

AFL-CIO Convention Days 3 and 4: Inspiring Resolutions & Internal Tensions

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[I blogged daily for The Independent from this week's quadrennial AFL-CIO convention in Los Angeles. This is my third blog. For my coverage from Days 1 and 2 of the convention, click [here](#) and [here](#).]

LOS ANGELES—If you go by a strict reading of the resolutions passed at the AFL-CIO convention that concluded Wednesday, this is a solidly progressive organization ready to speak with brio for all working people and not just its millions of current members and retirees. Calls for a smooth transition to citizenship for new immigrants, an alternative to the politics of austerity, organizing and acting in solidarity globally, significantly improving Obamacare leading to health care for all, ending mass incarcerations, organizing the South, and supporting workers of all sexual preferences are great stands.

So is building up the state and local labor federations as active community organizations, supporting higher education and ending student debt and—most of all—actively and uniformly cooperating with militant social movement organizations on their goals, too. These resolutions marked the just concluded Los Angeles convention. In key ways affiliated unions, especially in the public sector, are already on board in practice.

Changing Times

One more indication of the changing times: The AFL-CIO, a federation of 57 International unions with some 13 million members, no longer calls itself “the” labor movement” but *a part* of the labor movement, along with the 89 percent of the labor force that is not organized in a union. Admitting that alone is refreshing.

Still, it's a bridge too far to write, as Tuesday's *Huffington Post* did, that “Labor Reinvents Itself.” The AFL-CIO wants to re-invent itself, and it should, but too much of the convention had an air of rebranding if not magical thinking. Almost all of the “resolved that” language in its resolutions were modest implementations in comparison to the strong “whereas” motivations. They also point more toward politicking and preserving the AFL-CIO's vaunted access to the Obama administration than mass campaigning. The only scintilla of publicly-voiced dissatisfaction with the White House (though there was plenty of grouching in the halls) came from possibly inadvertent floor remarks by Lee Cutler, Secretary-Treasurer of New York State United Teachers' (NYSUT), who in supporting a roundly backed condemnation of Honduran labor and human rights violations, told delegates that Honduran unions were forming their own party to contest upcoming elections. “That's something I think we might want to consider here,” he said.

The Obama Message

And that was almost lost in the fawning that convention leaders bestowed from the podium on new Labor Secretary Thomas Perez. Once a Maryland-based labor union stalwart, Perez was now on Obama message, talking airily about administration efforts at “growing the middle class,” aiding “middle-class workers” and “growing the economy from the middle class out,” rather than the top down (though sadly not from the bottom up). Throughout he conflated economic justice with social opportunity. He pledged his department would “play a key role as we confront the challenge of

economic opportunity, secure a better bargain for the middle class, and build ladders of opportunity with sturdy rungs that all people can reach.” Here was the much-anticipated new Labor Secretary, the child of Dominican immigrants, mythologizing how more and lower steps on an economic ladder would deal with a jobs crisis, end the predations of an economic plutocracy and reverse the inherent lack of room at the top.

If Labor buys this twaddle, then they should rename its Washington D.C. headquarters the 815 16th St. NW Shelter for Battered Unionists. As for fulfilling this week’s ambitious agenda for remaking the AFL-CIO as an organization that works hand-in-glove with existing social movements, here’s the problem: few outside organizations have come on board.

Despite press reports that the Sierra Club and the NAACP are already part of the effort, no such pact has been made. The only group of national note that can be point to—and it’s no small feat—is the National Organization for Women. The other eight announced organizations—including the Brooklyn-Queens based Make The Road NY and the Blue Green Alliance (a longstanding coalition of unions and environmentalists chaired by Steelworkers President Leo Gerard, and Sierra Club Executive Director Michael Brune) are an indication of what could be done. And those relationships are at present particular to the unions involved.

Labor & The Environment

Internal strains also remain. These became apparent even in this largely orchestrated atmosphere of the convention. Referring to the resolution calling for close cooperation with those who at the same time oppose building the controversial Keystone XL Pipeline, Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA) President Terry O’Sullivan groused to some labor journalists in classic old guard speak.

“These groups have no equity with the work. I grew up believing that you didn’t get in each other’s way... but [these groups] are taking food off our table. I won’t get in another union’s way,” he said as he cited as the example of Communication Workers efforts over the years to raise telephone rates on customers in order to fund member raises, something that hurt the public but was seen by the affected union as necessary. So, Sullivan implied, how is buddying up with tree huggers kosher?

Getting the whole AFL-CIO to line up with groups sometimes hostile to union ends (as is clearly the case with the Keystone XL Pipeline and the Gateway Pacific Terminal in Washington State —projects anathema to environmentalists but seen as job generators for workers) have to be resolved and the unions have to buy into these new alliances. Incanting the right words, as many recognize, isn’t enough.

So while it’s way too early to write off the new effort at inclusion as a self-delusion for hard times, let alone a parlor trick or vitamin-enriched repeat of the hopes of the early Sweeney era, it’s not yet time for hosannahs. When pressed, one senior Federation official admitted privately that the program “is a work in progress that won’t operate the same in every state or with every organization.”

Reporter’s Notebook

Sadly, the AFL-CIO’s newfound feistiness appears to stop at “shore’s edge” ... During the convention, there was a cathedral-like silence over any discussion of the Obama administration’s then-anticipated Syria bombing plans. The labor federation also refused to take a position on the bloated military budget. A resolution from the Wisconsin AFL-CIO urging cuts in Pentagon spending was referred back to committee. Explaining the quietism on military spending, one senior staffer

told me that the Federation didn't want the Obama administration caught in "a pissing contest with the GOP over what to cut in the budget."

One of the most vexing internal issues facing the AFL-CIO is how to respond to provisions of the Affordable Care Act (aka "Obamacare") that could penalize unions with certain types of health insurance plans they have won for their members. Some, like LIUNA chief Terry O'Sullivan have suggested that unions should fight for Obamacare's repeal if their concerns are not addressed. A floor discussion over the matter prompted a *New York Times* story headlined "Unions' Misgivings on Health Law Burst Into View"... In the end no amendment was raised that would force a vote on the matter. But the fact that a floor discussion happened over key differences was unprecedented in modern times.