

## What Role Should Unions Play in Politics

By Alexa DeMarco

Jimmy Carter once said, “Every advance in this half-century— Social Security, civil rights, Medicare, aid to education, one after another—came with the support and leadership of American Labor.” Our Nation was founded on the principle that we were a government ‘of the people, for the people and by the people.’ In theory, this was a beautiful concept. In practice, it was not always viable. By virtue of economic, social and racial differences, corporate power and political corruption, each man and woman’s voice was not given the same weight. Enter the Union. Unions were developed to provide collective power to the voices of the under-represented working class. The power brought to the bargaining table allowed workers to finally have a collective, recognized interest. It gave them a voice in the decisions that impacted their lives.

Along with that voice, comes the recognition that there is virtually no concession to be gained at a bargaining table, which is immune from being taken away by regulations or legislation. In order to protect the right to bargain, and the things labor Unions bargain for, they must also have a voice in politics. Unions, with their approximately 14 million members, are the largest melting pot of races and cultures in America. They are our firefighters, our medics, our teachers, our police officers, our factory workers, our laborers. They are the lifeblood of our country. Unions represent an incredibly diverse group of working Americans. Mother Teresa said, “I can do things you cannot, you can do things I cannot; together we can do great things.” Unions embody that idea. They were founded to organize people with shared interests to provide them with a collective mechanism to magnify their voices.

Webster defines *Politics* as the activities, actions, and policies that are used to gain and hold power in a government or to influence a government. Unions need to participate in political

activities and actions to protect their rights to bargain, the interests of their members, and their very right to exist. Just like every other “special interest” group in America, who comes to the political table to represent the collective interests of those who identify with the group, the Union is the “voice” of working Americans. For the Union to pull out of the political conversation would be to lose the largest, and most critical, representative voice at the table.

Many issues in politics boil down to what needs should be addressed by society and what needs ought to be addressed by the individual. Many times those issues are decided by the man or woman with the biggest pocketbook. Especially in today’s media-heavy society, political ads, media spots and exposure all cost money. This system obviously favors those with wealth. Sadly, the interests of the highly wealthy and middle-class working Americans don’t often match. How can the inequity of the modern political system be solved? The answer can be found in the Union. Unions pool resources of middle-class workers and allow a collective use of funds for political advertising. Unions also increase voter participation among members and advocate for policies that help those who are in the middle class.

We live in a country where a multitude of people clamor to be heard. The Union allows millions people to be heard without violence. Dr. Martin Luther King once said “The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life.” Unions are critical players and great equalizers in the American political scene, and should continue to be the representative voice of their members.