

Four unions announce boycott of AFL-CIO convention

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25 July 2005

On the eve of the AFL-CIO convention, officials from four unions representing nearly a third of the US labor federation's membership announced they would boycott the organization's national conference that starts Monday in Chicago. The move appears to be the first step towards an organizational breakup of the fifty-year-old labor federation, which has been beset by a bitter factional struggle within its executive board since last November.

The boycott announcement followed a meeting of the AFL-CIO Executive Board on Sunday, which failed to resolve differences between the two factions.

None of the unions that announced the boycott—the Service Employees International Union, Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers and the textile and hotel workers' union UNITE/HERE—has declared a formal severing of ties with the AFL-CIO.

However, the decision not to attend the constitutional convention, which includes withholding dues money from the labor federation, makes a split more probable, several officials told the Associated Press.

SEIU President Andrew Stern has been threatening to pull his 1.6 million-member union from the labor federation and set up a new organization if AFL-CIO President John Sweeney is re-elected at the convention and the Executive Board rejects his demands for the restructuring of the 60-union organization.

For the vast majority of American workers, whether the AFL-CIO splits or stays together is of little consequence, particularly since the proportion of the American workforce that is unionized has fallen to almost negligible levels. The unionization rate among private-sector workers dropped to just 7.9 percent in 2004, the lowest percentage since 1901, and overall union membership is 12.5 percent, down from 35 percent in 1955, when the AFL and CIO merged, and 20 percent as late as 1983.

The in-fighting within the top echelons of the AFL-CIO is not a dispute between leaders of genuine working class organizations. It is an unprincipled faction fight within a labor bureaucracy—an upper-middle-class stratum whose interests are hostile to the workers it nominally represents.

In the history of the labor movement there are few precedents for a split so devoid of any substantial differences. Outside of a few organizational complaints—most concerning the dispensation of dues money—Stern and his cohorts have not elaborated any serious reasons as to why they might leave the AFL-CIO. Predictably, this struggle has taken place behind the backs of the 13 million

members of the labor federation, let alone the tens of millions of workers who stand outside of the unions.

Stern has long been a loyal member of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, whose personnel and social physiognomy have been shaped by decades of betrayals of working class struggles, ferocious anti-communism, and machinations with the CIA against the international workers movement.

The SEIU leader was brought into prominence by his mentor, John Sweeney, the former head of the SEIU. He has no fundamental differences with the AFL-CIO's policies of labor-management collaboration, economic nationalism and defense of American capitalism. He is not an opponent of the war in Iraq. He is not advancing a platform of more militant struggle, and has not even criticized the virtual abandonment of the strike weapon by the AFL-CIO leadership.

On the critical question of the disastrous political orientation of the labor federation, which has doggedly opposed any break with the American two-party system, Stern has nothing to say. Instead, he has praised Sweeney's "political" efforts, which have turned the AFL-CIO into a virtual adjunct of the Democratic Party, adding only that the union federation might also support more "labor-friendly" Republicans.

One need only consider the union leaders who have joined Stern's "Change to Win" coalition to see that any "new" labor movement created by these people will be just as hostile to rank-and-file workers as the AFL-CIO. Included among them is James P. Hoffa, whose Teamsters union is synonymous with corruption, gangsterism and the suppression of members' rights.

Some officials within Stern's faction have attempted to compare their actions to the split within the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1935 that led to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). That struggle, however, erupted over serious questions, and the different factions gave expression to powerful social forces.

The leaders of the AFL craft unions were opposed to any effort to organize the millions of unskilled and immigrant workers employed in mass production industries, such as steel, auto and rubber. The more farsighted union officials, such as mineworkers' leader John L. Lewis, recognized that the labor movement could not survive without unionizing the industrial monopolies, like US Steel, which controlled the coal mines and exercised overwhelming influence over the economy.

At the same time, Lewis and the other CIO officials were under

the pressure of a militant and insurgent working class, radicalized by the mass unemployment and pervasive poverty of the Great Depression. These workers were increasingly coming under the influence of socialist ideas, and Lewis and his cohorts realized that if the CIO did not contain this movement, it could take an anti-capitalist and revolutionary path.

There are definite reasons for the bitter infighting that is consuming the AFL-CIO bureaucracy today, but they have nothing to do with what is being said publicly, let alone the genuine interests of the working class.

For years, the bureaucracy was able to insulate itself from the impact of the disastrous policies it pursued in response to the decisive changes in the US and world economy over the last quarter century. As American industry faced increased international competition in the 1970s and 1980s, the union bureaucracy functioned as junior partners with corporate management and did everything possible to suppress the resistance of US workers to wage-cutting, corporate downsizing and outsourcing to low-wage countries.

In exchange for its services, the labor bureaucracy gained access to an array of labor-management programs, slush funds and real estate ventures that enabled it, combined with increased dues levies on its remaining membership, to maintain and even increase its income, despite the continual loss of union members.

The plummeting membership rolls, however, have finally caught up with the labor bureaucracy. As its overall income declines, the union bureaucracy enters into ever more bitter turf wars, with unions engaging in raiding drives against one another to secure new members and new sources of dues income.

Meanwhile, corporate and political circles no longer see the AFL-CIO as a social or political force capable of mobilizing a significant section of the working class. It increasingly occupies the role of bit player in the internal struggles of the American ruling elite.

It is noteworthy that Stern's first salvo against Sweeney followed Democrat John Kerry's failed bid to win the 2004 presidential election. While making clear that he had no differences with the pro-war and pro-business policies espoused by Kerry and the Democrats—policies that alienated millions of working class voters and facilitated Bush's reelection—Stern argued that the AFL-CIO had to overcome its membership problem in order to more successfully campaign for the Democrats.

The declining influence of the AFL-CIO has encouraged growing sections of big business and the Republican Party to circumvent the unions altogether. In the recent period alone, the federal bankruptcy courts have granted United Airlines the right to stop paying into the union pension fund, Republican governors have unilaterally abrogated public employee contracts, and the Bush administration has moved towards establishing a pay-for-performance system for all federal employees, along the lines of the Department of Homeland Security.

Stern made clear the centrality of jurisdictional disputes between various unions in the current conflict at the top of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. In a recent interview with the *Nation* magazine, he bitterly complained that the Steelworkers union was infringing on

the SEIU's turf by organizing commercial building and healthcare workers.

Stern told the *Nation* he had offered the United Steelworkers union the option of organizing security guards at industrial facilities if they agreed to lay off security guards in commercial buildings. The Steelworkers officials, however, saw that as an attempt to distract them from organizing healthcare workers, Stern complained.

The fight within the labor bureaucracy has generated little interest except among ex-radicals and liberals such as those who publish the *Nation*, Democratic Party officials who are concerned that a split in the AFL-CIO could disrupt their flow of money from the labor bureaucracy, and media commentators who worry that a split could weaken a long-standing and reliable prop of American capitalism and its two-party system.

Among union members, the rift has been hardly noticed. The comments of one worker, cited by the *Detroit News*, sum up the general contempt in which the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is held. Noting that few of his fellow workers were following news of the possible breakup, Skip Hanline, a member of the United Auto Workers union at Delphi's steering assembly plant in Athens, Alabama, said he had seen a drastic shift in the unions over the last 20 years. Union leaders, he said, had more in common with company executives than with assembly line workers.

"The unions have become more capitalistic in nature," Hanline said, "They're more corporate in the way they run things."

The fracturing of the AFL-CIO underscores the fact that at a resurgence of the working class movement will not emerge through this bureaucratized apparatus, or any of its factions, but through the creation of new forms of organization—above all, a political party of the working class that consciously strives for the unity of workers internationally and the reorganization of economic life based on socialist principles of genuine democracy and equality.



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