

# CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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## The State of the Labor Unions

Two weeks ago, five major labor unions formed what they call the Change to Win Coalition. Frustrated with the AFL-CIO leadership, which coalition members view as “stodgy and defeatist,” they want to reform the larger body, restructure labor organizing, and reverse the steep decline in organized labor’s membership. According to Nancy Cleeland of the *Los Angeles Times* (6/16/05), the five unions represent some 35 percent of AFL-CIO membership and include unions with the highest growth rates in the labor movement.

Few commentators give Change to Win much chance to win. Most predict a split from the AFL-CIO, and, indeed, the board of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union has given its president authority to disaffiliate. American labor may take its cue from the 1930s, when John L. Lewis’s mineworkers union left the American Federation of Labor to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Lewis’s action ushered in a period of competition that helped the labor movement to flourish, reaching its peak membership some 20 years later.

Since 1983, union membership has fallen from roughly 20 percent of the national wage and salaried workforce to 12.5 percent in 2004. And public sector union membership (education, police, firefighters, and others) is four times that of the private sector.

One has to ask if the launch of Change to Win is not a desperate gamble to reinvigorate a labor movement depending largely on government employment, a gamble unlikely to succeed. But alongside the practical and ideological obstacles to a revived labor movement, there are questions of justice involved. Two principles offer guidance.

The principle of subsidiarity, or sphere sovereignty, urges government to refrain from usurping the basic functions of commercial activity, rejects state ownership of the means of production, and calls attention to the distinctive character of human work. Subsidiarity does not imply freedom from all regulation for employers or freedom for employees to make unreason-

able demands. Rather, as Canada’s Work Research Foundation explains, subsidiarity guides the division of responsibility among society’s governmental, economic, and non-economic agencies toward the goal of human dignity and the common good ([www.wrf.ca](http://www.wrf.ca)).

The second principle—the counterpart of subsidiarity—is solidarity, the responsibility of government to protect society’s weakest members. Workers deserve solidarity proportionate to their weakness at the bargaining table. Solidarity calls for unions to better represent those underrepresented and for government to revisit the legal framework within which this takes place.

It is no coincidence that Change to Win represents many workers in low-paying jobs, from janitors to service employees and migrant workers, who regularly protest the absence of social cooperation in their relations with management. In his best selling *What’s the Matter With Kansas?* Thomas Frank argues, for example, that employers, like those who control the meat packing industry, retain power by employing a union-free, heavily immigrant, and transient labor force and by externalizing the social costs of health care, education, and law enforcement. Union organizing constitutes a practical route to achieving better pay and work conditions in lieu of simply hoping for better treatment from employers or calling for massive state intervention.

Power imbalances in the workplace will not be magically reversed by calls for respecting the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. In a fallen world, self-interest is a constant working to perpetuate imbalance. But the goals of social cooperation for dignity’s sake require appropriate structures and just relations. “A code for business calls also for a code for labor,” declared Abraham Kuyper in 1891. It still does.

—Timothy Sherratt, Political Studies,  
*Gordon College*

**The Center for Public Justice**

P.O. Box 48368 \* Washington, DC 20002 \* 410-571-6300 \* Fax 410-571-6365 \* [www.cpjustice.org](http://www.cpjustice.org) \*  
[capcomm@cpjustice.org](mailto:capcomm@cpjustice.org)

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