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A "New Labor Movement" in the Shell of the Old?

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A "New Labor Movement" in the Shell of the Old?

Abstract

[Excerpt] A lot has changed since the formation of the AFL-CIO 40 years ago. A regulated national economy has been transformed into a global economy – one in which American workers can be put into competition with others anywhere in the world. Corporations have decentralized their activities, downsized their in-house operations, and outsourced their production even while concentrating their power around the globe. Large urban industrial complexes like Detroit and Pittsburgh have been replaced by small, highly mobile production units, which can easily be relocated. White men have become the minority of the U.S. workforce and women and people of color the majority.

Keywords

AFL-CIO, labor movement, reform, demographics, change



A “New Labor Movement” in the Shell of the Old?

■ *Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello*

PART I: THE POLITICS OF REFORM

A lot has changed since the formation of the AFL-CIO 40 years ago. A regulated national economy has been transformed into a global economy—one in which American workers can be put into competition with others anywhere in the world. Corporations have decentralized their activities, downsized their in-house operations, and outsourced their production even while concentrating their power around the globe. Large urban industrial complexes like Detroit and Pittsburgh have been replaced by small, highly mobile production units, which can easily be relocated. White men have become the minority of the U.S. workforce and women and people of color the majority.

Meanwhile, no major American institution has changed less than the labor movement. Today’s unions are as poorly adapted to today’s economy and society as were the craft unions of iron puddlers and cord-

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wainers to the mass production industries of 70 years ago.

The insurgent campaign, "A New Voice for American Workers," which recently captured leadership of the AFL-CIO, has called for a "new labor movement," but the effort to construct a new labor movement comes up against the fabled rigidity of the AFL-CIO. Labor historian David Montgomery once compared the AFL-CIO to a great snapping turtle, "hiding within its shell to shield the working class from contamination." How can the emergence of New Voice contribute to the development of a new labor movement, given its location within the rigid and contorted shell of the old?

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF LABOR

For the past two decades the AFL-CIO has executed a stately, slow-motion collapse. Membership has plunged to 15.5 percent of wage earners, with only 11.2 percent in the private sector. Major strikes and lockouts—for example Bridgestone, Caterpillar, and Staley—have ended in devastating defeats. Not surprisingly, many workers will accept almost any concessions rather than strike. In the past year, there were only 385 work stoppages compared with 3,111 in the peak year of 1977. Real wages have declined about 15 percent since 1973; real incomes for young families have decreased by one-third. And, after its greatest grassroots mobilization in 20 years, labor saw a Democratic President and Congress it had worked hard to elect pass a NAFTA agreement that poses the threat of a personal pink-slip to large numbers of American workers and union officials. Maine AFL-CIO President Charles O'Leary observed that labor's public image is that of "white-haired old men meeting down in Bal Harbor talking about the past." The once powerful AFL-CIO seemed little more than an empty shell.

During the past two decades of labor's decline there have emerged a considerable number of reform movements, local activists, leaders, and staff members with progressive political ideas. They have been visible in official and insurgent strikes like the Pittston coal strike and the Austin, Minnesota Hormel strike; the biannual labor convocations held by Labor Notes; the militant AFL-CIO Organizing Institute; the transnational and strategic corporate campaigns of the Industrial Union Department; the local coalitions against NAFTA; the cross-union activism and solidarity promoted by Jobs with Justice; and the successful reform movement in the Teamsters union. Until 1995, however, barely an echo of these new forces was audible inside the AFL-CIO's headquarters in Washington or its council meetings in Bal Harbor.

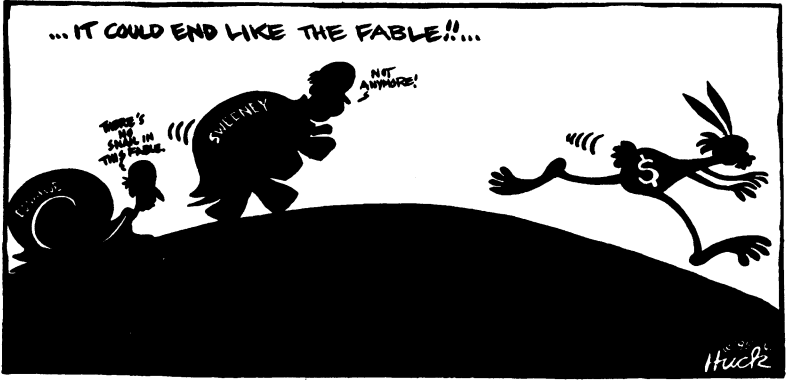
NEW VOICE

Early in 1995, leaders of the biggest unions—well aware that inertia at the very top of the AFL-CIO was contributing to the decline of their own organizations—attempted a conventional power play. They asked Lane Kirkland, for 16 years the president of the AFL-CIO, to step down and let his second-in-command, Tom Donahue, take over. When Kirkland said no, they asked Donahue to run against him, but he declined. John Sweeney, head of the large and fast-growing Service Employees International Union, emerged as the insurgents' alternative. Sweeney says he launched his candidacy only because Donahue refused to join the drive to unseat Kirkland. "I decided to run for president of the AFL-CIO because organized labor is the only voice of American workers and their families, and because the silence was deafening."

As Kirkland continued to hang on, the Sweeney campaign dubbed itself "A New Voice for American Labor" and developed a momentum of its own that went far beyond the initial palace power play. To Sweeney, generally regarded as a dynamic but mainstream trade unionist, the New Voice ticket added Richard Trumka of the United Mineworkers, for many a symbol of militancy, and Linda Chavez-Thompson, representing women and people of color, groups notoriously under represented in the AFL-CIO's top echelon.

New Voice developed a trenchant critique of two decades of labor movement failure. Sweeney scored the AFL-CIO as a "Washington-based institution concerned primarily with refining policy positions" instead of a "worker-based movement against greed, multinational corporations, race-baiting, and labor-baiting politicians." He charged that the American labor movement is "irrelevant to the vast majority of unorganized workers in our country" and added that he had deep suspicions that "we are becoming irrelevant to our own members." Linda Chavez-Thompson attacked "30 or 40 years of AFL-CIO isolation and inaction."

Further, the national union presidents who initiated New Voice turned to forces from outside the palace. New Voice mobilized thousands of activists and progressives and promoted many of their ideas and programs. By the time Kirkland finally accepted his opponents' original demand and stepped down in favor of Donahue, it was too late—there was no going back for the forces the Sweeney campaign had mobilized. It is symbolic of the new forces at play that the reformers who have taken over the Teamsters provided Sweeney's margin of victory at the AFL-CIO convention in October; it is indicative of the continuity in the AFL-CIO's power structure that the presidents of a few large unions called most of the convention's shots.



NEW DYNAMICS

New Voice has shifted the AFL-CIO's rhetoric from that of business unionism toward that of a social movement and proposed institutional vehicles for making that rhetoric real. But the new AFL-CIO Executive Council is composed primarily of the same officials who have presided over the last two decades of the labor movement's decline. Few of them have challenged the institutional constraints imposed by labor law, union structure, bureaucratic deadwood, and organizational inertia. While some New Voice leaders have been associated with progressive or reform forces in their unions, others have fought oppositions who have advocated the very changes that New Voice now promotes. Some have silenced rank-and-file initiatives and even broken strikes of their own members. Few have projected an alternative vision for the labor movement, let alone for society.

Nonetheless, even bureaucrats, faced with extinction, have been known to change. Many of the union leaders who initiated the CIO—John L. Lewis in particular—had been politically conservative and heavy handed with their own members. But they came to recognize that the labor movement—and their own organizations in particular—could only be saved by unleashing a rank-and-file initiative that they could not always count on controlling. Those who now lead the AFL-CIO likewise must encourage dramatic change or see their own organizations plunge toward extinction. They might prefer to have change limited to a militant business unionism which combines top-down control with more vigorous organizing and a greater willingness to strike. Nevertheless, any substantial revitalization of the labor movement will require a move toward social movement unionism, in which grassroots activism supplants the rigid, bureaucratic character all too typical of American trade unions.

TRANSCENDING THE SHELL

Much will depend on the interaction of those at the top of the AFL-CIO and those at the grassroots. The new leadership has promised to set up a slew of task forces, institutes, centers, and committees to implement the New Voice program. These can provide information, resources, networking, and leadership that will be invaluable to local activists. Whether all these institutions will actually be formed remains to be seen, but they will accomplish little unless they encourage those on the ground to empower themselves. Progressives at higher levels, in particular those in the new institutions initiated by New Voice, need to work with, support, and protect local activists.

Some of the most important recent initiatives of labor movement activists—building local coalitions, conducting their own international outreach, organizing solidarity operations, and supporting rank-and-file insurgencies—have been independent of and at times even opposed to top labor leadership. Activists may well be tempted to abandon such independence for more conventional activities within the framework of a more accepting AFL-CIO mainstream. And the labor mainstream may try, from the best of motives, to internalize such efforts. (A top AFL-CIO official has already told local Jobs with Justice activists that, with New Voice's ascendancy, they should start directing more of their efforts into regular union channels. One labor leader recently said that the only coalition we need is the AFL-CIO itself.)

The unfortunate result could be official coalitions dominated by the unions with only paper participation by allies; international linkages limited to top union officials; union solidarity that mobilizes more staff than rank-and-file; and isolation of progressives from the struggle for grassroots democracy within the labor movement. It could also turn progressives into disciplinary agents within the labor movement and leave them no base if conservative forces regain control at the top.

In an earlier era, trade unions were regarded as only one element of a wider labor movement. Tomorrow's "new labor movement," likewise, should be seen less as a reformed AFL-CIO than as a broader constellation of allied forces and institutions. Both AFL-CIO leaders and local activists should promote institutions allied with, but outside, the shell of the AFL-CIO: occupational safety and health groups, labor education programs such as the Highlander Center, labor history associations, labor arts programs, producer and consumer cooperatives, vehicles for community investment, Jobs with Justice, political coalitions, issue coalitions, local labor centers, and the like. Such initiatives "outside the shell" are the key to putting the "new" in the "new labor movement" and to opening the way for future organizing.

PART II: THE FUTURE OF THE REFORM AGENDA

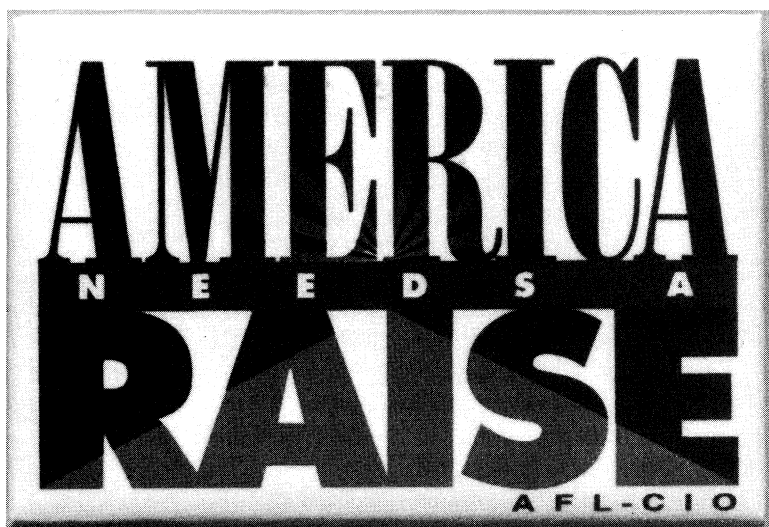
The New Voice campaign issued an election platform with a broad evaluation of the crisis facing American workers and dozens of specific proposals for generating a new labor movement to meet it. Taken as a whole, the New Voice platform represents a serious, comprehensive, and well-thought-out response to the AFL-CIO's present predicament, incorporating a great many of the ideas proposed by reformers over the past few years.

While this program may prove, like so many electoral platforms, to be just a set of attractive promises that will be largely ignored once its proponents are installed in office, it provides both a valuable starting point for a discussion of what changes the labor movement needs and a set of commitments to which the new AFL-CIO leadership can be held accountable. Part II of this article asks: Are the proposals themselves adequate? How can this ambitious program actually be implemented? How adequate and appropriate are the initial steps to implement it? And how should labor activists, progressives, and rank-and-file leaders relate to those efforts? This article addresses in turn each of the seven sections of the New Voice program:

- Organize at a pace and scale that is unprecedented
- Build a new and progressive political movement of working people
- Construct a labor movement that can change workers' lives
- Create a strong new progressive voice in American life
- Renew and refocus our commitment to labor around the world
- Lead a democratic movement that speaks for all American workers
- Institutionalize the process of change

ORGANIZE AT A PACE AND SCALE THAT IS UNPRECEDENTED

The New Voice program states that "the most critical challenge facing unions today is organizing." While previous AFL-CIO strategy concentrated on political efforts to ease organizing by changing labor law, the New Voice platform argued, "We must first organize despite the law if we are ever to organize with the law." It proposes to increase the AFL-CIO organizing budget by \$20 million. It would create an AFL-CIO



Organizing Department with an Office of Strategic Planning to facilitate multi-union organizing and explore experimental organizing approaches. The AFL-CIO Organizing Institute would be expanded to train and deploy 1000 new organizers over the next two years.

Organizing has often been offered as a panacea for what ails the labor movement, but the realities are sobering. One study in 1990 by Gary Chaison and Dileep Dhavale estimates that to maintain present memberships unions would have to spend \$300 million dollars on organizing. The difficulty of conventional organizing—professional organizers handing out union cards and petitioning for NLRB elections—has led many labor activists and progressives—including those associated with the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute—to advocate more radical approaches.

New Voice rhetoric redefines organizing as a movement for human rights, not just a vehicle for economic bargaining. It envisions a strategy that moves beyond workplace-by-workplace organizing to the creation of a mass movement. In his acceptance speech Sweeney proclaimed, "If anyone denies American workers their constitutional right to freedom of association, we will use old-fashioned mass demonstrations, as well as sophisticated corporate campaigns to make worker rights the civil rights issue of the 1990s."

Organizing strategy would include "training and motivating rank-and-file workers to organize the unorganized;" supporting "local coalition-building efforts with community, religious, civil rights and other organizations;" creating a network of "local organizing centers" and

community-based Worker Rights Boards. Sweeney, during a 1995 speech to the National Press Club, also emphasized the value of new forms of “community unionism,” such as the Los Angeles Manufacturing Action Project, and experiments with “associational unionism.” “Workers in many cases feel more comfortable forming an association that addresses sexual harassment, pay equity, promotional activities” instead of, or prior to, traditional collective bargaining.

Discontent among American workers is at a historic high. If the labor movement can make itself a vehicle for expressing that discontent, people will clamor to join unions or will simply go ahead and organize themselves. But at present most do not identify joining a union as the solution to their problems. No organizing technique is likely to be effective if people see the labor movement as an undemocratic, toothless bureaucracy representing interests that are different from their own. Ultimately, success in organizing new members will depend on success in transforming the labor movement itself.

BUILD A NEW AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL MOVEMENT OF WORKING PEOPLE

The New Voice program emphasizes that “our politics must start in the neighborhoods where our members live and vote.” It calls for a National Labor Political Training Center to train labor activists and political candidates and a Labor Center for Economic and Public Policy to develop policy and support legislative efforts. A new media strategy would establish a media workshop, studio facilities, marketing and distribution teams, and a strategic center. A Campaign 96 Fund would expand money devoted to politics.

Central Labor Councils (CLCs)—currently seen as the stepchildren of the labor movement—would be revitalized to serve as “the front line of labor’s political efforts.” (Chavez-Thompson noted, “The AFL-CIO has left the state federations and the central labor councils up the creek and they didn’t even lend them a paddle.”) They would organize members on a multi-union basis in neighborhoods to “re-energize our base and build bridges with individuals and organizations who share our views.” CLCs would be connected to the national AFL-CIO by a new Advisory Committee of CLC leaders and by assigning Executive Council members to act as liaisons to groups of councils.

An apparent contradiction in this program has to do with the relation to the Democratic Party and its candidates. Sweeney has said that labor needs to “stop wasting our money on candidates who turn their backs on workers after they are elected.” But in spite of its dubious

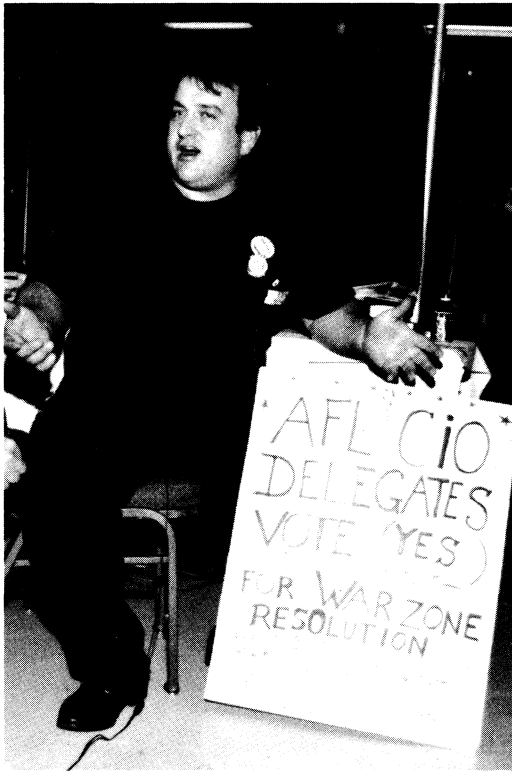
record, he has indicated a continuation of the traditional AFL-CIO knee-jerk support for the Democratic Party. On NBC-TV's *"Meet the Press"* he said, "President Clinton has done a great job as president and deserves our support." In his acceptance speech at the AFL-CIO convention he said, "We will re-elect a president and elect a Democratic Congress committed to the people who 'work hard and play by the rules.'" Sweeney's strategy seems to be to assert more influence by involving the labor movement more intensively with the Democratic candidates.

Such a strategy cannot deal effectively with "candidates who turn their backs on workers after they are elected"—a problem evident on issues ranging from NAFTA to labor law reform. Nor is it likely to "build a progressive political movement." Local labor activists have developed more promising strategies. In many states they have established coalitions with other progressive groups that have in effect created their own progressive political machines from the ground up. They have recruited activists from their own ranks, trained them, put resources behind them, and managed their campaigns. This has created a base from which they could challenge Democratic machines in primaries or, when necessary, run independent candidates. If the AFL-CIO wants to build a progressive political movement and hold those it elects accountable, it should direct major support toward such efforts and encourage its local affiliates to participate in them.

Considerable sentiment has also developed in the labor movement for a labor-oriented third party, perhaps modeled on the Canadian New Democrats. Whether or not a third party is ultimately the best political strategy, labor can only benefit from the development of a party with a pro-labor platform. The AFL-CIO should welcome the participation of labor activists in groups like Labor Party Advocates and the New Party, and should support independent and third party candidates where Democratic and Republican candidates are unacceptable.

CONSTRUCT A LABOR MOVEMENT THAT CAN CHANGE WORKERS' LIVES

The New Voice platform declares that "the Federation must be the fulcrum of a vibrant social movement, not simply a Federation of constituent organizations." The proposed vehicle for this is a Center for Strategic Campaigns that would coordinate national contract campaigns and establish a national network of resources inside and outside the labor movement for bargaining and organizing campaigns. A strategic campaign fund would provide grants to unions in difficult contract



Edwin Ng/Vanguard Press

fighters. A strike support team of top leaders and staff from international unions would be deployed early to help local leaders with long-running strikes.

Breaking with the past, New Voice leadership is trying to identify the AFL-CIO with militant labor struggles and stress solidarity. New Voice candidates joined picket lines around the country (provoking their opponents to do the same). They honored strikers and locked out workers—like Staley hunger striker Dan Lane—at the convention.

Richard Trumka has been assigned responsibility for coordinating the emerging initiatives around strategic campaigns.

The new AFL-CIO leadership has planned a series of campaigns to build momentum for its efforts through 1996. In a December 1995 address to the National Press Club, Sweeney outlined the AFL-CIO's plan for the first year. In the spring it will hold hearings on falling living standards in communities across the country. "We will ask working men and women what is happening to their jobs, their paychecks, and their family budgets." "Union Summer" started in June, with a 1000 college students and young workers organizing voter registration and living wage campaigns. "Union Fall"—to "organize and mobilize working Americans around the fundamental issue of raising wages and increasing incomes"—will start in September.

However, some elements of what the labor movement can do to "change workers' lives" are missing. For example, little attention is given to issues such as shorter hours, rights for contingent workers, resistance to lean production, and other problems of daily work life. Similarly,

“capital strategies,” which promote employee ownership and community economic development, are not included in the New Voice vision.

CREATE A STRONG NEW PROGRESSIVE VOICE IN AMERICAN LIFE

The New Voice program calls for an overhaul of the AFL-CIO’s public communications and public affairs work to “redefine America’s (and many of our own members’) perceptions of us.” The AFL-CIO should provide “a forceful new voice for working families on national issues.” The vehicle would be a revamped Labor Institute for Public Affairs, transformed from “an institutional support organization” into a “pro-active strategic operation” aimed at “creating a pro-worker and pro-union public environment.”

Sweeney has begun an effort to redirect the national political debate by trying to make low wages amid high profits a national political issue. “In every speech I give from the Press Club to the picket lines, I try to make this simple point: America needs a raise.”

Labor’s problems with the public—and with its own members—go far beyond “communications,” however. As a recent study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the AFL-CIO observed, “...Members generally have little or no ideological orientation that would link economics, government, and politics. So while they know that these are hard economic times for working people, few can articulate any explanation for what has gone wrong, who is responsible, or what should be done about it.” The Hart study concludes, “Labor’s longer-term strategic mission is to develop an ideological framework among the membership that helps them to make sense of the Brave New Economy they confront in ways that lead to progressive political conclusions. We need to tell a compelling story about the economy, corporate irresponsibility, and the conservative policies that have helped shift even more bargaining power toward capital over labor.”

The war of ideas has been crucial to the Right’s current dominance. The labor movement needs to provide a distinctive labor interpretation of what has happened to working people, why, and what to do about it. “America needs a raise” may be a good initial slogan, but it provides no answer to the ideas of the Christian Right, Pat Buchanan, the free-market Right, New Democrats, corporate globalists, and establishment liberals. Labor needs to explain that the suffering of working Americans is being created by global corporations who are playing workers and communities off each other, and that the solution to our deteriorating conditions of life and environment lies in a new solidarity of

working people.

Then it needs to develop a program to address the real problems of working Americans, including local, national, and transnational strategies for countering the effects of globalization; providing jobs and economic security for all; establishing basic democratic rights and a high quality of life in the workplace; giving individuals and families greater control over the time of their lives; reversing the drive toward inequality; and protecting the natural and social environment on which our life and our economy depend. Ultimately, this adds up to an alternative vision of society and the place of workers within it.

Developing an alternative vision of this kind is not something that can or should emerge from a committee or a handful of leaders. But organizational leaders can foster an environment that nurtures such a vision. Toward that end the AFL-CIO should create an equivalent of the Organizing Institute dedicated to popular education for its members and allied groups. It should promote and distribute a wide range of existing models and materials and fund development of new ones. Its goal should not be indoctrination but rather informed debate on the future of work and society. In parallel, activists should create and the AFL-CIO should support the development of an independent labor education movement like that which exists in England and many other countries. This movement would include university and college-based programs like the Labor Studies and Labor Extension Programs at the University of Massachusetts where rank-and-file activists from different unions and different backgrounds can come together, and independent centers like the Highlander Center in Tennessee and the Labor Institute in New Jersey.

RENEW AND REFOCUS OUR COMMITMENT TO LABOR AROUND THE WORLD

The New Voice program appears at first to support the cold-war-oriented international policy that has been such a dominant feature of the AFL-CIO since its inception. It states, "we are proud of our accomplishments over the years, culminating in the defeat of apartheid in South Africa and the role of Solidarnosc in leading Poland to democracy." (While many American trade unions provided valuable support to the freedom struggle in South Africa, the AFL-CIO's most notable contribution was its long-running refusal to work with the principal black trade union center, COSATU, because of its alleged Communist ties.)

The program proposes, however, to redirect the AFL-CIO's interna-



tional work. "In today's global economy we need to see our international efforts much more in terms of the self-interests of American workers." While this formulation may seem to indicate a nationalist or protectionist direction, the contemplated shift seems rather to be from "helping" downtrodden workers abroad to mutual aid for mutual benefit. "We recognize that we need the support of the international free trade union movement because global employers exploit workers wherever quick profits are to be made—and because so many of our American employers are corporations that are controlled abroad."

New Voice proposes to create a Transnational Corporate Monitoring Project (perhaps as part of the Center for Strategic Campaigns) which would serve as a central resource for information on global, corporate, and labor organizations; support all efforts to achieve international solidarity on behalf of American workers; and monitor international institutions and treaties like the World Bank, the IMF, GATT, and NAFTA. Such a project could serve as a vehicle for reorienting the

AFL-CIO vis-a-vis the global economy, but there are several problems.

One problem has to do with how the AFL-CIO will approach the global economy. In a labor version of economic nationalism, Sweeney told the AFL-CIO Convention, “the problem is American companies that export jobs instead of products.” If the AFL-CIO embraces an economic nationalism that promotes the interests of American workers at the expense of those elsewhere, it is hardly likely to find enthusiastic support when American workers need international solidarity. Instead, it needs to develop a global strategy based on raising the labor, social, and environmental standards of workers all over the world. As Richard Trumka put it, we need “an America which doesn’t compete around the globe by driving our wages down, when we should be forcing our competitors to pull theirs up.”

Another problem has to do with the heritage of the AFL-CIO’s international work. During the cold war the AFL-CIO international operation was virtually an arm of U.S. foreign policy, often lending support to dictatorial regimes around the world. *Business Week* described the AFL-CIO’s global operations, such as its International Affairs Department (IAD) in Washington and its American Institute for Free Labor Development in Latin America, as “labor’s own version of the Central Intelligence Agency—a trade union network existing in all parts of the world.” The AFL-CIO demanded that trade unionists shun all contact with unions tainted by communism; in practice, it often demanded that its affiliates shun even non-aligned unions. The principal funding for AFL-CIO activities overseas is the U.S. government. This is particularly ironic, since the AFL-CIO defines “free” labor unions with which it will cooperate as those that are not subject to government influence or control. The past role of the IAD and the regional institutes in such countries as South Africa, Brazil, Russia, and Chile forms a serious block to solidarity with the very labor groups with which U.S. workers need to cooperate.

A clean break with this dubious past would require abolition of the IAD and the regional institutes. Short of that, the AFL-CIO could decline all government money for international programs, or accept it only for programs initiated by unions in the host country. At the least, it should insist on total transparency in all its international programs. And it should end the double-talk in which “free” trade unions are defined as those that conform to the policies of the U.S. government, and many militant, self-directing worker organizations are shunned as Communist-tainted.

Some national union leaders, as well as many if not most of the activists who supported *New Voice*, reject the AFL-CIO’s cold war her-

itage. Even if they won't or can't abolish the IAD there is a great deal they (perhaps operating out of the proposed Transnational Corporate Monitoring Project) can do. For instance, they can pick some good fights that symbolize the common interests of workers in different countries and the value of international labor solidarity. When these fights require cooperation with labor organizations the AFL-CIO has previously shunned they should insist that cooperation is necessary and right. They can use these fights to educate union leaders and members on how workers should deal with the global economy. In these efforts they should utilize the experience of groups like the National Labor Committee in Support of Worker and Human Rights in Central America and the International Labor Rights Research and Education Fund.

The New Voice program notes that "we also have much to learn from unions abroad." The New Voice leadership should encourage tours to learn from unions in Canada (health care, labor law, and international labor cooperation), France (resisting government cuts), Germany (shorter hours and job training), Brazil (alliances of labor with the poor and unemployed), South Africa (transforming racist institutions), and others. If the AFL-CIO won't do it, progressive unions should give some highly visible invitations to some previously "shunned" unions, and let the chips fall where they may. The Transnational Corporate Monitoring Project should take as one of its most important tasks to make it possible for workers anywhere to link up with those in the same industry, company, or occupation anywhere in the world.

LEAD A DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT THAT SPEAKS FOR ALL AMERICAN WORKERS

The prevailing image of organized labor is a bureaucracy that primarily represents the special interests of its officials and a privileged sector of the workforce. The New Voice platform proposes to "create a labor movement that speaks for and looks like today's workforce." This involves a redefinition of the role of the labor movement, a new emphasis on racial, ethnic, and gender inclusion, and reforms of organizational structure.

Representing all workers. New Voice leaders are trying to position the AFL-CIO as an advocate for all working people, not just the agent of those in unions. The New Voice program states, "The labor movement must speak forcefully on behalf of all working people." Sweeney proclaimed, "To the more than 13 million workers we represent, and to millions more who are not represented, our commitment is firm and clear.

When you struggle for justice, you will not struggle alone.” Linda Chavez-Thompson said the labor movement needs to be the voice of those who need us, such as the unemployed, the underemployed, the young, the old, the poor, and children. “We need to be the hopes and dreams for those who can’t speak for themselves.”

This change of emphasis is essential for creating a new labor movement, but it needs to be implemented concretely. For example, campaigns for higher minimum wages, rights for contingent workers, and laws requiring just-cause for firing would address core problems of workers who are not organized. AFL-CIO support for Worker Advocacy Resource Centers and organizations of the unemployed would show commitment to advocating for all working people, not just current union members.

Inclusion. The New Voice leadership has begun to change the scandalous domination of the AFL-CIO by old white men. It created a new position of executive vice-president and ran Linda Chavez-Thompson, a Latina woman, for the seat; she will have primary responsibility for outreach to women and minorities, probably starting with a series of regional conferences. New Voice reserved 10 seats on the Executive Council for women and people of color and negotiated a new Executive Council with 6 women, 9 African Americans, 1 Latino, and 1



“I find cultural diversity in the workplace quite exhilarating. I’ve learned to say ‘NO’ in thirty languages.”

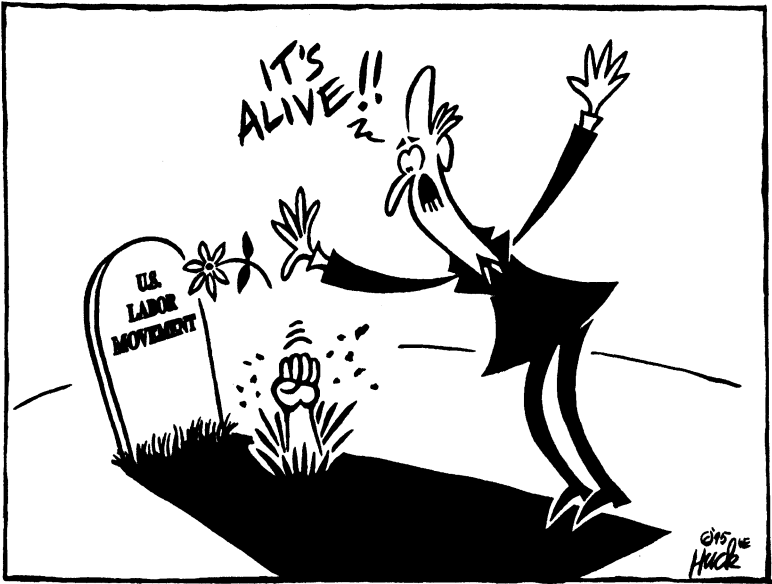
Asian-American. It proposed establishment of an advisory Young Workers' Task Force.

The AFL-CIO has taken steps in the right direction, but there's a long way to go to reach full and equal representation. Prior to the October convention, black union leaders noted that they were not consulted in selecting either candidate. Louis Uchitelle, in a July 15, 1995, article in the *New York Times*, states that according to William Burrus, executive vice president of the American Postal Workers Union and a leader of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, "Decisions were made without including us. Now, after the fact, they are reaching out to hear our views." The Coalition of Black Trade Unionists drew up 11 demands calling for more minorities and women as delegates, Executive Council members, and staffers. While both tickets agreed in principle to most of the black unionists' demands, the issue of tokenism remained. As cited by Martha Gruelle in an October 1995 *Labor Notes* article, William Burrus states, "You can't hold them accountable until they're forced to recognize the political strength of groups like women, African Americans, and Latinos." The look of the Executive Council won't change "as long as they have the power to anoint with a hand on the shoulder who they want."

The question of inclusion also involves the ways issues are framed. William Lucy, president of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, notes that the AFL-CIO opposed NAFTA primarily on the grounds that Americans would lose jobs as companies shifted operations to Mexico. According to Lucy, what should also have been stressed was a civil rights issue: the diversion of investment from urban communities where blacks might have gained employment. Burrus also notes, in the Uchitelle article, that "With a black viewpoint included, the campaign against NAFTA might have been a lot deeper and broader."

Organizational Reform. The New Voice program proposes to "expand the involvement of our grassroots leaders" and calls for "the top leadership of the Federation" to be "in constant touch with its grassroots leadership." It proposes quarterly Executive Council meetings with written agendas circulated in advance and summaries of Council action sent to affiliates; an annual budget; annual General Board Meetings of all AFL-CIO unions and of all State Federation Presidents; an annual conference for all central labor council leaders; and sets an age limit of 70 for top officers.

By the very act of contesting the election, New Voice has challenged the one-party, party-line norms that have governed the labor movement since the era of Sam Gompers. Sweeney, quoted in the October



28, 1995 issue of *People's Weekly World*, told delegates to the AFL-CIO convention that the secret to protecting the labor movement lies in part in "opening the AFL-CIO to debate. When we do that, the solidarity and unity that are at the core of our movement are tempered and trued and made stronger." Like Pope John XXIII, he has recognized the need to "throw open the windows of the church."

But the New Voice program barely begins to grapple with the depth of the problems created by the lack of democracy in the AFL-CIO, let alone in the labor movement as a whole. For the previous 16 years, the AFL-CIO Executive Council was composed of 33 mostly white male international union presidents who were reelected every two years as a group by voice vote without opposition or debate. They met in closed sessions and kept any disagreements secret; Council minutes remained closed even to scholars for thirty years! The new Executive Council was also selected via a back-room negotiation between the two tickets and elected with virtually no opportunity for discussion or alternative nominations. Many national unions function with a similar level of democracy.

This real lack of democracy contributes mightily to negative public and member perception of the labor movement. The Hart study noted that many union members often liken the union to "another boss." "Too many members see unions as bureaucratic institutions which have

lost sight of the average member's interests."

Sweeney has said that the whole governance and structure of the AFL-CIO needs to be reviewed to "find ways to operate more effectively." But the reforms proposed by New Voice so far are grossly inadequate to address this in reality.

Unions at every level need to be run more by rank-and-file workers and less by full-time officials; to guarantee freedom of speech and association without the threat of reprisal; to provide direct election of top union officials by all union members; and to ensure rank-and-file negotiation and ratification of contracts. New AFL-CIO structures should support rank-and-file empowerment, not re-centralization of authority.

While democratic reform will require a grassroots struggle union-by-union, the AFL-CIO can make a significant contribution. It should use the precedent of its first contested presidential election to advocate a new norm of democratic pluralism, rather than single-party rule, for all levels of the labor movement. It should insist that oppositions and insurgencies be regarded as legitimate elements of the labor movement and pursue genuine neutrality toward them. It should welcome those who have been "shunned" because of past support for oppositions and insurgencies back into the fold. Its emerging ethical practices code should require that affiliates provide the basic human rights and democratic practices that we demand of governments throughout the world.

Now, as in the past, conflicts between national union leaders and their own rank-and-file are likely to pose difficult problems for the AFL-CIO leadership. What will the New Voice leaders do when rank-and-file workers reject contracts but are ordered back to work by national union officials? When appointed trustees replace the elected leaders of local unions? Or when workers strike despite the opposition of their union leaders? While it may not be the AFL-CIO's role as a federation to pick sides in such situations, at the least the new leadership should ensure that the AFL-CIO will not function as a *de facto* strikebreaker. Labor activists who believe in union democracy should continue to support the right of rank-and-file workers to act on their own behalf, whatever national unions or the AFL-CIO may do.

INSTITUTIONALIZE THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The New Voice platform emphasizes the need "to provide for a process of continual growth and change." To that end it proposes a "Committee 2000" of top union officials to conduct a Strategic Planning Process and submit a report to the 1997 AFL-CIO Convention. While such a Strategic Planning Process is doubtless a good idea, the proposed form

suggests that the process of change will be tightly controlled by those at the top of the labor hierarchy, when what is required most of all for a new labor movement is relaxation of that top-down control to make room for a continuing process of initiatives from below. In shaping the future, the new AFL-CIO leadership needs to pay far more attention to John Sweeney's campaign rhetoric: "We mean more than just changing the leadership of our labor federation at the top. We mean building a strong new movement from the ground up."

The organizational strategy outlined in the New Voice program is essentially to build a new AFL-CIO staff structure that largely by-passes the existing officers and departments. This responds to the need to address a new set of tasks, to avoid entanglement in structures that are poorly adapted to those tasks, and to circumvent the bureaucratic deadwood. While perhaps wise, this strategy risks building not a new labor movement but rather a new bureaucracy in the shell of the old. In the October 1995 issue of *Labor Notes*, labor writer Suzanne Gordon wrote of the New Voice program:

"For every union problem, there's a new Washington solution—an institute, a task force, a monitoring project, a clearinghouse, a policy center, a training center, a center for strategic campaigns, a new organizing department (with an office of strategic planning), a strategic planning process ("Committee 2000"), two or three campaign funds, a labor council advisory committee, and a 'strike support team of top people' from various union staffs. . . . This platform proclaims that 'we must *institutionalize* the process of change.' They will certainly do that if, on top of the AFL-CIO's many existing departments, they establish all these new institutions in and around 815 16th Street, NW."

If the new AFL-CIO leaders count on their new committees, task forces, institutes, and centers to create a new labor movement, they will fail. Only if they are able to nurture a new movement culture that values and promotes rank-and-file initiative do they have a chance to succeed. What they can and should do (and what the New Voice program at its best proposes) is encourage and provide resources for a wide range of such initiatives.

After the devastating defeat of the Pullman strike in 1894, Eugene Victor Debs opened the pages of the union's magazine not only to the union's members but also to the widest possible range of those throughout the country who had proposed new approaches to the labor question. Such an open discussion—updated for the age of electronic communication—provides a more inspiring model of how to "institu-

tionalize the process of change” within the labor movement than a committee of top union officials attempting to chart the future for the entire labor movement.

CONCLUSION

Throughout its history, the labor movement’s low points have also been its turning points. The same could be true now. But to meet the needs of working people today, the labor movement needs to change at least as radically as the transnational corporations have changed. What needs changing goes far beyond the AFL-CIO as a national union center; the entire definition of the labor movement as a means for particular groups of workers to bargain with particular employers within the framework of a national economy is as outmoded as the vertically-integrated national corporation. Its focus on collective bargaining, its definitions of bargaining units, its divisions among unions, its notions of seniority, its limited repertoire of tactics, its narrow conception of workers’ needs and interests, its faith in the beneficence of economic growth, and its embeddedness within a national framework—all require drastic change.

In today’s globalizing economy the needs of working people and the goals of the labor movement can only be met through a worldwide coalition of labor and other movements to impose human and ecological interests on transnational corporations and other out-of-control institutions and forces. Within such a coalition, the labor movement can represent the specific needs of workers in the workplace—and their organization at work as part of the movement as a whole. In some ways, such a labor movement will more resemble that of the 19th century Knights of Labor than the model we have inherited from Gompers and Meany. Can the emergence of new leadership in the AFL-CIO contribute to such a change, or will it instead help contain the forces of change within the existing shell?

Some shelled animals outgrow their original shells but continue to prosper by adding on new, larger, and differently-shaped chambers; some leave their outgrown shells behind; some die when their shells no longer allow them room to grow. If the AFL-CIO can change enough to let a “new labor movement” emerge, or even if a revitalized labor movement eventually has to escape from its confines, the current attempt to build a new labor movement within the shell of the old will have played a constructive role. But if the AFL-CIO tries to confine the regeneration of the labor movement within its own shell, it risks killing the very forces that might give it a new life. ■