

Upstarts tell it to Sweeney

A handful of top national labor union leaders has threatened to bolt from the powerful AFL-CIO and set up a new labor alliance unless the parent body adopts new policies to stem decades of decline in union membership.

The internal power struggle, which has been simmering for months, became public during a meeting yesterday of major union leaders in Washington.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney called the meeting to review last week's election results and labor's prospects under a second Bush administration. Sen. John Kerry briefly addressed the labor leaders to thank them for supporting his run for President.

But the big topic on everyone's mind was the rebellion against Sweeney's leadership.

The dissidents, who have banded together into a group called the New Unity Partnership, issued a 10-point program this week and even created a Web site to promote their reform movement — www.unitetowin.org

The dissidents claim that organized labor's current crisis is so profound that the union movement can be saved only by a total overhaul of the AFL-CIO, the consolidation of many small unions into powerful big units and an unprecedented effort to organize nonunion workers.

They note that the percentage of union members in the labor force has plummeted from 35% in the 1950s to 13% today, and they insist the only way to dramatically alter that trend is by going after giant

nonunion corporations like Wal-Mart that they blame for eroding wages and living standards for millions of Americans.

Amazingly, the three main rebel union presidents are all Ivy League graduates.

Andrew Stern, leader of the effort and president of the 1.6 million-member Service Employees International Union, the largest and fastest-growing group in the AFL-CIO, is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. Bruce Raynor and John Wilhelm, co-presidents of the newly merged UNITE-HERE, went to Cornell and Yale, respectively.

Other national labor leaders sympathize with the dissidents but fear that a nasty debate and a

possible split of the federation will only further weaken the labor movement.

"Everyone knows the labor movement is in crisis," one top New York State union leader told me yesterday. "These guys are calling for necessary reforms that have to be made, but they have no diplomatic skills, and this kind of change requires a lot of diplomacy."

The reformers would prefer someone like Wilhelm, who has led the nation's hotel workers for years, to replace Sweeney as the AFL-CIO president. But until now, Sweeney has insisted he will run for reelection next year.

Wilhelm has good relations with both Jimmy Hoffa, leader of the powerful Teamsters Union, and with Richard Trumka, Sweeney's second in command. And Trumka, in turn, has the backing of most of the major industrial unions in the

auto, steel and coal industries.

But many other presidents are reluctant to wage an open fight against Sweeney, who is considered a decent if lackluster leader.

Hoffa, whose union is one of the few in which members directly elect their president, could end up a chief broker of a compromise between the two sides.

Here in New York, Dennis Rivera, president of the 250,000-member 1199/SEIU, has been a big backer of Stern's aggressive approach to forcing change in the national labor movement.

"If we can't get the necessary changes labor needs, we may have to reconsider how we invest the per-capita dues we now give the AFL," Rivera said.

No one doubts that leaders like Stern and Rivera have turned the SEIU into the most effective operation in the labor movement.

But in some parts of the country, that streamlined operation also has brought with it a top-down leadership structure that sacrifices real democracy among local union members.

It also has meant turning over union management of union locals to well-meaning college graduates with little real labor experience. And rank-and-file workers are not getting the training to become leaders themselves.

"The union movement could have lots of democracy and still have no real worker power in this country," one SEIU leader said yesterday. "We either reverse the current trend and gain more members or unions will die."



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