AFL-CIO Charts a New Course

written by Michael Hirsch | October 1, 2013

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LOS ANGELES — At the time of its merger in 1955, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) represented one third of all American workers. Once called "Big Labor" by critics, it was rightly credited with winning the sorts of concessions that allowed working people to enter into what was identified as a rising and broadening middle class. Today, less than one in eight workers is unionized. Organized labor is no longer "big." It even borders on the powerless when it comes to reversing soaring levels of inequality and beating back the decades-long corporate attack on its own members' living standards, let alone being a champion for the rest of the workforce. That's been the case at least since the 1980s, regardless of which party controlled the White House.

With the prospect of its own extinction now recognized even by itself, the AFL-CIO — the nation's largest labor federation, with 57 affiliated unions and 13 million members — gathered in early September for its quadrennial convention in the City of Angels seeking something of a miracle.

In the weeks and months leading up to the convention, AFL-CIO president and former miners' leader Richard Trumka emphasized that it was no longer possible for the Federation to continue with business as usual. This once-insular labor federation decided to throw open its doors — announcing that it would aim to organize much of the 89 percent of the U.S. workforce that is not in a labor union and do so in tight, mutually beneficial coordination with non-traditional worker organizations that do not engage in collective bargaining. It pledged to work with movements of feminists, youth, people of color, the LGBTQ community and the lowest paid members of the workforce, who even many of the Federation's own affiliated unions traditionally ignore.

Welcome Words

"The labor movement consists of all workers who want to take collective action to improve wages, hours and working conditions," reads the key resolution adopted at the convention. "Our unions must be open to all workers who want to join with us."

One hopeful observer in attendance, the National Organization for Women's Terry O'Neill, called the effort "not just transactional, but transformational."

Certainly the rhetoric is bracing and welcome. If you go by a strict reading of the resolutions passed, this is a solidly progressive organization ready to speak with brio for all working people and not just its current members and retirees. Calls were made for a smooth transition to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, rejecting the politics of austerity, organizing and acting in solidarity globally with other workers, transforming Obamacare into health care for all, ending mass incarceration, organizing the anti-union South and supporting workers of all sexual preferences.

It's come a long way from the cretinous public remarks of former AFL-CIO head George Meany, who in 1972 said that the "Democratic Party had been taken over by people named Jack, who look like Jills and smell like Johns."

Hopeful too are the plans to build up state and local labor federations as active community organizations with an eye toward cooperating with militant social movement organizations on their

goals as well. One more indication of the changing times: the AFL-CIO no longer calls itself “the” labor movement but a part of the labor movement. Admitting that alone is refreshing.

The selection of Tefere Gebre, 45, the charismatic, Ethiopian-born leader of the Orange County, Calif. Federation of Labor, as the Federation’s new executive vice president at least symbolizes the change in direction.

Many Hurdles

Despite all the positive signs, the effort to revitalize the AFL-CIO faces many hurdles. The largest one is the unremitting hostility of corporate America toward all but the most servile unions. But other challenges flow from the contradictions built into the Federation’s “big tent” structure, which includes more conservative elements such as unions that represent workers in the construction, energy and armaments industries. They hold jobs in the most politically conservative sectors of corporate capitalism, which employ a correspondingly lower proportion of females and people of color — workers that have been most closely touched by the progressive movements of the last four decades.

Predictably, Trumka’s “y’all come” call is garnering opposition from key elements within the Federation that bridle at being yoked to environmental groups like the Sierra Club, which has opposed the Keystone XL pipeline, coal-fired power plants and more.

“These groups have no equity with the work,” groused Laborers International Union of North America President Terry O’Sullivan, a vocal supporter of the Keystone XL pipeline, which could create thousands of temporary construction jobs in the Great Plains states where it is slated to be built. “I grew up believing you didn’t get in each other’s way … but these groups are taking food off our table.”

At this point, the concerns of the AFL-CIO’s “Old Guard” seem overstated. Despite press reports that the Sierra Club and the NAACP are already part of the effort, no pact has been made to bring them on board as affiliated organizations. The only group of national note that can be pointed to is the National Organization for Women. The eight other announced organizations — including Make the Road New York and the Blue Green Alliance (a longstanding coalition of unions and environmentalists chaired by the heads of the Steelworkers Union and the Sierra Club) — suggest only the potential of an inclusive strategy.

Old Habits

On political action, myopia still prevails. The Federation’s preference remains for insider politicking over the kind of mass campaigning that has been a hallmark of recent efforts by fast-food and Wal-Mart workers to win a living wage and union representation (see page 15). President Obama, perhaps the worst Democratic chief executive since Woodrow Wilson, sent a lackluster three-minute video message to be played during the Convention and was praised repeatedly for keeping the door open to union lobbyists. Open it is, but not in any way answerable.

A senior staffer told me that the Federation isn’t looking back much further than the 2010 election debacle or ahead to more than the 2016 election cycle. And while there is some interest in grooming explicitly labor candidates to run in Democratic Party primaries, there will be no jump-starting of insurgent independent campaigns that would challenge officeholders from both parties.

Sadly, the Federation’s newfound feistiness appears to stop at the proverbial water’s edge. There was a cathedral-like silence hanging over any discussion of the Obama administration’s then-anticipated Syria bombing plans. The AFL-CIO also refused to take a position on the bloated military

budget, even tabling a Wisconsin state federation resolution to do so. Rationalizing the silence on military spending, another senior staffer told me that the group's leaders didn't want the Obama administration caught in "a pissing contest with the GOP over what to cut in the federal budget."

The AFL-CIO wants to reinvent itself, and it should, but too much of the convention had an air of rebranding if not magical thinking. Still, the Federation remains the largest institutional actor on the left, with hundreds of millions of dollars in its war chest and a clear self-interest in forming alliances with movements for social change, in order to turn back the wave of attacks coming not just from the far right but from corporate America, too. Succeeding here means more than talking a better talk; it means artfully putting into practice its stated commitment to social justice unionism for all working people, not just for its own members. It also needs to ensure that its affiliates are on board so that cooperation with allies is transformational and not just a series of tactical, momentary alignments.

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