This weekend a remarkable event will occur that I hope ushers in a new era of hope and energy for America’s next generation. The AFL-CIO opens its convention with a day of workshops welcoming a host of young people—the next generation of hope for labor and for, the next generation, perhaps the first step toward reversing the downward slide in living standards they seem destined to experience. Here is my memo to the next generation suggesting why they should pay attention and take up labor’s offer to work together.

Memo to young workers: One thing should be very clear to you today: It is up to you to reverse the direction of the economy that our generation is leaving you. Unless you do so, the American Dream—that your family will experience a higher standard of living than you did growing up—will be a far flung fantasy.

A second point should also be clear: You can’t meet this challenge acting alone. Getting a good education is a necessary, but in today’s world, far from sufficient ticket to a middle class or better life. Just ask the forty to fifty percent of college graduates who are either unemployed or working in jobs that are far below the knowledge and skills they acquired in their education.

It will take a collective effort by your generation to turn the nation’s economy around to give you a fair share of whatever prosperity you help generate. How to do this?

There is an institution you have ignored largely up until now that wants to and could help: the labor movement. The labor movement is in as much trouble as you are. Its membership is at a hundred year low. It can’t organize workers under a broken labor law and it can’t muster the political support needed to fix the law.

So why, might you ask, should you think that labor can help? Despite all its legacy problems, labor remains the largest and potentially most powerful force for economic and social change in the nation. Moreover, labor knows and acknowledges the depths of its problems and also knows that you are the key to its renewal. So labor today is reaching out to young workers like never before and is opening up to new ideas, new leaders, and new approaches to gaining a voice and representation for the next generation of workers. This gives you the opening you need to shape the next generation unions to serve your interests.

What is labor doing?

Let’s start with the fast food protests that last week spread to 58 cities and over 1,000 stores calling for a $15 an hour wage. These were funded and led primarily by the Service Employees International Union with support from other unions. http://lowpayisnotok.org/strike-
In the past year a coalition of unions led by the United Food and Commercial Workers have supported similar one day protests from brave Wal-Mart employees. www.ufcw.org/makingchange

Across the country labor unions are working in coalitions with community groups to promote increases in the minimum wage at either the state or federal level and to pass city-level living wage ordinances. Labor is also working with the over 200 Worker Centers that have sprung up in cities around the country to help immigrants and other low wage workers enforce their legal rights on the job.

The nation’s largest union federation, the AFL-CIO, is actively reaching out to young workers. http://www.aflcio.org/Get-Involved/Young-Workers. Next week’s AFL-CIO Convention will begin with a day of workshops designed to introduce young workers to the labor movement. They will hear about the federation’s Young Workers’ Action Network, the New Organizing Institute, and the “Next Up Program,” all new initiatives that train and support young leaders in mobilizing their peers around issues of central concern to them.

While at the convention young workers can visit with any of more than a dozen unions which have youth programs that encourage associate membership, provide mentoring, and in some cases education and training programs and scholarships to young people not covered by a collective bargaining agreement.

Those looking for a new way to form professional networks within their occupation and get needed health care and other benefits might look at The Freelancers’ Union, http://www.freelancersunion.org/ a group of over 200,000 media, legal, IT and other professionals in New York.

Labor knows young workers need to take charge of their own destiny and build on the tools young workers know best. That is why unions in the U.S., Canada, and Europe are all asking young people to help figure out how to harness social media to serve as a source of power. Various efforts are in the “incubator” stage to promote worker centric apps to provide workers the information on where the best (and worst) jobs are in their region and occupation. The Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) http://rocunited.org/ serves as one example of how this can be done. They publicize a Diners’ Guide to restaurants that provide good, healthy food, follow sustainable practices, and pay good wages. Likewise they publicize restaurants that fail to meet these standards. By doing so ROC appeals to consumers as well as workers. They encourage customers to inquire about these practices when they frequent their favorite restaurants.

Labor has a long way to go but it has started down a path of listening to the next generation of workers and potential members, considering new ways of mobilizing, organizing, and learning from the next generation, and searching for new sources of power through coalitions, networks, social media, knowledge, and mobility.
There even is a new name for these efforts coined by Amy Dean, an innovative labor advocate in Chicago. She calls it Alt-Labor. http://www.bostonreview.net/blog/amy-dean-alt-labor-day-2013

America needs an alternative to the present economy. Young workers desperately need an alternative. Labor is open to new approaches. Sounds like it is time to give Alt-Labor a try.