

Inside the house that John tried to rebuild: battles in the AFL-CIO



Union leaders in the US face huge pressure to address the crisis facing organised labour as unionisation continues to decline – currently to 12,5% of the workforce or 7,9% if you only count the private sector. The crisis has caused huge tensions and divisions within the AFL-CIO. **Harold Meyerson** reports on these developments and the upcoming AFL-CIO conference.

On 3 May, 167 of the AFL-CIO's 426 employees reported to work to find that their positions had been eliminated. Whole divisions were being scrapped, publications abolished, programmes terminated. Some departments were being consolidated, and 61 new positions being created within them, but the house that AFL-CIO President John Sweeney had built was, by Sweeney's own decree, being partially torn down.

Two days later, many of the staff gathered to meet with Sweeney and his chief of staff,

Bob Welsh. Amid understandable wailing and gnashing of teeth, Welsh was emphatic about one point: Those who had lost their jobs should direct at least some of their anger at a coalition of insurgent unions who had put forward various proposals to reduce the staff complement of the federation. Unions representing 40% had demanded that the federation all but dismantle its existing structure in order to devote half its resources to organising. Sweeney and his supporters had rejected these moves, but now, facing the possibility that some of those unions might

leave the federation altogether, they were instituting a smaller (\$15m) organising programme of their own, which was one reason for the retrenchments.

With a sometimes-startling ferocity, union leaders are accusing one another of indifference to the erosion of labour's strength and a chronic incapacity to do anything about it. While the first accusation is largely bogus, the second is sadly true - save for a handful of unions that have transformed themselves into successful organising machines. Today, the leaders of



some of those unions have embarked on a campaign - which may take the form of a rancorous challenge to Sweeney's re-election - to reshape the movement along the lines of their own organising-oriented unions. At the same time, some of them are threatening to leave the AFL-CIO if Sweeney prevails - a parting likely to weaken labour's vaunted political operation and possibly set union against union in a scramble for members. It's a moment of both peril and opportunity for labour, though peril looms as much the larger of the two.

ORIGINS OF THE TENSION

It's nearly a year since Andy Stern, the president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), first threw down the challenge to Sweeney and the AFL-CIO, telling delegates gathered in San Francisco for the union's quadrennial convention that it was time either to 'change the AFL-CIO or build something stronger'. Of all the attacks Sweeney had weathered, this might have been the unkindest cut. The SEIU was his old union, and Stern had been the young firebrand whom Sweeney had plucked out of a Harrisburg, Pennsylvania local 25 years

earlier and promoted to organising director. Stern had done his job too well - while the rest of the labour movement was shrinking, the SEIU doubled its membership during Sweeney's tenure to 1.2 million, adding an additional 600 000 new members since Stern succeeded him in 1996. It was now the federation's largest affiliate, home to 11% of the federation's members and source of 11% of the federation's budget. And now Stern was hurling ultimatums. The federation had to put vastly more money into organising and compel the merger of smaller unions, unable to organise, into larger ones. Either the AFL-CIO would shape up or the SEIU would ship out.

And not just the SEIU. For several years, it had allied itself with a number of other unions with ambitious and successful organising programmes. The unions included the Labourers, headed by Terry O'Sullivan; the Union of Needletrades, Textiles and Industrial Employees (UNITE), headed by Bruce Raynor; and the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (HERE), headed by John Wilhelm (the latter two merging in 2004 as UNITE-HERE). Alarmed by labour's decline, these leaders had long been calling

on the AFL-CIO to do more to address the crisis.

As early as 2002, Wilhelm asked the federation to consider a huge campaign, beyond the capacity of any one affiliate, to unionise Wal-Mart, America's largest employer, whose policies and practices reduced the living standards not only of its own 1.2 million employees but of countless others at its thousands of suppliers and subcontractors. With labour under assault, Wilhelm said, unions had to make tough choices. The federation, he argued, should be spending 75% of its budget on politics and organising. This was war; sacrifices would have to be made. 'We have to blow up the AFL-CIO bureaucracy,' he told a Los Angeles labour forum in February. 'The staff should be cut by at least 50%'.

At the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in March, the insurgents presented their proposal that the federation rebate half the dues (affiliation fee) payments of those unions with substantial organising campaigns in their core industries. If unions were to grow, every dollar not spent directly or indirectly on organising was a dollar wasted.

Vegas proved to be a bloody ground. A

coalition of unions representing 60% of the federation's membership beat back the insurgents' resolution. Led by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Communications Workers of America (CWA), the majority grouping argued that serious organising was impossible given the erosions in labour laws once intended to protect unions' rights to organise. The proper goal of the AFL-CIO, this faction argued, should be to elect a Democratic Congress and president who would pass new laws permitting workers to organise again.

To that end, the executive council, in a meeting marked by rancorous exchanges between Stern and AFSCME President Gerald McEntee, passed a resolution doubling the size of its political budget.

Stern, whose union has organised 49 000 child-care workers in Illinois and 41 000 home-care workers in Michigan, said: 'Other than when jobs are going overseas there's not an employer where - with enough time, money, and strategy - you don't have a legitimate shot at building a union. Others think you have to legislate ourselves out of the problem - elect friendly officials, pass labour-law reform. We think you have to grow your way out of the problem.' Stern is all but contemptuous of those leaders who despair of organising, calling them 'a group of leaders who are defeated, who believe they can't grow.'

SWEENEY UNDER THREAT

By the end of the Vegas meeting, the movement's cracks had widened to chasms. UNITE-HERE considered disaffiliation; Teamster officials talked secession, too. Sweeney returned from Vegas facing a double threat: Some unions were threatening to pull out, and Wilhelm was sounding out support for a challenge to Sweeney (whose current term will be up at the AFL-CIO's July convention in Chicago). The threats were interconnected: If Sweeney couldn't keep the unions from leaving, perhaps Wilhelm could.

In April, Sweeney's problems were compounded when four of the insurgent unions - the SEIU, UNITE-HERE, the Teamsters, and the Labourers - abruptly moved to dismantle the crown jewel of the

federation's operation, its political programme. They informed the federation that they were withdrawing the names of their members from the AFL-CIO's political files, the computerised list with which labour wages its national, state, and local campaigns. The action threatens to undermine the foremost voter-mobilisation campaign in the Democratic Party's universe.

Facing mounting threats, Sweeney responded. The May retrenchments, he announced were part of a massive restructuring of the federation along the lines that his critics had suggested. In addition to the \$15m set aside for organising, he called for the establishment of Industry Coordinating Committees to plan organising campaigns, like the Wal-Mart effort, that no one union could take on. 'If this had happened two years ago, the NUPsters would have applauded,' one federation insider noted. But the dissident leaders quickly made clear that Sweeney's reforms were too little too late and that Sweeney himself had become the issue. This was made clear during a Teamster conference in May where Stern, Wilhelm, Raynor, O'Sullivan, and Teamsters President James Hoffa made cumulatively clear the growing intensity of the split in labour. 'The American labour movement at the level of the AFL-CIO has lost its way,' Wilhelm told the Teamsters.

Ever since the merger of UNITE and HERE, Wilhelm had been the logical candidate to challenge Sweeney. His credentials as an organiser and strategist were beyond dispute. It was Wilhelm who persuaded the AFL-CIO to reverse its historic opposition to undocumented immigrants and to become, in fact, the nation's leading advocate of immigrant rights. Unlike Stern, he had taken care to maintain good relations with most of his fellow union presidents. As AFL-CIO presidents are elected by the presidents of the federation's affiliated unions, and not the rank and file (which means just 15 men determine the outcome of the election), this was no small virtue.

For American labour, the season of blood and knives has arrived. Longtime allies have turned on one another; personal relationships have frayed. Sweeney himself, endeavouring to hold things together, ascribes some of the tension to the times. 'We have to understand,'

he said, 'that the political climate of the past four and a half years is the worst in modern labour history. It's made us angry and frustrated.'

ATTACK ON LABOUR

Indeed, whole sectors of organised labour look to be on the brink of crumbling. Airline unions are powerless to stop the shredding of their members' contracts. The once-mighty United Automobile Workers (UAW) is stuck in an industry whose two largest employers, General Motors and Ford, seem poised for huge cutbacks. The Bush administration is gunning for unions as well.

Even at the time of the merger, a small number of labour leaders, particularly, the UAW's legendary Walter Reuther saw that unions had to do radically more to boost their membership, which had not grown as a percentage of the workforce for a decade. Reuther's sense of urgency was not widely shared, as Solomon Barkin, the in-house intellectual for the old Textile Workers Union, noted in a brilliant paper, prefiguring today's debate, that he wrote in 1961. Unions were resting their great organising drives of the 30s and 40s at their own peril, Barkin argued. The economy was growing in those sectors where unions were missing.

Barkin's fears proved prophetic. For 40 years after the merger, the AFL-CIO, and most of the union movement it headed, was indifferent to organising. In the 60s efforts were made to organise public sector workers but the decline of private-sector unionism continued unchecked. Not until 1995, after two decades of decline, when Sweeney ousted longtime AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland on a platform of boosting labour's organising and political clout, did the federation even turn its full attention to the challenge of rebuilding the movement.

For a time, all was bright. Hiring Steve Rosenthal as the AFL-CIO's political director, Sweeney poured resources and talent into the federation's election work. Labour's political programme became the model for all voter-mobilisation efforts, and by 2000, labour's share of the electorate had risen to 26% (from 14% in the last Kirkland-era election of 1994). Sweeney created an organising department within the federation, and he

raised the organising budget, for a while, at least, to 30% of total expenditure and set that goal for member unions. He told affiliate unions that labour needed to grow by a million members a year for the next 20 years to regain its strength at the time of the merger.

Only a handful of unions have reached the 30% target, and many unions have abandoned organising altogether. The unions that have made the change to organising mode come from both the pro- and anti-Sweeney camps: the SEIU, UNITE-HERE, and the Labourers among the oppositionists; AFSCME and the CWA among supporters; and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose presidential preference remains murky. But changing to organise entails persuading members to increase their dues heavily to fund such a transformation, the hiring and/or training of hundreds of organisers, and the development of crack corporate research teams. Though the AFL-CIO organising department has offered excellent training programmes, most unions haven't been willing to make that leap.

In the eyes of his critics, Sweeney did not push his colleagues hard enough for change. Raynor calls him 'a consensus builder'. When Stern (SEIU) began arguing that the AFL-CIO should abandon a search for consensus, a debate erupted over the how-tos of union organising. CWA executive vice-president Larry Cohen and a number of other CWA leaders criticised the SEIU for top-down organising, arguing that educating and mobilising the rank and file, through a system of hyperactive shop stewards, is the only way to ensure union democracy and growth. In the CWA's view, the SEIU moves more like an army than a democratic union.

But it moves. Cohen's arguments aren't entirely wrong, but they are prescriptions for disengagement with the bulk of the American workforce until such time as the law changes or American workers revolt en masse.

SWEENEY'S SUCCESSOR

As president of HERE since 1998, Wilhelm built what is surely the leanest union staff of any major international, hiring organisers and

corporate researchers in part through savings achieved by killing off other departments (health and safety among them). Wilhelm taking over the AFL-CIO might be a little like a guerrilla leader who's fought in the hills for many years finally occupying the capital.

Wilhelm's critics complain that his union is not merely lean but understaffed and disorganised, that Wilhelm's record as a manager leaves much to be desired. In many ways, a Wilhelm presidency would be less the negation of Sweeney's than its logical successor. An articulate speaker as well as a skilled negotiator, Wilhelm would provide the kind of public presence labour needs if it is to become more of a movement and less of a rickety federation incapable of the kind of death-defying organising campaigns it needs to survive.

But Wilhelm has yet to declare his candidacy. With most federation presidents still supporting Sweeney, the dissidents' campaign plan - other than to threaten the dissolution of the federation should Sweeney be re-elected - remains unclear. 'SEIU fouled up this campaign from the beginning,' one union leader said, when Stern raised the spectre of disaffiliation during the union's convention in July of 2004.

While the 71-year-old Sweeney is well liked personally by labour leaders across the spectrum, it was by no means a given that he could have engendered support for another term as AFL-CIO president before the current controversy began. When he took office in 1995, he pledged he'd serve for ten years, and it was widely expected he'd step down this July.

A few union presidents fairly bristle with cultural resentment at Stern, and, to a lesser degree, Raynor and Wilhelm, whom they see as having set themselves up as hip leaders in an otherwise square movement. 'Why did they do the NUP (a short-lived rebel coalition called the New Unity Partnership) thing at all?' one leader wonders. 'It came off as a clique, as guys who thought they were better than everybody else.'

On 16 May, a group of union leaders met to discuss alternatives to Sweeney. This group included the presidents of the AFT, the UFCW,

the Fire Fighters, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers. It's by no means a given that these unions would support a Wilhelm candidacy, but the meeting raised the prospect of yet another insurgency and even deeper problems for the AFL-CIO's current administration.

WAY FORWARD

If Wilhelm and unity do not prevail, what then? Whether the SEIU will disaffiliate by itself or with others is as yet unclear. Some union leaders believe that the SEIU is bluffing in order to gain leverage for Wilhelm's candidacy. If the dissident unions were to disaffiliate and set up a rival federation, what would be its guiding principles? The dissident unions may all argue for the imperative of organising, but while the SEIU, UNITE-HERE, and the Labourers have transformed themselves into kick-ass organising machines, the Teamsters and the UFCW have made no such transition. Similarly, the five unions occupy a fairly broad political spectrum.

Whatever the case, the act of disaffiliation is sure to complicate the life of the AFL-CIO's state federations and central labour councils that wage their political and lobbying campaigns with money and activists provided by the SEIU. The biggest question is whether disaffiliation will help labour grow. The resources that the SEIU would gain from not paying AFL-CIO dues come to a little more than \$10m a year - real money, but a small fraction of the SEIU's total organising budget. Labour needs to pool its resources, not divide them, to have even a chance to grow. It needs to redirect resources from unions and sectors and states where unions have maintained a presence to those sectors and states where they do not yet exist. It cannot wait until labour law is reformed to begin this project. Labour's present business, if it does not organise, is the business of dying.

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This is an edited version of an article entitled 'Labours' Civil War' written by Meyerson who is editor-at-large of The American Prospect. The article appeared on The American Prospect Online, 25 May 2005.