

Open Lecture

Suddenly Silent: Reflections on the Crisis of Leadership in the Post-September 11th American Labor Movement

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This essay examines the American labor movement's failure to mount serious opposition to the rapid advance of the right wing's social and political agenda that followed the September 11th attacks in the US. While taking the larger social and political context into account, the paper focuses on the ways the current "public relations" model of unionism contributed to creating and sustaining the labor movement's sudden silence in the face of the Right's dramatic rewriting of the American political scene. For 10 years, my job has been to communicate unions' vision and policy proposals to members and the public. Building on that experience, I highlight the strengths and failings of the public relations model.

During the 90s, American labor leaders successfully used the techniques of opinion poll-based leadership to harness existing worker discontent and translate that energy into action in the form of a significantly more vibrant labor movement. In the post-September 11th political crisis, however, the logic of finger-to-the-wind leadership left unions reluctant to buck popular sentiment by speaking out against the right-wing backlash that

followed the attacks.

I suggest that opinion-poll leadership failed in the post-September 11th era because it takes as its guiding light the shifting sands of public opinion rather than a core set of principles. Loath to offend, the movement thus became tongue-tied at precisely the moment an alternative needed to be voiced.

Ultimately, then, this paper hinges on the question of whether it is possible to have a movement that is both democratic and capable of withstanding extreme swings in public sentiment in times of crisis or rapid social change. I argue that such a balance is possible only if the movement is grounded in a core set of mutual, well-established principles and values.