

“Change to Win” labor fed collapses

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A few years back, many labor “radicals” pinned their hopes on the new “Change to Win” labor federation, which promised to step up organizing and build a more powerful labor movement based on sectoral unions. Today, Change to Win is in ruins, and the piecards are fighting over the remains.

As we noted in *ASR 37*, there was never anything remotely democratic – let alone revolutionary – about the new set-up. The bulk of the new federation’s “organizing” was through cooperative deals where employers specified in advance which operations the unions would be given representation rights at, and what (if anything) workers would get. Much more money was spent on politicians than on organizing, and none of the new federation’s unions were internally democratic. This was, at root, a split based on bureaucratic maneuvering and titles, not strategic vision.

As Change to Win was forming, UNITE (textile workers) and HERE (hotel and restaurant) merged to form a new union that had nothing to do with the heralded sectoral strategy, but rather was a marriage of convenience between one set of union bureaucrats controlling a great deal of money and many functionaries but few members, and HERE, which had members and organizing campaigns but little money. When HERE elements recently took control of the union, UNITE HERE president Bruce Raynor decided to annul the merger and take the assets (a bank, benefit funds, buildings, etc.) with him. The Service Employees sought to capitalize on the break-up, setting up an interim Workers United to amalgamate UNITE Joint Board-controlled locals into SEIU. (Raynor resigned just as the union was removing him from office, and joined the SEIU staff as “president” of Workers United.) The whole operation is now in disarray with both sides fighting over who controls which contracts and which dues streams. Employers are taking advantage of the situation to stall on bargaining, and stop collecting union dues through the check-off. Jurisdictional disputes, raids and law suits are on the horizon as far as the eye can see. (But at least some publications are benefitting in this difficult media economy from full-page ads taken out by SEIU urging readers to lean on UNITE HERE to accept their offer to let it keep \$50 million of the union’s funds and divvy up the members through binding arbitration.)

SEIU faces its own internal strife as a result of its take-over of its West Coast healthcare affiliate, leading the former officials to launch an independent union that promises democracy (not that the officials were great champions of rank-and-file unionism before they came up against the Stern machine). In response, SEIU cut a deal with the California Nurses Association (which

recently merged with the United American Nurses and joined the AFL-CIO) to end their bitter war and divide up the hospital workforce. (*Many of the workers traded in the deal are outraged.*) The United Food and Commercial Workers is struggling to hold on to its existing members, and has no strategy for organizing new ones. Of the CTW affiliates, only the Laborers are in decent shape.

Change to Win and AFL-CIO officials are now meeting with the independent National Education Association (which never belonged to either) about (re) uniting, though thus far the AFL-CIO is insisting that Change to Win come back with their tails between their legs, refusing even token concessions to the breakaway bureaucrats.

UPDATE: In These Times reports that the United Food and Commercial Workers (whose president heads CtW) are in the process of returning to the AFL-CIO fold, which would leave just SEIU, the Teamsters and the United Farm Workers (a husk of its former self) in Change to Win.

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