

TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

Story and photos by Catherine J. Rourke

LABOR PAINS: TALES FROM THE AFL-CIO CONVENTION FLOOR

How the labor movement's new direction impacts local workers

"Workers must either start making history or they are history." Larry Cohen, Executive Vice President, Communication Workers of America

"*The Red Rock Review?* Is that a newspaper from Mars?"

That was the typical question asked about my media pass as I sat wedged between television cameras from MSNBC and reporters from *The Wall Street Journal* during countless press conferences at last week's AFL-CIO Quadrennial Constitutional Convention in Chicago.

"Oh, Sedona? Sure, I've been there," said another reporter from a major East Coast daily. "Rock shops, red dirt, Jeep rides and crystal ball gazers; nice place."

The classic bottled perception of our town. We discussed how an acre of that red dirt can go for one cool million and how one two-lane road can generate so much controversy. But it was the reporter's next response that offered a more interesting message for Sedona.

"Why isn't your community leading the nation by emphasizing the spiritual component behind the issues? Sedona could easily set the precedent for positioning its water, housing and traffic issues with solutions for positive change for the rest of the country."

Indeed, why aren't we, as a spiritual Mecca of beauty also a forerunner of truth and positive change? Instead we are caught up in the same quagmire of development and traffic issues as the reporter's East Coast city – without any viable solutions.

And then there's the issue of work.

Living wages, affordable housing, health care, secure retirement and even worker dignity. These subjects were all the focus of a convention 2,000 miles from home whose motto was "Reward Work, Respect Workers."

But why so much hoopla about work? After all, a job's a job. Or is it just that? The fact remains that more than 75 percent of Americans spend more than 90 percent of their waking lives revolved around



Rev. Jesse Jackson addresses delegates at the AFL-CIO convention in Chicago.



"Reward Work, Respect Workers" was one of the convention themes.

their jobs, including preparing for them, commuting to them and actually engaged in them. And, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a shocking 87 percent report that their wages and working conditions fail to honor their needs.

"This is not going to be a country for the one percent; it's going to be a country for the 99 percent of working people," said Larry Cohen, executive vice president of the Communication Workers of America, during the convention's Voice at Work rally. "If workers stand united, they will never be defeated."

Sure. But how, especially in right-to-work states such as Arizona?

As the temperatures soared in Chicago during a record heat wave, so did the heated debate on the convention floor. And after several days of endless speeches and canned press conferences, of stirring rallies, political rhetoric and podium pounding – from top labor leaders and prominent senators to great orators – everyone agreed that workers' rights had reached an all-time low and were in need of serious mending. Yet no one seemed to have any answers and not one leader from any contingency proposed a strategy for fixing the problems, other than a division of labor itself.

Like Sedona, the question still remained: Indeed, why aren't we the forerunners of positive change and how on earth are we going to do it? Meanwhile, as labor struggled with its schism and political struggles, workers shuffled along in quiet desperation at their jobs, indifferent to and even unaware of labor's ongoing debate .

So, too, the heat escalated that week in Arizona as more than 1,000 copper miners walked off the job at Asarco and Phoenix bus drivers and Qwest workers contemplated a strike. And in Sedona, Mariana Solana headed to her subminimum wage job as a waitress at a small restaurant where she hasn't had a raise since 1991...where tips are dwindling due to a lousy economy...where the tourism volume has fallen off thanks to the war and rise in gas prices...where business has dwindled due to the glut of more restaurants than tourists...where she has no mediation or grievance over her workplace issues.

Issues such as performing side duties off the clock or toiling 12-hour shifts without any overtime pay. Issues such as having to tip a hostess who hardly even seats her section and gives preference to the waiters who pad her pocket. Issues such as never having a break or management's failure to properly rotate stations so that she can sometimes enjoy the prosperity of having the preferred window tables. Issues such as promoting younger workers despite her years of seniority.



"Use Our Power" chanted delegates during a convention rally.

What hope or strategy or shred of dignity did the convention pundits, bloggers and podium pounders have to offer Mariana in Sedona? Where do we go from here?

The answer to that came not from the convention floor, nor from its delegates or resolutions. It lurked on the convention's fringes...not in the voices of suited senators and labor leaders but in those of its working prophets: the pregnant Vietnamese janitor who cleaned the facility's restrooms, the tuxedoed waiters at the media lunch table, the Good Humor man selling ice cream outside the convention hall in Chicago's searing heat wave and a manicurist named Shoshanna waiting for the bus to take her to the ghetto on the city's south side.

The truth loitered in the empty vacant stares of the teeming masses on Chicago's Wabash Avenue and in voices like that of 94-year-old Leslie Orear, who told tales of

working the city's slaughterhouses and packing houses nearly 75 years ago. The killing floor of the hog house bore chilling resemblance to Marianna's waitress job in Sedona: no breaks, no overtime, no mediation, no grievance procedures and always the same abysmal wages.

What does America's labor movement propose for Mariana and other Sedona workers – the day laborers and motel housekeepers, the retail clerks and the Jeep drivers? The labor movement isn't just about schisms and money and power; it is about a social movement whose time has come, a revolution of hearts and minds that comes from all workers and not just union members, that starts with souls on the streets versus senators and statesmen at convention podiums.

Waiting for the No. 8 bus in Bronzeville with young Shoshanna bore more answers than all the press conferences combined as she asked questions more profound than those of seasoned journalists.

Should she choose between her bus fare or buy a Slurpee to curb her hypoglycemia and walk the 18 blocks home?

"I ain't got money for both," she said.

Next month: Part 2 – Inducing Labor: Real Action for Real Workers

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