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CALL To Discuss the Future of the Labor Movement and Union Organization

In response to a call to debate and discuss how to change the labor movement to build its success and raise standards and opportunities for all workers that has been called upon by various unions, union coalitions and the AFL-CIO, I have drafted what I believe are fundamental questions for discussion on how to build the labor movement to bring more light to this process and how we do our work.

These questions that need to be addressed go beyond the specific questions about how to strengthen our state and federal labor bodies which President John Sweeney has requested for the upcoming AFL-CIO Convention next July, I think they even go beyond the type of questions that the unions threatening to leave the AFL-CIO are raising if change does not come. I believe that there are many fundamental questions that need to be asked and answered first before we can decide what to do and where to put future resources. Below are a few of them and my thoughts as a veteran of the labor movement. As there are many criticisms I must certainly agree to share in any blame that is generated from this document. I currently am a delegate to the Albany County Central Federation of Labor, VP of the Capital District Area Labor Federation, member of CWA Local #1104 and Coordinator of the Capital District WORKER Center.

Submitted by Fred Pfeiffer.

First as it is accelerating the debate- Why are the New Unity Partnership (NUP) Unions threatening to pull out of the AFL-CIO? Is there another way forward?

Central to their demand is a critique that the AFL-CIO has not done enough to wage successful change and campaigns in the labor movement to organize new workers. They also accuse the AFL-CIO of going too slow in merging unions and creating industry power by allowing industry wide jurisdiction in order to develop market share and influence in each area in order to improve

workers standards. They call for even more resources to be put into organizing.

The amount of money being spent on organizing has increased but have the results been worth the investment? Often organizing is done in a top down fashion and local union members and even locals do not have any say in how the money is spent. As a result many campaigns fail because the local conditions are not ripe. This money in many respects is wasted and spent inefficiently.

Along with bold leadership such as that of the NUP and other unions there needs to be bottom up input in how most effectively to utilize these resources which come from members dues. Finally, the members must be involved in the organizing campaigns from the beginning not just as an after thought.

In terms of industry wide organizing- The members have a right to be consulted before they are turned over to another Internationals. There are many factors that need to be considered before this happens- potential of desertification on joining another International to name one and many other local factors. It is possible that coordinated bargaining as the G.E. bargaining has been conducted historically is another avenue for success in an industry if all the unions cannot be merged. Coordinated bargaining between unions could be a viable first step in mergers. Coordinated lobbying in government funded programs can be another avenue that has already been done in NYS for education dollars in May of 2003.

The NUP has made a valid point that we are in a crisis. Is threatening to divide our fragile unity the solution when many strategies have not been exhausted and firmer internal leadership and democracy could be summoned?

Should these unions really pull out if their demands aren't met? Is this tactic the best way to make their point?

This is a drastic tactic that if implemented could result in disunity including raiding and a further decline in the movement due to infighting and blood letting which will surely be taken advantage of by corporate power and the right wing. Also there would be massive demoralization among union members. Although the unions in the NUP are some of the most innovative and progressive (including SEIU, LIUNA, the Carpenters and UNITEHERE) and positioned in cutting edge industries can they also claim not to be part of the problem? We would need to ascertain if they have been successful to answer this question.

Although they have led innovative change and conducted organizing campaigns that has gained membership they cannot claim to be successful on just this one potentially short term criteria and basis. Numbers can rise and fall dramatically based on changes in the economy and industry. (This is not meant to minimize the important gains workers have gained when organizing campaigns in industries and major urban areas have been won which we all celebrate.)

In order to judge their long term success and ability to adjust to the needs of union members and unorganized workers I think it is useful to answer questions that point to a criteria of success from an objective yet partisan union member/ wage workers' point of view as well as from a long range perspective. The ability to lead and grow is connected to the answer to these questions that if agreed upon need to be incorporated into our work. These are important questions to ask whose answers should shape our movement. I have suggested answers, which of course are subject to debate also.

What is the purpose of the labor movement and its unions?

To move workers out of poverty and keep them out of poverty should be the number one goal. To measure how to do this we must answer the question "What is best for the Workers?" repeatedly as a litmus test and starting point for discussion.

What is the relationship of the labor movement and its unions to the economy?

The economy should work for the good of all workers. Unions should fight to make it so. Private corporate power and the priority of the rights of their capital and property must be adjusted in terms of the greater good for working families. Future generations must be included, therefore the economic plans must be sustainable and protect resources and the environment. Therefore we should be opposing corporate abuse of power everywhere and replacing the corporate vision with our vision. This includes short term vision and long term vision.

For example, corporations and their corporate charters should not have rights superceding those of citizens. Investment by the Government and venture capital in new industries must be regulated to insure that local jobs are produced in an efficient cost ratio to government supports and that the industry is viable for the long term. To support any project at citizen expense invites failure as business assumes no risk. Labor needs to be a genuine

partner at the table from the beginning of any project and worker rights need to be written into any work plan. Disadvantaged workers even those not yet organized need to be included in the development of job opportunities for our poorest wage earners. Labor needs to speak for them as well as protecting current members.

In order to be effective in regional economies unions need to have the autonomy to act locally. They need to develop a local vision seasoned with the national experience as to what economic outcome they desire for their communities. Monolithic control of a national or even statewide industry will not necessarily serve every area or area spin off or sub industries which employ many workers. Further a section of the economy should be protected and remain regional and traditional to protect our roots and skill level.

What is the relationship of the labor movement to the rest of society?

Workers organizations must fight for social justice and equity in the system and for the expansion of civil rights to encompass everyone's uniqueness and human rights. At the same time every person has the responsibility to work for a better future. Unions should be following the work to organize new workers into the movement and let their knowledge and contribution help the movement grow. Unions should be leading the movement not just protecting their existing structure/s. A good example is the debate over national healthcare. If a national system could be developed that was better for workers then all unions should fight for it. Even though a union had a successful health and welfare fund that might be in jeopardy in the face of a national plan, they ought to support a plan which benefits all of labor and protects their standards if they are higher.

When a battle is won such as access to healthcare or raising the minimum wage or electing a responsive representative, the labor movement should go out and organize people affected/ benefited into community organizations and unions where possible. Traditional methods of organizing i.e. contracts need to be expanded to area standards associations for childcare providers as CSEA is doing or Downtown Unionization as is being done in Montpelier, Vt. for example. PLA's are another.

With the answers to these questions giving us some direction what are some of our goals- short term and long-term?

Short term:

Involve all union members and workers who want to be involved in the discussion on the future of the labor movement.

Focus on the entire community and assess their needs for jobs, housing, living wages, human rights and develop action programs to make gains politically, economically and to increase rights and opportunity. Fight for reliable studies and recommendations.

Organize and protect workers and their unions in current struggles.

Educate our members to the importance of fighting for all working people not just protecting the gains we have made for union members as in current battle for NYS minimum wage increase.

Fight for decent jobs or income now for all workers. If a worker is willing to work they should be entitled to a job at living wages. Jobs need to be created to improve the environment etc and educational opportunities should be provided at no or low cost by government and industry.

Long term:

Elect leaders who will fight for our rights and empowerment.

Develop a labor media accessible to all workers.

Educate a new generation of worker scholars who understand the partisan nature of our philosophy and the fact that corporate property rights need to be regulated and excessive wealth should be used for good of society. If there is great economic disparity created by the economy it must be equalized by shifting income from the few at the top to the majority of workers on the bottom. A successful economy does not create a few winners and a majority of losers.

Promote internationalism and bring end to all war as it squanders our resources.

Save the environment and allow future generations their opportunity.

Build a sustainable economy that benefits all workers.

Besides the present leadership, who should be involved in the discussion of where we need to go to reach our goals?

Obviously all the stewards, officers and interested rank and file should be summoned. We need to be honest as to our predicament and to the challenges facing us. We need to listen to the workers issues even if it means changing policies to give them power and influence in our decisions. We need to approach non-affiliated independent unions also. We should find a way to involve our community supporters even if they are not union members. The future of the labor movement affects us all.

What type of program do we need to get us there?

Besides shoring up the strength of our present unions and their membership, we need to entrench ourselves in our communities and get union members involved in all aspects of the policy and decision making affecting our lives. We need to seize the morality of our issue/s and involve community organizations and faith institutions recognizing their contribution to sustaining the community and at the same time challenging them to exercise a morality and call for social and economic justice locally and nationally. This type of outreach will enable us to develop contacts with workers in all walks of life.

While we include new constituents we need to fight local actions that produce results and give working people's hopes and dreams that they can realize in their future. We must therefore be present at meetings that affect our cities, school and communities and exercise our right to speak in favor of policies that will help workers and their children. Tax issues, housing issues, public access to media issues, healthcare access, rights of the elderly, the disabled, immigrants to name a few must be addressed. If we took care of each other there would be many jobs and opportunities. This is the arena for local Labor Councils and their delegates to be involved.

While we are working on these programs we need to remind the community that the reason we have the resources to get involved is because our unions have organized members to gain rights and improve standards in their industries. This helps all workers standards. Our members dues and volunteerism allows us to be proactive and support our communities and that they as workers themselves they need to consider joining a union and the labor movement.

We must examine the present organization of the unions and the schism between elected officers, staffers and members, how do we resolve the contradictions that some get pay and other perks for fighting the boss and others get better contracts (sometimes) for fighting the boss? In other words how do we eliminate the "them and us" on the labor side of the table?

We have to walk the walk of workers if we are to march together. Our unions need to look at the salary structure of the top leadership and give up any excessive salaries and perks that separate them from the people they represent. The paid staff must be allowed to have unions and to have time to be involved in their communities. Paid staff must understand that their standards cannot be that far ahead of the workers they represent. They will be more effective for the workers if they are involved in their community as

they will have leads and credibility for organizing and contract campaigns. Union members need to have the first opportunity to be hired as staff. We must live near the people we represent and see them in the streets. Many of the union leaders do so but we need to focus on the importance of this presence. Solidarity with our community should be our guiding principle. The amount of dues going to the International appears from the perspective of many local unions to be excessive. The Internationals should be open about the money they take in and how it is utilized to prove to local bodies that it is well spent. The money should either stay in our communities by allowing local unions to retain more of the dues and/or by developing programs that send money and organizing into the community. Local autonomy should be preserved as long as the organization is living up to an agreed upon program as recommended and developed both locally and nationally. Money could be awarded through grant programs to support community organizing.

Dues should be looked at in terms of whether low wage workers can afford their dues structure. If not then the structure must be changed to reflect the reality. A worker making low wages in a unionized industry should not have to pay dues that hurt them. A worker making 8-10 dollars an hour cannot afford \$30 to \$40 dollar an month in dues as is common. A direct associate member program needs to be developed and marketed. This would provide basic legal and communications and organizing assistance to non-union workers. Perhaps this could be organized through Worker Centers in every community as we have begun here in the Capital District.

What type of organization do we need to get there?

We need area institutions that allow access to union delegates with the emphasis on inclusion- affiliated bodies, local unions, should have access to the organization and meetings with full voting rights. The number of affiliated bodies should be expanded. These local congresses should both respect minority rights as well as consider the density of unionized workers in area industries. The emphasis should however be on bringing those into the movement who are not there, not only protecting the standards of those workers who have already gained through organization.

We need to develop more outreach teams to go out and meet with interested groups and explain to them our structure, find out their goals and work to include them in our organization if they so desire to get involved. Our local movement must be autonomous but link to the national struggle and

leadership through a formal but equitable governing structure for national input and leadership.

Why is this discussion so important and urgent?

According to Yogi Berra, “The future ain’t what it used to be”. Unless we realize our role in influencing the present and future sustainability of the world and the progress of civilization, the respect for the rights of each citizen will be undermined and ultimately our dreams and aspirations much reduced including the possibility of there being only enough for an elite with the have nots suffering immensely as we see in many under developed countries on the global scale.

Finally, is there an answer to the first question?

Based on the above policy arguments, I believe that the AFL-CIO should open its doors to the entire labor movement and our supporters in the community to address all these issues in order to enrich the dialogue and avoid a split in labor. Only if the above questions are addressed can we come to agreement for instituting a new reform that both follows good leadership and is at the same time bottom up in nature. It must be one which fundamentally transforms union structures from the restraints on a labor movement caught up in a labor law that protects corporate power and greed. A labor law that does not recognize our rights as workers over the corporate forces of productions and does not regulate wealth for the good of all. The method of bargaining contract by contract approach to building the labor movement bargaining unit by bargaining unit does not work alone. Added emphasis on community and industry standards needs to be taken up with flexible organizing approaches. Fighting the contract fight although important and essential in protecting our small base among workers will only protect this beachhead at best and at worst will result in a further decline in the labor movement.

I would suggest that a call for an open forum asking for local discussion and debate incorporating the above questions and potential answers to our dilemma in a spirit of inclusion be sent out. To involve area union members and supporters in a spirit of unity and frank appraisal of our situation would be productive. A report on our discussion could be issued and presented to the national AFL-CIO. This report could be developed into a plan and resolution to be presented in July at the AFL-CIO Annual Convention. We need to act now to maximize potential changes and accelerate the necessary

reforms while building unity within the labor movement and avoiding a split that could actually push the labor movement and worker standards backwards.