

Two messages for Ohio

One about change, the other about excellence

By Michael Douglas, Beacon Journal associate editor

Dave Regan looks squarely at the future of the labor movement. The president of the Service Employees International Union Local 1199 (covering Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia) cites the steep and unrelenting decline: Unions represented 35 percent of workers 50 years ago and 12 percent today (the number falling to 8 percent of workers in the private sector).

He figures organized labor has one last shot to reverse course, or face oblivion within 10 years.

His remedy? Labor must alter its methods, in a big way, if a union with 23,000 members in Ohio hopes to reach 100,000 by 2015.

Regan stopped by our offices not long ago, one of two recent visitors who left a notable impression. The other was Sabodh Chandra, a former Cleveland law director now running for Ohio attorney general in the Democratic Party primary. (The first name rhymes with "abode," the last with "tundra," as he playfully explains to audiences.) Both were striking and refreshing -- young, smart and energetic. Each reflected something Ohio must embrace to arrest its relative decline and enhance its quality of life.

For his part, Regan welcomes wrenching yet necessary change. Chandra champions nothing less than the pursuit of excellence in public life.

You would think Big Labor had gotten the message. Then, look around Ohio, at the Democratic Party, for instance, its atrophied condition the result largely of its dependence on union money and the rest of the labor campaign apparatus. Regan admits labor contributed heavily to its own decline, traveling from contract to contract, failing to devise a strategy for the future, one that invested the resources required to grow. The Service Employees International Union expressed its frustration last year, joining with six other unions, bolting the AFL-CIO.

The SEIU represents 1.8 million workers nationwide, mostly in health care, building and government services. Regan seeks to break free from debilitating perceptions and realities about labor, the image of unions as nothing more than narrow special interests, clinging to outdated work rules and other elements of a distant past as the world rapidly changes, peeling jobs from their ranks. He wants to rebuild the social contract that found value in workers with a strong voice in national decision-making. That begins with labor pursuing ways to serve its members and elevate the whole.

Thus, SEIU Local 1199 issued substantial reports the past year on aspects of health care in Ohio. One examined the higher prices many hospitals charge uninsured or underinsured patients. The other cast a critical eye on the return that state taxpayers receive from tax breaks for nonprofit hospitals.

Regan states flatly the purpose: He desires improved prospects for organizing in the health-care industry. The welcome departure involves the approach (whether you agree or not with the

conclusions of the reports). His local has jumped impressively into a debate that touches all of us.

Join Subodh Chandra for a conversation, and you quickly grasp that he wants you to know he is the smartest one in the room. A more seasoned campaigner would let the audience reach that obvious conclusion: He is sharp.

Born in Oklahoma City, of Indian heritage, the father of young triplets, Chandra is a former federal prosecutor. He has practiced law in Los Angeles and Cleveland. Most recently, he resurrected the Cleveland law department, representing one of the bright chapters in the troubled tenure of Jane Campbell. As law director, he brought enthusiasm, professionalism and focus to the office. He aggressively pursued predatory lenders. He overturned the corrupting use of special counsel (outside law firms turning campaign contributions into billable hours).

The result? Legal work returned to the department, a change that helped attract a higher caliber of staff attorney.

Chandra knows how to jab Republicans. He entertains as he recounts the misadventures of Tom Noe, Bob Taft and assorted others who have either broken law or stumbled into an ethical thicket. He rightly chides his own party for failing to offer (so far) a plausible alternative to many discontented independents and moderate Republicans.

Most appealing is his ambition, his high-mindedness about public service. He understands the skepticism that greets a candidate quoting Robert Kennedy quoting George Bernard Shaw about dreaming things that never were and asking why not. That hardly discourages Chandra from describing an attorney general's office that would be a model for the country. He has in mind Eliot Spitzer, the avenging and admired attorney general of New York.

Many candidates visit our offices, and many of the statewide variety point to the national recognition they have received. Few display such imagination and passion, such an eagerness to deliver the very best.

Chandra faces a tough primary campaign. His opponent, state Sen. Marc Dann, has performed a service for Democrats and the state, holding Republican feet to the fire. If he has lingered too long at times on Coingate, he has also joined a band of Democratic lawmakers in crafting sensible alternatives to the Republican agenda.

What Chandra immediately asks is: Who has actually run a large legal department and to much applause?

Ohio still flails, a state with a glorious past and a discouraging future, lacking enough strong ideas and inviting leaders. Then a Dave Regan and a Subodh Chandra surface, and there is a hint of hope that Ohio may embrace change and pursue excellence, after all.

from <http://www.ohio.com>

Originally published by Akron Beacon Journal January 8, 2006
© 2006 Beacon Journal and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.