

A falling out within the US labor bureaucracy

Service workers, Teamsters split from AFL-CIO

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The International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) announced July 25 that they have severed formal ties with the AFL-CIO, the main US trade union federation.

As a result, the AFL-CIO convention convened in Chicago to mark the 50th anniversary of the merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations has recorded the loss of roughly one-quarter of the federation's membership and some \$20 million in annual per-capita contributions from the two unions.

The desertion marks one more blow to a degenerated and right-wing official labor movement that has presided over countless betrayals, while seeing the percentage of unionized workers decline to the lowest level in over a century.

Speaking at a Monday afternoon joint press conference in Chicago, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa and SEIU President Andrew Stern both spoke in vague terms of their split opening up a "new road" for the unions and an opportunity to "grow the labor movement." Their more concrete remarks centered on the fact that they will keep the approximately \$10 million that each union had previously kicked in annually to the national federation.

Questions at the press conference also touched on the millions of dollars in back dues that both the SEIU and the Teamsters would have had to pay the AFL-CIO to attend the convention. Stern referred to the money as being "allegedly" owed to the federation, while voicing confidence that his union and the Teamsters would manage to resolve outstanding disputes with the AFL-CIO.

In his statement, Hoffa lamented that the unions have "lost the ability to organize." He continued: "The economy has changed and good jobs are being outsourced, union jobs are being outsourced." He added that unions in the AFL-CIO were "living off the past."

Stern noted, "This country once had one out of three workers in unions; it's now down to about 8 percent in the private sector."

Two other unions—the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) and UNITE/HERE, an organization representing textile and hotel workers—joined the Teamsters and the SEIU in boycotting the convention, but did not announce disaffiliation from the AFL-CIO on Monday. If they follow suit, it will mean a loss of fully one-third of the federation's 13 million members.

UFCW President Joe Hansen said Sunday that his million-member union would make a decision on disaffiliation "in a short period of time." John Wilhelm, co-president of UNITE/HERE, said his union's hierarchy was "keeping all options open."

The four unions are members of the "Change to Win Coalition" that formed to press for changes in the AFL-CIO's policies. The group also includes the carpenters union—which broke with the AFL-CIO in 2001, largely over jurisdictional disputes—as well as the laborers and farm workers unions.

In his keynote address to the AFL-CIO convention, the federation's president John Sweeney called the disaffiliation "a tragedy for working people." He warned, "At a time when our corporate and conservative adversaries have created the most powerful anti-worker political machine in the history of our country, a divided movement hurts the hopes of working families for a better life."

Sweeney described himself as "very angry" and insisted that the future of the unions "should not be dictated by the demands of any group or the ambitions of any individual."

From his own bureaucratic perspective, Sweeney's bitterness is entirely understandable. He rose to the leadership of the AFL-CIO a decade ago, mouthing much the same reform rhetoric in opposition to then-president Lane Kirkland. Moreover, he came out of the SEIU, where he helped groom Stern as his successor.

In his letter informing Sweeney of the SEIU disaffiliation decision, Stern declared that the split was necessary because "we can't reach agreement on basic principles." But neither

at Monday's press conference nor in the heated debate that led up to the AFL-CIO convention have he or any of the other leaders of the Change to Win Coalition been able spell out any principled grounds for their organizational break.

This incapacity to clearly present the basis of their differences to a wider working class audience is the hallmark of an unprincipled dispute within the labor bureaucracy, where the overriding issues are those of money and positions, and disagreements over policy are of an entirely marginal and tactical nature.

Significantly, in the 43-pages of resolutions and amendments that the faction of the bureaucracy led by Stern and Hoffa submitted to the AFL-CIO convention, the word "Iraq" appeared not once. Nor does the subject of the US war feature in any other of the statements issued by the Change to Win group.

On this, the most decisive political question facing the American working class, Stern, Hoffa and company have no disagreements with the Sweeney leadership, which supports the continuation of the US war and occupation.

Indeed, the resolution presented by the Sweeney leadership to the AFL-CIO convention—with no opposition from the SEIU or Teamsters—criticizes the Bush administration not for continuing the illegal war, but for failing to counter the mass opposition that it has engendered within the US. "No foreign policy can be sustained without the informed consent of the American people," the AFL-CIO bureaucracy counsels the White House.

Under conditions in which he and his bureaucratic allies accept both the war and the AFL-CIO's decades-old collaboration with US imperialism internationally, Stern's frequent talk of uniting workers across borders to confront global corporations is not merely hollow, but wholly hypocritical.

Another word that fails to appear in the proposals submitted by the Change to Win coalition is "strike." This so-called opposition has no criticism of the bureaucracy's abandonment of the strike weapon, nor of its subordination of the working class to the employers through corporatist policies.

Nor is there any hint, either in the coalition's documents or in the statements made by Stern and Hoffa Monday, that the seceding unions intend to advance a political alternative to the AFL-CIO's longstanding subordination of the American labor movement to the corporate-dominated two-party system.

On the contrary, Stern stressed that the SEIU intends to cooperate with the AFL-CIO on political campaigns and boasted that his own union already contributes more than the federation itself to the Democrats.

Hoffa, on the other hand, merely indicated that he would

prefer to "invest" the money withheld from the AFL-CIO in the Teamsters' own organization, and expressed impatience with "throwing money at politicians." This could well be a hint at a renewed turn by the Teamsters to the Republicans.

Both officials indicated that they had instructed their local unions to continue their participation in AFL-CIO state labor federations and local central labor councils. They added, however, that the Sweeney leadership might bar them from these bodies.

For all the talk of "growing the labor movement," the split takes place in an atmosphere of retrenchment. It has the character of a falling out within the union bureaucracy over the allocation of dwindling financial resources. The steady and protracted decline in membership has emerged as a threat to the bloated salaries and privileges of the bureaucrats themselves.

In one telling exchange at Monday's press conference, Stern was asked by a reporter whether he and Hoffa would seek to "mimic" the mass unionization that accompanied the split from the AFL craft unions in 1935 and the founding of the CIO.

"It is a global and not a local economy," Stern replied, "and we're not so unwise as to fail to recognize that this is not the 1930s anymore."

These bureaucrats have no intention of leading a struggle against the assault on workers' jobs, living standards and democratic rights. Such a movement can only come from below and in opposition to all factions of the ossified labor officialdom. Its development requires above all the organization of an independent political party of the working class that fights in a common struggle with workers all over the world for the socialist reorganization of society.



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