

Andrew Stern's Getting America Back on Track

More right-wing proposals from the American labor bureaucracy

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Getting America Back on Track: A Country that Works, Andy Stern, Free Press, New York, New York: 2006, 224 pp.

Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), recently conducted a nationwide tour to promote his new book, *Getting America Back on Track: A Country that Works*, which advances his plans to revive the US trade unions on the basis of even closer collaboration with corporate America.

In 2005 Stern led the SEIU out of the AFL-CIO labor federation along with five other unions—the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Teamsters, UNITE/HERE, the Laborers International Union and the carpenters.

The split reflected the deep fissures within the trade union bureaucracy growing from the isolation and alienation of the privileged apparatuses of the unions from the great mass of the working class. Despite the growing anger and frustration within the working class, union membership continues to decline year after year and the rate of private sector unionization has fallen to its lowest level since 1900.

In his book, Stern expresses concern about the decline of the US trade union movement within the context of mounting economic inequality. He notes, for example, the statements of former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan, who warned in a 2005 address to Congress, that inequality “threatens democratic capitalism” (p. 7).

Elsewhere he speaks about the mass protests of immigrant workers in the United States last year as well as the strikes and protests in France against attempts to cut employment protections for young workers.

But Stern's book is not directed to workers, nor does it advance any serious strategy to fight the corporate assault on jobs and living standards. On the contrary, the book is a warning to the ruling elite that if the unions—which have served corporate America for so long—are allowed to collapse then dangerous social upheavals, outside the control of the labor bureaucracy, will erupt.

There is no analysis in the book of the disastrous policies of the American trade unions: its undying defense of the profit system and anticommunism, its rabid nationalism or its alliance with the big business Democratic Party. The SEIU chief rejects out of hand any suggestion that workers should challenge the existing economic setup, let alone replace it with a socialist alternative. Instead, he repeats the worn-out nationalist plea of the labor bureaucracy for the employers to join together with the unions to increase competitiveness so as to “ensure America's continued economic leadership.”

In order to pursue this corporatist strategy Stern insists the unions redefine their role in order to win the confidence of big business. In the first place, this means renouncing any residual connection to the class struggle.

Stern spells out bluntly the dilemma facing the American trade union

bureaucracy. He recalls nostalgically: “Once, free democratic unions were seen in contrast to the government dominated unions of communist dictatorships, and were a battering ram to knock down the Iron Curtain.” However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, he complains, the unions were viewed by those in power as “impediments” to “economic progress.” The challenge, he asserts, is for the unions to find a “twenty-first century role in the American economy” (pp. 38-39). In other words, the union bureaucracy must find a way to convince the powers that be of its continued usefulness.

Stern boasts that the SEIU is on the right path by insisting on the importance of beginning at all times with the needs of the employers.

He writes, for example, on page 58: “our priority should be to contribute to our employers' success...” On page 105 he declares: “Employees and employers need organizations that solve problems, not create them. In a fast-paced competitive world, unions need to facilitate competition by leveling the playing field for all employers, not by simply raising the cost of doing business for unionized ones.”

Along this line of thought he advances the idea that unions become “outsourcers,” taking over from employers “hiring, training and benefits administration and the setting of industry standards” (p. 109).

In an interview with the business journal *McKinsey Quarterly* (2006 Issue I), he is even more explicit, calling for the unions to become “labor contractors” that “supply skilled workers to employers.”

This rather blunt statement more or less describes the role of the unions today. These organizations do not express the interests of the working class, but serve as vehicles for the labor bureaucracy, which siphons off a share of the profits extracted by big business. In return they promise a steady supply of docile labor.

It is absurd, therefore, when at one point in his book Stern suggests that many union leaders suffer from a lingering “class struggle mentality” (p. 70). In fact, all sections of the AFL-CIO are wedded to the policy of corporatist union-management collaboration. Strike activity has fallen steadily over the past 25 years and is now at close to its lowest level in modern times. The only way for it to fall any lower would be for strikes to cease altogether.

If Stern's words have any serious meaning they intend to imply that the response of the working class to widening social inequality, increasing lack of access to healthcare and the dumping of pensions should be to stop all struggle.

For this to happen would mean the utter crushing of the working class and the suppression of all democratic rights. However, instead of this being done by means of a police-state dictatorship, Stern proposes that essentially the same thing be carried out by means of a corporatist union-employer alliance.

If anyone considers this an exaggeration, consider the fact that Stern

praises the official state-sponsored unions in China. In a visit to China, he was impressed by the ACFTU (All-China Federation of Trade Unions), an organ of the repressive Stalinist regime, causing him to assert that he was “awestruck by its dynamism” (p. 28).

Stern includes a subsection in his book entitled “global unions.” In introducing the subject, he writes: “National unions by their very nature are not built to have the strength to successfully address their members’ issues when they operate in only one country of a global employer” (p. 111).

It is impossible for even the most obtuse union leader not to recognize the shattering impact that the rise of the transnational corporation and globalized production has had on the old labor organizations. However, acknowledging this fact and being able to advance a progressive response are two different things.

Taken by itself the globalization of production is a progressive development, containing the seeds of a higher standard of living for those all over the globe. Under capitalist private ownership and the nation-state system, however, globalization is turned against the interests of the working class and society as a whole, leading to bitter inter-imperialist conflicts and pitting worker against worker in a drive to lower wages and living standards.

However, it is impossible for unions, which are wedded to the defense of their “own” national ruling class, to forge a genuine alliance with workers in other countries because the first rule of internationalism, demonstrated time and time again by history, is that the main enemy is the capitalist class in your own country.

As Stern makes clear, he defends American imperialism and is a supporter of its global crimes. The brief reference Stern makes to the Iraq war indicates his support for the goal, if not the execution, of this bloody imperialist project. “Time has revealed that our political leaders rushed to war in Iraq without a plan and enough troops to secure peace,” he writes (p. 101).

The above passage comes in the midst of a lengthy section where Stern expresses his admiration for none other than former Republican House leader Newt Gingrich, who offered him advice on the inter-bureaucratic struggle within the AFL-CIO. He notes approvingly that Gingrich “cited his respect for the United States Army as an institution that consciously and continuously conforms itself to changing times” (pp. 100-101).

Given Stern’s embrace of American militarism, it is no surprise that the “global unionism” he advocates has nothing in common with genuine working class internationalism. In the first place he gives it passing reference. Insofar as he does propose measures for global cooperation, they evince an outlook that sees unions in other countries serving as little more than an appendage to the maneuvers of the US labor bureaucracy.

He proposes on page 113, for example, the “outsourcing of strikes,” e.g., the US labor bureaucracy could “pay strike benefits to workers in low wage countries” as an alternative to calling out its own members on strike.

In the above-cited interview with the *McKinsey Quarterly* he spells out the logic of this line of thought even more explicitly: “If workers are ready to go on strike in the United States, and we are ready to pay them to strike, it would be very costly. But paying workers in Indonesia or India or other places to go on strike against the same global employer isn’t particularly expensive.”

This passage is striking for its bluntness and arrogance. An international working class movement must be based on a program of mutual solidarity in a struggle for the liberation of all, not one which views workers in other countries as pawns in the pursuit of narrow national interests.

In the final analysis there is little difference between the global unionism that Stern proposes and the notorious alliance of the AFL-CIO with the US State Department in the creation of stooge, CIA-run unions in Latin America and other regions to serve US foreign policy interests.

Sterns proposals for social reordering are contained in the final chapter of his book, entitled, “A Plan for a Country that Works.” None of his proposals go beyond the milk toast reforms advanced by sections of the Democratic Party, which all concerned know have no chance of being adopted due to the resistance of big business to any infringement on its profits.

Stern proposes that the capitalists and their political representatives be persuaded that these measures are in their own best interest. He writes, “My hope is that future history books will write about this time and say, ‘America’s leaders came forward, Americans lifted their voices and became the wind that sailed America to a new future’” (p. 183).

It is not clear to what degree this expresses self-deception or conscious duplicity and cynicism, though long experience leads one to suspect the latter predominates.

This view is supported by the fact that Stern bluntly admits the worthlessness of the labor bureaucracy’s alliance with the Democratic Party. He writes, “Despite four Democratic presidents since the AFL-CIO’s inception, and decades of a Democratic controlled Congress, the union movement had steadily lost members. Hitching our fate to politics and Democratic politicians had proved a losing strategy for American workers” (p. 93).

This statement is basically correct, if one understands by politics, capitalist politics—not political struggle in general. But, as in other places in the book, from a correct observation Stern draws reactionary conclusions. He proposes to address the failure of the unions’ alliance with the Democratic Party—by seeking closer ties to the Republicans!

In a chapter titled, “Pushing past partisan roadblocks,” he boasts: “In 2004, SEIU was actually the largest contributor to both the Democratic and the Republican Governors’ Associations” (p. 121).

While expressing dissatisfaction with the Democrats, Stern is not seriously considering severing links to the party—which has long been used to block the development of an independent political movement of the working class. In 2004 the SEIU spent a record \$65 million in the Democratic presidential campaign.

Stern’s overtures to the Republicans are part of an effort to shift the Democratic Party even further to the right. The main mistake the Democrats have made, as far as Stern is concerned, is that they continue to defend to a limited extent, at least verbally, the reforms of the New Deal period.

Nowhere in his book does Stern speak of the militant mobilization of the working class. Instead he advocates toothless protests, corporate campaigns, etc., aimed at awakening the “conscience” of big business. Meanwhile behind the scenes the real meat and potatoes business is carried out involving bartering the workers’ interests to secure the needs of the bureaucracy. At times this takes extremely cynical and unprincipled forms.

For example, in Houston the SEIU waged a year-long campaign to convince corporate tenants and office building owners to sign a contract for 5,300 janitors. Last November the union hailed as a “victory” a deal that raises hourly wages from \$5.15 to \$7.75 over three years—roughly the amount the employers would have to have paid anyway because of the planned hike in the minimum wage. The workers will now have to pay union dues out of a paycheck that guarantees wages that would leave a family of four well below the poverty line.

Stern is aware of the dangers to the capitalist system as well as the trade union bureaucracy posed by the growth of class polarization. In expressing these concerns, he speaks as a representative of the privileged, not the oppressed. Social polarization has grown in the unions hand in hand with the rise in CEO pay and stock prices. For example, according to financial reports filed with the US government Stern received \$249,599 in salary and expenses in 2005. His associate, James P. Hoffa of the Teamsters, received \$297,772. Another Stern ally, Joseph T. Hansen of

the United Food and Commercial Workers, took in \$336,776.

Stern apparently isn't conscious of the irony when on page 67 he remarks about workers involved in the SEIU campaign to organize Los Angeles home care workers, "These minimum wage earners paid union dues for ten years for the dream of having their own organization."

The gall of such a statement hardly requires additional comment.

Stern's book demonstrates that workers cannot look to any faction of the trade union bureaucracy to offer leadership in the struggle against social inequality, war and class oppression. Instead, it shows the determination of the union apparatus to shore up the capitalist structure and stifle any independent manifestation of the interests of the broad masses of people.

New organizations are needed based on a new leadership and perspective. No serious struggle against social inequality can be conducted without striking at the roots of the problem, the capitalist profit system and its nation-state setup. This requires the building of an independent political and socialist movement of the working class.



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