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## Organized labor aims to rekindle its fire



Jim Kabell  
News-Leader file photo

Jim Kabell was frustrated and disappointed. He stood in front of a mostly empty Teamsters hall to introduce a very important speaker.

At least that's what he thought.

The agenda featured a rousing speech about the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots and what working people can do about growing inequality in this country.

Kabell had been excited. It would remind people of their power to come together and make things happen.

He'd expected between 200 and 400 people to come hear Tom Woodruff, executive director of the Service Employees International Union and the organizing director of Change to Win, a new coalition of unions seeking to increase union membership and their political clout.

This is what gets your blood pumping if you're a union member, Kabell thought.

But where was everybody?

In the Teamsters' previous meeting, around 250 people showed up to hear a discussion about their pension benefits. The one featuring Woodruff had been opened up to everybody, not just Teamsters members. All friends of labor, all progressives, the entire community.

And barely more than 50 people attended. That's not the way it should be with unions.

Unions can't work unless people buy into the idea that they have more power when they're working together and organized than they do as individuals.

The central theme of Woodruff's speech was that the increased gap between the rich and the poor has come at the same time organized labor's numbers have dwindled.

Woodruff shared several statistics to show how out of whack things have become.

- Incomes are staying the same or declining for 60 percent of families in this country.
- The top one percent of wage earners in this country have more wealth than the bottom 95 percent combined.
- More than half of all American workers don't have pensions.
- 46 million Americans don't have health insurance.
- 37 million adults in this country don't have drug coverage.
- The average CEO pay is now more than 431 times that of the average worker.
- From 1948-1979 average wages climbed 75 percent.
- From 1979 to the present, average wages climbed 2 percent.

At the same time all this has happened, union membership has dropped from 35 percent of all workers to 12 percent today, he said.

And, as Kabell learned, many of the people who are in unions don't get fired up about their traditional issues.

The gains of organized labor have been taken for granted and largely forgotten, say Kabell and other experts.

Springfield was once a strong union town, said David Richards, head of Special Collections and Archives at the Meyer Library at the Missouri State University. Richards oversees the Ozarks Labor Union Archives, which holds the records of many unions that used to be strong here. Unions used to touch every aspect of a person's life here.

Bartenders, butchers and bakers all used to be unionized here, as well as the projectionists at movie theaters.

Lately, union membership has been in a holding pattern, Kabell said. No major gains and no major losses. For the last five years, they've had about 27,000 members. Twenty-five years ago there were closer to 37,000 members in the local union, Kabell said.

The major declines came during the Reagan years when Kabell said he felt a cultural shift.

People wanted to be the macho guy and stand for themselves, he said. They'd tell themselves that they didn't need anyone else.

But that's just wrong, he believes.

"People forget we do need community," he said. "We need people to stand for each other.

"People don't realize their power to impact change. People have strength. They gain strength from each other, they gain momentum from working together. People don't realize that and they forget that. We have to be retaught ... about the strength that we have in numbers."

Kabell also realizes that the responsibility for teaching and getting the message out largely rests on his shoulders. The day that Woodruff spoke was the last day of hunting season. The weather was in the 70s. The Kansas City Chiefs were on television.

People had lots of reasons not to show up. But Kabell can't think of any reason that's good enough to explain the absence of so many of his fellow union members.

As it is with so many things, better organizing will have to start with him. It's not the way it should be, but it's the way it is.

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