John W. Budd’s article “Implicit Public Values and the Creation of Publicly Valuable Outcomes: The Importance of Work and the Contested Role of Labor Unions” lays a foundation for real action plans and demands. But as an organizer for more than 25 years, the world as I see it on this topic is far simpler than the picture the article offers, and it urgently needs those plans and demands.

Professor Roger Green of Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, New York, would occasionally use the phrase “paralysis of analysis” to describe a situation in which people analyze something to death.

The article considers the range of public values on work and the options for creating work-related publicly valued outcomes and notes that there is no consensus on the best way to define or fulfill public values. If it leads to action, instead of more analysis, it will have served a very useful purpose.

Budd’s article properly criticizes as narrow the perspective of those who see work merely as a private activity that generates commodities, services, and income. In my world, work is like breathing, not just how you earn a living. Work is everything you do every single day. Play and recreation and rest are all the same as work. There has to be a new definition of the word “work.” We have to take it out of the workplace and put it squarely at the center of human existence.

The rich think that their work is special and that they work harder than what we typically think of as
centers, on street corners, and in small businesses. Labor unions cannot foster economic fairness if they do not know what their members see as unfair. Labor unions have got to look at unconventional institutions and sectors of working people in order to keep growing. The rise of the Fast Food Forward campaign had to be hammered into the upper floors of some unions by community groups and workers themselves before organized labor saw through the lens of race and ethnicity and gender. They soon realized this was an untapped group that needed organizing. Why were they ignored for so long? Power concedes nothing without a demand.

My father, who worked on the docks of Philadelphia, had to demand every day to be let into the union so that he could work in the Sugar House, inside, instead of constantly being outside in the elements. My mother had to demand every day that she be allowed to organize waitresses and laundry workers because she felt that a union needed to be there and that was the job of the union.

So how can we best use Budd’s insights? With the addition of a race and gender and ethnicity lens, his argument reinforces the message of my organization, the Black Institute:

- Develop knowledge through research, data, and polling
- Develop leadership through training and taking what we learn from the research, data, and polling and making it plain, so that we can shape public policy
- Develop community, organizing, and mobilizing on those public policies

Ours is a head, heart, and feet strategy. Translating an article like this one into action should be the next step. The subject of work and unions is life or death for some of us out here, not theory. I would love to see Budd’s students and readers turn the paper into live work. If you need help, just call the Black Institute.