10 Issues on Labor's Future (June 13, 2005)

Organizing New Members Is Major Task, But Winning a Good Contract is the Goal

By Harry Kelber

(Fifth in a series of ten articles)

Organizing workers into unions is an essential beginning, but not the end, of the process of building a strong labor movement. There are too many examples of successful organizing campaigns that turned into failures because the unions were unable to win a collective bargaining contract from a resisting employer. The newly-organized workers simply got tired of waiting a year or two or even longer for their first contract, and they lost interest in the union.

Collective bargaining is an important concern for union members who lose millions of dollars in wages and benefits annually because of faulty bargaining practices of union negotiators. Yet neither AFL-CIO president John Sweeney nor Service Employees president Andy Stern has anything worthwhile to say on this subject.

In his 28-page document, "Winning for Working Families," Sweeney admits that the AFL-CIO leadership "played no significant role in the core responsibilities of national unions — bargaining contracts, representing workers on the job and recruiting new members."

Sweeney also concedes that "wages are shrinking, dependable, defined benefit pensions are being replaced with shaky 401(k) plans or nothing at all, and health care costs are crushing." Workers don't have to be told how their standard of living is declining. What they want to know is why unions can't negotiate better contracts, since many major corporations are reporting huge profits. And when does Sweeney expect the situation to improve?

Stern, in "Unite to Win," has just two brief references to collective bargaining. He offers no prescription for dealing with labor's lack of success in contract negotiations; he assumes there will be an upgrade in the quality of negotiated contracts, once there is an increase in density through massive organizing victories. Stern is equally silent about how long it will take before unions are able to deliver the kind of contracts that workers feel they deserve.

Actually, there are two competing philosophies regarding collective bargaining, similar to the differences over organizing. Both the Sweeney and Stern factions are advocates and longtime practitioners of the top-down school of unionism. They believe that they — and they alone — should run the labor movement in behalf of working people, because they are smart leaders and thinkers.

They promise to provide strong leadership, and they wish that advocates of union democracy would shut up and stop interfering with their half-baked, ideological views. It's worth noting that Stern and his colleagues have made no effort to reach out to the rank-and-file of other unions, where they are either unknown or disliked.

The advocates of union democracy are inspired by one basic belief: that since workers are directly affected by the kind of contract the union negotiates, they should have a voice and a role in the collective bargaining process. They should participate in the drafting of contract demands and have representatives on the negotiating committee; they should be kept informed about the day-to-day

developments, and be given copies of any tentative agreement, with ample time to debate its provisions.

Many labor leaders regard collective bargaining as a poker game in which they will be matching wits with employer representatives, and they feel they are smart enough to present a convincing case for the union's demands. They tell members as little as possible about what's going on at the negotiating sessions, because, they say, they want to avoid leaks that might help the employer.

Sometimes, union leaders hold secret meetings with the employers to try to come to an agreement even before formal negotiations begin. If they're successful, it transforms the bargaining sessions into a play-acting game, because the terms of the contract have already been agreed to.

A favorite gambit is "crisis bargaining," during which either party or both threaten to walk out, but finally come to terms at zero hour, when the current contract is about to expire. It's to the advantage of both sides of the bargaining table to make the negotiations appear tough, heated, exhausting and unnecessarily prolonged.

Since most union leaders don't consider a strike as a real possibility, they don't have to worry about mobilizing the workers on the job site. They try to shame the employer into giving them a deal that they can pretend is a victory when they present a tentative contract to their members.

It's not that difficult for union negotiators to defend a lousy contract from critics with the statement that "it's not what we're happy with, but it's the best we could get without walking out on strike." There have been cases where unscrupulous union leaders made a private deal with an employer to shave a percentage point or two of the wage package for a hefty bribe.

Smart employers are more concerned with how their employees in the workplace feel about their wages, benefits and working conditions, rather than the union representatives sitting across from them at the bargaining table. If their employees are passive, know very little about what their negotiators are doing or saying and are not prepared to go out on strike, the situation is ideal for the employer to play hardball and force the union to make concessions and accept an inferior contract.

Conversely, if the workers find several ways to express their unhappiness with conditions on the job, including approval of a vote to authorize a strike, it probably would affect the employer's negotiating stance, and improve the chances of reaching a fair agreement.

The problem with the elite leadership approach to collective bargaining is the temptation to accept an inferior contract if it will mean cooperative, rather than adversarial, relations with the employer. Labor leaders in both the Sweeney and Stern camps, who have tight control of their unions, can make secret contract agreements that short-change their members — and have no problems in weathering rank-and-file protests.

Union democracy, on the other hand, is a bread-and-butter approach to unionism, insisting that members, not elected officials, should have the final say on the policies and activities of their union. What¹s wrong with that?

Article 6: Labor¹s Media Crisis (*To be posted Monday, June 20)*

Harry Kelber¹s e-mail address is: <hkelber@igc.org>.