

Crisis of labor bureaucracy dominates US union summit

By Shannon Jones
31 March 2005

The AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting held February 28-March 3 in Las Vegas highlighted divisions within the leadership of the labor federation over the allocation of its dwindling resources. The American unions are reeling from decades of membership loss that have reduced the rate of private-sector union organization to the lowest level since 1901.

On the very eve of the meeting, the AFL-CIO failed in another attempt to organize a Wal-Mart location. A five-year United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) drive to organize a group of Wal-Mart employees in Loveland, Colorado ended ignominiously. The workers voted 17-1 against the union. The AFL-CIO has yet to organize a single store owned by Wal-Mart, the largest US employer.

The Executive Council voted by a two-to-one margin to reject a proposal by a group of unions, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Teamsters, the UFCW, the Laborers International Union, and the merged needle-trades, hotel and restaurant workers union, UNITE/HERE, to increase funds for organizing by reducing member unions' payments to AFL-CIO national headquarters. The majority faction, headed by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, went on to pass a counter-motion allocating 50 percent of federation dues to political and legislative action. The main import of this measure is to increase the AFL-CIO's already substantial financial support to the Democratic Party.

Underscoring the disquiet within the labor hierarchy, the opposition motion was endorsed by unions representing some 40 percent of the membership of the AFL-CIO. Talk continues of the SEIU and other unions leaving the AFL-CIO and setting up an alternate labor body.

John Wilhelm, president of the hotel and restaurant division of UNITE/HERE, has indicated he may challenge Sweeney for the post of AFL-CIO president at the federation's convention next July.

At the previous AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting, held in November of 2004, Andrew Stern, head of the SEIU, the largest AFL-CIO affiliate, called for a drastic restructuring of the federation, including the consolidation of the current 60 international unions into 20 or fewer. He said such moves were needed to free up more funds for an organizing drive to reverse the hemorrhaging of union membership.

Opponents charged that Stern's proposal was undemocratic, with some threatening to pull their unions out of the labor federation if Sweeney gave in to the SEIU's demands.

Following the November meeting, Stern decided to fold up his opposition group, the New Unity Caucus, in order to forge an alliance with the Teamsters, which, while opposing some of the SEIU's proposals, indicated agreement with many of its goals. At the Las Vegas meeting, the SEIU supported a resolution moved by the Teamsters calling for increased spending on organizing through a rebate of dues from the center back to member unions.

The council meeting was acrimonious. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Stern and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) President Gerald McEntee got into a "curse-filled

shouting match." The immediate issue was the competing claims of the SEIU and AFSCME for the right to organize some 50,000 child-care workers in Illinois. The workers are not state employees, but they care for about 200,000 low-income children through state grants. Governor Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat, recently announced that the workers would be allowed to unionize.

In February of this year, AFSCME filed a petition with the state of Illinois that delayed the certification of 20,000 child-care workers who had signed cards authorizing the SEIU to be their bargaining agent. McEntee justified the move by declaring, "We're the largest child-care union in the United States. That is our core industry."

The incident underscored the degree to which inter-bureaucratic struggles over "turf," rather than principled differences over policy or tactics, divide the leadership. It also highlighted the degree to which the AFL-CIO is dependent on the patronage of the Democratic Party to maintain its dues base among public sector workers.

What is facing the AFL-CIO, whatever the outcome of the internal dispute, is a substantial downsizing, as the organization shrinks its apparatus in the face of dwindling resources. This was underscored by the decision of AFL-CIO, in the wake of the Executive Council meeting, to announce staff cuts of 80-100 people, about one fourth of the current personnel at the federation's Washington DC headquarters.

The respective public positions of the two bureaucratic factions represent two sides of a classic "Catch 22" argument. The forces headed by Sweeney insist the AFL-CIO can reverse its organizational decline only by electing more supposedly pro-labor Democratic politicians. The group headed by Stern of the SEIU and Hoffa of the Teamsters, on the other hand, claims it is impossible for the AFL-CIO to succeed in electing more Democrats unless it reverses its membership decline.

The circular character of this discussion prompted the *LA Weekly* to comment, "Indeed, much of the Executive Council meeting focused on an increasingly bizarre debate between those union leaders who argued that labor's future lies in expanding its political program and those who argued that the future belongs to those who organize. When pressed, leaders on both sides of this debate readily acknowledge that labor needs to do both. Indeed, John Wilhelm, who heads the hotel division of UNITE/HERE, had stated at a forum in Los Angeles in February that he thought the Federation's political budget should be doubled—though when that proposal came before the union presidents in Vegas, he voted against it, since it made no provision for increasing organizing. The unreality of the debate was further underscored by the fact that the Teamsters' proposal, if enacted, would augment the organizing budgets of the major unions by less than 10 percent."

The arguments on both sides are hollow and unprincipled. No one in the leadership is able to state the obvious—the perspective that guides the AFL-CIO is bankrupt. Both Sweeney and the opposition start from the basic premise that the fate of the labor movement is tied to the success of the Democratic Party. However, the AFL-CIO's embrace of the

Democratic Party expresses not the interests of the working class, but the pro-capitalist and nationalist orientation of the labor bureaucracy.

It is telling that neither Sweeney nor his opponents has attempted any serious assessment of the dismal failure of the presidential campaign of Democratic candidate John Kerry, on which the AFL-CIO lavished \$150 million.

Kerry ran a right-wing campaign, supporting the war in Iraq and refusing to seriously address the issue of social inequality. In the wake of the election, the Democrats are lurching further to the right, providing the votes needed to confirm Bush's reactionary cabinet appointments and backing blatantly pro-corporate legislation, such as the new bankruptcy law and new restrictions on class action law suits. Prominent Democrats, such as New York Senator Hillary Clinton, have called for more troops to be sent to Iraq and made overtures to the Christian fundamentalists.

The AFL-CIO's inability to chart a viable course for the working class reflects its nationalist orientation and defense of the profit system. The unions have proven powerless in the face of global corporations that are able to shift production to low-wage areas all over the world.

The only answer to globally mobile capital is for the working class to adopt an international strategy. However, the AFL-CIO is incapable of doing this. It is by virtue of its history and program, and the privileged petty-bourgeois social layers comprising the union bureaucracy, a national organization tied to the interests of American capitalism and the American state.

As a national trade union organization, officially and organically hostile to socialism, the AFL-CIO depends for its dues income on keeping jobs within the United States. Thus the American labor bureaucracy has responded to the rise of transnational corporations by deliberately working to reduce labor costs within the US, i.e., assisting US-based companies in driving down wages and benefits and squeezing more production from fewer workers, in order to induce corporations to retain production within the US. This is the essence of all declamations from union leaders about "saving American jobs" and making American labor more "competitive."

The result is a race to the bottom, with the AFL-CIO seeking to underbid workers in Japan, Canada, Europe, Mexico, etc. On this basis, any international solidarity between workers of different countries who are exploited by the same transnational corporations is blocked and subverted. More often than not, US union leaders pursue this reactionary, anti-working class policy with the aid of flag-waving chauvinism and heavy doses of racism and xenophobia.

The AFL-CIO has resolutely opposed any political break with the two parties of big business. It has worked to keep the US working class under the political domination of American capital, primarily through its alliance with the Democrats.

When the crisis of American capitalism, which erupted to the surface in the 1970s, led the ruling elite to launch a massive assault on the living standards of the working class—an attack that was organized through the policies of Democratic and well as Republican administrations—the AFL-CIO abandoned any support for militant struggle and instead offered its services to help impose draconian cuts in jobs, wages and working conditions.

It deliberately isolated and sabotaged scores of bitter labor struggles against wage-cutting and union-busting throughout the 1980s, beginning with its betrayal of the 1981 strike by the PATCO air traffic controllers, and adopted the program of corporatism—uniting with management in a "partnership" to "save" American jobs by slashing labor costs.

This policy of unlimited class collaboration was the means by which the trade union bureaucracy sought to defend its own narrow and selfish interests, in opposition to the needs of the workers it nominally represented. In helping the employers destroy jobs and drive down wages, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy sought to demonstrate to management its

continued usefulness. At the same time, it sought to offset the fall in union membership by directly seeking the patronage of the employers and the state.

Union leaders went onto company boards of directors and obtained positions on employer-funded labor-management committees. Unions attempted to obtain bargaining rights, not by fighting to maintain and increase wages and benefits, but by assuring employers that they would help impose substandard contracts that ensured higher rates of productivity and improved profits.

These policies have undermined the long-term viability of the AFL-CIO as an organization. Entire areas of the country—former auto and steel union strongholds such as Detroit and Pittsburgh, the West Virginia and Kentucky mining areas, and many more—have been devastated by closures and layoffs carried out with the collaboration of the union bureaucracy.

The bureaucracy's betrayals, its shameless collaboration with management, its corruption and contempt for democratic procedures have succeeded in alienating masses of workers from the AFL-CIO.

The 1990s provided an unanswerable refutation of the union leadership's present claims that the answer to labor's protracted crisis is the election of a Democratic president. Despite the election of Democrat Bill Clinton in 1992, and the speculation-fueled economic upturn of the mid- and late-1990s, the unions were unable to recover any of their membership losses. Meanwhile, social inequality increased to the highest level since the 1930s, while workers' wages and living standards barely kept pace with rising living costs. By 2000, the rate of union organization had fallen to under 14 percent, compared to 15.8 percent in 1992.

The election and re-election of Bush came as a further blow to the labor bureaucracy. It expressed the deepening crisis of US capitalism, which is impelling the ruling class to destroy all vestiges of the social reforms won by the working class during the twentieth century.

The unions are facing attacks that directly threaten the income of the bureaucracy, such as the decision of the Bush administration to weaken the bargaining rights of unions at the Department of Homeland Security, and moves to impose similar measures at the Defense Department. Right-wing Republicans are pressing to illegalize the card check system, which makes it possible to win bargaining rights without a certification election.

Newly elected Republican governors in Indiana and Missouri have revoked collective bargaining rights of some 50,000 state workers, and in Oklahoma, the Republican-controlled state legislature has passed a law taking away the right of municipal workers to organize.

The income of the trade union bureaucracy is being further undermined by the ongoing attacks on pension funds, spearheaded by the airlines and now spreading to auto and other sectors of the economy. The administration of employee pension funds has historically provided a significant source of perks for the union hierarchy.

The impotence and despondency of the AFL-CIO leadership before these corporate and government attacks are reflected in recent comments by officials on both sides of the current dispute within the union hierarchy.

"We're in deep trouble," declared the UNITE/HERE official and prospective AFL-CIO presidential candidate, John Wilhelm. From the Sweeney camp, McEntee of AFSCME lamented, "These are the darkest days I have ever seen for American workers across the United States."

The answer proposed by Stern and other opponents of Sweeney to focus more energy on organizing is nothing new. The same stereotyped discussions have been repeated by the AFL-CIO leadership for years.

The AFL-CIO has devoted millions of dollars to organizing with very little to show for it. When Sweeney took office in 1995, there was talk of new members flocking to a revitalized AFL-CIO. Nothing of the kind happened. If anything, the loss of membership has accelerated. Now Sweeney finds himself faced with a challenge by a protégé from his old

union, who uses many of the same phrases Sweeney used to unseat his predecessor, Lane Kirkland, as AFL-CIO president.

The AFL-CIO is reaping the harvest of its betrayals. Despite the deepening social crisis, the AFL-CIO cannot attract the support of the mass of workers, especially younger workers. The AFL-CIO's failures at Wal-Mart, for example, come despite the fact that the giant retail company is notorious for its low wages and abuse of worker rights.

Indeed, why should Wal-Mart employees or any other workers have confidence in an organization that produced a disaster like the recent Southern California supermarket strike-lockout. There, after a record 19 weeks on the picket line, workers were forced to accept huge concessions, including a cap on employer contributions to medical insurance and lower starting pay and benefits.

The feud within the leadership of the AFL-CIO is not a harbinger of its reawakening, but a further manifestation of its irreversible decay. Whatever the outcome of the factional struggle, the result will not be the "reform" of this organization, but another stage in its collapse.

What is required is the building of a new political movement of the working class, based on a socialist and internationalist program and entirely independent of the Democratic Party. This entails an uncompromising struggle against the moribund AFL-CIO apparatus and the establishment of new, genuinely democratic rank-and-file organizations in the factories and work locations.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>