

# "The Deal is dead"

## A labor instructor/organizer tells how unions got to where they are, and where we go from here

Dan Leahy, who describes himself as "basically a kid from an Irish Catholic working-class family," has been director of The Evergreen State College's Labor Center since its inception in 1985.

In the four years of the center's existence, Leahy has

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received high marks for an innovative and creative approach to Labor's problems -- as well as a reputation for outspokenness. For this reason and because Newspaper Guild members need to see the woods beyond their immediate trees, PNNG President Emmett Murray requested an interview.

The result was a two-hour taped session on June 13 which, transcribed, came to 16 pages of single-space type. And that didn't include both participants' side excursions into history, literature, respective backgrounds, the nature of newspapers and publishers and personal views on a number of other subjects.

A native of Seattle, Leahy, 45, went to high school at St. Edward's Seminary in Kenmore, where he studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Realizing secular life was more to his liking, he enrolled in Seattle University, graduating there in 1965 with majors in economics and philosophy. For a time he headed a labor field study for undergraduates at Cornell University, where he organized a New York statewide coalition of labor unions for fight for public ownership of utilities.

He was only too successful. The private utilities shrieked, and the university told Leahy to "sterilize" the project. Instead, he and his staff of 11 resigned.

Between jobs in subsequent years, Leahy helped organize the nationwide Citizens Party, and in the early 1980s became a leading activist in the fight against the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS or "Whoops") boondoggle, which culminated in the system's colossal \$2.25 billion default.

The "victory" was Leahy's undoing, at least for a while. "It made me a hot item," he recalls, "but exposure -- interviews, TV, etc. -- was a mistake, because I couldn't survive. Not even my friends would pick me up. I mean, who wants to give a job to the guy who caused a \$2 billion debt?"

So he took his wife and small son to Portugal to "cool off." But before leaving, he applied for a faculty opening at Evergreen. Within a year, he was notified he had the position, and returned to begin teaching public-policy courses in 1984. The Labor Center began a year later.

Operating with a full-time staff of two and a floating

pool of a half-dozen part-time temporaries and a yearly salary budget of \$100,000 appropriated by the Legislature, the center "directly touches" about 4,000 people a year in the labor field, Leahy estimates. The cost of running the center comes from fees, tuitions and contracts with labor unions for specific projects.

Although Larry Kenney, head of the Washington State Labor Council, serves as elected chair of the center's advisory committee and the center is primarily for the education and training of labor unionists, it is not run by the AFL-CIO or affiliated with it or any other labor federation.

The interview has been somewhat condensed and abridged but, more conveniently for the reader, broken up into installments. The next installment will appear in the August issue of the Bulletin.

Leahy wanted it clear at the outset that "these are my own personal views, not to be confused with prevailing wisdom."

**PNNG:** How do you account for the changes in the collective-bargaining climate in the past decade?

**Leahy:** Basically, I think American corporations lost the Vietnam War. And when they lost the war they lost their ability, both literally and symbolically, to use American forces overseas for high rates of profit-taking. America's post-World War II economy was based on military alliances and, given the strength of those alliances, corporations kept open markets and made lots of money.

Vietnam symbolized the end of that -- literally, in terms of Southeast Asia; figuratively, in terms of the world. So they "came back" in the early 1970s and were, I think, the subject of public scorn. They had very low ratings. They had to figure out how to reorganize in a world economy that could be no longer protected by the U.S. military.

One of the things they did was to make a judgment and go ahead and bust unions.

**PNNG:** What do you mean, "bust unions"?

**Leahy:** I mean take the social income away from working people. It means not only driving wages down so that profits at home can be more but also taking workers' social wage away. In other words, the corporations lost profits abroad and decided to take them from people here at home. That meant unions had to be attacked and their "middle-classdom" had to be attacked.

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SOURCE: BULLETIN . Pacific NW Newspaper Guild  
JULY, 1989



Dan Leahy has been head of The Evergreen State College Labor Center for four years.

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It meant that the living standard of American working people had to go down.

The idea that they could get education for the kids, that one person in a household was sufficient to support it, that you could buy a home, that you had certainty in the future, the idea that you had safety on the job, that somehow there would be an increase in the standard of living available to people if they worked hard enough -- all these ideas had to be attacked.

PNNG: You mean a death sentence was decreed to all the concepts that came out of the union movement of the 1930s and stayed a part of the labor scene until then?

Leahy: Yeah, they had to be nullified. So they [big corporations] organized a new political body in 1973. It was called the Business Round Table, and it was made up of three groups: the Construction Users Anti-Inflation Group, which was out to get the building-trades unions; the March Group, composed of CEOs interested in changing America's corporate image, and the Labor Law Study Group, which was bent on seeing basic changes in labor legislation.

PNNG: Which of the three groups was more immediately successful?

Leahy: A major focus of the Round Table was the construction trade unions. They wanted to smash them so they could make more money in that arena. And they did.

PNNG: This would coincide with the beginning of massive urban development, such as took place in Seattle in the mid-'70s, wouldn't it?

Leahy: Certainly. Seattle is a prime example. There's a haunting figure I use in my classes: 20 years ago, 80 percent of construction activity in the U.S. was union. Now it's 22 percent. And that's not a result of changing com-

position of the workforce, or any of those other "causes" they give. It's the result of an organized, systematic campaign by the Business Round Table to smash unions and take away their power in the workplace.

But the symbolic smashing -- no, I hate that word; let's say quelling -- of what we call the post-World War II capital-labor accord was in 1977.

PNNG: What happened that year?

Leahy: We'll get back to that. But first you have to understand what had happened before. Between 1945 and

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*"The corporations lost profits abroad and decided to take them from people here at home. That meant unions had to be attacked."*

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1955, there was the building of a social accord, an informal understanding, an arrangement, a "deal"; whatever you want to call it. It argued out how Labor was going to relate to Capital, to corporations; how working people want to relate to wealth, if you will.

PNNG: How did it go?

Leahy: Something like this: In exchange for wages, hours and conditions and a regular bargaining environment mediated by an effective National Labor Relations Board, labor unions would stop talking about how society should be organized. They would not suggest that any increase in workers' standards of living come out of corporate profits. They would not ask questions about how corporations invested their plant. And they would defer all other conceivable issues under management-rights clauses.

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**PNNG:** What was the quid pro quo?

**Leahy:** That Labor would get a piece of the American pie. Labor would be "accepted." A symbol of that success would be a labor union's ability to sign a contract and during the course of that contract mediate and arbitrate within it, adjust at the margins and then renegotiate it for improved conditions. Note that I said improved conditions. Now, all of this Labor did, from 1955 to '75, roughly.

**PNNG:** But what you're talking about, this postwar labor accord, sounds essentially what Samuel Gompers did with his American Federation of Labor back at the turn of the century and later. This was his major selling point for something as radical as organized labor in that post-robber baron era -- that unions would take the purely economic road, not, as in Europe, the societal or political one.

**Leahy:** That's true, but don't forget the major part of Gompers' and the AFL's "acceptance" came because he pledged support of America's role in World War I. The CIO wasn't part of that deal -- it didn't even exist yet! And the labor movement was decimated after the war -- the Palmer raids, etc.

True, in exchange for his support, Gompers downplayed the craft-guild concept of design and control of the workplace. And he downplayed the trade-union, republican idea of society. But there were a lot of questions still open, questions that were much more explicit in the post-World War II era as a result of the social turmoil of the 1930s. By that time, unions were advocating a more direct role in electoral politics, the idea of big government's role in labor affairs had broadened, and the whole concept of social welfare had progressed. Issues like these weren't even "on the table" in Gompers' day.

**PNNG:** Getting back to the 1945-55 "Deal," was that basically it?

**Leahy:** No, I think there were two other conditions. One was that unions would not organize the South. That was because part of the Democratic coalition -- the Dixiecrats -- was overtly racist. So, in fact, Operation Dixie was stopped.

**PNNG:** What was that?

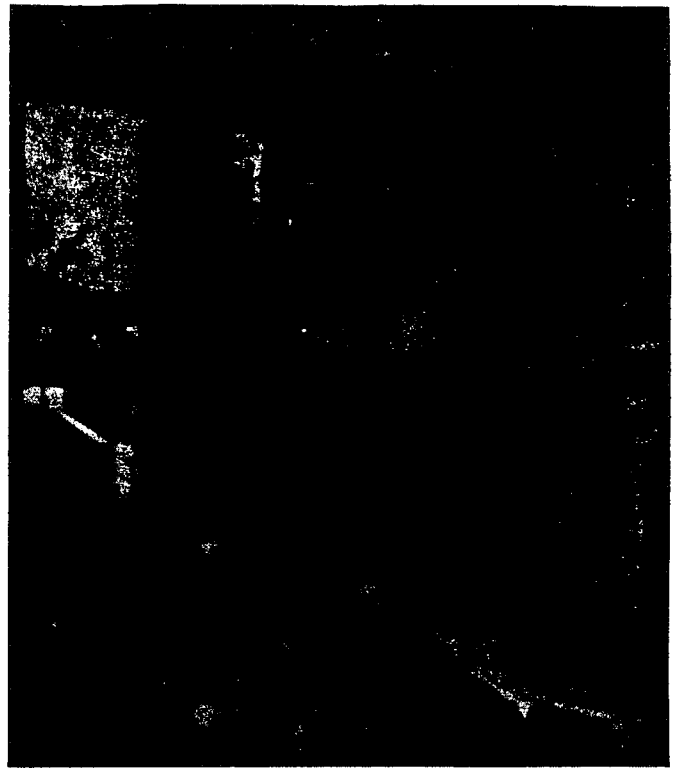
**Leahy:** Just like it sounds: a postwar drive to organize business and industries in the South. So, the South didn't get unionized. That's one explanation for the civil-rights movement of the '60s, its civic and noneconomic character. In other words, rights organizers couldn't piggyback on the gains of Labor -- there were none.

**PNNG:** What was the other condition?

**Leahy:** Sexism -- the refusal to recognize that women were now permanently in the workplace, and if they were, to make sure they stayed underpaid.

**PNNG:** Given women's buying power in this country, wouldn't that be against corporations' own interest?

**Leahy:** Well, I don't know. What is their interest? This is a little off the subject, but not very: I went to a labor-history conference recently and heard this guy Nelson



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*The post-war labor-management deal was "that Labor would get a piece of the American pie. Labor would be 'accepted.'"*

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Lichtenstein talk about making -- or remaking -- the working class; that class is made constructive as opposed to just existing in society. He talked about remaking the American working class during World War II.

I thought while listening, this is one of the places where the fight for organized labor was created, because they brought in all the ethnic groups that used to be driven out of the country, or at least not allowed to join the ranks. The Eastern Europeans, the Finns, the Southern Europeans, they became accepted into the labor movement and into American society. The price of their acceptance was they got to be "white."

**PNNG:** Didn't this acceptance come more from the needs of wartime production?

**Leahy:** Yes, and the war benefited these guys. They were pulled in and made productive citizens. Anyway, the reflection of this labor-capital accord was a stable collective-bargaining environment. The right to organize was recognized in fact, not just in law.

**PNNG:** Wasn't this recognized in fact with passage of the 1935 Wagner Act?

**Leahy:** Hey, it took the Supreme Court to implement that act in the next few years, and even then it was only because of a massive political campaign. Many employers

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still refused to recognize it. And then the Taft-Hartley Act vitiated a lot of those gains in 1947. Legislation is one thing, making it stick another. The postwar Deal is what made it all workable.

**PNNG:** This bargaining "stability" you talk about sounds like a domestic version of what the U.S. is always striving for in the Third World, particularly in Latin

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*"People say that Labor declined during the Reagan years. Hell, there's been a three-decade decline ever since 1955, when the CIO merged with the AFL ... I believe this is the only country in the industrial world that's had a three-decade steady decline in labor unionism."*

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America. No matter what the bloodshed or repression, things are considered stable as long as no one rocks certain U.S. business boats, or assumptions, and tries to claim more than they "should." If a country, say Nicaragua, wants to redefine the terms of the deal that keeps Central Americans in their place, that's a no-no.

**Leahy:** Exactly. In this country, that's why it was so much of a deal. Look at 1946: the greatest wave of strikes in American history. Coming off the war, everyone wanted peace. A piece of the American dream; they wanted it all. They were setting up labor schools all over the place in 1945, '46 and '47. All these guys were coming back into civilian life with the idea that "Oh boy, now that peace is here we're going to get ours." But that wasn't to be the case. About this time the CIO unions were starting to get iced out.

**PNNG:** Why was that?

**Leahy:** Because they were rank-and-file-controlled. They weren't going to accept business unionism; they weren't going to accept "business agents." My God, can you imagine that term, business agents? The CIO guys also weren't going to accept American foreign policy. But that was key to the Deal, right?

**PNNG:** What do you mean, "key"?

**Leahy:** What's one of the strongest things the AFL-CIO still holds on to? They're more foreign-policy oriented than the American people themselves. So the tightest part of the Deal was that organized labor would support the U.S. overseas. And it did -- and continues to do so.

OK, so no questions asked where U.S. corporations put their money. We just want wages, hours, benefits, a stable bargaining environment, blah, blah, blah. All that, of course, had certain consequences.

**PNNG:** Such as?

**Leahy:** Well, people say that Labor declined during the Reagan years. Hell, there's been a three-decade decline ever since 1955, when the CIO merged with the AFL. In

1955, union membership was at its peak: 34 percent of the workforce. Different bulges have been created, such as in the public sector. But there's been an absolute decline in the private sector. I believe this is the only country in the industrial world that's had a three-decade steady decline in labor unionism. This idea that it all has something to do with the Reagan years, that's nonsense.

**PNNG:** All Reagan did was accelerate things?

**Leahy:** Correct. And Bush will be more an acceleration of Reagan.

**PNNG:** Why this acceleration in the first place? That go back to the Business Round Table of 1977?

**Leahy:** Right. It started with labor-law reform that was in the hopper. It was basically an effort by unions to speed up the NLRB process. Modest stuff, really. But Labor wanted it, and they were moving it through Congress. But Business smashes it; drives it into the ground. Major campaigns, by business large and small, halts it in its tracks.

I think that symbolized the breaking of the postwar accord. And it was the beginning of concessionary bargaining.

**PNNG:** That's when the givebacks, the takebacks began.

**Leahy:** Yeah, unions are now "anachronistic." We're in a new economy worldwide; we have global competition. So naturally there must be givebacks. Unions, you know; they have to "give" something so a national recovery can be effected. If we give just one round of wages back things are going to pick up. Then there's the second one. Well, we'll still recover. Sure. Then there's the third one. Tough, but we'll get it back.

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*"We have this argument over whether (the decline of Labor) is all cyclical or whether there's a fundamental shift in the way American corporations ... view organized labor"*

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Heard any of this before? Meanwhile, union memberships are dropping out of sight.

**PNNG:** So what have we got?

**Leahy:** Well, we have this argument over whether it's all cyclical or whether there's a fundamental shift in the way American corporations are organizing their place in the world; therefore whether there's a fundamental shift in the way they view organized labor.

**PNNG:** We take it you're of the fundamental-shift school.

**Leahy:** Indeed. Just look at organized labor between 1975 and 1985 -- let's say post-1977. I think the reason unions have been unable to counter that assault is because their power, after World War II, has depended on the largesse of the corporation.

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*Next month: How labor unions cut themselves off from their power base.*

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# "The Deal is dead" -- Part 2

## How unions cut themselves off from their power base

### A labor instructor/organizer tells how unions got to where they are, and where we go from here

*July's Bulletin carried the first installment of an interview by PNNNG President Emmett Murray with Dan Leahy, a self-described "kid from an Irish Catholic working-class family" who has been director of The Evergreen State College's Labor Center since 1985.*

*In Part 1, Leahy described the post-World War II "Deal" between Labor and management -- that unions, in exchange for accepting the status quo on how society was organized and how business used its profits and for fully endorsing U.S. foreign policy, would in turn receive a piece of the American pie. Labor would be "accepted."*

*Then came the Vietnam War, in which American corporations "had to figure out how to reorganize in a world economy that could be no longer protected by the U.S. military." So they decided to bust unions, Leahy said, meaning that the living standard of working people "had to go down."*

*The Deal was finally dissolved in 1977, according to Leahy, with "an organized, systematic campaign by the Business Round Table." Blaming today's takebacks, union-baiting and feeling of general Labor impotence all on Ronald Reagan or new-right hard-liners, Leahy said, was missing the point.*

*In this second installment, Leahy describes how Labor has cut itself off from its power base, speculates on the true nature of education and suggests that unions recapture the high ground by reacquainting themselves with their own history.*

*(Leahy wanted it clear that "these are my own personal views, not to be confused with prevailing wisdom.")*

**Leahy:** I think the reason unions have been unable to counter that (post-1977) assault is because their power, after World War II, has depended on the largesse of the corporation."

**PNNNG:** Explain that.

**Leahy:** Simple. Labor unions had cut themselves off from their power base, their rank-and-file support. They cut themselves off from most of their natural allies -- the environmental movement, church movements, the movements of the underdeveloped world, grassroots political movements. So by the time 1977 rolls around, the only source of power was the willingness of the corporation to go along with the Deal. But the corporations decide, because of their losses overseas, they're not going to do the Deal anymore. They needed that surplus. They want it. They take it. And they continue to take it.

**PNNNG:** How about a slightly different angle to that: After World War II, the U.S. was the only nation left unscathed among the major combatants, the only country left with its industrial plant intact. More than that, it emerges with the greatest production capacity in its history. American business couldn't help but make a profit. You'd have to be an economic imbecile not to turn a dollar in world trade. Our would-be competitors -- Germany, Italy, Japan, England -- lay in ruins or were

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prostrate. We had the benefit of Britain's collapsing empire. Simply put, we had no competition out there.

But 30 years later, these countries had recovered -- ironically, in large part because of our aid. But now we started facing competition. That would seem to coincide with your now-let's-get-the-unions shift of the mid- to late '70s more than your Vietnam War theory.

In other words, we found we were not the only kids on the block, that others just as tough if not tougher than us were scrambling for the trade buck, and we were straddled with a whole generation of corporate heads who had never had to deal with real competition.

**Leahy:** All of what you say is true. But these other countries also organized economically. Their alliances were geo-economic ones. Ours were military. Our economy was organized around NATO, SEATO; treaties like that. Meanwhile, Germany, Japan and the others are competing -- and I don't think American corporations are trying to compete. They're trying to buy in. Like GM's buying into Isuzu. I don't know if they're structured to compete anymore.

**PNNNG:** I read recently that U.S. corporations now own 20 percent of the Japanese industrial plant; that 8 percent of Japanese workers are employed by U.S. businesses. So maybe it's going both ways.

**Leahy:** That's my point. That seems to be the pattern. I don't see that as competing, exactly. They certainly don't seem to be investing here at all. Mergermania seems to be the pattern, if anything.

**PNNNG:** Given this rather grim scenario you've painted, you appear to be working with a dead artifact -- American Labor. Do you consider yourself an archaeologist?

**Leahy:** Oh, no. By no means. Of course, if you're studying labor history, in a way you have to be an archaeologist. But the rewards are great. Our history is rich, even if it's hard to find. Such as when we had those

Guild guys down, old-timers, man; they were great. [Ed note: As part of an oral-history project a few years ago, the Labor Center videotaped some Newspaper Guild veterans of the 1936 strike against the Seattle P-I.] That's one of the things we do here at the center: stress history. Our history.

**PNNG:** Why is that so important?

**Leahy:** People have to be able to see themselves as acting. And the only place working people can see themselves that way is in our history. In our standard history books, we're always being told of something happening to us. But we did things. We analyzed the political economy. We decided to form a new structure -- and we did.

We at the Labor Center talk about how working people have organized themselves differently throughout history, depending on how they could gain and protect their interests. The Knights of Labor, the AFL, the CIO, the Wobblies, the public-employee drives -- whatever. It's how all these organizational forms developed. And need to develop now in order to deal with this new assault.

**PNNG:** Let's ask an obvious question. Why do you think there's never been much success in getting labor history into the American school curriculum? The labor movement has been so ignored in textbooks that it's non-existent. Except, of course, when major strikes, disturbances or massacres occurred.

**Leahy:** Listen, education is extremely political.

**PNNG:** Yes, but most Americans are not aware of that. They think only foreign countries inject a point of view or propaganda into their textbooks.

**Leahy:** Right. They think education is a process of transferring a given set of values to our kids. But it's not. It's a struggle for the type of social life we want to envision. Somebody said the curriculum was the instruction in, preparation for, and legitimization of a particular form of social life. Why did they attack all those labor-education centers and close them down in '45, '46 and '47?

**PNNG:** Who are "they"? And how were these centers funded?

**Leahy:** I'll answer your last question first. These centers were established independently or by universities and were financed by the Veterans Administration. They were for returning war vets; G.I. Bill stuff. "They" were the usual right-wing groups that run around today. As the Cold War heated up, they exerted pressure on Congress and the government. Pretty soon the attorney general got into the act with his "list." Subversives, you know? Next came investigations, congressional subcommittee probes, revocation of tax-exempt status. As I say, they shut 'em down.

**PNNG:** Do you think education is the real labor-management battleground?

**Leahy:** Indeed I do, more than ever. When the Washington Round Table was set up in 1983 by George Weyerhaeuser and the boys to duplicate the success of the Business Round Table nationally, what did they do? Their first campaign -- and their consistent target for the



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next five years -- was the public school system. They have done nothing but reports and proposals on K-12 schooling, on higher education, on success in school districts. And they continue to pound on it. They're even suggesting curriculum now to the Legislature. When I first came here to Evergreen, I had a regular faculty job and I'd invite these guys down -- Round Table spokesmen -- to talk to my class. I was given the impression that education was something to organize around, something these guys and we could agree on; a common-denominator issue. I believed that then. I no longer do.

**PNNG:** What do you believe in now?

**Leahy:** That the Washington Round Table -- and the Business Round Table -- perceive the public school system to be the critical component for restructuring of, how do you want to say it, the "new America." After all, the "American Century" ended about 20 years short, and they are currently reshaping America's position in the world. In order to do that, they have to reshape our youth. U.S. corporations and their leadership are going into today's classrooms -- into the kindergartens even --

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# "The Deal is dead" -- continued

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and are restructuring the idea of "high skills." What are "high skills"? A goddamn McDonald's job, at low wages and service to the economy!

I think they are dead-serious about education. I spend a lot of time with the Washington Education Association [the teachers' union] and we've been looking at this.

PNNG: Back to the original question: Why the dearth of labor education? There's certainly no scarcity of business education.

Leahy: I was getting to that. Unions used to be places where people came and learned about themselves and their world. I remember seeing pictures of the old Wobbly halls, and they had reading rooms. Unions got the books to working people. That's one of the things labor unions have to do today. They have to fight for members. They have to fight for their members to get the time to stop and think who they are, what their relations is to this new world and what they're going to do about it.

PNNG: Do you think the Labor Center fulfills this role?

Leahy: I do. It's a place that gives people the excuse to stop and think: What's going on here? Who are we? Are we just employees? Are we citizens? Are we analysts of the political economy? Are we historians of our own history? And, given all this, how are we going to act differently? What new organizational forms are we going to create and whom do we have to talk to? I mean, everyone points out that there's a whole new labor force out there made up primarily of women and immigrant, nonwhite labor.

PNNG: What is organized labor saying to these newcomers?

Leahy: I don't know. You tell me. Something like 45 million people have entered the workforce in the past 20 years. This huge bulge going through. And only 5 percent of them are union!

PNNG: Let me ask you again . . .

Leahy: I know, I know: So why no labor history in American schools? I think it's because the dominant culture will not tolerate the idea that working people have their own history. That they can in fact act, think, design and shape -- democracy. All this crap about computerization in the schools; it's really about what concept our kids are going to get to think about. I don't want some kid of mine at a computer designing a math problem. I want him using that computer to tell me, for instance, what kind of democracy we might have by the year 2000. Or asking me what does democracy mean right now and how do we shape it into something better.

PNNG: That's an awfully tall order.

Leahy: Maybe so. But they are conceptually de-skilling our kids. They are eliminating the idea that there is something other than a business-dominated culture, in which Big Business gets to define words like standards, excellence and competition. It's just bullshit. It's infuriating.

PNNG: Have schools ever been any different? They only thing that saved many of us is that we did most of our reading outside of school. Otherwise we'd be basket cases by now.

Leahy: Right. And guess what we're producing.

PNNG: Probably what our school systems always have

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produced.

Leahy: Yes, but I think it's increasing. One of the things that do not exist anymore is cultural space -- other places where you get to learn things. What's the cultural space today? The mall! Few worthwhile places are left to teach a kid things that supplement the school system.

PNNG: No cultural space at all left?

Leahy: Maybe that was too drastic a statement. I do think there is some cultural spaces left. But most are gone. It's too bad. Look at the number of people who read in this country, I don't mean a pop novel or how-to-diet book, but really read. When we do these labor seminars, we ask that people read books.

Now, we have educators, teachers and the like. Thing is, a lot of them are not used to reading books. They're not used to reading stuff that makes them think. But they do, with us, and they enjoy it. But in our culture, it's not rewarded. So labor groups, press groups, whatever -- they're going to have to fight for some space to read.

PNNG: Speaking of such activity, does Big Labor think the Deal is still on?

Leahy: Definitely. At least many still do. But there's no Deal left in the present structure.

PNNG: You seem to be agreeing with [management consultant] Peter Drucker. He maintains the historical period that witnessed the affluence of the American worker isn't ever going to return. That they will never again achieve the standard of living their earning power bought them in the 1950s, '60s and early '70s. You know, their own home, the extra family car, the boat, the camper, the kids in college. And that their children, watching this decline, see unionized labor as a dead end. They want something else. Is Drucker right? Is that the

end of it?

**Leahy:** It is, if Labor doesn't challenge wealth. If that's true, then, yes, they're not going to get it anymore.

**PNNG:** Are you preaching revolution?

**Leahy:** No, I don't think so. Was it revolution when the CIO was organized?

**PNNG:** There are many who would say yes to that. And it certainly was bloody at times. A lot of heads got bashed in. But revolution? Probably no. A definitely new direction, though.

**Leahy:** Somebody once said that American working people are neither victims nor celebrants of American capital. Currently, they're being victimized; they're busy being victims. I don't think that's the best part of them. I don't think that's what they are. They're at their best when they stand up and say, "This thing has got to be redone. This is not what democracy is about. Democracy is not about a Third World right here at home."

**PNNG:** Some are saying that's exactly what we're turning into, stripping our natural resources to ship pulp and logs abroad and getting back nice finished Sונים and Datsuns.

**Leahy:** Socially, too, we're going Third World. They're destroying Seattle. I love Seattle. But Western Avenue has become a main thoroughfare, and to the right of it are these goddamn condominiums. The realm of rich people -- and street people. I think there's a direct relationship between Jim Ellis's Convention Center scam and the homeless.

**PNNG:** So what does American Labor need to do right now?

**Leahy:** It needs to challenge that [business] idea of America. They always have and I think they will again.

**PNNG:** Short of a major catastrophe, economic or natural, do you see this happening? Something like the Great Depression, when people look around and moan, "My God, we better do something!"?

**Leahy:** I'm an organizer. . . I think if somebody chose to say, ". . . They have been attacking us for 10 years and we have to counterattack, and we have to do that with the only tool Labor has ever had: ideology. By that I mean a belief in defining American democracy by mobilizing people on a mass base," then, yeah, that would be the answer.

**PNNG:** You make it sound so direct and to-the-point.

**Leahy:** It is. But what do we hear instead? It's "Labor's going down the tube." It's "because of the anti-union South." It's "because of Reagan." It's "because of global competition."

Labor's going down for every conceivable reason except the real one: failing to take a look at itself deep down and thinking of how it organizes.

**PNNG:** Or, put another way, labor unions have to stop playing the victim, the martyr, and get on with the show.

**Leahy:** There's hope. Some of the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] craft unions are telling their cadres: "Look, don't b.s. anybody. We've made mistakes on environmental issues, we've goofed on other fronts -- sexism, racism. Yes, folks. But we're not going to do that anymore. We're going to start changing the way we move."

**PNNG:** That's all very nice, but how do unions counter this all-pervasive: "These union guys are troublemakers. We've seen it all before. They're radicals. They're just interested in lining their coffers and mounting a strike and putting good, decent people like you out of work. We're the guys who'll give you everything you need. We might not pay you what you'd like, but nobody gets what they want. That's life. After all, we're America. See that flag? That's us. These guys aren't." How do you combat that?

**Leahy:** As you always have: by telling the truth. No one believes that crap they put out. I suppose working people tolerate it, but no one believes it.

**PNNG:** They may not believe it, but most people are too scared to do anything about it. They're afraid of not working, not having a job to support their families. Fear is a potent weapon.

**Leahy:** I agree. It is. But I think leadership should provide ways for people to act in a positive way without risking their lives or their livelihoods. That's what an organizer does. And I think there are a lot of ways for trade unions -- or newspaper guilds -- to act that will allow them to build in such a way. Real simple things --

the idea of unions being able to talk to other unions, for instance.

That a union can still stand alone -- walk up to that bargaining table and they're going to talk to you for some reason, right? -- that's gone. Because they don't talk to you anymore, do they? No. Because the Deal is dead.

That's one of the strengths of the Labor Center, this cross-union effect. People come from other unions; they find that real helpful. It opens them to saying, "Hey, we need other support."

**PNNG:** The Guild nationwide has been encouraging inter-union support in the newspaper industry for some time.

**Leahy:** The thing is, this can't be tactical. Bottom-up organizing is merely a tactic. You've got to go beyond that, to a conception of where citizenship and power reside. There has to be a belief that you can organize society differently. The way I think society is organized in our American democracy -- or at least should be -- is that individuals, acting together, can define their concept of the community or of the world.

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*In next month's issue, Leahy concludes with his plan for rebuilding Labor's power base.*

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# "The Deal is dead" -- Part 3 (conclusion)

## The need for a competing vision on what American society should be

A labor instructor/organizer tells how unions got to where they are, and where we go from here

The July and August Bulletins carried the first two installments of a lengthy interview by PNNG President Emmett Murray with Dan Leahy, a self-described "kid from an Irish Catholic working-class family" who has been director of The Evergreen State College's Labor Center since 1985.

### INTERVIEW

(This series, incidentally, has gained widespread attention and has been reprinted in a number of other labor publications, including those of the Aerospace Machinists Union and the American Postal Workers Union.)

In Parts 1 and 2, Leahy described the post-World War II "Deal" between Labor and management -- that unions, in exchange for accepting the status quo on how society was organized and how business used its profits and for fully endorsing U.S. foreign policy, would in turn receive a piece of the American pie. Labor would be "accepted."

Then came the Vietnam War, in which American corporations "had to figure out how to reorganize in a world economy that could be no longer protected by the U.S. military." So they decided to bust unions, Leahy said, meaning that the living standard of working people "had to go down."

The Deal was finally dissolved in 1977, according to Leahy, with "an organized, systematic campaign by the Business Round Table." Blaming today's takebacks, union-baiting and feeling of general Labor impotence all on Ronald Reagan or new-right hard-liners, Leahy said, was missing the point.

But more injurious, Leahy posited, was Labor's cutting itself off from its own power base -- natural allies like the environmental and church movements and the "cries of the people" in the Third World. Labor, in the three-decade postwar rush for riches, had largely forgotten what it stood for, Leahy argued; that it was as much actor as audience in American history. "Working people CAN act, think, design and shape democracy," was the way he put it.

Central to Labor's future, in Leahy's view, is the wresting back from megacorporate America of the symbols, the essence of the nation's ideals and putting them to work on the "real labor-management battleground" -- education. "They are conceptually de-skilling our kids," he raged. "They are eliminating the idea that there is something other than a business-dominated culture."

At the close of Part 2, Leahy argued that bottom-up labor organizing should merely be a tactic, that the goal



must go beyond "to a conception of where citizenship and power reside. . . that individuals, acting together, can define their concept of their community or of the world."

In this third and final part of the series, Leahy tells of his hopes for the future of Labor and what he thinks working men and women need to do to get back into the mainstream of contemporary American history.

**PNNG:** We're talking here of the true nature of power, aren't we? The same way that [noted Chicago organizer] Saul Alinsky defined it.

**Leahy:** Uh huh. That's what power is, and there has to be a belief in that.

**PNNG:** But that's not how we usually hear it defined by U.S. labor leaders.

**Leahy:** Much of Labor believes power comes from an individual's expertise. Now, that was the case when the Deal was cut. If you have a deal and you're looking for people who can manipulate it, great; have a business agent or an administrative officer who knows the contract backward and forward, and let him cut a new deal.

But if there is no Deal, then a professional with contract knowledge isn't going to help you at all. Yes, unions know contracts. But what good's a contract if they won't talk to you? You need to know the internal logic of your workplace, what drives management, what

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supports it -- and then you'll know just as well who, in fact, you are. In other words, are you just an employee of that company? Are you a community member? Are you a citizen?

**PNNG:** Are you saying that what you call yourself, or what you know yourself to be, counts the most?

**Leahy:** Well, take Jerry Wurf [former head of the State, County and Municipal Employees Union]. He used to say he organized the union by changing the name of "servant" to "employee." His members weren't public servants, they were public employees. And public employees have the right to organize.

**PNNG:** It seems what you're saying might have had more validity 20 years ago. The problem is, in the past eight years we've seen what some call a corporate vampirism become entrenched. People start saying some of the things you're advocating, in front of these Round Table types and they'll have an answer: "That's outright commie stuff."

**Leahy:** Hell, they'll always say that, no matter. They always have. So what?

**PNNG:** True, but hasn't the nation moved quite a bit to the right in the past decade?

**Leahy:** Have you read the book "Right Turn"? [by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers; Hill & Wang, 1986; \$8.95 paperback] It argues that Americans still have the same ideas and ideals as they always did on how society should be run. I believe that.

**PNNG:** Good. That and \$1.50 will get you a beer at your local tavern.

**Leahy:** Perhaps. But I don't think the powers-that-be are being fought on this issue, on the way corporations are organizing. Do you think anyone took on Reagan? The Democrats sure as hell didn't. Everyone from [former House Speaker] Tip O'Neill on down rolled over and played dead.

**PNNG:** You mean they didn't challenge basic assumptions based on outmoded concepts?

**Leahy:** There is a reason Democrats think we're always at war. They support basic notions. Scoop Jackson: big liberal, right? "I'll give you high wages at home," he'd say, "but I want your boys over in Vietnam. But so now they don't go to Vietnam, so I can't give you high wages anymore." What's a "liberal" Democrat going to say to anybody? Nothing!

We give these talks periodically about the Washington Round Table, and there'll be somebody standing next to me who says, "Jeez, I'd hate to get hit by those guys." And I say to them: "You know what? You've been in a fight with them for 10 years and they've taken your f----- head off!"

**PNNG:** Are you saying union-busting is going on all around them and they're not aware who's behind it?

**Leahy:** "Union-busting" means nothing anymore. Why? Well, when you're down to 14-16 percent of the workforce, who are you going to call a scab?

**PNNG:** You can't say no one's fighting the corporations on basic issues. For the past several conventions the AFL-CIO has had bitter floor fights over its support of U.S. foreign policy. The SEIU [Service Employees International Union] has had a very activist Central America labor wing. [William] Winpersinger of the Machinists union has for years publicly espoused radical, progressive approaches to labor problems. What about the conscience-raising "Jobs for Justice" campaign the CWA [Communications Workers of America] is waging successfully in places like Denver and Miami?

**Leahy:** All true. But all these are in effect fringe plays. I'm not putting them down by any means. What I'm saying is, there are a lot of regional, tactical fights led by good, articulate leaders. But lacking is a nationwide, conceptual response -- an overall strategy. Is anyone in Labor with a respected, national voice saying we have to reorganize American society and the way our resources are allocated? Only corporate America is saying this.

**PNNG:** What has happened to the old Labor/Democratic coalition that could be saying this now?

**Leahy:** I keep thinking, the majority of the American people no longer have a political party. The majority who are either registered or eligible don't vote. Some say it's the largest mass movement in Western democracy -- the movement of American voters away from the polls. One of the reasons these guys [Ferguson and Rogers] say there's been a "right turn" is because an ever-decreasing number of voters are deciding the outcome.

All those who would have some counter-vision of how democracy in America should be organized don't vote anymore.

**PNNG:** They're apathetic.

**Leahy:** It has nothing to do with apathy. They've made a judgment that it's not to their advantage.

**PNNG:** Do you think this country's labor movement would've had more of an advantage if, as in Britain and other industrialized nations, it had its own political party?

**Leahy:** I don't think there's any national debate over how America is organized as a society. There are no competing visions; there's only one. Now, the policies to carry out that vision are debated within the Democratic and Republican parties, but they both have the same idea. The absence of a working people's party has led to that. Hell, if Labor doesn't create a debate, I don't know who will.

**PNNG:** What's your definition of a party?

**Leahy:** To me, what a party stands for -- whether it's electoral or not -- is principles. A party shapes and holds your principles and values, and expresses them. I think American Labor has, from Shays Rebellion on down, a set of core values that contradicts market values. Labor thinks people are human beings; are inquisitive -- as opposed to acquisitive -- people. It believes humans are

motivated by curiosity to know who they are. I don't think they're motivated by greed. Now, American business *does* think we're motivated by greed, money and possessions.

PNNG: Hasn't the Deal you refer to shaped that perception to a large extent? You know, "Sign the contract, get your money and get out of here."

Leahy: Absolutely. And now unions think they can organize strikes and fights for better wages and that they can win. They cannot. People will not fight for that. They'll gripe and moan about it, but they won't go to war over wages and benefits. They will go to war over respect, over conditions that will affect their kids. But they won't over wages. I have teacher-union leaders say to me, "Why is that members come to me to complain only about salaries and wages?" I reply, "Because you present the union as incapable of talking about anything else. Since 1955, you've told them that's what the union is. So what do you expect them to ask you about?"

PNNG: We in the Guild have gone through this a number of times. We'll poll the membership. They'll respond that we want this, we want that -- a whole variety of things. But when it comes down to the wire, wages and benefits are usually what they are willing to strike over. The rest of it -- dignity, respect, better conditions -- drops by the wayside. Naturally, there are many who feel very strongly about such things, but I'm talking about the majority.

Leahy: Maybe the Guild needs to rethink its approach, but that's not for me to say. Back to teachers: In 1970, they made a deal that gave them collective-bargaining rights in this state. In exchange, they no longer talked about curriculum.

So the WEA became a 43,000-member union that made collective-bargaining agreements to hell and back. They became a very powerful force -- but they didn't talk about education. Then they went out and organized one of the biggest PACs in the state. They endorsed candidates. They did this, they did that. By 1980, they hadn't gotten zilch for it. Meanwhile their teachers, in terms of their effect, their ability to teach in the classroom -- in fact their ability to do anything but process technical information for kids -- has become nil. And they're resenting the hell out of it.

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management understand that we're willing to fight for fair and equitable treatment for our members."

Joyner sees what he calls Persis' "no-go-tiation posture" as leading to a possible attempt at union-busting.

He cites a union-decertification petition that was being circulated at the J-A just before negotiations began -- "a de-cert that had management knowledge and forbearance."

Joyner says the employee responsible for circulating it was transferred into the Guild bargaining unit from an excluded position, and then told by management that

PNNG: So what's the WEA thinking about doing now?

Leahy: Hah! Can you imagine? They're thinking of organizing around education! These people became teachers because they wanted to teach. But the idea that the union wasn't bound to that was something they had to remember.

PNNG: But one of the teachers' unions' biggest victories was getting teachers decent salaries. They forced the public acknowledgement that teachers deserved higher pay. Before then, it was the same for teachers as it used to be for journalists: "Hey, you're professionals dedicating your lives to a higher cause. Why should you ask for more pay? You should be paying us! Unions are for the blue-collar manual bozos."

Leahy: Don't get me wrong, I'm not knocking teachers' unions. They did indeed win a substantial victory on that issue. But now it's time to move on. For years the WEA had completely forgotten it was a union of educational workers. But I think that not only are they coming back to this concept, they have to in order to save their union.

PNNG: Do you have any suggestions for general improvement in unions' performance?

Leahy: I don't think there's any technique to impart to people that will allow unions to do better at the bargaining table. If management doesn't accept the rules of the game anymore, then that's it. You have to rebuild your power base on the outside, demonstrating that you can affect their profit-taking in some way. Or change the rules of the ball game completely.

PNNG: How do you do that?

Leahy: Just what I've been suggesting, in effect, for the past two hours. There's no smart-guy way out of it.

PNNG: Have you seen anything hopeful in the labor movement lately?

Leahy: Yes. Every time we have an education class, every time we have an event, I see hope. Every time I see working people at one of our workshops or conferences, getting a chance to think about themselves conceptually, their relationship to society, their union's relationship to their country, I see hope.

And if we don't have hope, what *have* we got?

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despite a union-shop agreement in the current contract, she didn't have to join the Guild.

"Management then forced her refusal to honor the union-shop clause to arbitration despite clear knowledge that they were in a losing position," Joyner said.

The J-A lost the arbitration.

Meanwhile, Joyner says, the company has already admitted to contracting out Guild-jurisdiction jobs in the Circulation Department and is preparing to install computer telephone modems to allow free-lancer, stringers and other non-Guild writers to tie directly into the J-A's newsroom computers.