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Divorce--Union Style

Can the labor movement overcome UNITE HERE's messy breakup?

Peter Dreier August 12, 2009 | This article appeared in the August 31, 2009 edition of *The Nation*.

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"I never heard people with Ivy League educations insult each other so articulately," recalled Joe Hansen, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union.

Hansen is usually leading negotiations with giant grocery chains and meatpackers. But for the past several months he's also



been trying to mediate a dispute between rival unions and their leaders: Andy Stern (University of Pennsylvania, class of 1971) and Bruce Raynor (Cornell, 1972) of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and John Wilhelm (Yale, 1967) of UNITE HERE. Since late last year, their attention--and that of the broader labor movement--has been diverted by internal squabbles that have erupted into a civil war between former friends and allies. It involves a battle over turf, ego, money, members, strategy, principles and the future of the labor movement.

Hansen met with Stern and Wilhelm on July 31, and he speaks regularly with Raynor. The discussion went well enough that they scheduled another round of face-to-face meetings for mid-August. Hansen thinks a settlement is within reach.

"Then we can all go back to doing what we're supposed to be doing," Hansen said. "Organizing workers and getting pro-worker legislation passed in Congress."

Ask any union official, labor organizer, rank-and-file leader or labor-oriented academic--they'll all tell you the same

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Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

thing: this is labor's moment.

Thanks in part to the labor movement's efforts last year, unions have an ally in the White House and a Democratic majority in Congress. Long-neglected issues that unions have supported--healthcare reform, immigration reform and especially labor law reform--are on the national agenda. If labor and other liberal groups can help Democrats expand their margin in Congress next year and mobilize to push centrist Democrats in a more progressive direction, America could be in store for the next New Deal. All agree: the stakes are high.

"We're at the most daunting moment of economic challenge in our lifetime," says Stern, the president of SEIU, the nation's second-largest union. "We need to focus all of our energy on organizing workers, mobilizing the public and passing legislation that turns our country in a new direction."

Over the past decade, labor observers agree, SEIU and UNITE HERE have been two of the

most effective unions in terms of expanding membership, winning good contracts, forging alliances with community and religious groups, and helping elect progressive candidates at the local, state and national levels.

Until this past spring, UNITE HERE had roughly 440,000 members, about two-thirds of them in the hotel, hospitality and gambling casino sectors, with most of the others in the garment industry. But in May, Raynor, UNITE HERE's president, led between 105,000 and 150,000 members, mostly garment workers, out of the union and into a new SEIU affiliate called Workers United (the two sides dispute the number). SEIU represents close to 2 million members in a wide swath of public and private sectors, including hospital and nursing home workers, janitors, security guards and government employees.

How and why SEIU wound up with these former UNITE HERE members is the source of much friction within the labor movement, causing union leaders, liberal academics and rank-and-file members to choose sides. Wilhelm and UNITE HERE accuse Stern, Raynor and SEIU of poaching their members and money. Raynor says he is just taking out what UNITE brought into the 2004 merger with HERE.

Wilhelm joined the labor movement in 1969; Raynor and Stern in the early '70s. They hoped to change the world and reverse labor's fortunes. Unions, which had represented 35 percent of the workforce in the late '50s, were starting a steady decline as unionized factories shut down and moved overseas, businesses began an aggressive antiunion assault and unions failed to organize workers and add new members. The three baby boomer radicals were known as brilliant organizers and rose steadily through the ranks of their respective unions.

Wilhelm and Raynor knew each other casually. In 1999, Wilhelm praised Raynor at a ceremony honoring him with an alumni award from Cornell's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. But the two didn't become close friends until 2003, when Wilhelm was leading a strike of 2,500 maintenance, clerical and food service workers at Yale University. To generate national publicity and put pressure on the Yale administration, the unions brought more than 10,000 supporters--including members of other unions, community allies, students from Yale and other universities, and political figures like the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Vermont Governor Howard Dean--to shut down a section of downtown New Haven in September of that year. More than a hundred demonstrators were arrested, including Wilhelm, Raynor and Stern, as well as AFL-CIO president John Sweeney and Douglas McCarron, president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters.

Raynor says he told Wilhelm he'd help raise \$1 million to replenish the strike fund. "I called Andy, and he got SEIU to write a check for \$250,000," Raynor recalls. Soon after the strike ended, Raynor and Wilhelm began talking about merging their two unions. A friend of both leaders called their relationship a "mutual admiration society." UNITE and HERE officially tied the knot in 2004, forming UNITE HERE.

UNITE, itself the product of several previous mergers of garment and textile unions, including the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers and the International Ladies' Garment Workers, inherited a proud tradition of progressive social unionism among immigrant workers. UNITE HERE also inherited ownership of the garment unions' substantial assets--including two large Manhattan office buildings, the nation's only union-owned bank (the over \$4 billion Amalgamated Bank) and a relatively large operating budget.

At the time, the merger seemed to make sense. UNITE's membership had been dwindling dramatically since the 1970s, as the US clothing industry shrank and Americans began importing most of their apparel from Asia, Mexico and Central America. Under Raynor--who made his reputation organizing J.P. Stevens textile workers in the South during the '70s--UNITE was servicing its members, including its many retirees, and trying, with modest success, to make inroads organizing workers at industrial laundries. But the union's future

looked bleak.

HERE (Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees), in contrast, was a union on the move. Its young organizers viewed their union as part of a crusading social movement led by Wilhelm, a feisty and charismatic figure. Wilhelm began his career as a student at Yale and then helped unionize the university's clerical and blue-collar employees. Under his leadership, the union organized a successful rebuilding effort in Las Vegas hotels and casinos. HERE evolved from a highly decentralized network of local (and sometimes corrupt) affiliates to a stronger, more coherent and more effective organizing force. It focused primarily on immigrants in low-wage jobs in national hotel chains and the growing number of gambling casinos. But despite its growth, HERE was starved for cash and lacked the financial resources to expand as quickly as Wilhelm thought was possible in the booming hotel and casino sector.

After the merger, Raynor became president of the new UNITE HERE, with Wilhelm assuming the leadership of its hospitality division, the sector where the union was anticipating the most growth.

In 2005 Stern, Raynor and Wilhelm led their unions--along with the Teamsters, the United Food and Commercial Workers and several others--out of the AFL-CIO and formed another union umbrella, Change to Win, which pledged to devote more resources to organizing new workers and reorganizing the labor movement along industry sector lines so that it could be more effective in challenging global corporations.

Within three years of the merger, however, Raynor and Wilhelm were clashing over the pace of change and, some longtime HERE leaders claim, Raynor's heavy-handed leadership style. Wilhelm's aides say Raynor offered employers weak "sweetheart" contracts so the union could add new members and employers could avoid a protracted fight, bad publicity and a possible strike.

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