



Soul of a union man—Leo Gerard recalls 54 years in the movement

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I was raised in a company house, in a company town, where the miners had to buy their own oilers—that is, rubber coveralls—drill bits, and other tools at the company store.

That company, Inco Limited, the world's leading producer of nickel for most of the 20th century, controlled the town of Sudbury, Ontario, but never succeeded in owning the souls of the men and women who lived and worked there.

That's because these were union men and women: self-possessed, a little rowdy, and well aware that puny pleas from individual workers fall on deaf corporate ears.

As I prepare to retire in a couple of days, 54 years after starting work as a copper puncher at the Inco smelter, the relationship between massive, multinational corporations and workers is different.

Unions represent a much smaller percentage of workers now, so few that some don't even know what a labor organization is—or what organized labor can accomplish. That is the result of deliberate, decades-long attacks on unions by corporations and the rich. They intend to own not only workers' time and production but their very souls.

I'd like to tell you the story of Inco because it illustrates the arc of labor union ascendance and attenuation over the past 72 years since I was born in Sudbury.

When I was a boy, the Inco workers, about 19,000 of them, were represented by the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers. The union was gathering strength. My dad, Wilfred Gerard, was among the rabble rousers. We lived just a few miles from the mine, and workers would gather at the house. Someone would bring a case of beer, and my mom would make egg salad or baloney sandwiches.

Conditions in the mine were terrible, and these workers were organizing to achieve change. I recall them talking about a work stoppage over safety glasses. I was amazed that they would have to take action like that to get essential work equipment. The company, I thought, should voluntarily take this simple step to ensure workers were not unnecessarily injured on the job.

I learned two important lessons from sitting on the steps and listening to those meetings. One was that the company would do nothing for the workers unless forced by collective action. The other was that labor unions were instruments of both economic and social justice.

I started work in the smelter at age 18, after graduating high school. My mother told my girlfriend, Susan, my future wife, not to let me get involved in the union—because if I did, I would be gone all of the time.

For a few years, I resisted union activism. Still, I carried a copy of the labor contract in my pocket, pulled out just high enough so the boss could see it. I knew what it said, and I wanted him to know I knew.

In 1967, when I was 20, the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers merged with the United Steelworkers (USW), and I became a USW member.

It didn't take long for the guys at the smelter to see that I had a big mouth. And in 1969, they petitioned for me to become a shop steward. That was the beginning. My mom was right. It did mean I was gone much of the time.

I got myself demoted so I could work day shift and attend college at night. On day shift, I noticed the company was using a bunch of contractors. Many were performing work that was supposed to be done by union members. Other contractors sat in their trucks parked behind the warehouse doing nothing. So I got about six guys to help me track and record the violations every day.

Then we would file grievances against the company. We could not win because the contract language was weak at that point, but we took it through all the stages of grieving, and it cost Inco money. That made the bosses furious.

So they took it out on me. You have to be prepared for that if you are going to be an activist. They made me rake rocks that had fallen off the mine trucks onto the road. They made me pick up trash in the parking lot. They tried to humiliate me. But I always found a way to comply without bowing to them.

The advantage we had in those days was that they thought they were smarter than us. They didn't understand that we were a team and we stuck together, so there was no way they were going to own us.

That was the 1960s, a different time. Union membership in the United States rose through 1965, when nearly one in three workers belonged. In Canada, the rise continued through 1985, when the rate was 38 percent. The drop off in the United States was fairly slow until 1980, when it plummeted to 23.2 percent. It has now fallen to 10.5 percent. In Canada, the decline was steady, but much slower. The rate there remains 30.1 percent, close to the all-time high in the United States.

The difference is that in the United States, corporations and conservatives engaged in a successful campaign, beginning in 1971, to seize power from workers and propagandize for what they euphemistically called free enterprise. Really, it's cut-throat capitalism. The upshot is that U.S. workers have more difficulty forming unions than Canadians, and U.S. corporations can more easily lock workers out of their jobs and hire strikebreakers. The intent is to enable corporations to own their workers, lock, stock, and soul.

Lewis Powell, the late U.S. Supreme Court justice, launched this drive to crush labor, the left, and environmentalists in the United States with a memo he wrote in 1971 for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and distributed to corporate leaders.

Powell told the Chamber that it had to organize businesses into a political force because, he claimed, corporations and the free market system were “under broad attack,” and in “deep trouble.” He inveighed against regulations sought by car safety activist Ralph Nader, by environmentalists petitioning for clean air and water, and by unions demanding less deadly mines and manufacturing. He castigated those on the left pursuing a fairer, safer, and more humane society.

Businesses must cultivate political power, and wield it, Powell said, to secure “free market” advantages, such as tax breaks and loopholes specifically for corporations and the rich.

Powell also told the Chamber: “Strength lies in organization, in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available only through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and national organizations.”

That is exactly what the Chamber achieved. It catalyzed a business movement, funded by wealthy conservative family and corporate foundations, including those of Coors, Olin, Scaife, and Koch, to name a few. The foundations sponsored conservative professors at universities and right-wing “non-profits” such as the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity, and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which provides junkets for right-wing lawmakers at which it encourages them to champion anti-union and anti-worker legislation. These groups bankrolled conservative candidates and secured appointment of conservative judges.

Between the end of World War II and 1970, during the rise of unions, workers’ incomes rose with productivity. Income inequality declined, and North America became home to the largest middle class in history. After 1970 and the Chamber effort to implement the Powell manifesto, unions declined and workers’ wages stagnated. Virtually all new income and profits went to CEOs, stockholders, and the already rich. The middle class dwindled as income inequality rose to Gilded Age levels.

This occurred at the same time that corporations expanded, becoming massive multinationals, with facilities sprawled across the world and without allegiance to any country. This happened to Inco. Vale do Rio Doce, a Brazilian corporation, bought it in 2006, and now Vale is a true multinational with facilities worldwide.

Multinationals spurned their obligation to serve workers, consumers, communities, and shareholders. Instead, they focused only on shareholders, the rest be damned. They closed factories in the United States and Canada and moved them to places like Mexico and China, with low wages and lax environmental laws. They exploited foreign workers and destroyed North American workers’ lives and communities.

As far back as the 1970s, the USW, the AFL-CIO, as well as the textile, shoe, steel, and other industry leaders, warned Congress about what this trend, combined with increasing imports, meant for American workers and their neighborhoods. In 1973, after the United States experienced its first two years of trade deficits in a century, I.W. Abel, then president of the

USW, urged Congress “to slow the massive flood of imports that are sweeping away jobs and industries in wholesale lots.”

Congress’ failure to heed this alarm resulted in the collapse of the U.S. textile and shoe industries and many others. It very nearly killed the steel industry, which has suffered tsunami after tsunami of bankruptcies, gunpoint mergers, and mill closures. Tens of thousands of family-supporting jobs were lost and communities across both the United States and Canada hollowed out.

In 1971 and 1972, the trade deficit totaled \$8.4 billion. Last year it was \$621 billion. Every imported toy, shoe, bolt of cloth, and ingot of steel means fewer U.S. factories and jobs and more struggling towns.

The USW presidents who followed Abel—Lloyd McBride and Lynn R. Williams—escalated the battle against offshored factories and unfairly traded imports. The USW even filed suit to try to stop the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) because Williams, like independent presidential candidate Ross Perot, saw that it would suck Canadian and U.S. factories and jobs south of the Mexican border.

The late USW President George Becker and I agitated for change, confronting and cajoling presidents and prime ministers and members of Congress and Parliament. The USW marshalled all of its forces, including activists in its Women of Steel and NextGen programs, the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees, and its Rapid Response coordinators. Tens of thousands of workers rallied, camped out in Washington, D.C., harangued lawmakers, and sent postcards.

Working with allies in the community, such as environmental and human rights groups, faith and food safety organizations, together we have won some short-term relief measures. These include the tariffs on imported steel and aluminum imposed last year and the defeat of the proposed new trade deal, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which would have extended NAFTA problems across Pacific Rim countries.

In the decades that the USW battled bad trade, I moved through the ranks, from staff representative, to District Director, to Canadian National Director, to USW Secretary-Treasurer. Among my goals was to forge international workers’ alliances to combat the corporate cabals that always got seats at the table to write the trade deals that worked against workers. When I was elected USW president in 2001, one of my top priorities was expanding the union’s coalitions.

Now the USW participates in three global unions, which together represent more than 82 million workers in more than 150 countries worldwide. The USW and partner unions also created more than two dozen global councils of workers, including those for workers at ArcelorMittal, BASF, Bridgestone, DowDuPont, and Gerdau. These employers quickly learned that taking on workers at one factory meant taking on workers at all of their workplaces internationally.

In 2005, the USW and the Mexican miners’ union known as Los Mineros formed a strategic alliance. And the USW gave Los Mineros General Secretary Napoleon Gomez sanctuary in Canada when he was unjustly accused of wrongdoing by a Mexican government intent on shutting him up after a mine disaster.

In 2008, the USW joined with Unite the Union, the second largest union in the U.K. and Ireland, forming Workers Uniting to fight exploitation and injustice globally. And the USW formed alliances with union federations in Australia and Brazil, where the organization is known as the CUT.

This international brotherhood and sisterhood stood with Canadian mine and smelter workers for a year beginning in July 2009.

During its first negotiations with the USW, Vale, the Brazilian corporation that bought Inco, demanded harsh concessions from its thousands of Canadian workers. Though Vale was highly profitable, it said it wouldn't even bargain with the USW unless the workers first accepted the cuts. That forced them out on strike.

I started talking regularly with the head of the CUT in Brazil to strategize and plan joint actions. Brazilian workers and community groups wholeheartedly supported their Canadian brothers and sisters. They demonstrated in front of the Vale headquarters and threw red paint—symbolizing blood—on the building. They shut down traffic with all sorts of street actions. They protested at the Vale shareholders meeting, inside and out.

They also traveled to Canada, in force with flags, for a rally in Sudbury in March of 2010, when the strike was eight months old and banks were repossessing some workers' cars and foreclosing on homes. By then, Vale had 100,000 workers in mines and smelters across the world. Supporters from many of those communities—in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia—joined thousands of Canadians who marched through the streets that cold day.

Vale could see that its Canadian workers, in Sudbury, Port Colborne, and Voisey's Bay, were not alone. They had allies from around the world willing to stand up to the giant multinational.

The strike ended 12 long months after it started. We didn't get everything we wanted, but we certainly didn't accept Vale's concessionary demands. Vale failed to accomplish its mission, which was to spread to all of its operations worldwide the authoritarian, top-down, nasty management practices that it had honed in Brazil. The proof of that is the next round of negotiations with Vale went fairly well, and we got an honorable settlement.

Now, for labor to secure gains, in the United States or Canada or anywhere, workers must mobilize. We have to bring everyone together—women, men, poor people, people of color, gay people—all working people. None of us is big enough or developed enough to win this fight alone.

If we fight together, I can't guarantee we will win. But if we don't fight for justice, I can guarantee we will lose.

Since none of us is willing to owe our souls to the company store, we're going to have to find ways to continue building coalitions robust enough to confront capital and win the battle for economic and social justice.