

10 Issues on Labor's Future (June 27, 2005)

Will Union Members Lose Their Rights Under Proposals to Reshape AFL-CIO?

By Harry Kelber

(Seventh in a series of ten articles)

Whatever their differences, John Sweeney and Andy Stern agree that control over AFL-CIO's Executive Committee should be in the exclusive hands of the presidents of the largest international unions.

Since 14 of the top 15 unions are headed by white males, it means that women, minorities, state federation and central labor councils are effectively disenfranchised from top-level decision making — even on issues that directly affect their members.

Even if there is a loud outcry of protest, the big unions have more than enough convention votes to secure passage of a "presidents only" Executive Committee. As a result, there will be no need for holding regular elections. These leaders will be accountable to no one but themselves, since they cannot be turned out of office, no matter how poorly they perform.

Union members have seen a steady erosion of their rights, as their leaders become more remote and act like CEOs. AFL-CIO conventions used to be held annually; now they are held every four years. Some international unions hold their conventions every five years. Less and less opportunity for members to be heard.

The AFL-CIO started out with a weekly newspaper. In 1980, the paper became a biweekly. When Sweeney became AFL-CIO president in 1995, the official publication became a monthly magazine, *America@Work*. Now that is gone, and there seems to be no need to replace it. Many international unions have gone from monthly publications to quarterlies, with fewer pages in each issue.

When Sweeney had to make budget cuts, the first victim was the Education Department. Less and less opportunity for members to be kept informed about what's happening in the labor movement.

Many collective bargaining contracts are now being negotiated for from five to six years, instead of from two to three years — less and less activity for the rank-and-file.

The current attitude among leaders in both the Sweeney and Stern camps is that they're going to improve workers' lives, without much input from the workers themselves. As of now, they haven't come up with a realistic plan to achieve their promises.

Sweeney, while he constantly refers to his mantra, "working families," is hardly an advocate of union democracy. His prime concern is to please a group of major international presidents, whose combined convention votes can guarantee his re-election. He sees to it that dissident rank-and-file groups are denied their right to free speech.

Stern is openly contemptuous of advocates of union democracy, calling them ideologues, abstract intellectuals, whose views can only hamper his efforts to restore the American dream to America's working class. He is saying, in effect, "trust me and I'll deliver."

Is "union democracy" an obsolete concept that has outlived its usefulness? Are we in a period where only a tight group of all-powerful leaders can rescue the labor movement as it spirals down to irrelevancy?

Have unions been transformed into corporations, where union officials act like CEOs and management boards and make all the decisions, while the members are mere stockholders hoping for a proper dividend? If that is the image of the trade union of tomorrow, the labor movement is doomed.

Article 8: Governance (To be posted July 4, 2005)

Harry Kelber's e-mail address is: <hkelber@igc.org>