"Unions spend a lot of time putting out fires. I think they need to spend equal time starting fires, inspiring people."

Elaine Bernard is a leading figure in the labour movement, a highly sought-after thinker and commentator on union issues. As the executive director of the Labor and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School, she is in demand for her perceptive take on the labour movement. Her research and teaching interests include international comparative labour movements and the role of unions in promoting civil society, democracy and economic growth.

We spoke to her about the challenges that face unions in the coming years.

How can unions best learn from each other?

It’s tricky. How do you get people to start to share experiences? Groups like the ITF are essential to help unions communicate, in all kinds of ways.

One way we try to connect people is to write case studies. They aren’t designed to be war stories, or even success stories. Instead, they’re designed to be discussion tools, so that people look at a particular problem. They have to put themselves in the shoes of leader and look at the decisions the leader had to make, based on what is known in the case study. They discuss the environment in which the decisions are made. In this way they can see how decisions are made and strategies develop.

There’s a tendency in the labour movement to say that every case is special, every case is unique. This is true, but it’s about drawing, from that uniqueness, lessons that are more universal. We need to spend more time doing those things. There is an appetite. It starts with people doing similar work in different companies, in different circumstances. You can look at how they have constructed a community of interest to bring about change.

How can the developed and developing worlds work together on organising? Is there a danger that developed countries set the agenda?

In developing countries, the vast majority of workers are in the informal sector. The formal sector is very small. What workers seek to do is to formalise relationships in an informal sector.

Meanwhile, developed countries face growing informalisation of work in the formal sector. Unions are trying to deal with this. People in developing countries have figured out how to organise in the informal sector. We can all learn lessons from
Logistics and strategy

The United Parcel Service (UPS) campaign by the Teamsters is an interesting campaign to look at. It doesn’t have a narrow logistics focus, but it shows how you can mobilise members and get the public on side. It did this by looking at success stories and telling a story the public can understand. For UPS, the story was ‘part-time America isn’t working’. You don’t have to be a UPS driver to understand that part-time work is a problem. It managed to make UPS employees people the public could identify with. These types of things work very well.

The problem is that companies are not stupid. Where we identify a key lynchpin in the operations, the management already knows about it. There’s this notion that you can simply determine one key pressure point, put some careful resources into that and the whole institution will fall into your hands... it’s a little more complicated than that. Union strategy is like a chess game – you’re not playing on your own, each of your moves provokes a move from other side. What got you something in the past won’t necessarily get you something in the future. You have to look at how the terrain changes.”

The vast majority of workers feel powerless. In local areas, unions need to meet and discuss what works. Unions spend a lot of time putting out fires. I think they need to spend equal time starting fires, inspiring people. Often unions only meet to talk about what’s wrong. Why not meet to talk about what works, what’s right, how can we grow the good? How can we play a positive role as unions as well as changing and stopping the bad?

All organising starts with people being motivated to take action. There has to be something people care about. They have to feel they can achieve something and they need to be able to talk to others so they feel motivated. That is actually organising.

It’s a big word that comes down to straightforward things. That’s the way unions are built.

If unions are spending more time on organising, without more resources, how can they decide what work to stop doing?

It’s a complicated process. It starts by doing what you’ve always done, but differently. Never do for others what they should be doing for themselves – you risk disempowering people.

For example, how do you deal with a grievance? Does a union rep take on the grievance, do the paperwork, speak to management? If you have an organising model of building workers’ sense of their own power, you could sit down, find others who might have the same problem and go to management as a group. Rather than an administrative function, this could become an organising opportunity.

Look at everything as you start to think about building the power of your members. How do we start to do this with the lens on of helping to mentor and bring along a whole new generation of leaders in the workplace? There’s a tremendous opportunity to learn across groups.

■ How can unions build their organising work?

The issue is understanding organising – it’s a process of building power. The end is to have power, not to organise for its own sake. Ultimately, organising is a method of constructing power where it doesn’t exist.

You might have many members but, unless they’re organised, have goals and are purposeful in having strategies, you don’t have much power. Just because someone is a member and pays their dues, it doesn’t mean they see themselves as the power of the organisation.

One example I use is to look at where the members see the power of the organisation. Do they see it in the full-time staff employed by the union? When a staff member arrives, does that mean the union enters the facility? If so, what happens when the staff member leaves? Where does the union go?

Members need to see power embodied in each member. In today’s society, where there is much emphasis on the individual, people are losing the sense that you can build power by constructing collectives that are purposeful and that take action.

Unions are important for all of society. We breathe life into democracy.

■ How can unions build power in an increasingly hostile environment?

The environmental movement says “act locally, think globally”. Unions could adopt the same approach.