

# The Health Workers' Struggle . . . and the Story of One Rank and Filer

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Labor's Civil War in California

Cal Winslow

Oakland: PM Press, 2010, 115pp, \$12

Shades of Justice: A Memoir

Paul Krehbiel

Altadena, CA: Autumn Leaf Press,

2008, 422pp, \$19.95

Anyone who keeps up to date on the saga of the labor movement, its fumbling efforts to climb out of an ever-deepening hole, its moments of national influence and its moments of furious internecine fighting, will likely have been receiving email memos from the Service Employees union for at least several years, and almost as likely to have been receiving bulletins attacking the leadership of same union during the last year or so. It is a curious thing altogether, along with so much else popping up unbidden on the web, and many veteran observers, not to mention labor activists young and old, often seem to lack the baseball game-style program that would explain these particular players, their positions and their revealing stats. Can anyone now remember when Andrew Stern, now much under attack despite having raced to the showers, was batting .350? How about Mary Kay Henry, his successor at SEIU, or Sal Roselli, the challenger from the National Union of Health Workers: which notable fastballer or even knuckle baller was throwing more shutouts at the employers?

Baseball metaphors have probably lost their laugh value, but the charges and counter-charging email memos often do not seem much better at explaining things. Everybody, or at least everybody who is vocal, seems to have a team and is a rigorously loyal team player. Many spitballs, not to mention beanballs, are thrown (sorry for another Summer metaphor) by one faction against another, more than at any time in my days since the palace coup against the Old Right in 1995, and more between self-described progressive factions against each than anytime in memory.

What's it all about? Labor's Civil War in California, a short history of the conflict, written from a highly partisan standpoint, pinpoints (and arguably over-pinpoints) the source of the conflict in the behavior of Andrew Stern from the early years of the new century onward. Stern was the Golden "Boy" (that is to say, not quite as elderly as most other labor leaders, and presiding over some victories rather than steady defeats) of labor's declining era, among other successes, leading the SEIU to the largest single victory since the 1940s, the enrollment of nearly 75,000 employees of the homecare industry in Southern California.

There was something about this victory, actually several poignant details, that do not quite place it in the pantheon of glorious labor struggles of the past. First, it was a political deal, like most of the unionization of public employees, at every level of government, since the 1950s. Democrats had to be finessed, and they got a big something in return. Second, the members of the workforce, containing many from Mexico and elsewhere in Central America (or Asia) did not entirely know that they were joining a union! Good luck that their wages improved, bad luck that they learned they had to pay monthly dues to some mysterious organization far from their own influence, let alone control.

This type or at least this scale of victory was, nevertheless, widely viewed as the great lever hurtling a revived American labor movement forward. It didn't happen, and by the new century, Stern was evidently growing restless. Meanwhile, the hotel and restaurant workers, key to the most unionized city in the nation (no, not Detroit anymore but Vegas, home of the casinos, resort hotels and thousands of nonunionized sex workers) merged with UNITE, the remnant of the old, heavily Jewish "needles trade" unions whose industry had disappeared overseas — except for the new

sweatshop thousands who remain unorganized. HERE had the energy and the plan, UNITE had the Amalgamated Bank with its financial reserves from generations of dues collections. HERE-UNITE and SEIU together abandoned the faltering AFL-CIO together and set itself upon a vigorous agenda, supported by the Carpenters, Teamsters, Laborers and Farm Workers. Within the new Change to Win coalition (or mini-federation), disillusion soon set in, and some of the key players were at each others' throats.

At this point, we pass into highly disputed territory. Following the example of the declining AFL's regional and local bodies — which merged, purportedly to save money but very much against the will of many local central labor council members — Stern devised a plan to merge ever larger former SEIU locals into super-locals. The results, considered outrageous by many, were strictly predictable: more power at the top, less at the bottom. If the super-locals were more efficient or capable of taking on management, no one could prove it.

The hyper-energetic campaign to elect Barack Obama and its aftermath proved altogether the final precipitating factor. SEIU threw enormous dues money and energies into voter registration and drives for the big "O," quite a contrast to some other sectors of labor, notably the American Federation of Teachers, whose leaders seemed to consider Obama unreliable on defense (i.e., of Israeli interests) and anyway, unelectable as a person of color, the union's political chiefs finally bowing before the nomination results — but not cheerfully. What did SEIU or any other union get from the new president? Very little in the short run, certainly not the labor reform promised. Obama was hamstrung by Congress or...he was a Business Democrat after all, notwithstanding a friendly appointment or two.

By this time, former UNITE president Bruce Raynor (long known as one of labor's valiant figures for creating union locals across racial lines in the South, and disliked among labor's aging cold warriors for his New Left background) urgently sought to withdraw his troops and his bank account from the merger. The HERE-UNITE membership drive had not been all that successful after all. Never mind: HERE wanted the piggy bank, and arguably needed it to hold on in a recession economy, let alone advance. Thus the scenario of multiple back-stabbing that emerged, along with a bright and shiny new player on the scene: the National Union of Health Workers.

Here a little history is useful, if perhaps not so useful as one might hope. One story has to do with Jobs with Justice, launched a bit more than twenty years ago with great hopes, by veterans of New Left vintage and Alinsky-orientation, including Stern. Fronted most curiously by one of the otherwise most intimate of Lane Kirkland's buddies, Communications Workers leader Morton Bahr, and allied with other union leaders scarcely known for a progressive bone in their bodies — but hopeful of some labor revival — JwJ had a good run. Labor solidarity across race, ethnic and gender lines, mobilization on behalf of strikers, coalitions with community organizers (notably ACORN) and so seemed to promise much. And then it ran out of steam, for a variety of reasons. Remnants still linger on locally, barely, without attracting much notice.

Another story goes back further in history properly to Local 1199 in New York City, a hospital workers' union that could be described as the last success of the Old Left (Popular Front division). The most interracial, politically progressive union carried on heroically as FBI assaults and raiding destroyed other Left unions or decimated them so far (as with UE) that they could hardly be recognized. A leadership crisis following the retirement of the old leadership ended the glory days but the 1199 past success effectively set the pace for other unions of health workers to proceed amongst the most ill-treated but also rapidly expanding sector of the American workforce.

Except that progress was proving difficult here, too, and the conflicts between and among several unions were growing ever more messy. By the early months of 2010, the NUHW was winning over handfuls of locals by convincing members of their democratic practices, while SEIU responded with legal threats, sometimes more than threats. Andrew Stern resigned, succeeded by a quietly leftwing, openly lesbian Catholic unionist, Mary Kay Henry. It was a maddening moment for NUHW supporters because Stern had been so easy to hate (along with his leading lieutenant, Anna Burger,

whom he had anointed to succeed, but who could not convince the other functionaries). Meanwhile, former UNITE leader Bruce Raynor continued to joust with HERE for money and members, bringing a portion of former HERE membership, along with a chunk of the treasury, into SEIU in the bargain. What a mess!

The efforts to explain or untangle the mess have not, so far, been a great deal of help. Finding a disinterested observer is about as hard as finding a peacenik at a Tea Party rally — or an actual socialist in Obama's circle of economic advisors. An essay by Max Fraser in the *Nation* (July 5, 2010) usefully summarizes the situation but like others, places nearly all the weight, good and bad, upon Stern the personality.

Cal Winslow's fine little book lays out fuller details and is quite helpful, in its own fashion. It does not seek far behind the layers of current discussion, it offers few deep historical insights into what has made American labor organizations so predictably bureaucratic and conservative (note: I made a stab at this in *Taking Care of Business*) and what continues to make Andrew Stern, for any and all faults, not much like, say, inept, morally repugnant figures like George Meany and Lane Kirkland who were nevertheless ardently supported by most union leaders along with the intelligence agencies that counted upon their collaboration at home and abroad.

Still, Winslow has done better than some of Stern's major critics or at least as well as others. Herman Benson, for instance, longtime head of the Association for Union Democracy (AUD), has been raging at Stern for crimes so familiar in the sectors of labor that Benson rarely bothered to criticize, a habit that Winslow unwittingly identifies by hailing the AFL figures speaking at a recent HERE convention, hailing down criticisms on Stern that anti-reformers like James Hoffa, Jr., among others that could have made more credibly by talking back at the mirror. Not quite "a seminal moment" in US history, as commentator Juan Gonzalez insisted at the time, it is more likely destined to be remembered as another round of collective defeat-turned-inward. If Change-to-Win, now minus several of its founding unions, was destined to collapse, as some claimed eagerly, what did that say for the AFL main body, stuck in the same old rut as ever?

Winslow's strong point is his reportage of SEIU efforts to shut down California health workers' move toward NUHW, and his conclusion that these workers have responded by bringing a higher level of democracy, rank-and-file participation, into union practice. Is this democratization a tactic or a goal? Do we see in it the potential rebirth of the kind of democratic participation that was the nature of the IWW, sometimes the early CIO (sometimes not), the Teamsters for a Democratic Union project and so many others at local and regional levels that, with some exceptions, were always turned back?

This is a good and necessary question, and one that is not really aided by the single-minded, even obsessive project of bringing down Andrew Stern the personality, the labor leader, the apparently unwanted public face of American unionism. Or by elevating assorted critics of Stern (and his allies) into more than mere tactical allies, making them veritable paragons of union democracy.

All the more so when the sudden retirement of Stern seemingly drains much of the juice out of the current attack narrative. We never really learn, in the polemical perspectives of Benson, Winslow or another shrewd observer, Steve Early (whose union days in the Communications Workers were no strangers to jurisdictional disputes, or to thuggish union presidents until the present CWA leader, for that matter), why the marriage of HERE and UNITE did not work, or why in not working, did not lead to some kind of amicable divorce. And thus why the continued presence of Bruce Raynor, one of labor's best in recent decades, would turn out (according to insiders) to be the real bone in the throat of the NUHW and its obligatory allies. John Wilhelm, as the dynamic leader of HERE, another authentic labor hero and founder of CtW, was now eagerly returning his union to the AFL that he rejected only a few years ago, adding more confusion to at least some outsiders.

More perhaps to the point than all this: with so much blood on the floor, how might things be settled so that the task of organizing the unorganized can actually begin to take place again...before unions collapse under the accumulating weight of their debts and membership losses? It's a ponder.

Here we can usefully turn to the rank and file of the NUHW, a vital, tragic but also heroic story in its own right. This rank-and-filer is someone whom I met, or seem to have met, forty years ago and then again, for a few days, when a doomed attempt was made to relaunch Students for a Democratic Society and a counterpart post-student body, the Movement for a Democratic Society. Paul Krehbiel and I were among the few non-youngsters on the latter scene, greatly changed by age but with basically the same non-Communist/Maoist, anti-imperialist, syndicalistic politics as we had when young and doubtless more vigorous.

Paul was a Buffalo (more properly Tonawanda) suburban lower middle class/ working class kid of the 1950s-60s. He traces his radicalization during the Vietnam Era with great care and candor, something remarkable for a life-time organizer/activist who did not become anything close to a professional writer. His closely-considered details include parents, pals, enemies, girl friends, teachers and others. But perhaps the most poignant stories are not quite told: how he gave up art, his deepest pursuit, for being a lifetime political activist. But we do learn how he went to art school in Toronto, not far across the border, and how he defended teachers there who had been fired. But the summer job, between semesters, proved to be decisive.

Paul was one of those rebels for whom my magazine *Radical America*, launched in 1967, had been created. We devoted ourselves to social history, especially labor history, and our readers were mainly graduate students. But we were thinking all the time that there might be a direct way to influence a rapidly changing class conflict. The demography, a majority of white males, was melting away, and with it, a considerable segment of the automatic redneck support of war and invasion, also the racism, and so on. In 1968, dreaming at the age of twenty of being a professional sculptor and meanwhile working in a metal plant, he watched as two of his fingers were crushed by a stamper. He needed a life change.

It came as he dropped out of art school and started attending a blue collar college in Buffalo. There was Students for a Democratic Society, waiting for him. He became an activist and a good down-to-earth one, but also studied hard, as many of us did in those days (defying the stereotype of the stoned-out radical student). He naturally gravitated to blue collar organizing, including draft resistance, figured out for himself the best literature from any part of the Left to give to prospective draftees as he talked to them.

His retelling of the various local (sometimes national) activities in this sector is one of the best anywhere, so much so that it defies summary. The space between the factory and the campus, the changing sentiment of the community from the stand point of one activist, ends only in 1971, and by then Krehbiel has covered more than four hundred pages. It fast-forwards to one last, brief chapter on life after the 2000 election. One wishes he had started earlier and covered more space in the recent years, but his final lessons come to the necessity of nuts and bolts in building mass movements. No one knows better how difficult these are.

It is no surprise, then, that Krehbiel's blog, linked to *Labor Notes*, is one of passionate attachment to NUHW, to its leader Sal Roselli, and to the day-to-day events in one work-place location or another. Krehbiel updates the Winslow commentary usefully — and continually.

And yet so much remains unknown, uncertain and troubling. Is the NUHW struggle a metaphor for a very different kind of unionism, one little-known in the main body of the AFL, and if so, how comfortable are fellow enemies of Stern and his successor likely to be with such a bottom-up style? Is SEIU going to "implode," as assorted critics of Stern have been prone to predict, or, more likely, under Henry, will triage on behalf of the vigorous, healthy sections, protecting those from the damaged branches reattaching themselves (if all goes well) to the NUHW. Will the remnants of CtW slink back into the AFL? Or more likely in the saga of union quarrels, will the conflict drag on for years, driven as much by the familiar personal enmity as any other logic. Actually, this time around, money is an even bigger motive: the Federation has too little to offer the departed internationals, in return for their dues payments. But perhaps this factor might also work the other way, toward reconciliation of some kind, probably with Bruce Raynor taking a well-deserved retirement, and his

faction of HERE-UNITE dissolving into an already reconciled HERE-UNITE-AFL.

A longer discussion than these books allow might turn our attention to the larger failure of the labor movement to organize much of anyone, and the propensity of unions to snatch territory from each other at great expense to their treasuries and to morale at large. There may be as many actual auto workers now as in the later 1980s, but the UAW is looking at colleges (and some AFT locals), casino workers (HERE-UNITE locals) and so on. Those non-union plants in the South and elsewhere are obviously less inviting targets. The same goes, naturally, for the undocumented workers in today's sweatshops, especially garment industry shops: these seem to have been written off in advance. Endless other examples could be found. How do these books help an exploration of this topic and why do they not go further in exploring it?

Whatever the case, the situation for NUHW is dire. SEIU has lots of resources and lots of friends in high (as well as other) places. Settlement with SEIU, including the survival of a vigorous collection of their locals in California, would appear to be the best solution for NUHW, if only they can get it. Seeing no easy victory ahead and wanting obstacles out of the way, Stern opted for a no-raiding agreement with the California Federation of Nurses years ago; that may be the best way out for all, and Mary Kay Henry may be the one who decides to make it on terms acceptable to NUHW.