

Corporate Unionism (5)

“Restoring Democratic Unionism”

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The AFL-CIO convention on July 25-28, 2005 in Chicago gives us an opportunity (it may be our last chance) to supplant corporate unionism with democratic unionism.

We will begin our campaign for union democracy soon after the November presidential elections. We will use the Internet for weekly analyses about what the New Unity Partnership and the Sweeney team are saying and doing. We will post our own leaflets on major issues that can be downloaded, duplicated and distributed widely.

In the coming weeks, we will post the phone number, fax and e-mail address of the 54 members of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, that can be downloaded and ready for use when we need them.

If we want to have a say about how our dues money is being spent and know what policies and actions union leaders are taking in our name, we'll have to start speaking up. It won't happen otherwise.

Here are five important reforms that can make a difference in how we're treated in our unions. And what each of us can do to make them a reality.

1. There's a simple, common-sense solution to the AFL-CIO's outrageously lopsided convention voting system that permits the same group of national leaders to be elected again and again, without opposition or debate. The rules must be changed so that every delegate has one — and only one — vote.

It's not a radical idea. On the contrary, the “One Delegate, One Vote” system is standard practice in nearly every organization, including both Houses of Congress. It is used by the Canadian Labor Congress, to which most AFL-CIO international unions are affiliated and whose delegates abide by CLC voting rules.

We've got to smoke out every Executive Council member who is a candidate for re-election to find out whether they favor or oppose equal voting for convention delegates. Let them hear from hundreds of us.

We're going to send e-mails to the heads of every affiliated state federation and central labor council, asking them to pass resolutions in support of the "One Delegate, One Vote" principle, so they can have a voice at AFL-CIO conventions. Let each of us contact our local labor affiliates with the same message.

2. We want to insist on fair and free elections of the AFL-CIO leadership at the 2005 convention. We can't allow the Executive Council to get still another four-year term, without opposition or debate on the life-and-death issues confronting the labor movement.

To ensure there's a real election contest, we want at least 25 labor activists to become candidates for Council seats. Their job will be to force incumbents to state their views on organizing, politics, worker rights, outsourcing and other issues.

Wherever possible, unions should invite incumbents and challengers to a debate. Candidates should not be allowed to hide their presence or views by being members of a slate. Each of us can send e-mails to particular candidates asking them to answer our specific questions.

3. We are entitled to an accurate report about how our dues money is being spent. Labor organizations, from the national AFL-CIO down to each local union are required to file annual financial reports with the U.S. Labor Department (available at: www.dol.gov), listing salaries of officers and staff and all expenditures, along with other data.

But we should also have the right to question any substantial expenditure that seems to be out of line. We should be notified in advance of any costly project the AFL-CIO plans to undertake.

Financial data about the state of pension funds is particularly important. We should get reports about where our pension money is being invested, and if there's a problem, we should be told about it.

The AFL-CIO should function more openly, so that we'll be better informed about what's going on. There's no reason why we should

be denied periodic reports from major departments, like organizing, health and safety, education and international affairs. We would become smarter members, better willing and able to contribute our knowledge and skills to the union.

If department directors balk at cooperating, we should send delegations to remind them they're supposed to be working for us, not themselves.

4. All of us must feel free to speak our minds at union meetings and in our publications or elsewhere, without the fear that we will be intimidated, ostracized or otherwise punished for dissenting opinions. Critics should be judged on whether their opinions make sense and not by the status of the person being criticized. On the other hand, individuals who are attacked for alleged wrongdoing should be given the right to respond to their accuser in an appropriate forum.

Union publications belong to all of us; they are not the property of a group of union leaders who happen to have positions of authority at a given time.

There must be an end to censorship of dissident views, events and personalities. Their activities should be judged by the same newsworthy criteria as with other labor stories.

Fairness is especially important when editors decide which letters to publish and which to omit. Reading the letters in most publications, the impression one gets is that we're all happy with the way our unions are being run, and none of us has any complaints. Can editors be encouraged to run an occasional letter or two of criticism? Or can dissident letter writers be sure they won't suffer reprisals?

All of us have to function like an oversight committee, so that our publications merit our trust for their fairness in reporting the news. We must ask editors to explain why, when they ignore an important labor story that was featured in the mainstream press. We must send a pile of critical letters to the editor to test whether he or she will print any of them. We should arrange for delegations to visit a few editors for a discussion of their policies. If we don't speak out, nothing is going to change.

5. We need to have a better and closer relationship with our union leaders. Right now, it's all but impossible to establish contact with them. They've developed a one-way communications system in which they're constantly telling us to write faxes and e-mails on this

or that campaign issue, but they don't want to hear what we have to say.

In the early 1990s, we had a labor forum on the Internet where we were able to express our opinions and provide feedback to our officers. AFL-CIO leaders took that away from us when they established a new Web site. We used to be able to have dialogues with union members from other trades and occupations. That's gone, too.

It's important that we have access to our leaders. We can't afford to let them ignore our thoughts and feelings, because it's our lives and our future that's the bottom line. We'll have to send a flood of e-mails to convince President Sweeney to restore our voice on the AFL-CIO Web site.

Unless we act together with a show of strength, we're going to give the same self-serving Executive Council, with its long history of failures, another four more years in office to weaken our power to win decent contracts.

When we realize what's at stake, sending a few e-mails or joining a union delegation or attending a rally is not much of a burden, but collectively, they can have a tremendous impact.

Remember, our campaign to reclaim our unions starts in January. In the meantime, we'll keep you posted on any new developments on our Web site: www.laboreducator.org. Our e-mail address is hkelber@igc.org.