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GROUND LEVEL COVERAGE OF CAMPAIGN '08

Labor's Self-Inflicted Wounds Threaten Progressive Movement

By Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele

Just as we are on the precipice of a major political realignment, a possible resurgence of progressive politics in Washington, the backbone of that movement -- organized labor -- is engaged in a self-destructive internal battle. This could not only undermine efforts to revive the labor movement, but also hurt chances of electing a liberal Democrat to the White House and then expanding a progressive Democratic majority in Congress. It could also threaten progressive's ability to mobilize the grassroots political clout that will be needed to pass health care reform, end the war in Iraq, address global warming, reduce poverty, and ironically - to pass labor law reform.

Just this week, violence broke out at a union conference in Michigan when members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) - the nation's largest labor organization - attempted to protest a scheduled speech by the president of the California Nurses Association (CNA). The two unions have been attacking each other vociferously for months, each organization claiming that the other was at fault for one or another transgression, and in recent weeks the war has escalated out of control.

Regardless of who is at fault - both organizations claim the other has interfered to disrupt organizing drives - the fighting among these two dynamic workers organizations has to stop. There is only one result that is predictable if the conflict continues - hostile employers and right wing forces in general will benefit.

Throughout the course of U.S. labor history, bloody battles have occurred between intransigent employers and workers who have tried to organize to improve their lives. Corporations once used hired guns to thwart workers' rights. But in recent years big business has used lawyers and consultants to help them fire workers for participating in organizing drives and have threatened to close workplaces if employees unionize. Indeed, keeping American workplaces "union-free" has evolved into a billion dollar industry.

But there have also been critical moments when unions have fought one another. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was formed in 1935 from a split with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), when legendary Mineworkers leader John L. Lewis led the effort to establish a separate organization dedicated to organizing workers in the industrial sector of the American economy. The CIO helped usher in a dramatic wave of successful union organizing.

During the Cold War of the 1950s, the labor movement was divided by ideology and power struggles, when the major union federations ousted unions led by radicals, a split that business groups encouraged. In the California grape fields, the United Farm Workers and Teamsters fought over the right to organize farmworkers in the 1960s. Two years ago, a number of the nation's largest unions -- including SEIU, the Teamsters, the United Food and Commercial Workers, UNITE HERE, and others -- split from the AFL-CIO to form the Change to Win coalition, critical of other unions' failure to invest more resources into organizing the unorganized workforce. And in Los Angeles, two unions representing actors and radio artists are currently at odds over several issues as critical negotiations have just begun with powerful Hollywood producers.

Some labor historians have argued that competition among labor groups can be beneficial - by pushing unions to find innovative ways to organize the unorganized - but the current fights are mainly self-destructive. For example, both SEIU and CNA are in many cases attempting to represent the same workers at the same health care facilities. Unions should be spending their time, money and energy organizing the 89 percent of American workers who are unorganized rather than fighting each other.

Ironically, organized labor's self-inflicted wounds are taking place just as the movement was resurging. Last year, for the first time in decades, the proportion of American workers in unions increased. A number of unions have been creative in winning organizing drives in places and industries that some thought would never see a labor victory -- such as janitors in Houston. In Los Angeles, carwash workers - some of the most exploited people in the country - have recently turned to organized labor for help.

Ironically, the confrontation between SEIU and CNA has occurred just as Los Angeles' growing labor movement was putting on a show of strength. This week it sponsored a three-day 28-mile march from Hollywood to the shipping docks in San Pedro, weaving across the city, to unite its diverse unions and its allies among community groups, clergy, and environmentalists.

Over the next few months, 30 unions with close to 400,000 members will be negotiating new contracts. Under the leadership of Maria Elena Durazo, the charismatic head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, these unions are mobilizing public support for their contract talks, calling it a "fight for good jobs." Actors, nurses, hotel workers, janitors, garment workers, truck drivers, security guards, school teachers and other union members have joined forces to highlight the centrality of the labor

movement to restoring the key components of the middle class -- secure and well-paying jobs, health insurance, decent housing, and the ability to save to send children to college, take a yearly vacation, and retire with dignity.

Indeed, for over a decade, Los Angeles has been a bright spot among organized labor. Los Angeles unions have been adding members, building bridges between ethnic and racial groups, and exercising their political muscle to help elect pro-labor candidates in City Hall, the state legislature and Congress. The Los Angeles labor movement has found strength, energy and a new generation of leaders, many of them immigrants. It has renewed the concept of "social unionism" by reaching out to groups concerned about affordable housing, public schools, immigrants' rights, women's rights, and the environment. In one of its most creative efforts, the Campaign for Clean and Safe Ports, the Teamsters union has joined environmentalists, religious leaders, community activists and civil rights leaders to push for fundamental changes in the way the movement of goods is conducted in LA and Long Beach, the nation's largest port and the biggest source of pollution in the region. If the campaign is successful, the air will be cleaner, the port will be safer, and the truck drivers will gain wages and benefits that will dramatically improve their lives.

The rest of the labor movement needs to learn from the Los Angeles approach. In the next decade, organized labor as a social, political and economic force will either grow or die. Today, union's collective bargaining agreements play a less important role in the United States than in other affluent nations. Only France, with 10% of its workers represented by unions, ranks lower than the United States (11%) among industrialized nations in the density of union membership.

In the 1950s, unions represented more than one-third of all U.S. workers. The decline of union membership, which accelerated starting in the 1970s, coincided with the upsurge of Big Business and the Religious Right, the network of right-wing think tanks, TV and radio shows, newspapers and magazines, and the GOP takeover of Congress and many state governments. Over the past 30 years, we've seen a protracted battle over women's rights, environmental regulations, workplace safety, housing reform, health care, militarism, and the widening gap between the rich and the rest.

Countries that were behind the US on measures of economic and social well-being have now surpassed us. For example, Americans work more hours each year than employees in Canada, Western Europe, Japan, or Australia. In 2004, the most recent data collected by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), employed Americans worked an average of 1,824 hours annually, compared with 1,816 in Australia, 1,789 hours in Japan, 1,751 hours in Canada, 1,669 in England, 1,585 in Sweden, 1,443 in Germany, 1,441 in France, and 1,363 in Norway.

Unlike every other affluent country, the U.S. has no statutory minimum vacation policy. As a result, American workers spend fewer weeks on vacation than workers elsewhere. Most countries mandate that workers get at least four weeks of paid vacation a year. France, Austria, Denmark and Sweden require five weeks.

And we know that the U.S. is the only country without a system of universal health insurance. It is also the only country without mandated paid maternity leave. We spend less on job training, child care, and affordable housing, and much more on prisons, than other well-off nations. Our workplace safety laws are weak and poorly-enforced compared with elsewhere. The U.S. also has the widest gap between rich and poor and the highest poverty rate among developed nations.

The weakness of the American labor movement, compared to its counterparts in other affluent, democratic societies, accounts for many of these disparities. But Americans are not generally anti-union. A recent poll found that 58 percent of non-managerial workers would join a union if they could. But they won't vote for a union, much less participate openly in an organizing drive, if they fear losing their jobs for doing so. That's why the next President and Congress needs to make reform of our nation's outdated and pro-management labor laws a top priority.

Organized labor still has a significant capacity to mobilize both money and members to influence the outcome of elections. Union members are more likely to vote, more likely to vote for Democrats, and more likely to volunteer for campaigns than people with similar demographic and job characteristics who are not unionized. In the 2004 presidential election, union members represented 12 percent of all workers but union households represented 24 percent of all voters. Despite John Kerry's tepid campaign and upper-crust demeanor, union members gave him 61 percent of their votes over George W. Bush. In the battleground states, where unions focused their turnout efforts, they did even better. In Ohio, for example, union members favored Kerry by a 67 to 31 percent margin.

When voters' loyalties were divided between their economic interests and other concerns, union membership was a crucial determinant of their votes. For example, gun owners favored Bush by a 63 to 36 percent margin, but union members who own guns supported Kerry 55 percent to 43 percent, according to an AFL-CIO survey. Bush carried all weekly church-goers by a 61 to 39 percent margin, but Kerry won among union members who attend church weekly by a 55 to 43 percent split. Among white males, a group that Democrats have had difficulty attracting in recent Presidential elections, Bush won by a 62 to 37 percent margin. But again, Kerry carried white males who were union members by a 59 to 38 percent difference. Bush won among white women by 55 to 44 percent but Kerry won white women union members by 67 percent to 32 percent.

The prospects for a progressive resurgence haven't looked brighter since the 1960s. In the political arena, the labor movement is expected to form the backbone of the Democratic Party's efforts to take the White House and expand its majority in Congress in November. Unions, with more trained organizers and rank-and-file activists than the rest of the progressive movement together, have been poised to send their troops, and their funds, to Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, Florida, Colorado, Minnesota and other battleground states to register voters and get them to the polls on election day.

The upcoming election will be the most important in memory. But will the labor movement be able to marshal its potential resources to bring about "regime change" in Washington? A few months ago, the answer seemed to be yes. But now the situation is cloudier.

There's room for disagreement about how the labor movement should change its structure to accommodate the transformation of the economy and business. But in addition to honest disagreements among labor activists about how to move forward, there are also unnecessary turf wars and ideological splits, what Freud called the "narcissism of small differences." While labor engages in these internal fights, Republicans and their allies among Big Business and the Religious Right -- who until recently

anticipated major setbacks in this election season -- are coalescing around McCain.

It's bad enough that the two remaining contenders for the Democratic Party's Presidential nomination are attacking each other, giving presumptive Republican nominee John McCain ammunition to increase his chance for victory in November. But when unions -- the institutions that provide the most effective ground troops and other resources for Democratic candidates, progressive legislation, and building a movement for change -- are also at each others' throats, Republicans and corporate America can only sit back and smile.

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