

A Stern challenge to U.S. Labour: Change direction or die
By David Bacon

For almost a year, a debate has been growing within the US labor movement over its direction, structure, politics and vision. Previous attempts have been made to discuss the problems of labor in the post-McCarthy period, notably when the slate headed by current AFL-CIO President John Sweeney campaigned for office a decade ago. The current debate, however, is already more far-reaching, and has elicited formal contributions from many international unions, state labor federations, central labor councils, local unions, and individuals. (They are posted on the AFL-CIO website, <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutaflcio/ourfuture/proposals.cfm>)

This discussion was formally initiated at last summer's convention of the Service Employees International Union, when President Andy Stern called for deep structural change in US unions. He warned that while problems might be submerged through the election season in the interest of defeating President George Bush, they would reemerge afterwards, and could be put off no longer. Stern himself pushed that process along, when his union issued a 10-point proposal in December, called Unite To Win, which immediately stirred intense controversy. Other unions responded.

Almost every voice has agreed that labor today faces an unprecedented crisis, caused by the declining percentage of organized workers in the US workforce. Just after World War 2, unions represented 35% of US workers. By 1975, after the Vietnam War, it had dropped to 26%. Today only 12% of all workers, and 8% in the private sector, are union members.

SEIU's proposals cover a wide range of issues, but its most controversial items include giving the AFL-CIO the authority to require small unions to merge into ones large enough to have strength to bargain and organize, and to redivide jurisdictions, so that workers in the same industry would no longer be divided among a number of unions. In a recent interview on KPFA radio, Stern held up the west coast longshore

contract as a model, in which local unions in every port come together to negotiate one agreement with the entire shipping industry. "Contrast that with Kaiser," he said, where for a long time sixteen separate unions went their own way, and the strength of workers was divided. Or take the airline industry, where unions are divided by craft, by companies, by union and non-union. We have to look in the mirror and be honest. When we divide the strength of workers, and we don't have a united strategy, workers pay the price."

One response to the SEIU proposals comes from the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT's contribution, *Joining Voices*, notes that "despite unprecedented efforts in organizing, political mobilization and community outreach, organized labor in 2004 commands less power to save and secure good-paying jobs, expand collective bargaining rights throughout the economy, enact family-friendly national legislation and assure decent education, housing, healthcare and dignified retirement for American workers than at any time in more than half a century."

The AFT, like many unions, however, expresses reservations about forced mergers and changes in jurisdiction, while admitting that the goal of increased strength is a good one. "We are unaware of any reliable and valid objective data," the report says, "demonstrating that critical mass or density occurring within a single union as opposed to several results in better or poorer outcomes for any given segment of the workforce..." It calls for Industry Occupation Labor Centers, in which many unions could cooperate to organize and represent workers in a given industry, on a voluntary basis. "This approach relies on voluntarism and inclusion rather than exclusivity," it says. "The AFT's experience in pursuing merger with the NEA demonstrates the difficulties of moving such an agenda, even with the full support of the leadership of both national organizations. Any attempt to dictate .. would from the start be doomed to fail."

Other unions have expressed concern over the ability of rank-and-file union members to have a voice in the restructuring process, and exert adequate control over the proposed larger unions. Larry Cohen, vice-president of the Communications Workers of America, emphasizes that "strengthening the role of shop stewards and workplace mobilizers continues to be critical for collective bargaining, organizing and political action. In fact, without effective shop stewards, there is little likelihood that we will be successful in any

area. Union democracy is not a slogan, it must be a reality in everything we do."

Similar proposal for consolidating central labor councils and state federations, giving them staff appointed by the AFL-CIO, have elicited similar concerns. According to the North Carolina Federation of Labor, "democracy is the cornerstone of the labor movement at every level. The rank and file should have a voice in the direction of the labor movement," it says. "We believe strongly that having elected officers rather than appointed staff is critical."

"Workers are going to get a chance to vote no matter what we do," Stern responds. "But the truth is you have to have a certain amount of strength in this economy to deal with global or national employers. The question isn't whether we're going to take away rank-and-file democracy, it's whether we're going to have the strength in which democracy can be exercised."

Both SEIU and AFT proposals agree that organizing is a critical issue, and that it requires more support, but they have different ideas about where that support should come from. SEIU calls on the AFL-CIO to take the \$25 million annually that it receives from union credit card royalties, and use it to boost organizing. Wal-Mart should be the target, the union's proposal explains, because it has become a symbol of low-wage, no-benefit employment, affecting millions of workers in other jobs.

"When we think about auto, steel and rubber workers," Stern says, "before the 1930s and 40s they didn't have high skilled, high wage jobs. But they got a union, and a union job turned out to be a good job, where you could raise a family and enter the middle class. Wal-Mart jobs are not inherently bad jobs. Wal-Mart workers are not inherently unskilled people. They just work for a company that thinks it's more important to give the five Walton family members, who are each worth 20 billion dollars, another billion dollars a year, rather than to give every employee healthcare."

SEIU would have the AFL-CIO require affiliated unions to devote eventually 20% of their revenue to organizing, using a rebate of federation per capita payments as a reward.

Both SEIU and the AFT make a proposal calling for the creation of new unions in the now-vast sections of the US economy and geography where they don't exist. The AFT recalls that this was the method used when the United Mine Workers sponsored the creation of the Steelworkers Organizing Committee in the 1930s, or when the United

Auto Workers helped public workers and teachers get bargaining rights a few decades later. It calls its approach solidarity organizing. Unions created from scratch in industries like high tech, banking and insurance, or in regions like the south and southwest, might be able to defy injunctions and use innovative tactics, since they wouldn't have the buildings, funds and assets that established unions are often worried they might lose.

Contention grew much more heated over how unions should engage in politics, in the wake of George Bush's reelection last November. The AFT's proposal contains no specific recommendations for change, but presents A Peoples' Agenda, arguing that "labor's power, legitimacy and appeal are derived from enduring principles rather than from more-effective tactics and efficient structures." The items on the agenda include full employment and fair compensation, dignified work and dignified retirement, healthcare and leisure, quality public education and available child care for all, civil rights and economic opportunity, decent housing and quality public services, participation in the structure, processes and quality of work, and international solidarity upholding labor rights as human rights.

SEIU calls for reassessing labor's relationship with the Democratic Party. "Workers don't have a party right now that speaks clearly and precisely to their economic interests," Stern asserts. "Workers are looking for leadership on the economic issues that confront them every day, and don't see in either the Democrats or the Republicans the kind they want. It is up to our union and other unions to raise the question, Where are the organizations that speak for us? Can we change the ones that are there to be more responsive to workers? If not, what do we need to do? We're not going to win elections for workers when you don't have parties that run on platforms that mean much change in their lives."

While disagreeing intensely over possible changes in structure, there is a general feeling in most reform proposals that the social vision of the labor movement has become too limited. As a result, workers outside union ranks often don't feel inspired by the idea that an alternative to the present situation is possible, and that unions speak for it. The People's Agenda represents an effort to define that vision, placed in terms of New Deal style demands. "If what we stand for first is more powerful unions, card check and

neutrality, density and market share, we're going to continue to become even more marginalized, even when we win," it warns.

Stern has announced, however, that the discussion process must result in concrete changes, agreed at the AFL-CIO convention in July. He has threatened to leave the federation in the absence of a sufficiently far-reaching program. "We need to either change the AFL-CIO, or build something stronger," he warns. "We could do both -- it's not necessarily an either/or choice. But workers in this country need a fighting chance to change their lives. Unless we have organizations that are focused exclusively on doing that, we're in a desperate situation. Even if it means that our union or other unions go out and try it alone, I think that's better than continuing to go in the same direction."