

AFL-CIO appears in danger of disintegrating

As we approach its fiftieth anniversary convention at the end of this month, the AFL-CIO appears in danger of disintegrating. Six unions, professing dissatisfaction with John Sweeney's leadership, have formed a kind of parallel organization, which they have called "Change to Win." One of these, the Carpenters, is already out of the AFL-CIO. Three others, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and the Union of Needletrades, Textiles and Industrial Employees/Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (UNITE HERE) have been given authority by their executive boards to leave the AFL-CIO if they believe it necessary. As of this writing the Teamsters are considering like authority. Of the six, only the Laborers have said they will not withdraw.

The six unions have issued a position paper, "Restoring the American Dream." It proposes a five-point agenda with numerous sub-points. Most of the sub-points of immediate concern to Building Trades workers are grouped under the first main point, which says, in part, "Central to the mission of the federation is to stimulate and focus on union organizing activities to bring the maximum number of workers together along industry or occupational lines."

Under this point it proposes:

- Rebates from the AFL-CIO to unions with "a strategic plan and commitment to organizing in their core industries;"

- Supporting mergers between unions;

- Making the AFL-CIO coordinator of "efforts to unite workers to build bargaining strength;"

- Centering on the AFL-CIO a permanent campaign versus "huge nonunion global corporations like Wal-Mart;"

- Focusing politically on "growth and worker power" in a program "workplace-centered, worker-oriented, and independent of any party or candidate;"

- Reorganizing the AFL-CIO, with "a streamlined Executive Committee," "financial and organizational accountability and openness," "multi-union coordination around key initiatives," and establishment and enforcement of standards in "bargaining, strategic industry plans and results, political fundraising and participation ,workplace organization ;"

- Supporting "leaders who aggressively support fundamental change."

Some Building Trades workers still resist organizing. They see themselves stretched thin to make a living even in good times. They ask, "What are you going to do with all these guys when the work slows down?"

But we have no alternative to it. Clearly our political influence is too weak. This influence requires not just money, not just member effort, but numbers. Votes count. Without organizing, and with our numbers shrinking, we will weaken further politically. Even if our numbers remain constant it will be relative to a growing population, and we will weaken. And if, as the economy expands and the workforce expands with it, we do not move to control that workforce but leave it unrepresented and underpriced, we will lose work to it anyway when the work slows down. We have no hope but in growth. The emphasis of the six unions on organizing is justified.

And if rebates from the AFL-CIO contribute to organizing, well and good.

Mergers between unions are the subject of rumors and discussion on every jobsite. Done well, they might in some degree address the problem of jurisdictional disputes, one of the deepest weaknesses of the Building Trades union movement.

At one time, unions arrived at formal agreements or formal decisions were rendered on jurisdiction. Many of these agreements and decisions were codified in the "Green Book." Ideally, these agreements and decisions would determine our actions on jurisdiction. All too frequently they don't. All too frequently our unions take what they can with no regard to them, and there is no referee to call the unions back or impose a penalty. And the work itself has moved in many cases beyond the agreements and decisions. New processes of construction have developed, and new variations on old processes, with sometimes little more than chance determining which trade performs them, or sometimes with one trade lowballing another to get the work.

The glazier looks at the sheet metal worker, the sheet metal worker at the glazier, the operator looks at the carpenter and the carpenter at the operator, and each says, "Shouldn't that work be mine?" In an industry in which work comes in waves and unemployment often in deep troughs, this is a powerful question. At present it eats the time of business agents and the time and money of unions and contractors for little or no return.

Meanwhile, a few blocks or miles away, the non-union sector grows.

Insofar as mergers occur between unions competing for jurisdiction, that competition could be transformed into a matter

of internal organization of dispatch, apprenticeship, contract negotiation, and so on. Time and money could be saved for better member service and for organizing. Done well, mergers would require real effort and care and mutual respect between unions. Contracts would have to be brought into accord with each other. Trust funds and plans would have to be intermeshed, apprenticeships coordinated, International and local offices combined and reorganized.

But this is one place where we have to ask if the six unions tread dangerous ground. If unions leave the AFL-CIO the temptation will be for them to forego the trouble of well-considered mergers and to grab the work, in the expectation that the workers sooner or later will have to follow. Before workers follow, though, they would likely suffer long unemployment, loss of health care, even the failure of their pension plans. Their bitterness at this would make them at best unenthusiastic union members, at worst dedicated enemies.

The six unions tread further this way in making the AFL-CIO coordinator "of efforts to unite workers." To achieve this they recommend giving the AFL-CIO the charge of "identifying lead and dominant unions by sector, industry, employer, market, and, where appropriate, craft" and of deterring "the 'race to the bottom' caused by employers seeking to use one affiliate as a means of protection from another." While the latter is desirable, the former gives pause. The training, the good work, the negotiated standards and benefits, even the justifiable pride of smaller crafts must be respected. If "lead and dominant unions" are identified in order to lead campaigns that benefit not just themselves, but smaller crafts, this should be all to the good. If they are identified carefully and honestly to come to true resolutions of jurisdictional disputes, this may initially be uncomfortable but would ultimately be helpful, particularly if those resolutions deter the "race to the bottom." If they take advantage of their identification as "lead and dominant" just to roll over smaller crafts, though, this will wound the union movement critically.

Regional, national, and international campaigns to fight such corporations as Wal-Mart are overdue. Organizing by local unions at a local level is necessary, but when a company such as Wal-Mart builds it is with out-of-area contractors and workers who feel no need to respond to anyone or anything local. Only a national campaign has any chance of changing Wal-Mart's behavior. And opposition to unions is so ingrained in Wal-Mart that a national campaign, to be truly effective, should seek to change the company in all its aspects -- as builder, as buyer of goods for sale, and as employer.

The Building Trades have long focused on programs "independent of any party." We have dealt consistently with what we call "Building Trades Republicans," moderates who support Davis-Bacon provisions and other causes dear to us. The Democrats, for their part, have often failed us. Nationally they have done little to undo excessive restrictions on our rights of protest and of organizing and little to restrain the excesses of business in opposing us. They couldn't muster the courage to give us any form of national health care when they had the opportunity, and we, our contractors, and the country as a whole are suffering the consequences now. We should feel free to deal with whoever serves us best, of whatever party. This is not at all to argue for switching our allegiance to the Republicans generally. Most would prefer that we fade away, and those union leaders who have played cozy with these owe us an explanation of how this coziness has served us.

No one would argue against efficiency in the governance of the AFL-CIO, or that greater efficiency isn't possible. The "streamlined Executive Committee" the six unions propose, though, will be "comprised of the largest unions with several additional rotating seats to endure diversity." Again, we have to ask if the six unions risk enabling large unions to plow through the legitimate concerns of smaller unions.

And we have to ask if in "supporting leaders who aggressively support fundamental change" they risk supporting ego in place of reason, personality in place of efficacy.

We can hope that this brinkmanship in which they are engaged results in a stronger labor movement, in more united action, in more work and better wages and conditions for us all. We can hope that it doesn't result in a bitter division in our movement and in the depredation of some unions by others. We can hope.

I will be attending the convention as an alternate delegate for the San Francisco Labor Council.