Left Pitted Against Left in "Labor's Civil Wars"

written by Herman Benson | July 3, 2011

THE "CIVIL WARS" that Steve Early mentions in his new book are not about the class war between labor and capital, nor any war between a conservative right and a radical left in unions. It is the war that split labor's progressive left, and Early is an apt author to tell us about it. He was one of those sixties radicals who became, as he tells it in an earlier book, "embedded in the labor movement." Later, while in law school, he wrote briefly for the *United Mine Workers Journal* just after the victory of the insurgent Miners for Democracy. He campaigned for Ed Sadlowski in his insurgent run for Steelworkers president; then took over the Professional Drivers Council and led it into the insurgent Teamsters for a Democratic Union. For the next 27 years he was employed on the international staff of the Communications Workers of America. But even while performing his official duties for the CWA, he moonlighted on his own time, reporting voluminously on insurgents, rank and filers, and assorted social radicals in and around the labor movement.

The war he writes about was triggered by the swift celebrity rise of Andy Stern, touted as the labor leader of the future, the champion of a newly invigorated and enlightened union movement. Many of those once-young radicals, like Early, had oriented to the labor movement; but in the civil wars that followed, they divided into bitterly opposed camps.

IN 1995, JOHN SWEENEY, in a rare palace revolt, took over as AFL-CIO president. In distancing himself from the conservative legacy of former AFL-CIO presidents George Meany and Lane Kirkland, Sweeney proposed to energize labor into a crusading movement for social justice in America. When nothing much happened, Andy Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union, seized the spotlight that Sweeney had briefly occupied.

Armed with the resources of his million-member union of health care, building maintenance, and public workers, a union immune from the ravages of global competition, President Stern vowed to turn his union, and the labor movement, into an organizing colossus that would reverse labor's decline, enroll millions of unorganized workers, especially the oppressed and super exploited unskilled minorities and immigrants, into a powerful workers' army so numerous, so influential that the nation's political leaders, Democratic and Republicans alike, would be forced to respond to their mighty social pressure.

To free his hand from what he saw as the stodgy AFL-CIO — too male and too stale — Stern led a consortium of unions out of the AFL-CIO. Justice for All! Revive the spirit of the CIO! Change the labor movement! Change the nation! Change the world! Change To Win!. Heady stuff!

(Who remembers now, after the outpouring of labor money in the election of 2010, that Change to Win saw part of the solution in shifting money from political action to union organizing? If you scrutinized Stern's coalition, it didn't seem so new or so inspiring — Teamsters, Carpenters, Laborers, Hotel Workers, the disintegrating Needle Trades — but who was looking too closely?)

Meanwhile as America seemed to be drifting to the right, student radicals out of the sixties, civil rights workers, community organizers, farm worker campaigners, immigrant advocates, and a younger generation of academics and educators were looking to the labor movement to provide a social counterforce. Stern won their acclaim. Some cheered him on from the outside. On the left in

and around unions, there was near unanimity: Stern's road was the true road. He recruited them into his staff.

But Something Went Wrong

AFTER A YEAR OR SO, the unity broke, the left divided into warring camps, some rallied to Stern's team as ardent defenders, others turned into passionate critics. This is the story that Early tells so well in this book in fascinating, meticulous detail chapter by chapter with profiles on all the characters, major and minor and who did what, why, when, where, and to whom.

As Early explains it, the mighty crusade to organize the oppressed often degenerated into sweetheart agreements with management as the "high road unionism turns into collusion with union-busting employers." Stern's monopoly claim to jurisdiction over all health care turns into a bitter war with the California Nurses Association. His reaching for new fields to conquer turns into a destructive attempt to destroy the teachers union in Puerto Rico.

In the name of rebuilding the union with twenty-first century technology, Stern undercuts the traditional union system under which stewards, close to members on the job, process their grievances, and replaces it with a remote call-in center where disembodied telephone voices discuss a member's problems. Stern's stirring call for "justice for all" becomes a facade for neglecting the union's fundamental responsibility to its own members' daily needs on the job.

Stern hoped to convince hedge fund operators and the heads of big corporations that unionization is in their interests. At the same time, on the pretext of unifying the union for a mighty battle against monopoly capital, he moved to transform the whole union leadership cadre, top to bottom, elected and appointed, local and international, into one disciplined monolithic bloc dependent upon an authoritarian top leadership. From partners in the battle for social justice, he would transform them into voiceless, obedient, quasi-militarized subordinates.

The "civil war" reached its climactic and culminating moment with what Early calls: "The Mother of All Trusteeships," the trusteeship imposed by Stern on United Healthcare Workers-West, the 150,000-member SEIU local in California. Sal Rosselli, the local president who is prominent in labor and political circles in California and was a top SEIU officer, had sharply criticized a collective bargaining agreement reached by Stern. In retaliation, Stern, unleashing his authoritative powers as SEIU president, embarked on a relentless drive against Rosselli, ending with his removal of the whole Rosselli team from office in UHW-W and a Stern trusteeship takeover. The civil war escalated when the Rosselli's supporters refused to capitulate. They withdrew from the SEIU, established a new independent union, National Union of Healthcare Workers, and challenged the SEIU in a series of NLRB collective bargaining elections. The SEIU assigned an army of paid staff employees to the drive; by one estimate it spent $40,000,000; its own claim is $4,000,000. In any event, SEIU resources dwarfed the insurgent NUHW. Their local treasury impounded by Stern, deprived of office and salaries, the NUHW's champions entered the battle dependent upon donations and volunteer labor.

A decisive battle was played out in October when the SEIU and the NUHW competed in an NLRB collective bargaining election over representing 43,500 workers at various Kaiser facilities in California. At the time, SEIU's United Healthcare Workers was still their legal representative. But their democratically elected leadership — the Rosselli team — had been removed and replaced by Stern's appointed trustees. The NLRB offered unionists an opportunity to restore leaders they had once elected. But the SEIU held on; in voting 18,290 for the SEIU and 11,364 for the NUHW; the majority chose to submit to an officialdom selected for them.

With that, the war, at least on its main front, ended. But inconclusively. For the SEIU, it was a Pyrrhic victory: it emerged seriously damaged. For Rosselli's NUHW team, it was a serious setback; it was defeated but not destroyed.

The favorable bonds in and around the labor movement that the SEIU forged in the early days of its rise in public esteem have been shattered. Some two hundred or more labor oriented labor intellectuals, academics, political and community leaders in California and around the country criticized or condemned Stern's heavy-handed attack on Rosselli. With that, the SEIU glow of progressive virtue was extinguished.

Change to Win, the coalition that Stern led out of the AFL-CIO and that promised to revive the glory days of the old CIO, turned out to be a momentary aberration already crumbling. The Carpenters Union, which left the AFL-CIO before Stern, has already seceded from CTW. Who knows why it ever joined CTW in the first place? Perhaps because Carpenters President McCarron thought it might promote his imperial ambitions in the construction trades. The Laborers Union has left to rejoin the AFL-CIO. The Teamsters union remains, but why? President Hoffa never had any intention of adjusting to the Stern rhetoric. Unite/Here, the abortive merger of the Hotel union with UNITE, the disintegrating needle trades union, broke apart in its own private civil war. When Stern financed a war against Unite/Here, it too left CTW and rejoined the AFL-CIO. Anna Burger, CEO of Change to Win, resigned when the SEIU executive board refused to anoint her as Stern's successor as SEIU president. There no longer seems any justification for the continued pointless existence of a Change to Win which is already self-destructing.

Stern's stock in labor's upper echelons collapsed deeper than the Dow Jones average. In rejoining the AFL-CIO, Unite/Here President John Wilhelm, once Stern's chief collaborator in CTW, said to the federation's executive council, "We cannot let the SEIU speak for the labor movement.… if one of the final chapters in my career is to help stop this attempted takeover of the American labor movement by SEIU, I will be content.…" John Sweeney, now AFL-CIO president emeritus, said he agreed with Wilhelm and characterized Stern's behavior as "despicable."

Stern himself abruptly walked away. At 59 this spring, still young for a labor leader, he retired as SEIU president. He left abruptly in the middle of his term of office, only two years after his reelection at the union's convention where he had orchestrated a dizzying reorganization of the SEIU and proposed to lead a great surge for American labor. But he obviously decided not to hang around to see how it would work out. But he did stay long enough to trustee Rosselli's local. Once Stern retired, his own international executive board repudiated his leadership by rejecting Anna Burger, his chosen successor, and selecting Mary Kay Henry instead. (Taking the hint, Burger resigned as head of CTW. Having lost his power as a union leader, Stern retained his talents as a PR personality. Just when his labor influence and reputation had begun its roller coaster drop, President Obama appointed him to the 18-person Commission on Fiscal Responsibility, presumably as its one, and only, labor representative.)

By failing to pick up those 43,500 Kaiser workers, the SEIU's menacing rival, the National Union of Healthcare Workers, was seriously weakened but not eliminated. Before the October referendum, it had already won over a few units from the SEIU. In the month after, it wrested three bargaining units away from the SEIU (two were at Kaiser) totaling some 2,300 workers. As the months go by, additional NLRB elections will come. NUHW is likely to emerge as a California-based health care union of 6,000-10,000 members, not enough to offer an immediate threat to the SEIU in health care, but strong enough to force it to reconsider its authoritarian ways. In the future, any health care workers who find an SEIU regime intolerable will know that the NUHW is there with an alternative.

If the rejection of Stern's choice as successor is an accurate indicator of what is to come, the

SEIU international executive board may shift course by emphasizing the positive, by concentrating on organizing the unorganized, and pursuing a progressive role in politics. The post-Stern leadership may be wise enough to pull back from the super authoritarianism that led to the ruinous war with Rosselli. Free of Stern's domination, the board may be more flexible in reacting to independent-minded critics in the locals.

Stern's monopoly claim on all health care workers which led to his war with the California Nurses' Association over organizing registered nurses, has been replaced by an SEIU-CNA peace pact. The bitter conflict between John Wilhelm's Unite/Here and Bruce Raynor's SEIU-backed Workers United has been peacefully resolved. As part of their peace treaties with the SEIU, both the CNA and Unite agree to abandon their financial support for Rosselli's independent NUHW.

Early's book comes at an apt moment. The civil war he describes so vividly and so fully seems to have run its course. Tensions may remain but the hot war is over. And so his account is definitive in the sense that it covers its whole course from start to finish.

With peace breaking out, where does that leave the partisans of the "left"? It seems that they are back where they began shortly after Stern sounded the uncertain trumpet, but with this difference: issues of union democracy have been posed more clearly than before.

SEIU critics, leftists and not so leftist, may have been repelled by Stern's bull-in-the-china-shop rhetoric and by the disruptive effects of his too overtly and overly repressive methods. Still, in other unions there are officers who pursue the even tenor of less obtrusive but authoritarian ways. (For details, subscribe to *Union Democracy Review.)* Construction unions, especially the Carpenters, have been creating the kind of undemocratic structures that exceed Stern's and go beyond anything before in the American labor movement in their erosion of members' rights.

At the heart of Stern's guiding philosophy was the notion that in order to advance labor's cause it was necessary to centralize power in the hands of an authoritarian — and progressive — leadership. Meanwhile, democracy in unions (or as his ideologists put it derogatorily: "democracy") had to await that happy day when democracy would finally prevail in industry. Labor's civil wars tested out that philosophy in practice. The question remains posed today as uncertainly as before. Is it to be Stern's way, or shall we count on unleashing the power of the membership by refurbishing the practice of union democracy? The dampening of the "civil wars" described by Early and now a return to normality leaves that issue unresolved as before.

In all this, Early aims to write accurately and objectively even while making full disclosure of his own partisan sympathies. He is for all the good progressive policies and causes; he accepts the idea that unions must organize sometimes from top down and sometimes from bottom up as long as it emerges as a movement that vests power in a rank and file endowed with democratic rights.

While still working for the Communication Workers, Early just managed to escape deep trouble. In his moonlighting essays he was an outspoken critic of Stern's SEIU policies and practices at a time when Stern was at the height of popularity. Stern was outraged. (In fact, to this day Early triggers special allergic reactions in the SEIU body.) Stern wrote to Morty Bahr, then CWA president and Early's boss, demanding that he silence this irritating gadfly. Stern was still in the AFL-CIO and his fellow big labor leaders were anxious to keep him there. A high commandment in the labor canon orders union leaders: Thou shall not speak ill of a fellow labor leader. In this case, a mere underling had the audacity to speak against a top ruler. Intolerable! How would Bahr react? For Early, it was a dangerous moment.

It turned out to be a Perils of Pauline cliffhanger. In the nick of time, Stern split away from the

AFL-CIO, taking away a few million members. Luckily for Steve, it was now open season for attacking Stern.

Retired from remunerative employment and free to write as he pleases without looking over his shoulder, Early is embarked upon a new career as a labor journalist. It’s a fitting time. Dissenting union democrats can use a good writer to tell their story.