

## CLA ALIVE!

Revival Speech – 1999

You may be wondering why **I** was selected to present a speech at this CLA convention. After all, I am only a rookie when it comes to labor unions. In this union world, I am a mere babe, compared to all of you. Though I was a member of the IWA during my late teens, since then I've not kept up with union matters until now. The reason I am speaking today is that I volunteered my service in such a way that it would have been embarrassing for Doug to turn me down. So, don't blame him for bad taste. It's my doing, not his.

Yes, I volunteered to give this speech. But I had a very specific reason for doing so. I have a message that I believe the CLA needs to hear badly. It is a message about a problem that perhaps is more easily recognized by a newcomer like myself, by a babe, than by an old timer who is accustomed to the spirit and the routines of the CLA.

Before going on, I want you to know how proud I am to be associated with the CLA. The purposes and goals of the CLA – I am proud of them. I do not know much about MN and CA regions, but I do know that in MI the CLA has made a real difference in the lives of its members. It has helped them live decent lives and work under decent conditions. That's very important, for we spend more time at work than at any other activity – apart from sleeping.

What I'm going to say comes out of a heart and mind dedicated to help the CLA to become more outreach minded, to become more concerned with bringing our message to the community around us, out of a desire for the CLA to develop a greater burden for the millions of people who are both overworked and underpaid. The problem? Are you ready for it? I will put it in question format.

Do you realize ***how stale the CLA looks to a newcomer?*** Could it be that you have lost some of your sense of mission that characterized the earlier CLA? Are you perhaps too satisfied with the status quo, with things as they are? You seem satisfied that as member of the CLA you are well taken care of, receiving good

pay, having a good pension and operating under good working conditions. Do you ever give any thought to the millions of fellow workers who have none of these? Millions of fellow workers who are overworked and underpaid? Who have no protection of any kind? Who are subject to the daily whims of money-minded employers? Who begin the day, not knowing whether they will have a job at the end of the day? Do you realize you appear to be merely a mutual benefit society concerned only with self? Your job is done. You have established your comfort zone. You have no further plans or desires. You've made it. And now that we've arrived, don't disturb us with anything that could upset our comfortable apple cart.

Ask yourself honestly. Am I getting close? Isn't that how some of us feel? Really? Deep down in our hearts?

When you think of it, the CLA was originally meant to be a light on the highest hill in our communities, in our nation, for all to see, not a light hidden under a bushel. The light of an exciting message and an exhilarating mission in the world of labor relations. Yes, exciting exhilarating. The principles on which the CLA was founded and to which we still officially adhere are deep, profound, exciting, practical and needed as much today as in 1931, the founding year.

But how many of us still give these any thought apart from our staff who are hired to do so? I honor them for doing so. I deal mostly with Mike as my immediate supervisor and through email with Doug as President and I see how hard they are trying. I imagine the same is true for our other staff. But there is no way these few can carry the entire mission of the CLA on their shoulders by themselves. Unless the CLA turn itself into a team in which all members play active roles, the CLA is likely to slowly fade away. The enemy will finally have won the victory. Wouldn't that be a shame and pity after all these years? The secular spirit will have bulldozed down yet another signpost of God's Kingdom, one of the very few in labor relations.

What lies behind this critical assessment of the present CLA? Except for the staff and a few others, I detect little enthusiasm for the CLA and its goals or message. I attend business meetings at the local level and observe that there is hardly

anything but routine agendas, hardly ever any new challenges or outreach. Routine. Routine. Routine. That's the main impression I have picked up.

It can also be described as **complacency**. Whenever I sit down with Mike and discuss ways of raising the public profile of the CLA, or to raise public interest, if it requires the participation of the members, the most common caution I receive is that the members do not want to get involved. When Richard was with us, he would give the same caution. In short, it sometimes looks as if the CLA really consists of a few very active officers who have to deliver certain services to the members. And as long as these goods are delivered efficiently, there is nothing further to worry about. The job is done.

**This situation is not new to the labor world.** After the big secular unions made their breakthrough and gained power, they became complacent. Just read the literature coming out of AFL-CIA circles. They admit that they had become complacent and that they had lost their sense of mission and urgency. They have learned that the reward of complacency is similar to the reward of sin: Death. Atrophy. Loss of members. Loss of power. Loss of influence. The labor movement lost millions of members.

They discovered the truth of Jesus' statement that Life is gained only by being prepared to give it up, by taking chances. When you seek life as the highest good, when you have as highest good your own comfort, your own safety, you lose your life. This is a paradoxical but most basic law of life. Life is gained only by giving it up and it is lost when you seek it for its own sake as the highest good of all.

It is a rule of life that always holds without exception. It is as sure as any natural law. As sure as any ball you throw into the air will come down again. No matter what kind of ball. No matter its color. No matter its size. It will come down again.

All of a sudden, the AFL movement woke up. Since it woke up it has started a vigorous campaign to unionize all over the country. They aim at turning every American city into a union city. Many of its earlier strategies have been dumped in favor of new ones. There is a heavy **new emphasis on getting involved in the community** so that the community will think of unions as a force for positive

change. Community service and involvement. There is a heavy emphasis as well on **working with the churches**. When I attended an AFL conference in Chicago I was struck by the emphasis on the church and there were quite a few church leaders given prominent roles at the conference. There is also **a move away from the rhetoric of class struggle**, away from the traditional union adversarial spirit towards greater cooperation with management.

***But the greatest emphasis for change was on the role of the members.*** They had come to realize that unless members take an active role in organizing, nothing will happen. And so endless stories were told at the conference about the success of campaigns that involve the members first of all, but also the churches and the local community.

The rest of this speech is dedicated to an increased role of CLA members in our attempts to expand into the nursing home sector. In this speech, I am not going to make any concrete suggestions as to how we should involve our members. That will have to be discussed by this assembly or perhaps by local committees within the CLA.

I do have a new brochure that contains suggestions about what you and your members can do, starting right now without holding any meetings at all. Please be sure you get your copy and take extras for your members. Make photocopies of them in your local office and distribute them amongst your members. You may wish to edit them to suit your own area better.

Since I started with you a year and a half ago, I have tried many different things – but with very little success. **There are simply too many hurdles to be overcome for just a few paid staff members.**

**One hurdle, at least in West MI is that outside of the construction zone, the CLA is an unknown entity for which no non-union workers dare take risks. Nurse aides know they need to organize. They know they MUST organize if they're going to improve their lot, but they do not have enough reasons to trust the CLA to stand by them if they should be fired for trying to organize a union local.**

They need to hear from our **members** how this union works, not just from one paid organizer. They need to hear your testimonies. Our members must stand together in our effort to unionize nursing home staff. They must get involved. **They must seek out members of this target group and give their union testimony and do all they can to encourage them to organize.** And that's only one of the things our members must do for us to succeed.

**Members of our target group must begin to think of the CLA as a friend of theirs, as their advocate, who will stand by them in thick and thin.** We must together find ways of getting this image of the CLA through to them and we can only do that together. Put our heads, our minds, our efforts together with theirs. Make ourselves publicly heard and known as advocates for and friends of the underdogs of the nursing home world.

A second hurdle we have to overcome is **the strong opposition of the community to unions in general**, no matter what kind of union. If it's a union, it must be bad. You know all about that. Even Christians find it impossible to muster any interest or sympathy for a Christian union like the CLA. A union is by definition evil to them. And a Christian union is to them a contradiction in terms. This is no more possible than a Christian devil. They have all been brainwashed by the media. Where there is a strike, it is always the union that gets the brunt of the negative news. When some union official is exposed for fraud, it gets headlines and people are once again confirmed in their prejudice. If a businessman or employer commits fraud, it is usually seen as an isolated case that has nothing to do with business in general. I suspect that a careful study would reveal that more fraud and other criminalities are committed by business people than by union officials simply because there are many more business people. Yet people continue to support and even admire business. No one rejects business in general because of the fraudulent schemes so many businesses operate. The anti-union prejudice is strong.

That prejudice cannot be overcome by one lone half-time organizer or by a small handful of officials without the active support and involvement of the members. **We must develop a social reputation that evokes approval, if not admiration**

**from the community. We must speak up together on selected issues that will evoke public interest in the CLA. We must raise our social voice. We must become a publicly recognized force in our community in the name of Jesus.**

What I am advocating is similar to what the AFL is now pushing. Community involvement of the membership. Without such involvement we are spinning our wheels and wasting both energy and money. The AFL is devoting 1/3 of its budgets for this purpose --- 1/3! And it is pushing for cooperation of all members.

Many stories of victories based on member cooperation can be told. One concerns a Seattle hospital. Workers had joined the SEIU, but the company dragged its feet in contract talks. Until the union called in hundreds of union members working for other companies. These workers joined the hospital employees in putting the heat on the company. The company changed its tune quickly and a reasonable contract is currently being negotiated in good faith.

I could tell you how a union and churches got together and completely took over the parking lot of a large store in a bid for greater justice. Several church services were held on the parking lot. No room left for customer parking. When the owners saw this community demonstration, they gave up their hard line and gave in.

What I am advocating is also part of the earlier tradition of the CLA. It was active in the community. It would organize rallies and draw considerable crowds. I do not know what happened, but perhaps some of you can tell us how we've lost it. We have sunk into oblivion – and now we are paying the bills for that neglect.

Our churches are part of that community. Most of our members belong to the church, but how many fellow members of these churches still know of the CLA? When was the last time our members saw to it that the church invited a CLA staff or officer to address them? What are our members doing besides drawing good wages?

**Things are beginning to change.** Our President more than anyone else is doing something about it. The revival of the *Labor Herald* is a major a step in the right direction. I am very grateful for that development. But we need to use that

*Herald* beyond merely distributing it amongst our members. Our members have to share them with others, especially with members of our main current target group. Our members must help distribute the brochures that are being produced. I wonder how many of us here in this room today have done anything along that line?

In our staff meetings in MI we have thrown around various ideas. The time has now come to get the members or committees together to work on some of these ideas and get busy. I would suggest that a committee be established around each one of our 3 offices to get the discussions and planning off the ground. We do not need to develop expensive national committees to be successful, for we are all living in different communities. We can work locally and then share our successes, challenges and problems in national reports, conventions and in the *Herald*.

Finally, **a most important tool is that of prayer**. We have started with staff prayer meetings in our MI office, but that's only two people. Prayer meetings to plead with God for inspiration and dedication. But such prayers must not be restricted to our offices and staff. The members at large must join this prayer effort. We must ALL desire and pray for this mission. We should give this priority, for nothing good will come of our efforts unless it is inspired by the Spirit of God Himself. We badly need His inspiration, creativity, determination to succeed. And with Him on our side, we will surely be victorious.

But even with Him on our side, the victory is no more automatic than was the victory of Israel to gain the land of Canaan. God WANTED them to win. He wanted them to have the land. But their own disobedience and their own lack of faith and devotion defeated them. Divine victory is offered to us, but we must do our part in it. It is never automatic. I have no doubt that God would love the CLA to become a successful, effective and strong witness for Him in the jungle of labor relations. I have no doubt that God wants to improve the working conditions of nurse aides. But He has left us the honor and the challenge to have it become that. And He will work through us, provided we dare to create the changes that are needed and renew our vision and commitment.

I was reading about a nursing home Family Council that had gone stale and that wants to be revived. They use words such as CELEBRATE. Celebrate how God has used us in the past and still is today. Celebrate. Be excited about the CLA. GET OUT OF THE RUT – another phrase used to revive that organization. The same needs to be said for us, the CLA: Get out of the rut, the rut of complacency and old routine. DREAM BIG – another term used to revive that organization. Lift your eyes up to the heavens, to the far horizons and imagine what you want things to look like when you arrive at that horizon. Imagine how GOD would want it to look like. And then go ahead and work towards it. Few things will be impossible. That council's final word was USE EVERYONE'S TALENTS. That has been my main thrust to you today. We hear it said in the churches. We hear it said in business. We hear it said everywhere. Let us hear it said in the CLA of the new millennium.

In closing, I hold up this communion cup and pray it loudly for all the world to hear:

***HOLY SPIRIT CHEERS***

***FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD***

***IN LABOR RELATIONS***

***FOR NURSE AIDES, WHO SUFFER SO***

***MUCH INJUSTICE WHILE TAKING CARE***

***OF OUR PARENTS, UNCLES AND AUNTS.***

***HOLY SPIRIT CHEERS FOR THE CLA.***