

Lost Ways of Organizing: Reviving the AFL's Direct Affiliate Strategy

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From its founding in 1886 to the merger with the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1955, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) chartered some twenty thousand directly affiliated local unions. This article reevaluates the Federation's role in organizing by detailing the ways in which the direct affiliate strategy allowed for a wide range of representational strategies and facilitated the organizing of marginal sectors of the workforce. Reviving the direct affiliate strategy today would enable the Federation to expand jurisdictional boundaries, redefine the criteria for union membership, initiate alternative representational approaches, and boost the resurgence of labor's economic and political power at the subnational level.

THE ASCENT OF JOHN J. SWEENEY in 1995 to the presidency of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) has been accompanied by what generally is perceived as a break with the Federation's long-standing reluctance to take a leadership role in organizing. When former AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland characterized the Federation's historic relation to organizing as "one of service, back-up, and assistance," no one contested that depiction (Cooper 1995, p. 5). Rather, the debate within the AFL-CIO centered on how far the

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Federation should depart from its traditional approach of ceding leadership in organizing to the International unions.¹

Yet the historical record tells a different story. From the birth of the AFL in the 1880s, through the formation of the CIO in the 1930s, and the eventual rejoining of the two federations in the 1950s, the ability of the American labor movement to organize new workers has depended in part on aggressive and innovative organizing initiatives undertaken at the Federation level. The vigorous leadership of the CIO in the 1930s and its indispensable role in expanding unionism into the mass production industries have been detailed most recently by Robert Zieger (1995). The character and extent of the AFL's organizing initiatives have yet to be delineated.

In 1886 the founders of the AFL declared the organizing of local labor unions and their formation into national organizations a prime object.² And, as I argue in this article, to a surprising degree the Federation itself took charge of translating this goal into concrete gains, chartering thousands of new local unions, aggressively seeking the affiliation of independent organizations, and promoting the creation of new international bodies. For much of its history, the Federation coordinated a far-flung network of AFL volunteer and paid organizers who worked to build up the membership of existing internationals and, when necessary, to set up new local unions directly affiliated with the Federation.³ Through the medium of these local union affiliates, the Federation encouraged the organization of marginal and forgotten sectors of the workforce and allowed for a wide range of representational strategies.

In short, the historic role of the Federation in organizing has not been "service, back-up, and assistance" but direct involvement, leadership, and institutional experimentation. John Sweeney's program to expand Federation-level organizing resources and to make the Federation itself a

¹ For convenience, I shall often use International to mean both national and International bodies. For an expanded version of this article with more detailed citations, consult Cobble (1996a).

² *AFL Constitution*, 1886, Article II, Section I and Article VI, Section 2.

³ On AFL organizers consult American Federation of Labor (1919, pp. 306–308); Lorwin (1933, pp. 350–351); Taft (1957, pp. 100–102); Taft (1968, pp. 27–40); Keiser (1965, pp. 75–76); *AFL Proceedings* (1888 p. 12; 1891, p. 19; 1893, pp. 68–69; 1897, p. 16). The history of direct affiliates is documented in the following archival collections: AFL, *AFL-CIO Charter Books*, 1890–1966, Collection 18, George Meany Memorial Archives (GMMA) [hereafter cited Coll 18]; *Directly Affiliated Local Unions, Charter Files*, 1900–1965, Microfilm 22, GMMA [hereafter cited Micro 22]; Collection 40, *AFL Federal Local Unions/AFL-CIO Directly Affiliated Local Unions Charter Records*, 1924–1981, GMMA [hereafter cited Coll. 40]; and *American Federation of Labor Records: Part I: Strikes and Agreements Files*, 1898–1953, Microfilm edition [hereafter cited *Strikes and Agreements Files*].

site for innovative organizing practices in many ways is a continuation of tradition, not a break from it.⁴

But what about the AFL's earlier practice of directly affiliating local unions? In this article I attempt to answer the following questions: What was the extent and nature of the Federation's involvement in direct organizing of locals and Internationals? Why did the Federation initiate this practice and how well did this particular structure serve the labor movement? And, what are the implications of this prior history of federation organizing for the current labor movement? Are any lost historical traditions worth reviving? Are there inherited assumptions and practices that need reevaluation in light of changed circumstances?

The Federation: Organizing Local and National Unions

From its inception in 1886 to its merger with the CIO in 1955, the AFL chartered roughly 20,000 local unions around the country, some 12,000 before 1933 (see Figure 1).⁵ Throughout this period the Federation chartered local trade unions (workers from a single trade) as well as federal unions (workers from different trades).⁶ Any group of "seven wage workers of good character, and favorable to Trade Unions, and not members of any body affiliated with this Federation" could petition the Federation for a local union charter.⁷ Many groups of workers simply self-organized; others had assistance from an AFL organizer or a local body such as a central labor council, state federation, or an affiliated local union.

The ups and downs of membership in AFL locals and in the number of extant local affiliates in any one year generally paralleled the shifts in overall AFL membership (see Figures 2 and 3), but the largest percentage of AFL members residing in directly affiliated local unions was during periods of rapid overall growth and mass demand for unions (see Figure 4). Indeed, the chartering of local unions was the principal strategy the Federation relied on in its large-scale organizing initiatives undertaken at the turn of the century and again in the 1930s.

⁴ Sweeney's reforms break with the anemic role of the Federation in the postmerger years. But, as I argue in this article, the subordinate role of the Federation is a recent development.

⁵ By my calculations (compiled from figures published in the AFL *Proceedings*), the AFL issued 12,165 charters before 1933 and 19,048 by 1955. My figures correspond to those gathered by Taft (1957, pp. 96-97) for the years 1890 to 1905. For a higher estimate of the overall number of charters issued to local unions, see *Guide to American Federation of Labor Records* (1979, p. vii). The discrepancy may be due to the latter source counting charters issued to central labor councils, state federations, and international unions.

⁶ Historically, the terms used to describe the different types of AFL local unions were not employed consistently. I use "trade locals" to refer to the single-craft local unions, "federal labor unions" to refer to the mixed bodies, and "directly affiliated local unions" as the generic term.

⁷ AFL Constitution, 1886, Article VIII, Section 3.

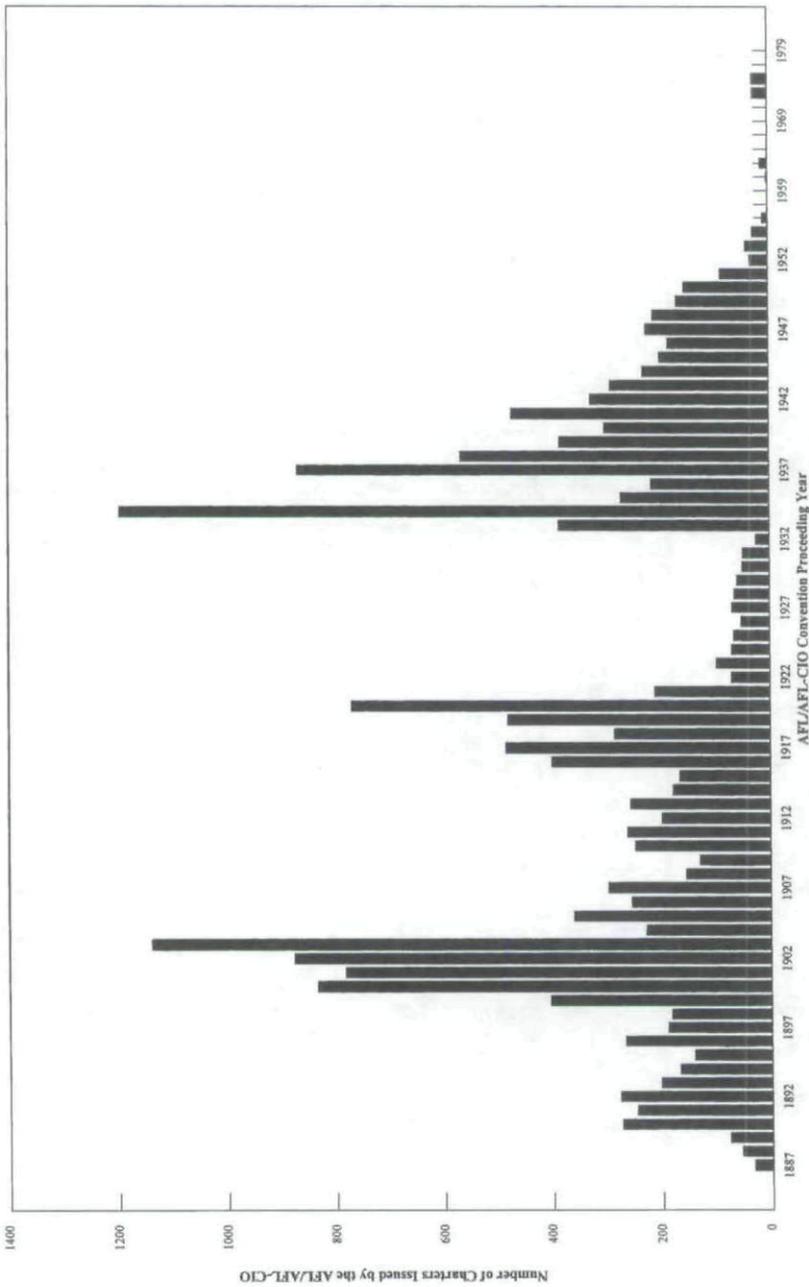


FIGURE 1
 Number of Charters for Directly Affiliated Local Unions Issued by the Federation, 1887-1979

SOURCE: Data from 1887 to 1890 compiled from "AFL Account Books December 1886-February 1890," AFL Records: Samuel Gompers Era. (Microfilm Edition, 1979). For 1891-1979, see AFL Convention Proceedings.

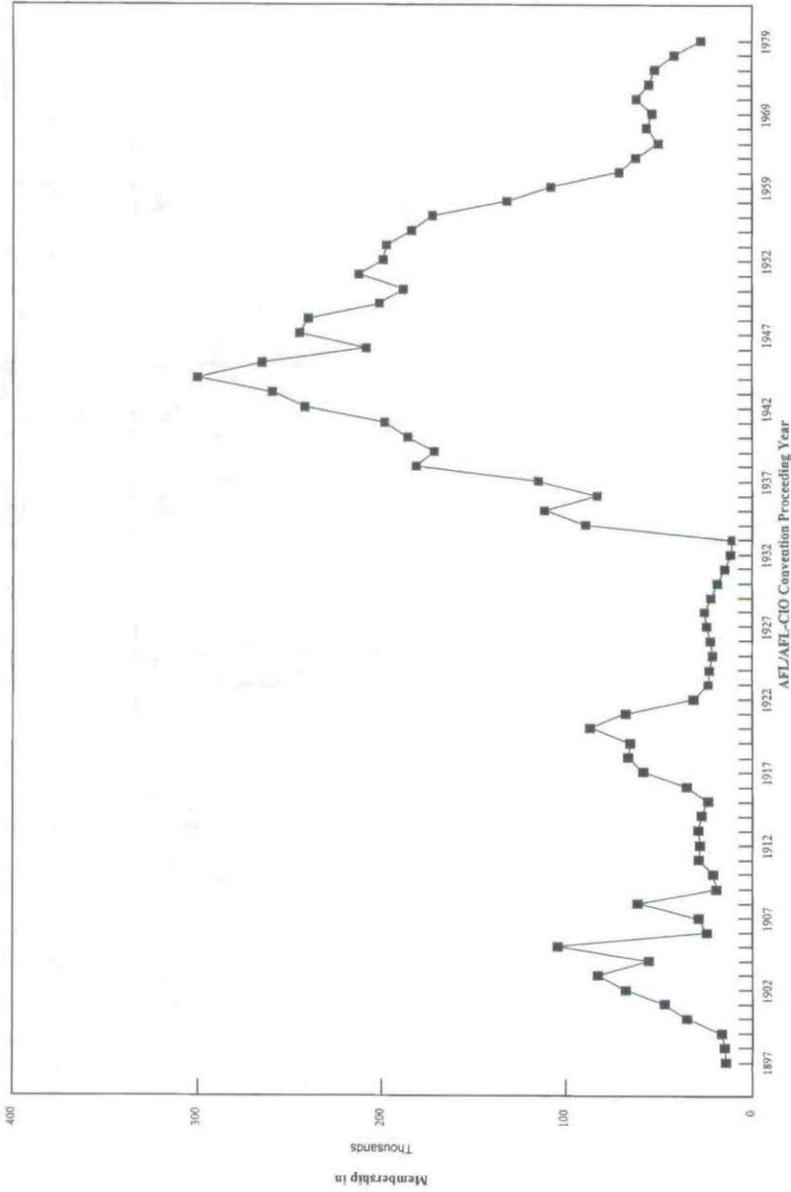


FIGURE 2
Membership in Directly Affiliated Local Unions, 1897-1979

SOURCE: Data from 1897 to 1902, 1905, and 1908 from Leo Wolman, *Ebb and Flow in Trade Unionism* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1936), pp. 192-93. Other years compiled from AFL Convention Proceedings.

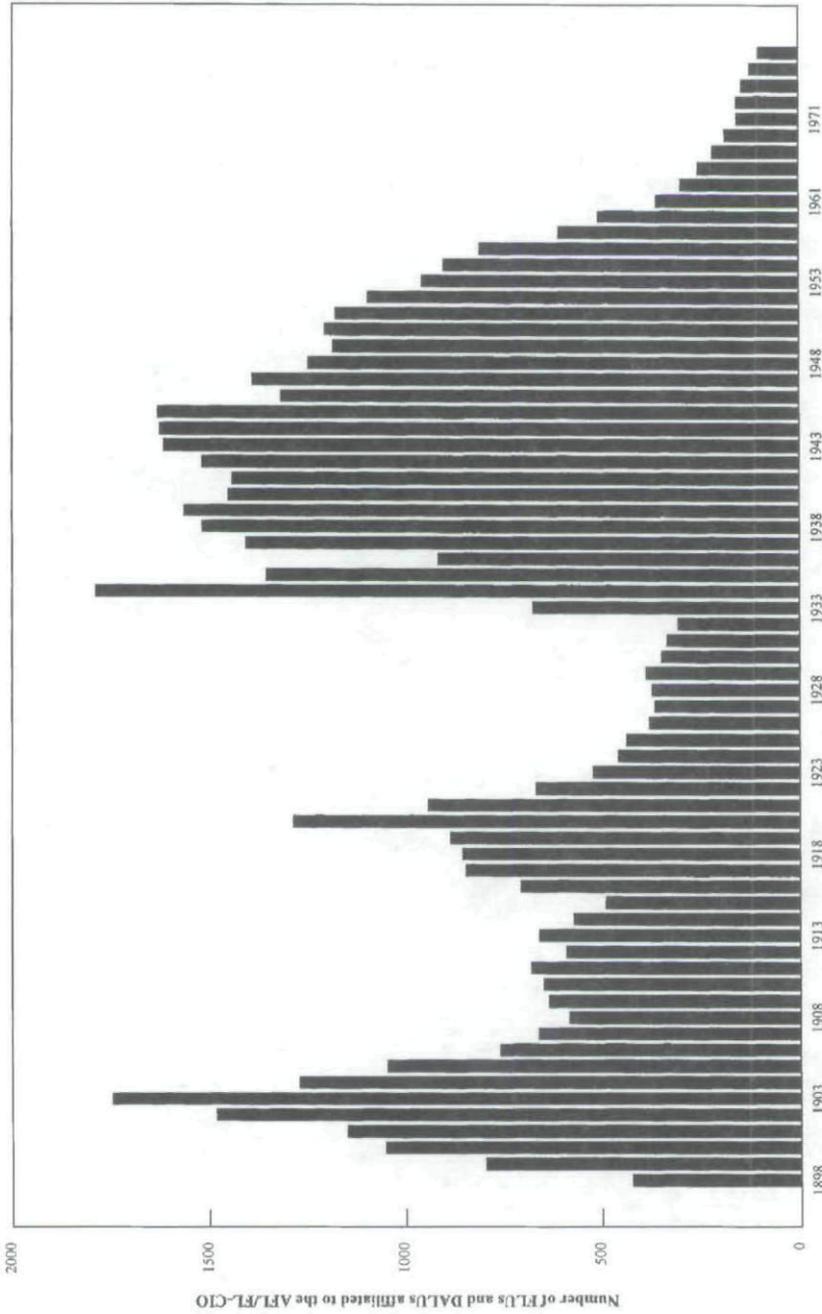


FIGURE 3
Number of Directly Affiliated Local Unions in Existence, 1898-1979

SOURCE: The 1945 figure is from Collection 18, Vol. 9, George Meany Memorial Archives. Other years compiled using data from AFL Convention Proceedings.

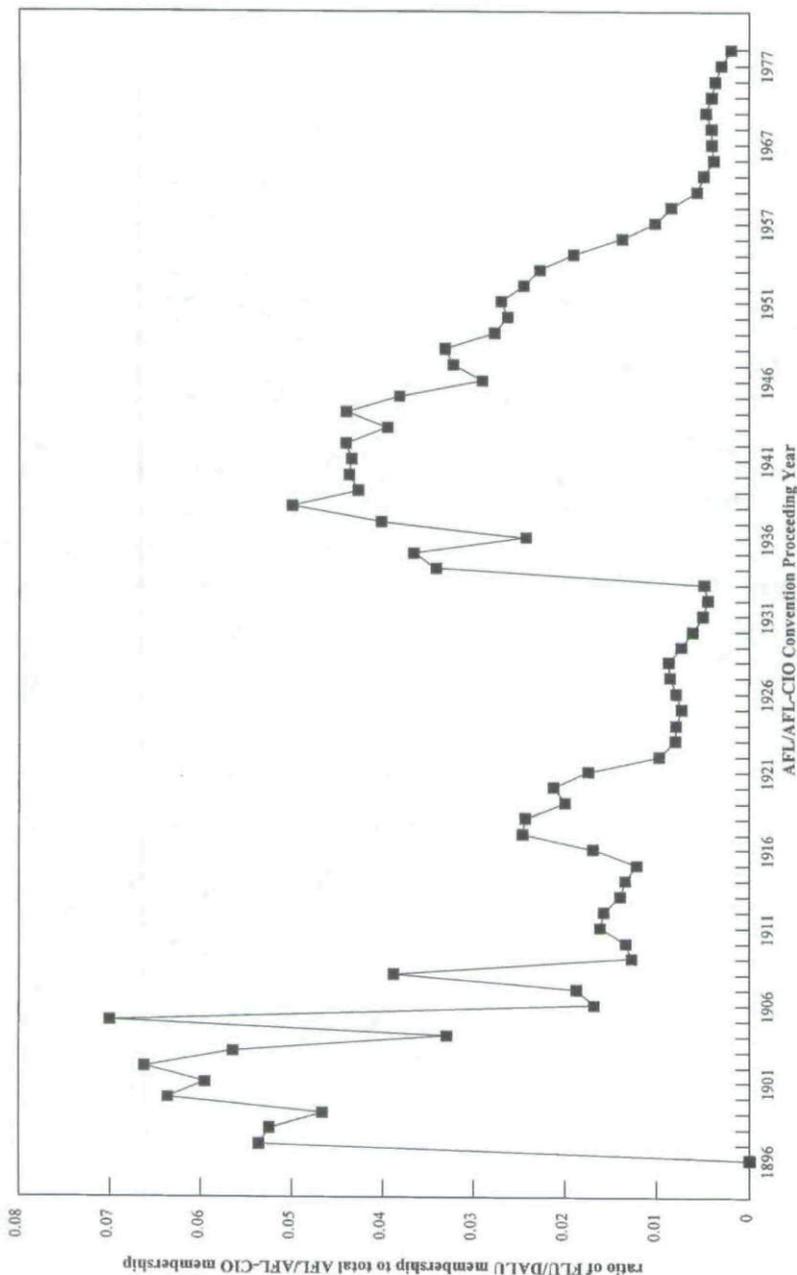


FIGURE 4
 Directly Affiliated Local Union Membership
 (in proportion to the total AFL/AFL-CIO membership, 1897-1977)

SOURCE: Compiled using data from AFL Convention Proceedings.

In the post-World War II period, the Federation abandoned its direct role in organizing and servicing locals. In 1957, for the first time in the history of the AFL, not a single local union charter was granted (see Figure 1). The postmerger AFL-CIO discouraged the formation of new local and national affiliates and initiated a campaign to transfer its local affiliates to an appropriate parent International.⁸ By 1995 only some twenty directly affiliated local bodies remained (Shantz 1995).

In part, the contemporary relevance of the Federation's direct-affiliate strategy has been lost under the avalanche of scholarly criticism directed at the Federation's practices toward its local unions. Some scholars dismiss direct affiliates as mere "holding cells," purgatories to which workers were banished until they could see the light of day, embrace craft unionism and be absorbed by a national union (Foner 1964, pp. 198-200; Zieger 1995, p. 69). Others criticize the very idea of long-term attachment of locals to the Federation rather than to an International, viewing AFL affiliates as isolated "anomalous appendages" receiving far less in service than they paid in dues and lacking adequate representation in AFL governance (Zieger 1977, p. 35; Lorwin 1933, pp. 70-72, 325-64). Still others detail the ways in which "second-class citizenship" in federal locals "ghettoized" minorities and the unskilled (Spero and Harris 1931, pp. 96-99; Northrup 1944, pp. 8-9; Foner 1974, pp. 92-93).

The AFL's craft and international union bias and its suspect practices regarding minorities and women clearly hampered the effectiveness of its local union organizing strategy. Nevertheless, to view the history of AFL locals solely in this negative light ignores the significant contribution of the Federation's direct-affiliate strategy in expanding and building the labor movement.

The AFL's willingness to charter local unions meant that a mechanism existed for a wide range of workers to gain union membership cheaply and quickly, regardless of whether an appropriate international union claimed them. Without the intermediary of an AFL local, many groups of workers would have been lost to the labor movement. Workers often knew of the AFL even when they lacked familiarity with the various Internationals, and applying for an AFL charter was a simple procedure. Workers sent in a signed petition to AFL offices, accompanied by a nominal fee and the endorsement of a local union official, such as an AFL organizer (paid or volunteer) or an officer of the local Central Trades Council. The workers pledged to uphold the AFL Constitution and "advance the Trades Unions movement." After a brief investigation, the vast majority of petitioners

⁸ Zieger (1977, pp. 78-87); Reel 9, Micro 22 and Coll. 40, Box 2, File 10; Barbash (1961, pp. 56-63).

received a single-page "Certificate of Affiliation" from the Federation within a few weeks.⁹ In contrast, affiliation with an International was often a more formalistic, formidable, and costly process.

Moreover, federal locals gave "workers in jobs not immediately conducive to trade organization an avenue to affiliation" (Kaufman 1973, pp. 168-69). Federal locals were "an innovation" and a "progressive step" in organization, AFL president Samuel Gompers declared in 1888, opening "the door to an immense number who previously could not identify themselves with the labor movement proper."¹⁰ Particularly in periods of mass demand for union organization, AFL local unions functioned "as rallying centers for unorganized workers" (Saposs 1935, p. 77; Zieger 1977, pp. 1-8, 34). Although many lasted only a few months, others eventually affiliated with an existing International union or combined with other locals to form their own international.¹¹ Still others retained their affiliation with the AFL on a long-term basis, functioning as full-fledged, autonomous local labor bodies for half a century or more.¹²

The "anomalous" structural relations between the AFL and its local unions certainly offered disadvantages. AFL local unionists voiced their displeasure time and again over their lack of equitable representation in AFL convention deliberations.¹³ As creatures of the AFL, each local union, like each central labor council and state federation, was limited to one voting representative at AFL conventions; International bodies sent numerous delegates, the exact number determined by their membership count (Lorwin 1933, pp. 325-26). And undoubtedly, in some cases AFL locals received less "service" from the Federation than they would have from an International. Many Internationals had more staff and resources than did the Federation, and they could exert more economic pressure on employers and provide better strike benefits than the Federation.

⁹ AFL Constitutions, 1887-93; AFL *Proceedings*, 1891, p. 54. The AFL Constitution gave the president of the Federation the power to grant local certificates. The majority of petitions received approval, even those that provoked protest from other affiliates, but Internationals could and did convince Gompers and later William Green to deny affiliation requests. Controversial requests for national charters often came before the Executive Council.

¹⁰ Letter from Gompers to Louis Hartmann, June 30, 1888, in Kaufman (1989, p. 128).

¹¹ An exact accounting of the fate of these locals is impossible to reconstruct. In the Charter Books, the "fate" of individual locals sometimes is recorded in pencil next to the original entry indicating the date the AFL issued the charter, but a systematic record was not kept. See also Micro. 22 and Coll. 40.

¹² Coll. 40, Box 1, File 6; Reel 8, Micro 22; and Coll. 18, vols 7,8. Most long-term locals consisted of workers in minor or regionally based trades whose small numbers precluded national organization but see Zieger (1977) for an account of the Madison, Wisconsin Battery Workers (1936-1963), a large industrial local.

¹³ AFL Convention *Proceedings*, 1888-1955.

Yet some AFL locals enjoyed close ties to powerful and generous state and local labor councils as well as the attention of competent, energetic Federation organizers who negotiated contracts, handled grievances, and conducted strikes. And, with the legitimacy of Federation affiliation, local unions gained the economic support of other AFL-affiliated unions who typically honored AFL-sanctioned picket lines and boycotts.¹⁴ AFL locals paid higher per capita dues to the AFL than those paid by other affiliates such as Internationals, but Federation dues compared favorably with those levied by Internationals on their locals. Some Internationals even complained that workers preferred affiliating with the AFL rather than with them precisely because of the lower costs associated with direct Federation affiliation (AFL 1897, pp. 15–16; Ulman 1955, pp. 420–21; Lorwin 1933, pp. 334–36).

Indeed, some locals thrived precisely *because* of their “anomalous” structural relation to the AFL. Some preferred the sometimes distant relation with the Federation to what they perceived as the more controlling management of an International. Direct affiliation with the Federation allowed them autonomy while linking them organizationally and in spirit to the larger labor movement. And, where no international existed, affiliation with the Federation could rescue local unions from isolation and provincialism (Zieger 1977, pp. 30–46; Taft 1957, p. 54).

In addition to chartering local unions, the Federation took a leadership role in forging new national organizations, operating “as the organizing agency in fields outside the jurisdiction of existing internationals” (Brody 1964, p. 20). Once a sufficient number of related local unions existed, the AFL would call a national conference of all unions representing workers in that trade, whether affiliated with the AFL or not. Often, this conference would be the occasion for the founding of a new national union. In the meat industry, for example, the AFL provided the initial impulse for the formation of some dozen butcher and packinghouse locals in the decade after its founding, and then helped bring these scattered locals together into an International in 1897 (Brody 1964, pp. 22–23).

The meat industry experience was not exceptional. Directly affiliated locals often acted as the “nurseries for new national unions” (Hoxie 1931, pp. 116–17). Philip Taft (1957, p. 98) estimated that “between 1896 and 1901 the AFL formed thirty-five international unions out of directly chartered federal and trade unions.” Lorwin (1933, p. 67) counted 69 national unions chartered from AFL local bodies between 1899 and 1904.

¹⁴ The quality of service provided by the AFL to its affiliates can be glimpsed in Reels 1 and 2, Strikes and Agreements Files.

Although the chartering of new International unions slowed after 1905, at its 1921 Convention the AFL listed 86 still-surviving internationals that had been formed from directly chartered local unions in the past 26 years (AFL 1921, p. 25). Of the 107 AFL national affiliates listed in Florence Peterson's 1944 *Handbook of Labor Unions*, slightly over one-fifth of the Internationals started as directly affiliated local unions.¹⁵ Indeed, some of the most prominent current international unions began as scattered AFL local affiliates, including the Service Employees International Union, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees, the Building Laborers, the American Federation of Teachers, the Teamsters, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and others. The hod carriers, garment, textile, auto, aluminum, and rubber workers also had their origins in AFL locals (Beadling 1984; Peterson 1944; Palladino 1991; Taft 1957).

Yet despite the Federation's record in chartering local and national bodies, the predominant historical scholarship judges the AFL's organizing performance harshly (Fink 1990). This assessment stems in part from a counterfactual reading backward from the historical record: the AFL at its peak only represented a small portion of the U.S. workforce, thus, the AFL must not have engaged in much organizing. The presumption of AFL organizing inactivity, ironically enough, also is rooted in an unduly foreshortened historical memory. The activism of the early AFL is forgotten; its lackluster organizing record in the decade before World War I and its dismal decline in the 1920s overwhelm its earlier contributions.

Moreover, the resurgence of the AFL in the 1930s and 1940s has been overshadowed by the CIO and its aggressive role in expanding unionism in mass production. Yet as Christopher Tomlins (1979) and I (Cobble 1991) have argued, the rise of the labor movement in the 1930s and 1940s had as much to do with the growth and transformation of AFL unions outside of mass production (the Teamsters, the Carpenters, the Food and Commercial Workers, Hotel and Restaurant Employees, and others) as the emergence of the UAW and other mass production unions.

But what about the role of the AFL in bringing unionism to mass production workers? Many historians have read AFL organizing efforts in mass production as an abject failure: the bulk of the federal labor unions they initiated in the early 1930s failed to sustain themselves for any length of time, and by 1935 there was widespread frustration with the AFL's refusal to charter new Internationals with unrestricted industrial charters in these industries (for example, Zieger 1995). Yet by my estimates, from

¹⁵ I have found no other directories that indicate in a systematic way whether or not AFL local unions had a role in founding specific Internationals.

1933 to 1945, the AFL chartered between 5,000 and 6,000 local unions. Some 20 percent (1500) of these were still in existence as AFL locals by the war's end.¹⁶ And, although 80 percent of the locals disappeared from the AFL affiliate lists, many of these had merged into existing or newly established Internationals. Indeed, the AFL's organizing activities helped lay the groundwork for most of the major CIO mass production unions. Where old-line AFL craft Internationals blocked federal labor union campaigns for industrial Internationals as was the case in electrical, auto, rubber, and other industries, the federal locals broke with the AFL, becoming the nucleus of new renegade CIO Internationals (Morris 1958; Saposs 1935; Millis and Montgomery 1945; Taft 1959; Matles and Higgins 1974; Phelan 1989; Cobble 1996a).

In sum, the Federation's considerable activities in chartering local and even national unions suggests the need for a reassessment of the standard historical portrait of the AFL as passive, stodgy, and little interested in reaching out to those beyond its ranks. A closer look at the actual workings of the AFL local bodies also reveals the wide range of institutional forms and representational strategies of the pre-Wagner Act labor movement and argues for a redrawing of the traditional membership boundaries associated with the AFL.

Beyond Craft Unionism?

With the exception of one short period from 1890 to 1892, the AFL constitution explicitly authorized alternatives to trade organization, providing for the formation of federal locals or union bodies comprised of workers in a variety of trades.¹⁷ The Federation took its charge to organize diverse bodies seriously, initiating industrial and geographical as well as craft-based locals. In 1887 Gompers hailed the formation of "quite a number of Federal Labor unions within the past year," and as the AFL charter books make clear, organizing on an industrial basis continued throughout the life of the AFL.¹⁸ In the 1920s the U.S. Department of Labor could still report in its surveys of AFL affiliates that a federal labor union "may include any number of different crafts and callings, and is somewhat analogous to the

¹⁶ My estimates are based on Coll. 18, vol. 9.

¹⁷ AFL Constitution, 1886, Article VIII, Sect. 3. Taft (1957, p. 97) and Ulman (1955, p. 354, fn. 5) are mistaken in asserting that before 1893 the AFL Constitution provided that federal labor unions could be formed only by workers in one trade. AFL Constitutions, 1886-93.

¹⁸ See, in particular, Coll. 18, vols. 1-5. Dozens of mixed federal labor unions were chartered even during 1890-92, the period in which the AFL Constitution restricted federal labor unions to one trade. AFL *Proceedings*, 1887, p. 10 for quote.

'mixed assemblies' of the old Knights of Labor" (U.S. Department of Labor 1926, pp. 3-4; U.S. Department of Labor 1929, pp. 6-7).¹⁹

In fact, many of these AFL bodies did resemble the mixed community-based assemblies of the Knights. Ulman (1955, p. 354, fn. 5) has noted that many federal labor unions more closely conformed to "industrial" than "mixed" bodies in that they were multicraft but single industry. Yet a significant number were multicraft and multi-industry. Hoxie (1931, p. 118) has referred to these locals as "indiscriminate" unions, but many appear to have a clear, coherent jurisdictional rationale: that of location. They were chartered as geographic unions, corresponding to the geographic territory of either a town, community, or region. Many of these community unions formed in small towns and geographically remote regions that had neither large employers nor a sufficient number of workers in a single trade.

But the AFL federal locals differed from the assemblies of the Knights in one crucial way. Although both the Federation and the Knights chartered local unions in a variety of institutional forms, the Federation often saw federal labor unions as "temporary structures; whereas, the mixed assemblies of the Knights were viewed as more permanent" (Ulman 1955, p. 354, fn. 5). For the Federation, the craft form remained the ideal. Trade unions, Gompers believed, were the superior form of organization for all workers, "the natural outcome of our economic system." The craft form was the mature organizational state; the industrial or geographic form, a state through which workers would pass. Workers in mixed bodies were not as well positioned to extract concessions from employers or to sustain their organization, Gompers explained. Workers grouped by trade "know each other and they know whom to trust." They have that social glue so necessary for solidaristic economic action (AFL 1897, pp. 15-16; Kaufman 1987, p. 88; AFL 1919, p. 230).

Not all workers agreed. Many saw their "community of interest" grouped along industrial or geographical lines rather than craft. The union names requested by local petitioners, for example, clearly suggest worker identifications other than craft. In the 1890s the Federation issued charters to the "Working Women's Guild," "The Workingmen's Benevolent Association," "The Cooperative Labor Union," "The Pioneer Union," "The Working Girls of Toledo," and "The Progressive Union." But increasingly, as petitions bearing titles such as the "Laborers Rights Protective Union" or "Ladies Union Label League" reached AFL headquarters, the AFL

¹⁹ Scholars divide over the degree federal labor unions resembled the mixed assemblies of the Knights. Ulman (1955, p. 354, fn. 5) points to their dissimilarity; Commons (1918, pp. 346-47) sees them as "identical" as do Hoxie (1931, p. 118) and Ware (1929, p. 164).

changed the name to "Federal Labor Union" or insisted that local bodies describe themselves by their trade.²⁰

AFL locals demonstrated a remarkable range of representational strategies.²¹ Signing contracts and bargaining with individual employers was but one approach among many adopted by locals to raise the living standards of their members. Many groups, especially those in small towns or those representing trades with clearly defined local or regional markets, adopted working standards for their craft or their community as part of their bylaws, constitutions, or work rules. Union members then pledged to work only for employers who would abide by the wages and work rules adopted by the local. Standards were enforced as often through local legislative initiatives (for example, trade licensing laws, minimum wage ordinances, and other protective statutes) as through economic action. Many locals also emphasized benevolent functions, offering relief to the sick, burial benefits, unemployment assistance, training, and job referrals. A few set up community arbitration boards to mediate wage and other disputes between individual members and local employers; individual bargaining occurred alongside collective.²²

Social reform unionism usually is associated with the Knights of Labor, but it is evident in the AFL locals as well. Frequently AFL locals combined economic and fraternal aspects with a social reform orientation. The objects of the Muscatine, Iowa local, for example, included "the moral elevation of its members through educational methods" as well as the "fostering of fraternity," shorter hours and increased wages. They banned "partisan politics or sectarian discussion" but "permitted and encouraged . . . questions of social and political economy." One of their officers, the "lecturer," was required to "furnish lectures, speeches, essays or readings of interest to laboring men at least once a month."²³

In 1894 the AFL itself even advocated the formation of "nonpartisan social reform clubs" under AFL charters to "bring together, for mutual aid and instruction, such persons of various vocations as entertain a serious interest in the social problem, and desire to influence public opinion in

²⁰ Coll. 18, vols. 1 and 2.

²¹ For more general information on the representational strategies of pre-Wagner Act unions consult, Perlman (1928); Millis and Montgomery (1945); Bensman (1985); Cobble (1991).

²² See "Constitution, Rules, and By-laws of Nine Mile, FLU No. 6804," Nine Mile Montana, Adopted July 9, 1897, and "By-Laws and Rules of Order," FLU No. 6736 of Negaunee, Michigan, 1896; Hamilton, Montana, FLU No. 6640, 1897; By-laws, FLU No. 6303, Muscatine, Iowa, Revised and Adopted March 1897; Constitution, FLU No. 6623, Clinton, Montana, organized, 1896; Constitution and Bylaws of FLU 6729, formerly Eureka Assembly No. 5519, Salem, Ohio, 1891. All at the New York Public Library.

²³ By-laws, FLU 6303, Muscatine, Iowa, Revised and Adopted March 1897. Hamilton, Montana, FLU No. 6640, 1897.

favor of union labels and of the trades union movement in general, and such economic reforms as will serve to leave to the worker the wealth which he produces." Gompers himself joined one such club in New York City, but the AFL effort to set up clubs dedicated solely to social reform appears to have been stillborn (Kaufman 1992, p. 57; AFL 1894, p. 46). The AFL accepted charters from social reform clubs throughout the 1890s, but by the turn of the century few applications bearing names such as the "Social Reform Club" or the "Wonderful Progress Union" came in, and when they did, the AFL refused them membership.²⁴

Redefining the Boundaries of Union Membership

A conventional notion among researchers has been that AFL membership was restricted to the skilled.²⁵ The direct affiliate records reveal a different membership boundary. In Gompers's mind, for example, the federal labor unions were set up explicitly to organize the unskilled and those outside the existing jurisdiction of any International. "It has been the constant aim of the trade union movement to exercise its power and influence to organize our fellow workers engaged in unskilled labor. . . . In providing for the organization of our unskilled workers in Federal Labor Unions, the American Federation of Labor has adopted a splendid haven of protection," Gompers declared in 1897 (AFL 1897, pp. 15–16). The official reports of the Department of Labor describing federal labor union members as "chiefly unskilled workmen" attest to the partial implementation of the Federation's plan (U.S. Department of Labor, 1926, pp. 3–4; U.S. Department of Labor 1929, pp. 6–7). Even AFL *trade* locals had a preponderance of semi-skilled and unskilled members. Characteristic "trades" applying for AFL charters included conductors and drivers, machinists' helpers and laborers, cooks and waiters, clerks, longshoremens, hod carriers, telephone operators, sugar boilers, teamsters and shovelers, agricultural workers, laborers, operative cotton spinners, bootblacks, house maids, button workers, janitors, hospital attendants, and countless other semi-skilled or "unskilled" occupations.²⁶ As Spero and Harris (1931, pp. 94–96) conclude, federal

²⁴ Coll. 18, vol. 1.

²⁵ Labor historians writing before the 1960s tended to see the AFL as more inclusive than those that followed. Taft (1957, pp. 96–97), for example, argued that the AFL was "as anxious to recruit the unskilled as the skilled"; this desire, in part, prompted the AFL to set up federal labor unions. Of the new labor historians, only a few have taken the AFL's commitment to the unskilled seriously (e.g., Kaufman 1973, p. 169).

²⁶ See Coll. 18, vols. 1–5; the "Reports from Organizers and Local Unions" section in the *American Federationist*, 1903–1907; Taft (1968, pp. 112–16); Kaufman (1987, p. 222).

labor unions (as well as AFL trade locals) allowed the AFL to organize "the white helper and laborer who were excluded from unions of their crafts" as well as excluded minorities.

Moreover, although grouping workers together by occupation remained the AFL ideal, occupational categories often were broadly conceived. Internationals such as the Machinists or the IBEW limited membership to the "skilled," but others such as the carpenters, butchers, cigarmakers, or the iron and steel workers took in the unskilled along with the skilled (Ashworth 1915; Wolman 1924, p. 56; Morris 1958, pp. 59-63; Brody 1964, pp. 34-58). Gompers himself made it clear that the terms skilled and unskilled were fraught with difficulty. "There is no such thing as unskilled work per se," he maintained; "the distinction between wage-earners is one of degree only."²⁷ For Gompers, all wage earners had "know-how," and the line between skilled and unskilled was impossible to draw.²⁸ Skill was a social category: the perception of the expertise of the worker depended on the social status and compensation of that worker.²⁹

The problem with the AFL's trade bias, then, was not that it categorically excluded the unskilled. Rather, the problem was that it failed to recognize the variety of identifications that existed among workers and the need to accommodate this diversity by offering a variety of permanent organizational possibilities.

The Federation's organizing policies suffered from another ideological limitation: Gompers's rigid adherence to a movement restricted to wage earners. It was not the unskilled who were excluded but those not deemed bona fide wage earners. Gompers was explicit: In response to an inquiry about organizing in 1888, Gompers indicated that the workers could be in different trades or the same but must be "working for wages."³⁰ The single-page charters issued to every AFL local affiliate listed very few rules governing behavior, but prominent among them was the admonition that membership was restricted to wage workers only.

Gompers's narrow definition of the AFL's appropriate constituency was not necessarily shared by other labor leaders or by the rank and file. The AFL reminded local union members of the "absolute necessity to maintain the clear-cut character of our movement as a wage-earners' movement"

²⁷ Gompers (1925, p. 106) and *AFL Proceedings* (1918, p. 84).

²⁸ I have used the term popularized by Kusterer (1978) to emphasize the contemporary quality of Gompers's notions.

²⁹ Gompers's arguments are uncannily similar to those of feminist scholars who would "deconstruct" the category of skill and insist on its social nature (Philips and Taylor 1980).

³⁰ Gompers to Thomas Purdy, March 16, 1888, Reel 1, Vol. 2, pp. 371-73, Samuel Gompers Letterbooks, Library of Congress as reproduced in Kaufman (1987, p. 95).

over and over again because they resisted this fetter. Many locals desired the presence of "employers, superintendents, foremen, and businessmen," Gompers lamented (AFL 1897, p. 16). They drew the class line differently than did he. So did many Internationals. The Teamsters, for example, allowed team owners or "employers who controlled only one team" into the union (Taft 1957, pp. 109-113). The Internationals representing restaurant employees, printers, certain construction trades, and others also included foremen, the self-employed, and small businessmen. Some offered a nonvoting "associate membership"; others allowed full membership rights and privileges (Cobble 1991; Lipset, Trow, and Coleman 1956; Christie 1956).

The assessment of the AFL as exclusive has rested not only on its craft and skill bias, but on its seeming reluctance to open up membership to minorities and women. Some of the sharpest criticism, for example, has been leveled at the Federation's policy of setting up separate local unions for African Americans after 1900 and its subsequent unwillingness either to charter new national unions or convince Internationals to absorb African American workers (Foner 1974, pp. 92-93; Spero and Harris 1931, pp. 95-100; Northrup 1944, pp. 8-9). Space constraints prevent a satisfactory discussion here of the complicated history of the AFL's practices toward minorities and women. But from the evidence I examined, it appears that in the case of African American and minority men, the Federation itself only reluctantly agreed to charter segregated locals and that in many instances, the Federation pointedly encouraged local petitions from minorities in sectors where Internationals with "white-only" policies claimed jurisdiction (Cobble 1996a).

Similarly, the AFL from its earliest days lived up to its pledge that "any number of wage-workers, not less than seven, of either sex, can obtain a Certificate of Affiliation" (AFL 1891, p. 154). "Ladies FLU No. 2703 in Chicago" received its charter on June 14, 1888; soon after a half-dozen other "ladies" locals joined. The Chicago women's local (No. 2703) organized clerks, candymakers, typists, bookbinders, housewives, and others, becoming the "leading organization of AFL-affiliated female workers" in this period. They also instigated the Illinois Women's Alliance, a cross-class reform group that lobbied successfully for shorter hours and limits on child labor (Roediger and Foner 1989, pp. 165-70).

By the turn of the century, trade locals of women began to populate the charter records as well: "the Laundry Girls Union," straw and wool hat workers, shirt ironers, feather dusters, household employees, and telephone operators. Black women organized as did Puerto Rican, Mexican

American, and others.³¹ But unlike the case with minority men, the AFL often refused to charter locals for women when the Internationals excluded them.³²

Following World War II, all but a handful of recalcitrant Internationals modified their official exclusionary policies based on race, ethnicity and sex. And, although AFL "colored" locals persisted into the 1950s, the AFL stopped granting charters to race-segregated groups in 1949.³³

Toward the Future

The current AFL-CIO administration has come forward with a series of proposals that echo historical practice much more than is realized. The AFL-CIO's new organizing program, for example, revives the earlier activist legacy of the Federation in its call for increased organizing expenditures, for a new AFL-CIO organizing department charged with overseeing national organizing campaigns, and for making the Federation a site of organizing innovation and strategy ("A New Voice for American Workers," 8 n.d.; Bensinger 1995).

Moreover, harkening back to the variety of organizational forms evident among the early AFL locals, President Sweeney argues in his new book, *America Needs a Raise* (1996), for a rejection of the "one-size-fits-all pattern of unionism." A renewed labor movement, he insists, "may reach out to workers in their occupations and professions" as well as rely on organizing entire industries and communities. He even has charged the newly created "Committee 2000" with reassessing such fundamentals as whether unions should be based in companies and industries and whether "our most important function is to bargain and enforce contracts" (Sweeney 1996, pp. 123-42). Like the pre-Wagner Act labor movement, the new AFL-CIO is beginning to realize that organizing workers into enterprise-based bargaining units to secure contracts with employers may not always be the best strategy. Other means of raising the living standards of American workers are necessary and must be pursued.

Experimentation with new organizational forms and representational strategies is flourishing once again among various International and local

³¹ Coll. 18, vols. 1, 2 and 3. AFL Account Book, December 1886-1890 in *AFL Records: The Samuel Gompers Era*, microfilm edition (Microfilm Corporation of America, 1979); Kaufman (1987, pp. 175-77); Tronland (1929, pp. 970-71).

³² For example, the 1918 petition of the Seattle "Lady Barbers" for affiliation met stony silence from both the Federation and the Barbers' Union. Coll. 18, vol. 3. Consult Wertheimer (1977, p. 272) for other examples.

³³ The AFL chartered a "colored" Ordancemen's Union from Yorkton, Virginia on July 18, 1949. See Coll. 18, vols. 4 and 5 and Coll. 40, Box 1, Files 1 and 14.

unions. The success of the Service Employees International Union's (SEIU) janitorial organizing in the last decade or the market-wide organizing of the Southern California drywallers are but two examples of innovative non-worksite-oriented organizing campaigns (Sweeney 1996; Krieger 1995). Other unions are experimenting with representational approaches that move beyond traditional bilateral collective bargaining. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees' (AFSCME) Baltimore local, for instance, linked up with community and church groups to preserve the living standards of its own members and raise those of unorganized workers by pushing for new legislative provisions requiring city contractors to pay a living wage, health benefits, and provide training for minority workers. AFSCME organizers are now intent on convincing private sector employers to sign on to this "new social compact."³⁴ In San Francisco, The Communications Workers of America (CWA) 9410 offered a form of direct affiliation to the San Francisco United Taxi Workers. Ineligible for bargaining unit certification because of their "independent contractor" status, the cab drivers formed their own association to lobby for favorable city ordinances, improve the public image of drivers, and provide health care and other kinds of social insurance (Early and Cohen 1994, pp. 7-18).

But what about the AFL's long involvement with directly chartering local unions? Is there a reason for the Federation itself to reactivate its flagging direct-affiliate mechanism and serve, as did the AFL in the past, as the direct sponsor for new groups of workers? I would argue that the direct-affiliate strategy has much to offer a labor movement now committed to reaching out to all working people and revitalizing itself as a grassroots, social movement. As in the past, direct affiliation with the Federation would appeal to a wide variety of workers, offering local groups an uncomplicated yet meaningful mechanism for direct linkage with the larger national labor movement. Some of these new locals might eventually combine to establish new Internationals in emerging occupations and industries; others might prefer eventual affiliation with an existing International. Providing a temporary home for new workers inclined toward collective association would allow the Federation to better coordinate and define the distinct identities of its Internationals and avoid evolving into a labor movement consisting of a few large, homogeneous, and ill-defined "general unions." Today, as in the past, worker associations need a community of interest, whether

³⁴ On the Baltimore campaign see *Daily Labor Report* no. 238, December 14, 1994, and *Daily Labor Report* No. 1, January 3, 1995, Bureau of National Affairs; Sweeney (1996, pp. 133-136).

occupational, industrial, geographic or other, if solidaristic action and democratic participation are to be achieved.

But some groups might desire direct-affiliate status on a more long-term basis. This desire for autonomy and for the loose tie offered by Federation affiliation should be viewed as an opportunity, not a problem. Respecting the autonomy and right to localism of direct affiliates, rather than insisting upon the dominance of national bodies as did the historic AFL, appears appropriate in a new economy in which local and regional markets are rebounding (Piore and Sabel 1984; Hattam 1995). The current labor movement need not repeat the craft or the national union bias associated with the old AFL by viewing direct affiliates as mere "way stations" to craft unionism or to absorption by an International. Neither should local affiliates be reduced to "second-class" citizenship by restricting their representation in AFL-CIO governance. Direct affiliation with the Federation should provide access to the full voting rights and privileges of citizenship within the labor movement.

Encouraging a resurgence of localism through the direct-affiliate strategy would bolster central and regional labor bodies and help the AFL-CIO rebuild itself as a grassroots, community-based movement. Historically, central labor councils expended considerable energy in organizing directly affiliated local unions in their community. They valued the direct-affiliate mechanism as a simple way of expanding their ranks and hence increasing labor's economic and political power at the local and regional level.

But didn't the Federation initiate the direct-affiliate strategy primarily to organize in fields outside the jurisdictional scope of existing Internationals or in cases where Internationals excluded groups based on skill level, race, sex, or ethnicity? And haven't those situations almost wholly disappeared? In the past, the argument might go, there were large groups of workers over which no International claimed jurisdiction; today, jurisdictions are broadly defined and/or irrelevant to most organizing decisions. It is hard to think of a sector of the workforce over which no International claims jurisdiction.

Yet in one sense the jurisdiction of the labor movement today is even narrower than 100 years ago, and contrary to popular wisdom, it is much in need of expansion. In the late nineteenth century, Gompers defined the jurisdiction of the AFL as all wage earners, regardless of skill, race, sex, or national origin. The early AFL never lived up to these lofty ambitions, but today's labor movement does represent workers of all skill levels, and its membership is close to 40 percent female and disproportionately minority (Cobble 1996b).

Today's excluded are no longer defined by skill, race, or sex: the new untouchables are those considered "nonemployees" under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). Many of the new crafts (technicians and knowledge workers) are ineligible for bargaining unit membership as are countless other so-called independent contractors, managers, and "supervisors." By my estimates, close to a third of the private sector workforce is no longer covered by the NLRA (Cobble 1994, p. 290). This one-third is growing rapidly. If the Federation is to speak for all working people, it needs to reject the NLRA as the arbiter of its class boundaries and once again define its own membership criteria.

Of course, many independent contractors, assistant managers, and others are really "employees" as defined by the NLRA and should be reclassified. But the strategy of legally reclassifying workers, while necessary, is not sufficient. As the nature of work changes and employer/employee distinctions disappear due to the growth of subcontracting, independent contracting, teamwork, and the reorganization of work, many nonsalaried workers engage in what historically have been "managerial" responsibilities. The Federation could take the lead in organizing these new untouchables and push the labor movement into new jurisdictional frontiers just as it did in the past.

Many workers outside the jurisdiction of the NLRA are in fact already forming local and national associations that might be candidates for AFL charters. Stressing strategies other than collective bargaining, these associations offer workers information about their rights, help them set reasonable fees for their services, lobby for them with employers and government officials, and offer life, health and supplemental unemployment insurance, job referrals, and other services relevant to their working lives.³⁵ Many eschew the union label but others identify explicitly with the trade union tradition and speak forthrightly about the need for unionization. A recent *New York Times* editorial calling for an organization to represent the needs of "the swelling ranks of executive and professional self-employed"—an organization that would help set fees, provide health, life, disability, and dental coverage, provide job referrals, and lobby for their inclusion in the unemployment system—was headlined with what is still seen as a contradiction in terms: "A Union for the Self-Employed?" (Rot-

³⁵ Many constitute themselves along occupational or craft lines (the National Waiters Association, for example). Another group, Working Today: A National Association of Employees—"open to all those who work or want to work: professional and service workers, managers and time-clock punchers, consultants, freelancers, and part-time and seasonal workers, as well as all those who are unemployed"—has chosen the neo-Wobbly or "one big union" approach. Herbert (1995, p. 24); literature copied from Working Today, 25 W. 43rd St., Rm 620, New York, New York 10036, in author's possession.

kopf 1995). But whether or not these groups call themselves unions and regardless of whether the Act defines them as "employees," the AFL-CIO should claim them as part of the movement it leads, a movement to better the conditions of all working people.

The AFL locals of the past were self-constituted communities that believed in the goals and collective approaches of organized labor; neither the law nor one's relation to a particular employer determined one's eligibility to participate in the labor movement. Indeed, it is important to remember that many early AFL locals were not necessarily united on the basis of occupation, industry, enterprise, or location. They identified broadly with what they saw as the goals of the labor movement: to raise the intellectual, economic, and social status of working people. Why not create the possibility once again of membership for those who support the overall political and economic efforts of the labor movement? The Federation historically has seen its principal mission as representing workers in the political arena; linking local groups of sympathetic workers to their central labor councils and state federations rather than to separate national bodies is the logical, historically consistent structure.

Individual fee-based membership could continue to be an option as currently exists through the AFL-CIO's "associate membership" program, but AFL-CIO affiliation should facilitate identification with a social movement, not just offer individual economic benefits. The heritage of securing individual rights through collective means is central to the history of the labor movement and should be preserved. Offering a new kind of membership based on group affiliation perpetuates that ideological heritage. It also links itself firmly to the organizing traditions of the AFL.

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