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**Who Needs Unions?  
Solidarity America  
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"Unions once served a purpose, but they don't anymore."

Throughout the past 30 years, that assessment of the union movement in America has been heard repeatedly, mostly from people who work in the so-called technological, information, or other "industries," where workers don't sweat much (at least, from the skin) and who believe that they are in control of their own destinies.

The mergers, downsizing, and consolidation of those "industries" since the 1980s have drastically changed the minds of millions of those workers, when they were put to the curb with nothing but their thin resumes. And this includes engineers and many others in the professional class.

Many of them now know that, if they had had a contract when the crisis arose, they might have had a right to severance pay, possibly a pension when they were older, job retraining, and health insurance for some period of their unemployment. That is, if they were among the lucky few to have any benefits at all.

To have a contract that would have provided what other developed countries consider normal benefits, those white collar workers would have to have had a union. Without a union, there is little hope for any rights on the job, including the right to speak out about working conditions or anything else.

American workers in these "non-sweat" industries feel that the America of computers and information technology has outgrown the need for unions, without even a thought that the air conditioning in the workplace is not for their benefit, but for the computers

and equipment, the stuff that really matters in a company's bottom line.

With the U.S. economy in turmoil, these workers are most vulnerable, since, even those with unions and contracts are facing an uncertain future.

But there are workers - and lots of them - who are virtually never given a thought. They're here in the U.S. and they're around the world, making the things that Americans buy at their local big box discount store and on Fifth Avenue.

Although 5,000 miles separate them, there are two workplaces that provide some insight into the problem of workers without a union, without a contract, without much hope for a better life, unless they can organize themselves into a union.

One is in the Hudson Valley of New York and one is in Turkey. In Newburgh, N.Y., workers who are mostly Spanish-speaking and women, bottle nail polish and handle other household chemicals, while hundreds of Turkish workers produce leather products for the likes of Prada, Mulberry, Louis Vuitton, Samsonite, Aspal of London, Nicole Farhi and Luella, all high-priced goods that are sold in the trendiest of specialty stores and retail outlets.

What do they want? They simply want a wage they can live on and they don't want to die from what they are exposed to at work. In Newburgh, some of the workers have been with the company for 12-20 years and they've always worked for the minimum wage. At the current New York rate of \$7.15 an hour, that isn't much living. In Turkey, the workers are seeking much the same things, decent wages and a safe workplace.

The American employer has fired - laid-off - 30 of the 40 workers, not in order of seniority or last-in, first-out, as is common. But the ones who were fired were those who most strongly supported the union, a Teamsters local.

Workers complained of a lack of ventilation and the resulting sickness, unclean working conditions, one toilet for all of the workers, and dead rodents in the cafeteria.

What the Newburgh workers are constantly exposed to are phthalates, toluene, formaldehyde, and, possibly, acetone, a common ingredient in nail polish. The Los Angeles Department of Public Workers considers nail polish to be a hazardous waste and the European Union has banned toluene, formaldehyde, and dibutyl phthalate as dangerous to nail salon workers and to all women.

Conditions at the three Turkish factories are appalling, according to [LabourStart.org](http://LabourStart.org): Workers earn poverty wages, work long hours, and suffer from a variety of health complaints linked to poor health and safety conditions. They complain that there are not enough toilets for all the workers and those that exist are filthy. The only drinking water is from a hose on the toilet floor.

Workers are attempting to organize with Deri Is, the Turkish leather workers union, but the hostility toward the union is as strong as it is in the New York plant. Why is there such hostility in both countries? Because changing the workplace to provide a healthier and safer environment for workers costs money.

The globalization of the world's economies has made employers everywhere reluctant

to change. The bottom line around the world is based on the lowest cost for labor and transnational corporations are demanding the lowest price for every consumer product. It's what the remaining giant retailers in America are demanding and getting.

Because of this demand and the downward pressure on labor, American companies - like the small factory in Newburgh - are directly affected by the low wages in the rest of the world.

Leather workers are exposed to chemicals and toxins every bit as dangerous as the sickly sweet smell of nail polish, probably more so, but providing a safe and healthy working environment will add costs to the bottom line and that's not going to happen. This is why Turkish leather workers want a union. It's why the nail polish workers in Newburgh want a union.

If they are allowed to exercise their legal right to bargain wages, benefits, and working conditions, they know they will be able to head off the disease that comes in old age after long exposure to toxins. For some, old age has come early.

The worldwide leather industry has a lot of children working in it, in numerous countries, on most continents. Children are about 20 percent of the workforce and they work in the same conditions as their adult counterparts. For them, childhood is something they never heard of and their young lives likely will be cut short by the chemicals and the hard work.

In a time when workers in every part of the world are competing with each other for work in nearly every industry, the lowest-labor-cost firms in the lowest-labor-cost countries are going to be the "winners," if you can call workers in such appalling conditions winners.

Part of the solution is unionization of workers everywhere. It's their only defense against gross exploitation and wage slavery. It's also why it's so dangerous to try to organize a union in most of the world.

But, outlive their usefulness? American unions never have realized their full potential and they're needed now more than ever.

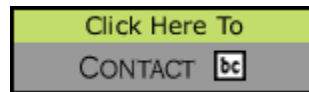
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**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

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