

After the Conventions: Labor *Still* Needs Independent Politics



James Hoffa, IBT President, announces withdrawal from the AFL-CIO

COURTESY IBT

AFL-CIO nor the Change to Win coalition does that.

The following is a sampling of comments from various leaders of Labor Party-affiliated unions:

Noel Beasley
UNITE-HERE
Midwest Joint Board

“The U.S. trade union movement is not at a crossroads as some may think; actually it is at a fork in the road. The distinction of course is that at a crossroads you have the option of continuing on in the same direction; at a fork in the road, you must choose and change course.

“It’s very important now that progressive union activists,

regardless of their affiliation with one or another federation or union, continue to work together to forge new ways of building the power of work-

ers. Our efforts now should go into articulating a program and building new structures that begin to deliver that program. That inevitably also means dismissing programs and discarding structures that have failed.

“The political alienation of many U.S. workers is based in the demonstrable fact that they

have been betrayed on all sides by most of those elected or selected to lead them. Those of us dedicated to building a movement based on fighting for freedom and equality rather than simply protesting against oppression and disparity have an historic and rare opportunity to escalate the pace of change. The less time we spend dissecting the personalities involved and the more time we spend analyzing and leveraging the forces in play to develop the program the better.”

Baldemar Velasquez
Farm Labor Organizing
Committee

“I’m not sure any of the proposals by either group will radically change anything. The writing has been on the wall for a number of years and people are still talking about cosmetic changes ... No one is talking about how to build a truly international labor movement. I don’t mean merely ‘solidarity’ or ‘support.’ I mean trying to figure out how to create integrated international unions which would operate in ways that reflect the integration of the world economy.

“The real tragedy is that U.S. unions can’t even find ways to coordinate their activities in a single city while the people that they are up against are coordinating operations and pitting



AFL-CIO President John Sweeney addresses the federation's July 2005 convention.

TIM BOYLE/GETTY IMAGES NEWS

workers against each other in dozens of countries at a time. Nothing will really change until unions understand the forces of globalization that are driving outsourcing, privatization and union busting in every country in the world. Our politics must be based on this understanding. It is

Make no mistake about it: the recent split in the AFL-CIO has created plenty of bitterness on both sides. The Change to Win Coalition (Teamsters, Laborers, UNITE HERE, SEIU, UFCW, Carpenters, United Farm Workers) believes it has a bold new vision to revitalize the labor movement by focusing on organizing. The AFL-CIO insists that the solidarity of a united federation is essential to advancing workers concerns and that the differences are not substantive.

What does the split mean for the future of the labor movement? Where do we go from here? What does it mean for independent politics? The unions affiliated with the Labor Party have taken many different positions on these developments. But what brings us together is a call for independent political action – neither the

“The imperative is clear: we cannot revitalize and expand our labor movement without building an independent politics of labor.”

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

Mark Dudzic
www.thelaborparty.org

**Top 10 Problems with the
Current Debate in the Labor
Movement**

Rose Ann DeMoro
www.counterpunch.org/
demoro07212005.html

Change to Win Coalition

www.changetowin.org

AFL-CIO

www.aflcio.org

Labor Party

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 United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America
 United Mine Workers of America
 United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing,
 Energy, Allied-Industrial & Service Workers
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After the Conventions

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far more important to invest in our future and build the strategic alliances that will allow us to confront the corporations on an international scale than it is to worry about who will win the next election.

“Unions can’t be run like corporations. I get really nervous when union leaders start talking about density and market share. We [FLOC] would never have won the Mt. Olive campaign if we thought like that. Once a union takes up a fight, it can never walk away. Our very existence depends on the trust and respect of the people we claim to represent. Once you lose that, you have nothing left.”

Cecil Roberts
*United Mine Workers
 of America*

“This is not the first time this has happened [the UMWA – on two separate occasions – left the labor federation, only to return later]. The AFL-CIO did just fine without us, even though we were the largest union in America at the time. That will be the case in this instance as well.

“But we don’t have time for regrets. The problems confronting America’s working families are too great. We can’t afford to focus our efforts and energy on those who are not here, but on those who are and the promise that we all, standing in solidarity, represent for America’s workers.”

Leo Gerard
United Steelworkers

“We all know what we have to do. We must grow our ranks and our political power. We will make greater progress growing the labor movement when we have more political power, and we’ll have more pro-worker

elected officials – at every level of government – when we’ve organized more workers into unions. Through organizing and through politics, we will make the labor movement stronger than it’s ever been.

“We are sorry to see SEIU, the Teamsters and UFCW leave. They’re weaker without us; we’re all stronger together. Nonetheless, we’ll continue working to strengthen our union and the Federation, to grow our membership, and to build worker power and win real victories for our members, our families and future generations.”

John Gage
*American Federation of
 Government Employees*

“AFGE disagrees with the decision of the two unions to disaffiliate. However, AFGE will not be distracted from our mission to fully represent our members on their very critical issues they face. In the spirit of solidarity, the 54 unions of the AFL-CIO will continue to support us and we will continue to support them in our struggles on behalf of working men and women. At the same time, we will look forward to the day when the two unions reunite with their brothers and sisters in the AFL-CIO.”

Rose Ann DeMoro
*California Nurses
 Association*

“There are no real ideological disputes ... no issues affecting the majority of working Americans are being debated ... and no real solutions are being proposed

“No discussion of non-bureaucratic strategies are on the table – including expanded coalitions with non-labor community, religious and environ-

mental groups; active grassroots education and mobilization campaigns to challenge the corporate/far right agenda; building genuine political independence and holding the Democratic Party accountable to worker and public interests, and serious consideration of – imagine, a labor party for a labor movement.”

Mark Dudzic
Labor Party

“What’s still missing though, from both sides of the split, is the articulation of a grand political theme to regain the offensive. 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.

“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.” **LP**

Bankruptcy: No Good for Your Health

Earlier this year, Congress passed legislation making it more difficult for consumers to file for personal bankruptcy. The Bankruptcy Abuse Prevention and Consumer Protection Act imposes rigid repayment schedules, mandatory credit counseling and a means test which eliminates the opportunity for bankruptcy judges to take individual circumstances into consideration when making a ruling. In addition to being a boon to the banking and credit card industries, the legislation purports to encourage “personal responsibility.”

The “reform” is especially harsh in light of a new study which shows that more than half of the 1.5 million bankruptcy filings in 2001 are due to medical causes. The authors of *Illness and Injury As Contributors to Bankruptcy* surveyed 1,771 personal bankruptcy filers. Of those surveyed, three-fourths had

health insurance when hit by an illness or injury. One-third of those with private insurance lost their coverage during the illness, racking up medical costs averaging \$18,000.

An illness or injury often results in job loss which results in loss of insurance coverage. Clearly, an employment-based health care system compounds the problems leading to medical bankruptcy. *The report is available at www.healthaffairs.org.*

Americans Want Government to Address Health Care Crisis

Given the burden that rising health care costs overall, and increased cost shifting from employer to employee places on working Americans, the results of a recent poll aren't surprising.

Americans rank health care (22 percent) behind only war and foreign policy issues (28 percent) and just ahead of the economy (20 percent) as the most important problem for the government to address according to the July/August Kaiser Health Poll Report tracking survey.

Fewer people name terrorism (9 percent), tax and budget issues (6 percent), education (5 percent) and crime (3 percent) as the most important problem. *More information: www.kff.org*

Impact of Health Care Reform

A recent report by the National Coalition on Health Care – *Impacts of Health Care Reform: Projections of Costs and Savings* – models the impacts of four scenarios for national health system reform.

“In all four scenarios, the cost of a reformed system would be less – much less – than the cost of continuing with the status quo. Even after taking account the costs of assuring universal

coverage, annual system-wide savings would be between \$125 billion and \$182 billion in the tenth year of implementing reform.”

“America can afford health care reform. What we cannot afford is a continued failure to address the crisis in health care,” says Henry E. Simmons, President, National Coalition on Health Care.

The study found that savings from the implementation of national health insurance (similar to the Labor Party's **Just Health Care** plan) would begin in the first year and would be about \$182 billion in 2015. Total savings in the first decade of implementation would exceed \$1.1 trillion. Comparable savings for the other three scenarios range from \$320 to \$369 billion; significant but far less than national health care.

“In sum, a reformed health care system ... would cost our nation much less money than an unreformed system. What should also be clear from this analysis is that a reformed system would produce more value than an unreformed system – by guaranteeing health insurance for all Americans, by increasing the efficiency of the health care sector, and by improving the quality and safety of the care that patients receive.”

Report available: www.nchc.org

1.7 Million Veterans Lack Health Insurance

A Harvard University study found that almost 1.7 million veterans of all wars lack health insurance. This is an increase of 13 percent since 2000. More than one in three veterans under the age of 25 have no health insurance. The report, *America's Neglected Veterans: 1.7 Million Who Served Have No Health Coverage* is available at:

www.pnhp.org

LP

DC LABOR FILMFEST SEPTEMBER 15-21, 2005

Academy Award-winning filmmaker Barbara Kopple will receive the Tony Mazzocchi Labor Arts Award at the upcoming DC Labor FilmFest. Kopple will receive the award at a screening of her 1976 film *Harlan County, USA* which chronicles the struggle of Kentucky coal miners to win union recognition.



Barbara Kopple

COURTESY CABIN CREEK FILMS

Actor and activist Jane Fonda and 9to5 co-founder Karen Nussbaum will attend a 25th anniversary screening of *Nine to Five* – the hilarious caper in which Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Dolly Parton take on their “sexist, egotistical, hypocritical bigot” boss. When they gain control of the office, they implement flex time, day care, equal pay and much more. Fonda and Nussbaum will discuss the impact of the film on the organizing of women office workers around the country.

The festival features the Washington, DC premieres of *Mardi Gras: Made in China* – which tracks the production of Mardi Gras beads from a factory in China to New Orleans – and *The Phantom of the Operator* – a found-footage film documenting the role of the telephone operator in the evolution of the communications industry.

Also featured are *Where Do You Stand? Stories from an American Mill*, *Off to War* and *Maid*s.

For a full schedule of films and events:

www.dclaborfilmfest.org



COURTESY DAVID REDMON

Mardi Gras: Made in China

A Flamethrower in the Rain Forest?

Mark Dudzic, National Organizer

It's always a good idea to read the business press to see what the other side is thinking. These days, they are positively gleeful about the prospects of crushing the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association (AMFA) at Northwest Airlines. This says volumes about the effect of the recent divisions and changes in the labor movement on the lives of ordinary working people.

It appears this strike is shaping up to be another long and bitter battle with a tragic ending. Lured out on strike by a management intent on implementing impossible-to-accept wage and staff cuts, the Northwest mechanics may well have walked into a trap.

AMFA has not been a beacon of solidarity within the labor movement; nor are its leaders known for their brilliant strategic thinking. But this is not news. The past 25 years are rife with examples of boneheaded unions crushed beneath the well-oiled wheels of the corporate/government juggernaut. PATCO is the perfect example: a non-AFL-CIO union run by "brilliant" outside consultants endorses Ronald Reagan in the 1980 elections and then decides to go it alone and take on the U.S. government and airlines.

Given the consequences of that defeat and the orgy of union busting that it ushered in, what could be more boneheaded than the restrained delight of many of the other unions in the airline industry as they watch AMFA get its comeuppance? Surely they know they are next in line for the same treatment. And, like PATCO, the defeat of AMFA will have ripple effects far outside the airline industry.

Already, the business press is trumpeting the well-prepared strike-breaking operations as a model for getting rid of the troublesome "legacy" costs of employees. "[I]f one airline can use a walkout as an opportunity to cut jobs and revamp its operations," reported the New York Times on August 22, "...companies in other industries could do the same. In particular, that could be a threat to the United Auto Workers union, whose leaders are meeting this week to discuss General Motors' bid for lower health care costs in the face of mounting losses."

What does all this have to do with the formal split in the labor movement that took place at this summer's AFL-CIO convention?

Well, first of all, despite statements from both sides that a stronger, more powerful labor movement emerged, the business press has not, in any way, reported the split as "bad" for business. That ought to make any trade unionist nervous.

Secondly, unlike the mass popular uprising that preceded and closely followed the birth of the CIO in the 1930s, the split has not advanced workers' understanding of the practical application of the principle of solidarity. Back then you had the general strikes in Minneapolis and San Francisco and the rubber workers sitting down in Akron. Today, public relations consultants and lawyers shape strategic decisions while laid-off union mechanics willingly scab for the chance of a permanent job paying one third less than they earned previously. As Jack Metzgar observed in *New Labor Forum*, "The CIO was a spark in a California drought whereas what we need today is a flamethrower in a rain forest."

Then there is the "head-in-the-sand" attitude of many activists in the trenches. This point was driven home to me at a conference of local union leaders in northeast Indiana a couple of days after the AFL-CIO convention. Many felt that the divisions at the top had nothing to do with them and wouldn't change the balance of power in their shops. This attitude is as wrongheaded as the AMFA/PATCO go-it-alone attitude. Without a broad-based movement, without a strategic direction and a commitment to solidarity, we are doomed to defeat after defeat. Without it, we are little more than company unions in a dog-eat-dog world.

The real tragedy is that no one is addressing the fundamental question of how we organize and fight *as a class*. And nothing is more fundamental than the political urgency to create a party of our own. Any program that seeks to revitalize the labor movement without raising this issue dooms us to continue to fight with one hand tied behind our backs. Whatever forms and structures the labor movement takes in the upcoming days, we must demand that it take up this project of political independence.

And whatever else happens to our poor, beleaguered union movement, the Labor Party will continue to be a place that brings together activists committed to uniting all working people around a party that fights for their interests.



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LABORPARTY

"It's a good thing President Bush is coming to New Orleans. He needs to spend a couple of nights in the Superdome - he should bring the twins, too!"

- anonymous Louisiana oil worker on learning that Bush would visit Gulf Coast four days after the hurricane hit

As we go to press, the outrageous story of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath is becoming apparent. Adolph Reed, Jr. comments on the political causes in "[Katrina: Nothing Natural About It](#)" at www.thelaborparty.org