If huge disparities in income and wealth create major public health problems (see REHW #654) and an unsustainable society (REHW #629), then we need a more equitable distribution of available benefits. Historically, labor unions have played this role, effectively advocating for minimum wage laws, the 8-hour work day, paid vacations and holidays, health insurance, and retirement funds. Today when the typical chief executive officer earns in a day what a typical worker earns in a year, we find ourselves -- more than ever -- needing the labor movement to provide pressure toward a fairer distribution of benefits. This essay was originally written for the Labor Party (see www.igc.org/lpapr) --P.M.]

by Peter Killman*

Part 1: The Problem

The bad news is that since 1979 the percentage of union workers in the United States has declined from 24% to 14%. The good news is that given the choice of joining a union or not, 48% of workers in this country would join.

Due to the export of jobs, outsourcing and automation, existing union jobs are being lost as fast as new members join unions. The traditional strategy of organizing workers -- work place by work place -- does bring in new members, but employer opposition still denies most workers union representation.

A case that makes the point is the healthcare industry in Massachusetts, which currently employs 400,000 workers, 10% of whom are union members. Unions put a fair amount of financial and human resources into organizing healthcare workers, and in 1997 organized 819 new members through the union certification process. At this rate it would take 434 years to organize the industry if the number of employed stayed at 400,000, but the industry is projected to grow another 250,000 in the next 45 years.

You see the problem. We have to do something different. In Sweden, for example, 83% of the work force is represented by unions, and employers are prevented by law from interfering with the formation of unions. Unlike U.S. workers, Swedish workers have the right to associate and bargain collectively. In Sweden, Japan, France, Germany and most countries with which U.S. corporate managers say we compete, the right to associate and bargain collectively is a basic human right recognized by the United Nations and stated in the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 under Article 20: Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. This right is explained in the UN's International Labor Organization's Convention #87-- Freedom of Association and the Right to Organize, which establishes the right of all workers to form and join organizations of their own choosing without prior authorization. Although 118 countries have ratified Convention #87, the U.S. Senate has steadfastly refused to do so for the past 51 years.

Freedom of speech plus freedom of assembly equals freedom of association. It works like this. A group of people want to form a corporation. They call a meeting (freedom of assembly) and discuss (freedom of speech) their options and decide they want corporate recognition. Then they send a representative to their state capital and discuss (freedom of speech) their options and decide they want corporate recognition. Then they send a representative to their state capital and file some papers. That's it. Their corporation is recognized by the rest of the society. No cards are signed; no campaign is waged, no one gets fired and no election occurs. Just recognition. In this country forming a corporation is a protected activity. It is a right. Getting a corporation to recognize a union is not a right; forming a union is not a protected activity. IF IT WERE, 48% OF THE WORK FORCE WOULD BE UNION MEMBERS IN A HEARTBEAT.

During a union campaign, in this country, the company will put up anti-union posters and hold captive-audience meetings. But the union can't put up posters because it doesn't own the walls. The union can't bring a representative to the work place to talk to workers in the private sector because the union doesn't own the building.

In this country we have freedom of speech and assembly on public property. On private property the owners of the property determine who can speak and assemble. Workers surrender their free speech rights to their employers when they enter the work place.

If we want to associate, to organize, to exercise power, we need to change some fundamental relationships in our society.

But first we need to understand how the fundamental relationships that now govern our lives were set. WE NEED TO KNOW OUR OWN HISTORY.

"He came to know... that history was not a page in a book, but something held in memory and in blood."[1]

Part 2: Knowing Our History

Imagine a church without the Bible, a synagogue without the Torah, a mosque without the Koran or the Iqrooquis without their story of creation. It is the teaching of the stories from these great books and oral traditions that holds the congregations and tribes of our people together. The wisdom acquired over the ages is passed down through the stories of the past. These stories guide us into the future: they give us our values, direction and strength. Without them we are rootless, have no direction and live only in the uninformed present.

The same is true for labor. We need a framework to view our history and connect the many stories of our great struggles. We need to learn from our past mistakes and victories. We need to take the best from the past and use it to help build our future. If not, we will forever live in the present and make the same mistakes over and over again.

It is often said in labor circles that we will never increase our numbers until we have better laws. The fact is that for most of our history pro-labor laws have been the exception. Most laws relating to labor have been anti-labor, anti-union laws. It wasn't until 1937 that the National Labor Relations Act was declared constitutional and today that law is of more use to the employer than it is to us. But that is nothing new. The law favored the wealthy in the 13 American colonies and still does in the country our people created.

George Washington didn't become the most powerful and one of the wealthiest men in America in 1776 by surveying house lots.[2] It is true that Washington did do some surveying for the Ohio Company, a company in which he was a major stockholder. George and members of the planter and commercial class in colonial Virginia where he grew up had a plan to exploit labor and make themselves even richer and more powerful. The plan had two parts. First, they had slaves to run their tobacco plantations and second, they created the Ohio Company. The Ohio Company was founded in 1748 by George's older brother Lawrence and received a grant of 200,000 acres of land west of the colony of Virginia from the King of England. Later, Virginia's Royal Governor Dinwiddie, himself an Ohio Company principle, "successfully appealed to the British authorities in London to offer ships passage to indentured servants who would work to clear and improve roads and farmsteads and build company trading posts for seven years, in return for the right to remain on the lands as leaseholders afterward."[3] Pretty good plan. The King grants the company the land and then supplies unpaid workers to build the roads, to access the land and the forts to defend it. Then if the workers survived their seven years of servitude, and many didn't, they had the privilege of renting land from the Ohio Company.

But it wasn't just Washington who was involved with this kind of scheme. The Ohio Company was in competition with the Loyal Land Company of Virginia, owned in part by Thomas Jefferson's dad, and the Vandalia Company, owned in part by Ben Franklin. We
have heard a lot about Washington, Jefferson and Franklin, but who were these indentured servants and slaves? What was their history?

The history of the indentured servant, for our purposes, begins in 1500 when one-third of the land in England, France and Germany was owned by the Catholic Church. Much of this land was occupied by subsistence farmers. With the Protestant Reformation of the Church in 1517, Church land was taken over by nobles or sold to speculators who drove the tenant farmers off the land. Then in the 1600s and 1700s the "common lands" which had been at the disposal of the poor in Europe were enclosed, fenced off, and the people who lived on them driven off the land. Finally, in the 1800s, in a process known as "clearing the estates," farmers were pushed off the land they rented to make room for sheep to provide wool for the growing textile industry.

As these events were taking place, laws were passed that called for people without a place to live or work to be branded, punished, jailed or sold into slavery. This created a large pool of humanity with an incentive to leave Europe and provide cheap labor in North America.

Meanwhile in Africa, rich merchants from Europe organized an international slave trade, buying slaves from West African princes whose soldiers carried European weapons. The trade in African slaves spanned three centuries and, "Before it was over, ten to twelve million Africans would be transported to the New World."[4]

Indentured servants from Europe and slaves from Africa, people whose lives were contracts to be bought and sold, provided the founding fathers of our nation, men like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Benjamin Franklin, the labor to exploit the natural resources of North America. Roughly half the immigrants to colonial America were indentured servants. At the time of the war of Independence, three out of four persons in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia were or had been indentured servants. And by this time, roughly 20 percent of the colonial population was in slavery.[5] Slaves from Africa and indentured servants from Europe lived under the same fugitive slave laws, and their children were the property of the masters. These people were property to be bought and sold -- property protected by colonial law and later the United States Constitution.