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The Failure of Organizing, the New Unity Partnership and the Future of the Labor Movement

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Abstract

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Keywords

New Unity Partnership, union, labor movement, organizing, labor rights

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The Failure of Organizing, the New Unity Partnership And the Future of the Labor Movement

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**--- DRAFT ---
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The Failure of Organizing, the New Unity Partnership and the Future of the Labor Movement

The New Unity Partnership (NUP) has stirred up a firestorm of controversy in union circles. Its inception can be traced to the July 4th holiday in 2003 when five national union presidents gathered for a candid private discussion about the future of the labor movement. The motivation for the summit was concern about the collective inability of unions to reverse their fading fortunes. At this and subsequent meetings the unions considered structural and strategic options to promote union growth, ultimately committing to a form of mutual aid pact to pool resources for coordinated organizing initiatives and to support each other in critical campaigns. The controversy stems not from this tangible outcome, but from the NUP's call to dramatically restructure the entire movement by redefining the AFL-CIO and consolidating unions into fifteen or twenty sectoral powerhouses (Bernstein 2003, Wypijewski 2003).

The unlikely alliance includes three of the most progressive unions [SEIU (service employees), UNITE (needle trades and textiles) and HERE (hotel and restaurant)], plus two conservative construction unions [LIUNA (laborers) and UBC (carpenters)]. The common ground is a commitment to organizing. As explained by Andy Stern, president of SEIU, "all of us are radicals about growth" (*Business Week Online*, 2003B). What is most intriguing is the presence of the UBC, the renegade union that seceded from the AFL-CIO in 2001 in a squabble over dues and organizing (and subsequently developed close ties to the antiunion Bush administration). It seems that the idea for the July summit actually grew out of efforts by some of these same union presidents to convince the UBC chief, Doug McCarron, to return to the AFL-CIO. McCarron's views on the necessity of focusing single-mindedly on recruitment, along

with his opinion that AFL-CIO dues needlessly drain resources better devoted to growth, apparently we persuasive.

The NUP is viewed by some as a threat to the AFL-CIO, and more widely as an indictment of its president John Sweeney. It has been criticized as a presumptuous attempt by a self appointed group of union leaders to map the future for everyone else. This opinion was advanced for example by USWA (steelworkers) president Leo Gerard in an interview during the March 2004 AFL-CIO Executive Council meetings: "These are five guys sitting around and talking. They don't represent the labor movement" (Franklin 2004B). A more charitable interpretation was offered by Paul Booth, Assistant to the President of AFSCME (state, county and municipal), who both credits and cautions those involved for their "powerful impatience" (Meyerson, 2003)

At this juncture, the long term impact of the NUP is uncertain. What is clear is that the parties intend to do more than talk. The five unions have already joined together for a massive demonstration (and other actions) in support of HERE contract negotiations with Yale University in the fall of 2003 (Cummins 2004). They intend to continue to look for opportunities to conduct coordinated campaigns, and hope "to chart a new organizing course that might inspire others" (Moberg 2004). The most dramatic outgrowth of the NUP is the planned merger of UNITE and HERE. As explained by UNITE president Bruce Raynor, "There are 76 unions. There need to be fewer, more formidable unions. And how do you lead except by example? If we can do this and it goes well, hopefully that puts the idea in the minds of other labor leaders" (Meyerson 2004).

The UNITE-HERE merger brings together two unions with aggressive organizing programs that target similar workers, most of them immigrants or African Americans. Aside from the promise of creating a more powerful union, the merger also frees HERE president John Wilhelm for an anticipated campaign to succeed Sweeney at the AFL-CIO when his term expires in 2005 (Greenhouse, 2004A).

Whatever the fate of Wilhelm's unannounced (and unconfirmed) candidacy, the very creation of the NUP is momentous because five unions closely associated with organizing have signaled their disaffection with the current AFL-CIO. Sweeney was elected president of the federation in 1995 on a platform that emphasized organizing, and this has continued as the clear priority throughout his tenure. What happened to the Sweeney revolution? What has blocked progress? Does the NUP offer a viable alternative route to union revitalization? Will the NUP change the course of the labor movement or become a minor historical footnote?

In order to place the current situation into perspective, it is important to step back and trace the recent evolution of labor strategy, with particular attention to the organizing priority and the efforts by the Sweeney administration to promote growth. That will set the stage for a look at the most recent data on membership, which indeed confirm that union fortunes have continued to decline. Then it will be possible to review the type of restructuring proposed by the NUP in more detail and to weigh its potential vis-a-vis alternative courses of action.

Emergence of the Organizing Model¹

Organizing has been at the heart of union strategy discussions for twenty years. It moved to center stage in the context of rapid decline during the Reagan era. The labor movement lost more than one-fifth of its private sector members during the first half of the 1980's, sent reeling by twin recessions, globalization, de-regulation, technological change, and the Reagan National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). It was in response to this crisis that national union leaders attempted to confront the deficiencies in prevailing union practice (Hurd, 2001).

The AFL-CIO Executive Council initiated strategic planning in 1983, with the presidents of most top unions participating in the process. Initial consideration of dramatic restructuring of the movement through mega mergers to consolidate around “cones of influence” with clearly defined jurisdictions proved too threatening to some unions and the idea was abandoned. Instead, a blueprint for change was adopted in 1985 that included reorientation of the AFL-CIO as well as suggested courses of action for affiliated unions. The plan's modest recommendations included merger guidelines (a shadow of the cones of influence proposal), but also endorsed efforts to increase members' participation in their unions, and to improve organizing activity (AFL-CIO, 1985).

Much of the subsequent practical effort to institute change involved application of what came to be known as the *organizing model*. The original specification of this concept can be traced to a massive teleconference on “internal organizing” on February 29 and March 1, 1988, sponsored by the AFL-CIO and broadcast by satellite to multiple

¹ Portions of the next four sections are condensed and updated from Hurd (2004), repeated here with the permission of the editors of the cited collection.

locations across the country with hundreds of elected leaders and union staff participating. The labor educators and organizers planning the conference decided to contrast the typical union workplace with an activist one using the terms *servicing model* and *organizing model*. This original conceptualization of the *organizing model*, as defined in the AFL-CIO training manual *Numbers That Count*, argues that unions can be more effective when representing workers if they use the same mobilizing techniques with current members that are most effective when recruiting new members (Diamond, 1988). Throughout the late 1980's the *organizing model* was used almost exclusively in this sense referring to internal organizing.

The AFL-CIO's most innovative initiative on the external organizing front during this period was the formation in 1989 of the Organizing Institute (OI). Headed by star organizer Richard Bensinger, the OI was established as an independent entity insulated from the bureaucratic culture of the tradition bound federation. It trained union organizers in an activist grassroots approach, and became something of an oasis for militants from the dozen AFL-CIO affiliated unions with energetic organizing programs.

By the mid 1990s the OI had trained and placed hundreds of organizers, and the style of member recruitment it promoted was accepted as the prevailing "model" of organizing. Perhaps because of the parallels to the mobilization approach to internal organizing outlined in *Numbers that Count*, it became common place for those in union circles to refer to the OI approach as the *organizing model*. Although the OI did not advocate this terminology, by 1995 the *organizing model* concept was indiscriminately used to refer to both internal organizing to mobilize members, and external organizing that promotes grassroots activism as a way to build support for union representation.

It is this merged conceptualization of the *organizing model* that has survived. As summarized by Heery, et. al. (2000:996):

... The organizing model ... tends to be used in two overlapping senses. First, it can refer to a model of good practice which contributes to membership growth ... Elements of this good practice include: reliance on targeted and planned organizing campaigns; ... identification of issues around which workers can be mobilized and the use of mobilizing tactics in the workplace ...; the use of rank-and-file organizing committees to plan and conduct campaigns... Second, it represents an attempt to rediscover the 'social movement' origins of labour, essentially by redefining the union as a mobilizing structure which seeks to stimulate activism among its members.

Changing to Organize, Organizing for Change

When John Sweeney challenged Lane Kirkland for the presidency of the AFL-CIO in 1995, his "New Voice" campaign proposed changes based on the premise that "the most critical challenge facing unions today is organizing," and called upon national unions to "organize at a pace and scale that is unprecedented" (Sweeney, et al, 1995:2,3). With organizing at the top of the agenda, the subsequent victory of Sweeney's slate was widely interpreted as an endorsement of this priority.

Once in office, the new president created an Organizing Department and appointed Richard Bensinger as director. The OI was moved into the Organizing Department, its budget was increased sharply, and a new fund was established to subsidize strategic organizing campaigns. Bensinger was charged with redefining the federation's role in organizing, a daunting task because there was no tradition of leadership from the center in this arena. The AFL-CIO had restricted itself to supporting the organizing efforts of affiliated unions, typically only in response to requests for assistance.

With the endorsement of Sweeney, Bensinger's Organizing Department set out to convince union leaders at the national and local levels to embrace the organizing priority and to initiate institutional change to sustain increased organizing. Supporting this effort was a group of union officials who had embraced the OI in the early 1990s as participants in its elected leader task force. Bensinger kept the original OI group intact and added a few new members to form the AFL-CIO Elected Leader Task Force on Organizing, chaired by Bruce Raynor who at the time was Executive Vice President of UNITE. Other key task force members included John Wilhelm, then Secretary-Treasurer of HERE, and Tom Woodruff, Vice President of SEIU.

The Elected Leader Task Force held a series of retreats for union officials who expressed an interest in organizing, then late in 1996 released "Organizing for Change, Changing to Organize." The report called upon union leaders to take risks and make the dramatic changes necessary to succeed at organizing. It identified four keys to winning (Raynor, 1996: 13):

- Devote more resources to organizing.
- Develop a strong organizing staff.
- Devise and implement a strategic plan.
- Mobilize your membership around organizing.

Selling this simple agenda (but complex task) dominated the work of the Organizing Department.

The AFL-CIO officers were fully engaged, and shifting resources to support recruitment efforts quickly became the focal point of both their speeches and the Organizing Department's campaign. In consultation with Bensinger, Sweeney decided to operationalize the call to shift resources by asking all unions to move toward a goal of

devoting 30% of their budgets to recruitment. To promote acceptance of the program among affiliates, the Organizing Department set as an objective for 1998 to: “lead an expanded Changing to Organize program and provide technical assistance to unions on crafting strategic plans to support a greatly increased organizing focus...,” and to “help unions move the Changing to Organize message deeper and broader among local union leaders” (AFL-CIO, 1998:7).

Although the expanded OI training program continued to promote an activist approach tied to mobilization, it was in the late 1990s that strategic debates moved away from the *organizing model* and began to concentrate on institutional structure and budgetary decisions. In order to understand the shift it is important to look at the barriers to organizational change that had stalled progress.

Impediments to the Organizing Model and Organizational Change

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s the *organizing model* as originally conceived had attracted great attention throughout the U.S. labor movement. *Numbers that Count* was the most requested publication of the AFL-CIO as many unions developed internal organizing initiatives. However, implementation of the *organizing model* proved to be difficult except during the period immediately preceding the expiration of collective bargaining agreements (a time when member interest in local union affairs typically is at a peak no matter what model of unionism is practiced). It seems that members do not have a taste for continual warfare at work, preferring stability rather than on-going confrontations. Furthermore, mobilization does not free time for other pursuits; to the contrary, it requires careful planning and intense effort by

staff and elected leaders in order to succeed. Locals with effective internal organizing programs are indeed vibrant, members are engaged, and effectiveness in the workplace improves. But this internal energy does not translate directly into growth because it concentrates attention on practice within existing units rather than outreach to potential new members (Fletcher and Hurd, 1998).

This reality led labor leaders who embrace the organizing priority to refocus their efforts towards mobilization designed to support external organizing. As Tom Woodruff of SEIU explained in 1995: “The organizing model ... points us in the most narrow way. The better job you do with fifteen percent of the market, the more it motivates the boss to wipe you out. We have to direct our energy outside” (Fletcher and Hurd, 1998:45). It is this perspective that was behind the AFL-CIO led campaign to persuade unions to shift resources away from representation and to concentrate instead on external organizing.

Although the Changing to Organize program clearly influenced strategic priorities and budgetary allocations, there was quiet resistance to the commitment of 30% of resources for recruitment which was viewed by most unions as excessive. Furthermore, Richard Bensinger ruffled the feathers of several key union presidents. His commitment to the organizing priority was unquestioned, but his frank criticism of national union leaders who did not demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm for the organizing agenda won few friends, and pressure mounted from members of the AFL-CIO Executive Council to have him replaced. In the summer of 1998 Bensinger was asked by John Sweeney to step down as Organizing Director (Meyerson, 1998).

In reality the problem was not only with Bensinger, who had done a great deal to further the Sweeney goal of establishing organizing as the most important challenge facing unions. What Sweeney and his advisors had envisioned was re-positioning the federation so that it could assume a leadership role in organizing and other aspects of union strategy. But this dream of a stronger center building consensus around a common set of objectives was resisted on all sides by national union leaders with their own priorities.

Individual national unions determine internal resource allocations and develop their own recruitment programs. In response to Sweeney's prodding the leaders of the national unions have indeed accorded more importance to the organizing priority, and virtually all lend at least rhetorical support. Most unions have increased the funding, and many have devoted substantial resources to the effort. However, the individual unions jealously guard their authority over organizing strategy, staffing, target selection and all decisions related to coordination with other unions. The federation's role as arbiter of disputes where there is competition between unions in specific campaigns is accepted, but efforts by the AFL-CIO to broker broader agreements regarding organizing jurisdiction have been rejected.

After Bensinger's departure the AFL-CIO retained its commitment to Changing to Organize, but struggled to capture some semblance of authority in this arena. In 2000 Sweeney was able to persuade the Executive Council to endorse a specific goal of organizing 1,000,000 workers a year, and the federation's organizing program embraced a three-point process to achieve the objective (AFL-CIO, 2001:8):

- Encourage national affiliates to set and achieve higher numeric organizing goals.

- Assess how the federation's resources can best be used to help achieve these increased goals.
- Track and share information about organizing campaigns.

The 1,000,000 goal was never taken seriously by affiliates, and the Organizing Department eventually has retreated to a more modest role. The current practice is to provide assistance to national union organizing campaigns where possible, to continue to offer guidance to unions that agree to invest more resources in organizing, and to design a long term campaign to amend labor law to establish an enforceable right for workers to organize into unions (AFL-CIO, 2002). Labor law reform is the most public part of the current effort and is referred to as the Voice @ Work campaign.

Is Organizing Enough?

The push for unions to reallocate resources to recruitment is far removed from the *organizing model* ideal of engaging workers in the life of the union. Rather than stimulating creative experimentation, the difficult challenges posed by internal mobilization become convenient excuses for progressive unionists to turn away from the mundane concerns of current members. Even in those few unions that have achieved the prescribed magnitude of reallocation, the substantive organizational change has been limited to a shift in priorities. Instead of addressing the representation of current members, these unions direct attention outside to the more exotic realm of new organizing, where struggles with the boss and the corporate power structure dominate staff attention and stimulate militance. This nearly single minded focus on external organizing potentially relegates current members to substandard representation and disenchantment. Even newly recruited members face this fate once the first contract is

signed. The problems inherent in the much maligned servicing model, namely a disengaged apathetic membership, are thereby exacerbated. Only the small militant fraction of members who get drawn into external campaigns as volunteer organizers share in the fervor.

But in most unions the call for dramatic budget reallocation prompted only modest shifts, and (other than the marginally increased attention to organizing) life continued as before – there was no soul searching, no engagement, and no organizing momentum to inspire progressive staff and militant members. A notable weakness in the AFL-CIO's Changing to Organize program was that the objective of achieving grassroots activism and member mobilization as the key to injecting social movement zeal was abandoned at the alter of quantitative recruitment goals. The federation's program did not promote any change in practice beyond resource reallocation, but rather spread the message that union revitalization is simply a matter of adding members and extending the labor movement as it exists. No substantive organizational change was prescribed.

On the one hand this approach was pragmatic given the difficulty encountered sustaining the *organizing model* and the need for resources to construct an extensive recruitment effort. On the other hand without more substantive transformation and concentrated attention to the social movement dimension of the *organizing model*, even the narrow goal of sustained membership growth has proven impossible to achieve. If the internal life of the union does not offer to potential members a dynamic home imbued with spirit and purpose, what incentive do they have to join? In those unions that have made a substantial financial commitment to recruitment (including at least four

of those in the NUP) there is notable energy on the organizing front, but even here there is no credible evidence of sustainable growth.

With national unions operating independently and making pragmatic decisions about recruitment, a wide range of approaches has emerged. As activity has increased differences in style and focus have spawned open debate about all aspects of organizing. Particularly contentious have been disagreements over the appropriate role of jurisdiction, with a wide assortment of unions initiating organizing campaigns beyond their traditional base (many drawn to opportunities in health care and the public sector). The earlier apparent consensus regarding the *organizing model* and the grassroots approach to recruitment has long since dissolved. In the context of quantitative goals, the ideal of organizing as a method of engaging members and building commitment has given way to debates about appropriate targeting, how to be cost effective and how to manage organizing programs efficiently.

The lack of consensus about strategy has come to the surface because union density has continued to decline in the U.S. This is in spite of nearly a decade under the leadership of John Sweeney and in spite of broad endorsement for the organizing priority. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the grim reality. Table 1 compares three contiguous seven year periods – the first seven years of Sweeney’s presidency (1995-2002), the last seven years under his predecessor Lane Kirkland (1988-1995), and the Reagan years (1981-1998). Clearly union density declined most rapidly during the Reagan years, but subsequently the results under Kirkland and during the Sweeney era are almost identical. In 2003 the decline continued, with density falling overall to 12.9

percent and in the private sector to 8.2 percent, the lowest level since 1901. (US Department of Labor, 2004; Freeman, 1998).

Table 1
Relative Change in Union Density by Sector

	1981-88	1988-95	1995-2002
Total	-21.5	-11.3	-10.7
Private	-32.1	-18.9	-16.5
Public	+6.7	+3.0	+0.3

Source: Barry T. Hirsch and David Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book*, 2003 edition, 11, 12, 16. Washington: Bureau of National Affairs.

Table 2 looks at comparative trends for the ten industry groups with the most union members (accounting for approximately 90% of total membership). The story is the same; although the pace of decline has slowed a bit for some industry groups (and even turned around for the hospital industry), contraction has accelerated for others. Even in those industries and occupations where recruitment efforts have been most obvious and where there have been notable major victories, the results are extraordinarily disappointing. Clearly the heightened level of organizing activity has not

been sufficient to overcome either the difficult environment for unions in the U.S., or the institutional inertia inherent in the labor movement.

Table 2
Relative Change in Union Density by Industry Group

	1988-1995	1995-2002
Construction	-13.7	-0.5
Durable Goods Manufacturing	-20.3	-17.5
Non-durable Goods Manufacturing	-20.1	-20.8
Transportation	-11.9	-10.8
Communication	-23.6	-23.7
Utilities	-6.4	-9.3
Retail Trade	-9.1	-25.0
Hospitals	-5.4	+1.4
Education	+1.4	-1.4
Public Administration	+6.0	+1.6

Sources: Barry T. Hirsch and David Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book*, 1996 edition, pp. 74-80, 1999 edition, pp. 128-135, 2003 edition, 48-55. Washington: Bureau of National Affairs.

The New Unity Partnership

Before the formation of the NUP, a debate was already simmering among national labor leaders about what had gone wrong with the anticipated Sweeney led renaissance, and what needed to be done to re-energize the movement. Though much of the discussion addressed what national unions should do to improve organizing success, discontent with the failure of the AFL-CIO to lead effectively also began to surface. Early in 2003 the SEIU fueled the flames of debate by publishing “United We Win,” a position paper that called for dramatic restructuring to consolidate resources and promote expansion. The SEIU framework was presented as an antidote to creeping general unionism. The premise captured the widely shared frustration with the lack of progress: “... despite many victories and reasons for hope within ... the broader labor movement in recent years, the strength of... unions in the United States continues to decline” (SEIU, 2003:2).

The SEIU argued that simply increasing the pace and scale of recruitment would not be enough, and implied that simply adopting the correct organizing methods would not be enough, that simply being militant would not be enough. The conclusion was that there is a fundamental weakness in the movement’s structure that must be addressed. The SEIU explicitly called for realignment so that there would be a smaller number of large unions that are “... industry focused... not general” (SEIU, 2003:21). Such a realignment would be designed to enable unions to demonstrate market power, giving unrepresented workers more incentive to join. The paper closed with a call for

open discussion about how to establish the rules and culture necessary to facilitate restructuring.

Then, at the February 2003 AFL-CIO Executive Council Meeting, Sandra Feldman of the AFT (teachers) joined with Andy Stern, Bruce Raynor, John Wilhelm and Terry O’Sullivan of LIUNA to push through a proposal that created a new executive committee, ostensibly a forum for candid discussion of the challenges confronting the labor movement. The idea was for a relatively small group of union presidents (including those from the ten largest unions plus seven others selected by Sweeney) to meet monthly with the federation’s officers to plot strategy. As described in *Business Week Online* (2003A), the goal of the committee would be: “to reinvigorate the AFL-CIO and refocus its agenda on recruitment and politics – and ditch almost everything else.” Contrary to the hopes of at least Stern, Wilhelm and Raynor, the newly established executive committee apparently did not promote the type of candid debate about these ideas that they has envisioned. Whatever went on behind closed doors, it is clear that the committee failed to initiate any substantive change to the federation. It was at this juncture that discussions began with Doug McCarron and a coalition was forged leading to the NUP.

Just what has the NUP proposed? Other than the details spelled out in the SEIU paper (which was used to stimulate discussion among the participating presidents), public statements by the alliance’s lead characters have endorsed only general concepts. One is that the situation faced by the labor movement is urgent. As captured by O’Sullivan, “What happens in the next five years defines the next fifty” (Meyerson, 2003). A second is that organizing is the most important priority. According to Wilhelm,

“At this point all it represents is a group of union leaders trying to figure out the way to organize on a bigger scale” (Moberg, 2004). A third is that the labor movement needs to be consolidated through mergers, a priority reflected in the plans of UNITE and HERE to join forces. A corollary of both organizing and consolidation is that jurisdiction needs to be determined based on industrial sector and markets, though exactly what this means is still vague. Finally, there is some consensus that the role of the AFL-CIO should be redefined, though there is no apparent agreement on how this will be accomplished. Stern notes, “We need to talk about should the AFL-CIO be revolutionized, should its role be drastically increased or decreased” (*Business Week Online*, 2003B).

In spite of the public criticism of the failures of the AFL-CIO, the framework proposed by the NUP is remarkably similar to the federation’s agenda for the past nine years. Throughout his term in office, John Sweeney has stressed the urgency of the situation and exhorted national unions to concentrate attention and resources on organizing. It is clear that the leaders of the NUP unions remain committed to the principles of the Changing to Organize program, and blame lack of progress at least in part on the failure of other unions to embrace these principles. This unflinching commitment to the concept that the potential for growth is inexorably linked to a massive shift in resources is not surprising, especially given that the same elected leaders that worked with Richard Bensinger in the mid-90s to design the AFL-CIO program are involved in NUP – Presidents Raynor of UNITE and Wilhelm of HERE, and Executive Vice President Woodruff of SEIU.

The implication is that Sweeney has not been aggressive enough in confronting recalcitrant unions or in clearly assigning organizing jurisdiction. This sentiment is tempered with the realization that the AFL-CIO has only limited influence over affiliates, thus the call to revolutionize the role of the federation. This also was part of the Sweeney game plan, at least early in his administration, though there was a notable retreat from the effort to establish a lead role in organizing when key national unions resisted. Even within the NUP there is not consensus on just how strong the center should be, with Doug McCarron believed to favor a much leaner federation with more national union autonomy.

What most clearly separates the NUP framework from current strategy is the call to restructure unions through mergers. This general concept has been broached before, dating back to the “cones of influence” discussions during the strategic planning process of the mid-1980s. More recently, a futures committee that functioned during Sweeney’s first term addressed the question of how to promote mergers, and three major manufacturing unions attempted to lead the way with a “heavy metal” conglomeration [USWA, UAW (auto workers) and IAM (machinists)], though negotiations ultimately failed due to differences in governance and internal culture. The NUP idea is much more ambitious than these previous attempts; it calls for a 70% reduction in the number of affiliated unions to no more than twenty organizations, with jurisdictions assigned based primarily on industrial sector.

Beyond the basic principles, there seems to be no clearly defined agenda. Brainstorming notes from discussions among the five union presidents have been leaked and posted on the internet, fueling public debate that clearly stretches the intent

of the NUP well beyond any formal plans (see for example Wypijewski, 2003). It is apparent that for now the unions intend to work collaboratively and attempt to demonstrate in practice the validity of their priorities to other unions. Any formal proposals to change the rules of the AFL-CIO, any open challenge to John Sweeney, or any move to bolt from the federation will likely wait at least until after the 2004 U.S. presidential election, and possibly until the AFL-CIO convention in 2005.

It is not even certain that members of the NUP are committed to engage in a struggle for leadership of the federation. There seems to be an agreement that these unions stand to benefit from a stronger overall labor movement which could enhance the organizing environment. Given this, the NUP would prefer to shape the federation to mesh with its agenda. However, there is a notable gap in that agenda that could limit the NUP's role in the AFL-CIO – there is no consensus on the appropriate role of labor in electoral politics.

After discussing options to enhance influence, the five union presidents ultimately agreed to disagree about political action. This became evident during the Democratic Party presidential primaries: SEIU was a high profile part of the Howard Dean campaign, LIUNA joined with the IBT (teamsters) and sixteen other unions to endorse Dick Gephardt, UNITE backed John Edwards, HERE watched from the sidelines and UBC retained its ties to the Bush administration. None had the prescience to align with John Kerry. The failure of the NUP to elucidate a political strategy may ultimately limit its influence, particularly given the historic coordinating role played by the AFL-CIO in this arena.

Efficacy of NUP Style Restructuring

The NUP framework is not likely to attract a broad consensus, at least in the short term. Although there is support for the argument that the current situation is dire, general agreement that organizing is extremely important, and respect for what the SEIU has accomplished, few labor leaders are prepared to endorse a single minded focus on growth. Probably the most prominent and relevant view of recruitment at the national level advises patience, arguing that progress has been modest because members and local leaders are still tied to the *servicing model*. With time, experimentation and diligence, the organizing priority will spread more widely and deeply and density will begin to rebound. This position has been pushed into the background, but it still provides solace to national union presidents who are uneasy with the evangelical zeal emanating from the NUP camp.

Apart from occasional sniping, there has been no substantive critique of NUP unions' accomplishments in the organizing arena. A careful look at industrial and occupational data for the ten year period from 1992-2002 is sobering, and a bit surprising. Table 3 presents data for industries and occupations that fall within the jurisdictions of NUP unions. Although a bit less negative than the overall situation depicted in Table 2 above, the picture is similar. Membership and density have fallen in most relevant industries: textiles, clothing and laundry (UNITE); restaurants and hotels (HERE); and building services and nursing homes (SEIU). The only industry with increased density over the past five years is hospitals (SEIU), though unionization is lower than in 1992.

Table 3

U.S. Union Membership in NUP Markets

	1992		1997		2002	
	Members (1000s)	Density (%)	Members (1000s)	Density (%)	Members (1000s)	Density (%)
Industries:						
Textiles and Clothing	186.0	10.7	131.9	8.1	61.9	6.4
Laundries	29.1	8.2	21.0	5.7	14.5	3.8
Restaurants	102.8	1.9	92.5	1.5	78.4	1.2
Hotels	130.2	10.2	117.4	8.6	111.1	8.4
Building Services	60.3	11.4	58.1	9.4	54.2	7.7
Hospitals	713.0	14.5	675.1	13.1	755.0	14.2
Nursing Homes	189.8	11.0	166.3	9.7	168.8	9.0
Occupations:						
Registered Nurses	284.5	16.0	321.4	15.8	349.3	15.6
Nursing Aides	215.0	14.0	234.4	13.0	308.3	14.3
Janitors	390.0	19.4	376.7	17.8	352.4	17.1
Carpenters	150.9	18.6	150.9	15.5	195.1	17.4
Construction Laborers	131.1	20.5	151.4	19.0	174.0	17.5

Source: Barry T. Hirsch and David Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book*, 2003 edition, 48-67, 89-108, 130-149. Washington: Bureau of National Affairs.

Looking at selected occupations the picture is mixed. Density is lower among registered nurses (SEIU), janitors (SEIU) and construction laborers (LIUNA); but it is up over the past five years for nursing aides (SEIU) and carpenters (UBC), though still below the 1992 level for the latter. Membership is up in four of the occupations due in part to higher employment levels, accounting for some of the growth experienced by NUP unions.

Obviously the snapshot by industry and occupation does not tell the whole story. In several of the relevant markets other unions share turf with members of the NUP, and there have been some serious dislocations in the relevant sectors: clothing and textile production has been slashed due to globalization; restaurants and hotels suffered from months of depressed tourism after 9-11; privatization has made it difficult to maintain density in health care industries; outsourcing has reshaped building services; and in construction, project management firms have replaced general contractors, reinforcing the growing corporate sophistication of the non-union sector. But the fact remains that even with Herculean reallocation of resources and substantial internal restructuring, the NUP unions have not been able to overcome these environmental forces to turn things around in their own markets on a national scale. This demonstrates just how difficult it is to build momentum for growth.

In spite of the rather meager results, there is little question that these five unions are in a better position today than they would be absent their recruitment efforts. From the stand point of other unions, the NUP's restructuring ideas are more problematic than the organizing prescriptions. For one thing, there is little taste among elected national leaders to cede decision making power to the federation. The effort by Sweeney to

augment the role of the center was firmly rebuffed, and yet his approach was genteel in comparison to what some in the NUP seem to envision. It is hard to imagine the presidents of the IBT, the UAW, the UFCW (food and commercial) or any of a dozen other major unions granting significant authority over organizing jurisdiction or mergers to John Wilhelm or whoever might emerge as Sweeney's successor.

Regarding the call to combine unions based on industry and market, the resistance will be steep. In spite of the indisputable logic in the conceptualization of a labor movement structured to maximize bargaining power, there are a number of hurdles in the way. First, there is substantial support for occupational jurisdictions; this is a particularly viable stance for unions organizing in professional and technical fields because those workers have demonstrated strong occupational identity and a proclivity for collective action through professional associations (Hurd and Bunge, 2004). Second, the track record for mergers is not good; negotiations inevitably are complex, internal political opposition must be overcome, most are dominated by defensive rather than strategic concerns, and many extend jurisdiction into new industries and sectors rather than consolidating market power (Behrens, Hurd and Waddington, 2004: 125-126).

Third, and possibly most telling, there is widespread cynicism about the motives of the unions floating this idea. The SEIU has prospered by extending its jurisdiction from building services into the public sector and healthcare (in both instances mergers with unrelated unions were an essential part of the strategy). Now it seems to be making a case to appropriate healthcare for itself, in the process potentially cutting off access to two dozen other unions with at least a modest presence in this growth

industry. At the same time UNITE, forced by globalization to flee the rapidly disappearing clothing and textile industries, is staking a claim to laundries and retail clothing - both nominally the province of other unions. Even the merger with HERE is viewed as a curious step in the context of the call for industry based mergers; the combination is clearly reasonable given the unions' shared organizing philosophy and the potential for mutual benefit, but how it demonstrates the concept of restructuring for market power is less obvious. Furthermore, the merger process itself may prove difficult; both UNITE and HERE still need to address internal resistance to change on the part of traditional joint boards and locals respectively, and there may be problems melding unrepresented HERE staff with the more feisty unionized UNITE staff.

The NUP also has been criticized for the top down nature of its proposed restructuring, and the implicit disdain for union democracy (see for example Benson, 2003). Though there certainly is merit in the argument that revitalization must engage and invigorate rank-and-file union members, this issue is unlikely to be a major impediment to the NUP. If the organizing commitment, market focus, mutual aid and the recent merger all pay dividends in membership and bargaining power, concern about internal decision making process will not prevent other unions from embracing the NUP model.

However, concern with democracy does raise an important feature of the five unions that are involved. All of them retain strategic and budgetary control in the office of the national president. At least four of them (the possible exception is LIUNA) have implemented rather drastic internal restructuring in recent years to augment centralization of authority. In three unions (SEIU, UNITE, HERE) staff can run for office,

and the power to impose trusteeship's on locals has been used to place in positions of authority key staff members that share the unions' organizing philosophy. This top-down internal restructuring has been an essential ingredient of the drive to move forward. Extending this approach to unions with stronger traditions of democracy (for example professional and public sector unions) or of local autonomy (many of the former AFL unions) will not be easy. Adopting this type of practice at the federation level in the face of inevitable opposition from powerful national union presidents may well be impossible.

The Future Course of the Movement

While the NUP controversy has been simmering, consensus has emerged that labor's short run priority must be to defeat the reelection bid of George Bush. The President has leveled an open attack on federal unions – denying unionization rights to airport screeners, limiting those rights in the departments of Justice, Defense and Homeland Security, and threatening jobs in all agencies (including the quasi-independent postal service) with privatization (Hurd, 2003: 15-17). He also has called for strict limits to union political action, and he clashes with labor on virtually every piece of legislation related to the economy or the workplace.

Agreeing to oppose Bush proved easier than coalescing behind a specific Democratic candidate, and during the primary season unions divided their allegiances among four different contenders. By the spring of 2004 John Kerry was established as the presumptive nominee, the earlier dissension was subdued, and AFL-CIO affiliates

joined forces to endorse him. With virtually unanimous support on the Executive Council, a temporary dues increase was put in place to fund a \$44 million federation political program; in addition individual unions will fund their own action programs (led by SEIU with \$40 million) in an all out attempt to reverse the political climate (Franklin, 2004A).

This intense electoral offensive is tied directly to the objective of union growth. On November 13, 2003, the AFL-CIO achieved a milestone in its Voice@Work campaign for labor law reform when the Employee Free Choice Act was introduced in Congress by Senator Edward Kennedy. The bill would establish union certification based on signed authorization cards, provide for arbitration in bargaining for first contracts, and increase penalties for employer unfair labor practices violations (AFL-CIO, 2003).

The federation subsequently secured support for the legislation from all nine Democratic candidates for president including Kerry. The intent is to make the reform proposal a major election priority, and all candidates for Congress that seek labor endorsements will be pressed for commitment. By early April the bill had 179 sponsors in the House and 31 in the Senate. The AFL-CIO's progress in advancing such ambitious legislation with the potential to facilitate major organizing gains has won praise across the labor movement. According to CWA Executive Vice President Larry Cohen, this represents the "best ever political work of a united labor movement...; we have by far the most important political support for real collective bargaining rights in recent times." (Cohen, 2004).

Neither Cohen nor other labor leaders anticipate that the Employee Free Choice Act will become law any time soon, regardless of the outcome of the 2004 elections. The objective is to increase awareness among elected officials and the public of the inherent prejudice in the current NLRB union certification process in order to build a base for amending labor law at some point in the future. Nonetheless, there are many at the national union level who believe that “the best strategy to reverse labor’s decline is to defeat President Bush and elect someone friendlier to unions” (Greenhouse, 2004B).

This attitude (and hope) is oddly reminiscent of 1992 when the Kirkland AFL-CIO promoted Bill Clinton as the best antidote for labor’s ills when he challenged the senior George Bush. A Democratic victory in that election did confer a less antagonistic environment, but the Dunlop Commission appointed by Clinton’s Secretary of Labor to review labor law was a major disappointment. The Republican right captured control of the House in 1994 and Kirkland was removed from office in the aftermath.

Is there reason to believe that a Kerry victory would prove more beneficial? In spite of the effectiveness and accomplishments of the Voice@Work campaign, it is difficult to image any tangible payoff. As Michael Kazin observed a few years ago in an article largely sympathetic to the Sweeney political program, labor’s alliance with Democrats never fulfills hopes (Kazin, 1999). What are the chances for favorable labor law reform with union density and influence clearly on the wane? Even with a Kerry victory, the Democrats’ prospects for winning control of Congress are limited. And an ambitious proposal to amend labor law would require a 60-40 margin in the Senate to halt debate in the face of inevitably stiff opposition. The prospects for this type of margin seem immeasurably small even two or three elections into the future.

In spite of the disappointments of the past, there are many tradition bound labor leaders who cling to the notion that a Democrat in the White House will provide the magic that will allow density to rebound and restore economic power to unions. There are at least as many who whole heartedly endorse the political effort, but are more cognizant of the complexity of the challenge and continue to concentrate on organizing strategy as the key to growth. In either case, a Kerry victory keeps the dream alive for a political solution and labor law reform, and thereby strengthens the position of John Sweeney should he stick with his announced intention to stand for re-election in 2005. Should Kerry lose, the anti-union fervor of the Bush administration will be unleashed. In this environment the NUP call for drastic structural change and a shift in priorities may well attract more adherents.

Apart from the current unity of purpose in the face of a common enemy in the White House, labor must address the weaknesses that provide the backdrop for the strident proclamations of the SEIU and its collaborators. A pragmatic interpretation of the options was suggested prior to the emergence of the NUP by Paul Booth of AFSCME, who composed a thoughtful response to the SEIU's "United We Win" restructuring proposal. He pointed out that the SEIU conceptualization is only one of several approaches stimulated by "...frustration that the change to organize movement hasn't yielding an overall gain in union density" (Booth, 2003:1). He argued that no single plan for growth is likely to generate consensus at this juncture and posited that a variety of measures may be required to deal with the diverse challenges faced by unions in different sectors of the economy. He called for open dialogue,

experimentation and careful assessment of results from implementation of nine separate strategic approaches.

In addition to top down restructuring, Booth identified increased effort, more effective targeting, capital strategies, alternative forms of representation, renewed attention to the social movement aspect of the *organizing model*, and a range of initiatives to improve the political/legal environment. He confessed his personal inclinations towards reliance on political influence (which he attributed to his career in public sector unionism) but clearly viewed the political approach as only part of the solution. Though his insightful analysis was lost in the furor surrounding NUP, Booth's message is if anything more convincing today: experimentation on a variety of fronts is better than retrenchment, and more prudent than embracing any one formula. Most important, organizing is still central to the hope for survival (Booth, 2003).

Reflections on Rugged Terrain

Regardless of who is the next president of the U.S., or for that matter the next president of the AFL-CIO, the most likely scenario for several years hence will be for the movement to continue its gradual decline. The federation's role is unlikely to be very different from today – it will attempt to provide direction and to mediate among various factions. Experimentation on the organizing front will continue as suggested by Booth, with individual national unions joining with those associated with the NUP in situations where there is potential mutual benefit. There are likely to be heated debates over matters such as organizing jurisdiction and merger, undoubtedly influenced by the NUP.

In spite of the controversy, the NUP has performed an extraordinarily useful function by stimulating serious reconsideration of strategy, structure and the role of the AFL-CIO. Although it seems unlikely that the NUP formula will be implemented, the dramatic nature of the proposal at least broaches the notion that significant organizational transformation is required. But there is incredible inertia, and parallel to the search for new approaches there will be continued retrenchment, defensive mergers, and steady but decelerating drift towards general unionism.

Ultimately the path to revitalization is unlikely to be smooth. In fact, the terrain that labor must traverse is exceptionally rugged. As Booth suggests, there is no one approach that can touch on all of the challenges that must be confronted. The AFL-CIO's Changing the Organize program emphasizes top down resource reallocation, essentially spreading the message that bigger budgets for recruitment would spur a quantitative rebound in union membership and density. As Bill Fletcher and I have noted, this formula "largely assumes that little will change in the structure, function, leadership, and culture of organized labor" (Fletcher and Hurd, 2000: 59).

The current AFL-CIO emphasis on labor law reform, no matter how important, suffers from a similar flaw – it is also a top down initiative to promote growth of unions as they exist, in this case by changing the rules of engagement. Even in the set of alternatives enumerated by Booth there is scant attention to the overriding philosophy of narrowly conceived economic unionism, to labor's mode of operation when representing members, to union leadership, or to the movement's internal culture. The NUP proposal at least denounces the status quo, but it focuses narrowly on structure and also offers a top down solution. Although the shape of the movement would be modified,

unionization as it currently is practiced would not be altered directly. In fact, the presence of UBC and LIUNA in the NUP alliance sends a clear message that narrow economic unionism is fully consistent with the proposed restructuring.

Twenty years ago the Kirkland AFL-CIO engaged the former generation of labor leaders in deliberations about strategies for the future. The new generation of leaders is engaged in a parallel debate today. Among the collection of officers and their top advisers are a fair number of politically progressive unionists with roots in the student movement of the 1960s, in Saul Alinsky inspired community organizations, or in other social advocacy groups. To some extent, then, the arch-typical old guard conservative union leader of the past has been replaced. The contemporary clan of traditional leaders shares turf with a new era, progressive breed; in spite of their differences, though, most in both groups hold to the conviction that they know what is best for workers.

Is it any wonder that the presidents of SEIU, UNITE and HERE can comfortably join in alliance with the presidents of UBC and LIUNA? Though there is no common social agenda (explaining in part the inability to reach consensus on a political strategy), there are overlapping values: 1. they are all “radicals about growth,” 2. they are all prepared to use militant tactics to gain bargaining leverage, and 3. they all embrace narrow economic unionism (the progressive leaders implicitly assuming that increased bargaining power will generate social equality).

Changing to Organize, the Voice@Work campaign, and the NUP restructuring framework share a common objective: they all seek to promote some type of permutation for the sake of union growth. As good as it is to shake up the movement,

they also share a common flaw. There is no unifying vision of a different world, no new paradigm to inspire workers and challenge the status quo. As Simon Greer of Jobs with Justice muses, shouldn't labor leaders be asking 'How do we build a progressive movement?' rather than 'How so we restructure our bureaucracy?' (Greer, 2003: 82).

It seems that at a minimum labor needs to recapture the *organizing model* ideal of injecting social movement zeal within the rank-and-file. To do this and to attract the masses of unrepresented workers, there really needs to be a coherent vision about how our economy and our society would be different with a more vibrant labor movement. Simply arguing that unions would gain economic leverage and the power to take wages out of competition is not likely to provide inspiration or to attract new adherents. Any initiative to transform the movement also needs to embrace internal change, to engage members in educational programs with political and conceptual content, to design leadership development programs that target a diverse cross section of rank-and-file activists, and to mobilize members more effectively not simply around narrow contract demands, but around a social justice agenda.

In this context, unions need to build new cultures that attract key groups of workers to the movement. Low wage, low skill manufacturing and service workers, many of them immigrants, African-Americans and women, will be drawn to organizations that reflect their respective cultures, especially at the leadership level. Professional, technical and skilled craft workers will be drawn to organizations that elevate occupational status and embrace cultures consistent with professional norms. Contingent workers of all wage and skill levels will be drawn to organizations that are

flexible enough to experiment with new forms of representation molded to the transient nature of their work life.

In the evolving work place, unions cannot afford to be content with solutions that promise to spread the movement as it exists. A transformed, revitalized labor movement will emerge from an intricate mix of strategies. The transition will require an effective political program and will undoubtedly involve experimentation with new institutional structures. But, institutional transformation requires more than hard headed leaders committed to a resource shift and structural realignment. The movement also will need to engage current members, and be capable of making a cultural connection with broad and diverse cross sections of the evolving workforce. Labor's future depends on developing a vision that together with institutional flexibility is capable of adapting to a complex set of challenges and a rugged terrain.

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