The New Unity Partnership: Sweeney Critics Would Bureaucratize to Organize

written by Herman Benson | May 27, 2010

WHAT JOHN SWEENEY DID UNTO LANE KIRKLAND IN 1995 may now be done unto him. On September 18, this year, Sweeney announced he would run for reelection as AFL-CIO president, along with Rich Trumka, secretary-treasurer, and Linda Chavez-Thompson, executive vice-president. But his term of office doesn't expire until mid 2005, almost two years to go.

Ordinarily, such a premature declaration would seem strange. Not this time, however, because Sweeney needs to forestall a not-so-subtle drive by five international union leaders to push him out. They had planted stories in *Business Week* and in the *American Prospect* about his probable "retirement" in 2005 (news to him!); they were already mulling over the choice of his successor. The pressure on Sweeney continues. When the *New York Times* reported that he would run for reelection, it added, "Some labor officials questioned whether Mr. Sweeney might reverse himself and . . . not seek another term." [What "officials"?]

The five were banding together, they said, because at a time when labor must grow or die, the AFL-CIO remains passive and impotent. Calling for change, they propose to show the way to organize the unorganized. And so memories of the 1995 AFL-CIO convention in New York! That's when Sweeney, at the head of a coalition of international presidents, proclaiming that labor must grow or die, called for change and proposed to lead the federation in a drive to organize the unorganized. His drive for change succeeded only partially. He was elected AFL-CIO president to head a new leadership; he beat the drums for organizing; he called upon affiliates to put forces in the field; he recruited hundreds of eager students for demonstrative summers of organizing.

But it didn't work. Now, eight years later, back to square one. Despite his exhortation, the response from the established labor leadership was limp. There have been some gains in organizing, but the unionized section of the private, nongovernmental workforce remains at the dangerously low 9 percent.

Now, the five restive international union leaders, publicly expecting Sweeney to bow out, have joined together in a formal organization, partially inside the AFL-CIO and partially outside, complete with a name, New Unity Partnership. Time and tide wait for no one. They intend to reorganize themselves and then demonstrate to the labor movement how to organize the unorganized. The implication of their message: Lane Kirkland and Tom Donahue, the AFL-CIO old guard and all their predecessors, talked of organizing; but did nothing. Sweeney promised to organize, but accomplished next to nothing. But this time, really and now, they will organize.

Together, the five international presidents make up an odd combination: Douglas McCarron, Carpenters union; Bruce Raynor, UNITE; John Wilhelm, Hotel union; Terrence O'Sullivan, Laborers; Andy Stern, Service Employees.

In 1995, the Carpenters and UNITE both voted for the old guard against Sweeney, the reformer. The other three backed Sweeney. When McCarron pulled the Carpenters out of the AFL-CIO, Sweeney announced that Carpenter locals would be barred from AFL-CIO state and city federations. In a serious rebuff, an unusual coupling of the building trades and the New Unity Partnership defeated Sweeney and blocked his move.

Wilhelm and O'Sullivan head two unions once heavily infiltrated by organized crime. Their unions, at least at the national level, were freed from organized crime, not by internal insurgency and reform, but by the U.S. Department of Justice. Wilhelm and Stern, who have both earned reputations as modern, progressive leaders, are allied with McCarron who exchanges mutual public expressions of admiration with President Bush.

Unlike Sweeney, the Partnership starts out with a scientific plan scrupulously worked out on paper by research workers, complete with graphs and statistical charts. The NUP program is inspired by a 44-page analysis prepared by Stephen Lerner of the SEIU organizing staff. The key aim of any organizing effort, according to this plan, is for unions to win a decisive market share in industries by increasing "union density" and controlling the "labor supply" and so gain the ability "to take wages out of competition and raise standards."

According to Lerner, here's the problem: "The current structure of the labor movement stands in the way of organizing workers and building increased strength for workers at every level of the labor movement." And so, they would reorganize the labor movement, but *really* reorganize it: Unions must stop taking the lazy way out; no more picking up whatever is easy to organize; and so no more "general workers unions" that reach out for anyone who will pay dues, from laborers to nuclear scientists. They must concentrate on increasing that "density" in their assigned basic markets. We have to get rid of that clutter of little organizations, those "corner store" unions which are happy with a tiny, selective membership so long as they pay enough dues to sustain the officers' salaries.

The graphs and charts demonstrate that American industry is shaped into 15 great segments: services, government, manufacturing, mining, etc. And so, we have to get rid of that useless proliferation of impotent unions and organize into 12-15 big, powerful unions, each in its defined industrial segment. To get there, we must eliminate the defectives, merge some, swap locals and members, and end with those powerful few, each with its authorized clearly defined sphere of influence.

Wheels and Charts

THE FORMATION OF THE NUP has been compared with the rise of the CIO within the old AFL, but differences are more striking than similarities. The CIO arose in response to the turbulent, spontaneous, often uncontrollable initiative of thousands of workers. The NUP arises out of the brain of well-meaning idealistic union staffers. The ideological flavor of the plan recalls the old-fashioned disputes of yesteryear; a weird combination of old AFL conservatism with its strictly assigned jurisdiction and the old radical industrial unionism with its imaginary unions concocted out of wheels and charts.

The five in the NUP promise to plunge forward. Success, they say, will induce others to join in. It will be interesting to see how they solve their own immediate problems. One of the five, the SEIU, has many of the characteristics of the "general workers" union they want to abolish. Will it swap away all its government workers and other incidentals? Will the Laborers union fork over its 500,000 mail handlers and the millions of dollars in federal insurance money that goes along? Will the Laborers and Carpenters merge into a single construction union and convince, say, the IBEW electrical workers to join and surrender the autonomy it now enjoys in its limited field? UNITE has nothing to swap; its basic industry is in collapse. Who will define the limits of its ultimate imperial domain? Such questions, limited when confined within the NUP five, would be magnified a thousand-fold if extended to the rest of the labor movement.

Like many a grand plan emanating out of the minds of great thinkers, the NUP project requires that its leaders be endowed with extraordinary authority. Naturally, they are impatient with

questions of union democracy. Not necessarily hostile to the idea as an abstraction, but impatient with anyone who would focus on the subject as a practical need.

"It is too narrow to talk of union democracy only," writes Lerner. (Would it not be "narrow" to talk only of anything?) "If only 10 percent of workers in an industry are unionized it is impossible to have real union democracy because 90 percent of the workers are excluded." An elusive formulation which implies that the 10 percent, we who are organized, must wait for our union democracy until that 90 percent come along, which could be a long, long time. Actually, as many union activists insist, union democracy, can be a spur to organizing by making the labor movement more attractive to recruits. But the NUP seems to see union democracy as an inconvenience, even an impediment; in any event, its whole program is permeated with that narrow spirit.

Those few massive unions, with their exclusive jurisdiction, would allow no refuge for workers who, fed up with a highhanded officialdom, seek more congenial representation. This is the no-raiding pact elevated to the point of fanaticism.

The NUP proposes to eradicate any element of autonomy for state and city AFL-CIO federations; all delegates would be selected by the internationals, not by affiliated locals. State and city federation presidents could serve only part-time. The federations would be ruled by full-time executive vice presidents, not elected by the delegates, but appointed by the national AFL-CIO. The local federations would lose control over their own money; all per capita payments would go to the national AFL-CIO. These organizational trappings are never explicitly justified; they are simply enunciated and shoehorned to fit into the NUP conception of a newly bureaucratized labor movement.

This vision of a highly-centralized labor movement that restrains membership initiative in an authoritarian straightjacket is no mere bad dream, no reverse utopia. The model is already in operation. The Carpenters union has already been reorganized to show the way. Its locals have been reduced into impotent units. Merged into sprawling regional councils, locals are not permitted to pay any officers or staff members; their main source of income, the work tax, is taken over by the councils. Locals have lost all control over collective bargaining. No member can hold any paid staff position in the council or any local without the permission of an all-powerful executive secretary treasurer. Local delegates, who elect the EST, cannot hold a paid union job without his or her endorsement.

Experts and Idealists

SUPPORT FOR THE NUP comes from divergent sources: from a younger generation of union leaders, social idealists (for want of any better term) who are impatient with the slow pace of progress and will let nothing to stand in the way. With them are the congenital authoritarian types. What binds them together, at this juncture, is the conviction that if they could be relieved of the ‘narrow' restraints of democracy, with all power placed in their hands, they could save the labor movement. Unskilled, low-wage workers, immigrants, and even undocumented workers make up a large part of the membership of four of the five NUP unions: Laborers, SEIU, Hotel, and UNITE. Huddled masses yearning to be free, make way for the experts and idealists!

The five unions are already reaching out to others who they feel share their values, in particular, the Teamsters and the United Food and Commercial Workers. They hope for support from liberal Republicans, and from Karl Rove, Bush's chief advisor.

They are not likely to reshape the whole labor movement. Extensive resistance is unavoidable: on the one hand, from grassroots local leaders and rank-and-file activists who would welcome an

effective program to organize the unorganized but want a voice in running their own unions; on the other hand, from complacent, entrenched office holders who simply distrust any program of action, good or bad. In any event, given the current political and economic trends in the country and in the world, even the best program of organization will continue to run into heavy employer resistance.

The NUP aim — a vigorous organizing campaign — is undermined by an ideology of bureaucratism that can be summarized thusly, arm determined leaders with unrestrained centralized power. Give them the money to pay a disciplined staff and the authority to control it. Avoid being diverted by demands for "union democracy." Steel yourself against whining local complaints from those already organized. Go full speed ahead to win decisive "market share" by increasing "union density."

In its blend of dedication and authoritarianism and its preoccupation with the mechanics of organizing, the NUP evades the politics of union organizing. That is, not politics in the narrow sense of electing Democrats instead of Republicans, or maneuvering cleverly between them, or beefing up labor's standard political action program, but politics as broad social policy. In a nation narrowly poised between conservative and liberal wings contending for power, the critical political problem is how to create a climate receptive to unionism. How to influence people and shift the balance of opinion toward sympathy for programs of social justice — including the right to organize.

It is ironic, but labor can learn something from the Bush camp, which says it has discovered a new weapon of mass instruction. They report that, after years of effort, they have accumulated a mailing list of 6,500,000 potential supporters whom they will rely upon to bring the right-wing message to the voting population. This conservative popular army is now essential, they realize, because voters are becoming skeptical of what they hear from the mass media; they tend to shrug off those blaring radio and TV ads. Hence, the Republicans want to rely more on direct human contact; voters can be moved most by what they hear from friends and neighbors, at social gatherings, and at work.

In this, the labor movement should be way ahead. In a generation of effort, it has accumulated a list of 16,000,000 — 13,000,000 in the AFL-CIO alone. This is more than a mailing list; it is roster of dues paying members whose lives, and families' lives, are directly affected by their union membership. Here is labor's popular army, the force that could mold the mind of the nation. But our labor leaders, including the New Unity Partnership, have a serious political problem, an internal union problem. The union army does not respond with enthusiasm to their call.

That reality was on display in heavily unionized California in the fall 2003 during the recall campaign. To stop the recall of Governor Davis, AFSCME reports, it alone "made 643,000 calls to California union members. We sent 127,639 pieces of mail to our union members and retirees, and distributed 140,000 flyers in English and Spanish, and some 5,000 AFSCME volunteers worked from the beginning of the campaign through election day."

Failure! Few must have been listening. In "a GOP power grab," Arnold Schwarzenegger swept in with a huge majority.

Even more cruel was March 2004 with its New Hampshire and Iowa primaries. Here, where labor political advocates find their most favorable soil, selectively Democratic, a majority of the union voters rejected candidates vigorously endorsed by union leaders. More than half said no in Iowa and three-quarters in New Hampshire.

Those who would effectively organize the unorganized at this juncture, should recall Walter Reuther's admonition: Unionize the organized! The need is to create a sense of identity between

members and their unions so that they become recruiters for the cause and defender of its principles in the broad public.

And for that, the labor movement needs an expansion, not limitations, on workers' rights in their unions. For the right to speak up without fear of retaliation, the right to run for office without niggling restrictions, to criticize incumbents and their policies, to fair referrals from hiring halls, fair trials, fair elections and referendums, accurate information on workers' rights on the job and in the union hall. Convinced that their union belongs to them and is truly a force for social justice, members can be inspired to transmit that conviction to the nation.

IF A MAJOR BREAKTHROUGH for the labor movement requires cultivating the spirit of freedom in unions and not its stifling, the New Unity Partnership is off the track. By disparaging union democracy, even violating it, the New Unity Partnership undermines the very basis of its own campaign to organize the unorganized.

But it does seem clear that the NUP will put substantial resources into organizing. If they follow through, we can expect progress; bureaucracy at its best, spiced with a dash of idealism, is bound to chalk up some real achievements in organizing. If they fail, it will be another in a line of disappointing and discouraging efforts. And so, while we can't wish them well in their drive to bureaucratize the labor movement, we can only hope for successes in their effort to organize. In any event, the defense of union democracy will remain more relevant than ever.

Footnotes