

All Together Now?

More Inclusion, More Debate, More Accountability

by Tom Leedham,

Secretary-Treasurer, Teamsters Local 206

The decision by some big unions to split from the AFL-CIO and form Change to Win in 2005 was top-down. Local union leaders were not consulted, much less rank-and-file union members.

Now leaders at the top appear to be moving toward reunification—again with no involvement of local leaders or members. But neither decision has had much effect on the working men and women who pay the dues.

CTW unions typically criticized the AFL-CIO for too much emphasis on politics and not enough on organizing. Earlier discussions (some referred to it as a debate within the labor movement) centered on the structure of organized labor and the need for consolidation of unions around industry segments.

Missing from the debate was any discussion of how decisions within the labor movement are made and how the decision-makers are chosen. There were lots of comments about the need for change and stodgy, ineffective leadership, but barely a whisper about the accountability or worker involvement that real democracy would bring.

Three and a half years later, few working people could list any accomplishments of the breakup, if they're aware of it at all. Is the talk of reunification now an indication that the problems earlier reported have been addressed?

It doesn't seem that way. Unions that complained of too much emphasis on politics spent record amounts of political money in both 2006 and 2008.

We Need a New Labor Movement

by Hetty Rosenstein

New Jersey Director

Communications Workers of America

When it first became known in 2005 that some unions were considering leaving the AFL-CIO because they had a different vision of the labor movement, I spent much time reading, writing, and participating in discussions about it.

But much of the debate didn't feel relevant. It broke down around a power play between Washington leaderships.



Jim West/jimwestphoto.com

Members of the AFL-CIO, Change to Win, and the National Education Association joined to march in the presidential inaugural parade. The presidents of 12 unions met January 7 to discuss forming one big labor federation, healing the 2005 split.

Organizing has continued to be largely the responsibility of individual unions rather than multi-union efforts, not significantly different than prior to the split. For unions like the Teamsters that have increased organizing numbers, it's unlikely that they would credit that success to any umbrella organization.

If everyday union members have experienced anything as a result of the split, it is likely to be weaker local and state labor organizations, which has meant less member mobilization across unions for mutual support. Jobs with Justice has had to try to fill this gap.

EFCA'S SHOPPING SPREE

There may be new and compelling

I hope the discussion of a reunified federation isn't only a reversal of the one that led to the split. We don't only want to change the structure to allow for a rotated president or a different term of office or a different dues structure.

One change that I hope to see is a structured and respected position in a new federation (and in all unions) for our rank-and-file leaders: shop stew-

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reasons to rebuild one "House of Labor." The Employee Free Choice Act, if passed in its current form, will lead to more union members, but it will also motivate employers to shop for compliant unions.

At the first sign of legitimate organizing, they'll rush to sign up their employees with corrupt or company-oriented unions rather than having to deal with honest, more militant labor organizations. A new federation must establish a strong and fair judicial process to minimize employers' ability to union-shop.

Reunification seems to be on the table primarily because President Obama has expressed a preference for dealing with just one federation. We should insist that the president listen to diverse voices of labor, not just one top leader.

Mending the split will, however, give cover to leaders deserving of criticism. It's rare indeed for a federation president to openly criticize a member organization or its leadership.

Clearly at this time of challenge, labor needs more inclusion, more debate, and more accountability. Without these basic democratic concepts we risk finding ourselves in the same position three years from now. □

The AFL-CIO, Change to Win, and the National Education Association shared space on a first-ever labor float in the inauguration parade January 20. Can they take unity further?

The presidents of 12 big unions met in Washington January 7 to discuss forming one labor federation. Such a move would heal the 2005 split-off of seven unions from the AFL-CIO.

Reportedly, one impetus was a request from President Obama's transition team, indicating that the administration would prefer to deal with just one labor voice. The meeting was led by David Bonior, chair of American Rights at Work.

A stumbling block: Who would head the united federation, as AFL-CIO President John Sweeney retires?

The Teamsters are said to oppose AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Rich Trumka, who wants the job. Memories are long: Trumka backed sitting Teamster President Ron Carey in 1996 when current president James Hoffa tried, unsuccessfully, to unseat Carey.

Others have put forward the notion of a rotating presidency.

What would the combined federation be called? Labor Notes is running an online contest—find the winner at labornotes.org.

What could, should, and probably will the united federation do? We're starting the discussion with four perspectives from different corners of the labor movement.

Sense of Opportunity Makes Unity More Important

by Russ Davis and Margaret Butler

At an incredibly difficult time for workers, the labor movement has embarked on one of the most ambitious campaigns in recent memory: to pass the Employee Free Choice Act. EFCA has brought together the AFL-CIO, Change to Win, and unaffiliated unions.

This broad support has been a major factor in spurring reunification talk. The prospect that the measure could unleash widespread organizing campaigns, bringing in millions of new members, is another.

With this sense of opportunity in front of them, unions are more inclined than ever to advance together, although major jurisdictional issues may arise as a result of EFCA.

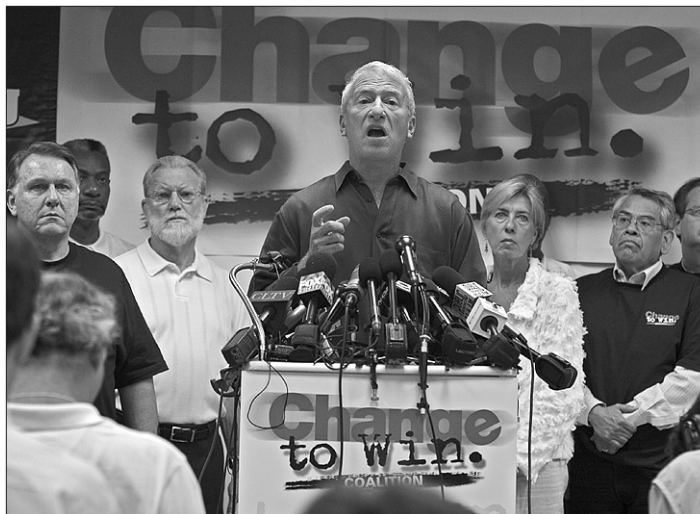
The need to unify to fight effectively seems obvious; it is also a core principle of the labor movement. This need has rearranged some of the previous divisions that led to the split in the first place, with unions including the Communications Workers and SEIU both making EFCA a top priority.

For Jobs with Justice activists, a unified labor movement will avoid confusion for our community and religious members. But for more than 21 years, Jobs with Justice has been a place of unity for the labor movement. It includes AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions, independent unions like UE, and other organizations like workers centers, on an equal basis.

Even at the height of the split, both sides understood that Jobs with Justice needed to play a role of unity in action.

In Portland, meetings with some unions were held to explain our principles and our commitment to all workers, but that was the only real impact of the split. There was a conscious effort by locals to

other and work together in the EFCA campaign. A local Change to Win strategic campaign is under way in Boston but uses CTW staff, not local CTW unions to carry it out.



SEIU President Andy Stern announces Change to Win's disaffiliation from the AFL-CIO in 2005.

CHAMPION ALL WORKERS

It is vital that a unified labor movement champion immigration reform, national health insurance, pension protections, and extending the safety net to protect all workers. If labor does so, passage of EFCA and support for union organizing will be seen as real steps toward making the economy work for everyone.

In the midst of recession, some workers are beginning to fight back. As we saw with the UE members' sit-in at Republic Windows in Chicago (see page 12), those who do fight inspire and

excite others.

With the prospect of mass resistance on the horizon, unity in action is more vital than ever, whatever organizational form the labor movement takes. □

[Russ Davis is the executive director of Massachusetts Jobs with Justice. Margaret Butler is the director of Portland Jobs with Justice. Both sit on the national executive committee of JWWJ.]

turn out members and staff across the split, to show that it would not impact street solidarity.

In Massachusetts, the split has had little impact locally. Locals are affiliated or not to the state AFL-CIO and central labor councils for their own reasons, not for reasons relating to the split.

Locals continue to support each

Split Did Not Revitalize Labor

by David Novogrodsky

As a delegate to the Chicago AFL-CIO convention in 2005, I remember having amicable chats with Teamsters and Service Employees friends the night before the convention. So I was amazed when a middle-of-the-night letter from future Change to Win head

Anna Burger was slipped under my hotel-room door.

It explained that her group had "fundamental differences" with the federation and needed to leave. However, she continued, they would remain in central labor councils and state federations.

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Reunification: We Need a New Labor Movement

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ards. We aren't going to re-organize the working class solely through paid organizers. We need to train stewards, first to fight for the Employee Free Choice Act, and then to be the thousands of organizers we will need once we pass it. We need stewards who understand that they are not only stewards for their shop but leaders in a new labor movement.

I hope the new federation has the capacity to provide research, technology, training, public relations, a massive database, and coordinated political work. It should be a resource for union leaders at all levels, including rank-and-file leaders.

We need excellent research and policy work that is well-publicized and accessible. We need the best, the brightest, and the most progressive minds working for the labor movement, so that we are the place that publishes the new data, that educates the newest organizers, that develops new labor candidates to run for office.

SPEAK FOR ALL

A new federation should seek to speak for all working families and not only workers in unions. In order to do that with real authority, there must be a place for non-majority organizing. We need better ways for unorganized workers in semi-organized industries to become part of the movement.

The Working America canvass is a good way to communicate electorally, but we have to do more than sign people up to phonebank them. In addition to health care and card check, the labor movement should think about pensions, taxes, and re-regulation. These are ways to get not-yet-organized workers and industries involved.

As more families fall to the margins of poverty, I hope the new federation leads a street fight for jobs and against foreclosures. We should be in the center of the fight against poverty and to maintain the few remaining middle-class jobs.

I hope that the new federation works hard on restoring not only the right to organize but also the right to strike. We can't bargain good contracts and protect them without the right to strike.

I hope that the new federation stakes out peace and equality as part of our mission. Our economy is in shambles not only because of greed, deregulation, and tax cuts. It also is in shambles because of war.

The labor movement's finest hours have been when we stood up for civil rights, fought for the Voting Rights Act,

and rejected racism and sexism. I hope the new federation embraces marriage equality and the rights of all families to be recognized as such.

A new federation should seek to speak for all working families and not only workers in unions. To do that with real authority we need better ways for unorganized workers to become part of the movement.

Our unions do not play well with others. We have more money and we push past smaller community groups and behave in an arrogant manner.

But while we weren't looking, those community groups turned out millions of volunteers to elect Barack Obama

Split Did Not Revitalize Labor

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Over the next days the AFL-CIO adopted most of the Change to Win program, except forced consolidations and greater centralization. The lasting effect has been structural change.

Rather than a more concentrated and centralized AFL-CIO we have the opposite. We have something like "unity" at the local and state levels, but not at the federation level. It actually goes further: state and local bodies are open to what we used to call "non-affiliates," primarily NEA, but also many others.

We also saw the California School Employees Association and the California Nurses Association join the AFL-CIO. The latter was surprising, as it followed the launch of the American Nurses Association's AFL-CIO affiliate, United American Nurses. All of this resulted in a rather new union structure.

SINGLE VOICE

The current impetus for reunification comes from David Bonior, former chair of American Rights at Work, and the Obama administration, who wish for a convenient single union voice (a historical rarity).

This follows a widespread realization that the split over "fundamental differences" actually weakened the federation's resources in such critical areas as health and safety, and legal and legislative strategy.

One thing a split was supposed to change was labor's slide in membership.

while some union members barely participated. We need those community organizations, and we must show more humility when we work with them. We should provide them with more financial support, and the federation and state and central labor bodies should have as part of their mission real coalition-building in the community.

Mostly, on the edge of change for the country, I hope we have a federation that is more vital, more inclusive, more democratic, and less paranoid.

The truth is—I hope we don't have only a new federation of unions. I hope we have a new labor movement. That is the last and best hope for the future.

The discussion of reunification should be about how to encourage that movement. What the structure, dues, and leadership will be is only important within the context of building that movement. □

The point has long been argued. Dissolving the AFL-CIO, a 1963 Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions report said, could recapture the competition that was integral to massive union growth.

Some thought the 2005 schism might be a replay of the CIO's exit from the federation in 1935 (although, unlike John L. Lewis, Burger and Andy Stern threw no punches. They were no-shows at the convention).

Hopeful types thought that playing up the seriousness of what looked like a hissy-fit about not much would at least shake things up.

But unlike the CIO's separation, which energized competition and growth in both federations, it is clear that the 2005 split has not.

Even prior to the recent Bonior/Obama prod there was a general consensus in union circles that Teamsters, UNITE HERE, UFCW and Laborers would return to the AFL-CIO upon John Sweeney's retirement, even if the Service Employees and possibly the Carpenters would stay out.

If NEA were to join the federation at the national level it would mimic changes now in place at state and local levels. If all of this happens, we could have a somewhat transformed federation, more open to a cacophony of voices in what is already a transformed AFL-CIO in all but the top levels. □

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