

# COLLISION COURSE

## As a coalition of rebel unions threatens to bolt from the AFL-CIO, many look to L.A. for leadership

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

The already suffocating Midwest summer will get a temperature boost in Chicago next week when the national convention of the American Federation of Labor convenes July 25-28. In this era of runaway shops and attacks on the living standards of working people, it's no surprise that anger and frustration should surface in the venerable labor organization. But a challenge posed by a powerful, six-union coalition called Change To Win is exceptionally sharp - and a possible split in the AFL-CIO looms in the background.

Change To Win wants the AFL-CIO to nearly triple its organizing budget and consolidate 60-some unions into eight in order to revitalize the dwindling ranks of unionized workers in the United States. Union membership was at a high of 35 percent of all U.S. workers in 1955. It's now at 13 percent, and if you cut out public-sector employees, the percentage drops to around eight percent.

The heat is on current AFL-CIO President John Sweeney to reorder the union's priorities - investing more funds in rank-and-file organizing and less in the Democratic politicians whose support is often lukewarm at best. Also at issue is - in the event of a split - whether Sweeney or the AFL-CIO's executive board will allow remaining unions to work with the renegades. A battle is brewing over a proposed resolution that would allow disaffiliated unions to continue working at the local level with those that remain in the fold.

The question is especially important in L.A., where unions have been able to have a substantial impact in advancing a labor-friendly public policy agenda. L.A.'s County Fed has pulled together some 300 unions to elect public officials united around such basic standards as fair hourly-wage payment and safety standards.

Although many Angelenos are unaware of the implications of these issues, the actions of groups with names that sound like an arcane jumble of acronyms - SEIU, UNITE HERE, UFCW - affect the entire city. As wages are driven lower, the deeper the cuts into health care and retirement. As it is, the federal minimum wage hasn't been raised in eight years, the temp work force has grown, pensions have been looted, and vacation time is scarce.

The face-off in Chicago is seen by many as a kind of last stand by organized labor. "If they don't make changes, there will be no labor movement in 20 years," says Peter Dreier, professor of politics at Occidental College, who has written extensively on labor issues.

Echoing that sentiment was Tyrone Freeman, president of the L.A. Service Employees International Union - SEIU Local 434-B - which represents home-care workers who tend to the elderly and infirm: "There won't be [organized labor] in five years."

Change To Win - which represents grocery workers, hotel workers, truck drivers, carpenters - is led by SEIU President Andrew Stern, a Yale graduate and onetime social worker who heads a 1.8 million-strong union that has shown booming growth nationally. It has enjoyed particular success here in L.A. A 1999 campaign organizing home-care workers, led by Freeman's Local 434-B, brought some 50,000 employees into SEIU ranks, the majority of them African-American, while the nationally recognized "Justice for Janitors" campaign pulled in 8,000 more in L.A. over a decade and continues to challenge.

The Change To Win coalition argues that the AFL-CIO should be more parsimonious with funds that

frequently show little return - it popped for some \$65 million in support of John Kerry's failed presidential bid. Instead, they reason, money should be invested into organizing campaigns that bring in more employees, particularly those in low-income sectors, like the service industries.

The AFL-CIO's Sweeney was elected in 1995 on a platform of change, which included expanding union ranks through aggressive organizing. Some of that has taken place on his watch, but nearly three million manufacturing jobs have disappeared since his election - which may not be his fault, but has become his problem.

The service sector - hotel workers, food-service workers, retail clerks - is the fastest growing section of labor in the U.S., in part because those positions can't be shipped overseas. By contrast, intellectual technology jobs were ballyhooed as the growth industry of the last decade, but multi-degreed professionals have watched with dismay as high-tech positions have been off-shored.

"Microsoft has invested \$1 billion in India and China to develop technical infrastructure there," says Phillip Mattera, a researcher at the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Good Jobs First and coauthor of a study tracking globalization policies. "Any jobs that can be digitized - financial, software, technical support, even medical, like the reading of x-rays - can be off-shored now to highly educated individuals who will work for less."

Los Angeles' muscular labor organization, the County Federation of Labor, could play a pivotal role in the drama in Chicago - more so if a split actually occurs in the thirteen million-member national labor alliance. In spite of the assault by U.S. companies, L.A.'s unions have increased their numbers by aggressive organizing, particularly among immigrant workers.

With a possible national fracture looming, events in L.A. are being scrutinized by activists all over the United States. "L.A. has been a model of how the labor movement can really get its act together," says David Reynolds, professor of Labor Studies at Wayne State University in Michigan, and project co-coordinator for the AFL-CIO's Building Regional Power Research Project. A national split, says Reynolds, "can make things messy, but locally, unions can do good work."

Los Angeles has a particular stake in the whole national debate, and leaders from Los Angeles have helped push it to this point. Maria Elena Durazo, the energetic president of the hotel workers union - one of that national unions threatening a split - played a crucial role in the 1999 national labor convention held in L.A. Durazo, along with allies from the successful L.A. organizing coalition, Justice for Janitors, the garment workers union, and the United Farmworkers, was instrumental in pressuring the AFL-CIO to organize immigrant workers, a sizable chunk of the service workforce.

Now L.A.'s labor movement is again on center stage, even as it reels from recent seismic changes. Miguel Contreras, the County Federation leader who was key to local organizing efforts and the election of such labor-friendly officials as Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, died suddenly at age 53 of a heart attack. His death came just days before the election that selected former labor organizer Antonio Villaraigosa as mayor of Los Angeles.

The local movement was initially split between supporters of former mayor James Hahn and those backing Villaraigosa. But after Contreras's death, they threw their weight behind former County Fed political director Martin Ludlow, who was then a member of the L.A. City Council.

Ludlow takes over as permanent head of the County Fed on July 18, a week before the Chicago showdown. He believes that the AFL-CIO could fracture, but seems unperturbed. "I would not be surprised if a split occurs, and my hope is that it won't signal a major rupture," he says. Ludlow thinks that the debate about organizing is a good one for the labor movement, and is confident that the County Fed can hold together no matter what. The dissident unions "may be disaffiliated in L.A.," he says. "But they won't be disavowed."

They will be partners and we'll continue to work together on many, many political initiatives."

It's not going to be easy. If the convention passes a resolution to allow the possibly disaffiliated unions to continue working with those that don't break off, Ludlow's hopes can be realized. President Sweeney is expected to resist such an effort, since it makes a split less threatening.

Union activists around the country are worrying about what comes next. In many cases, they look to L.A., where labor organizing is gaining, not losing, momentum. Says Wayne State labor scholar David Reynolds, "People I work with get a lot of phone calls from unlikely places - [such as] Birmingham, Alabama - who look at L.A.'s work and say 'We want to get started on this process.'"

Published: [07/14/2005](#)

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