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for the New Labor Movement*

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Jane Slaughter Responds

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Abstract

[Excerpt] It was refreshing to read an article about the "new AFL-CIO" that remembered that the labor movement will have to change from the bottom up. Too many ignoramuses in the mainstream press acted as if John L. Lewis had risen from the dead last October — and as if John L. were all we needed.

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It was refreshing to read an article about the “new AFL-CIO” that remembered that the labor movement will have to change from the bottom up. Too many ignoramuses in the mainstream press acted as if John L. Lewis had risen from the dead last October—and as if John L. were all we needed.

The way the New Voice slate chose to run their campaign was remarkable. They went out to the rank-and-file, even though rank-and-file AFL-CIO members had no votes in the election and no influence on how their international union presidents would vote. Since the election, a new spirit of openness from the top has made many activists feel that more is possible, that expression of difference is permissible. We can all be glad that John Sweeney, Linda Chavez-Thompson, and Rich Trumka were elected.

But Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello are right to remind us to keep the focus on ordinary workers, both inside and outside existing unions. Their insistence that the “labor movement” must be much broader than collective bargaining institutions—a hodge-podge of movements and organizations of workers and their families—is right on the mark.

Mostly, they’re correctly circumspect about what the Sweeney team can accomplish from on high—even if “they” want to. They know that protocol is the ruling energy in intra-Fed dealings; the AFL-CIO cannot tell an affiliate union what to do, and Sweeney is unlikely to try. After breaking decades of encrusted protocol by running for the top job, Sweeney is apt to be careful about offending union presidents now. Word is that he was willing to keep his promise to do something for the locked-out Staley workers, but their International leaders said no thanks; apparently they just wanted the Staley struggle over with, and Sweeney did not ride in on a white charger.

We would be wise not to put too much hope, therefore, in the New Voice’s “strike support team of top leaders and staff from international unions deployed early to help local leaders with long-running strikes.”

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Here in Detroit, where six newspaper unions have been on strike since July 1995, the AFL-CIO has sent in what seems like dozens of support staff. But the local union presidents continue to make the most important decision: the strike has not moved off center since they chose to honor an injunction against mass picketing last fall.

Brecher and Costello write that it may not be proper for the national Fed to pick sides in disputes between local unions and internationals, such as occurred over the Hormel strike in 1986. In a healthy labor movement, it would be proper—national leaders would lead. The AFL-CIO president would help the embattled workers and challenge an International that was undermining members' struggles. The most we can hope for, today, though, is neutrality. More likely, dissidents and reformers in one union will continue to be treated like pariahs by the Fed and by officials of other unions.

Perhaps inadvertently, the New Voice program revealed the degree to which the AFL-CIO Executive Council "had" functioned as an old boys' club, when it proposed quarterly Executive Council meetings with written agendas circulated in advance. Apparently written agendas weren't necessary for the Florida gatherings OCAW President Bob Wages calls "the annual beached whale event." Sure, let's have written agendas, but Brecher and Costello are right that the New Voice program barely begins to grapple with the "undemocracy" of the AFL-CIO.

Political action? The New Voice program is more of the same, only it promises to try harder. Wages again: the AFL-CIO Executive Council's perspective is that "if Clinton doesn't win it'll be the end of life as we know it." This is the same Clinton who bought votes to push through NAFTA, who did nothing on the anti-scab bill, and who pushed a health care reform that indulged the insurance companies. Even if he's committed to the Democrats for 1996, now would be the perfect time for Sweeney, capitalizing on his image as a reformer and militant, to say that the AFL-CIO will begin exploring the third party option as of January 1997. Which stance is more likely to win concessions from candidate Clinton—"labor is with you no matter what," or "we're looking for our own voice?"

It must be added that Sweeney's neutrality on the organizing done by Labor Party Advocates has helped that organization considerably. Local central labor councils have been able to endorse LPA without fear of the wrath from on high which would have been likely under his predecessor Lane Kirkland, and even mainstream unions—the American Federation of Government Employees and the Mine Workers—have felt free to endorse.

Amidst the welter of New Voice proposals, the sincere commitment

to organize new members stands out. Brecher and Costello are right not to focus on the how's of organizing; no campaign, they say, no matter how expensive or well-meant, is likely to succeed if the union movement doesn't become something you'd want to join.

Which brings me to the crucial piece that both the New Voice and Brecher/Costello leave out: the workplace. If American workers are to organize, they will not be roused solely by fear of losing their jobs. More and more, workers are afraid of their jobs. It's hard to believe that the workplace is becoming more unhealthy and more tense as the dirty industrial jobs die and the computers take over—but it's true.

For the last 15 years, a wave of worker participation programs has swept the workplace. These programs began in the auto industry with Quality of Work Life, moved on to Employee Involvement, and by 1990 Total Quality Management was everywhere. In 1994 the AFL-CIO finally took notice and issued a report from its Committee on the Evolution of Work (of which Sweeney and Trumka were members). The report assures us that unions can benefit from these employer programs: "An increasing number of employers. . . have been open to joining with unions. . . to create partnerships to transform the work system."

The Fed went on to list five principles and four guidelines for a successful program, noting that employers who smash organizing drives in plant A while promising jointness in plant B "lack a full commitment to partnership." Guideline #1 is "mutual recognition and respect." Under this guideline alone, "partnership" should be dismissed as fantasy. The number of employers who pass the "respect" test could probably be counted on the fingers of a worker who has lost a hand in a workplace injury.

What makes the "partnership" rhetoric so insidious is that it acts as a cover for the introduction of "management-by-stress" or "lean production" techniques. These methods include elimination of job descriptions ("flexibility"), de-skilling ("multi-skilling"), speed-up ("continuous improvement"), and stealing workers' job knowledge ("worker participation"). In the auto industry, for example, the result is that the rate of workplace injuries multiplied five-fold from 1980 to 1992. The blue collar workforce at the Big Three has shrunk by a third.

An important facet of this degradation of work is the question of work time. "Flexibility" means, in the words of Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, that "relatively few people actually work for the high-value enterprise in the traditional sense of having steady jobs with fixed incomes." Part-timers and temps are preferred; and the "remaining full-timers" shoulder as much overtime as they can bear. Often they don't even get premium pay, as "Alternative Work Schedules" become widespread.

The Staley workers, for example, were resisting 12-hour days/three-on-three-off.

These changes on the job could and should make the workplace once again a locus of struggle. I'm reminded of the anonymous factory worker of the 1930s: "I ain't got no kick on wages; I just don't like to be drove." But the New Voice "platform" did not say word one about workplace conditions. Similarly, this spring, Sweeney's union, the SEIU, debated a report from its Committee on the Future. The report is significant because it's the closest thing we have to Sweeney's plan for American labor. That document barely mentioned the workplace. When it did, it was to "greatly expand SEIU support for union-led workplace participation programs." Since his election, Sweeney has spoken before a number of employer groups, reassuring them that the labor movement seeks cooperation.

Finally, it's instructive to look at SEIU for a sense of how Sweeney sees rank-and-file participation and control. SEIU is one of the most staff-run and staff-dominated unions, even at the local level. Not only does the union hire most of its staff from outside—people who've never worked as a janitor or in a nursing home—those staffers may then run for local office and become elected officials. Many "locals" are huge, statewide amalgamations where members "haven't a prayer" of influencing the professional officials' priorities.

Thus the question arises: If the new federation does succeed in organizing thousands of new members, what is it organizing them into? I think of what happened to the Los Angeles janitors of SEIU Local 399, many of them immigrants. Salvadoran cleaners used civil disobedience to disrupt business as usual in Century City's luxury office buildings, even invading the bars frequented by the resident executives and lawyers during happy hour. They won a contract. But then they were dumped into a 25,000-member citywide local run very much in the old style.

In 1995 they and others organized a dissident slate called the Multi-racial Alliance to run in the local's first contested election ever. When they won and the local went through predictable upheaval, the International threw the local into trusteeship. "The rank and filers had violated the understanding that their organizing was to stop when they became members," wrote Martha Gruelle in *Labor Notes*.

The New Voice program was right to emphasize organizing the unorganized. Workers need unions—but not just as bargainers and door-knockers for candidates. There's a connection between exercising control of your local union and building a union that lives and breathes in the workplace. If the "new AFL-CIO" is to fulfill its promises, it needs a commitment to building "workplace" power. ■