

WORKING CLASS MANIFESTO



West Point mechanics and bus drivers (left), negotiating their group employee contract with management.

-Jerry Ebert

(All photos from Hudson Valley NY work locations)

For 48 years before I retired in 2019, I worked constantly as a musician, journalist and union organizer.

Although I could never save enough to buy a house, I was able to stop working at age 66 thanks to my generous Social Security check and my even-more-generous monthly union pension.

I'm a baby-boomer, part of the Luckiest Generation because we're the children of the Greatest Generation.

My grandchildren will never be as fortunate unless they organize themselves politically and at their workplaces.

Confronted by multiple threats such as warfare, pandemics, global warming, racial and political divisions, my grandkids will need to stand as strong as my parents, for the world's luck is running out. They'll need to become the even greater Greatest Generation.

Working Class Manifesto is a burning message to them, and to the working poor I've known and served all my life. These pages are a roadmap into the Middle Class.

It's not a call to revolution. Nor is it another political philosophy or economic theory. Personally, I've never trusted liberal or conservative philosophies because both are too rigid, and their extremist elements nauseate me.

This is a call for us to do smart, practical business through intelligent negotiations and focused political action.



Me in 1985, with a family on a picket-line at a factory in Port Jervis.

We want to be part of a healthy Middle-Class

We the people of the world who work 35 or more hours per week deserve a stable Middle Class lifestyle for ourselves and our families.

Roughly 75 percent of employees in my United States work in private sector service-providing industries. It's therefore a matter of the highest national security that our workers make decent money to spend creating a healthy economy.

A Middle Class lifestyle includes affordable housing, healthy food, decent clothing, protection against our medical, dental and optical expenses, reasonable communication and transportation costs, adequate time-off from work, protection against unjust termination, protection of our mentally ill and incapacitated, equitable taxes, the opportunity to save money, a secure retirement, and most importantly, equal protection under the law.

Many of us slave two jobs yet are still one flat tire from broke.

We save nothing because nothing's left to save.

We eat cheap food because we can't afford healthy.

We give our lives to our jobs, with little life for our families.

We are the Working Poor.

Our work supports our employers, and our taxes support our government. Therefore, our employers and our governments owe the Working Poor the ability to pay our basic bills, save some of our money, and secure our retirement. These obligations are not entitlements, but debts we have yet to collect and business we have yet to conduct.

We have two challenges: negotiating group-employee contracts (also called collective bargaining agreements) with our employers, and pressuring our lawmakers to pass helpful legislation. We can accomplish both goals if we settle our internal differences and unite to face the companies and governments we serve.

Message To The Radicals

Rev. Martin Luther King had it right, as did Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ. Non-violence is a weapon.

In our struggle for a more secure employment, we must practice the three nons: non-hatred, non-violence and non-destruction of property.

Imagine a scenario where someone is pushing for you to do something. To increase the pressure, they insult and threaten you. How would you react? Probably as I would: you'd resist, even if you were initially inclined to do what was asked.

Sometimes in my job negotiating contracts for workers, I had to urge them to vote to strike. Over the years I learned that if I cultivated the respect of the boss along the way, he or she would then usually reach out to make a decent deal with our negotiating committee before the actual picket-line was ever assembled. When I didn't cultivate respect, prolonged problems ensued, and sometimes the entire effort collapsed.

King, Gandhi and Christ had it right: love is a weapon. It's not just an ideal; it's a strategy.

To do otherwise is to be self-destructive. Those who espouse hatred, violence and destruction of property harm the cause they espouse.

As you read the 15 steps outlined next, keep that in mind.

Fifteen Steps To A Healthy Middle Class

1. RECOGNIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF NEGOTIATING:

Successful employers have one unanimous thing in common: they continually negotiate. As a rule, when they negotiate deals involving money, they make sure any and all specific agreements are committed to a written contract, with two signatures sealing the deal.

For all his many faults, Donald Trump emphasized the same thing in his book *The Art of the Deal*. If we're not intelligently negotiating, we're not doing smart business.

If you hesitate because you don't want to ask an established union to help you negotiate your group-employee contract, there's a way you can do it instead by forming your own employee association. Pros and cons will be explained later. Don't let that fear paralyze you. The main idea is negotiate a contract. Keep reading.

Those who own and manage our jobs deserve our respect for what they've achieved. Most of them worked long and hard to gain their success; many were once as poor as us. We owe them our strong productivity, our attention to detail, and our punctuality. Insubordination – the failure to follow direction - is justified only if the task is unlawful or poses imminent danger (legal emphasis on imminent). We need to recognize that our cooperation in maximizing productivity is

a tremendous asset at the bargaining table; it strengthens our position, and results in respect from most bosses. It's the thing we must give them if we expect them to give to us. Anything less is arrogant, which earns you disrespect.



Valley Central NY school bus employee negotiations.

2. **RECOGNIZE OUR BIG MISTAKE:** In my United States, our Middle Class was relatively prosperous from the 1940's through the 1970s. Back then, roughly 40 percent of us negotiated group-employee contracts, enforced by unions or independent associations. As of 2022, we've dropped to 11 percent. *Our big mistake was abandoning the idea of negotiating group-employee contracts.* In my country, presently 10 percent of the population controls 97 percent of all capital income. The rich have wildly succeeded because us Working Poor have stupidly dropped the ball.

Those among us who still negotiate workplace contracts, including most police, nurses, and teachers in my United States, are doing relatively well. The rest of us have fallen behind. When there's no contract, there's no security.

Don't blame our employers for trying to discourage us from negotiating group-employee contracts: they're just practicing smart business. If you were them, you'd think the same damn way: you wouldn't volunteer to negotiate with your workers unless you were required.

However, we the employees must insist on collectively negotiating a contract with our employers. We cannot take no for an answer, because we cannot accept being treated as indentured servants.

Enough is enough. No more being stupid. We need to organize ourselves. United, there's no force on earth strong enough to divide us. Divided, we get what we have now.



St. Luke's/Cornwall Hospital employees rallying for a fair contract.

3. UNDERSTAND THE THREE DEGREES OF SLAVERY:

If someone works fulltime but can't pay his or her basic, reasonable bills, he or she is slaving. Exceptions include if you're pissing your money away on stupid shit such as drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, or if you're ruined by medical bills.

There are three degrees of slavery, in my humble opinion:

-FULL SLAVES: best exemplified by the experience of Africans in America beginning in 1619 and ending in 1865. It's how the pyramids were built, and how Hitler maintained his war machine. The ancient Spartans had more slaves per freeperson than any other slave nation in history. Slavery is still rampant throughout the world, especially in the sex-trade. It is an abomination.

-TWO-THIRDS SLAVES: what African-Americans suffered from 1875 until the Civil Rights Act of 1965. It presently includes most migrant workers and domestic helpers, in my country and throughout the world. It is an abomination.

-ONE-THIRD SLAVES: Those who work full-time or more but still cannot afford basic food, shelter, clothing, transportation, communication and medical care. That's a lot of us – too many hardworking people. The only way we can advance is through a group effort, folks...it ain't gonna happen otherwise, mark my words. We can plow the field for our children to harvest, as our ancestors did for us. But it'll take dedication and work.



I helped organize over a thousand Catholic School Teachers in the Archdioceses of NY, Brooklyn/Long Island, and Northern NJ.

4. UNDERSTAND GROUP EMPLOYEE CONTRACTS:

Although there are more sections you can add depending on your workplace issues, every group employee contract has seven main elements:

1. Money, including base pay, stipends, bonuses, overtime, holiday, vacation and longevity pay. The contractual increases are usually spread annually over a three-year period.
2. Medical, Dental, Optical, and Retirement Benefits. (Unless you're in a country where health benefits are

provided and the retirement program is adequate. Not so in my USA, shamefully.).

3. Working Conditions, addressing specific issues.
4. Protection Against Unjust Termination by requiring any disciplinary actions to meet the legal definition of “Just Cause.”
5. Time-off, including vacation, sick, medical, personal, jury, and family leave.
6. A procedure to mandate Labor-Management meetings on a regular basis to discuss ongoing workplace issues.
7. An Independent Arbitration Process to settle any contract disputes that cannot be resolved through discussions or mediation.

Online you can find hundreds of actual workplace contracts to study for more ideas. Every workplace problem you can encounter has a contract proposal waiting to fix that problem. Most of it is common-sense language once you see it. The employees must be surveyed to gain their ideas for the contract proposal. The employees then elect a negotiating committee. Any final contract must be approved by a secret ballot vote of the employees.



C&S Warehouse employees, with me holding their contract.

5. **ORGANIZE YOUR CO-WORKERS:** Your employer will understandably be upset if he or she hears you're talking about negotiating a group employee contract. Some might even consider firing you. Don't say a word to any co-workers until you know you'll be safe if the employer finds out.

In my country, thousands of people died trying to organize workers for negotiations before it was legalized in 1935 by the National Labor Relations Act. The federal National Labor Relations Board forbids an employer from firing anyone engaged in "concerted activity" (in concert with others) to try and negotiate a contract. However, if you're fired, you must be able to prove the employer absolutely knew you were involved, or the NLRB will dismiss your case. It costs nothing to file such a charge online. The NLRB allows you the option of forming your own association or joining an established union. It has a great website you can plumb for more info: NLRB.gov. If you're a public employee, search your state website for its labor relations department.

If you're from another country, research your legal protections before you say one damn word to a co-worker.

See what protections are available, and strictly adhere to their requirements. In some countries, you risk your life.

Before you consider organizing to negotiate a contract, consider your employer's business. Is it doing well, or barely surviving? We say in America: you can't squeeze water from a stone.

My best advice: before you discuss these issues with your co-workers, go privately to an established union to discuss the possibilities. Even if later you choose another union, no union, or forming your own association, you'll learn much from that meeting. A suggestion: if you do form your own union, call it instead an "Association for Contract Enforcement" (ACE for short). It's a better title than union, because it puts the emphasis where it belongs: negotiations. Also let's face it: big business has done a great job of poisoning the word union.

6. **UNDERSTAND GOOD AND BAD UNIONS:** As with any and all organizations run by us dumb-ass egotistical humans on God's green earth, there are good and bad unions. Not joining a union because some unions are bad is similar to being arrested but not seeking a lawyer to represent you because some lawyers are crooked, or not believing in God because some religions shield abusers. I've seen lots of decent and lazy unions, but it's not unions I believe in, it's negotiations. In *The Communist Manifesto*, I believe Karl Marx asks all the right questions but arrives at the wrong conclusion. The answer is not a noun, but a verb: negotiate.

You can form your own association to negotiate a contract, or you can join an established union. If you join an established union, you usually don't start paying union dues until after you vote to approve your contract (ask!). Most unions charge about one to two percent of your pay. Union negotiators KNOW the workers will never vote to approve a contract unless it covers the union dues, plus, plus, plus. Management knows it too, which is a good thing, because ultimately management does not want you to vote no on any final offer they extend. If you form an independent association, you'd better start putting some money together because, if you succeed, you'll probably need a damn lawyer! A good established union will earn that money back for you, and much more. If you're an independent association and can't afford to have a lawyer on retainer, some bosses will deliberately take actions that require you to hire a lawyer, in the hopes they can cause financial problems. If however, you're an established union with a lawyer on retainer, the employer will not be so fast to welcome legal actions. It's therefore in my opinion a smarter business move on your part. Ask these questions of any union you interview:

1. Does the union require elections of its officers every three years?
2. Does it have a lawyer on retainer, so you don't have to pay for your legal representation if you're disciplined or terminated without Just Cause?

3. Are its dues going to cost you no more than two or three percent of our annual pay? (NO dues should be charged UNLESS AND UNTIL the workers vote to approve the contract and the raises take effect.)
4. Will you have a trained, union-employed representative assigned to your workplace, and will you have that reps' cell phone number in case of emergencies at work? My experience with having an employee as the main representative of the union instead of a union-employed representative is this: they eventually either get bought off or scared off. You need an independent, union-employed rep whose only allegiance is to you, and whose job every three years depends on your vote. Ask how many total workers your union rep is handling; anything over 750 means he or she is running very busy, depending on the type of work.
5. Does the union have a secret-ballot voting procedure not only for officers and workplace reps, but for the approval of all contracts, and the calling of a strike if necessary?



Sullivan County employees counting the contract ballots.

7. **PUSH OUR POLITICS:** For the Working Poor to rise into the Middle Class, here's a few key economic issues directly related to legislation we must win:
 1. Medical, Dental, Optical and Childcare. If our countries refuse to provide these services, we need a tax refund for all such expenses in excess of five percent of our net income.
 2. A Stable Retirement. Those who work full-time for 30 or more years deserve to retire and be paid at least 90 percent of the average of the most lucrative five years of our employment. Those with less hours should be paid a pro-rated benefit.
 3. Better Rights To Negotiate Group Employee Contracts. We need strong legal protection against retaliation, no unreasonable limits on the subjects we can negotiate, the

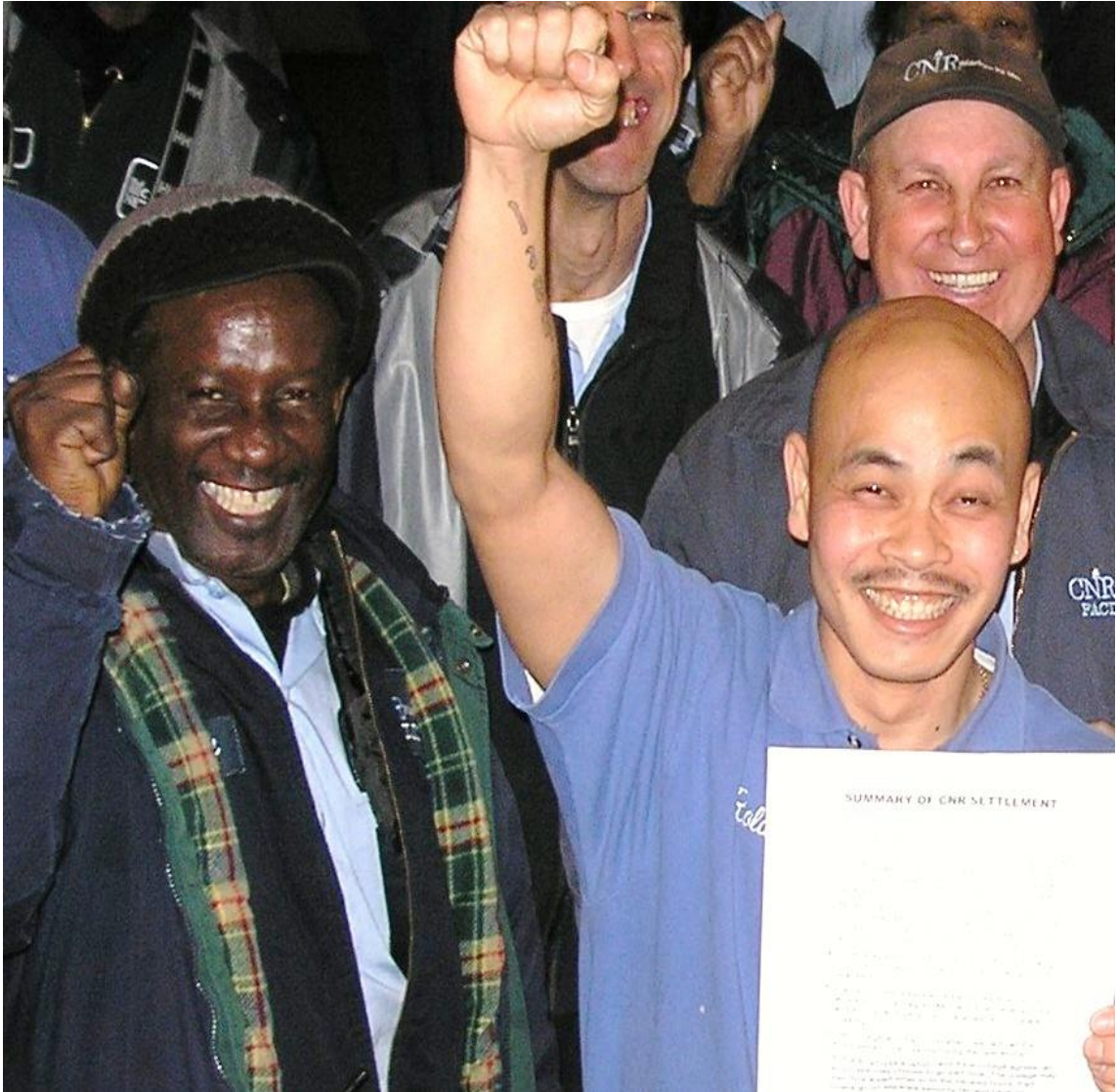
right to collect dues from those our contracts cover, and the right to strike if there is no signed contract.

4. Equitable Taxes. In my country, we need a return to the time when America was great for the Middle Class. Back then, taxes were equitably levied on both rich and poor. Since then, the wealthy have succeeded in shifting the federal, state, local and school tax burdens to the Middle Class and Working Poor. We need to reduce or eliminate tax breaks for wealthy corporations, unfair tax exemptions for religions and other “non-profits,” and overseas tax evasion by domestic companies. We need to shift our school tax burden to the state and federal governments, rather than to those who own homes. In my country, taxes on the wealthy and big corporations have been drastically reduced since the time of The Greatest Generation. The Middle Class and Working Poor have been forced to pick up the slack. There’s only one thing that means more to a politician than a wealthy donor: voters who vote in a bloc. We must incessantly push for candidates that will fight for this cause, so that our own tax burden is stabilized and reduced. Don’t blame the wealthy for winning great tax laws; blame us for being distracted and disunified as it happened, and for supporting candidates who all along were aiming to cut the taxes of the wealthy and the big corporations. These same candidates who bellow about our high taxes are the ones who have been passing legislation that increasingly shifts the tax burden from the rich to us middle and poor folks. We need to reverse the trend.



The Sullivan County Negotiating Committee with me.

5. A Fairer Credit Rating System. How could a system that has such a huge impact on us be so unregulated? Why in hell are we forced to accept a credit card so that we can “build” credit? Why can’t we compare multiple loan offers on different cars without it affecting our rating?
6. Protection of our Environment. It’s all we have, and we’re destroying it. Global warming is our legacy, and our grandchildren will pay the price if we don’t fix it now. All of us in every country must push for stronger safeguards to protect our water, our earth and our air.



College of New Rochelle maintenance employees with their deal.

7. Protection of our Senior Citizens and Incapacitated.
For those who are truly needy, we should provide for them. Seniors should not pay taxes after age 65 for anyone earning less than \$100,000 per year. Medicare should be made free, and should provide full dental and optical.
8. Requiring The Healthy To Work. We who work hard are pissed to see the healthy among us mooching our tax

dollars on free government program. If you're healthy, you should be required to do *something productive* to qualify for help. There should be no free rides unless you truly are incapacitated. Everyone has to carry their fair share of the work it takes to make our countries successful. The goal of any government assistance program should be to wean people off it, unless they are truly needy. We don't mind paying for our social programs through our taxes, as long as others aren't free-riding. In practical terms it means that federal, state and local agencies responsible for investigating welfare fraud should be well-supported.

9. Equality For Women. This world will not find peace until women are equal to men.
10. Equality Among Races. Every child ever born is a child from God's arms. The same God. In my country we have a god-awful history of white supremacy that is encouraged by the wealthy to keep us divided. Here's a horrible statistic: a black woman is four times more likely to miscarry or die while giving birth than a white woman.
11. Prison Reform. In my country, approximately one in 18 white men will go to jail; one in every four black men will go to jail. That is the sickest yet most important statistic you should consider when you think about the lives – and families – damaged by the racism promulgated by my white brethren. Incarceration should be avoided except for the violent and recalcitrant. Prisons should gear toward training inmates on what to do and how to act once they re-enter society.

12. Healthy Food. Presently many of our governments, including my United States through our Department of Agriculture, are subsidizing the junk-processed foods that are destroying our health. Obesity and diabetes are suffered by many of us because we're poor and it's the cheapest food available. There's no fat people, only fat food. Our governments should subsidize only healthy foods.
13. Election Reform: we need legislation that restricts the wealthy from controlling politicians, and restricts gerrymandering of our voting districts. In a world where autocracy is increasingly acceptable, we must be the guardians of democracy.
14. Protection of our Mentally Ill. In my country, until the 1980s the mentally ill had separate facilities to handle them. They were far from perfect, but were abolished in the 1980s. Now we house our mentally ill in our prisons, or among our homeless. This is America's secret shame. We need to correct this if we are ever to consider ourselves a decent civilization.

8. **UNIFY OUR VOTES:** Politicians need money and votes to survive. The wealthy and powerful presently provide far more money to the politicians than us working folks could ever pay. It will stay that way unless laws level the playing field.

That leaves us with our collective vote. If the wealthy and powerful divide us, they divide our vote and render us inconsequential.

In my country, our votes were united from the 1930s through the 1970s. Beginning around 1980, the wealthy and powerful started dividing our votes by fanning the flames of our social and cultural differences, in a return to the same tactics encouraged by the notorious robber-barons of 125 years ago. Our cultural wars have overtaken our former collective desire to make more money. We're like a smoker taking another puff off the cigarette of cultural wars, experiencing a phony mental high but ignoring the fact that it's killing us by dividing us.



Legendary Folksinger Pete Seeger helped us win a decent contract for the Wappingers Town employees. See the dedication to him at the end of this book.

9. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR DISUNITY: While we Working Poor argue and divide over many social and political issues, the real issue has never changed: *we need a bigger slice of the economic pie.*

Our main debate should be over what we earn and how much tax we pay.

Don't blame the wealthy for protecting their wealth; most of us'd do the same damn thing if we were rich. It's human nature; *wealth's natural instinct is to protect and expand itself.*

Nor can we blame the rich for encouraging and financing some of our social divisions. They're distracting us, which is a smart business move on their part. If you were a billionaire interested in keeping the Working Class down, you too would finance organizations that encourage our disagreements.

Blame ourselves for failing to think intelligently about our common goals of more earnings and less taxes. Blame us for failing to unify, for divided we have fallen.

The wealthy work on a mostly-united front to grow their wealth (for example, collectively lobbying for lower taxes and weaker labor laws). However, most of us Working Poor folks ignore what we have in common, and thrive on our divisions as a gossip thrives on the latest bawdy rumors. We're stupid/lazy when it comes to doing business. We want it done for us, by the rich no less. Freaking brilliant.

We act as though we're *entitled* to decent laws and wonderful workplaces. Truth is, if we want these things we must work to achieve them. You can say you want to be a musician, but if you're not singing or picking up an instrument once a day you're full of crap. Same with saying you want a better economic situation. We must unite around our common goals, or else we're just talking bullshit when we complain about our jobs.



Two photos of me with the West Point Mess Hall employees.

- 10. BE A SIFTER:** Stop thinking of ourselves as conservative or liberal, or members of a particular political party or religious or ethnic group.

Instead, think of ourselves as sifters, discerning all we can about all sides of various subjects. To sift is to practice intelligence.

Think outside the box. Sneak around the mental barriers that keep us from expanding and evolving.

Be a liberal conservative or a conservative liberal.

Enjoy rather than bemoan the diverse opinions and beliefs people hold. See both sides, and let what you see percolate through your brain as water percolates through coffee grounds to produce a fine brew.

Ask questions rather than vomit opinions. Don't share your opinion unless you've studied all angles of an issue; otherwise you're just dribbling verbal diarrhea. Speak 20 percent of the time, and listen 80 percent.

11. **NEGOTIATE:** developing contract proposals starts with you first surveying your co-workers and drawing up a contract proposal. Sample workplace contracts are available online; a good union will do the job for you. In my career I've negotiated on behalf of police, nurses, truck and bus drivers, teachers, factory and kitchen workers, and many other groups. There are more similarities than differences among these professions when it comes to good contract language

Once the proposals are completed, by secret ballot the employees vote on which of their co-workers should be on the negotiating committee. Try to pick the best, most productive workers, for they will be more respected by management.

Put your best foot forward when negotiations begin. Thank management for the jobs you have, and the work they do to keep the operation going. It's not easy being a boss. Show some respect.

Give management a copy of your proposals, and review them one-by-one. Listen carefully to their responses; you will learn much. If you want them to listen to you, be willing to listen to them.

It usually takes about 10 negotiating sessions to reach a deal, spread over maybe three to six months. If management is being reasonable, you stay reasonable.

However, if management becomes nasty and unmoving, you have to consider taking a strike vote. Ultimately, your only real weapon at the negotiating table is your power to withhold your labor. REMEMBER THIS: the members can authorize a strike, BUT you don't have to implement it right away. Some of the best deals I ever negotiated came after the workers voted for a strike, but before the strike actually happened.

Prepare newsletters to keep the members informed on the progress of negotiations, being careful not to reveal your negotiating strategies on paper. The boss reads those newsletters more carefully than the employees!

By law in most countries, the company MUST negotiate in good faith, and is not allowed to unilaterally change any existing pay or benefits unless the employees vote to approve such a change in the final contract vote.



Monroe Town Employees with their new contract.

Put your best foot forward. Be respectful and professional as you present your proposals. Listen to management's responses with minimal interruption. Take notes on what is said, and respond when it's your turn.

Show gratitude for the work the boss does to keep the company rolling. Tell your co-workers to stay productive and cooperative with management. The most effective negotiating committees are the ones packed with the most productive employees, for those are the employees that managements respects the most. Keep the asshole-hotheads off the committee if possible. Productivity is a weapon in negotiations. Exude belief in the mission of the company. This proves you're a worthy partner.

- 12. DON'T PANIC:** If negotiations grow difficult, you have options. My advice: do nothing that would make your fellow employees look stupid, greedy or rude. Every company has an Achilles' heel: find it, and press. It could be publicity about the justice of your cause. It could be the threat of a strike, boycott or sit-down action (Occupy!). Brainstorm with others on strategy ideas, sort the negative from the positive, and do all the chosen ones timed as best as possible, in a shotgun

effect: you never know which pellet will down your target. Don't do anything illegal, including violence, vandalism, or theft. You'll look like shit to the public, and you'll only antagonize your adversary and create a situation where reasonable negotiations are impossible, while inviting revenge. Keep them talking. REPEAT: keep them talking. When you're no longer communicating, you're no longer negotiating. Don't let your co-workers rush you: in any negotiations, the one who's in a hurry loses. Since no one pays any dues until the first month the contract is in force, what's the freaking rush? You can always negotiate for the pay raise to be retroactive. Avoid sick-outs or other lapses in productivity; it's just not a good way to do business.

If you must "go nuclear" and organize a work stoppage (strike), make sure your co-workers are at least 80 percent behind the effort. A strike is a very dangerous road to travel. Better to threaten the strike than to actually begin one. In my country it is illegal to stage an "intermittent strike" where you walk off the job for a few days, return, then walk off again. So if you begin a strike, be sure you are ready for the long haul. Some workplaces have to strike just once in their history of negotiating, to send the message that'll last 20 years or more.

Some bosses will withstand the strike for a week or two at least, just to send the message that a strike is equally painful for both sides. Nevertheless, sometimes the possibility of a strike provides a huge motive for management to settle favorably with your co-workers. Sometimes it's the only

option left. If it's nerve-wracking, remember this old Chinese saying: *The earth and the sky are in chaos, and all's well.*

Once you negotiate a tentative deal, you must bring it back to your co-workers for a secret-ballot vote to approve or reject the deal. Make sure you explain it correctly, and account for any shortcomings or failed objectives. Everyone should have a copy of the deal.



West Point employees rally for a decent contract.

13. **STRIKES ARE A NECESSARY EVIL**, along with boycotts and sit-ins, but keep it in your back pocket. I've run dozens of them in my life, and feel like a soldier who hates war. However, sometimes when you have a really tough company with lots of money and no desire to share it fairly, you need to do it. The key is to make sure at least 80 percent of your co-workers will support it. Before you even consider voting for a strike, you must exhaust negotiations.

In my country, the good news is that 98 percent of all negotiations are settled without a strike (source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

In our United States, the National Labor Relations Board has rules and procedures which management and unions must follow while negotiating. For example, management or the union can't agree to something one day, then renege on that agreement at a later date. (This would be considered Bargaining in Bad Faith, and the NLRB would prevent it.) The NLRB also has strict rules and procedures that govern the calling of a strike, so make sure you're familiar.



My last organizing drive before retiring: winning the right to a contract for the UNFI truck drivers in Newburgh.



This strike never took place; the company offered a decent deal after we had voted for the work stoppage.

14. **ENFORCE YOUR CONTRACT:** this is essential to its success. Thank the boss for completing negotiations on the workplace contract. Now that you're an equal partner, act like one.

Most employers will grudgingly if secretly respect you for being smart enough to obtain a contract, for they know you're doing smart business. Hopefully they'll come to see your organization as an asset. They will not want to break the contract, because it will cost them legal fees and mental aggravation.

If the boss comes to you with a situation involving an incompetent or insubordinate employee, do your best to counsel that employee to do the right things. Never counsel an employee in front of the boss; you are the employee's trusted advocate, not the arm of management. Do business,

treating each employee as you would treat a brother or sister. In a sometimes-appreciated way, unions provide a valuable service to the employer by helping create an environment of mutual respect and assistance. If you counsel an employee to correct his or her mistakes, and the mistakes continue, well then, as my mother would say, *you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink*. Your union is not a magic bubble that protects the guilty. You tried, and that's all that's important.

I always advise workers to put any tough issues with management in the form of a question rather than a statement, so that you don't come off as insubordinate. Create a paper trail if you think you might need it. The boss might not always be right, but he or she is always the boss.

If you have an employer that still wants to resist your efforts even after the contract is in place, or a new manager who opposes the whole idea of your contract, then you'll have to dig in and fight. Tell the employer he or she can either have total peace or total war, but not in-between. Limbo is your enemy. If the boss forces you to do battle, make good trouble. Publicize your problems, and mobilize the workforce by keeping them well-informed. Nothing pressures a boss more than seeing critical handbills legally posted and/or distributed throughout the workplace. Even more than money, the boss needs peace among the workforce. Deny peace to the boss unless and until it's a complete peace based on cooperation and mutual respect. Sometimes you have to train the boss to do the right things.

Occasionally an employer will deliberately force your group to pay high legal fees to defend various grievances and arbitrations. Be careful to avoid this trap; that's why an established good union is a safer bet, because their lawyers are on retainer.

As in negotiations, *keep everyone talking*. A smart boss will want your input before making any changes.

Cooperate, be patient and respectful, and do business. You've earned your place at the table; now keep it.

15. **MAKE OURSELVES LEAN** for the struggle ahead, because we will always need to go further. We need to lose our hopelessness and helplessness. We need to clean our acts up individually. As Gandhi preached, we must be worthy of our cause. Ours should not be a movement to protect those who do not want to work as hard as the rest of us, so don't use it to conceal or excuse your laziness and incompetence. Narcissistic, violent and over-emotional people should be shunned. Fanatics are our enemy. Power mongers are unwelcome. We need to be strong physically, mentally and spiritually to move forward as a unified, healthy group. We need to self-discipline ourselves, to build strength for the struggle ahead. Our enslavement depends on our hopelessness, and our hopelessness springs from our self-inflicted weakness.

We need to organize.

-Dedication-



Me and Pete, right. More photos at end.

This little book is dedicated to legendary folksinger Pete Seeger. It was an honor to fall into his orbit when I was a teenager; over the years we played many gigs together.

Less than two years before he died in 2014, the Hudson Valley Labor Federation asked me to give the welcoming address at a banquet honoring his contributions to the labor movement. Here's what I said:

Tonight we honor Pete Seeger for his lifetime of work on behalf of the Labor Movement.

Pete was born on May 3, 1919. By the late 1930's, he was helping rally workers to win collective bargaining rights. If you do the math, that means he has been helping us for over 70 years, longer than most of us have been alive.

He has stood beside us as we rose to represent nearly 40 percent of America's working people by the 1950s, and he has stood beside us as our movement has slowly but surely dwindled to the level where now we represent a mere 11 percent of the public and private sector workforces.

Much has been written of his union organizing exploits in cahoots with his pal Woody Guthrie and his close friends in the Almanac Singers and the Weavers. There are legendary stories of how he and his friends came to write and adapt labor classics such as "Union Maid" and "Talkin' Union Blues," along with world classics such as "This Land is Your Land," "We Shall Overcome," "If I Had a Hammer," "Irene Goodnight," "Turn Turn Turn," "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" "Guantanamo" and many others.

But those who know Pete will tell you he is a man with his eyes firmly fixed on the future, not the past. So these days when it could be argued the future existence of the labor movement is in peril, perhaps the best lesson Pete can teach us is the example of his life.

As with hopefully everyone here in the room tonight, Pete Seeger is an idealist. He is the embodiment of the phrase “Think globally, act locally.” His idealism encompasses the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the environmental movement, the peace movement – the human movement toward progress and equality. We must follow his path, for the growth of unions is inextricably tied to the challenge of creating a just and peaceful society.

He’s a great listener, and will only offer up a thought if he thinks it’ll contribute something toward the conversation. Too often I believe we labor activists, including myself with the Teamsters, prefer to lead the conversation rather than listen and consider different ideas.

He’s the kindest, most considerate and compassionate man I’ve ever met. Since my brothers and I first started playing music with him in 1971, I have witnessed countless instances of small, random acts of kindness on his part. He has a hard time saying no to anyone, whether it be an autograph seeker, people begging his time to tell their story, or someone asking if he would play a benefit concert for their cause. We too must be generous of spirit, and give constantly of our time and energy even if sometimes we just don’t feel like it.

He's a deeply humble man who doesn't believe in hero worship, is not interested in receiving credit for anything, and is more concerned about the future of our world than he is about his own future. I try to remember that, every time I worry about union politics or the next Teamster election.

He's a great one for taking old songs and putting new words to them, and has always encouraged me and others to do the same thing not just with old labor songs, but songs by popular songwriters such as Johnny Cash and Bruce Springsteen. In the same way, we labor activists must take the old words of the labor movement such as union solidarity and the power of collective bargaining, and rephrase them to a newer generation for whom those words may sound vague and out-of-date. Just as a good song must catch your attention and have a hook, so too OUR message must be catchy enough to be heard above the noise and distractions of modern life. We must once again capture the hearts and imaginations of the American public, and there is an art to it that Pete has been practicing all his life.

When local musicians gather at the Beacon Sloop Club or some other jam session, Pete has us take turns, in what we call "Trading Songs." Each musician plays one favorite, while the others try to back him or her up. Sometimes it's not perfect, but it's always fun and instructive. In the same manner, our unions should get together more often and trade ideas and strategies on how to better serve our members, how to organize more effectively, how to improve the image that the general public has of us, especially the younger ones.

He's not afraid to fail, not afraid to take a chance on a controversial cause, not afraid to adapt or change course, not afraid to stand for what he believes, not afraid to admit he was wrong. Likewise, we too must not be afraid to admit our mistakes and learn from them, not afraid to face the daunting challenges ahead of us.

He cannot go long without laughing. I've always thought his constant good spirits is born of his love for everything living. I have seen him piercing and angry, but I have never seen him in a bad mood. How many of us union officers, organizers and supporters can say the same, especially after a rough membership meeting? Yet it is imperative that we too remain happy warriors for our cause, no matter how dark the road ahead. And folks, if the Republicans take over Washington D.C., our road will indeed be dark and treacherous.

So as we honor Pete tonight, I ask that we honor him tomorrow and in the difficult months and years ahead. The best way we can honor him is not by giving speeches or awards, but by following the example of his life.

Everything Pete does comes from the heart. Now more than ever, we must fully put our hearts into saving the labor movement, into fighting for justice for all, and into helping avert the environmental disasters that are upon us.

Pete, thank you for showing us the way.



From left, Pete with my brothers Ray, Ed and me at a labor rally.



Pete with me and workers I organized in Wappingers Falls, NY.



Pete and me at a union rally.



From left, my brother Ray, Pete and me.



I learned so much from him...



At a labor rally for the Communications Workers of America.



...above and below, together at a river festivals.



From left, my brother Ray, sister Joan, brother John, Pete, me, and my brothers Ed and Matt at one of our last labor rallies. I miss his wisdom...his laughter...the ancient tones he strummed on his guitar and banjo...his boundless optimism.