

SIEU head says unions might be better off if Democrats lose

Criticism of Kerry-Edwards ticket quickly retracted

Kate Randall
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Andrew Stern, head of the 1.6-million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU), commented Monday that both organized labor and the Democratic Party might be better off if John Kerry were to lose the election.

Stern told the *Washington Post* that both the labor movement and the Democrats are “in deep crisis,” that the party lacks new ideas, and that a Kerry victory might stifle union and Democratic Party reform. He said Kerry’s election could hamper the “evolution” of the discussion within the party of such reform.

Stern’s statements came on the first day of the Democratic National Convention in Boston, and were at sharp odds with the air of unity being enforced at the stage-managed affair. Later that day, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney—in an attempt at damage control—told the *Post* that Stern’s comments were “not justified.”

Stern himself had retracted his criticisms of Kerry by the end of the day in an interview with CNN. And in a July 27 statement on the SEIU’s web site Stern writes: “There’s nothing I want more than a John Kerry victory. He’s spent a lifetime fighting for good jobs and strong families, and a Kerry victory is the biggest goal of our union right now.”

Despite this recantation, Stern’s criticisms are a sign of the growing alienation among working people from the Democratic Party’s right-wing, pro-war and anti-social policies. It is also an indication of nervousness within both the Democratic Party hierarchy and the trade union bureaucracy that this discontent may find expression outside the two big-business parties.

Truth be told, there is little danger of the SEIU pulling the plug on John Kerry. The union has pledged

\$65 million of its members’ dues money to promote the Democrats, and will send more than 2,000 union members to work full-time campaigning in a number of battleground states—the largest non-party expenditure ever in a national election by a non-party organization. The SEIU will also dispatch about 50,000 union “volunteers” to campaign just prior to and on Election Day.

It is also true that Stern’s statements were influenced less by genuine concern over the welfare of the union’s membership—the largest in the AFL-CIO—and much more by considerations of internal power struggles within the labor hierarchy. The Service Employees International Union, along with AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees), supported Howard Dean in the primaries, and came around to support John Kerry only when the Democratic Party elites had made it clear that he was their chosen candidate.

Stern has also threatened to break with the AFL-CIO and take the SEIU’s membership with him to form some new union apparatus. At the SEIU’s convention in San Francisco in June he stated, “Our employers have changed, our industries have changed, and the world has certainly changed, but the labor movement’s structure and culture have sadly stayed the same.” Despite such demagogic rumblings, however, Stern’s vision of a change of “structure and culture” in the AFL-CIO would more likely preserve the present setup of the union federation—while placing Andrew Stern at its head.

Union intrigue and skullduggery aside, Stern’s comments articulated—albeit in an extremely refracted fashion—the growing chasm between the needs of union

members and their families and the policies of the Democratic Party. A Kerry administration would have nothing to offer working people to address the crises of unemployment, low wages, and poor or nonexistent healthcare—let alone the human suffering and tragedy posed by the continued occupation of Iraq and the “war on terror.”

Before retracting his remarks, speaking of efforts to create new political and union organizations, Stern said, “I don’t know if it would survive with a Democratic president,” because, like former president Bill Clinton, Kerry would use the party for his own political benefit, and labor leaders would become partners in this new enterprise.

The SEIU members who have been asked to take time off work to volunteer for the Democrats include some of the most exploited sections of the unionized workforce—local and state employees, security guards, janitors, healthcare workers, public school workers, bus drivers. That Stern can one minute say the Democrats are a “hollow party” with nothing to offer working people, and the next ask these workers to sacrifice their time and energy to promote a Kerry presidency, is both cynical and worthy of contempt.

Stern’s comments earlier this week are only a pale reflection of the huge chasm separating the mass of working people in America from Kerry, the Democrats and their supporters in the trade union bureaucracy. The fact that Stern could so quickly flip and proclaim himself “100 percent behind Kerry” is testament to the putrefaction of the bureaucracy he inhabits, and awareness among this corrupt layer of the fragile hold they have over their own membership.



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