitting in the dark. One is when former US Army specialist Robert Acosta, maimed in the leg and minus a hand, tells of conversations with civilians since his return to the States.

“How’d you lose your hand?” someone will ask. “The war.” “What war?” “Iraq.” Pause. “That still going on?”

The other sound bite is less damning, more of a personal challenge, and it comes when ex- US Army Reserve specialist Aidan Delgado simply says, “Americans want to honor vets with yellow stickers rather than listening to them.”

“The Ground Truth” listens. Directed by Patricia Foulkrod but really written by the men and women whose tours of duty it describes, this short, sharp documentary is not about George Bush or left/right politics or 9/11. It’s not even really about the war in Iraq. It’s about the US soldiers who are fighting that war: why they went, what they saw, how they feel when they come back.”

Showing “The Ground Truth” at your union hall or in your community is a great way to initiate a discussion about the war in Iraq and its impact on soldiers, families and communities back home. If you would like to arrange a showing, call Sue D’Amore at 978-934-3256



new technologies that monitor and pace them; by scripts that are imposed on them; by attendance policies, dress codes and other rules that make them feel like they are back in kindergarten, or in jail; and by production quotas that are practically un-meetable. Workers are also increasingly isolated on the job – finding that the opportunities for interaction with their co-workers are disappearing.

But too often, unions are only focused on enforcing existing contracts and negotiating new ones every three or four years. They fail to take on the ongoing changes that management is making in the workplace, even though these changes are undermining the quality of life for union members and undercutting the power of the union. This leaves unions open to increasing attacks by management and growing criticism from their members. The servicing approach that so many unions take, tells the members: “Turn your problems over to us and we’ll deal with them,” and it sets the union up for failure in the members’ eyes.

The Cult of Individualism

Outside of work, the cult of individualism is being promoted by the right wing. The Republican attack on Social Security was in great part an attack on community, on the idea that we can all do better by sticking together. Instead of social security, we are offered 401(k)’s and other forms of individualized retirement savings – with everyone reduced to watching out for themselves.

When members see their wages stagnant or even declining, when they see no collective solutions, they look to tax cuts and shopping at WalMart to stretch their dollars. When members don’t see collective improvement in their futures, they look to cut the best deal they can for themselves – by playing management’s game, by looking for a promotion, by ducking and covering, or by pursuing another job elsewhere (in which case, they aren’t going to invest in improving the job they have).

In this environment, it’s no big surprise that our members are disconnected from our unions and from any thought of collective action.

Taking on "Apathy"

So what can we do about this?

The battle to re-connect with our members has to take place on many different levels. It means re-thinking how the union does its work and how it is organized. It takes a commitment to doing education for leaders, activists and members around:

- Understanding individualism and how it is being pushed in our society;
- Looking at the situation inside each of our locals: How are the members becoming isolated at work? How are they being distanced or distancing themselves from the union? What are the ways that the union might be contributing to members’ expectations that "the union" will take care of things?
- Taking on issues on an ongoing basis – building Continuous Bargaining campaigns around the changes in the workplace and the developing issues that are affecting our members’ lives.
- Re-thinking union strategies including contract strategies that are built around member engagement and union-building, and include significant components of communication and member activism.

This is a significant shift for many, if not most unions. It is taking on a culture of service unionism that has been built up over many decades and it will require commitment and resources. But it can work. We have training programs that can help you look at your own situation, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your union and develop a strategy for change that will better position your union for the challenges ahead.

Open Enrollment Program: Continuous Bargaining

Two 3 Hour Evening Sessions in Late November/Early December

Our workplaces are changing rapidly. We are being monitored, computerized, automated, sped-up and eliminated as management introduces new technologies and work restructuring programs. These changes, along with new attendance, drug testing, and other management policies, are having devastating impacts on our members and our unions. Continuous bargaining is a union strategy for taking on workplace change and forcing management to deal with the union. In this hands-on training we will identify and analyze the changes that are taking place in your workplaces and develop specific union-building and member-involving strategies for bargaining over change. The cost will be \$15 for the two sessions. **If you are interested in attending this training or would like more information contact Sue D'Amore at 978-934-3256 or email Susan_Damore@uml.edu**