

10 Issues on Labor's Future (June 20, 2005)

How Can Unions Organize Millions of Workers If They Don't — and Won't — Even Talk to Them?

By Harry Kelber

(Sixth in a series of 10 articles.)

If you will examine Andy Stern's "Unite to Win" and John Sweeney's "Winning for Working Families," you will not find a single word about communications, because in the minds of these two great labor thinkers, there is no need to spend time on this subject.

In fact, one of Sweeney's first acts in cutting the AFL-CIO budget to please Stern was to shut down the federation's monthly magazine, *America@Work*, which, despite its many faults, provided union members with at least some information of what was going on in the labor movement.

The "strategists" in the Sweeney and Stern camps have never explained how they plan to organize millions of workers into unions without reaching them through a sustained radio, television and newspaper campaign with labor's message. What they've told us is that, by spending multiple millions of dollars and restructuring the unions, non-union workers will be stumbling over themselves to join.

But if that doesn't work, Stern has another solution: Break away from the AFL CIO and start his own "stronger" labor federation. He won't give any clues about how he would do it or how it would work. And he brushes off critics who say the split in organized labor would weaken its economic and political power, and trigger a war between the two rival labor groups.

Neither Sweeney nor Stern have applied, or even recognized, a simple truth about union organizing: that worker-to-worker dialogues bring the best results.

There are hundreds of thousands of union members who could be very useful in massive organizing campaigns, but our leaders do not want to — or perhaps don't know how to — involve them.

Is it so strange that millions of members feel alienated, cynical and hostile, because their leaders pay so little attention to their needs or let them offer their own views?

And unorganized workers tend to believe the terrible things they hear about unions, when there are no responses from labor leaders. Conservative writers and politicians keep hammering away at "Big Unions" and "labor bosses" with all sorts of allegations, some of them well-founded, and you won't find one national union leader who will go on radio and television or seek a press interview, to provide convincing refutations to the accusations. Try to remember when was the last time you saw a national labor leader on television, and what did he or she say that was memorable?

The International Labor Communications Association (ILCA), which represents hundreds of labor publications throughout the country, has offered some proposals that would solidify and enrich AFL-CIO's massive organizing

campaigns. In a letter to Sweeney, ILCA president Martin Fishgold said the federation should “invest in the creation of a national labor media in the form of at least one cable television station, at least one radio network, and at least one national weekly publication.”

In regard to financing the labor media operation, Fishgold said: “Such ventures can be highly profitable, and the use of pension funds to invest in them, rather than in our corporate opponents, should be considered. But there are sufficient funds in the current AFL-CIO budget and the budgets of internationals to take this step without using pension money.”

It’s time national labor leaders learned that, in the field of organizing, the name of the game is “communications,”

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