

Labor Debates Its Future

On the heels of the brutal defeat of labor's agenda in the 2004 election as well as two decades of declining union membership, the most far-reaching debate in many years is raging within the labor movement. What is the future of labor? How can the labor movement best confront this crisis of declining power?

A challenge from the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to institute radical reforms in the structure of the AFL-CIO and the labor movement as a whole kicked off the initial firestorm of proposals and counter proposals (see box this page for sources of information on the debate).

More than 20 national unions have joined the discussion with proposals of varying length and complexity. Most address structural and internal issues such as reallocation of resources to organizing, restructuring national unions through mergers and increasing union density in key industries. The debate is a healthy one and a good first step to revitalizing the labor movement.

What's missing though, from each of these proposals, is a concrete strategy that spells out how we get from here to there.

The challenge, however, also led many unions to give careful thought to and analysis of the role of the labor movement beyond these structural issues. Some reminded us that labor has

its greatest success when we define ourselves as a broad social movement, fighting not only to save and secure good paying jobs and expand collective bargaining rights but also to fight for decent education, housing, health care and retirement for all working people.

And, as our opponents continue to paint labor as a "special interest," the American Federation of Teachers warns: "We must speak immediately, consistently and *convincingly* to the values and interests of all working families—union members or not. ... Organized labor is, and must act as, the people's lobby."

Rebuilding Political Strength Is Key

Most unions address the need for labor to rebuild strength in the political arena. Many praise the AFL-CIO's unprecedented mobilization of union and non-union volunteers during the 2004 electoral campaign. Here are some examples that typify the political discussions:

AFSCME "To fight back—and win—working people need more power in our workplaces, our industries, the capital markets and—most of all—in the political process. Building and wielding political power is how we can restore our right to organize, exert more leverage on employers of all kinds, and win lasting victories on issues ranging from raising the minimum wage to providing health care coverage for all Americans, preserving Social Security, improving our public schools and pub-

lic services and making sure that trade agreements protect workers' rights, instead of off-shoring our jobs."

IAM Labor must "use our power to discipline politicians who take organized labor's financial and organizational support and then vote against our members' most basic interests."

UAW "The UAW supports taking a fresh look at labor's political action programs. We think it's important to question some long-standing assumptions as we work to develop new programs and strategies."

APWU "Politics represents the only salvation for furthering the ideals of the American labor movement. Organizing must be viewed as a means to more effective political action. More members without more political clout will not advance the conditions of workers."

SEIU The AFL-CIO should "allocate at least 10 percent more resources to its political member-mobilization fund and

The Debate Continues: A Revitalized Labor Movement Needs a New Vision of Politics

by Mark Dudzic
www.thelaborparty.org

More information and proposals for reform:

www.aflcio.org/
aboutaflcio/ourfuture
www.unitetowin.com

involve members in achieving 1) public policies that help more workers unite with us and 2) other major legislative goals, such as health care and good American jobs, that improve the lives of all workers."

Many of these proposals indicate the need to pursue a larger political vision. The Labor Party agrees. What's missing though, from each of these proposals, is a concrete strategy that spells out how we get from here to there. "None come close to articulating a grand political theme to regain the offensive," says National Organizer Mark Dudzic in the

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Labor Party News Inaugural Issue

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Labor Party News which replaces the Labor Party Press as the official news publication of the Labor Party.

We will continue to bring Labor Party members news and information about our issues and campaigns as well as the Capitol Hill Shop Steward.

The new format allows us to publish more frequently. The Labor Party News will be available as well on our website. For more about our new look, see Mark Dudzic's column on page four.

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Future of Labor

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Labor Party's response to the ongoing debate. "Instead, the proposals take it as a given that labor will continue to operate within the confines of the failed two-party system and that the concerns of working people will continue to be subordinated to the few-and-far-between bones thrown to us by the Democratic Party. ...

"The imperative is clear: we cannot revitalize and expand our labor movement without building an independent politics of labor. There is much that we can do today to build a new politics without abandoning the field of battle or playing the spoiler. To regain the political offensive, the AFL-CIO should include the following in its plan to revitalize the labor movement:

1. Take up issues that speak to the core concerns of all working people. Labor must gain control of the terms of the debate on issues such as the skyrocketing cost of health care, affordable housing and access to a college education. Our positions on these issues must be bold and unambiguous, not shills for any particular candidate or either of the political parties. Labor must present a clear picture of what

politics would look like if it were conducted on behalf of the vast majority of Americans who work for a living.

2. Shift resources to a long-term project to build political independence. Just as labor needs to move resources from servicing current members to organizing new members, so in politics we must begin to invest in our political future. We recognize that substantial resources must continue to fund the defense of daily attacks on our movement. But labor must begin to put money and organization into expansive political projects to allow us to regain the offensive. Labor should start today by allocating at least 20 percent of its political resources to promoting independent politics through well-financed, strategic, issue-based campaigns.

3. Seek out opportunities to run pilot programs and electoral campaigns at a local or regional level. Every two years, nearly 90 percent of all Congressional races are not seriously contested. Politicians who betray or ignore labor are seldom called to task. Once we move out from the swing states, opportunities abound for independent political

initiatives that don't involve playing the political spoiler.

4. Take back politics for our members and for all working people. If we ask our members what they think of politics today, many will tell you that it is nothing more than a corrupt, rich man's game. Workers are crying out for a new political direction and long to stop playing defense. Labor must launch an education and discussion process to speak to more than the crisis imperatives of the next election cycle. Such discussion will help spread a new vision of an energized, vibrant labor movement that is fighting on behalf of all working Americans."

For more on the direction of labor and the Labor Party, see National Organizer Mark Dudzic's column on page four. To read the full Labor Party statement, visit our website. **LP**

Union membership as percentage of workforce:

1954:	35%
1974:	26%
1984:	20.1%
2004:	12.5%

Source: *Corporate Power and the American Dream* and U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Step by Step by Step

Support the Free Higher Education Campaign

Working-class Americans are being priced out of a college education. Tuition is skyrocketing; available financial aid isn't keeping pace, and debt is increasing drastically.

It doesn't have to be this way. Higher education should be available to everyone; it should not be limited by financial considerations. This is the basic and simple idea that underlies the Campaign for Free Higher Education.

More than 70 percent of the union members we've surveyed, from many different regions and occupations, agree that their union should fight for the right to free public college tuition. Campaign activists around the country continue to secure endorsements from academic and labor organizations.

Add your union or organization's voice to the campaign by passing a resolution of support. Here's how: 1) Visit the cam-

campaign website to download a sample resolution and modify it to fit your union's needs; and 2) Let the campaign know about your resolution by using the contact form on the website or mailing a copy to the Labor Party.

Is your union a Labor Party affiliate? Watch your mail for a packet of information including the sample resolution. Website: (www.freehighered.org) **LP**

How to Turn the Tide

Arnold Schwarzenegger stormed into office as California's governor vowing to clean up Sacramento by taking on "special interests." Most Californians thought he meant curbing big business influence. Instead, the governor redefined the term: he spells special interest U-N-I-O-N.

After just one year in office, the governor's pro-business, anti-worker agenda was in full swing. He vetoed all of the Chamber of Commerce's Top Ten "job killer" bills and overall vetoed 33 of 38 bills the business group opposed. The vetoes include a proposed increase in the minimum wage and bills to curb job outsourcing and to protect employee privacy. And, he forced the legislature to overhaul the workers' compensation system and led the campaign against Proposition 72's health care directive.

2005: The Year of Reform

The governor dubbed 2005 the Year of Reform, for which his priorities include: elimination of state public employee pensions (offering 401(k) plans instead to future employees) and implementation of merit pay for teachers. The governor intends to call a special election (likely in November) to bypass the legislature on these priority issues and has set a goal of raising \$50 million to support the initiative campaigns.

No Comment

"It is not the nurses. It is the unions that I'm against."

- Arnold Schwarzenegger, 3/13/05

Going Too Far?

He declared a state of emergency in December to overturn the legal requirement that employers allow workers a lunch break sometime before the sixth hour of their shift. Meal breaks are the focus of a major class-action lawsuit in which Wal-Mart employees charge that their managers routinely deprived them of the breaks.

"He has taken more big corporate special interest money per hour than any governor in California history—now he's trying to take away a law that's already on the books to help Wal-Mart and other large businesses," says Art Pulaski, executive Secretary-Treasurer of the California Federation of Labor. Strong union opposition forced the governor to retreat to non-emergency public hearings on the proposed changes.

"[W]hen he is wrong, you have to confront him and stick to the issue. And you can beat him."

Last November, at the request of the state's multibillion dollar health care industry, he delayed implementation of nurse staffing ratios until 2008. In 1999, California passed the first-of-its-kind law, which required that by 2004 hospitals have one nurse on duty for every six patients. The second phase of the regulation required a one-to-five ratio by January 2005.

When the California Nurses Association (CNA) showed up to protest the emergency decree at a women's conference where Schwarzenegger was speaking, he told the participants, "Pay no attention to those voices over there. ... The special interests



CNA nurses dogged the California governor on a recent cross-country fundraising trek. Here, nurses, joined by teachers, firefighters and other union activists protest outside a DC fundraiser.

don't like me in Sacramento because I am always kicking their butts."

The Tide is Turning

Far from being cowed, nurses went on the offensive. As Rose Ann DeMoro, Executive Director of the 60,000-member CNA responded, "We expect more from the state's top officer than just pre-pubescent comments and blatant pandering to corporate donors." Wherever he goes, nurses in their scrubs are there to protest—marching on the capitol, flying message-trailing planes over his home, picketing his events, and exposing him in newspaper and television ads. CNA sued the governor and won, twice. In March, a Sacramento superior court ruled against delaying implementation of the staffing ratios, ordering hospitals to implement the ratios immediately.

The tide is beginning to turn, and we can thank California's nurses for taking the lead. "There was a sense you didn't want to fight him head-on," Richard Holober of the Consumer Federation of California told the LA Times in

March. "The CNA was not concerned about that. They were concerned about protecting patients. ... They have shown other unions and other opponents of the governor's policies that when he is wrong, you have to confront him and stick to the issue. And you can beat him."

In March, the governor backed away from his pension take-away demand and admitted that his committee to cut regulatory boards had overstepped. And, his approval rating dropped from 65 to 55 percent between September and January according to a Field Poll.

Schwarzenegger hopes to lead a new wave of the right's assault on workers. Instead, he may be an object lesson in how to reverse the tide. **LP**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

www.calmurses.org

www.cft.org

www.calaborfed.org

www.calcsea.org

www.iaff.org

Time of Hope, Time of Opportunity

Mark Dudzic, National Organizer

This past January I attended a conference of activists from the UNITE HERE Midwest region. These folks had been on the front lines in the 2004 elections working the swing states of Ohio, Wisconsin and Michigan. Were they defeated, demoralized and discouraged? Hardly.

Like other committed activists I have spoken to since the election, they want to sum up the lessons learned and move on. They understand that their attempts to organize effectively around the elections were limited by a candidate and party too beholden to corporate interests to provide a serious political alternative for working people. These activists are eager to develop new campaigns around issues—such as health care, economic security and an end to war—where they set the terms of the debate. They are proud of the working class politics they have begun to create and excited about new possibilities now that they are out from under the shadow of a failed national political campaign.

This is a time of hope and opportunity. The 2004 elections mobilized tens of thousands of new activists like those at the UNITE HERE meeting. They engaged in elections work not because of the charisma of their candidate or the purity of his purpose but were motivated instead by a sense of deep crisis and necessity to fight back. The Labor Party can provide the framework to bring them together in a politics of the future.

Now that the elections are over, the debate on the future of the labor movement has taken on a new urgency. This debate, which has spread beyond the confines of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, also creates a window of hope and opportunity. True enough, the massive crisis confronting us is 25 years in the making and will not be resolved easily. But acknowledgment of the crisis and the openness of the current debate and search for solutions are vital to the rebuilding of our movement.

The fates of both the Labor Party and the labor movement as a whole are intertwined in the outcome of these debates. The Labor Party cannot survive and grow when the labor movement is in broad

retreat. Without a strong and expansive labor movement, we cannot expect to regain the political offensive and build an independent working class politics. Likewise, as I argue in my March 5th statement, "The Debate Continues," the future of the labor movement is dependent on the creation of a real party of labor. Labor cannot revitalize itself while trapped in the two-party system. It must be our highest priority to make sure that the debates over labor's future address these issues.



WORKADAY

When the Labor Party's Interim National Council met last December, we discussed how best to take advantage of this period of opportunity. We determined to focus our organizing efforts on the working-class activists newly energized by their election work and to participate fully in the debate about labor's future.

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Those of you who receive our email updates know that we released statements in the past few months on the 2004 elections, the future of the labor movement and the direction of the Democratic Party. Members and non-members alike responded enthusiastically to these ideas and proposals. Activists downloaded the statements and used them to initiate discussions in their unions and organizations. By distributing these statements via the Internet, we reached an audience much broader than our current membership.

We have resolved to make sure that every ounce of our limited resources be applied to the new window of opportunity to build our party and we hope that the Labor Party News reflects this approach. We want to know what you think about these new opportunities and strategies. To that end, I encourage every Labor Party member to respond to our Membership Survey. Watch your mailbox for the survey and take the time to respond. If you would like to comment on the Labor Party News, email news@thelaborparty.org.

www.thelaborparty.org

No Comment

"All kinds of protests, left and right. They're following me. They think I'm going to say 'Oh, my God! There are protests. Maybe I should change my remarks.' ... I don't care. 2005 is the year of reform."
— Arnold Schwarzenegger

"I believe in promoting, publicizing, marketing my ideas and our policies and our recommendations on how to fix the state ... the same way as you do with a movie or any product."
— Arnold Schwarzenegger

"There will be the unions and the special interests fighting us. Now we are going to the source, right there where all the evil is and we are going to fix this problem once and for all."
— Arnold Schwarzenegger

"Schwarzenegger says he can't be bought, but apparently he can be rented."
— Sacramento Bee on the governor's fundraising

For more on Schwarzenegger's assault on workers, see page 3.

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