

# THE AMERICAN PROSPECT



## The Seeds of a New Labor Movement

SEIU's David Rolf—virtuoso organizer and mastermind of Seattle's \$15 minimum wage campaign—says labor needs radically new ways to champion worker interests.

[Harold Meyerson](#)

*This article is from the Fall 2014 issue of The American Prospect magazine.*

If anyone has the right to be upbeat about the prospects of the American labor movement, it should be David Rolf, the president of a Seattle-based long-term care local of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Between 1995 and 1999, while still in his 20s, Rolf directed a campaign that unionized 74,000 home care workers in Los Angeles. It was the largest single unionization since the United Auto Workers organized Ford in 1941. SEIU then sent him to Seattle, where he has nearly quadrupled SEIU's Washington state membership. Last year, he led the initiative campaign that persuaded voters in SeaTac, the working-class Seattle suburb that is home to the city's airport, to raise the local minimum wage to \$15—the highest in the nation. He also managed to make SEIU's campaign to organize fast-food workers and raise their pay to \$15 the centerpiece of the mayoral race in Seattle proper. Prodded by the fast-food workers, State Senator Ed Murray ran on the promise to raise the local minimum to that level. After Murray was elected mayor, he appointed Rolf to lead the labor delegation on the business-labor task force that would devise the plan for phasing in Seattle's new minimum. This summer, the city enacted the task force's recommendations. The \$15 minimum wage is now law.

Over the past 15 years, no American unionist has organized as many workers, or won them raises as substantial, as Rolf.

Over the past 15 years, no American unionist has organized as many workers, or won them raises as substantial, as Rolf. Which makes it all the more telling that Rolf believes the American labor movement, as we know it, is on its deathbed, and that labor should focus its remaining energies on bequeathing its resources to start-up projects that may find more effective ways to advance workers' interests than today's embattled unions can.

In early 2012, Rolf attended a national SEIU board meeting in New Orleans, where he heard a presentation from the head of the union's Louisiana local. The local had had 6,000 members a few years earlier, but it had shrunk to 1,200 after the chambers of commerce in cities with which it had had contracts got court injunctions forbidding any such contracts.

"Anti-union injunctions?" Rolf asks incredulously. "Getting a federal law forbidding such injunctions was the No. 1 demand of unions in the 1928 presidential election. Were we back in 1928? Before Norris-LaGuardia [the 1932 federal act that forbade such injunctions in the private sector; the Louisiana local was public sector]? Before the Wagner Act? Before the New Deal? This set me on a quest to figure out what had happened to labor—and what we should do now."

Leaders of the biggest local unions, Rolf realized, were clustered in a handful of regions where labor, though declining, had not yet disappeared. "If you're a union leader in Seattle or New York or L.A., you can think things are OK," Rolf says. "But there goes Wisconsin; there goes Indiana. If right-to-work passing in Michigan isn't Lenin's statue coming down in Red Square, I don't know what is."

Most labor leaders and activists concur that the union movement is in something close to mortal peril. With Rolf, they believe that the inadequacies of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (the Wagner Act), which union-busting employers are able to violate with impunity, have made it almost impossible to organize private-sector workers. Unable to grow, labor has also seen its ranks diminished by the offshoring of millions of jobs and the relegation of millions more to the ranks of contingent labor or ostensible self-employment. Today, the percentage of private-sector workers in unions has dropped to a bare 6.7 percent—roughly its level at the beginning of the 20th century, before the advent of a sizable middle class.

"The path to collective bargaining has been shut down in the United States," says Larry Cohen, president of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and head of the AFL-CIO's Organizing Committee. Where Rolf differs from most of his colleagues is in his belief that collective bargaining—at least, as the nation has known it for the past 80 years—is not coming back. In a paper he distributed to his colleagues in 2012 and in commentaries he wrote for several magazines (including this one), he argued that unions should acknowledge their impending demise—at least in the form that dates to the Wagner Act—and focus their energies and resources on incubating new institutions that can better address workers' concerns. "The once powerful industrial labor unions that built the mid-century American middle class are in a deep crisis and are no longer able to protect the interests of American workers with the scale and power necessary to reverse contemporary economic trends," he wrote in his paper. "The strategy

and tactics that we've pursued since the 1947 Taft-Hartley Amendments [which narrowed the ground rules under which unions may operate] are out of date and have demonstrably failed to produce lasting economic power for workers. We must look to the future and invest our resources in new organizational models that respond to our contemporary economy and the needs of today's workers."

This October, with funding from his local, from the national SEIU, and from several liberal foundations, Rolf will unveil The Workers Lab, housed at the Roosevelt Institute in New York. The center will study and, in time, invest in organizations that, in Rolf's words, "have the potential to build economic power for workers, at scale, and to sustain themselves financially." Whatever those organizations may be, they won't be unions—at least, not unions as they currently exist.

Rolf's prescriptions, and Rolf himself, have engendered a good deal of controversy within the labor movement. His blunt talk about unions' inadequate present and nonexistent future have made him "a pariah to some in labor," says David Freiboth, the head of the Seattle-area AFL-CIO. "He's brilliant. He's egotistical. What he says about the movement, people take personally. He's not wrong in what he says, but there's a way to tell your wife she's overweight. You don't just say, 'Honey, you're fat.' But that's David's way."

But the unease that Rolf and his ideas have created can't just be ascribed to a lack of tact. Rolf's role is that of a disruptive innovator in an embattled and defensive institution. He gives voice to the fears that many in labor share but are reluctant to acknowledge or act upon. And his quest for some new way to amass power for workers, something other than the decaying collective bargaining regime of the past eight decades, raises yet another fear: Suppose there is no new way for workers to assert their interests? What should labor—what should the nation—do then?

And yet, quite independent of Rolf's writings, a growing share of the organizing in labor today is already taking place outside the structures of collective bargaining. Unions are organizing domestic workers, who have no common employer. They are organizing taxi drivers, who are self-employed. The AFL-CIO's major organizing effort, Working America, is a community-based campaign that until recently hadn't dealt with its members' workplace concerns or had a presence in those workplaces. And in the fight to raise Seattle's minimum wage to \$15, even though few if any of the beneficiaries were or would become union members, Rolf ended up bargaining with employers on behalf of the city's entire working class.

Rolf loves talking about the ins and outs, the stratagems and tactical coups, of the campaigns he's directed. The leader of the largest local union in Washington state—SEIU Local 775, which represents home care and nursing home workers—had not planned to wage a campaign last year to raise the minimum wage in SeaTac. But when the Port of Seattle, which runs the airport, and Alaska Airlines, the airport's dominant airline, spurned the efforts of SEIU's organizers to unionize the baggage handlers and fry cooks who worked at the airport at or near minimum wage, "we needed a big piece of leverage to bring them to the table," Rolf says.

The leverage was an initiative the unions said they'd place on SeaTac's November 2013 ballot—an initiative so radical it would surely push Alaska Airlines and the Port to the table. The initiative would increase the local minimum wage from Washington state's minimum of \$9.32 to \$15.00 at both the airport and its surrounding hotels. The phase-in period between election and implementation would be a mere seven weeks.

Still, Alaska Airlines and the Port refused to bargain. SeaTac voters would never approve such a measure, they believed; SeaTac wasn't that kind of town.

Seated in his neat, sparsely decorated corner office in the downtown Seattle headquarters of Local 775, Rolf recounts how his union, the fast-food organizing campaign it guided, and the coalition it assembled proved them wrong. Rolf is 44, but his wide eyes and baby face make him look considerably younger—a union and political prodigy wise beyond his years. In the breadth of his historical references and in his occasional use of the high-tech business patois that is increasingly Seattle's *lingua franca*, he can seem more like an unusually well-educated business academic than the labor leader who led the campaign that won the nation's highest minimum wage.

“We were backed into the initiative by Alaska's and the Port's intransigence,” he says. He quickly recognized the measure could not pass absent an extraordinary effort. “There were 11,000 registered voters in SeaTac, and we figured the only way we could win was to expand the electorate.” The coalition's canvassers registered 1,000 new voters, mainly immigrants. (SeaTac is home to many Somali Americans who work at the airport.)

Speaking rapidly, warming to the topic, Rolf continues: “In the normal Washington-state model, your peak communication with voters is the Friday before election day. But we peaked when the ballot hit, well before the final weekend. [All voting in Washington is done by mail ballot.] We put 400 professional union organizers on the doorsteps that day and for the next five days—eight-hour shifts. We targeted people who never voted or only voted in presidential elections, but who had family, friends, someone they knew who worked at the airport. The organizers each had a list of 25 voters; they went back to each initiative supporter's house repeatedly until they saw they actually mailed the ballot.” The initiative passed by 77 votes.

Their coup de théâtre was to arrange a televised debate among the major mayoral candidates at which the questioners were all low-wage workers

But the triumph in SeaTac was only the second most important victory that Rolf's union won last Election Day. In Seattle proper, State Senator Ed Murray was elected mayor, chiefly on the strength of his pledge to raise Seattle's minimum to \$15 as well. While SEIU's “Fight for 15” campaign to unionize fast-food workers has highlighted the plight of low-wage workers in dozens of cities, only in Seattle did the issue come to dominate the municipal elections. That was Rolf's and his fast-food organizers' doing. They timed the workers' demonstrations to coincide with key events during the campaign. Their *coup de théâtre* was to arrange a televised debate among the major mayoral candidates at which the questioners were all low-wage workers (including a Burger King employee active in the fast-food campaign)—who, of course, asked the aspirants if they supported a \$15 minimum for Seattle. It was there that Murray, more than any

of the other candidates, first spoke favorably of the idea. As the campaign progressed, as the demonstrations continued to draw widespread coverage, and as the \$15 question came up at every candidates forum, the fight for 15 became Murray's signature issue. On Election Day, his victory, the victory at SeaTac, and the upset Seattle city council victory of Kshama Sawant, a Trotskyist champion of the \$15 standard, combined to create a perfect storm for a pay raise.

"David's initiative, injecting the fast-food campaign into the mayor's race, was the key to the Seattle raise," says the AFL-CIO's Freiboth.

Before he even took office this January, Mayor-elect Murray appointed a labor-business task force to arrive at a common plan for phasing in a new minimum wage. Both Freiboth and Rolf feared that national groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce would mount an initiative campaign if the city government raised the minimum to \$15. The way to forestall that was to have the plan that the city council would vote on devised by a task force that included Seattle's own business leaders—particularly from the low-wage hotel and restaurant sectors.

When the deliberations on Murray's task force threatened to break down, it was Rolf who held things together, says Howard Wright, the Seattle hotelier and convention executive who headed the task force's business side. "He kept saying, 'Let's not have our desires for the perfect get in the way of success.' He was practical, less ideological than other members of the task force. If the labor movement had more David Rolfs, it would hold its own for a very long time." (An assessment with which Rolf clearly disagrees.)

Confronted with the prospect of Sawant's supporters mounting an initiative campaign like SeaTac's, which would raise the minimum to \$15 immediately, the task force's business-side members had no real alternative but to agree to a \$15 standard that would be phased in more gradually. The labor side of the task force, which Rolf headed, prevailed on most points of contention. While stretching out the phase-in to seven years for mom-and-pop businesses, the task force voted almost unanimously to limit the phase-in to four years for corporate-affiliated franchises like McDonald's, and to include tipped workers under the ordinance's provisions. In June, the city council enacted the task force's recommendations, and Murray signed the ordinance into law.

"It wasn't traditional collective bargaining," says Rolf, "but it was an alternative form of bargaining. It was very like Europe—politically constructed bargaining between the leaders of business and labor. Some of the people who will benefit from the raise will be union members in home care and grocery stores, but most will never be union members. It covers more people than any contract you could get today."

But the unions' success in raising the minimum to \$15 also illustrates how difficult it has become to unionize workers, absent recourse to electoral politics and local government regulation. Given Seattle's progressive politics, it proved easier to win a minimum wage increase to \$15 an hour—which will hike the pay of an estimated 100,000 workers by the time it fully takes effect—than to organize just 4,000 workers at the airport.

Indeed, SEIU's nationwide campaign to win fast-food workers a contract with such giant corporations as McDonald's and Burger King has yet to add a single worker to its ranks. That can't happen unless those corporations recognize the union and sign a collective bargaining agreement with it, a happy ending that some union strategists can't quite envision ever coming to pass. What the campaign has accomplished is to have highlighted the low pay and arbitrary work schedules of millions of workers, which in turn has led a growing number of liberal cities and states to enact minimum wage hikes—though none as far-reaching as Seattle's—and paid sick day laws.

The disjuncture between unions' ability to advocate for workers in the political arena (though only where the center-left governs) and their inability to augment their shrinking ranks with new members cannot continue indefinitely, however. It takes the resources of unions like SEIU and federations like the AFL-CIO to elect public officials who will respond to workers' concerns, just as it takes those resources to mobilize workers' demonstrations of their concerns.

“SEIU is making a huge investment with no clear sense that it will ever be able to claim a fast-food worker as a member. How long can that be a sustainable model?”

Within labor, “that's one reason why the fast-food campaign engenders a sense of unease as well as a sense of excitement,” says one union official. “SEIU is making a huge investment with no clear sense that it will ever be able to claim a fast-food worker as a member. How long can that be a sustainable model?”

And yet, precisely because organizing that results in a union contract is all but impossible save in a small number of sectors, much of the organizing currently under way in the United States is of and by workers who aren't in standard employee relationships, or who seek legislative rather than contractual remedies, or both.



Women Together/Flickr

MacArthur Award-winning organizer Ai-jen Poo, director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, addresses a rally.

When we started organizing domestic workers,” says Ai-jen Poo, founder and director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (and a recipient this year of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award), “we were calling for a standard contract. But domestic workers aren’t covered under the National Labor Relations Act, or the Fair Labor Standards Act, which is the federal minimum wage legislation. So we shifted our focus to changing labor laws in New York state.”

There, the alliance built an organization of domestic workers that demonstrated and held events to make themselves visible (to themselves no less than to everybody else) as a group of workers who were singularly devoid of the rights most Americans took for granted. After years of lobbying Albany, in 2010 they won a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights that protected them from discrimination and harassment, gained them coverage under worker compensation laws, guaranteed them one day of rest per week, and entitled them to three paid sick days. Hawaii, California, and Massachusetts have since passed their own versions of the act. In October, the alliance, which has grown to include chapters in 42 cities, will join with SEIU and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in St. Louis for the first home care worker organizing summit, which, says Poo, “will look at, among other things, how we can raise our wages to \$15.”

Since there’s no employer or agency with whom domestic workers can collectively bargain, building membership is arduous, and building a membership that can financially sustain the



organization is, at least for now, impossible. Foundations and individual donors fund the alliance. One way to enroll workers in the group, Poo says, is to establish member-led enforcement programs once protective legislation is enacted. Members take assignments both to inform domestic workers of their rights and to provide them with and serve as member contacts when those rights are violated.

A similar dynamic exists at the National Taxi Workers Alliance, whose members are classified as independent contractors. Unlike domestic workers, however, taxi drivers (in most cities, an almost entirely immigrant workforce) come together in the course of their daily rounds in airport parking lots. When Bhairavi Desai, the daughter of Indian immigrants, began organizing New York's cabbies in 1996, she spent most of her time in the taxi lines at LaGuardia Airport, with the goal of building an organization that could compel the city's Taxi Commission to enact pro-driver (or at least mitigate anti-driver) regulations.

In 1998, more than 90 percent of the city's drivers participated in a one-day strike over the commission's newly enacted driver penalties, which the commission promptly rescinded. The Taxi Alliance's biggest victory came in 2012, when the commission agreed to set aside six cents per fare to establish a supplemental health and disability fund that partially covers drivers' dental and vision care.

Like the National Domestic Workers Alliance and many workers centers in immigrant communities, the Taxi Alliance provides workers with a range of services, including help in filing for citizenship and dealing with their children's schools.

Like the National Domestic Workers Alliance and many workers centers in immigrant communities, the Taxi Alliance provides workers with a range of services, including help in filing for citizenship and dealing with their children's schools. Unlike most of those centers, however, it limits the amount of foundation grants it accepts, in the belief that such grants can restrict the organization's freedom of action. Until the past couple of years, in consequence, Desai was its only paid staffer.

Of the 30,000 active drivers in New York, 17,000 belong to the Taxi Alliance, of whom 3,500 pay the annual dues of \$100. The organization has also established chapters in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Austin, and Montgomery County, Maryland. Nationally, 4,500 drivers pay dues to the organization.

Since 2012, traditional unions have begun organizing taxi drivers as well, notwithstanding that none are in traditional employer-employee relationships. The Teamsters have organized drivers in Washington, D.C.; AFSCME has organizing campaigns in Chicago and New Orleans; there are even campaigns in several cities to organize drivers for Uber. The unions' campaigns, and those of groups like the Domestic Workers and the Taxi Alliances, attest to many immigrants' openness to organizing as a way to improve their generally abysmal working conditions and pay. But for most, such improvements may come outside of the collective bargaining arena.

In 2011, the AFL-CIO broke new ground by affiliating the National Taxi Workers Alliance. "Many affiliates in the AFL-CIO or Change to Win [the mini-federation of the SEIU and the



Teamsters] have some locals of contingent workers, or individual members who are contingent,” says Desai. “But we’re the first national affiliate where all the members are contingent. We bear witness to the fact that workers anywhere and everywhere can organize.”

Do you want to see news done right?

In an age where cat memes are considered “news,” *The American Prospect* is dedicated to providing deep, well-reported coverage of vital issues and stories like this. Please sign up and we’ll send you more like this one.

>

By far the largest number of members enrolled in a union-organized non-union are the 3.3 million members of Working America, an AFL-CIO-backed group that recruits people in working-class neighborhoods on their doorsteps in an effort to persuade them to support labor-backed candidates at election time. The program began a decade ago with the goal of swaying the votes of non-union white working-class electors in such swing states as Ohio and Michigan by making the economic populist case for the AFL-CIO’s endorsed candidates. Working America was “battling for people who otherwise would be captured by Fox News,” in the words of Karen Nussbaum, the organization’s director. In the dozen states in which it has been active, Working America is recognized as an effective political force that has influenced numerous elections.

Over the past couple of years, Working America has expanded its mission. In Albuquerque, it mobilized voters to pass an initiative giving the city council the power to raise the minimum wage, then organized them to pressure the council to raise it, and then enrolled its activists to serve as informal enforcement agents—a task the city was slow to undertake. (Members handed out palm cards reading “Got Your Raise Yet?” to workers in low-wage establishments.) It recently placed organizers in four cities, says Nussbaum, “in a pilot program to deal with workplace and community issues.”

Polling has shown that most Working America members support the candidates and positions the AFL-CIO recommends. In most places, however, it is not the kind of organization whose members ever attend a meeting, much less pay any dues. It’s a problem to which Nussbaum is no stranger. As one of the founders of 9to5, a proto-feminist organization of secretaries in Boston in 1973, she grappled with how to build a workers’ organization that couldn’t fund itself through collective bargaining. “Today, it’s become one of the biggest challenges not just to Working America but to the entire progressive movement: How do you build self-sufficient workers’ organizations outside of collective bargaining?” Working America has begun experimenting with brokering health insurance policies under the Affordable Care Act to its members as a possible source of funding. “SEIU got its start providing burial insurance to janitors,” she notes.



AFL-CIO

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and National Taxi Workers Alliance Executive Director Bhairavi Desai (center, at podium) at the federation's Washington, D.C., headquarters on October 20, 2011, when Desai accepted the alliance's charter as a member union of the AFL-CIO. The two are surrounded by members of the alliance.

More than most union leaders, Rolf is a student of labor history. As an undergraduate at Bard College in the early 1990s, he wrote his senior thesis on the “Protocols of Peace”—the 1910 agreement between New York’s clothing manufacturers and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, hammered out by Louis Brandeis, Lincoln Filene, and John Dewey.

“In the 19th and early 20th century, the American labor movement consisted of competing experiments with a range of origins, goals, and structures,” Rolf says. “In Seattle, the first unions evolved from gangs of white workers beating up Asians. Elsewhere, labor was shaped by syndicalists, anarchists, immigrant movements, communists, eight-hour-day clubs—the sum total of all this wasn’t just unions but a range of very different movements. The Yiddish-speaking socialists had very little in common with the iron workers who blew up the *L.A. Times*.”

“We had competing models of how to build power for workers,” he continues. “We’ve had one model since 1935 [when the National Labor Relations Act was passed]. Which would be fine if it weren’t dying.”

Rolf has firsthand experience with what the 1935 model once could accomplish. Born and raised in Cincinnati, he grew up in middle-class surroundings (his father was an attorney; his mother a teacher active in Unitarian causes), just a generation removed from working-class roots. “My mother’s father would tell me about how the UAW changed his life,” Rolf says. “He would migrate back and forth from the farm to the factory, depending on the economy. He was an industrial carpenter at a GM plant in Ohio. Three times while he worked there, the union struck; three times he walked the picket lines. He credited that, he credited the UAW, for making him middle class.”

At Bard, Rolf was active in a range of progressive causes, particularly pro-choice groups and the campus chapter of ACT UP New York. As his choice of topic for his senior thesis indicates, he was growing more interested in working people’s movements, and spent the summer between his junior and senior years interning for an SEIU organizing project in Atlanta. As graduation neared, he couldn’t figure out what graduate specialty he wished to pursue, so he decided to take a year off from academics by accepting a job offer from the SEIU local for which he’d interned. “But I fell in love with working in the movement,” he says, “and never wanted to do anything else.”

The labor movement to which Rolf reported, however, could no longer grow and deliver as it had in his grandfather’s day. Rolf’s new employer was a local of Georgia state workers who had no legal bargaining rights—“then or now,” Rolf adds. “We had a theory that the local could first win the right to have its members check a box to set aside a small portion of their paycheck for union dues, just as they could check a box to set aside donations to the United Way. From there, we thought it could win some rights, though not collective bargaining, through an executive order by the governor, and then full bargaining rights through the legislature. What the hell were we thinking?”

Some of what SEIU was thinking was that the South was gradually becoming more like the rest of the nation in accepting unions. In fact, the rest of the nation was becoming more like the South in rejecting them.

“I owned a suit and I could talk to politicians, so I got the job as a legislative assistant—really, our lobbyist.”

Though just 23, Rolf says, “I owned a suit and I could talk to politicians, so I got the job as a legislative assistant—really, our lobbyist.” Traveling to every one of Georgia’s 180 legislative districts and calling on the legislators with groups of members, Rolf got a bill enacted that gave members the right to designate dues payments to the union. But there, as Georgia moved steadily to the right, the union’s progress halted. The hoped-for executive order and the right to collective bargaining grew steadily more implausible.

Nonetheless, Rolf’s success impressed Andy Stern, then SEIU’s national organizing director, who offered him the job of restarting Los Angeles’s stalled-out home care worker campaign in 1995. Rolf jumped at the chance, and within four years, he succeeded in organizing 74,000 L.A. home care workers—almost entirely women of color—into a new SEIU local. To win the campaign, Rolf had to assemble a coalition of home care providers and clients to pressure the

L.A. County Board of Supervisors to establish a public agency that would serve as the workers' employer with whom they could negotiate. (Under California law, counties administer Medicaid-funded home health care.) Rolf also had to have SEIU wage, and win, a series of election campaigns on behalf of candidates who were allies and *protégés* of the supervisors. He had the union develop a registry to match up clients and providers. Once the supervisors had agreed to establish the agency, SEIU had to win the union-ratification votes of tens of thousands of workers who shared no common workplaces. It was the largest organizing campaign the national union had ever run. When the vote results were announced, Rolf had just turned 30.

Rolf's success in Atlanta and his triumph in Los Angeles, while both relying on his ability to turn out members at crucial times, were primarily victories achieved in the political arena. After the home care worker campaign, Rolf's political skills were so apparent that Antonio Villaraigosa offered Rolf the position of campaign manager for his upcoming mayoral campaign, and Stern (by then, SEIU president) told him he could be SEIU's top person on Al Gore's presidential campaign—both offers that Rolf rejected in favor of another offer from Stern to go to Seattle.

The L.A. victory set the template for the subsequent efforts by SEIU and AFSCME to organize home care workers—the only truly large-scale organizing campaigns by any unions to have succeeded in the new century. Among those successes were Rolf's own efforts to organize such workers in Washington state. Within four years of his arrival, Rolf steered to passage a statewide initiative to create a public authority that could bargain with home care workers; he made SEIU instrumental in the election of friendly legislators; he had the union inspect and rehabilitate 723 ballots during the protracted recounts in the 2004 governor's race. (Democrat Christine Gregoire ultimately won by 130 votes.) The local's efforts produced a legislature and governor who not only backed the unionization of home care workers but also raised their pay in a succession of state budgets.

Since Rolf's arrival in 2000, Local 775 has grown from 1,600 to 43,000 members, while the total number of SEIU members in Washington state has swelled from 28,000 to 106,000

Since Rolf's arrival in 2000, Local 775 has grown from 1,600 to 43,000 members, while the total number of SEIU members in Washington state has swelled from 28,000 to 106,000. Full-time home care providers and nursing home employees have seen their pay doubled to the state's median. "If you're me, life is good," Rolf acknowledges. But he's convinced he's swimming against a historic tide.

Shortly after his grim epiphany on labor's decline at the New Orleans meeting, Rolf says, "I began looking at the data state by state. In 1983, Louisiana had the same share of unionized workers as Seattle had in 2012. Tennessee had the same percentage that New York had that year. When I turned all this into a PowerPoint presentation, New York was the only state that still had more than 15 percent of its private-sector workers in unions. Then I had to change the presentation; New York fell beneath 15 percent.

“The more I researched, the more I became convinced that the rest of the world had forgotten about us. We weren’t even worth killing any more. Our collective bargaining model had lost all visibility to the majority of American workers. For most union members, unions were just an inherited fait accompli—their workplace had been unionized decades before they got there.

## Advertisement

“Every condition and factor that underpinned unions’ power from the 1930s through the 1960s was gone: immobile capital, government assistance, the Cold War defense establishment, even organized crime, which propped up some unions so it could loot them. Not to mention losing two generations of workers by not organizing in the private sector after the 1940s. In the ’80s and ’90s, Andy’s [Stern’s] generation rediscovered organizing, but it was too little, too late.”

The very existence of the employer-employee relationship, Rolf points out, is under attack. “As we’re trying to turn contingent workers like home care workers into full-time standard permanent employees, far more full-time standard permanent employees are being compelled to become contingent.

“I had been convinced that SEIU’s model of growth [which his own work exemplified] was working. But I lost my faith in it. I hoped someone had found the silver bullet that would reinvent growth. I talked to people at worker centers, but worker centers turned out to be permanent wards of charity. I talked to academics. I couldn’t find it. I couldn’t even find a project devoted to finding it.”

Rolf studied how Silicon Valley incubated startups. With Stern, he paid a call on former Intel CEO Andy Grove, that rare Silicon Valley guru who’d written critically about American business’s abandonment of American workers. “Grove told us he didn’t know enough about the subject to offer specific advice,” Rolf says. “But he did say [to] think about outcomes and treat everything else—laws, strategies, structures—as secondary.

“That made me understand the death of collective bargaining isn’t something we should be sentimental about,” Rolf says. “We should understand what about collective bargaining worked, and try to recapture that. What really mattered was we created, first, the power to change workers’ lives economically; second, we created it on a scale that benefited millions, tens of millions, of workers; and third, we created a model of sustainability so our institutions could survive even in bad economies or when our political allies weren’t in power. Those are the three things that new institutions need to do.”



(AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Seattle Mayor Ed Murray, right, and Seattle City Council president Tim Burgess, second from right, cut a cake that says "#GoodWorkSeattle \$15," Monday, June 2, 2014, at a rally outside Seattle City Hall after the Seattle City Council passed a \$15 minimum wage measure.

Rolf's critics view these arguments as a dismissal of the valuable work that unions still perform. They see in them an arrogance—at once technocratic and prophetic—that some of them saw in Stern, who resigned as SEIU president in 2010 at least in part because, like Rolf, he believed the labor movement in its current form was both ineffectual and doomed. Rolf and Stern's attraction to the culture of Silicon Valley, their belief that labor could profitably learn from the Valley's experience with start-ups, and their penchant for business-school lingo have only further estranged their critics. ("Rolf says we need to become Labor 3.0," moans one union official. "Christ.")

Another union leader says he thinks Rolf's diagnosis of labor's ailments are brilliant, but that his prescriptions are "from Andy Land"—a reference to what he sees as Stern's mistaken infatuation with the egalitarian potential of the digital economy. Rolf dismisses these concerns. "We don't have to share the tech sector's values to learn from its successes," he says.

The same union leader also questions where Rolf and his new center are headed. “It’s not clear if Rolf wants to find new institutions that re-engage workers at the workplace, or new ways to mobilize them through politics or in partnership with employers,” he says.

“All the above,” Rolf replies. “I don’t have a singular theory of what will build worker power. I want to see how competing models fare—those where workers are opposed to their employers, those where they sometimes work with them, those where workers—like an increasing number of American workers—have no employer.”

A further difference between Rolf and his critics concerns union democracy. When Stern sent Rolf to Seattle, he made clear that one way Rolf could accelerate SEIU’s growth in Washington was to consolidate its 12 locals. Rolf did just that—reducing the number of locals to five, while nearly quadrupling its membership. Merging locals into mega-locals would make them better able to organize, play politics, and win contracts. And if such consolidations limited the scope of rank-and-file input and union democracy, well, Stern and Rolf saw union democracy as often impeding unions’ ability to re-allocate resources, from serving their existing members, to organizing new ones.

“He doesn’t want to screw around with bottom-up democracy,” says Freiboth.

Like Rolf, Working America’s Nussbaum has her list of criteria for what a new generation of workers’ organizations needs to do: amass power for workers to improve their lives, be financially self-sustaining, and be subject to workers’ democratic control. Rolf’s list includes the first two points but not the third. “He doesn’t want to screw around with bottom-up democracy,” says Freiboth. “If a union is bottom up, it’s modeled to serve its existing members and can’t be strategic in focusing on growth. ‘Progressive’ unions are now often the least democratic. They’ll service their members, but they won’t let democratic initiatives get in the way of their strategic initiatives.”

The labor leader whom Rolf repeatedly cites as a model for casting off time-honored union practices and devising new ones is John L. Lewis. Lewis didn’t care a fig for union democracy, but he built the CIO.





(Harris & Ewing/courtesy of the Library of Congress)

John L. Lewis, founder of the CIO, circa 1938.

Seattle's decision to raise its minimum wage has apparently inspired other cities governed by the center-left to raise their minimum wage levels as well, if not necessarily all the way to \$15. Shortly after Seattle passed its ordinance, San Diego followed suit. San Francisco and Oakland have wage-hike referenda on their November ballots, and the mayors of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York look to be converging on a \$13-and-change minimum-wage standard for their cities.

If workers' raises are to come from legislation rather than collective bargaining, however, is there a way they can use that legislation to build at least some organization? An embryonic version of Rolf's new institutions? During Rolf's meetings with a group of labor-community activists while the business-labor task force deliberated this year, that was a question he repeatedly raised. "David kept asking, 'How can we leverage things like a minimum wage victory to support worker organizing?'" says Rich Stolz, who heads an immigrant advocacy group. "Even if it may not be the traditional collective bargaining model, can we create associate memberships that offer benefits to workers? What can we do?"

One possibility is to build an organization devoted to monitoring and enforcing the legislation that unions have won—as the National Domestic Workers Alliance has done by enlisting its members to make sure that domestic workers’ newly acquired rights aren’t violated, as Working America has done in Albuquerque to ensure that employers are actually paying the minimum wage. In Seattle, Murray recently unveiled an enforcement program in which the city will partner with a private nonprofit organization to inform workers of their rights. “David keeps saying, ‘If it’s 1 A.M. at Taco Bell and a worker is asked to work off the clock, City Hall won’t be there—it’ll be up to the worker,’” says Sejal Parikh, who heads Working Washington, the Seattle fast-food workers organization.

“People have to know how to assert their rights on the job. To get there, we need workers going door-to-door and meeting in church basements.”

“Enforcing labor standards in the sectors most prone to victimization requires a bottom-up approach,” says Rolf, who favors an even more ambitious nonprofit operation, employing numerous low-wage workers, than the one the mayor has proposed. “People have to know how to assert their rights on the job. To get there, we need workers going door-to-door and meeting in church basements.”

Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein notes that a number of such organizations have arisen at various times to enforce laws and ordinances. During World War II, thousands of CIO members and their spouses served as the de facto enforcers of the wartime price controls in countless stores across the nation. The limitation on such organizations is that they’re not self-sustaining, and that the activists don’t win paychecks or receive benefits remotely comparable to those that workers get through union contracts. Murray’s proposed nonprofit may have some workers on staff, but that won’t make it a workers’ organization.

How could such a group become a workers’ organization, dependent not on government but its own members for its survival? It may require the labors of Rolf’s Workers Lab to figure that out.

Rolf is not the only premier union operative who believes unions in their current form are on the way out. Just as Rolf is the most successful union organizer of the past 15 years, the most successful organizer of the preceding 15 was Stephen Lerner, architect of SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign that unionized tens of thousands of the low-wage workers who cleaned the office buildings in the downtowns of multiple Northeastern, Midwestern, and West Coast cities.

Like Rolf, albeit with some difference, Lerner believes that the primary purpose of today’s unions should be “not to rebuild unions per se but to rebuild collective bargaining in a self-sustaining way.” Despite his success guiding Justice for Janitors—the single most notable organizing campaign of the 1990s—Lerner’s unconventional methods and ideas were not always welcome at SEIU, and in 2012, he left the union. Today, he is the chief strategist of three distinct but overlapping campaigns waged by local labor and community groups, all of which target the financial sector. The first organizes students to demand lower interest rates on college debt as well as lower tuition rates. The second organizes homeowners whose homes are underwater,

calling for cities to take over bank-owned properties through eminent domain. The third rallies public employee unions and community organizations to pressure cities to demand renegotiation of their debts to Wall Street. Lerner doesn't have Rolf's focus on developing new institutions that can exercise power for workers. Rather, he concentrates more on actions that could give bargaining power to a far wider range of constituencies.

As befits their respective personalities, Rolf's is a more methodical approach; Lerner's is more loose and dynamic. But when labor's two pre-eminent organizers of the past three decades agree that the collective bargaining regime established in 1935, in which the American labor movement has functioned for the past 80 years, is dead and not coming back, attention, as Willy Loman's wife says, must be paid.

Rolf's favored metaphor for the role that he believes today's unions should play is that of a "nurse log"—a term used by forest ecologists. A nurse log is a fallen tree that, as it decays, provides nourishment and protection to seedlings, some of which will grow to become new trees. "That's our choice," he says. "We can preserve the dying model, or we can use the resources of our model to give birth to what replaces it."

## About the Author



**Harold Meyerson** is the editor-at-large at *The American Prospect* and a columnist for *The Washington Post*. His email is [hmeyerson@prospect.org](mailto:hmeyerson@prospect.org) © 2014 by The American Prospect