

# American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** All Affiliated National and International Union Presidents,  
Principal Officers of State Federations and Central Labor  
Councils

**From:** John J. Sweeney

**Date:** April 8, 2009

**Re:** **Erroneous Press Reports on Status of Reunification  
Discussions**

As you are aware, along with a number of AFL-CIO union presidents, Change to Win union presidents, and the National Education Association president, I have been participating in a series of meetings over the past several months to explore the prospects for reunification of the labor movement. Former Democratic Congressional Leader and current American Rights at Work Chair David Bonior has helped facilitate these discussions.

The main issues under discussion have involved questions of governance, organizing jurisdiction, and programmatic focus of the Federation.

In light of some significantly incorrect press reports that were issued following the most recent meetings held earlier this week, I wish to reaffirm the following points which I believe broadly reflect the views of the AFL-CIO's national affiliates.

1. The AFL-CIO firmly believes that the imperatives for a united American labor movement are greater than ever. With the Obama Administration's and current Congressional leadership's very public support for strong, effective unions, it is critical that the labor

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movement take full opportunity of its ability to influence the national debate on the enormous issues confronting us: the revitalization of the economy, national health care reform, and passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, to offer just a few obvious examples.

2. In this context, it is urgent that we pursue all avenues to attempt to bring back together the unions that disaffiliated from the AFL-CIO in 2005, and to continue the ongoing progress that we have been making recently in formalizing our relationship with the NEA.
3. In the course of the reunification discussions that have taken place, the AFL-CIO unions have indicated their willingness to discuss a wide range of issues that one or more Change to Win unions have asked to have considered. And especially given the fact that in the AFL-CIO's case there are some 50 affiliated unions who have not participated directly in these discussions, the need for consultation with those not at the table has required more time to explore the possibilities.
4. Nonetheless, and contrary to suggestions in certain press reports, I can assure you that neither these discussions nor the National Labor Coordinating Committee that was announced yesterday as a very short-term vehicle to continue the reunification discussions and to facilitate coordination of activities with the non-AFL-CIO unions on some of the major, pending legislative matters, reflect any intention whatsoever for the AFL-CIO to relinquish its responsibilities to an umbrella organization of any kind. The AFL-CIO is America's Labor Federation and it simply will not yield its role to a coordinating committee of any kind.
5. Most importantly, again contrary to a few press stories relying on unnamed sources, the AFL-CIO has absolutely no intention of converting itself into a mere political/lobbying operation -- leaving all other labor-movement-wide activities to individual unions to undertake on a cafeteria style pay-as-you-go basis. Nor does it view the present reunification process as one by which some newly created organization will emerge. As stated above, we are open-minded and receptive to any and all suggestions as to how to improve the structure and programs of the Federation. And if any or all of the Change to Win unions are so inclined at the end of this process, their reunification will be welcomed. However, the AFL-CIO will not be disbanding to start anew, it will not be subordinating itself to or merging itself into any other organization, and it will not be abandoning its historic mission of fighting for economic, social, political, and workplace justice at every level.

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And on this, I am confident that the Federation's 56 affiliated unions are in agreement.

We will keep you apprised of further developments.

cc: Richard L. Trumka  
Arlene Holt Baker  
All AFL-CIO Staff

# The Washington Post

## Unifying Unions

By Harold Meyerson

Tuesday, April 7, 2009; 5:32 PM

Four years ago the American labor movement split asunder. Republicans, who controlled both Congress and the White House, were bent on privatizing Social Security, and liberals were in a slough of despond. Unions that made up about a third of the AFL-CIO's membership broke off to form a rival federation, with the keep-hope-alive name of Change to Win.

Today, the American labor movement proclaimed its intention to come back together -- helped, of course, by the fact that Democrats now control both Congress and the White House and are bent on enacting universal health insurance and, perhaps, some legislation that would make it easier for workers to join unions. After meetings in Maryland this week, the presidents of the two federations and of the nation's 12 largest unions -- including the National Education Association, which heretofore has not belonged to any labor federation -- announced the formation of the National Labor Coordinating Committee, an interim body that could pave the way for labor's reunification by forming a new federation with roughly 16 million members.

The committee will be headed by David Bonior, the former Michigan congressman and House Democratic whip who was the foremost congressional opponent of both the Reagan administration's support for Nicaraguan contras and the Clinton administration's support for free-trade legislation with China and other repressive regimes. Bonior, who headed former senator John Edwards's 2008 presidential campaign, might possibly emerge as the head of the new federation. He is currently president of American Rights at Work, a pro-union advocacy group that has been coordinating the campaign for the Employee Free Choice Act, and he would be an articulate spokesman for a movement that could surely use one.

The union presidents have largely agreed to focus the federation (its name is still up in the air) on the political and lobbying operations at which the AFL-CIO has excelled. They will continue meeting over the next several months to hammer out details -- a timetable that could produce a plan to be ratified at the AFL-CIO's convention in September.

The unification is the result of both dashed hopes and new hopes. The dashed hopes are those of the founders of Change to Win, who argued that by focusing on organizing rather than politics, they could reverse the decline in union membership. That proved not to be the case, which is why all of labor now sees passage of the Employee Free Choice

Act, which would protect workers' right to join unions, as key to their expansion -- or survival.

The governing structure of the new federation, however, may look a good deal more like that of Change to Win than the AFL-CIO -- that is, with power vested more in the presidents of its large unions than in the federation's president. (This is not surprising since the plan is being crafted by the presidents of large unions.)

The hopes propelling unification are those that labor has invested in the Obama administration -- which not incidentally signaled the unions that it preferred to deal with a unified movement.

Any doubters that Democratic victories last year have prompted union unity should consider an even more remarkable alliance of unions that have long been mortal enemies: the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), half of whose 2 million members are employed in health care, and the California Nurses Association (CNA), which recently merged with other state nurses' organizations to form a national union. Both are likely to be members of the new federation. After more than a decade of subverting each other's organizing drives and placing rival health-care initiatives on the same state ballots, the two have agreed to respect each other's jurisdictions (CNA will organize nurses and SEIU other health-care workers), to work together to organize major hospital chains and to lobby for universal health care.

"With Obama's election, and the opportunities it provides to change health care, pass [the Employee Free Choice Act] and organize hospital workers, it didn't make much sense to continue arguing about small things," SEIU President Andy Stern told me. Similar calculations have driven the larger labor unification.

Unified or not, the most daunting task the unions face is passing the Employee Free Choice Act -- a challenge that's grown steeper since Sens. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Arkansas' Blanche Lincoln (D-Walmart) announced that they wouldn't support the legislation in its current form. Labor must calculate how much it can compromise on a bill that is essential to rebuilding private-sector unions in America, and whether it can renew the fight if the Democrats pick up more senators in next year's midterm elections -- a campaign to which a newly unified labor movement would bring greater numbers, more coordination and a desperate ferocity.

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