

# Gunfight at the far from OK corral

The AFL-CIO's national conference held from 25 - 28 July in Chicago was supposed to mark the 50th anniversary of the merging of the American Federation of Labour (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955. Instead of celebrating unity, the conference saw the breakaway of the AFL-CIO's two largest affiliates and the boycotting of the conference by others. The **Labour Bulletin** reviews some of the reports of what happened at the conference.

A search of the AFL-CIO website after the conference provides very little of what went on behind the scenes. Instead, it was business as usual as various reports and pictures depicted the victorious leaders of the federation:

*'With boisterous acclamation from a roaring 2000-strong crowd of union delegates and guests, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka and AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson were re-elected as the nation's top leaders of America's union movement.*

*In nominating Sweeney for president, AFT President Edward McElroy said: 'There is a new spirit in the labour movement. This federation is in fighting shape. [Sweeney] has a plan for the future. He is not one for bluster and stealing the spotlight, he is a man of substance and a tireless fighter for workers throughout the world.' The Sweeney team, first elected in 1995, has worked over the past months to develop a historic plan to improve the ability of the union movement at all levels to organize and mobilize its members for political action.*

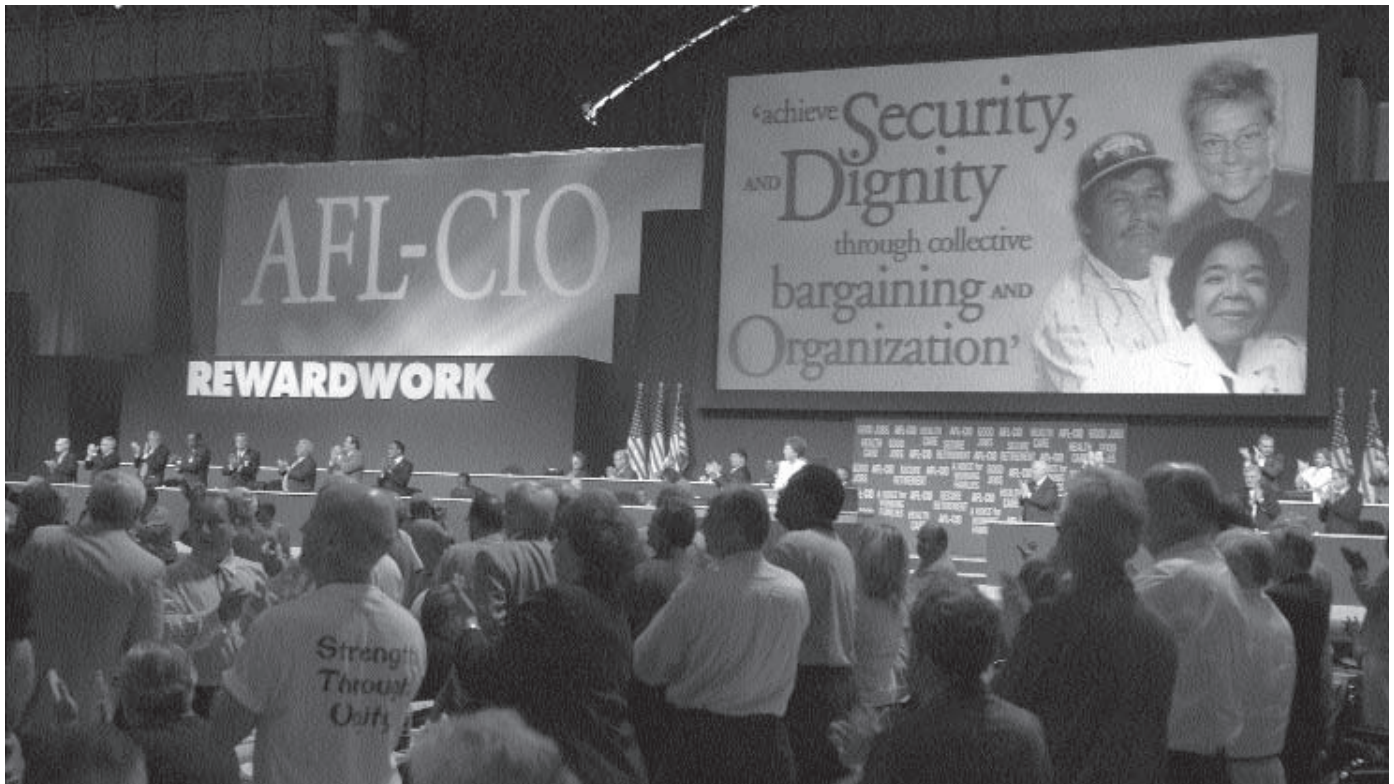
*The team's plan, adopted by Convention delegates, calls for major structural changes in the federation to better enable the union movement to fight back against 30 years of corporate assault, abetted by lawmakers who frequently do the bidding of Big Business and compounded by massive global economic changes. It also provides extensive new resources for organizing and creates a year-round political mobilization. Delegates also today approved several measures to ensure a strong future for the union movement, passing several constitutional amendments and resolutions changing the structure of the federation's governing bodies.'*

What was not on the website was the decision by four of the AFL-CIO's major

affiliates – Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers International (UFCW) and UNITE HERE (representing textiles and hotel workers) – not to attend the conference as well as the decision by SEIU and Teamsters (the union serving transport workers led by James Hoffa, son of controversial union boss Jimmy Hoffa) to disaffiliate from the federation. These two unions together have a membership of over three million which accounts for about one-third of the federations' total membership. Aside from the impact of membership, the financial implications could also be severe. The SEIU and the Teamsters together contribute around \$20-million a year in affiliation fees out of the federation's total budget of \$125-million.

These unions (with threats from others) have set up a rival organisation, Change To Win, which they hope will be better placed to address the long-term decline in union membership. These unions have argued that they no longer have any confidence in the leadership, which they claim has spent too little time trying to boost union membership in the high growth service sector. Sweeney accused the breakaway unions of a 'gross insult' to working people.

Challenge to the Sweeney reign emerged some time ago when the SEIU developed a view on how to reverse the downward slide of unions. At the heart of their position, as promoted by SEIU leader Andy Stern, was how the federation was spending its money. The likes of SEIU believes that more should be ploughed back into unions for organising so as to reverse the downward trend. The federation currently spends in the region of \$44-million (R280-million) on political lobbying with the majority going to the Democratic Party. Surprisingly, a large number of the federations' membership vote



Republican. Around a third of the 13 million members of the AFL-CIO voted for Bush in the 2004 presidential election and probably resent that their dues are spent supporting Democratic causes. The SEIU's main proposals include the following:

- the mergers of national/international unions so that there was less competition and a better use of resources; and
- the focus of unions on organising workers in their core areas, i.e. unions organising workers that they have traditionally organised rather than taking a scattered approach to organising.

Long time trade unionist and activist Bill Retcher argued that the issues raised by SEIU were important, but largely secondary to the greater challenge facing organised labour. *'Missing from the SEIU analysis (and virtually anything else that has subsequently appeared from either SEIU, its allies or its opponents) have been issues including a clear understanding of the forces of capitalism that workers are up against, including but not limited to globalisation; the manner in which the US government has shifted more and more to the Right and become increasingly hostile to workers and their unions; how unions should organize critical regions like the US South and Southwest, and particularly how to ally with African Americans and Latinos in these regions in order to be successful; how to engage in political action in such a way that*

*working people can advance an agenda and candidates that represent their interests and not simply the institutional interests of unions or established political parties; the continued relevance of fighting racism, sexism and other forms of oppression and intolerance if workers are to ever unite; how to work with and build mutual support with workers in other countries; and the critical importance of joining with others to fight for democracy.*

*I have not seen any of these issues addressed. Instead, the fight focuses on arcane issues such as whether the AFL-CIO should give larger or smaller rebates to unions that are allegedly organizing, and whether the AFL-CIO Executive Council should be larger or smaller. These contentious debates make a dangerous assumption: that the decline of unions is largely the fault of the structure of the AFL-CIO and/or how the AFL-CIO has operated. It ignores something around which most union leaders are in denial: the problems facing the union movement are with the way that unions in the US see themselves; their lack of a mission and strategy; and their blindness to the real features of the barbaric society that is unfolding before our eyes'*

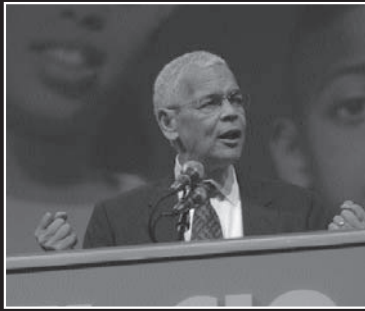
#### WHERE TO NOW?

A number of observers have asked whether the split will weaken US labour further – both on the shopfloor and in the political arena – at a time when membership continues to be

eroded through outsourcing and competition from abroad. *The Economist* in a recent edition argued: 'Though the split may in part be driven by personality clashes and power struggles among the union barons, to some degree it makes sense for the labour movement to divide and pursue two contrasting strategies. Many of the unions that are sticking with the AFL-CIO represent manufacturing workers, who feel threatened by free trade and thus want their unions to lobby for protectionism on Capitol Hill. Others represent public-sector employees, for whom political muscle is also important: the election victories of Republican governors in Missouri and Indiana last year led to the scrapping of collective-bargaining deals in both states. The breakaway unions operate predominantly in private, service-sector firms, whose priority is gaining members, and thereby recognition, in growing, non-union firms, as opposed to political campaigning.'

*The Economist* does however, point out that: 'In the long history of the struggle between capital and labour, one of the principal weapons wielded by the latter is solidarity. After all, workers of the world that unite have nothing to lose but their chains. So it is perhaps surprising that in America, where capitalism is reddest in tooth and claw, that the workers should have concluded that the best way to offset the power of the bosses is through schism.'

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**Leon Lynch**  
Vice President steelworkers – USA



**Julian bond** NAACP  
Executive Chairman USA



**Tony Padilla** assistant National Legislative  
Director, TCU – USA

## Movement with soul

A number of activists have argued that the US labour movement has yet to have a real debate on its future vision. **Michael Kazin** argues that aside from a vision, it has yet to articulate what kind of society the movement is fighting for.

*'A movement, however laudable and externally worthy, is bound to fail if it has no soul.'*

*Frank Roney, union organiser in 19th-century California*

The union movement faces many well-known challenges today – from the power of global corporations to an unfriendly administration in Washington, DC, to a lack of media coverage about workers' grievances and what unions can do to remedy them. But in addressing these issues, American labour activists face a nagging problem of their own: an apparent inability to put forth a compelling vision of what kind of society their movement is fighting for.

This was not a problem for unionists when they were struggling to gain a foothold during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Declaring that 'labour creates all wealth', artisans and factory workers demanded recognition and respect from the 'parasitic classes' above them. Eugene Debs spoke of a future 'cooperative commonwealth' in which no one would exploit the labour of others.

Organisers for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) defined Americanism as the right of workers to speak freely, join unions and go on strike—and compared such anti-labour employers as Henry Ford to the 'Tories' who sided with the British Empire in 1776. A belief

in industrial democracy helped embolden workers of all races to sacrifice for change and often put their foes, whether bosses or politicians, on the defensive.

But by the middle of the last century, when unions finally achieved a measure of success and power, their spokespeople largely stopped talking about their ultimate ends. With collective bargaining the rule for a large minority of wage earners, the old battle cries sounded overly confrontational or just old-fashioned. Rare was a figure like César Chávez, who viewed the California farmworkers' struggle as 'La Causa', a demand for cultural dignity and a decent life as much as for union recognition itself.

The labour movement needs to revive that sort of vision, which a little-known Irish-born organiser once called its 'soul'. Too many Americans – whether wage-earners or not – assume unions care only about getting more money and benefits for their members and embrace or reject them on that basis alone. In the current environment, labour's men and women will have to make a larger, more soulful argument if they hope to convince millions of working people to join a union and persuade the public at large to defend their choice.

What should that argument be? It's time, I think, to call again for workplace

democracy. On the job, most people are not free to exercise their rights under the First Amendment or to have a say, through elected representatives, about the conditions under which they work. Every day, in a nation that is supposed to be 'of the people, by the people, and for the people', millions of Americans spend most of their waking hours in petty tyrannies, large or small.

Most workers think there is no alternative to this hypocritical order. Corporations such as Wal-Mart spend tens of millions of corporate dollars to make their thorns of control smell like roses.

But the labour movement could start to convince Americans that it doesn't have to be that way. With concrete examples of outrages and the soaring rhetoric of popular rule, unionists could inspire non-union workers and draw the attention of reporters who think labour only knows how to play defence, and meekly. In so doing, the movement would reclaim one of its proudest traditions – making our country live up to its best ideals.

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