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Unions and Labor Day

By [David Dolev](#) - Thursday August 30 2007

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DISCUSS

Many of us remember hearing stories of our parents, grandparents or great-grandparents moving to America and struggling to "make it" in the new country. Some may have been small business owners while others were rank and file workers, but common to all was the struggle to sustain themselves and their families. Many suffered in sweatshops and developed the mutual



support system called the U.S. trade union movement.

The imperative of supporting one another in economic struggles was not new to them. One of our foremost scholars, the Rambam, states that the highest level of charity is "entering into a partnership with one in need, or finding employment for him, in order to strengthen his hand until he need no longer be dependent upon others."

Remembering their own struggle, our parents and grandparents passed on to us the commitment to help others in need. That is what unions are all about – supporting the basic right of individuals to a fair salary, benefits, workers safety, and the ability to raise him/herself to a better life. This is why so many in the Jewish community are supporting the 10,000 janitors in Greater Boston whose contracts are expiring on Aug. 31. Many are working two or three jobs a day and still not able to make ends meet. They need our help to secure a living wage, health insurance, and a life with dignity.

The most recent workers rights campaign, "Hotel Workers Rising," was also strongly supported by many in the Jewish community. This was another struggle of workers for a better life. Many of these workers, as were our parents and grandparents, are minorities and immigrants. Jewish support for the campaign did not go by unnoticed in the labor movement. The president of the local hotel workers union wrote a personal letter to the Jewish Labor Committee – "on behalf of thousands of hotel workers, their families and the elected leadership of UNITE HERE Local 26. We will never forget the friendship and solidarity you extended to our union during this contract struggle." Similar sentiments, recognizing the Jewish community's support, have been expressed by union leadership and members – security guards, janitors, healthcare workers, and members of the building trades.

The Torah also tells us, "When your brother falls and his hand declines with you, strengthen him, whether the stranger or the resident, that he

may live with you" (Leviticus 25:35). Rashi explains that the expression to "strengthen" or "support" him means not to wait until he actually falls (financial collapse) but rather to empower him beforehand so that he shouldn't fall in the first place.

Let us remember all of these things on Labor Day. The next time we need to build an addition to our synagogue or hire a janitor for our institution make sure that those we hire receive fair wages and benefits. In that way we can use our economic capacity to empower workers, support real social change, and fulfill our Judaic legacy.

David Dolev, director the New England Jewish Labor Committee, can be reached at bostonjlc@aol.com.

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