

New unity for labour?

*The current global order has put unions worldwide on the defensive and seeking ways to halt the decline in labours' power. Unions in the largest economy in the world are no exception with only 12.9% of US workers belonging to unions. **Ruth Milkman** and **Kim Voss** highlight some of the key debates taking place within the US labour movement as part of a process to ensure its survival.*

Nearly a decade ago, former SEIU president John Sweeney was elected as president of the AFL-CIO. This move generated widespread hopes that he would reverse labour's decline in the US. But the hopes have been short-lived.

The attempt to stem the long decline in the proportion of the workforce which is unionised, to which Sweeney's administration devoted enormous rhetorical and financial resources, has produced limited results. It succeeded briefly in stabilising (but not increasing) union density in the late 1990s, then the decline resumed with the turn of the century. By 2003, only 12.9% of all US wage and salary workers were union members. In the private sector density was only 8.2%.

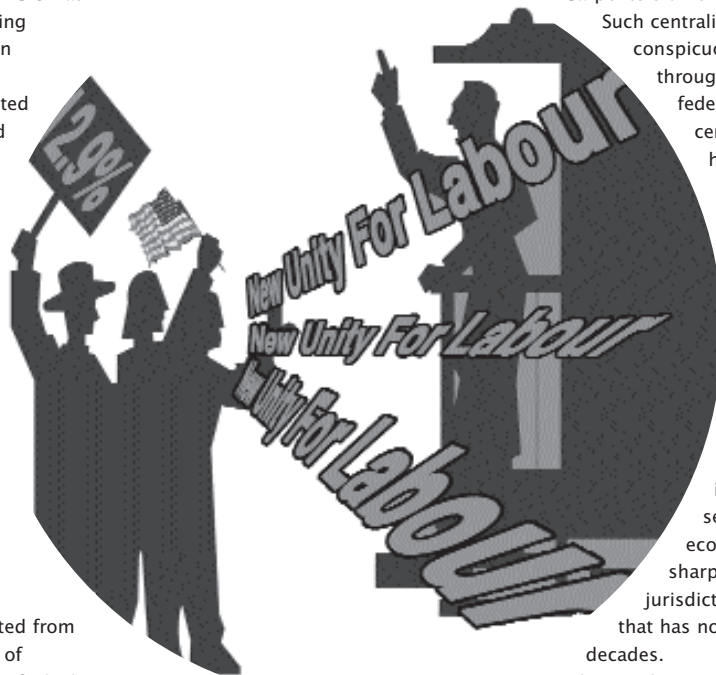
Indeed, the crisis – far from being solved – has been growing more and more severe, despite a decade-long



infusion of creative and sustained strategic thinking. The AFL-CIO has had four different organising directors since 1995, when Sweeney's administration began. All four were talented leaders who experimented with bold new approaches, yet none was able to reverse the relentless decline in union density, which virtually everyone agrees is a necessary condition for labour survival, much less revitalisation.

Faced with this dilemma, many activists and observers have come to believe that the basic structure of the AFL-CIO itself is a major obstacle to progress. The organisation was constituted from the outset as a federation of autonomous unions, each of which is free to act entirely independently in workplace, organising, politics and every other area of work. This means that even the most farsighted AFL-CIO leadership cannot impose its programme on the affiliates.

Sweeney can and does urge all the unions in the federation to adopt proven 'best practices' in the organising arena, for example, but very few have heeded his call. In the political arena, too, serious divisions remain, as this year's Democratic Party primary process vividly illustrated. The practical reality is that the AFL-CIO leadership, for all its inspiring rhetoric, simply cannot implement programmes or policies that *any* of its 60-odd affiliates – more than a few of which remain mired in the dinosaur age of 'business unionism' – find objectionable.



New Unity Partnership

Against this troubled background, a few leading apostles of union transformation have launched a bold new initiative, the 'New Unity Partnership' (NUP). Spearheaded by the giant SEIU, now the largest AFL affiliate, the NUP proposal has been the subject of intensive debate within labour circles over the past year. It advocates importing some of the structural changes that fostered the SEIU's growth and revitalisation over recent decades into the federation itself, along with other fundamental reforms.

If adopted, the NUP programme would radically alter the basic structure of the AFL-CIO, consolidating power at the top in the hands of the change-oriented unions (not only the

SEIU but also HERE, UNITE, the Carpenters unions and others). Such centralisation has been conspicuously absent throughout the federation's half-century-long history. The NUP aims to force multiple union mergers and designate clear responsibility among the resulting mega-unions for organising specific industries and sectors of the economy – a sharply defined jurisdictional division that has not existed for decades.

The NUP has not yet been formally unveiled, although draft documents have found their way onto the Internet. Many crucial details remain unclear, including the exact mechanisms of the proposed transformation. Perhaps the large NUP unions would break away from the AFL-CIO entirely and start a completely new national labour organisation or perhaps they would engineer an internal coup to take over the old structure and radically remake it from the top.

Divisions within the federation over the 2004 presidential primaries have diverted energy and attention from this agenda, yet those divisions themselves mirror the relationship of different national unions to the NUP programme. Ironically, the industrial unions – for an earlier generation of labour the fount of progressivism –

are the more conservative forces in the current debate. Not only are the NUP advocates from unions whose historic roots are in the old AFL, but the old CIO unions – motivated in part by ongoing concerns about trade and protectionism – lined up behind labour's old standard bearer, Richard Gephardt, when the SEIU and AFSCME supported Howard Dean and embraced his broader progressive agenda. Neither candidate made it as the Democratic nominee – perhaps another indication of labour's declining influence.

Divisions over NUP

Stephen Lerner, who directs the SEIU's Building Services Division, authored the most detailed published version of the NUP's controversial programme (in the 2003 *New Labor Forum*). Lerner and other leading thinkers were invited to debate labour's future by the UC Institute for Labor and Employment in Los Angeles and Berkeley in October last year. The following excerpts from that forum offer a window into the ongoing controversy and a range of perspectives on the NUP proposal. In addition to Lerner, the event featured:

- Kate Bronfenbrenner, a former union organiser now based at Cornell University, where she has spent the past decade documenting the efficacy of rank-and-file intensive tactics for overcoming the obstacles to successful organising.
- Jane Slaughter, the former editor of the Detroit-based *Labor Notes*, who has publicly critiqued Lerner's proposal for not sufficiently safeguarding or valuing internal union democracy.
- Dan Clawson, author of the 2003 book *The Next Upsurge*, who argues that labour must become a

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broader social movement (see SALB 27 (6), as it was in previous periods of union growth, by building alliances with other progressive social movements among women, immigrants, and community activists.

Forum debates

While the views of these four commentators do not always differ, their different emphasises, taken together, lay out the key issues facing the labour movement in this extremely difficult period.

Lerner argues that if the labour movement is going to survive, it has to reshape itself, build coalitions with other movements, and offer a new vision. Key to this is reviewing how the labour movement has chosen to structure itself. 'Just as in the 1930s the CIO insisted on a different model of organisation – industrial unions instead of craft unions – today we must restructure ourselves once again.

We not only need to revitalise the individual unions, but we also need to develop effective leadership and accountability structures for the movement as a whole.'

Lerner says, the current situation allows individual unions to do what they like. 'The AFL-CIO as a whole does not have any power. It is basically a bunch of separate fiefdoms, each of which can do anything it wants as long as it does not get indicted and pays-up the per

capita.' He says many of these fiefdoms are very small: There are 66 unions in the AFL-CIO, but once you get past the top 15 or so, the average membership is down to 50 000. The ten largest unions now account for about two-thirds of the entire membership. But because the AFL operates on consensus, all 66 unions have to think something is a good idea before change can be implemented.

Lerner says the most fascinating period in labour history was not the 1930s but from 1954 to 1979. It was an incredible period when organised labour's membership was increasing, but union density was declining. Unions continued to get more members in highly unionised industries during this long economic expansion, because employers did not fight that hard against them. He says it was a time of terrible self-deception, because membership was growing but without unions organising. Instead of unions that had their industry organised in the North following it to the South, they started to turn into general workers' unions. They said, 'Why should I have that brutal fight to organise in the South, when I can instead (and much more easily) pick up a few public sector workers...' Unions moved away from a model that said their job was to organise a specific industry and to take wages out of competition. By the late 1970s the unions had lost control of what gave unions power – their

ability to set and control wages.

'We have a profound choice to make: do we let the labour movement continue to fragment into a bunch of general unions that are jacks-of-all-industries and masters of none, or do we call for a radical restructuring of the AFL-CIO that takes us back to the approach of taking wages out of competition in individual sectors of the economy,' Lerner says. He believes unions can be a lot more effective if each union says: 'We're organising one industry; we're living, breathing, using our resources, mobilising our members, and using our density to try to break that industry.'

Another big challenge is to allow the labour movement as a whole to put together a strategy as to what individual unions cannot do. For example, everybody knows Wal-Mart is devastating the economy, yet no union in this country has said: 'It is

included the restructuring and consolidation of locals and the adoption of a policy mandating each local to regain the right to support other local's picket lines.

After a long internal debate, the New Strength Unity programme was passed at the 2000 SEIU convention with members voting to dramatically raise the amount of money dedicated to organising. The transformation of the locals has led, Lerner says, to a new level of activism never seen before. For example, when Local 32B-J in New York had their last contract expiration and strike vote, they filled Madison Square Garden with members. 'We also have more people in leadership that look like the members, in terms of race and gender.'

The transformation of building service locals is a model for what can happen in the labour movement as a

commitment, developing community and labour alliances, and making a real difference in workers' lives at work and at home. Building power also requires giving new members, primarily women and black people, a seat at the table and voice in the union once the union is won.

Bronfenbrenner highlights that some sectors are easier to organise than others. Rebuilding the labour movement could only be achieved, she argues, if unions, such as SEIU, UNITE, and HERE, who are having success in organising service workers, make a commitment to ensure organisation in manufacturing, high-tech and office workers. Such an approach would take time and require union education to ensure they concentrate on those areas where they have bargaining leverage and 'stop fighting about who's going to organise what.'

Many unions have never thought of using leverage with customers and suppliers to organise new members, she says. Nor had they sought their counterparts in the European headquarters of a company and asked them for support. She says that while employers have got more and more sophisticated, unions are not doing their bit by trying to research the companies they are organising in or even finding out who owns the companies.

Bronfenbrenner says unions should not just focus on organising at the expense of existing members for whom they had to ensure agreement on good contracts. She raises a number of other issues unions should focus on and take a stand on, such as the protection of immigrant workers, the dismantling of the constitution and affirmative action and the need to ensure the redistribution of wealth. Unions also have to focus more on

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my job, my future, my livelihood to organise Wal-Mart.' The labour movement has not developed a strategy for Wal-Mart, because of its dysfunctional structure. 'As long as we have a movement in which everybody can do their own thing and nobody can be held accountable, and there's no central way to make decisions, then there is no way to take on the largest corporation in the world,' he argues.

Lerner described how SEIU was restructured to meet the hard choices unions have to make. Major changes

whole. The efforts over the last 15 years have ensured union growth from 150 000 to almost 210 000 members.

Bronfenbrenner agrees that unions should focus on the jurisdictions where they have bargaining power. But power is about more than leverage, Bronfenbrenner argues. She says 'all the leverage in the world comes to naught if workers are unwilling to sign the cards or stay out on the picket line. Unions have to do the hard work of developing leadership, building solidarity and



union education and developing a vision. 'So I would say that putting resources into education is even more essential to labour's revitalisation than restructuring unions,' Bronfenbrenner says. Ultimately, however, 'whatever we do, we should not spend our resources attacking each other. We need to encourage debate, encourage experimentation, but not be so arrogant and foolhardy as to believe that any one of us has a magic formula or that those who do not agree with us have sold out.'

Slaughter begins with the point that everyone agrees on the need to organise but for what? She poses the question: 'What kind of unions with what kind of power are we trying to build?' She insists that simply building larger unions is not useful if those unions do not confront the employers. Union density is absolutely vital for union power – but unions with density also have to be willing to use their power.

She is therefore critical of 'organising' that attempts to win

recognition by assuring the employer that the union will neither mobilise workers nor increase the employers' costs. As unions become desperate to stem their membership losses, such strategies are becoming more common. As one example, she cites the United Auto Workers' attempts to win employer neutrality in organising drives by promising not to make those employers 'uncompetitive' if they are unionised.

Workers organised through such backroom deals are less likely to feel that the union belongs to them than are workers who have organised with their co-workers to confront the boss. New members quite naturally expect the union to act the same way after the organising campaign as it did during the campaign. If the union came in because union and management counterparts at headquarters made a deal, workers will understand that their role is to remain passive. If the 'campaign' went on without workers' leadership or even their participation, they will

expect the union to continue to function in this way. Too often, even current members refer to the union as 'them'.

This is not to say that unions should not seek employer neutrality. Neutrality is a huge boon to unionisation. But union leaders then need to pay special attention to how the resulting units can be owned by their members and to how they will confront management. 'If you are going to do that kind of organising, where workers are not the principal actors involved, it's even more important afterward for workers to have the democratic structure in their union that will enable them to feel that it's theirs, or to take it over if necessary.'

They need locals of manageable size, rank-and-file councils of locals within the same employer, the right to reject contracts and have that rejection respected (no 'vote until you get it right'), and a union structure not dominated by staffers.

Slaughter says that when unions organise through neutrality, the following questions can give an idea of the power relations that are likely to result: Are workers playing an active role in helping to determine the strategy, at least at the local level? Is the union using its ability to hurt the employer in order to extract the neutrality pledge – for example, its power in a related bargaining unit? If the union is making concessions in order to get neutrality, do the current members support that tack, and will the concessions handicap the union in the future? If the union is offering management a contract in advance, is it a sweetheart deal? Is the structure of the new bargaining unit such that workers can exercise their power, or will decision-making be controlled largely from above? Will the union

devote resources to developing leaders in the new unit, or will they just be moving on to the next target?

Clawson outlined some key developments in US labour history. More often than not, he says, union density is gradually declining, and once in a while a sudden burst of growth takes place. From 1933 to 1945 the number of union members increased more than fivefold, from less than 3 million to 15 million. And it was not just the number of union members that grew, he says. Labour's power grew even faster. Labour did not just buckle down and do a better job of what it had been doing all along. Instead, it was a time of rupture, of larger social, economic and political transformation. The labour movement created new forms and took on new issues, using new strategies and tactics.

If a labour movement is to maintain its vitality, Clawson says, it has to periodically renew itself in that way and connect to what is happening in the wider society. Since the last labour upsurge a number of things have happened that are significant when thinking about what a new kind of labour movement would need to take on, he says. These include:

- The number of women working for pay has increased dramatically, especially white married mothers.
- African-Americans used to be overwhelmingly concentrated in the rural south, but now they are more urban and geographically dispersed.
- The economy and labour movement, once driven overwhelmingly by blue-collar manufacturing, has shifted to a white-collar and service-sector economy, and one that relies more heavily on education.
- Immigration in the 1930s had been

reduced to a trickle, and most of that immigration came from Europe. As recently as 1960 only 6% of children were in immigrant families and two-thirds of those immigrants came from either Canada or Europe. Today more than 20% of children are in immigrant families and more than three-quarters of those families come from Latin America and Asia.

- The US economy was largely self-sufficient and US foreign policy for the most part avoided foreign entanglements except in Latin America and the Caribbean, in sharp contrast to today.

Other social movements since the 1960s have been centrally concerned with these various social changes, but not the labour movement. Perhaps the single greatest failure of the Left in the past half-century, Clawson claims, is the lack of connection between labour and the new social movements. That has drastically weakened the labour movement, contributing to its current state of ossification and insularity. And it also weakened the black, feminist, environmental, and student movements, limiting their working-class appeal.

Clawson argues that the following elements are necessary for a new burst of growth:

- Labour needs to strengthen its connection with other social movements. There have been some promising moves in that direction, like US Labour Against the War and the Immigrant Worker Freedom Ride, but many more such linkages need to be forged.
- Labour needs to create new forms of unionism, just as the CIO did. The CIO did not just reorganise the jurisdictional lines inside the existing AFL; it created a different kind of union. Similarly, today new

organisational forms are required – forms that break down the boundaries between unionism and the larger society. To mobilise people, labour activists need to think about the problems people actually face in their daily lives – and ask what kind of organisations can best deal with these problems.

- The labour movement needs to show a willingness to disrupt the normal functioning of society and the economy and to continue doing that until people with power make key concessions. The civil rights movement used civil disobedience. It was nonviolent, and it was inspirational, but what is often forgotten is that they kept going until they won. They did not have one sit-in and then go home after a few hours to watch the news. They kept having sit-ins until downtown businesses could not make money and gave in because they were feeling the economic pinch.

Clawson believes that if the labour movement could do 'those three things we will have the potential for a new upsurge of labour union growth, building a movement which can address the critical issues that have emerged since the last upsurge and making common cause with other social movements. If we cannot do these things, the night is upon us.'

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Milkman is the director of the University of California's Institute for Labour and Employment and professor of sociology at UCLA. Voss is professor and chair of sociology at UC Berkeley. Both Milkman and Voss have written extensively on labour issues. Their co-edited book, 'Rebuilding Labour: Organising and Organisers in the New Union Movement' is due for release in August 2004 from Cornell University Press.