

## **Will Reshaping the AFL-CIO Boost Power Of Leaders or Serve Needs of Members?**

**By Harry Kelber**

*(Fourth in a series of 10 articles)*

It is a sad fact that very few union members are interested in — or even know — the proposals by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and Service Employees President Andy Stern to restructure the labor movement. Very little effort has been made to inform and involve them about issues that can determine their living standards and economic future.

Everything is now in the hands of a few national labor leaders who have until now failed to come up with policies and programs to revive the ailing labor movement and give American workers the prospect of a brighter future. Can they convince us they have finally found winning solutions to our problems?

Let's examine Stern's restructuring proposal, because it has been widely publicized and has become a principal point of debate. Stern reiterates what we all know is true: "Today, global corporations threaten American jobs, families and the hopes of future generations. The middle class is shrinking, health care is becoming unaffordable and guaranteed pensions are disappearing, yet corporate profits are booming and the rich are richer than at any time in history."

So what does Stern propose to do about all this? His prime proposal is to merge the AFL-CIO's 57 international unions into some 15 to 20 "mega unions," each responsible for organizing a particular sector of the American economy.

There are no details about how the forced mergers would take place, what would happen to those unions that were left out of the selected "mega unions," or how long it would take to achieve the desired goal or what would happen in the meantime. Nor is there any certainty of success, even with the infusion of lots of money. Some critics have called Stern's plan a rearrangement of the deck chairs of the Titanic as it heads toward the iceberg.

From the perspective of the rank-and-file, whom Stern completely leaves out of the restructuring process, there are more direct concerns. Will they be allowed to vote on whether to approve or reject a merger of their union with another? What happens in a forced merger to the wage standards, working conditions and benefits in their current collective bargaining contracts? What rights will they have in a forced merger? Will too much power be controlled by the officers of the "mega-unions," so they won't be accessible or accountable to their members?

\* \* \* \* \*

In "Winning for Working Families," Sweeney says, "Our ability to create good jobs, ensure working families health care and retirement security, defeat unfair trade agreements and improve and protect progressive public policies depends on effective, people-powered mobilization at the local, state and national level." Sweeney has sung pretty much the same song for the past nine years, yet has been unable to achieve any of these goals.

Sweeney is full of “we must”s, but hardly any “howto”s. On page 5 of his major policy document, he says: “We must better communicate who we are and what we stand for with actions as well as words. We must integrate strategies for meeting the challenges of the global economy into every aspect of our work. We must help workers form unions in new ways. We must expand our outreach in many directions, from forming campus coalitions to working more effectively with community allies.”

Who is Sweeney kidding? Who does he expect will carry out this list of assignments, and how are they to do it? That’s not Sweeney’s problem. He’s given us “guidance.”

For years, Sweeney’s fondness for bureaucratic jargon and overloaded sentences in his pronouncements on the AFL-CIO Web site has been promoted as insightful, strategic leadership, but it is mostly bunkum that most labor activists have stopped reading or listening to long ago.

Sweeney, unlike Stern, favors voluntary mergers of unions, “especially those with common core jurisdictions.” He wants to keep all 57 international unions within the House of Labor by offering their leaders inducements to win their support, while Stern proposes to do what it takes to streamline the AFL-CIO into no more than 20 huge unions. Sweeney also says he would “identify” tens of thousands of local union coordinators to lead worksite education and mobilization.

\* \* \* \* \*

A clique of international union presidents in both the Sweeney and Stern camps are in agreement that they are going to run the AFL-CIO, just as in the past, and freeze out everyone else.

James Hoffa, president of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and a key figure in the Stern faction, proposes: “The 25 unions of the Executive Committee [composed entirely of international union presidents] is untenable. If 10 is too small, then let it be the top 15 and no more.”

And nine international union presidents in the Sweeney camp have issued a joint document that says the “Executive Committee should be composed of the Presidents of the largest affiliates.”

Since the presidents of the 15 largest AFL-CIO unions are all white, middle-aged or elderly males, except for one African-American (Bill Burrus of the Postal Workers), it means that women, who represent about 43% of the total AFL-CIO membership, will have no voice in national policy decisions that impact on their lives. Neither will Hispanic union members. African-Americans were lucky to have one representative on the proposed Executive Committee, because the Postal Workers barely made it to the top 15 largest unions.

Since the leaders of the big internationals have decided that only they can hold national office, qualified leaders and members from the state federations and central labor councils are permanently barred from seeking seats on the Executive Committee, which will become the real power within the AFL-CIO.

The top leadership of the Federation will continue to be frozen, as it has been for years. There will be no point to holding elections, since only the heads of the biggest unions will be automatically entitled to hold national policy-making positions indefinitely, even if they perform poorly.

\* \* \* \* \*

Neither Sweeney nor Stern are unwilling to restructure the undemocratic way the AFL-CIO convention elects its three top officers and the 51 members of the Executive Council. They love the process, because it enables them to get re-elected again and again without opposition or debate in a sham ritual that lasts no more than five minutes. Here is how it works:

Article IV, Section 4 of the AFL-CIO Constitution permits international unions to cast as many votes at conventions as they have members, based on their per capita payments to the Federation, while State Federations and Central Labor Councils are each limited to a single vote.

Thus, a small international union like the Federation of Professional Athletes, with 1,700 members, can cast nearly three times the votes of all 50 State Federations and 600 Central Labor Councils combined.

This absurd, archaic voting system has to be revised so that each delegate has one — and only one — vote. That principle of equity and fairness in voting is applied at conventions of the Canadian Labour Congress, to which many U.S. internationals are affiliated and abide by its voting rules. In most organizations, it is standard practice for delegates to have equal voting rights.

\* \* \* \* \*

Whatever restructuring of the AFL-CIO is deemed necessary, it should be done by providing opportunities for every union member to become involved in the process. That is the way to maintain unity while effecting change. We need talented labor leaders who are recognized and respected by broad sections of the labor movement for what they say and do. Inspiring the rank and-file to become involved offers the best guarantee that whatever changes are finally adopted will have the best chance of succeeding.

**Article 5: Improving Collective Bargaining**  
***(To be posted Monday, June 13, 2005)***

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