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# WORKING PAPER SERIES

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**COMMENTARY:  
LESSONS ON LABOR**

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# COMMENTARY: LESSONS ON LABOR

**I**n a few days I'll be leaving UUP to assume the presidency of the National Labor College. I'm excited about the role I'll play in helping to revitalize the American labor movement. The National Labor College is a key institution in providing organized labor with the tools it needs for the 21st century and I look forward to this challenge.

I've spent over 25 years as an activist in the labor movement. During my tenure as president of the United University Professions (UUP), I learned a lot about unions, and I want to pass some of these lessons on to you.

First, unions exist — first and foremost — to serve their members. That's why union leaders have a sacred obligation to aggressively and effectively represent the members' interests. But union members also have a sacred obligation as citizens of the union. They need to tell leaders what they want and if members don't always agree on exactly what it is they want, they need to step up to talk about it in an open forum. It's not always easy to do this, but that's the price of democracy. And, as I learned, without democracy there is no real union.

Second, I also learned that unions operate on the belief that a rising tide lifts all ships. I don't know if what's good for GM is always good for the United States, but I do know that what's good for GM's workers is definitely good for America. Unions made the middle class and it's no coincidence that the income gap between the richest Americans and everybody else just keeps getting bigger the more union numbers shrink. Fortunately, SUNY employees have UUP. UUP lifts its mem-

bers, its members lift their communities, their communities lift their regions and the state. When UUP does well, SUNY does well, and all the students who go to SUNY benefit.

Finally, unions are all about collective action. Collective action works. As children we learned about collective action in school although we didn't call it that. Wagon trains and barn raisings are collective actions that helped build America. But that happened a long time ago. Today, unions teach us that helping each other is still part of the American experience. Just look at the many victories UUP's collective actions have achieved over the years. We saved tenure, we protected the public teaching hospitals and with it care for the indigent, we negotiated good contracts, and we also got some really good budgets for SUNY, budgets that benefited thousands of students and the community of New York. The days of barn raisings and wagon trains are over, but the union marches on. I'll say it again: Collective action works.

Well, that's it for now. So I'll thank all my well-wishers and wish you all the best. And the best may be summarized in a message from an icon of the labor movement. Joe Hill said it all: Don't mourn. Organize.