

America's Labor Movement: The Political Winds are Shifting

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The labor movement is beginning to stir after decades of setbacks and defeats. Having embraced the concept of a partnership with the employers, most labor officials renounced any recourse to strikes, the only effective weapon when properly employed, and proceeded to negotiate one concessionary contract after another for their membership. Meanwhile they attempted unsuccessfully to pursue their goals through their other “partner,” the Democratic Party.

But the current economic crisis has resulted in tremendous pressure on the labor officials from the rank and file, who are bearing the brunt of the crisis through massive job loss, health care termination, home foreclosures and evictions. And although much still needs to change, hopeful signs are sprouting up on the horizon.

For example, in the past several years, organized labor has been passing one antiwar resolution after another. This year the AFL-CIO called for “speedy withdrawal from Iraq.” The International Longshore and Warehouse Union ([ILWU](#)) has called for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. The National Education Association, the Communication Workers of America, the American Federation of Teachers, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and United Electrical (UE) have all passed antiwar resolutions. Union officials have recognized that the hundreds of billions of dollars allocated to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could have been spent on job creation programs, education, health care, and other social services. [U.S. Labor Against War](#), a nationwide organization promoting antiwar positions in the labor movement, includes 184 affiliates, most of whom are local unions.

But the significance of these resolutions goes beyond a mere symbolic gesture. They represent a break with the official policies of the Democratic Party, since these wars are now Obama's wars. By breaking with the Democratic Party on war, the labor movement is taking a step in the direction of independent political action. That is, rather than cementing itself entirely to the Democratic Party, which is controlled root and branch by corporate America and the rich, many labor officials are beginning to acknowledge that their interests might diverge. The partnership is beginning to fracture and crack.

Another important crack is also surfacing. Given the severe government budget deficits on the federal, state and local levels, which have resulted in massive layoffs and reduced public services across the country, unions are taking up the demand of taxing the corporations and the rich in order to raise revenue and save jobs. The [Washington State Labor Council](#) has produced a strong resolution calling for taxing the rich, as well as the San Francisco Labor Council, the California Federation of Teachers, the American Federation of Teachers,

the Illinois state convention of AFSCME, and numerous SEIU and AFSCME locals.

Taxing the corporations and the rich is a demand that Democratic Party functionaries like to say is “off the table.” That means one is not even allowed to discuss it, which is tantamount to denying it any reality. The reason for this stern rebuke is transparently clear: Democratic Party coffers are filled with billions of dollars donated by corporations and the rich. Their donations make those from organized labor pale in comparison.

A third crack in the relation of organized labor to the Democratic Party is breaking through. The [Troy \(New York\) Labor Council](#) has called on the AFL-CIO to organize a demonstration in Washington D.C. to demand job creation programs and peace, among other things. The [Workers Emergency Recovery Campaign](#) (WERC), an emerging grassroots, national organization, has been working with members of the San Francisco Labor Council who will introduce a similar resolution to the Council. If these resolutions result in a significant campaign advocating a truly massive Solidarity Day III demonstration called by the labor movement, then organized labor will again be acting independently of the Democrats, as labor will rally its own members and their allies, including community groups and Black and Latino organizations, to make demands on the Democratic-controlled government.

In fact, the AFL-CIO itself is already calling for a government-initiated jobs program. Its new president, [Richard Trumka](#), recently observed: “Every day, it becomes more urgent that the federal government step up to the plate with bold actions to boost job creation. Such action should include urgently needed fiscal relief to state and local governments, community jobs programs, additional investments in infrastructure and green jobs and credit relief to small and medium-sized businesses. Failing to act puts us at very real risk of a lost generation of hard-working Americans who can’t put food on the table and bright young people who never realize their potential.”

As long as organized labor maintains any semblance of its partnership-with-the-employers approach, working people will be compelled to sacrifice for the “good” of the company. If the business moves to another country to take advantage of cheap labor, workers must passively accept their layoffs. If a company orders massive layoffs while requiring the remaining people to work twice as hard, workers will not be allowed to protest. And if wages and benefits are slashed to the core in order to raise profits, workers must submit in silence.

As the above cracks in the partnership testify, however, there is a growing recognition that the interests of workers and their employers do not always converge. And if these trends continue, they will culminate in the recognition that in fact the interests of workers and their employers stand diametrically opposed. First and foremost, businesses produce for a profit. On the other hand, people work simply in order to make a living. The higher the wages and benefits, then the higher is the standard of living. But the profits of the employer are proportionately lower. Therefore, any partnership with the employers will be forged at the expense of the workers. And there can be no doubt that the partnership philosophy has produced uninterrupted losses for the workers during the past four decades.

But if the interests of working people and their employers do not converge, it makes little sense for labor to operate within the Democratic Party, given that corporations and the rich control the Party. In the final analysis, in order for working people to effectively pursue their own interests, they will be compelled to organize their own party — a labor party — that can operate exclusively for them.

In order to encourage these developments further, we urge readers who are in unions to raise resolutions in their locals calling on the AFL-CIO and Change to Win to organize Solidarity Day III in the Spring 2010 in Washington, D.C. to demand jobs, housing, health care, full funding for public education and social services, and peace. In unity and solidarity there is strength; together we can win!

Below is a Sample Resolution:

Whereas — despite the so-called economic recovery — the economic crisis for working people has continued unabated with growing unemployment and rising home foreclosures and evictions,

And whereas this economic crisis has resulted in the underfunding and degrading of public education and social services,

And whereas the government has bestowed billions of dollars of bailout money on the financial institutions whose recklessness and greed created this economic crisis,

And whereas there is growing opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq by a majority of the people here in the U.S., not to mention in Afghanistan and Iraq,

And whereas these wars are costing billions of dollars each month,

Therefore be it resolved that the San Francisco Labor Council call on the AFL-CIO and Change to Win to organize a Solidarity Day III march on Washington D.C. to demand jobs, housing, health care, full funding for public education and social services, and peace.

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