

What Course for Labor?

This discussion is the most promising thing that has happened to the AFL-CIO in at least 50 years. I applaud union leaders for participating and sharing their thoughts publicly. Unfortunately, among some new ideas are many of the same mistakes that led to the decline in the labor movement in the first place. If the union movement is going to recover, there are three principal changes that must be made; they can be briefly summarized as:

1. Democracy
2. Democracy
3. Democracy

I'll elaborate:

1. Bring about any changes by democratic means, not top-down, by fiat from the AFL-CIO and affiliate union leaders. Even a "democratic" vote of affiliate union leaders at an AFL-CIO convention will not really be democratic, because the members of affiliated unions will not be involved. Who do the officials at the top, the Sterns and the Buffenbargers, think they are, saying that the union movement *has* to change this way or that way, and then go and do it at the next AFL-CIO meeting? Whose unions are they, anyway? Some of their suggestions are necessary and worthwhile, but are they the only ones with the good ideas? Do they think they know best and not care what their members think? They had better look over their shoulders and see if the troops are still with them. What if they have their revolution and no one comes?

The last big rebuilding in the labor movement was in the 1930's. Was it built by the leaders of the AF of L? No, it was started by some dissidents at the top, but built from the bottom up; that's why it succeeded. If the next set of changes is to work, it will have to be that way also. Otherwise it will amount to just more of the same: big shots telling everyone else what to do.

Perhaps it can't be put to a formal vote of all union members, but the effort has to be made to involve everyone, to find some consensus, before turning the world of labor upside down. The bureaucratic, undemocratic, corporate-oriented history of the AFL-CIO has caused the loss of credibility and faith in the leadership of the house of labor. Those things, too, have to be rebuilt from the bottom up. Dictating the terms from the top, no matter how wisely or sincerely, won't work.

First, campaign among the affiliated unions' members to educate and to get a consensus on what needs to be done and why, then start implementing the changes. Doing otherwise will be a) ineffective and b) an opening for anti-union forces to continue saying "See what Big Labor is doing — forcing members to toe the line." Such statements are certainly totally hypocritical, but as we have seen in the political arena recently, they will sway people. Rebuilding the union movement will have to be a real crusade to be successful.

No amount of "We'll try harder" will significantly improve the labor movement's position in society. That's because, to a large degree, unions and their leaders are working against their own interests, and doing more of what is done now will just make the problems worse. (Imagine a business operating in the red because the cost of production exceeds the product's selling price. Can the firm succeed by trying harder to sell more product?)

2. The AFL-CIO cannot, perhaps, dictate the internal life of member unions. However, it can set standards or goals for internal democracy and publicize them far and wide to assist members of individual unions in changing their own unions to meet those standards. What standards? Direct election of officers, ability to vote on contracts, things like that — ways to be sure that the dues-paying members have effective control of their union.

Heretofore, the record of the AFL-CIO has been miserable. Before and after merger, the AF of L and the CIO and many affiliated unions participated in McCarthyism, weeding out of the leadership at all levels the very people whose energy and dedication built the organizations. Their Cold War orientation caused them to bureaucratize and ossify, eliminating any possibility of change and growth. Internal democracy was mostly a sham. Leaders drew fat salaries, far, far above what their members earned, and they grew distant from the people working and paying dues. They lived lifestyles closer to their corporate adversaries than to their members.

Our present circumstances are the result. Ignoring all of this history, pretending it didn't happen, will solve nothing. Labor's leaders must not only *learn* from the past, but also *show the members* that they have learned. The movement will need this catharsis in order to regain the confidence of the members that any real change is underway. Are the leaders of unions and of the AFL-CIO up to this challenge? Can they take advice as well as give it?

3. Top union leaders have shown in many ways that they are out of touch with their memberships. The leaders have alienated members and driven them away on some issues. I'll make an analogy with the loss of the November election by the Democrats. The Democratic Party has, over the years, taken stands on issues that many people who would otherwise vote Democratic, abhor. A prime example (but not the only one) is Gun Control. Lots of more liberal people identified *other* people's ownership of guns as something that violated their own notions of peace and started pushing for laws restricting firearm ownership.

What was the result? A formerly fairly non-political organization called the National Rifle Association, which was mostly involved in firearms safety, the training of military and police, and promotion of the shooting sports, and which had had members like John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey, had to turn itself into a civil liberties organization to protect an important part of the Bill of Rights. Lots of decent, middle-of-the-road people reacted instinctively to an attack on one of the fundamental liberties of the United States and joined up or actively sympathized.

Something else even more important happened. Since many liberals didn't understand the significance of the issue and didn't join or support the NRA, that organization's membership became made up more of moderates and conservatives, and liberals started viewing it as a conservative organization, even though it had no broad political philosophy and welcomed anyone. As a result, the people who supported the NRA started thinking of themselves as conservative, especially as they were ever more alienated by what they saw coming from the liberal camp. Rejecting the liberal views, because they included gun control, they increasingly listened to the conservatives and started accepting broader conservative ideas. Many people who might have agreed with Democrats on many issues were *driven* into the arms of the Republicans. The espousal of the plank of gun control *caused* much of the polarization from which this country suffers today.

This was reflected in the labor movement, as well. We all saw many, many union members not “voting their paycheck,” as their unions urged them to, but voted based upon reasons that they saw as more fundamental or important. They obviously did not have much confidence in their union leaders, nor in the candidate for whom the leaders urged them to vote. To continue the example, many union leaders had either supported gun control themselves, when high a proportion of their members did not, or blindly ignored the stance of the Democrats on that issue, while still urging members to vote Democrat.

In either case, a new wedge was driven between union members and their leaders. Union leaders must stick to the issues of labor and not try to commit their members to the leaders’ own personal views on other matters. It’s not important how sincerely union leaders hold their views. Too many leaders have forgotten that they are not the union; the members are. What matters is how the members feel about those issues and whether the members feel that they are rational, important and arrived at democratically. If members feel that certain political views are being rammed down their throats, they will look elsewhere for leadership, as many former Democratic voters have done already.

The leaders unions and of the AFL-CIO need to try to undo the damage. As in #2, above, they also need to *show* the members that they have learned. Controversial ideas, no matter how strongly held by a leader, must not be forced onto the members. The unions and the federation will be much better served to bring up such ideas in the union/ federation press, analyze them and encourage all sides to express themselves.

The same sensitivity to the views of the members must be shown with regard to voting recommendations. If a candidate or party sympathizes with the union in some ways, but also holds positions with which large numbers of members disagree, the organization must consider withholding endorsement and letting the members decide for themselves. Ignoring these distinctions will only discredit the leaders in the eyes of the members, and in the long run, will discredit the organizations themselves.

Of course, there are many more changes that unions must make to improve and modernize their functioning, but those listed here are the fundamental and essential changes necessary to unblock growth and make effective political involvement possible.

Bruce A. Clark, Staff Member, PACE Local 8-675, Carson, California

Union affiliation is for identification purposes only. All opinions expressed here are those of the author alone and are not intended to reflect the viewpoints of the local or international unions.