

Corporate Unionism (3)

"The New Unity Partnership and Corporate Unionism"

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Third in a series of five articles (September 20, 2004)

For years, active union members have been complaining about labor's continuing decline and the ineptitude of the AFL-CIO leadership. Finally, a debate on how to reinvigorate the labor movement is taking place, so far only among top national labor leaders.

Initiating the debate are five union leaders who call themselves the New Unity Partnership (NUP) and who say they have solutions to labor's problems that are both necessary and practical.

Meeting in secret last year, they drew up a 13-page memo, complete with charts and graphs that provides a detailed blueprint for restructuring what they consider the AFL-CIO's ineffective, outmoded bureaucracy.

The NUP's top-down, corporate approach calls for reorganizing the AFL-CIO's 60 affiliates into about 15 unions, each of which will be assigned to a particular sector of American industry, such as services, manufacturing, mining, construction and others. These large sector unions, with their additional resources, would be in a stronger position to take on the giant American companies within their defined jurisdiction.

The goal is to increase market share and labor density (the percentage of union members in the total work force in an area) in order to strengthen union bargaining power.

While sector organizing and market share strategy are hardly new ideas, what is novel in the situation are the sweeping changes that NUP hopes to impose on the 13 million-member federation without even the pretence of seeking general rank-and-file approval.

NUP's "gang of five" consists of Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees; Terence O'Sullivan, president of the Laborers; John Wilhelm and Bruce Raynor, who share the top positions of their merged unions into UNITE HERE, and Douglas McCarron, president of the Carpenters. The four AFL-CIO leaders are so

entranced by McCarron's autocratic, corporate style, they are eager to become his close ally, even though he bolted from the AFL-CIO three years ago.

The NUP memo calls for the elimination of all full-time officer positions of state federations and central labor council. It states: "Each State Fed and CLC will have an appointed full-time Executive Vice President who will be the Chief Operating Officer." (Note the corporate titles.)

The affiliated bodies would be stripped of autonomy. "Each State Fed & CLC will be expected to meet standards set by the national AFL-CIO," according to the NUP memo.

Nor is that all that the NUP quintet seeks to change. It has drawn up a list of items that it wants to "Reduce/Eliminate or Refocus." They include: Civil and Human Rights; Education Health and Safety; Communications and Publications; Organizing Fund, and Policy Department.

It is not clear how the NUP will carry out the prodigious tasks of restructuring that it is demanding. Its proposals are certain to arouse a firestorm of opposition from national, state and local union leaders, as well as from labor activists who regard them as gross violations of union democracy.

The five NUPers appear to have a twofold plan. They will try to get one of their members, probably John Wilhelm, elected as president of the AFL-CIO at its July 2005 convention. If they are successful, they will be able to jump-start their restructuring program. If they fail, they can pull out of the AFL-CIO, as McCarron did, and set up their own labor federation. SEIU's Stern says bluntly, "We need to transform the AFL-CIO or build something new."

Some labor writers try to compare the NUP with the CIO of the 1930s that broke away from the AFL to organize millions of workers into new industrial unions. The comparison is absurd. The CIO came into existence at a time when there was a militant grassroots movement and tens of thousands of workers were involved in job actions and strikes. The new crop of CIO leaders felt close to the rank-and-file, identified with their problems, and had not yet settled into the bureaucratic model of leadership.

Today, no such conditions exist for the successful formation of a dual labor movement. In fact, the opposite is true: far too many union members are apathetic or cynical, and the NUP has given no

indication that it is interested in their views and suggestions. Furthermore, Andy Stern is no John L. Lewis.

The NUP's general attitude toward union democracy (a subject they rarely mention) is that it is a waste of precious time and a hindrance to whatever campaigns they are planning. Each of the five NUPers has shown a near-zero tolerance for criticism by dissident members of their own unions.

Two of the five NUP leaders have recently merged their unions, an action that has been hailed as an example for other unions to follow. Whether or not linking hotel and restaurant workers with apparel and laundry workers is a good example of a symbiotic merger, it provides a perfect example of corporate unionism.

Their members were kept in the dark about when, where or why the two union presidents — John Wilhelm for HERE and Bruce Raynor for UNITE — acting like CEOs, negotiated the terms of their private deal, including all of the financial arrangements and structural changes, without explaining to their members how they would be affected by the merger. Not a word about the merger appeared on their Web sites for months, while they were leaking the story to the media.

It is true that on July 8, 2004, delegates from UNITE and HERE gave their blessing to the merger, that was actually a *fait accompli*. How could the delegates do otherwise without jeopardizing their jobs in the merged union?

It is well to remember that when John Sweeney became AFL-CIO president in 1995, the new leadership came up with highly-acclaimed plans to build the labor movement, including the allocation of 30% of the federation's budget for organizing, the hiring of 1,000 new organizers and developing a "culture of organizing."

And in the next nine years, AFL-CIO leaders held three conventions, numerous Council meetings, frequent strategy sessions, even developing new structures, in the hope of reversing the decline in union membership and bargaining power. So why did they fail? Because they clung to the bureaucratic notion that a group of fifty or so labor leaders, sitting like corporate directors in a boardroom, could solve labor's problems without inspiring hundreds of thousands of union members to become participants in rebuilding the labor movement.

The NUP restructuring plan won't solve labor's problems if it can't organize the private sector, which has declined to only 8% of the national work force. They'll never achieve market share or density if they can't mobilize union members to participate in a massive organizing effort.

It is worth noting that each of the five NUPers spent several years on the AFL-CIO Executive Council and never uttered a public outcry that something had to be done about the federation's dismal organizing record.

Certainly, the NUP plan deserves a hearing, but there may be other ideas that also merit consideration. The discussion about the future of the AFL-CIO should be out in the open, where every union member can know what's going on. After all, it's their future that's on the line.

Article 4: "AFL-CIO Leaders and Corporate Unionism" will be posted on Monday, September 27, 2004.