

## **The Debate Continues:**

### **A Revitalized Labor Movement Needs a New Vision of Politics**

**March 5, 2005**

The debate over the future of the labor movement raged at this week's AFL-CIO Executive Board meeting. Although the Sweeney camp prevailed by a narrow margin on a series of technical and organizational issues, nothing was resolved. But the passions sparked at the meeting and over a large part of the past year insure that the discussions will continue well into this summer's AFL-CIO convention.

This is a good thing. It would have been tragic if our future as a movement had been papered over with a superficial compromise around a set of structural and financial proposals. It is a tribute to the principled leadership of many of the participants that this did not happen. All of us concerned with labor's future must use this opportunity to fully confront the profound crisis facing the labor movement. In particular, we at the Labor Party believe we must fully confront the fact that how we engage in politics has an enormous impact on labor's revitalization.

#### **Fight for Survival**

The debate is not really about the proper allocation of per capita money between organizing and the relative roles of the AFL-CIO or its constituent unions in providing services to its members. The stakes are much higher. Teamsters President James Hoffa expressed this sense of urgency at the post-Executive Board press conference on March 2nd: "American workers and workers the world over need a strong U.S. labor movement. Without it, the inexorable global race to the bottom will lead to further inequality, further erosion in basic wage, labor and social standards, and further limits on political democracy. ...Continuing on our present course simply insures further decline. It is therefore time to change."

However, it should come as no surprise that the debate has first focused on structural changes in the AFL-CIO. Founded fifty years ago, in a very different time, the AFL-CIO's purpose was to consolidate and administer a postwar system of labor relations. That system was premised on U.S. global economic dominance as well as capital's acceptance of labor as a "limited partner" and the mediation of this relationship by the federal government. None of those premises exist today, yet the AFL-CIO has changed little structurally.

Over the past 25 years, labor has suffered a non-stop onslaught from corporate America. Although our movement has, at times, heroically and brilliantly defended our interests, it has not been able to either restore the postwar "ideal" or create a new reality to ensure a strong and vibrant labor movement. Neither high market density nor aggressive membership mobilization has prevented entire industries such as meatpacking from reverting to Dickensonian conditions. Despite a ten-year commitment to shifting resources and changing internal union cultures to focus on new member organizing, labor has not successfully organized a single "new economy" sector. And on

the political front, labor has poured unprecedented human and financial resources into political mobilization yet has never been more politically marginalized.

### **Proposals for Change**

This is the context in which both the volume of proposals and the passion of their partisans must be understood. Even the most traditional labor leaders realize that our movement is at a “tipping point” from which there is no return. This passion no doubt will lead to internal reforms and new strategies that are necessary for the labor movement to organize effectively and rebuild density and bargaining power.

But we in the Labor Party believe that the discussion urgently needs to address how the labor movement fundamentally does its politics. It is here that the debate is at its weakest. More than twenty international unions have submitted written proposals or comments on the future of our movement. None come close to articulating a grand political theme to regain the offensive. Instead, the proposals take it as a given that labor will continue to operate within the confines of the failed two-party system and that the concerns of working people will continue to be subordinated to the few-and-far-between bones thrown to us by the Democratic Party.

Some unions, it is true, include a call for labor to engage in broader social reform organizing outside of the electoral cycle. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU), for example, calls upon labor to lead a “national campaign for quality health care for all.” And the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) lists a number of “values and interests” that the labor movement should advance on behalf of all working people. But these well-intentioned suggestions are not coupled with any serious plan of action or commitment of resources.

### **Political Independence Is the Key**

Labor’s dependence on a spineless and corporate-dominated Democratic Party to carry its political water has much to do with our current crisis. The practice of putting all of our eggs into the Democratic Party’s basket has been an unmitigated disaster. Any approach that calls for putting more eggs in that basket, or bigger eggs, or putting the eggs in faster is doomed to failure.

The failure to create a class-based labor party has hobbled the American labor movement almost since its inception. Unlike workers in nearly every other industrialized nation, U.S. labor has with few exceptions attempted to pursue working class interests within the confines of the multi-class Democratic Party. While the New Deal coalition that dominated American politics for nearly fifty years produced some remarkable gains in the social wage for working people, it also was incapable of pursuing many of the more expansive projects on labor’s agenda – like labor law reform – that could count on substantial and united opposition from employers. Further, the collective bargaining regime established after World War II (and enshrined in today’s AFL-CIO) led unions to negotiate as benefits what became social rights in other countries: health care, hours of work, leave policies, retirement benefits, etc. Working for gains for union members

exclusively helped create the public perception of the labor movement as a “special-interest group” rather than a social movement.

Over the past 25 years, as the forces of globalization and deregulation gathered strength, a resurgent employer class went on the political offensive and labor was politically helpless to defend its interests. This is where labor’s political demobilization proved decisive. Even as labor placed more and more effort into electing Democrats, the candidates it supported did less and less to advance labor’s agenda.

This employer offensive, buttressed by a well thought out ideological assault, succeeded in setting the terms of political debate. The architects of this assault had a plan and a strategy to repeal the New Deal and dismantle the collective bargaining regime. They moved systematically toward this goal, taking advantage of every legislative, administrative and judicial opportunity without compromising their ultimate goal.

Today, they are very close to victory. Worse, they have crafted a message that couples pro-corporate economic policies with a populist social conservatism. They have turned the class anger of millions of mostly white workers into anger against liberal elites. And, to be sure, ‘union bosses’ occupy a prominent place within this elite demonology.

Unable to transcend its own corporate ties, the Democratic Party proved incapable of opposing these developments. It has allowed the right wing to dictate the terms of the debate. It has consistently responded to these attacks by moving farther to the right and away from its relationships to labor and the other social movements that had constituted its popular base. And, lest we forget in these dark days of the second Bush administration, it squandered its moment in power in the 1990s by showing the corporate world its willingness to be stewards of their interests. Clintonism produced failed health care reform, NAFTA and the elimination of whole swathes of the social safety net. A renewed Clintonism will do nothing to advance the revitalization of the labor movement.

### **We Need Our Own Party**

The imperative is clear: we cannot revitalize and expand our labor movement without building an independent politics of labor. In early 1996, on the heels of Democratic Party support for NAFTA and a new voice in the AFL-CIO, a sizeable percentage of the labor movement thought the moment was right to come together to found the Labor Party. From the start, we took a realistic approach to the task of building independent politics. We realized that in a winner-take-all two-party system, labor could not completely disengage from its alliances with the Democratic Party. Instead, we concentrated on building the resources and support necessary to run credible campaigns while presenting a vision of what is possible when working people have power. We believed that with a newly-invigorated labor movement – one that vowed to implement new models to organize a million new members a year – the critical mass needed to allow our party to flourish and grow would be forthcoming.

But we do not have an effective labor party today. The labor movement as a whole has not yet met the challenge of creating and sustaining one. Instead, labor continued its broad retreat through two presidential election cycles, a major recession, terror and war. As our movement grows weaker, the need for a new class-based politics grows greater.

Few union leaders and activists could deny that labor needs its own political party and that the Democrats have failed us. Many of those who have contributed their proposals for change to the current debate make a case for independent politics. CWA activists Bob Masters and Hetty Rosenstein, for example, in their perceptive paper “No Short Cuts: Mobilization and Politics Must Drive Labor’s Revival from the Bottom Up” call for “a reform program that puts far greater weight on political and ideological change.”

But many in the labor movement remain skeptical about putting any resources into the creation of a labor party. The imperatives of waging a never-ending defensive fight for our very survival seem to rule out the possibility of engaging in a more expansive politics. This is a self-defeating and self-limiting perspective.

Others suggest abstaining from politics altogether. This is not a viable solution. Workers need active day-to-day representation in the political sphere. Unions do not have the luxury of withdrawing from politics altogether or engaging merely in symbolic acts of protest. We need to continue to fight the defensive battles that can have life or death consequences for their members.

### **A New Vision of Politics**

Playing defense is not enough. Even if we won every defensive battle against the Bush administration over the next four years, we would still be politically weaker in 2008 than we were in 2004. Creating a new political vision is central to labor’s re-invention of itself. A new vision can: 1) provide a bridge to the unorganized; 2) allow us to articulate our goals and visions for the future; and 3) provide a compelling narrative to unify and mobilize our members. And finally, in the end, it will be the political sea changes that will spark a revitalized labor movement.

There is much that we can do today to build a new politics without abandoning the field of battle or playing the spoiler. To regain the political offensive, the AFL-CIO should include the following in its plan to revitalize the labor movement:

1. Take up issues that speak to the core concerns of all working people. Labor must gain control of the terms of the debate on issues such as the skyrocketing cost of health care, affordable housing and access to a college education. Our positions on these issues must be bold and unambiguous, not skills for any particular candidate or either of the political parties. Labor must present a clear picture of what politics would look like if it were conducted on behalf of the vast majority of Americans who work for a living.
2. Shift resources to a long-term project to build political independence. Just as labor needs to move resources from servicing current members to organizing

new members, so in politics we must begin to invest in our political future. We recognize that substantial resources must continue to fund the defense of daily attacks on our movement. But labor must begin to put money and organization into expansive political projects to allow us to regain the offensive. Labor should start today by allocating at least 20 percent of its political resources to promoting independent politics through well-financed, strategic, issued-based campaigns.

3. Seek out opportunities to run pilot programs and electoral campaigns at a local or regional level. Every two years, nearly 90 percent of all Congressional races are not seriously contested. Politicians who betray or ignore labor are seldom called to task. Once we move out from the swing states, opportunities abound for independent political initiatives that don't involve playing the political spoiler.

4. Take back politics for our members and for all working people. If we ask our members what they think of politics today, many will tell you that it is nothing more than a corrupt, rich man's game. Workers are crying out for a new political direction and long to stop playing defense. Labor must launch an education and discussion process to speak to more than the crisis imperatives of the next election cycle. Such discussion will help spread a new vision of an energized, vibrant labor movement that is fighting on behalf of all working Americans.

Labor stands at a crossroads. A revitalized movement is essential for the well being of all working people as well as a democratic and peaceful world. Given the depth of our crisis, technical or facile solutions are not nearly enough. Radical steps are needed. Any real discussion of the future of the labor movement must include how we can build real political power.

**Mark Dudzic**  
**National Organizer, Labor Party**

Let's get this discussion started now.  
Please send us your comments at [debate@thelaborparty.org](mailto:debate@thelaborparty.org).

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[www.unitetowin.com](http://www.unitetowin.com)