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US Labour Movement

The split in the AFL-CIO

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To get to this year's heated AFL-CIO convention in Chicago, you had to walk the length of the newly remodeled Navy Pier, past a funhouse complete with a massive maze of mirrors. Watching people lost in confusion inside the maze, it was hard not to think about the tangled mess that was unfolding a hundred yards away.

Fallout from the late July departure of three of the AFL-CIO's largest unions - Service Employees (SEIU), Teamsters (IBT), and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) - has yet to be sorted out. The new Change to Win Coalition (CTW) and the AFL-CIO continue to react and counter-react to each other's thrusts and parries.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/AFLleaders.jpg>]

Mainstream AFL-CIO leaders, including President John Sweeney (left)

But what is clear is that the drama of the split has generated a good deal more focus, attention, and (more) talk about the depth of the crisis of U.S. unions than the so-called Great Debate about strategy and structure mounted over the last year. Labor activists' and rank-and-file members' reactions range from concern or anger about the split's dangers, to a hope that finally something is going to shake up labor's out-of-touch leadership, to a simple shrug of the shoulders.

Active members report a great deal of buzz about the split, even among members who are not usually interested in union affairs. Dan Campbell, Teamsters Local 200 representative in Milwaukee and a member of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), says, "The split has generated more talk about labor than any other in recent memory. You know the Change to Win Coalition has certainly raised right issues. I'm just not sure [the split] was the right response."

SHAKE UP?

Though SEIU President Andy Stern defended the need to split from a federation he described as "pale, male, and stale," many members and observers are confused about what differences exist between the two sides. Newly-adopted programs about mergers, leadership diversity, political mobilization, and industry-wide bargaining/organizing strategies sound virtually the same from both sides.

Bob McNattin, a ready-mix concrete driver in Minnesota and Teamsters Local 615 member, points out the irony of the Teamsters acting as a force for change in the labor movement. He compares CTW's actions to the kind of dissent and forced accountability that reform groups like TDU force on their unions.

"They are doing what we always do-hold their feet to the fire," says McNattin. "It will make for an interesting time for us in TDU this year. [The International] has always branded us as the 'dissidents' and 'splitters.' Now what are they going to call us?"

Leaders on both sides are eager to portray themselves as the voice for change and reform.

In his acceptance speech for his (uncontested) nomination as AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer, Richard Trumka evoked his old ties to the union reform efforts of the Miners for Democracy caucus and its murdered leader Jock Yablonski,

who, he said, “died fighting for...a more democratic union.”

But questions remain about how this talk will translate to action. Will union leaders be open to local members' efforts to democratize and revitalize their unions? Will new programs build enough power and leverage to fight concessions? How serious are leaders about pushing the pace and scale of change?

PARTNERSHIP

Recent remarks made by CTW and AFL-CIO leaders add to the confusion by emphasizing the need for both aggressive new organizing and greater cooperation between unions and employers. In a post-split interview with CNBC, Stern remarked that, “we need to build a new, dynamic, modern, flexible, innovative labor movement that can be good partners with our employer and we started down that road last week [with the split].”

When asked about the difference between CTW and the AFL-CIO Stern replied: “Our labor movement was built around an industrial economy back in the 1930s. It was sort of a class struggle kind of unionism, but workers in today's economy are not looking for unions to cause problems; they're looking for them to solve them.”

AFL-CIO's Organizing Director Stewart Acuff zigged and zagged in the same interview. While criticizing CTW for taking a more cooperative tack with Republicans, Acuff went on to praise labor-management cooperation at Southwest Airlines as an example of how unions can have more peaceful relations with an employer. According to Acuff, problems in the airline industry (which is currently wracked with strife over how to mount an effective fight over concessions) “[have] a lot more to do with the cost of fuel than it does [with the] relationship between the employers and the employees.”

ONE PROGRAM, TWO FEDERATIONS?

Weeks before the convention, the AFL-CIO Executive Council put forth proposals similar to the core principles floated by CTW, in an effort to stave off the split. Many of these were voted up, with little amendment, on the convention floor, despite the absence of many representatives from CTW unions.

CTW spokespeople continued to emphasize the differences, claiming that the AFL-CIO's new planks were merely lip service or “too little, too late.” One SEIU local staff person commented more candidly that “it was more like [CTW was] moving the goal posts each time [the AFL-CIO] got close.”

One amendment created new bodies, Industry Coordinating Committees (ICC), to address the lack of coordination and unity between unions in particular industries (or at a single large employer or in an occupation).

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/HoffaStern.jpg>]

Split leaders James Hoffa Jr (front) leader of the Teamsters and Mike Stern

The ICC's will be charged with building joint bargaining and organizing strategies across multiple unions in an industry-supposedly regardless of national affiliations. Under the plan, unions that undercut other unions in the industry with “substandard contracts” will be penalized.

Stern had called the freefall of the heavily unionized airline industry the “prime exhibit” for the lack of a strategically

oriented labor movement. He contended that an industry divided among crafts and subdivided among a dozen unions, without a coordinated strategy to deal with employers, is a major factor in the hundreds of millions of dollars of union concessions made since 2001.

Joe Uehlein, a former staffer for the AFL-CIO Strategic Approaches Committee, agrees that a breakdown in industrial focus and unity has factored into labor's decline. Uehlein believes that the ICC's represent "a serious effort."

Other planks lifted from the CTW playbook (if tweaked) were resolutions and amendments for industry-wide strategies, strategic voluntary union mergers, joint organizing initiatives, and a new political program. The political program would move away from bi-annual "get out the vote" and candidate support (in the main for Democrats) to a year-round mobilization effort focused more on legislation.

FLASHPOINTS

Many leaders and activists express concern that the split will cripple Central Labor Councils (CLC), state federations, and other local and regional bodies.

While some CLCs and state federations do little more than mobilize union members around political campaigns, some activists worry that the split will undermine the coordinating role that these bodies can play around local strikes and workplace campaigns.

SEIU, the Teamsters, and the UFCW attempted to stay in these local bodies after the split, only to have the AFL-CIO Executive Council forbid CLCs and state feds from allowing the participation of disaffiliated unions.

This ban raised the hackles of many local leaders. Some convention delegates stated that they would defy the ban by setting up bodies that would allow the full participation of all local unions, regardless of affiliation.

The AFL-CIO Executive Council reversed its position in early August. Its new proposal allowed now-independent local unions to affiliate with CLCs, which would issue special "solidarity charters."

The local would then have to pay dues plus a 10 percent "solidarity bonus" to help offset the cost of services provided by the national AFL-CIO. This money would go into the special fund set up at the convention to help local bodies hurt by the split.

One of the terms of the proposal was that the reaffiliated locals would have to pledge to work to reaffiliate their internationals with the AFL-CIO. This provoked a sharp response from CTW Chair Anna Burger, who stated that the proposal "uses the rhetoric of unity, but is designed to provoke unnecessary division."

Since that rejection, a number of CLC leaders are now shifting their anger back to CTW. Jeff Crosby, president of the North Shore Central Labor Council in Massachusetts, said that "Burger's tone was a slap in the face to central labor council leaders wanting to keep this whole thing together. If this continues it will be more and more difficult to keep CLCs together."

Another fear is that the split will lead to wide-scale raiding across the new divide. few instances have already become flashpoints, fueling the anger of leaders on both sides.

A dispute around the United Domestic Workers, an AFSCME affiliate, stoked conflict as early as the convention itself (see page 8). An AFSCME delegate received a standing ovation by angrily responding to a letter from Andy Stern that stated SEIU no longer was bound by the anti-raiding rules of the federation.

Reformers in the Teamsters also point to the danger sign contained in a directive from the IBT International. The memo discourages locals from raiding, yet sets forward a procedure for locals to raid if a union in a particular industry has a “substandard contract.”

UNITY FROM BELOW

While the rift at the top widens, awareness of the need to strengthen joint activity and solidarity seems to be growing at the grassroots. Organizations and campaigns that pull members in across union lines may play a greater role in keeping linkages alive.

Sensing the danger of a divided federation, Jobs with Justice issued a national statement before the split: “[JWJ] will continue to commit to building power for workers and communities. We will continue to work with any and all organizations that support these principles.”

This article was originally posted at [Labor Notes](#)

APPENDIX

BEHIND THE SPLIT IN THE AFL-CIO

Chis Kutalik

Behind the war of personalities and the big ideas of the dueling AFL-CIO and Change to Win (CTW) leaders, a story emerges that portrays the split as a play for power as much as it was about differences between the two camps. The keys to the split were dues rebates and presidential succession.

In an internal memo to the staff of the AFL-CIO, Robert Welsh, executive assistant to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, shines light on the backroom conversations that were happening in the leadup to the split. While Welsh may have had political reasons to circulate the memo, it provides a glimpse into the high-level pre-split negotiations.

Welsh wrote that there was “little or no difference in the final positions” between AFL-CIO and CTW leaders, except for two sticking points. The first was Teamsters President James Hoffa's insistence that the per capita dues paid by the Teamsters (IBT) to the AFL-CIO be cut by no less than half.

NEW PRESIDENT

The second was about who would succeed Sweeney. Many do not expect Sweeney, who is 71, to finish the full term he was re-elected to, and say that the real fight was over his successor.

Steelworkers President Leo Gerard told the Cleveland Plain Dealer that when the CTW wanted a 50 percent dues rebate, Sweeney supporters countered with an offer of 25 percent. Gerard said that the CTW was “willing to take a smaller rebate if they could pick Sweeney's successor.”

According to Joe Szczesny, who writes about labor for the Daily Oakland Press, CTW leaders had agreed to back Sweeney's re-election before the convention, but balked at allowing his successor to be chosen by the AFL-CIO Executive Council. CTW leaders saw this as a maneuver to ensure that Richard Trumka, the current AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer, would become the next president. CTW argued for a weighted vote that would give larger unions a greater say.

NO RANK-AND-FILE INPUT

Members in unions on both sides have raised questions about how top leaders handled decision-making around the split. Many key decisions were made with little to no consultation with members.

“Something had to be done to shake up this thing we call the labor movement,” said Scott Schroeder, a rank-and-file member of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 588 in California. “Not one time did reps come into stores telling members of the plan to exit the AFL-CIO—no letters, nada.”

“Most members had no clue any of this was even happening until they received their after-the-fact letters from [Local President] Jacques Loveall.”

In the pages of their newsletter, Teamster Leader, IBT officials stated that their decision to withdraw from the AFL-CIO “was reached as a matter of principle, after a lengthy and thoughtful process.” However, reformers are raising sharp questions about how long and how thoughtful this process was.

LENGTHY PROCESS?

Indeed, the Leader itself noted that on the day of the split, the IBT Executive Board met at 11 a.m to approve Hoffa's motion to disaffiliate. At 11:45 Hoffa announced the disaffiliation to IBT delegates, and he was at the CTW's press conference announcing the split by 1 p.m.

Sandy Pope, president of Teamsters Local 805 in Long Island, New York, circulated an open letter calling on the board to reverse its decision until there was a “broader discussion.” Pope wrote that: “The AFL-CIO is not just a national body. Many [IBT] locals and joint councils are affiliated with state and local labor councils. Any move that could seriously jeopardize the cooperative relationships needed to conduct strike support, coordinated bargaining, and political action deserves consideration by a wide range of local officers and concerned members.”