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# The Most Important Thing In the History of the Labor Movement: Since The Merger of the AFL-CIO?

By Rich Gibson

In 1935, at the annual bacchanal of the American Federation of Labor in Atlantic City, the bushy-eyed, bulbous, reactionary leader of the United Mine Workers, John L. Lewis, slugged the President of the racist Carpenters' Union, William Hutcheson, in the mouth. Hutcheson had offended Lewis with a slight about a rubber worker. That punch, 71 years ago, is seen as the symbol of what became the formative moment of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The CIO was born out of the slug aimed at the American Federation of Labor.

In 1955, twenty years following the Lewis punch, the AFL and the CIO merged, partly because the CIO's Walter Reuther thought the AFL's George Meany would soon be dead and Reuther could then anoint himself. That merger was not an agreement to boast labors' power, but to settle turf wars between labor bosses who, alone, would win more power from the merger. And, when Meany didn't oblige, Reuther took his United Auto Workers out of the CIO, but only for a short while.

Reg Weaver (left) of the National Education Association (NEA) and John Sweeny (right at podium) of the AFL-CIO announce the new relationship between NEA and the AFL-CIO in San Diego last month. Substance photo by Rich Gibson.

In 2005, another split occurred in the AFL-CIO, followed by a small reconciliation, but one billed as an earth-shaker. In 2005, a split led by Andy Stern of the the Service Employees (SEIU), the Laborers Union, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Carpenters Union, Unite-Here, and the Teamsters (some of the most mob dominated unions in the world) formed the Change to Win Coalition which promised that it could do better by workers. Stern's split cost the AFL about 40 percent of its membership, already down to about 12.4 percent of the US workforce, less than eight percent of the private sector, a loss of almost two-thirds of the numbers the AFL-CIO once boasted—meaning a massive budget cut and threatened pensions in the AFL-CIO Washington offices.

On February 27, 2006, in a wedding-cake structure, George W. Bush's favorite Hotel Del Coronado in San Diego, a bulbous, sweating, but well-coiffed and neatly suited Reg Weaver, President of the 3 million member National Education Association, hugged the almost equally oozing volume of John Sweeney, President of the decaying American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations.

Sweeney was reeling from the recent split led by his favorite protege, Andy Stern, who Sweeney had installed to succeed him as boss of the Service Employees International Union. Weavers' hug signified that the NEA would urge its locals to unite with the AFL-CIO, a back-door maneuver to promote a merger with the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of Teachers that had been rejected by the NEA rank and file in a 1999 vote. Sweeney really needed that hug, and it

appeared Weaver genuinely enjoyed it. The white Sweeney hugging the black Weaver, both declaring the importance of their embrace, was just one of many historical ironies that saw the moribund, racist, AFL-CIO, sucking life once again from another sector of the work force, this time the growing ranks of organized teachers; NEA, the largest union in the United States, by a factor of two.

Sweeney called the hug, and the deal that it finalized, “the most important thing in the history of the labor movement since the merger of the AFL-CIO.” The significance of the event, however, was largely ignored by the press; only a relative handful of reporters appeared at the press conference where, perhaps to prevent embarrassment to the union chiefs, empty chairs were filled with staff and other well-fed white officials.

The hug had been planned for New Orleans. The AFL-CIO likes its bacchanals at New Orleans’ Mardi Gras, or in Las Vegas. But, Hurricane Katrina crashed the party, so the AFL-CIO and NEA scheduled the squeeze for the next largest celebration of Mardi Gras, in San Diego. Unfortunately for the delegates, uncharacteristic rain fell for most of the week they were in town.

Questions in the press conference, early on, were soft-tossed for Weaver and Sweeney, though Weaver, quickly pouring sweat, struggled with each one. He is without question, the least well informed of the NEA leaders of the last thirty years, the result of a perversion of NEA’s promise of democracy, a practice that simply has elected national leaders (who typically spend \$1/4 million or more on their campaigns) move up from one office to the next, rarely with a serious challenge. The next inheritor to the NEA top office, Dennis Van Roekel, sat in the audience, watching Weaver stumble.

From a reporter, “Mr Weaver, what are you getting from this? Will you serve on the AFL-CIO board? Where is the money? Will teachers have to subsidize the AFL?”

Weaver: “No, I get no money, I will not serve on the AFL board, and neither will any other NEA officers. There will be no dues increase for this. Ah, teachers will not have to join the AFL unless their locals do. But many locals will join the AFL-CIO’s Central Labor Councils.”

A reporter: “ Why would the growing, vibrant, democratic, anti-racist, NEA want to affiliate with the undemocratic AFL-CIO which was shrinking, on-the-rocks, even before the split?”

Weaver: “We believe there is unity in numbers, and we will all gain from our united ability to do political action together. It will be good for the children, who need good schools.”

Weaver did not note that the AFL-CIO, dominated by private sector unions, routinely lobbies against taxes for public sector projects, like schools, that key AFL unions oppose NEA projects like universal health care and affirmative action (which placed Weaver in office), that it is unable to deliver even the votes of its own members, who routinely vote race over class, that is, vote Republican, and that the AFL-CIO clearly cannot organize anyone — except it can organize its mobbed up staff and officers to beat up and sometimes murder union reformers.

A reporter: “Reg, is this a done deal? Will it be presented to the summer Representative Assembly, always projected as the deciding body in NEA’s democratic processes?”

Weaver, fully puffed up: “No, I have signed this. I am in charge here. This deal is done.”

Later, Weaver admitted the summer NEA Representative Assembly might take the matter up, despite his signature.

A reporter: "Who caused this to come about? Who initiated it?"

Weaver: "This was initiated by rank and file members in NEA locals."

"Which NEA locals?"

"I am not sure. I think an NEA local in Kentucky..." looking around for help.

"Which NEA local in Kentucky?"

"I cannot remember."

Weaver had failed to read the press release that was written for him and distributed before the conference. The release quotes him, and names a Kentucky local which he says, in print, initiated the action. Weaver plain forgot to prepare, an unusual achievement for an NEA leader, commonly so well prepped by experienced professional staff that they sound like charming clones reciting talking points.

However, it is abundantly clear that NEA's Van Roekel — playing a lead role — and NEA Executive Director Jim Wilson, and the President of the American Federation of Teachers, Ed McElroy, along with Weaver, worked hard behind the scenes to manufacture what is a de-facto merger, and financial bailout, of the AFL-CIO.

The quasi-affiliation agreement will bring more and more NEA elected leaders and staff in close proximity to the corrupt, sold-out, and near-dead AFL-CIO, the latter of interest only to taxidermists of labor movements and a few academic opportunists who pretend that there is a Labor Movement that actually represents "labor," and that actually "moves." The association of NEA leaders, AFL bosses, and AFT hacks in particular, will likely lead to an NEA affiliation down the road, one that strips NEA of its marginally democratic structure, eradicate its calls for affirmative action and enforced term limits, and allows the leaders who pull off the deal to assume jobs for life. Or, perhaps the promise is a spot in the next Hillary/Oprah White House.

The period following the John L. Lewis punch of 1935 to the unification of the AFL-CIO in 1955 was a period of economic expansion in the US, and occasional radical labor strife, usually led by the CIO, strife that the AFL, in every instance, sought to undermine or sell out.

But there were bigger problems from the outset. Examined against the history of, say, the Industrial Workers of the World, neither the AFL nor the CIO stood for much.

The AFL, formed in the 1880's, remained a craft-based union movement (men organized along the lines of their skilled

trade, that is, all the joiners in one union, the plumbers in another, etc, with an unlimited number of potential unions representing people on the same job site) which sought to prop up member wages, not by organizing, but by keeping outsiders (black people, women, even non-relatives) out.

The AFL was openly racist and, even before WWI, the federation tied its interests to the interests of US capital, that is, the idea that American workers would do better if other workers did worse. Thus, during WWI, the AFL not only ratted out people opposed to the imperialist debacle, its leaders began a relationship with US intelligence that continues to today, to the point that nearly one-half of AFL dues are spent outside the US, used to assist CIA fronts like the American Institute for Free Labor Development, in destroying indigenous unions.

The CIO, following Lewis, was organized for the most part by radicals and members of the Communist Party USA (CP) and the Socialist Party (SP), Trotskyists, both being splendid reformers, both having abandoned much sense of revolution in favor of demands for collective bargaining, a slice of the pie. CP and SP leaders in the thirties led mass uprisings, plant seizures like the Great Flint Strike Against GM of 1937, the 1934 San Francisco General Strike, the Minneapolis Teamsters' strike, the Rubber sit-downs (where workers in Ohio briefly won a thirty hour work week—with forty hours' pay), strikes in the fields in California, and the Green Corn Rebellion, an armed uprising, in Oklahoma. They raised hell, fought racism (and to a much lesser degree, sexism), and served as the bird dogs for the Hunters, John L. Lewis and the authoritarian structures of the CIO unions.

The CP which had once enjoyed a mass base for its courageous working fighting Depression conditions, flipped repeatedly in the later thirties, following the demands of its Soviet Godfather, Stalin. The CP, in a matter of months, went from calling Roosevelt a social fascist tool of international finance capital, to suggesting that he was a good friend of the working class, and from denouncing the early stages of WW2 as just another imperialist war in which no worker should have an interest, to promoting the Hitler-Stalin pact, to demanding an end to class struggle during wartime in order to Save the Soviet Fatherland. The CP lost, for good reason, its ability to mobilize the rank and file, and into their places of second tier leadership slipped professional anti-communists, racists, like Walter Reuther, who codified the structural, anti-democratic moats around his leadership — a system of exclusion typical of all Big Labor today. Reuther was assisted in the anti-radical campaign by mass government cooperation in the McCarthy period.

By the time the AFL and CIO were nearing merger in the fifties, the AFL had toned down its (once nearly correct) claims that the CIO was nothing but a hot-bed of communists, and the CIO had mostly quit complaining (rightly) that the AFL was little more than an extension of the mob. Leaders on both sides dispassionately cut up the pie, just as any competing protection racketeers might want to end a war by deciding just what belonged to who.

On deeper examination, the greater truth was that neither the AFL nor the CIO was willing to address the system of capitalist exploitation itself, neither would say, as the IWW once did, "the ruling class and the working classes have only contradiction in common," neither was willing to seek international solidarity with other workers, neither was willing to invest much, if anything, in fights against racism or sexism, and both had fully tied their fate with the fates of US employers. They really believed that what was good for GM was good for all the people of the USA.

As US capital went into decline, shortly after the victory of the Vietnamese in 1975, US unions went into full retreat, making concession after concession, refusing to recognize that concessions do not save jobs, but, like feeding blood to sharks, only produce demands for more. Led by the American Federation of Teachers, which turned pension funds over to the city of New York, and the UAW, which howled "Buy American," as it lobbied for the billion dollar Chrysler Bailout — and protected Chrysler interests by using armed union staff to violently smash rank and file sit-down strikes as they did at Detroit's Chrysler Mack Avenue plant in 1973, the unions rushed to make themselves irrelevant to workers, or worse, simply an arm of the other side. By 2000, the UAW had lost one million members and done nothing about it. The largest union in the UAW was a state of Michigan office workers' local, and the union was busy in court winning injunctions against UAW retirees who sought to go to court to defend benefits the union had sold back to the auto companies.

This collapse can be traced to several factors:

1. The union leadership is utterly corrupt and cannot be transformed—fully alienated from the rank and file members who are forced to pay dues but who become slaves to a contract that is owned, not by them, but by the bosses and the union leadership who work in concert to protect that union bank.

2. The union leadership is guided by a dishonest and largely fascist ideology that snares their membership base. That stance can be summed up by what NEA's former president, Bob Chase, calls New Unionism; the unity of business, government, and labor (all labor) in the national interest.

3. Even if union reformers succeeded in creating more democratic and egalitarian unionism, which the last sixty years suggests is unlikely, the unions would still be structurally unable to meet the challenges of capitalism itself. The unions do not unite people, they DIVIDE people (by craft, skill, industry, race, sex, nation, public vs private, etc). There are, nearly, no progressive lessons to be learned from the Labor Movement, except when the rank and file fights the union — with the goal of overturning it entirely. The IWW notion above, that “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common,” applies to workers and their union leaders as well.

4. Many argue that radical work should be concentrated in the unions because, “that’s where the people are.” Actually, that is where only about 12% of the people are. Most people do not belong to unions—and those who do don’t participate in them, for good reason. Moreover, the industrial working class which once, under the banners of communists and the CIO in the thirties, civilized the US by winning the right to strike, to speak, for social security, medical care, and against child labor, this once-powerful industrial work force is simply no longer centrally positioned to introduce change. Their jobs have been outsourced, and those who remain are relatively privileged, even though they are working long, long hours. These workers have been habituated to decades of retreats, concessions, and betrayals, and while it is reasonable to expect occasional outbursts, it is highly unlikely that they will take the lead in social change in the foreseeable future. Indeed, history suggests the outbursts of this privileged section of the work force (even at critical junctures, like the dockworkers’ unfulfilled threats to strike against war), can as easily lead those workers to become fascists as anything else—and recent trends in the US make this possibility more real than others.

5. The central organizing point(s) of life in North America is no longer industrial work places, but schools, prisons, and the military, the carrot and the stick. The velvet glove is usually more potent than the obvious iron fist. More than 49 million kids are in schools now, more than ever before. One-half of them will be draft-eligible in the next five years. Many people now rely on schools for safety, food, health care, mental care, and above all, a modicum of hope. When the hope from schools is extinguished, youth are the most likely to initiate the struggle for social change, even if they may not be able to carry it through to the end, as 1968 in France demonstrates.

As the AFL-CIO disintegrated, the National Education Association grew, and grew, and grew, allowing its rival, the AFT, to keep its membership base in the ruined cities of the US while NEA grew big and wealthy affiliating suburban districts, sometimes promising (and taking) strike action, but more often than not, downplaying its role as a union, stressing its history as a professional organization (NEA was once so professional that Upton Sinclair wrote books denouncing it as a company union — see the Goose-Step and the Goslings). For about a decade, NEA may have been the most progressive union in the United States. All that now appears to quickly melt away.

Those who seek social justice through organizing, education, and agitation, need to look well beyond the failed traditions of unionism, to organizations which organize across borders of race, sex/gender, language, craft, and industry, but which recognize that what is at foot is an international war of the rich on the poor, a class war, and the old saw of the once radical labor movement, “Which side are you on?” is the question at hand. And, with that hand, perhaps it is time for yet another punch in some well-deserving mouth.