

V I E W P O I N T



The voice of labor is too often ignored by economic development planners, says University of Illinois professor Peter V. Schaeffer. Schaeffer, who has economic development experience in both this country and Switzerland, is also member of the Urbana planning commission.

Labor unions are getting a bad press these days, with their demands and work rules often seen as the cause of plant closings. Economic development planners, like others concerned with community prosperity, tend to accept the popular view that unions are a burden to employers, a drain on profitability.

I think that negative view is a mistake. It's true that many firms search out states with few unions and that the presence of unions may make economic growth more difficult to achieve. But economic growth is not necessarily the same as economic development. I define economic development as a process that improves the ability of the economic system to perform in such a way as to distribute the benefits most fairly. Such distributional concerns are central to the union movement.

If economic development planners adopt an anti-union attitude, they lose the opportunity to work with the only organizations that can legitimately claim to speak for employees. Instead of joining the naysayers, planners should try to get unions to become more active in the economic development planning process, which is now dominated by representatives of government and business.

That may not be easy, however. Many local unions have never considered playing a role that goes beyond the narrowly defined interests of their membership. They may also shy away from participating in efforts that include the chamber of commerce and other business groups. But the changes that have taken place in the last 10 years have softened the attitudes of at least some union officials. With a little encouragement, they may be ready to assume new roles.

What could these new roles be? There is little experience to draw from, but it is clear that one area where unions could fill a void is in job training. It is my impression that many of the programs established under the Job Training Partnership Act reflect employers' needs rather than workers'. Having workers represented might result in more training programs that don't simply leave workers vulnerable to future changes in the economic climate.

It is also possible that local unions might agree to establish a code of ethics for behavior before and during a strike. That this is not a completely unrealistic dream is demonstrated by the example of unions that have worked constructively with management to avert plant closings.

Finally, unions might be able to help fund economic development projects, especially if benefits to workers or employees are clearly present.

Former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall makes a similar point in *Unheard Voices: Labor and Economic Policy in a Competitive World*, published this year by Basic Books. Marshall, who served in the Carter administration, notes that there are two sides to the economic development equation: business and labor. It's time to start listening to labor's side and to try new ways of involving workers in decision making.

Unions have the responsibility of representing their members' interests. We as a profession should invite them to join the planning process so that all groups that are significantly affected by our activities will be heard.

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