

## *New Organizing and Social Unionism in Manufacturing: A Conversation with UNITE President Bruce Raynor*

by Gregory DeFreitas

**B**ruce Raynor is the President of UNITE (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees), one of the largest manufacturing unions in the country. Before taking over the union's leadership last July, he had earned a national reputation for many years of highly tenacious and effective labor organizing. The son of a Long Island truck driver, Mr. Raynor's growing involvement in the anti-war and civil rights movements led him to give up a biochemistry scholarship at Cornell University in order to study labor relations. In 1973, at age 24, he joined the Textile Workers Union (TWU) and began over two decades of organizing textile workers in the South. He helped lead the enormous and ultimately successful campaign to unionize textile giant J.P. Stevens, the historic struggle dramatized in the 1979 film *Norma Rae*. In 1981, he was elected southern regional director of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU, formed by the 1976 merger of TWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers). In 1995, ACTWU merged with the legendary International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) to create a new organization of 300,000 members: UNITE. Mr. Raynor was elected to be UNITE's executive vice-president, followed three years later by his promotion to secretary treasurer.

In addition to leading the organizing, member mobilization and collective bargaining agenda in the union's core garment and textile divisions, he has pledged to build on its organizing successes in a host of other industries, including: industrial laundries, warehouses and drug stores. In the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy, he led the union's extensive efforts to aid the thousands of workers displaced in the many downtown garment factories affected by the area's temporary closure. Then he helped create a coalition of major clothing companies, retailers and unions to launch a new "Proudly Made in New York" campaign. The campaign seeks to encourage American consumers to aid the city's struggling clothing manufacturers and their workers by purchasing New York-made goods.

Late last August, Gregory DeFreitas talked with Bruce Raynor at UNITE headquarters in Manhattan.

**Q: Recently, hundreds of workers from your union and others marched through the streets of New York to protest Banana Republic, Ann Taylor & Eddie Bauer's alleged use of sweatshop factories overseas to make the clothes they sell us here. How did UNITE manage to mobilize this new anti-sweatshop coalition?**

**BR:** People have been aware of the proliferation of sweatshops for a long time now, both the reemergence of sweatshops in New York and Los Angeles as well as the huge numbers around the world, as apparel gets produced by people who work for the lowest wages. Generally, consumers find it morally reprehensible. Most do not want to buy jeans made by people who cannot earn a living, by child labor or prison labor. What's different about this campaign and what spurred the large response is that we came to the conclusion that the people most responsible for it now are no longer the manufacturers, but much more the retailers. Because, more and more, the retailers set the price. The fact is that Wal-Mart and the May Company have a lot more to do with apparel production and prices and workers' wages and conditions than any other institution, including apparel retailers and the government. The reason they do is because, first of all, there are huge "private label" programs in these retailers. Second, there is growing consolidation of retailers: Wal-Mart is now a \$190 billion company. There are now just three major discounters. All the retailers that matter can be counted on one hand. Now clearly the ones with labels do have some influence on costs; the more important the label, the greater the influence. But there are also many who have lost their influence.

So the retailers generally set the price, and they also set the entire way the garment's constructed: they decide what cloth it's made of, what the buttons are made of, what thread, how many threads per inch, and what kind of seams. And they monitor production, whether it's made in Chinatown, Brooklyn, Los Angeles or Bangladesh. So the whole notion that retailers like Wal-Mart, whose inspectors decide whether it's 12 inches per inch on each pair of jeans, are unaware that the women who make their jeans don't have clean drinking water or live in houses without floors or don't make enough to send their kids to school or have Korean owners who hit them when they don't make production targets is preposterous.

So we have said that the problems are the retailers. They are the ones who ought to be legally responsible. They are certainly morally responsible and practically responsible. And it has to change. What has to change is this worldwide race for the cheapest wages, which leads to these abusive conditions. And if it is to change, then it's the retailers who have to be made to change. We are not kidding ourselves that these retailers are going to respond to moral suasion. They haven't. In fact, conditions worldwide for apparel workers have deteriorated over the past 10 years. Including for U.S. apparel workers: conditions in U.S. factories are worse today than a decade ago, worse today than 20 years ago. And the reason for that is this "race to the bottom" led by retailers. So, since moral suasion has failed, we have looked to the one thing that retailers understand: consumer sentiment. The fact is that these retailers will spend enormous amounts of money to promote their brands. What has changed is not only these private label brands, but also there are now retailers who are themselves brands. "The Gap" is a store, but it's also a brand. The same is true of "Old Navy," "The Limited" and "Victoria's Secret."

But, when the stores become the brands, then the stores are also vulnerable to the pressure from consumers. Because if the brand gets discredited, then the stores also feel that pain. There's also tremendous competition in retailing. So we think that opportunities exist to apply pressure on retailers to change conditions. What we did is mobilize not only our own members, who clearly want to see these changes. But, I think that what makes this coalition different is the presence of a dozen unions from other apparel producing countries. We have leaders of the Dominican, Guatemalan, Honduran and Nicaraguan garment unions, as well as unions from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Because this is not about keeping all jobs in the United States, though we want to have as many jobs as possible here; we think that's a noble cause. This is about worldwide conditions for apparel workers, wherever they are. So their presence was very important. Two other groups that are very important are the religious community and students. We had major Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders from both the East and West coasts, major figures in the social justice movement because this is clearly a moral issue. And the other group that, I think, is most exciting is college students who are part of this great movement called the United Students Against Sweatshops. It now has over 200 active chapters on campuses around the country. These students not only bring energy and excitement, but they also are the target audience that these chains are selling to. It's not you and I who they want to buy 6 new pairs of jeans this school season, it's the kids. So these student have a particular importance here that makes this coalition unique.

**Q: How do you respond to critics who charge that this sort of union position is protectionism, that in fact the American unions will be hurting foreign workers in pushing for higher wages and better conditions?**

**BR:** That argument is preposterous. That's the same kind of argument as the one claiming that the slaves were better off under slavery, or that children were better off in factories than in sewers. We have higher standards now, certainly higher moral standards and higher economic standards. There are 2 million garment workers in Bangladesh. The question is not whether there are going to be garment jobs in Bangladesh. It is: under what conditions are those workers going to work? Two weeks ago, 16 workers were killed in Bangladesh when a factory had a false alarm. The doors were locked in order to keep union organizers out (reminiscent of the Triangle Factory fire here) and workers stampeded to locked exits and people were killed in the crush. That is not a matter of protectionism; it's a matter of human rights and social justice. The drive for higher standards helps workers in the United States, and I am not embarrassed about that. It also helps workers in Bangladesh and Guatemala. It's our belief that we have an obligation and a right to try to raise worldwide conditions. That's what apparel workers want. A reporter asked us: "Who are you guys to decide what a Dominican garment worker needs?" That's a good point. In New York, we have a lot of knowledge of this because of the many Dominicans living and working here. But the Dominican garment workers know exactly what it takes to live a decent life in the Dominican Republic. They want to educate their children, they want to eat three meals a day, they want a decent place to live, they want to enjoy some of the pleasures of life and not work 18 hours a day. They also want to be treated with respect and dignity like any other person does. It's not that complicated to figure out. But the fact that our coalition has those leaders from those foreign unions shows that those workers know exactly what the conditions are in their countries that need to be improved.

**Q: You mentioned the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in lower Manhattan in 1911. This is the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that tragedy, in which 146 workers, mostly immigrant girls, died. The conditions in garment factories have undoubtedly improved since then, but have the U.S. clothing and textile industries ended dangerous working conditions? Is it only a foreign problem now?**



**BR:** The textile industry is much more high tech and conditions have improved there. I don't credit them with tremendous concern about worker safety as much as that new technology and factories mandated by economics have created a new environment. And there have been some efforts by industry to improve safety. In the legitimate apparel shops – Levi Strauss, Hart-Marx Corporation, GFT in New England – there are plenty of sewing shops in America where conditions are excellent. But there are also plenty of plants where they are not. Unfortunately, the sweatshop has reemerged with a vengeance: they are all over New York City and the Department of Labor has been unsuccessful in policing them. They don't have the resources assigned to the problem. And the union, which has been struggling against them has found that, when the retailer says, "I want to pay \$4 for this shirt, and he knows that there's \$2 worth of fabric in it and \$0.75 of buttons and trim, then he knows there's \$1.25 left to sew that shirt. He knows that there's \$0.50 needed for freight shipping costs, so now he knows what's left for labor. He knows whether that worker will get the minimum wage, health insurance, and whether the employer can afford to have good fire escapes, clean working conditions and ergonomic chairs, or whether it's going to be made in a loft with none of those things. And he knows whether the worker is going to get \$2 an hour or \$7 an hour.

The biggest single difference between union and nonunion garment workers in New York is that union workers get health insurance. That's vital, especially to the many working mothers who rely on the union job to get health care. Virtually no nonunion garment workers in the city get health care. They also don't get pensions or holidays or anyone to fight for them. Who's driving that? It's the retailer, when he sets the price. When Kmart says "We're going to make these blouses, and we're going to pay X amount of dollars per dozen for the labor costs and the fabric, then they create the sweatshop. And they consciously make that decision. It seems preposterous to think that these sophisticated retailers, who know whether the contractor put 11 stitches per inch instead of 12, and who will then send it back or not pay him, also did not know that his workers had no health care. Whether the factory is in Brooklyn or Guatemala. Their inspectors are all over these places over stitches per inch, over the side seams, over the fabric – but not over working conditions. A retailer may have 150 inspectors, but they are concerned with the quality and how it's produced and if it's shipped the way they want. They turn a blind eye to whether that worker goes home to a house without a floor.

**Q: Early in his administration, President Bush announced that he was opposing higher ergonomic workplace standards and is reshaping OSHA toward the more voluntary approach of the Reagan Administration. Is UNITE trying to move him and Congress on these safety standards?**

**BR:** Well, we don't think that convincing a president, who's never met anyone who works with their hands, that it's wrong for workers to get crippled is a particularly productive endeavor. But we are trying to convince Congress. It's a disgrace that it took so long to get higher ergonomic standards. We're very disappointed that Bill Clinton waited until the 12<sup>th</sup> hour of his presidency to do it. I think it shows that the Democrats have been unreliable partners of the labor movement. But we're going to fight in Congress. We don't think that most Americans think that workers should get crippled on the job and left to suffer. The people who profited from this ought to be responsible for it and correct it. So we're going to work very hard with Congress to create public support for higher ergonomic standards. In terms of OSHA, we're under no illusion that the Bush Administration has any intention to enforce safety and health laws. The Administration has been very clear; they're saying that they're going to help employers: to inform them when inspectors are coming and to help employers save a lot of money instead of making workplaces safer. So it's clearly going to be our job to fight in Congress and put pressure on the Administration. The American people do want safe workplaces. Bush is out of step on safety and health. It's only corporate executives who think workers ought to be crippled and enjoy it. The average worker, professional or small

businessperson believes it's the employer's responsibility to provide a safe workplace, including protection from ergonomic injuries or getting fingers cut off in a press or visual problems from staring at computer screens. The American people are on the right side of this issue. It's a matter of bringing the politicians around.

**Q: Millions of Americans first learned through the movie *Norma Rae* about the efforts to organize workers in the historically nonunion South. You were one of the leaders of the successful fight to organize the southern textile giant J.P. Stevens. Looking back on it, what were the keys to beating the odds and winning those battles?**

**BR:** I spent most of my adult life in the South organizing workers, mostly in textile and apparel. There are a few things that made organizing in the South possible. One is perseverance. It's a tough climate, but if unions stay at it, they can win. Southern workers are not antiunion, but the atmosphere is antiunion; southern employers are viciously antiunion. Many southern workers don't have union experiences because there's not as much union density and they don't have examples to look for. What's acceptable employer behavior in the South would still be considered pretty bad up here. Though employers are losing some of the shame up here that they ought to have. So southern workers have to learn, often through negative experiences, what they have to put up with to win a union campaign. It takes perseverance, it takes resources. I think the other thing is that race has always been such a strong issue in southern workplaces that employers have developed skills at dividing people by race. So a union really needs to work at creating a coalition in workplaces with large percentages of different races. Frankly, it's always easier to organize a workplace in the South when it is overwhelmingly just one race, because you don't have the employer's ability to divide workers. And I think that looking back on the Stevens campaign, what was critical was when workers stood up for the union and the union stayed with them year after year and we finally started winning union elections, we did not give in to frustration and have an emotional reaction to Stevens' refusal to negotiate a first contract after the union had won. We used other tools, because a strike would have been a defeat for the union and the workers. It's very difficult to win southern strikes in small mill towns. What we did was to launch a consumer boycott and pressure campaign against Stevens. It took longer and was a lot of work, but ultimately it brought Stevens around and they signed collective bargaining agreements. And today those workers are still under contract with UNITE.

**Q: How did the real-life women organizers in that campaign compare with the movie portrayal?**

**BR:** Actually, the woman portrayed in that movie, Crystal Lee Sutton, was quite an extraordinary leader. Real life wasn't as elegant as portrayed in the movie. But the heroes I encountered in southern organizing campaigns were amazing. There were black and white workers who stood up against tremendous pressures in communities where it was extremely difficult to do so if you were born and raised there. But I've seen hundreds of southern workers who were such heroes as to make Sally Field's movie character look sick, in terms of standing up in extraordinary circumstances to fight for unionism. For example, the Fieldcrest Cannon workers in Kannapolis, North Carolina. I've seen workers who, for 30 years in an antiunion town, have stood up through union election after election and then gone back into the mills and been subject to abuse, mistreatment, people on the street not talking to them, their kids harassed at school – yet they have stood up for the belief that collective action means something. So, the truth is that I've seen heroes who make the Hollywood characters look like exaggerations. I've known them, for example, in towns like Waynesboro, Georgia, where we fought a three-year battle for union recognition against a New York curtain and drapery maker, S. Lichtenberg and Son. There were people who worked to build the union, to fight for the union, and now continue to be leaders of the union. They stand up in political campaigns and have changed the very nature of those towns. They stood up to the newspaper that spewed antiunion garbage day after day, week after week. In that atmosphere, union heroes in the South are incredible, like no place else. Frankly, while it's difficult to organize a union in New York or Long Island, you're not subject to that atmosphere of intimidation that you have in the Southeast. If you're looking for people who are an inspiration to do this kind of work, there's no shortage of them in the South.

**Q: When trying to organize such poor southern workers, desperate for jobs, how do you deal with employer threats that they will be fired if they support the union, even if such firings are illegal?**

**BR:** One of the reasons we are successful in the South in winning elections and then winning contracts is that, once we commit to a group of workers, we are there. And if it takes two, three, four elections over a 10-year period, we are still there. And workers know that about UNITE, just as they knew that about our predecessor unions. For example, at Bernstein and Sons Shirt Company in Crystal Springs, Mississippi, we won the union election in 1973, but it took us until 1990 to get a contract – 17 years. The workers stuck and we stuck; people know that this union won't go away. So I think that's part of it. We never made financial decisions; we made moral and social justice decisions.

Secondly, our methodology has always been to tell workers up front: what might happen. We tell them they might get fired in this campaign. We say: “We will stick with you, our lawyers will support you, but the company could do it.” But, if people understand the risk people also want to improve their conditions. They have families and are working hard and they know it could be better, and they know there are risks. Southern workers don’t need to be told that there are risks; they have been brought up to know that there are risks. Yet they also believe things could be better and are willing to fight for that. So, you do see people stand up again and again, or else we wouldn’t be successful.

**Q: UNITE was founded by the merger of the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union in 1995. Since then, there’s been a lot of organizing, but the total membership has fallen by about 60,000. Why do you think that has happened? And, as the new president, how do you hope to turn that around?**

**BR:** The drop in membership is due to the dramatic drop in employment in the apparel and textile industries. Since NAFTA, the apparel industry has lost hundreds of thousands of jobs and so has the textile industry. Collectively, these industries have lost about 100,000 jobs in just this past year. That is going to have a tremendous impact on the union, as plants close and jobs move to Third World countries. So we have to organize enough to just break even, let alone to grow as a union. Having said that, 1999 was the first time in modern history that we reversed the decline in the union. That year we broke even -- quite an accomplishment thanks to new successes in organizing. And then in 2000 we did so again. So, for two years we stabilized our membership, organizing 15,000 to 18,000 new members a year. Our goal this year is to organize enough to grow. We are also fighting to preserve apparel jobs in the United States and Canada; we are the number one union in both countries. We’re growing in Canada, where the apparel industry is not under the same pressure as in the U.S.

The ways we are fighting to preserve jobs, in addition to the anti-sweatshop campaign, include the “Uniform Campaign:” We are calling upon unions and governments to buy uniforms produced under decent conditions. Often that means in domestic shops. We are calling on governments to buy domestically, and we think that is legitimate. The City of New York should support garment workers in New York and not feel the need to go to Bangladesh for uniforms. We recognize that there is going to continue to be shrinkage in this industry. But we are organizing aggressively to overcome that shrinkage. We showed slight growth in 2000, and in 2001 we surpassed the previous year’s organizing numbers by August. This is harder than for many unions, because of the shrinkage of our industry.

**Q: What share of UNITE’s budget now goes to organizing?**

**BR:** We now spend about 32% of our budget to organizing. UNITE’s goal is to move that up to 50%. That means making choices, because UNITE can’t do everything. We have to make choices among the good things that we do in order to put more resources into organizing. You can’t organize without resources. We are increasing the number of organizers and our efforts at organizing, and that’s an expensive proposition.

**Q: Why has UNITE increasingly been organizing in non-manufacturing industries?**

**BR:** We have represented New York industrial laundry workers since the 1930s, when we defeated Murder Inc. in an organizing drive. Starting in 1999, we launched a major effort to expand organizing among industrial laundry workers, which included bringing some industrial laundry workers from another union into UNITE. We went from 10,000 laundry workers in 1999 to 40,000 today. It is an industry that is growing: there are about 160,000 workers in that industry. So we represent about one-fourth now, and our goal is to represent a majority of them in the not too distant future. It’s a major effort across the country. In New York, as part of our negotiations last year, where we represented about 80% of that industry, we are now up to 90% by picking up nonunion shops here. And we are raising standards significantly, both here and nationally.

In retailing, we have represented clothing salesmen in New York in Barney’s and Brooks Brothers since the 1930s and ‘40s. We are expanding in that area: we have a big election coming up involving 2500 low-paid Duane Reade drug store workers. We already represent 52 Duane Reade stores with 750 workers. We are organizing the remaining 150 stores.

**Q: One UNITE local was, until recently, successfully organizing some greengrocers on the Lower East Side. Recently, there were reports of something of a trade with UFCW [United Food & Commercial Workers Union] to let them do the organizing instead. Is that a fair description?**

**BR:** Well, we have a philosophy about this. In all my years organizing in the South, we didn't compete with other unions. We think there are lots of unorganized workers. We believe, for instance, that laundry workers belong in UNITE, because we think we can do the most for them and we are committed to that industry. And there is something important about bargaining power in an industry. While it might seem fine for a hospital worker to be in, say, the steelworkers' union, the fact is that a hospital worker is better off in SEIU than in any other union. That's because it's their focus and they have leverage with national hospital chains to do more for those workers. We believe that is true in laundries and in certain other industries. We are focusing on industries where we can effectively represent workers.

In the case of greengrocers, the UFCW represents supermarket workers and had a serious interest in pursuing that campaign. We felt that the workers would benefit from one union instead of two competing. So we worked out an arrangement with them. By the same token, we already represented about 50 Duane Reade drug stores and the UFCW was talking to some workers. So, while it's a trade, I think that it's a good understanding. The word trade may connote some kind of "deal," but there's no "deal." As long as UFCW is committed to those workers, they will be better off in that union. As long as we are committed to representing Duane Reade and other retail workers in New York, as we are, then those workers will be better off in UNITE -- all the Duane Reade workers in the same union. So I think it was a good arrangement, instead of competing with each other. And we've worked hard at doing that. But sometimes you can't because some unions just won't agree to that concept. But the fact is that representing a critical mass of workers in an industry really matters.

**Q: But couldn't it still be said that drug stores are quite a nontraditional focus for a union like yours?**

**BR:** The fact is that most retail workers in America are unorganized and there isn't a major push by any union to organize them. In certain areas we are making a push because we believe retail is one of the lowest paid sectors in the country, cashiers is one of the fastest growing occupations, yet it's paid so little. Wal-Mart is the best example: not only is Wal-Mart responsible for lowering standards for apparel workers, but they're also responsible for lowering standards for retail workers. About 60% of their 800,000 Wal-Mart workers have no health insurance, because they schedule them for less than the minimum number of hours required (under Wal-Mart's policy, since there's no union) to qualify for benefits. So Wal-Mart is, in my opinion, America's biggest welfare cheat. Because they are getting the government to provide health care for 480,000 people who work for the largest corporation in the world. It's absolutely an atrocity.

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**Q: In organizing drives at Duane Reade and the garment shops, you're often trying to organize new immigrants. How does UNITE go about doing that? Do you mainly rely on salts or do you often try to work through community organizations and churches?**

**BR:** We do work with churches and immigrant advocacy organizations. But, we have always been a union of immigrants. The union was founded by Jewish, Italian and Eastern European immigrants. Now it's Latinos and Chinese and Indians. We are a union of immigrants – always have been and always proudly will be, in my judgment. The result is that we have a lot of experience in this area. There's no magic to it. We have organizers representing all immigrant groups: Filipino, Punjabi, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Latinos. Immigrants often come from better traditions of collective action than American workers. So it's not like it's extremely difficult. It requires understanding and respecting cultures and communities, and not imposing our own standards on them. But it also means

understanding that those workers are economic, if not political, refugees. They came here to earn a decent living and they also expect to be treated right. Many of them came here under terrible adversity, whether they're Mexicans or Central Americans who crossed the border, or Chinese who came by boat. They paid a terrible price to get here and they want a taste of America. So organizing them means understanding them and their culture and speaking their language and making them feel welcome in our union. I addressed a shop steward's class in White Plains last Saturday. There were 25 stewards in the class, of whom 21 were born outside the U.S. in 11 different countries, no more than 4 from the same country. Our two biggest victories in Ontario, Canada this year were in shops that were mostly Punjabi Indians. That's a group that feels very welcome in our union. Last year, our biggest victory was in French Canada, and those workers were Tamils, the ethnic minority in Sri Lanka. We are a union that always related to immigrant groups. We are the first union in America that ever had an immigration department. We have always been outspoken in favor of amnesty and fair treatment for immigrant workers.

**Q: Part of that history has been bound up with UNITE's commitment to what's been called "social unionism," in contrast to the older narrower wage-benefit focus of "business unionism." In New York City, during the postwar housing crisis when lots of people left for the suburbs, the ILGWU sponsored major housing complexes like the Hillman Houses on the Lower East Side, the East River Houses, the Penn South Houses that President Kennedy opened some 40 years ago. And didn't your union have the first union health center in America?**

**BR:** Yes, and we still operate a number of union health centers including a fine one in New York where my two sons are getting their health care. My family goes to the clinic because I believe it's the finest health care in New York, and if it's good enough for our members then it's good enough for union officials. We have our own nonprofit insurance company. We have literally hundreds of citizenship classes that we carry on throughout the United States and Canada. We have English as a Second Language classes. I think that we have broken new ground in immigrant's right protection in our contracts. For instance, in our laundry contracts we pioneered it in Chicago and have spread it to about half our laundry contracts in America. Hopefully, in another year or two, it will be all of them. The language requires, for instance, that the employer must require the INS to get a search warrant before the employer lets them on the premises. Also, language that protects workers who go home for a visit to their country, then can't get back because of problems with immigrant status. And specific leaves of absence that allow them to return to their home country. We are really very proud of breaking new ground in this area. In housing, we also played a major role building Coop City in the Bronx. And we have housing projects in Philadelphia, Chicago and Virginia. Our predecessor unions were major players in trying to promote decent housing in America.

**Q: Is your union supporting the proposal for a citywide "living wage" law that would require firms with city contracts or subsidies to pay each worker at least \$10 an hour plus health insurance?**

**BR:** Yes, absolutely. We all know the high cost of living in this city. I don't know how anyone lives on even \$10 an hour. The only one who could advocate paying less is someone who has never had to figure out how to live here. You know it's a funny situation: we elect politicians to office who never had to pay a grocery bill or decide between groceries for the kids versus gas for the car, then we wonder why they don't understand. The notion that our government should contract with a firm knowing that its workers make less than \$10 an hour is totally outrageous.

**Q: You were raised on Long Island, the son of a truck driver. What would you say to young people in the city and on Long Island today who are concerned about social justice issues? Are unions a possible career for young people who want to put those concerns into action?**

**BR:** Well, I went to work for the union as a conscious decision. I didn't come out of high school having decided that. I was not a social activist in high school at all. I went to school to study biochemistry. I changed because when I was in school there was an antiwar movement and a civil rights movement. I decided that the question of what you did with your life was about more than earning the biggest salary or owning the fanciest car or the fanciest address. I wanted to do something meaningful with my life. So I consciously changed my major in school to labor relations. I came out of school with the desire to work with the labor movement.

Why the labor movement? Because I believe that the labor movement is the only force in society with the independence of thought, the independence of action, the resources and the power to confront corporate dominance of American society. Unfortunately, the political parties are not the vehicles to challenge that, because corporate interests have major influence in both parties. Obviously, more so in the Republican Party, but they also have a lot of influence in the Democratic Party. Remember, it took a Democratic president to pass NAFTA, one of the worst events for working people's standard of living in America. Had a Republican been in the

White House, I don't believe that could have happened. So, if we are going to change the corporate dominance and control of our society by the market and bring back a sense of morality, of social justice and fairness, of a burgeoning middle class, then the only force in our society that has the power to do that is the labor movement.

The labor movement today is incredibly more open to the ideas and activism of educated young kids than it was when I joined it in 1973. The opportunities are plentiful now: unions are seeking idealistic young people who want to change the world and do it through the labor movement. The opportunities are plentiful in organizing, in research, in a variety of occupations. I have a daughter and two sons who are first-year college students. When I look at my kids, I realize that I have loved every day of my career. I love my job. I love it as much today as I did in 1973. I have no problem facing my kids and talking to them about what's right and what's wrong. I wonder about these corporate executives. I wonder about a GE executive who says: "What have I accomplished in life? Well, I shut down 6000 factory jobs in Schenectady and moved them to Matamoros, where people are making a fraction and living in open sewers and I devastated that community. That's what I've accomplished in my life. But at least we have a summer house in the Hamptons" Or someone who started their own business and created 4000 jobs in China for prison laborers and poverty-stricken people struggling for a subsistence wage, versus jobs that used to be in the Bronx or Brooklyn and that people earned a living from. I wonder how satisfied these wealthy successful people are who chose a path in business. There doesn't have to be anything wrong with a path in business. But I wonder what most businesspeople, as they approach maturity, can say about their lives. I never had a problem with satisfaction in my job, with telling my kids what's right and what's wrong, with saying what side I'm on and why I'm on that side. You have to decide what's important in your life. Is it to have a string of ever more expensive BMW models? What I'm incredibly thankful for is what I've done has been tremendously satisfying, I appreciate the labor movement, I have fun every day, I earn a decent living, I earn enough that my kids are going to college. No, I don't have a second home nor did I ever want a second home.

We live in a society where people tell us what to aspire to. I think you should aspire to happiness and satisfaction and to having a positive impact on the world. To me, there's no better way to have a positive impact on the world than to be part of the labor movement, the force that day in and day out stands up for the people of the world who don't have enough power, and against the interests that run everything. America's culture and economic power dominate the world, but America's sense of equality does not. I think that's the labor movement's job, and we desperately need idealistic young people to achieve that. I'm proud to say that UNITE has never had a problem attracting young people. Many of our staff come from the ranks, and yet many of our staff come from college backgrounds. The Ivy League and colleges all over the country are well represented among our organizers, our researchers and our officers. In our union, it makes no difference where you came from; it makes a difference what you bring -- how much commitment, zeal, dedication, and intelligence.

The other thing is that there's nothing more satisfying than fighting and beating a bigger opponent, like a big corporation, on behalf of people who don't have enough power. I'm sure that, on Wall Street, the thrill of making a big deal that makes Goldman-Sachs even richer than it was the day before can be exciting. But to me, there's nothing more exciting than the day we signed our first contract at Bernstein and Son Shirt Company in Crystal Springs, Mississippi and 300 black women danced in the streets over finally having gotten the respect that they deserved through a union contract.

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