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Infighting Distracts Unions at Crucial Time

By [STEVEN GREENHOUSE](#)

WASHINGTON — With their allies controlling the White House and Congress, the nation's labor unions should be making hay. Instead many unions are making war — largely with one another — in the biggest, nastiest surge of labor fratricide in decades.

With some union leaders condemning other leaders as dictators and Darth Vaders, business leaders are smiling. Every million spent by unions to bash one another depletes their coffers for battling corporate America and Republican political candidates.

“The other side doesn't have to take any shots at us,” said Amy B. Dean, a longtime union leader and an author of a new book on reinvigorating organized labor. “We're killing ourselves.”

Many union officials acknowledge that the infighting is undercutting two of labor's biggest objectives: having Congress enact pro-union legislation and organizing millions more workers to reverse labor's long decline.

“They need a united front when they go to Congress to get pro-union legislation through,” said Charles B. Craver, a labor law professor at [George Washington University](#). “If they miss that opportunity, it will be a very sad day for organized labor because they might not see an opportunity like that again for years.”

For the most part, the battles don't involve grand philosophical differences, as many labor union disputes have in the past. Instead, they often reflect power struggles, with some unions jockeying to take others' members at a time when unions are having a hard time gaining members at companies that are not organized.

The [Service Employees International Union](#), union officials say, recently spent millions of dollars in California on organizers and a phone and mail campaign — in one fight to

discourage workers from joining a rival health care union, and in another to urge hotel workers to quit their union and join the service employees.

“All this helps us only because it has to be a distraction within union ranks,” said Randel K. Johnson, senior vice president for labor, [immigration](#) and employee benefits at the United States Chamber of Commerce. “And that means they pay less attention to what’s happening on Capitol Hill.”

Despite the internal strife, some union presidents say labor is sticking together where it counts: pushing for universal health coverage, a robust [stimulus plan](#), immigration reform and the card check legislation that would make unionizing easier.

“If you look at the big issues facing labor, I think there’s a large amount of unity,” said [Andrew L. Stern](#), president of the Service Employees International Union, which is involved in much of the infighting.

But labor’s No. 1 legislative goal, the card check bill, remains stalled because unions have failed to muster the 60 Senate votes to overcome a [filibuster](#).

Several moderate Democrats have voiced opposition because the bill would make it far easier for workers to join unions without an election. The bill would require employers to recognize a union as soon as a majority of workers signed cards saying they wanted one.

“When you go up to lobby on the Hill,” said Gerald W. McEntee, president of the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#), “some people there are asking, ‘What are these unions fighting about, and if you can’t get your own house in order, why are you asking us to go out on a limb and support card check?’ ”

And on health care, unions fear that a provision they deplore — taxing employer-provided health benefits — will be enacted to help finance universal coverage.

The feuding has taken many forms: intraunion, between unions and by several unions joining forces against another union.

For instance, five years after the nation’s main apparel union merged with the hotel and restaurant employees’ union, the combined union, Unite Here, erupted into a civil war. The apparel workers’ president, Bruce S. Raynor, declared the merger a failure and asked for a divorce, saying “we can’t be held captive by a bunch of thugs.” The merger was supposed to produce more organizing, but he complained that it was producing less, despite stepped-up spending on organizing.

Opposing the divorce, the head of the hotel workers' side, John W. Wilhelm, insisted that the merger was a success and lambasted Mr. Raynor, asserting he wanted to undo the merger because he was a dictator who was losing a power struggle.

With Mr. Wilhelm blocking a split, more than 100,000 members of Unite Here broke away and merged into the Service Employees International Union. Soon the service employees were spending millions to persuade members of Unite Here to quit and join them. And soon after that, Mr. Wilhelm was accusing the service employees of a heinous labor sin, raiding another union to steal members.

"The S.E.I.U. is trying to hijack our union," Mr. Wilhelm said. At the Unite Here convention last week, Mr. McEntee denounced the service employees for "piracy," and Vincent J. Giblin, president of the operating engineers, called Mr. Stern, of the service union, the "Darth Vader of the labor movement."

Anger has been running high against Mr. Stern since 2005, when he precipitated a schism and half a dozen unions quit the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), accusing it of being stodgy and ineffectual. Those unions created the rival [Change to Win](#) federation, but nowadays that group is largely paralyzed because several of its member unions are raiding and denouncing one another.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. has internal tensions of its own. R. Thomas Buffenbarger, president of the machinists' union, recently issued a report that accused that federation of undisciplined spending and creative accounting. In 2000, the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s net assets were \$45 million, but last year, its liabilities exceeded its assets by \$2.3 million.

Late last year, several union presidents began a delicate effort to reunify the movement. But that effort has nearly ground to a halt, its momentum slowed by the intralabor nastiness, anger at Mr. Stern and other factors.

"Every division in the labor movement seems to have Andy Stern's fingerprints on it," said Leo W. Gerard, president of the [United Steelworkers](#). "Andy ought to start working for unity and not division."

Mr. Stern is also engaged in an all-out battle with Sal Rosselli, the former president of a union local representing 140,000 health care workers in Northern California. After Mr. Stern ousted him and other leaders, accusing them of financial misconduct and defying the parent union, they founded a rival union. Denying any wrongdoing, they said they were expelled because they were fierce critics of Mr. Stern.

This spring, the service employees dispatched more than 500 allies to Fresno, Calif., at great expense, to help persuade 10,000 home care workers there not to join the rival union. By a narrow 233-vote margin, they agreed to remain in the service employees. Now come similar secession battles in San Francisco and Sacramento.

Mr. Stern denied being a divisive force. He said the nation's "economic catastrophe" was fueling the internal strife. "That has created a lot of pressures and tensions on unions and union members," he said.

Regarding Unite Here, he said that merger had failed. As for criticisms that his union was raiding Unite Here's jurisdiction, he said the service union was trying to win over members of the old apparel workers' union and did not expect to organize hotel and gambling workers as a general rule. Disputing Mr. Wilhelm, he argued that the service employees union was entitled to some jurisdiction in organizing food-service workers.

Eager to discuss labor's agreement on universal health coverage, economic stimulus and other issues before Congress, Mr. Stern said, "in some ways, when you focus on the big problems, it's a more positive picture."

Not to everyone. "It's painful to see this infighting," Ms. Dean said. "Labor can't spend these kinds of resources — and waste these kinds of resources — that at the end of the day don't really advance the interests of working people."

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