

# Into the Unknown

## After breaking with the AFL-CIO, local unions and dissidents work to revitalize the labor movement

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

The offices of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy near downtown boasts skylights and a pleasing dearth of florescent lights. LAANE, an economic policy organization aligned with some of the most muscular unions in Los Angeles, also has an artifact of feng shui hanging above its entrance that you wouldn't associate with hard-headed labor politics: a pakwa, a brightly painted octagon with a mirror to deflect negative energy.

That's just the right touch these days for LAANE and other labor organizations, the better to fend off bad vibes aplenty. Last week marked an historic sunder in the national labor movement as three unions bolted from the American Federation of Labor - the AFL-CIO, the 50-year-old umbrella for most unions in the United States. The dissident unions - service employees, Teamsters, and grocery workers - take with them some four million members and about a fifth of the national labor federation's budget. Two more unions are expected to leave this week.

On one hand, the fracture looks like the final apocalypse for a national movement that now counts only 12 percent of the U.S. workforce as members. Compare that to 1955, when the AFL-CIO was born, and when one in three U.S. employees was a union member - or 35 percent of all workers. The schism will force Los Angeles labor leaders to negotiate new relationships with estranged family members without getting bruised in a potentially acrimonious process.

But the break also has workers' rights activists around the country hopeful that this represents a new direction for a revitalized American labor movement, one that actively brings in new members, promotes a community-friendly public policy agenda, and reaches beyond union members to rescue sinking labor standards.

Critical to LAANE's success has been the nonprofit's relationship with the L.A. County Federation of Labor, which has made L.A. ground zero for labor organizing - coordinating successful campaigns to bring thousands of low-wage workers into unions while advancing worker-friendly policies that benefit employees outside their membership. LAANE was key to the passage of L.A.'s living wage law in 1997. The organization is now focused on securing commitments from developers to mitigate harm from commercial development and create jobs that pay a livable wage, along with amenities like open space. There are at least a dozen such agreements in L.A., backed by official city enforcement mechanisms and made possible by union political clout.

But that's all affected by what happened last week in Chicago, when the coalition of unions called Change to Win initiated divorce proceedings with the AFL-CIO. Change to Win formed earlier this year to challenge what they consider the AFL-CIO's too-slow approach to organizing. Its leaders believe a split is the only alternative to the death of the American union movement.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters announced a boycott of the Chicago convention, then split from the AFL-CIO. They took with them a total of 3.1 million members. The grocery workers' union followed days later. And it's only a matter of time and logistics, observers say, before three more unions - the United Farm Workers, the Laborers' International, and the hotel and garment workers union (UNITE HERE) - follow suit.

L.A. union officials have pledged to continue the successful local working relationship. But at least one-third of the union locals affiliated with the L.A. County Federation of Labor belong to the Change to Win unions involved in the rupture. That poses a thorny question: Can local leaders set up a structure that will allow the breakaway unions to continue work with those that stay with the AFL-CIO?

John Sweeney, elected AFL-CIO president in 1995 and reelected last week, expressed deep anger during the convention's keynote address, and called the departure of SEIU "a grievous insult," and the division "a tragedy for working people.

"Because," he said, "at a time when our corporate and conservative adversaries have created the most powerful anti-worker political machine in the history of our country, a divided movement hurts the hopes of working families for a better life."

Observers worry that it could signal a move to preclude local cooperation. A crackdown could go as far as placing local labor organizations under trusteeship - a hostile takeover that, in effect, muscles aside local leadership. Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center, doubts Sweeney would interfere with local harmonious union relationships like those in L.A. "I'd be surprised if Sweeney would undermine efforts to keep together."

The present dilemma comes as no surprise to L.A. union activists. Martin Ludlow, the newly elected head of the County Fed, predicted the split in a recent interview with CityBeat. His predecessor, the late Miguel Contreras, had been working on contingency plans to preserve programs that advanced what they called a "working families agenda." And across the U.S., local labor councils like the County Fed have been negotiating development agreements like LAANE's and bringing more workers into union ranks.

In June, local and state labor councils formally organized into a national network - "the real labor movement," as LAANE's founder and executive director, Madeline Janis-Aparicio, calls them. The Change to Win coalition pledged that a generous slice of the dues that would have gone to the AFL-CIO will instead go to state and local labor councils for organizing efforts. The AFL-CIO also resolved at the convention to support more local organizing, but a motion to permit local labor councils to work with breakaway unions died in committee.

In L.A. and elsewhere, discussion entertains a setup whereby dissident unions could officially split from local labor councils, per the national policy, then set up parallel structures so the two factions could continue to coordinate on policy objectives. A spokesperson from the L.A. Fed says it's too soon to comment on such a notion. A newsletter for County Fed members said that the L.A. alliance "and over 300 central labor councils nationwide are looking for the best solutions to keep local labor movements strong," and adds, "[w]e are hopeful to seek solutions with AFL-CIO unions in the coming months."

Next month, John Goldstein, currently president of the Milwaukee County Labor Council, will take over the national network of labor councils that many hope will form the basis for a revitalized labor movement. LAANE's Janis-Aparicio and the County Fed are key players. "Let the dust settle," Goldstein says. "We're

all angry. It's like a divorce, with the parents parting ways. The kids have to figure out what to do."

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