

Herman Benson and the New Unity Partnership

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ANYTHING HERMAN BENSON WRITES on the labor movement is provocative and useful for discussion — even if on occasion, in my view, it also happens to be somewhat skewed. When organized labor faces the prospect of a turning point as potentially large and also as disappointing as that of ten years ago, the implications loom before all of us.

Benson's "The New Unity Partnership: Sweeney Critics Would Bureaucratize to Organize" (*NP* 37) reflects on the scant progress made since the passing of the Meany/ Kirkland/Shanker era of failure and disgrace. He correctly observes that organized labor has fewer members and not more, contrary to oft-repeated hopes and would-be rallying slogans. In June, UNITE and HERE carried through the merger of what is now to be the most vigorous and most progressive corner of American labor with the non-acronymic name, UNITE HERE. By Benson's reading, shared with many long-running reformers, size counts, but bigger (bargaining units, that is) may not be better and may very well be worse.

We don't know what will happen between now and the summer of 2005, when John Sweeney may retire instead of seeking re-election, or obligingly accept a re-election with the quiet promise of early retirement — or hold out for the continuation of his team, possibly provoking a breakaway move. One suspects that the leading characters are altogether uncertain themselves whether this is a poker move or something more. What else happens may very well depend upon the character and actions of the politicians newly elected or returned to office.

Among the plentitude of voices chiming in on the assorted issues around labor's squabble, Richard Hurd's essay, "The Failure of Organizing, the New Unity Partnership, and the Future of the Labor Movement" (*Working USA*, September, 2004) is thus far the most thoroughgoing and balanced. Hurd observes sagely that the driving notions of the NUP are altogether consistent with the unfulfilled aspirations of the AFL-CIO leadership since 1995 to jump-start organizing by devoting more resources and attention toward it. SEIU and UNITE HERE have no apparent social agenda in common with Laborers International Union of North America, let alone the Carpenters. But they all share a sense of urgency about organizing rare within the mainstream AFL-CIO unions — with the marked exception of the Communications Workers.

Is it an urgency that signals a potentially disastrous move ahead? That's certainly a good question. Benson closes his essay with a tease — the new partners of labor leadership may just do to Sweeney what he and his allies did to Kirkland not so long ago. But hold on here, Brother Benson. The deck has been so thoroughly stacked (according to my own reading, all the way back to Sam Gompers' mean swing rightward against Chinese immigrants, industrial unionists and democratic dissenters) that we cannot simply ignore the dead hand of the past upon the present. Arising from slumber with the world's biggest hangover, the labor movement has been so ruined since the glory days of the 1930s-1940s that desperate proposals unlikely a short time ago are more than understandable, and desperate measures worth considering.

Let me apologize in advance to Benson for guessing that his suspicions of SEIU and UNITE HERE have at least some of their origins in an old quarrel with the New Left and the antiwar movement. Benson's ideas of union reform did not always coincide with theirs, but more important, his long-time alliances frequently ran in the opposite direction. The Association for Union Democracy

has done splendid work, but within what always has seemed, to many close observers, sharp political limits. With the further passage of time, that limitation seems to be easing. In my view, it still colors Benson's perspectives on the NUP among other matters.

The issues of union democracy can never be, and have certainly never been, separate from larger perspectives on race and gender, not only nationally but globally. To paraphrase UNITE HERE president Bruce Raynor, an all white (and all male) building trades local in a Southern city is not "democratic" even if all its members should vote night and day. It is more a job-holding agency for sons, nephews and other relatives than it is a "union": in short, just the sort of unit that gave the thuggish George Meany his craft beginnings and set his mentality for all time. The ferocious hatred of affirmative action that still percolates through the officialdom of the United Federation of Teachers and assorted other unions (David Dubinsky may have been its last notoriously open hater among the fading needles trades) comes from here and is based firmly upon the same premise: democracy for us unless, of course, it gets out of hand.

Things are naturally not quite so simple. Gompersism opened the doors a bit, in the rush toward unionism during the First World War, with thousands of industrial workers joining the AFL. But Gompers simultaneously slammed the doors shut on the IWW, joining the Wilson government in its suppression and using secret government funds to launch a Latin America network that evolved, in later generations, into the oily operations of the American Institute for Free Labor Development.

All this now seems to have happened a long time ago. But ask certain pro-war union officials today, high or low, about their vision of American labor's future and, in a candid mood, they will provide a perfectly Gompersian (or Shankerian) answer. The U.S. military and economy must and will dominate the planet, using up its human and natural resources for our own purposes, and labor, if loyal, will reap its share of the rewards. That's the strategy. That has always been the strategy, long before Godless Communism, and no blather about "civil society" and "democracy" in recent, post-Communist times makes the reality any different.

CAN THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT break from this logic at the moment when transnationalism has become the imperative for its own survival? Less than a decade has passed since criminal involvements in human rights abuses by labor officials were both widespread and highly rewarded, and a shorter time since hints of a similar involvement have turned up in regard to Venezuela. It's not an easy question.

Due to labor's many past misdeeds, as well as a host of other factors, it has not yet been able to turn around a century-old reputation of hostility towards immigrants, legal or illegal. The SEIU seems to have been the most successful, along with UNITE HERE, LIUNA, the Communication Workers of America, and a very few others that we could name (the United Farm Workers obviously have the will, but have not found the way). The rest are treading water or going down, not only because industry is fleeing the United States for other shores. As a state labor official laconically observed to me recently: all the white people around here who want to join unions already belong to them; and so far we're no good at reaching the immigrants, the minorities, etc.

Unions are also losing in part because they are still stuck in nostalgia for those long-gone happy Cold War days (as Richard Rorty has written so admiringly), when George Meany was about to abolish social classes, and the nation's leading intellectuals (Rorty's favorites, like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., also happened to be high rollers in the CIA's heavily-funded cultural operation, but never mind) were confirmed Meany-Reutherites. Sorry, Professor Rorty, the past was never all that good; and not all the dirty bombs in the Pentagon arsenal can make The Plan work for labor now.

So: what are the alternatives? If the UNITE HERE/NUP proposal is a mistaken or limited one, a mere rerun of Walter Reuther's badly limited and doomed Progressive Alliance, then let's hear what someone else, including Herman, has in mind to revive labor and enroll the millions left out of labor's old imperial strategies. And let them tell us how it is going to be carried out against the weight of both capital and the imperial unionists still hanging like a millstone around labor's collective neck.

We need a much larger vision, as everyone knows. What Bill Fletcher has dubbed a long-awaited paradigm shift, to labor as a social movement of working class interests across gender, generational, racial, ethnic and geographical borders has been waiting too long. Continued stagnation and/or split offer bad alternatives that could only get worse if labor's Old Right successfully rallied backward-moving forces within a weakened federation, taking control and precipitating the collapse of the AFL entirely — and that may be the one strongest objection to the NUP.

Today's antiwar movement in labor, with all its limitations, promises to return to the historic point, two generations ago, when the AFL-CIO failed miserably: the utter hostility of its chiefs, those aging white men, toward the peace, environment and feminist movements of the 1960s-1970s, emphatically including an unwillingness to correct labor's own continuing racist practices even while lobbying Congress to take action. One cannot prove a negative, and a movement based in idealism rather than the cynicism of Meany, Kirkland, Shanker, and so on, would have surely faced rough sledding. But at least it would have encompassed the poor of the planet — many of them the new workforce streaming to the United States — and faced up to the dilemmas of ecological exhaustion. In short, it might well have captured the imagination of the largest radical generation since the 1930s.

It might even have evoked the Wobblies. Perhaps its successor still can, before time really does run out on organized labor.

Footnotes