In his article “Implicit Public Values and the Creation of Publicly Valuable Outcomes: The Importance of Work and the Contested Role of Labor Unions,” John W. Budd calls for the “reinvention of traditional labor unions or the development of new organizations and institutions.”

There is no question that the “traditional labor unions” have been fighting the last war. The leadership of the AFL-CIO has been slow to respond to a changing workplace and a changing labor force. Technology advances only escalate, and the nature of work is evolving. Low-skilled jobs have vaulted overseas seeking the lowest bidder, and robots are far better than humans at assembling automobiles. The economy, a decade or so down the road, will be made up of knowledge workers and low-paid service employees.

Some traditional unions are indeed working to create “work-related publicly valuable outcomes” in the quest for “economic fairness,” as Budd advises, or have done so. The American Federation of Teachers, for example, is a primary sponsor of “Reconnecting McDowell” (http://www.reconnectingmcdowell.org/), working with the State of West Virginia to revitalize McDowell County, one of the poorest counties in the nation. Similarly, after the devastating earthquake in Haiti, that union sponsored health clinics staffed by its members, teachers, and nurses. In New York State, union members and organizations such as the Central Labor Council and the Professional Staff Congress are at the forefront of lobbying efforts on behalf of a controversial law that would enable undocumented high school graduates to be eligible for tuition assistance grants, like all other high school graduates.

In 2011 and 2012, Occupy Wall Street raised hopes for a resurgence of the kind of social consciousness that could provide the necessary foundation for unions to play a far more effective role in creating publicly valuable outcomes. For a few short months, a grassroots movement appeared to emerge. Rhiannon Giddens’s protest song “The Bottom 99” (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh36PkhmN4U), evoking memories of Woody Guthrie, captured the essence of that hopeful spirit.

But then came the attack on the teacher unions in Wisconsin and the failure of the union effort to unseat Governor Scott Walker in response in 2012. That, along with the failure of the United Auto Workers’ recognition vote at the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, this year, even in the face of management neutrality, brought home a harsh reality: the relative impotence of the traditional labor union.

The election was vigorously opposed by Grover Norquist’s Center for Worker Freedom and the Tennessee Republicans; to use the terminology of Budd’s article in these pages, the opposition subscribes to an “egoist model,” in which labor unions are seen as simply the mechanism for inappropriate interference with labor’s proper role as a mere commodity.

Budd’s call is welcome indeed, but labor faces very serious obstacles in answering it in the face of the new workforce. One must wonder whether Google employees would “organize” to lobby for causes in national and international venues or whether unions...
of professional athletes would involve themselves in activities with “publicly valuable outcomes.” Indeed, will it even be possible for college athletes to become unionized? With less than 10 percent of the private labor force belonging to unions, and the percentages continuing to shrink, the future of the private sector union appears in serious doubt.

Perhaps a reemphasis on the organizing model, rather than too much focus on the service model, still offers real hope. The United Federation of Teachers, the New York City teacher union, has been without a contract for more than four years (the expired contract remains in effect until a successor contract is negotiated). Throughout the course of its continued battle with former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, the union developed relationships with parents and community-based organizations around the city, and organizing paid off. By the end of Bloomberg’s mayoralty, “almost half of all respondents said that teachers should ‘play the largest role in determining New York City’s education policy,’ compared with 28 percent who thought that the mayor-appointed schools chancellor should” (Stern 2013).

On the political front, unions still provide not only financial support but also “feet on the ground.” One of the major reasons the Republican hierarchy in Tennessee opposed the collective bargaining election was a fear of organized labor involvement in elections. From voter registration to actual voting, from providing financial support through political action committees to manning phone banks to knocking on doors, union members participate in much higher numbers than the populace at large.

Much of union social and political activism comes from the public sector, where about 37 percent of the employees are union members, because, as noted, private sector union membership has fallen disastrously. But perhaps the Occupy movement of 2011 and 2012 was only the first wave of a renewed social consciousness that could herald the revitalization of union organization across economic sectors. Let us hope that Budd’s call is widely heard.

Reference