

Talk to the ATU Convention

President Hanley, International Officers, Executive Board Members and Delegates to the Convention, I bring you greetings from the Industrial Areas Foundation, Its leaders, organizers and affiliates in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia.

The IAF was founded along-side the CIO in Chicago in the 1930s While John L. Lewis was organizing the Industry in Back of the Yards, our founder, Saul Alinsky was organizing the Industrial Areas surrounding those same factories. Much of what we know and profess about organizing we learned from you. Now it is our pleasure to be working along-side you again, 80 years later.

A few years ago, my parents passed away. My brothers and I found ourselves sorting through my mom and dad's possessions in the house we had called home for 50 years. We set up three tables in the living room; one for family heirlooms, one for valuable items no one wanted, and a third table for items to throw out. We worked for two days. I was diligently sorting and putting everything on the right table. Until I reached into a bag in my father's bedroom and found my grandfather's Cigar Rollers Union Card from 100 years ago. I stuck that card in my pocket. That was mine.

It was mine because for the last 37 years I have been working for unions or working alongside unions in the IAF. Think about that era. It has not been a good one for the American Labor Movement.

I began my work as a union organizer shortly before Ronald Reagan busted PATCO, the Air Traffic Controllers. The symbolism was not lost on anybody. It was open season on the American Labor Movement. If the President of the United States could do it, then certainly it was not immoral to hire union busting attorneys and consultants to break up the union organizing efforts at the small sewing plants where I was organizing in Alabama and Mississippi. Besides, breaking the existing law carried little or no penalty.

Meanwhile labor's so called friends in Congress were not going to help. Efforts to strengthen the Wagner act in 1978, when the Democrats held a strong majority in

both the House and Senate, had failed. So began years, decades, of playing defense.

We all know what playing defense means. It means depending too much on the grievance system. It means extending contracts because you are afraid of what a new one would look like. It means watching while employers try to bait you into a strike that they know you can't win. It means feeling powerless as bosses contract out work to greedy corporations who lower their costs on the backs of our members.

An entire generation of union leadership has been forced to play defense. But now, standing before the 2016 Convention of the Amalgamated Transit Union, I am here to tell you that this is the time to start playing offense. Yours is the union to show the rest of us how to do it. Your leadership is the leadership best equipped to throw the ball far down the field and score.

It has been awhile so let's remind ourselves what a potent offense looks like.

It looks like Atlanta, where local 732 first fought off a Republican scheme to eliminate its pension and then counter punched with a winning contract campaign and a successful effort to expand MARTA service. Curtis Howard and the leaders of 732, strongly backed up by President Hanley and the International, fought and won. The IAF was proud to play a part.

Offense looks like the regional campaign in locals 689, 1300 and 1764 where privatized "Circulator" drivers, with the help of IAF church leaders, fought and won living wages. Jackie Jeter, David McClure, the International and the new emerging 1764 leaders are continuing that work and are reimagining the entire regional transportation system. Offense looks like a greatly expanded, well funded, broadly supported transportation system that connects Baltimore to DC, Maryland suburbs to Virginia suburbs, and that employs thousands of additional union workers.

Offense looks like Minnesota where the professional state workers union, MAPE has just won paid parental leave for all state employees. Campaigns like that make our labor movement relevant to a new generation of millennial workers.

Offense looks like Vancouver where Local 1724 joined the IAF affiliate Metro Vancouver Alliance. Then ATU Local 1724 sponsored the membership of a riders with disabilities organization. That is smart.

Offense looks like a living wage for well trained workers becoming a line item in a city's budget – as it recently has in San Antonio Texas, due to the work of our IAF colleagues there. The IAF rediscovered the “living wage” in Baltimore in 1994, in New York City in 1996, and then around the nation afterward. The IAF made the “living wage” a standard for the 2012 London Olympics. I was proud to be a part of those efforts and was excited to be playing offense – thrilled to see our opponents reacting, giving ground, and losing.

There are other examples inside ATU, in other unions, and in broad based organizations, where we find people beginning to play offense.

But to effectively play offense we have to prepare. We have to strengthen our local organizations, and we have to be bold and be willing to take some risks. Most importantly, we have to find and invest in new leaders.

When ATU bought the old George Meany Center and refurbished it into the Tommy Douglas Center, you sent a strong message to your own union members, and the entire labor movement. ATU, you said that the training of leaders was a top priority. And training leaders is one of the key elements – maybe THE key element -- you will need to begin playing more offense.

But before you can train new leaders you have to find them. To find them there is no substitute for spending more time in the workplace, in the break rooms and on the shop floors. You have to meet people, not just when they have a problem or

grievance but when they are not in crisis, before they are in crisis. Those kinds of meetings we call individual meetings, or one-on-ones. Doing those one-on-ones – becoming full time and relentless talent scouts -- must become habit in the ATU.

Here is the tricky part. Many union leaders are reluctant to recruit. They fear that they are recruiting their future political rivals. I don't have an easy answer to that fear. You have to find the confidence to do it anyway. You have to trust that the shift to playing offense, to expanding our work, to adding members to our locals, will earn you the respect and support of your fellow workers. Otherwise, we can never create the kind of large and powerful collective necessary to play winning offense.

While many of the meetings we need to do are within our workplaces, there are also potential allies out there and we have to find them. There is nothing wrong with going to our traditional allies, the handful of clergy who are willing to come to our events or the few politicians willing to be seen with us in public. The traditional civil rights and environmental organizations are fine too. But don't stop there. We can find new allies but we have to actively look for them and not just when we are in trouble. And the time to look for them is before we get into a fight. That means asking your members where they worship. It means calling on pastors who are not among the handful of activists found in most cities. It means being honestly interested in them, in their ministries and their issues. Sometimes the institutions that we need to ally with don't even exist and we will have to organize them. That is true with the riders in our systems. If there is no strong rider organization in your town, it is probably up to you to build it.

The same is true for business leaders in our cities. Many of them are starting to realize that improved public transportation is good for business. Just as we are pressed by privatization and automation, they are pressed by an online marketing threat that means fewer people are going to their malls and shopping strips. Their situation and their self-interests have changed. We have not traditionally had a relationship with business leaders. We stereotype them as they do us. In Atlanta, financial planners who handled local 732's pension were key to saving it. They had relationships with Republicans in Georgia that we did not have, and it

was in their interest to leverage those relationships. As we speak, many business leaders in Atlanta are supporting a ballot question that will expand MARTA and increase our membership in local 732. Playing offense means designing new plays, with new players, that catch our opponents off guard.

Once we have trained leaders, formed a clear picture of who our allies are and who are our enemies, we have to get into action. And our action has to take new forms. My colleague, Mike Gecan in his book **Going Public** describes most of what passes for action as “re enactment”. We tend to repeat the same rallies - repeat the same slogans, preach to the same choir. Our actions have to look different. We have to have real targets, engage politicians in new ways and make our demands on people who can say yes or no to us.

I am 63 years old. God willing I hope to carry on the struggle with you for a while longer. But I am tired of playing defense. I want to play offense and I want to do it with the ATU. I want to honor my grandfather and my family’s commitment to organized labor. I want to revive the strong connection between John L. Lewis’s labor organizing and Saul Alinsky’s citizens organizing. That is how I feel as I stand here before you today. And that is how the thousands of leaders in the Industrial Areas Foundation feel as well.

Let’s get on with it.