

For Unions, A Time of Opportunity And Worry

Obama to Address AFL-CIO as Labor Faces Its Divisions

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PITTSBURGH -- When President Obama arrives here Tuesday to address the AFL-CIO's convention, he will find a labor movement eager for the opportunity his election presented -- and yet still consumed with divisions that threaten to distract from its agenda.

It was four years ago that the Service Employees International Union, the fastest-growing major union, and a handful of others broke away from the AFL-CIO, declaring that the federation had grown complacent and was too focused on preserving the gains of existing members instead of the organizing needed to reverse labor's decline. It was a blow to unity and a personal drama, given that the SEIU's ambitious leader, Andy Stern, was challenging his mentor, AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney. But many labor supporters hoped that Stern might lead a real rejuvenation.

Four years later, it is unclear what was gained from the formation of Change to Win, the new coalition. The unionized share of the private-sector workforce has kept falling, to 7.5 percent, down from one-third in the 1950s. The SEIU has grown, but some of its gains were the result of political deals with leaders like former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich. Change to Win was helpful in electing Obama, but no more so than the AFL-CIO, which played a decisive role in key Rust Belt states.

Meanwhile, the SEIU has had to spend heavily in a territorial fight with a Northern California local, which broke away last year, and it has raised eyebrows across the labor movement by becoming involved in the vicious civil war within the hotel and garment workers union, which belongs to Change to Win. And both coalitions face money troubles that limit their ability to promote Obama's agenda.

All this has left leaders in both coalitions wondering about the wisdom of the division and looking to patch things up before the moment slips away.

"There was no good reason for them to disaffiliate," Sweeney said.

Sal Rosselli, the leader of the breakaway SEIU local in California and who is in Pittsburgh to raise money from AFL-CIO unions for his battle with Stern, was more blunt. "It's been a fiasco," he said of Stern's Change to Win foray. "The leaders didn't walk the talk. They didn't mobilize workers. Instead, they tried to do these top-

down deals that had the opposite effect."

And Richard Trumka, the third-generation coal miner who takes over the AFL-CIO's helm this week after 14 years at Sweeney's side, was critical of the SEIU's effort to grab thousands of new members from the split of the hotel and garment workers union. "Every time you have raiding, it's a zero-sum game," he said. "At the end of the day, you spend precious resources and come out with the same number of members."

Stern declined to be interviewed about the split this week, instead releasing a statement praising Sweeney and Trumka. Officials with both coalitions noted that for all the strife, they have been working toward the same goals: universal health care and legislation making it easier to organize workers.

But there have been strategic differences, including over Stern's recent announcement that his union had persuaded Wal-Mart to support an employer mandate for health insurance coverage. As Trumka sees it, Wal-Mart is company non grata until it lets its workers organize.

"Them coming out and giving lip service to a health-care plan and still denying all of their members the right to belong to [a union] makes us wary," he said.

SEIU spokeswoman Michelle Ringuette said, "We would in no way couch our support of Wal-Mart's [health care stance] to give cover for the way they treat their workers."

What form reunification might take is unclear. Former Michigan congressman David Bonior presided over discussions this spring among the two federations and the National Education Association, which is independent. There is talk of creating an entity like the United Nations Security Council, with large unions holding permanent leadership seats and smaller unions rotating in and out. But this would be hard to sell to smaller unions and would leave the question of whether Stern would consent to taking a back seat to Trumka and the AFL-CIO unions that would dominate.

"Have there been differences? Yes," Bonior said. "Are they insurmountable? I don't think so."

The reunification may happen bit by bit. The carpenters union recently announced that it had left Change to Win, and several others, including the Teamsters, have been eyeing a return to the AFL-CIO. Terry O'Sullivan, head of the Laborers' International Union, which is part of Change to Win, said he believed it was time to reunite.

"We've had eight years of torture and hell with the administration of George W. Bush, and now we have a president that looks like us and thinks like us with a history of fighting for working families, with Democratic control of Congress," he said. "This is an opportunity of a lifetime, and we need to speak for the American labor movement with one voice. We don't want to miss an opportunity like this."

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