



COMMUNIQUE

THE STATE OF THE UNION

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

In the past five years, state legislators across the country have launched unprecedented initiatives aimed at weakening unions, lowering labor standards, and eroding workplace protections for both union and non-union workers alike. As if this wasn't bad enough, combine these political attacks with attacks from the media, the private sector, and even the United States Supreme Court, and labor unions of all sizes are finding their backs up against a brick wall.

But not to fear. Unions, including CWA Local 1180, are fighting back against the anti-labor rhetoric being spewed from all walks of life — hence the ultra-importance of members supporting their union, banding together in solidarity, and fighting to maintain rights that have been hard-won throughout the years (see “Benefits Under Attack” on page 5). What's important now is to send a strong message that organized labor is not to be toyed with. In states like Wisconsin, where Governor Scott Walker has done everything in his power to undermine labor's strength, union members are depicted as lazy and overpaid, and the root of all evil, including the collapse of many pension systems. This, unfortunately, is the message rampantly spreading throughout the country.

Unions have experienced an unfortunate decline in membership in the last decade. Two major consequences of this are that the American middle class is also in decline, and that Americans are hearing less about what organized labor means, and most knew very little to start with. As of today, there are 60 national unions representing more than 14 million workers throughout the country. No matter what work you do, there's a union that represents you – from administrative assistants and computer professionals to police, firefighters and doctors; from teachers and bus drivers, to sanitation workers and engineers. People who aren't in a union or don't know anyone in a labor union are often unsure of what labor unions do and why someone would want to join. In fact, what most Americans know about labor unions is what they hear and read in the corporate-controlled media — and we all know how inaccurate those reports truly are.

“Labor is the backbone of this country, of this state,” said Local 1180 President Arthur Cheliotis. “We are being depicted as the bad guys and

the reason for high taxes, when in fact, we are hardworking men and women who provide services that New York City needs. Government workers like us are the foundation upon which commerce, industry, and civil society are built. If we don't do our jobs then the whole system collapses. That is why we need to work on enhancing membership and rebuilding what so many politicians are looking to undermine. We need to be proud of our union, proud of labor, proud of our accomplishments, and proud to talk to others and tout who we are.”

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1963 union representation was 23.3 percent of all private and public workers. Today, that number has dropped to less than 12 percent. Yet, even with declining numbers, labor organizations are starting to show new creativity and aggressiveness in attaining their goals. One example of this solidarity is unions mobilizing for workers who weren't their members in the Fight for 15 movement for a \$15 hourly minimum wage for fast food workers, despite so few of these workers belonging to a union. Local 1180 participated in a huge Fight for 15 Rally in New York City that drew the attention of major media outlets. This type of union pressure to raise the minimum wage in the restaurant and retail industries has greatly helped place higher wages for low-income workers on the agenda for politicians and labor-intensive companies. In New York, Governor Andrew Cuomo even jumped on the bandwagon, knowing that it would help his approval rating, and has pushed for a \$15-an-hour minimum wage. With Vice President Joe Biden at his side, Cuomo announced an across-the-board \$15 minimum wage in New York City by 2018 and upstate by 2021. The move will likely require legislative approval. However, the New York State Labor Commission already has approved a \$15 wage for workers in the fast-food industry. Chalk up another one for labor.

The Fight for 15 is “significant in two ways,” according to one veteran Chicago labor attorney and expert on unionization topics. “It shows there's some point in going out and disrupting, and it builds morale, even if it hasn't brought in a lot of dues yet.” But the point is that once these fast food workers realize that their hourly wage was increased thanks to the efforts of organized labor, more will want to join the movement, thereby increasing the percentage of those belonging to a union.

It's time to start targeting younger workers and bringing them into labor's fold. According to one report from the second quarter of 2015, only 4 percent of employed 16- to 24-year-olds are union members, and the membership rate for workers 25 to 34 years old is less than 10 percent. Young workers are typically the first to be fired, regardless of what they

bring to the table. Workers aged 45 to 64 have the highest union participation rate at 14 percent. Given the choice between purchasing Netflix or purchasing union membership, younger workers are opting for Netflix.

For too long the growth of technology and the global economy has created a real crisis for labor unions in America. According to a report in the *New York Times*, "While the country's manufacturing output continues to grow steadily, it no longer produces significant job growth. [U.S.] factories compete against low-wage foreign labor by investing in automated machinery and implementing new techniques to make them far more productive. Since 2000, factories have shed more than five million jobs."

One advantage for CWA Local 1180 is that the work performed by members cannot be easily moved to a low-wage country. But that doesn't mean that the Local isn't faced with a myriad of other challenges.

"The City needs its workers to actually be located in the City," Cheliotis said. "However, it doesn't mean that government officials can't come after us in other ways, like trying to eliminate positions, shift benefit costs to workers, or increase our workloads beyond what's imaginable for one person. Another tactic, one that was used extensively by the Bloomberg Administration, is the contracting out of work that City workers could perform. City Time for example — an effort to eliminate 500 timekeeping and payroll jobs citywide — cost the City hundreds of millions of dollars in overruns. In fact, the expense was nearly 10 times more than paying the workers it was designed to replace. Unions joined together, did the investigations, and exposed the waste and corruption and forced the contractors to pay back the City. If we let them divide us, they will conquer us. If we stand united within our union and throughout the labor movement, we will succeed."

Cheliotis said the demise of unions will mean the demise of collective bargaining, and without collective bargaining, there is only individual begging. That means every man for himself. "Try to picture how that is going to play out," he said. "Every one represented by Local 1180 will be sitting down with their manager trying to justify why they are entitled to a raise, or to even keep their job. There will be no grievance procedure. It will be brutal. Unions make life better for everyone, everywhere. A unionless future will lead to elimination of the middle class and a grim future for our children and grandchildren."

The labor movement in the United States grew out of the need to protect the common interest of workers. And this still holds true today. While there are reportedly millions of workers in the labor force who have no possibility of organizing and collective bargaining, there are regions seeing big increases in membership. Take California for example, which has seen a tremendous increase led largely by healthcare employees and Latino workers. Unions are a political force in many states and are also a fighting force for social policies benefiting all workers. Unions are leading the fight to raise the minimum wage, protect pensions, and advance health insurance. But all of these successes do not outweigh the challenges organized labor is up against today.

Mark Twain said it best: "The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated." The media reports constantly about the death of the labor movement, and these reports are definitely blown out of proportion. Usually they contain some variation of the argument that unions were needed in the old days, but are now obsolete as all the tough work has

been done.

It's not yet time to write the obituary for labor unions.

"We are far from dead. In fact, despite corporate media's marginalization of unions, recent polls show that more Americans understand they need unions to reach and stay in the middle class," Cheliotis said. "New York is a labor state; we always have been and we always will be. We have been very accomplished at representing members' interests in the workplace; now we need to focus on new and emerging times, providing advanced education for our members so they are less disposable in today's marketplace. While a tremendous amount of industrial work is being farmed out to low-paying overseas companies, the one sector where the unions remain highly relevant is government."

That's because unions fit more comfortably into government workplaces than the private sector. But now the U.S. Supreme Court is prepared to strike down laws requiring public employees to pay unions dues, a major threat to organized labor. The Justices have agreed to hear a California case (*Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*) challenging the requirement that teachers pay their fair share of the cost to unions for negotiating better pay, benefits, and pensions, even when they disagree on political and ideological issues. "The Supreme Court is revisiting decisions that have made it possible for people to organize for a voice at work and in their communities — decisions that have stood for more than 35 years — and that have allowed people to work together for better public services and vibrant communities," said a statement from five union leaders representing teachers and other government workers.

In a ruling last year, Justice Samuel A. Alito, Jr., writing for the majority, welcomed a lawsuit such as this. Alito embraces an ideology that anyone familiar with European history in the 1930s recognizes. It is organized money bringing together government and corporations to rule a nation for the good of the corporations. It is called fascism and today, as it was then, it is funded and supported by corporations and the 1 percent. They want to return us to a time before unions, and in the name of individual freedom, give each worker the "right to work" as individuals, based on the absurd claim that a single worker can negotiate wages as an equal with a rich and powerful boss. "The biggest fear of organized money is organized labor because only when workers are organized can they negotiate as equals to their bosses," Cheliotis said.

"This case is one of the many that is eroding the gains that workers seeking dignity, justice, and respect have fought for and died for since the Industrial Revolution. Only organized workers in labor unions can fight organized money and build on our past gains to secure our future. Unions across the board are paying close attention to this case, as the outcome could severely impact how organized workers will fight in the future," Cheliotis said.

A January 27, 2015, article on prospect.org sums it up: "We can't deny or minimize problems and challenges. But we often go too far in decrying unions' fate. Get a grip; the labor movement is stronger than it looks. A lot of good organizing is going on, and most unions are doing an effective job at the bargaining table. Unions are a force in important regions and industrial sectors, still politically potent, and still bringing new groups of workers into their ranks."