

# The future for public sector unions. Part A

EN AVANT! (Forward!)

July 13, 2012

Initial compilation by:

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Three sections:

A - Thoughts looking forward from July 2-11, 2012

B - After July 10 Table Talk at Marriott Restaurant in Bloomington MN

C - Initial comments after the Wisconsin Recall election in June, 2012

ON DIALOGUE:

from Joseph Jaworsky's book, "Synchronicity, the Inner Path of Leadership" (1996). Preceding the chapter on "Dialogue: The Power of Collective Thinking", Jaworsky included the following quote from David Bohm's "On Dialogue". It speaks to this business of talking with, rather than talking to or at others: "From time to time, (the) tribe (gathered) in a circle.

*They just talked and talked and talked, apparently to no purpose. They made no decisions. There was no leader. And everybody could participate.*

*There may have been wise men or wise women who were listened to a bit more – the older ones – but everybody could talk. The meeting went on, until it finally seemed to stop for no reason at all and the group dispersed. Yet after that, everybody seemed to know what to do, because they understood each other so well. Then they could get together in smaller groups and do something or decide things."*

**BIGGEST MISTAKES LEADERS MAKE** (with thanks to Jermitt Krage)

A powerful six minutes from Harvard Business Review

<http://blogs.hbr.org/video/2010/08/the-biggest-mistake-a-leader-c.html>

I - Thoughts looking forward from July 2-11, 2012

1. Dick Bernard, retired MEA/Education Minnesota staff:

Second from the end of this compilation (beginning 1A) is an e-mail received August 5, 2011 (over a year ago) from a distant relative, Ken, in Cedar Rapids IA. It refers to a previously sent right-wing "forward" alleging union destruction of a Wisconsin school district, stands on its own and deserves plenty of attention. It was the last of perhaps 20 of these far-right "forwards" that were, as typical of such documents, almost always lies,

or so distorted as to qualify as lies. Of course, the Kaukauna example was questionable and I told him so. He and I haven't talked since, and my guess is he hasn't changed his mind. I'm 72, and I checked the family history and Ken is almost exactly my same age.

The remainder of my comments are at end of and within 1B, following 1A.

**2. Lee Johansen**, soon to retire from Education Minnesota staff: July 2, 2012

At this time I offer one overarching idea that I have been pushing since at least 1981 with only some small success. The idea is as follows. "Unions of public school employees must always, in everything they do, say and think align themselves with the work they do." Everything we do is for the good of the students in our school. We are for improving education. We have the needs of the kids in mind for everything we do. Unless we make this connection and repeat it over and over again connecting all our efforts with what is good for education is good school employees and vice versa we will be up against those who want to drive a wedge between the public and school employee unions.

**3. Bob Barkley**, retired NEA and Ohio Education Association staff and Ex. Dir: July 2, 2012

Answer: Use your power directly -- have general strikes and other such strategies when situations dictate and strength is sufficient. All unions should support any union! Rely on political solutions only from a position of strength.

**4. Corky Marinkovich**, retired Illinois EA and Minnesota EA staff July 3, 2012: Hi Dick. After just returning from three weeks in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Estonia, I saw some interesting sites and left with many thoughts and questions. For example, I conversed with a teen aged young woman who worked at a 250 year old church in Keurvu, Finland. She was very surprised to hear Finland had such high world wide regard in education rankings. She stated that she had taken ten (10) years of English as part of her education training and basically the young people we spoke to were very fluent in English. Not so for the older Finnish people we met.

I don't believe you could even obtain accurate rankings in Finland as the country is so rural and sparsely populated. I wondered how the children physically even got to school. The larger cities of Helsinki, Tampere, Jyvaskyla, Pori & Lahti would be exceptions to this sparse population issue.

With this I have one thought for future organizing:

How good is our public education system and how do we communicate to the public? We can't continue to only base our public contacts during collective bargaining conflicts.

**5. Jermitt Krage**, retired Wisconsin EA staff, July 5, 2012:

If you were in charge, what would be the most important things you would do now as an organizer in public sector unions?

I believe the challenge for leadership of public sector unions is to create a means of engaging stakeholders--starting with those who really care about public education and

public schools. We must also expand the stakeholder group, so that everyone who derives a benefit from public education would name themselves as a stakeholder. Together, through dialog, we must discover what is possible; a culture of collectiveness and collaboration. In a setting of this nature, leadership must reach deeper than their own association membership and expand into the community. The Association must include leaders of the community who are committed to the preservation of public education. Public schools and their employee associations are interdependent--one cannot be healthy if the other is unhealthy. Association survival is directly impacted by the health and vitality of public education. Likewise, public schools are directly linked to the health of the Association. We need to show that is our core belief, not just through our words but by our actions, long term.

With this as the goal, a foundation of trust needs to be established by expanding the role of leadership so that everyone could become a leader. Secondly, we must provide opportunities for both informal and formal engagement. Informal engagement would include dialog during one-on-one conversations and small group stories to create our shared interests. To broaden the community of trust, intensify the relationships, build accountability and commitment, we would establish formal engagement processes such as future search conferences, community dialog sessions, focus group interviews and appreciative inquiry summits. The engagement processes would include leadership and interest based strategies training and would be on-going. Engagement processes would create an organizational foundation that would include:

- A shared purpose
- Short- and long-term plans with mutually established goals and agreed-upon strategies to accomplish these goals
- Ownership and shared responsibility for the implementation of decisions made by consensus
- Ongoing assessment of programs and processes that assure continual growth

Finally, I believe that the stakeholders need to redefine the very governance structure of school districts. The traditional, hierarchical, top-down system does not easily support a culture of collectiveness and collaboration.

The foundation for this change is the way stakeholder groups approach their relationship with each other and the way they make decisions. It formally acknowledges that public education and children are valued and critical to the economic and cultural health of our country and are the foundation of our democratic principles.

Jermitt Krage

**6. From Denise Krewal on July 6:** a citizen who cares in Racine WI:

The ideas of all of these people are very insightful!

Regarding your organizing question about the public sector unions, I am not quite sure. One thing that I am sure about it that they have been demonized as greedy.

Neither my husband nor I have ever been (private sector) union members, due to lack of opportunity.

My father, however, was a lifelong UAW member. When he passed away, it was not politicians, or family members or the government who came to offer help. It was the Union. At the time, I was very ill and still living at home, and my mother had just lost her job. The union leader came to our house after the funeral with an American flag, a Bible and an offer to assist my mother in whatever way the union could help. The union sorted out her insurance questions and helped with widow's pension benefits. Without that help, I am not sure what would have happened, but the union was there for us.

I bring all of this up not for empathy, but to stress the point that the unions need good publicity. They do more good for people than most understand.

#### **7. From Sue Vento on July 7:** retired Education Minnesota staff

Focusing on establishing and nurturing strong relationships in the community. In MN, high-priced TV ads aired at politically critical times are considered community outreach but do nothing to build relationships and strive to identify and work together on shared interests. Instead, they feed an ego. Looking closely at where and how the union's money is expended externally it's those ads and relationships with other unions. The short-lived attempt to building school-business partnerships was a top down effort and was again focused on one personality and not the local unions where the businesses are located. Many - I repeat MANY - great opportunities have been either ignored or turned down by Education Minnesota to be a part of community projects/activities/events. The locals and the state union need to re-think this - sooner rather than later. All too often the education professions become isolating and cocoon like, which I think adds to the potential for educators to burn out - socializing, carpooling, working, playing with the people we work with. [There is] Little opportunity or effort to connect with others in the community. So a local/state commitment to 1) identify 2-3 external opportunities (memberships in organizations such as the local chamber, other civic organization, sponsorship of community project or event, inviting community leaders (civic and otherwise) to participate in union conversations), 2) concerted effort to take on another's cause in a genuine, non-you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours way, and 3) look to create conversations with current, former or potential adversaries.

Re-booting the student program and working to better connect with the teacher education programs are critical. I don't know - but would bet big money - that the education careers are much more challenging than what students are being prepared for. Are they prepared to deal with the relationships - administrator, colleague, parent, student, public? How do they equip themselves to deal with the hours and stress? Perhaps a one-year internship rather than semester of student teaching is necessary - and worth at least piloting. Getting students into classrooms early on is more important now than ever before - before it's too late to realize that perhaps they need to consider other career options. The CTA (California) had - and perhaps still has - a wonderful curriculum they used with teachers in trouble. It was union created, union provided and highly regarded. I remember hearing and then reading about it back in 1998 when I did a 3 week shared staffing

assignment there. Administrators praised it highly and both administrators and teachers noted that it was career-changing/improving. I regret that I didn't have the tools/expertise to help teachers who clearly weren't coping - either with curriculum, classroom management or other performance impacting stressors. Instead they'd attempt to regroup and meet district expectations. While some were able to do, I fear the vast majority never did - some left the district and/or the profession, others . . . Re: Politics - I continue to be amazed at how few educators are engaged in local politics. I could count on less than two hands the number of Ed MN members I saw (granted I don't know them all, but I know quite a few of them) who were at their caucuses and then the legislative and congressional conventions. After what happened in WI, I can't imagine not being involved . . . no wonder the Koch Bros. and other feel like we're such easy targets.

**From Judy Berglund received July 7, 2012:** Retired MEA/Education Minnesota newspaper editor.

I think we possibly have a receptive audience with young people, but I'm not certain how to start.

**8. From Jack Burgess received July 7, 2012:** Retired educator and union leader in Ohio; currently newspaper columnist.

Thanks for the invitation to have input into your excellent project. I have not organized employees in many years, but have worked on community organizing projects locally and been involved with politics—serving as Howard Dean's labor guy in Ohio, advising local candidates, etc. I currently serve on the executive committee of the Ross County Democratic Party.

## COMMUNICATIONS & MEDIA

My comments are generic to all progressive efforts in our time: We are losing the communications battles, largely across the board. The main reason is money. Corporate money is powerful and concentrated. Almost all major newspapers, chains, TV networks, radio, etc., are owned and operated by powerful corporate interests. More specifically, by wealthy white men, who are almost all Republicans. Citizens are bombarded constantly by corporate news and values. With the demise of the Fairness Doctrine (killed by Reagan's FCC in 1987) and the rise of cable, FOX, Clear Channel, etc. a difficult situation was made worse. Where would the average citizen hear about the value of unions or of government, or public schools, for that matter? I grew up in Flint, reading a daily paper, but also my dad's weekly union paper, LABOR. As union membership has declined, smaller and smaller percentages of people grow up that way. At one time, AFL had a nationally syndicated news program on radio. But that was dropped years ago. We need those kinds of programs. In Columbus, where I negotiated for the teachers, we bargained for air time on the school board's radio station and started a once-a-week radio program. Not much, but it's been going now for about 40 years.

So, the soil into which we try to plant the seeds of unionism is not as fertile as it would be if workers and others had more news about the value of labor and the non-inevitability of

complete corporate control.

Ideas for general communications:

- Take advantage of low-power, internet radio stations—unions, teachers, can get some of these
- Contact local radio and TV, talk shows, etc., asking that our side be put on. Train our people to do these talk shows.
- Push the use of bumper stickers. These have fallen out of favor, yet IF 100 or 1000 were to appear in one area over a week end, say, there would be an impact.
- Billboards, bus ads, etc.
- Newsletters and bulletins delivered by canvass crews
- Demand radio and TV stations broadcast “in the public interest,” as required by the Communications Act of 1933, and still on the books. Get a good lawyer and sue if they don’t. Complain to the FCC. Sue them if they do nothing. When a guy like Justice Roberts can rule for Obama’s health care, we know courts can sometimes still come through for progressives.
- Submit opinion columns to local newspapers. Usually no pay for these, but lots of local papers welcome well written pieces from local people. I have a column that appears in several small Ohio papers. (Tip: They’re looking for LOCAL writers, so find an angle. If you’ve lived in another town, you can use that. If you were born somewhere else, etc., use that as a hook when you contact the paper).

**9. From David Thofern**, retired MN teacher and union member who lives in Wisconsin. Sorry for the procrastination on responding to you. Just like a term paper, I'm starting it on the day it's due. I've actually been giving a lot of thought to your call for ideas on public sector unions.

I think the challenge for public sector unions, and unions in general, is how to convince the individual is how the union improves not only their own personal well being but increases their value to whatever entity they are working for. My own experience as a 30+ year member of the teachers' union is that a lot of the general public, Republican politicians and even some of our own members believed that the union existed simply to increase salaries and benefits for its members at the expense of the students. Over the years union members have grown so used to negotiated rights and benefits that they forget--or never knew in the first place--how long and hard the struggle was to obtain these rights and benefits. We've become complacent over the years. Hopefully events occurring in places such as Wisconsin will serve as a wake-up call to workers. But, it's discouraging to hear that nearly 40% of union members voted against the Walker recall.

Going forward, unions need to do a better job of explaining to the public why EVERYONE should be entitled to basic worker rights, starting with the ability to organize and bargain collectively. The opposition has done a remarkably good job of convincing much of the general public that public sector unions are their enemy instead of their partners in improving all of our lives. For the life of me, I cannot understand how poor and middle class Americans can be opposed to improving health care options,

retirement benefits, safe working conditions, etc.

So, moving forward, unions truly need to educate the public and put a human face on public sector union members. It's easy to have a negative reaction to "union thugs" (whatever or whoever that may be) but harder to put that label on the your child's teacher, the snowplow driver or the cop in your neighborhood. The current ad campaign that Education Minnesota is running is a good start.

Sorry if I can't be more specific. I guess if the answers were easy they would have been figured out by now. It's hard to watch generations of work and sacrifice being slowly, or, not so slowly, eroded in the name of "free market" and "freedom." It brings to mind the Bob Dylan lyric, "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose."

10. **from John Borgen**, July 8. Originally a Wisconsin teacher; career as MEA/Education Minnesota staff.

Dick, As you know, I sent a few written comments earlier which I think have value.

One need I perceive is for teacher union leaders to clarify and define the issues and stakes for their members, especially those under 40 years of age. Unfortunately, we have little institutional memory of past struggles and accomplishments. Few of our younger members understand the meanings and significance of unions, collective bargaining, exclusive recognition, due process rights, seniority, tenure, contracts, etc. Have our leaders been explaining these matters to members and made the ideas come alive? Or have members been left out of the loop as in, "they have to join or we'll collect fair share, we really can ignore them." THOSE DAYS MUST BE OVER! The implications for members and the future of public education must be explained, not as theoretical possibilities, but as real existential threats.

Fair share and dues checkoff has resulted in at least 30 years of soft membership commitment. Union leaders and staff, at all levels, should be out among the members, explaining what we do, and what it means. The union web page and newsletters should be used to educate members about union issues and cut way back on the feel good fluffy crap. We are at a critical juncture. Leaders of state unions and other elected leaders need to get out to the members and organize them!

Although we can say, and rightly so, that the right wing has done a number on us, we have contributed by lack of educating the public and union members and organizing them for action. Inane TV ads have made Education MN look foolish!

The union must be a champion for hiring the best possible candidates for the teaching profession, it must demand high quality training and staff development and it must publicly champion rigorous professional evaluation. I think this has happened, BUT the assault on seniority and due process which the right wing mounted in MN was poorly countered by the union from everything I saw and DID NOT see.

One last point and this needs a lot of study, BUT I think the entire political action and legislative program of the union should be revamped and have member involvement procedures be organized by where the members live, not where they work. Certainly some local union presidents who live outside the district they work in should interact with legislators from these school districts. I think Education MN would say this has been done, but I have observed that way too many members "hide" in the districts they live in. With technology as it is now the entire matrix of participation and engagement could be turned on its head. Legislators listen to constituents!

11. **Stephanie Wolkin**, July 11, 2012. Retired Education Minnesota staff  
If you were in charge, what would be the most important things you would do now as an organizer in public sector unions?

From Oct 2011 through Jan 2012 I subbed part-time in the Education Minnesota office in Duluth. We were asked to meet with members on right to work issues, which I did. I found that two groups were the most receptive: the professors at UM-Duluth...they shared volumes of scholarly writings and were quite cerebral about it all...and hit all the talking points quite well. The other group was the school secretaries in Duluth. Many of them lived in Superior Wisconsin and were married to men who were bus drivers, custodians or other workers in the Superior public schools. I started to get into my spiel and was interrupted by one woman who said "Let me tell you what Walker wants to do." Her husband was a school bus driver and had already felt the effects of Walker's anti-union proposals. She completely took over that segment of the meeting, which was fine with me, because she was speaking from the heart and had real credibility with the group, as opposed to me...a sub who didn't live and work in the area.

We all know the "good news" part of fair share...we get the dues rolling in every year like clockwork. The bad news is that we are no longer organizers. We hire people and call them organizers and they really just make phone calls and tell people what to do and hope they will get enough reports back to look good on graphs when the report is made to the board of directors. We are good at the CYA stuff. We print slick, shiny brochures. We can do the ads on TV and radio and pat ourselves on the back. But we aren't willing to get out and meet the members, every day, where they work, and address the tough issues. Even if we are willing, we don't have enough staff who even remember how to do that.

We need to talk with our members regularly, listen to them, and put them front and center.

We can't take for granted that members understand the issues and have enough knowledge to take the right positions without a bit of guidance from us. (not to sound paternalistic but ...)

We need to remind our members that social security and medicare are not government handouts but programs designed to help our communities stay strong and they are worth fighting for.

We need to remind our members that "a rising tide lifts all boats" and we can't be for

ourselves only as others suffer.

We need to remind our members that we are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, and we have an obligation to look out for the least of us.

Social justice is not the name of some committee at your place of worship...it is what our society should be about and what unions do.

Take the gloves off. Expose the frauds, liars and cheats for who they are. Sometimes there is no happily ever after. The fight goes on.

12. **Paul Rogne**. July 12, 2012. Retired teacher, longtime Federation then Association activist and three-time chief negotiator and teacher leader in Anoka-Hennepin, Minnesota's largest school district. Paul wrote a well-regarded history of the Anoka-Hennepin teachers union a few years ago.

Wow, if I were in charge. Now that is intimidating. I never felt in charge even when I was close to the action as a teacher union activist. It seems that nothing is really new about this problem. It always was a matter of being connected to the individuals at the very local and building level and in large school's in the departments. The more distant the union is perceived to be from the practical reality of the everyday job of teaching, the more likely to find a lack of buy-in to the cause.

Frequently in past years, as new teachers came on board, there seemed to be an increase in complacency. Often hard-fought gains, that took years of work by past union members, were taken for granted. Sick leave, child care leave, prep-time, job security, pensions, health insurance, steady salary increases, fair treatment by administration, teachers having a voice in decision-making by school administrations, and on and on. Now I sense that many teachers think those benefits would always be there so who needed a union anymore.

At least Wisconsin gives a very close real-world model for what could easily happen here in Minnesota. In fact, if it were not for a very close call electing Governor Dayton, Minnesota teachers would be faced with the same treatment as our neighboring state.

So how to reach individual teachers where they live and work every day and how to engage them and increase the value of the union in their minds? It takes a very full effort to ask them what they need. It is too easy for the union activists to think they know what is needed and just go ahead and try to do it. After all, those activists are teachers also, so they know what matters. That only carries the union effort so far. A leader who goes too far too fast without engaging the troops will soon look behind and see no one following. That will also be very apparent to the school boards, the administrations and the politicians. Instead, constant communications is needed to highlight and detail the issues of the day. Feedback from all the teachers needs to be actively sought - often face-to-face, one-on-one or in very small groups. What's bugging them lately? What should be done? Who can help? Will they help?

Also, more and more, teachers are using social media (Facebook, twitter), internet, text messaging and other digital forms of communication. This is an exciting and necessary newer way of engaging teachers than we ever used when I was an activist. Short bursts of information can be pushed quickly and often to teachers with an opportunity for instant feedback. Short, quick Q/A messages can go out at anytime targeted to different segments of the teaching population - segments based on teaching position, interests expressed previously, degree of commitment to action, political views, etc. Teachers are more busy and stressed than ever so any way to make communication fast, easily accessible and meaningful is valuable. Years ago we knew that many of our printed newsletters and bulletins never made it past the trash in the teacher mailroom, so it was essential then to have bold and clear headlines that grabbed attention. That need is ever more true today in the digital age. Deleting is easy to do if a message is deemed useless.

The union staff and activists at the state and local level must direct a significant amount of time, energy and other resources to the individual teachers or the future game is lost. There are immense, powerful and well-funded forces arrayed against public schools and teachers, plus the teacher unions. One thing those forces do not have is the power of the teachers themselves. These teachers are expert communicators, expert and passionate advocates for children. Those teachers hold immense power - often untapped and unrealized.

It will be a long-haul struggle as always. I wish them all well.

**1A (Per Dick Bernard comment #1) From Ken in Cedar Rapids Iowa August 5, 2011.**

My wife taught school for 40 years and in the NEA that long and in the CREA for over 30 years. I was in the meatcutters union for 23 years. The union publications and meetings always slanted toward the left. One union rep told us that as members work for years and become financially solid they vote republican because of all the taxes that come out of their check. We have all heard for years countless examples of welfare fraud, where people collect benefits and food stamps without deserving them. Its the democrats that cannot spend enough tax money to create dependents to get their votes. This has worked well for the dems for 60 years, but the country is in a different mood now, demanding accountability and responsibility. The debt ceiling vote was nothing more that politicians wanting to hold on to their power. Look what socialism has done to the European countries, they are going bankrupt. They are running out of other peoples money to spend, and that is exactly what Obama wants for this country. The best definition of a liberal I have ever heard is "someone who would love to give you the shirt off of someone else's back". That is so true. There are a lot of republicans who also need to be retired.

Look at the Kaukauna school figures--from a \$400,000 deficit to a \$1.500,000 surplus because of the union shackles being shed. That is tax money that will go into benefiting kids instead of democratic politicians. That's why they protested so long and loud and even ran away and hid for so long. There is a city in Rhode Island that recently declared

bankruptcy because of all the lavish public union pension and healthcare benefits they were forced to pay but cannot afford. Look at Detroit-a run down slum-like mess, and run for 60 years by democrats. California and New York (liberal havens) are billions in the hole. When I was young and naive I was a democrat but as I became aware of politics I sided more with republicans but now I would consider myself as an independent. Show me a conservative democrat and I would vote for him. I am sick and tired of our federal government being run like a giant Santa Claus operation, with a Robin Hood attitude that spouts class warfare all the time. Socialism has its roots in jealousy, envy, and greed and promotes robbery through taxation and produces dependency. I don't care to continue writing about politics.

I know I have my thoughts and you have yours and neither of us will change our mind so lets leave it like that.

**1B. Dick Bernard July 10, 2012:** Dick was MEA/Education Minnesota staff for 27 years and before that was the son of two public school teachers and for nine years a junior high school geography teacher.

**If I would boil this down to a single word it would be the word Relationships.**

If I "ruled" this "world" of disaster for public employee unions, and unions generally, I would work to make it into a great opportunity to organize, and to take back the conversation one person at a time in every community in this country.

I would work on micro-organizing (person to person) from leader to member; and from member to former members (like Ken) and to the community at large. I would work on relationship building, beyond a Facebook page or similar impersonal methods. Members and leaders have to understand that this is something that can't be hired out.

This is hard personal work, but it means going back to how it used to be done before bargaining and technology.

Unions need, in a most positive way, to go on the offensive. What does this mean? Talk about it back home.

**When I retired in January, 2000, almost on a whim, I decided to "Look at Public Schools from Outside the Walls". I also decided to get involved in what I call the Peace and Justice movement.**

**Both involvements were real eye-openers. There were very obvious problems that I had missed during my own career within the union, even though I was very interested in the whole business of relationships.**

**Everything I learned the last dozen years post-retirement is easily accessed at Looking at Public Schools from Outside the Walls. (simply enter the search phrase**

**OTW at [www.outsidethewalls.org/blog](http://www.outsidethewalls.org/blog). You'll be directed to February 11, 2011, which includes every reference. All you need to refer to is the first half-dozen lines.**

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