

## **Open Letter to All Those Concerned about the Labor Movement**

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"What's going on in the labor movement is a necessary re-examination of what the vision should be in this country for working people. . . . I compare it to the period after FDR was elected. During the New Deal, unions grew enormously, and the notion of what we now think of as the American middle class was invented. But it was preceded by exactly the same type of soul searching that is going on now. There were enormous disputes and fights and brawls within the labor movement about how to organize, and the relationship between local unions and then-nascent international unions." -- John Wilhelm, International President of UNITE HERE, Las Vegas Sun, May 31, 2009

"Many will argue that such public discord is ultimately harmful to the members SEIU represents and the workers they tirelessly and effectively organize. There is no denying that anti-union employers will use what is said by both parties in this debate against SEIU and probably other unions in the course of organizing campaigns. Like the questions of strikes, dues, and alleged union corruption, the question of union democracy will yet again surface as another issue with which the bosses will try to bludgeon us. At the same time, I believe that there must always be room within organized labor for legitimate and principled dissent, if our movement is to survive and ultimately grow." -- Mike Casey, UNITE HERE Local 2 President, Open Letter regarding SEIU/NUHW dispute, March 28, 2008

Earlier this year a conflict over control of UNITE HERE between former UNITE and HERE leaders went public. Seeking to capitalize on this dispute, SEIU moved to swallow up the breakaway UNITE faction and began organizing in UNITE HERE's core jurisdictions. Since then, the conflict has raged on setting off a civil war in the labor movement.

This summer, opinion in the movement has seemed to harden against SEIU with presidents of many major unions publicly criticizing SEIU's role in the conflict, and in particular the behavior of SEIU's president, Andy Stern.

We stand with UNITE HERE locals who are defending their union against raids and political attacks by SEIU and Workers United. However, it is not enough to simply criticize SEIU. The dysfunction of the UNITE HERE-SEIU fight, coupled with NUHW's struggle against SEIU in California, has opened up incredible space for folks struggling for a more democratic labor movement to put forward a vision of what that movement could look like.

In this letter, we will attempt to do that by taking an honest look at UNITE HERE. Specifically, we will argue that, for UNITE HERE to prevail in its struggle with SEIU, it must differentiate itself from SEIU by strengthening its democratic practices.

First, however, we should fully disclose who we are. We have all chosen to work in hotels in the Bay Area and to volunteer in UNITE HERE Local 2 organizing campaigns over the past several years. This practice is known as salting. Most of us had limited experience in the labor movement prior to working with HERE, but each of us has devoted a minimum of two years working and organizing in our hotels. We have each spent significant time with staff discussing and in some cases developing strategy and tactics in our campaigns. Additionally, this past winter we were involved in a conflict with UNITE HERE leaders in the Bay Area over their

unilateral decision to expel one of us from her hotel's organizing committee. This experience, as well as our time spent working on UNITE HERE Local 2 campaigns, informs our perspective.

In this letter we will try to put forward an independent and consistent analysis of unions that places emphasis on democracy and worker control. We will focus on the structure and culture of organizations, rather than the personalities of key leaders. We believe that this type of analysis can support all those struggling (whether as members or staff) to make their unions places that 1) teach and empower workers to fight collectively rather than simply mobilize them, 2) support and encourage differences of opinion and dissent, and 3) open up decision-making power to as wide a group as possible.

We recognize that the current struggle in organized labor exists within the larger context of an increasingly small and weakened labor movement. Partly this is due to factors beyond labor's immediate control, including decades of corporate and government attacks on unions and neo-liberal globalization. But our perspective is that we in the labor movement have to be self-reflective and take responsibility for our own actions. We know that writing this letter and raising questions about UNITE HERE in the midst of a war will lead many inside the union to claim that we are "aiding SEIU." Before the conflict with SEIU began, we were told that publicly raising questions about UNITE HERE would simply "aid the employers." Would we say that UNITE HERE is not entitled to fight SEIU because it "aids the employers"? As John Wilhelm, President of UNITE HERE, stated recently, "What's going on in the labor movement is a necessary reexamination of what the vision should be in this country for working people."

One of the greatest gifts we believe we can give each other and our movements is to engage in honest debate and discussion about what needs to happen to strengthen those movements. We are not participating in raids on a sister union; we are simply raising ideas and questions.

We want to help assure that UNITE HERE grows as a democratic, member-controlled union and does not one day become the monster that SEIU is now.

Change to Win?

The problems with the SEIU model have become more and more apparent. Endless mergers and trusteeships have created an increasingly top-down corporate decision-making structure within the union. This rush to centralize power has dovetailed nicely with the international union's approach to new organizing: on one hand they cut backroom deals with politicians and CEOs to gain the right to represent large groups of workers in exchange for weak contracts; and, on the other, when they actually do engage in organizing, they embrace what we call a "mobilizing model" of organizing. In this model, a small group of high-level union staff make strategic decisions and rely on lower-level union staff to ensure compliance with their program nationally.

Meaningful leadership development and education have been discarded in exchange for control. Exchanging stewards for call centers is the new SEIU. Even worse, members or locals that disagree with or deviate from The Program can expect to be retaliated against and marginalized. This is by no means what takes place at every SEIU local, but it's the standard by which the International operates, a model that has added a significant number of members to SEIU's ranks. When, in this model, do workers learn to lead their own fight?

When is solidarity built amongst co-workers? Where is the experience of collective struggle that will be carried forward by the workers, both inside and outside the workplace?

As SEIU's self-destructive battles with UNITE HERE and NUHW heat up, public criticisms of SEIU like ours have become commonplace. However, there has been very little critical analysis of UNITE HERE, or acknowledgment that the two unions formed Change to Win together, as well as Service Workers United. Instead, throughout this fight, HERE leaders and many of their supporters have positioned themselves as champions of "bottom-up" union democracy fighting against a reckless company union, SEIU.

Indeed, at the recent UNITE HERE convention, various changes were made to the union's constitution that in theory will protect members' right to disagree with leadership without fear of retaliation, mandate that members of affected locals vote on proposed mergers, and give members the power to elect important decision-making bodies within the international union.

Further, there are many aspects of the HERE model prior to the convention that in our experience demonstrated a genuinely militant, strategic, and democratic approach to organizing. They take on many real fights with employers, rather than negotiating backdoor agreements with them. Their campaigns are selected strategically to build density in areas where the union has leverage.

Locals develop highly coordinated campaigns with other locals nationally. For example, housekeepers in Chicago went on strike to support sister members' fight to win a contract in San Francisco. They prioritize organizing working-class women, people of color, and immigrant workers, and have stated their priority to have the leadership of the union reflect their diverse membership. Their stances on public policies that affect these groups are generally much more progressive than many other unions. Their organizing includes external pressure campaigns that utilize the participation of the local community. They also involve worker organizing committees in bargaining their contracts (this at least happens in our region, but possibly not in all locals). Shop stewards often fight grievances through direct action on the shop floor instead of bureaucratic procedures that leave out members. In our experience in Local 2, union leaders are committed to the labor movement, working long days and battling with hotel employers regularly.

As a result of all these qualities, the Local 2 contract with the hotels is very strong, with language that includes benefits, on-the-job protections, and progressive social policies (for example on immigration and affirmative action). In addition, Local 2 has committed significant resources to supporting NUHW's struggle against SEIU in California despite the fact that Local 2 is in the midst of citywide hotel contract negotiations in San Francisco. These are positive aspects of the HERE culture that should be recognized and are part of what could be a healthy, successful, and democratic union.

### Dangers in UNITE HERE

That said, we believe that UNITE HERE has many of the same structural and cultural flaws that SEIU does. UNITE HERE leaders and others have stated repeatedly that the union runs "bottom-up" organizing campaigns led by strong worker organizing committees. This sounds good but we have not seen this in practice. We have observed that 1) workers on organizing committees have been treated as objects of the campaign rather than active participants, 2) campaign strategy and tactics have been predetermined by high-level leadership and dictated to workers, 3) union members are treated similarly to unorganized workers, expected to follow a predetermined program without any genuine space to discuss and debate union decisions, 4) non-union workers on campaigns as well as members are faced with isolation and marginalization if they openly

disagree or organize against the leadership's plans, and 5) there are deep problems with the internal culture of the union, including treatment of union staff.

In this section we will focus on our direct experience in UNITE HERE organizing campaigns. However, we believe the issues we describe here about control of organizing campaigns exist in unions across the country and are therefore relevant to folks in all areas of the movement. Perhaps this stems from the fact that, when union leadership initiates a new organizing campaign, they often take the view they are the ones taking a risk and expending "their" resources, risking "their" reputations. They then come to see the campaigns as "their" campaigns. We will try to explain what it means on the ground when a small group of union leaders run campaigns all across the country.

On our campaigns, the organizing committees have had no independent decision-making power or even space to discuss decisions. Instead they have been used to rubberstamp and legitimize decisions on campaign strategy that a small group of high-level union staff have already made. Rather than being spaces for education and leadership development, committee meetings have consisted of union staff informing workers of the more or less pre-fabricated "plan to win."

This has played out in a number of ways on our campaigns. From the beginning, union staff have planned, set the agenda for, and ran committee meetings with minimal worker input. Workers are told when to show up for the meetings and asked to sit while union staff present information about the campaign. There has been no effort to teach workers how to organize a meeting, how to make an agenda, or how to facilitate a meeting.

Similarly, planning for actions has been entirely staff-driven. For example, union staff will decide, sometimes in conjunction with community and religious groups, that there will be a rally outside the hotel or a delegation to hotel management on a particular date. Rather than involve the committee in planning these actions, staff simply announce them in committee meetings and ask the workers to attend. Often, one or two workers are also asked to speak at the action in order to give a legitimate public face to the campaign.

Many of these actions have been carried out with relatively little attendance from the workers. In some cases, no workers were involved. Outreach to workers has also been controlled by staff with minimal worker input. Staff created elaborate house visit plans to reach workers who were not yet involved in the campaign. Committee members, who have relationships with their co-workers and could have helped develop plans to reach them, were left out of the loop and were often unaware a co-worker had been contacted by the union. This limited the leadership development of the committee as well as the internal organization of the workers.

Frequently, even small tactical decisions were made before being brought to committee members. For example, union staff would often decide the content of flyers that were to be handed to workers inside the hotel, without first consulting with the committee. Then, they would print the flyers and simply ask the committee to hand them out. In many cases, union staff passed out flyers to workers outside the hotel even though the committee had never seen them. This was especially problematic because each flyer stated at the bottom that it was a message from the worker committee.

When committee members have asked questions or openly disagreed with staff on strategy or tactics, their concerns have been minimized and ignored. This arose most sharply around the decision to call for a consumer boycott of one of our hotels. Many committee members were

opposed to the boycott, but when a few were brave enough to raise concerns, they were told that they were "just scared" or didn't understand the union's plan. In another case, one of us was expelled by union staff from the organizing committee after she shared sensitive information about the campaign with a labor journalist. Several months later, her co-workers on the committee presented union staff with a petition signed by a majority of committee members asking for her reinstatement to the committee. Rather than taking the petition seriously, union staff simply refused to consider their request. In some cases, committee members' differences of opinions have led them to be isolated from their campaigns. On some occasions when committee members have had serious disagreements with staff, they have intentionally not been informed of meetings, asked to speak at events, or called to be given campaign updates.

All of these practices have led to a disconnect between the workers and the campaigns. The organizing strategies and tactics are planned, coordinated, and carried out nationally by staff and union leaders. The workers inside the hotels are treated almost as an afterthought. Most of our co-workers were often entirely unaware of the union's activities on their behalf.

UNITE HERE has experience fighting large hotel corporations and has developed sophisticated campaign strategies capable of winning contracts. This is good. But to simply transfer what has worked before onto new campaigns is in direct contradiction with their stated goal of running "bottom-up" campaigns. The decision to call for a consumer boycott of a hotel, for example, should come after workers have studied the union's experience using the tactic and discussed other strategies for gaining union recognition from their employer. It should not simply be presented to the workers by union staff as the only possible way to win the campaign. If workers are not given a chance to discuss and make important (or even small) decisions about what is going to happen on a union campaign taking place in their workplace, exactly when will they begin to see the union as a democratic institution that they control and want to actively participate in? If workers can't even decide who will be on the organizing committee, when will they gain the practical experience of making strategic campaign decisions that will allow them to be the future activists and leaders the union is supposed to be cultivating? Where is the "bottom-up" happening? Instead we see the UNITE HERE model as more "top-to-bottom," where the workers are activated and mobilized by the top. This is an improvement over making direct deals with employers at the expense of organizing, but it is not democratic unionism.

Working for large hotel corporations, our managers give us orders and control what we do at work all day. Unions in general, and organizing campaigns in particular, should be places where workers learn how to independently analyze problems and generate and execute a plan of action. They should not be places that crush independent thinking. It is essential that union staff share their skills with the workers because they likely have union organizing experience that the workers don't yet have. But the workers are the ones taking the risks and have their own knowledge and experience within their workplaces and other parts of their lives. They are intelligent adults. Their relationship with the union should be one of mutual education and empowerment, not just another relationship of control.

Unfortunately, this lack of input and participation is not limited to workers involved in organizing campaigns at non-union hotels. In Local 2 there have not been regular monthly membership meetings as required by the by-laws. This is the case, we were told by one of the lead staff in the local, because, when they had these meetings in the past, only a small number of members came and they used the meetings as a forum to complain about unimportant things. Further, all committees, including the negotiations committee, are appointed by the President

(with the exception of the Executive Board). All shop stewards are appointed by the President. And all "leadership" meetings are only attended by members appointed as leaders by the President. In 2004, HERE and UNITE members from all across the country were not given the chance to vote on the merger of the two unions into UNITE HERE.

The structure of the union is also deeply influenced by the top-down organizing model we have been describing.

If a small group of high-level UNITE HERE leaders want to implement a tightly controlled organizing program all across the country, they need a large group of loyal staff to ensure that their plans are put into practice.

This creates problems on two fronts. First, it allows the union to operate independently of its members and the workers it seeks to organize. Researchers, boycott coordinators, community organizers, and hotel organizers have kept our campaigns "alive" and on program externally while very little has been done to build workers' collective power inside the hotels where we work. Second, this model creates a problematic internal culture among staff within the union. Strategy is developed at the top of the union hierarchy and then orders on how to implement the strategy are passed down to mid- and then lower-level staff. Obedience to orders, or in union parlance, "staying on program," is demanded of all staff outside of the leadership group.

Many typical problems flow from this: relationships among staff at different levels of the hierarchy are based on control; staff at different levels of the union have a lot of paranoia and insecurity about their own personal power; and uncritically following instructions, regardless of their political or moral content, is rewarded economically through promotions in the union hierarchy.

But that is not the whole story. To consolidate staff and worker discipline, a distinctly UNITE HERE practice known as "Pink Sheeting" has been developed in the union. This practice was criticized in a sensational public letter released by UNITE leadership earlier this year. This letter was meant to discredit HERE leaders and was not sincere. Nevertheless, pink sheeting is actually a serious problem in the union. It entails union staff gathering sensitive personal information about the lower-level staff that they directly supervise, as well as unorganized workers and members, in order to discover their personal weaknesses. This information is then used at a later point to "push" them to follow the union's program if they are resistant. For example (and this is a scenario we have heard about from multiple organizers in different cities), a lead organizer will share personal struggles that they have experienced in their life with a new organizer. The lead will then ask the new organizer about hardships they have experienced. Thinking that their fellow staff is simply opening up to them, the new organizer often shares sensitive information of their own. The information that the new organizer shares is then remembered by the lead (and in many cases actually recorded on a form that was originally pink). Down the line, if the organizer is told to do something on a campaign that they feel uncomfortable doing, the lead will put this information to use. They will bring up the sensitive information to convince the new organizer that, by following the lead's direction, they are confronting their fears and insecurities and becoming a stronger person, just like when they dealt with personal hardship in the past. While the details of how the practice is used vary, the constant is that emotionally vulnerable information is methodologically gathered on workers and staff. Later, if they express doubt about the union program, it is used to convince them to follow the union's plan.

This practice is a cynical and manipulative system of control. It creates a cult-like relationship of dependency between staff and their supervisors because staff who are successfully subjected to this come to see their supervisors as playing an important role in helping them develop emotionally. Pink Sheetting is not the common practice of building relationships that is necessary to all good organizing. Instead, it is a tactic designed to keep those involved in the union's work from straying from the directives of the union leadership. It undermines and contradicts real union democracy because it subverts not only independent action but independent thought. This practice has been more common in certain parts of the union than others, but it is clear that the national leadership knows about it. We know a number of staff who have quit in large part because this practice was used on them.

It is important to note here that this command and control-style union culture is endemic to much of the movement. It seems to have evolved out of well-intentioned efforts to reform unions that were often corrupt, did not represent the interests of their members, and were unable to respond to the anti-worker employer/government offensive that began in the 1980s.

Many of these reformers were able to rebuild their unions, fight racism and sexism in the movement, and initiate well-coordinated and effective organizing campaigns in unions that had not made significant efforts to organize new workers in years. This was often done by forming a new, well-organized leadership group that set a tightly controlled Union Program.

Despite the important gains won, we can see, several decades later, that the trajectory of this approach is deeply troubling. In many unions, more and more power has become concentrated in a small leadership group. Not only does this lead to the cultural and structural problems we have been describing in UNITE HERE, but in the extreme case of SEIU it leads to a total lack of accountability of the leadership of the international union. The damage that Andy Stern and his inner circle have done to workers in this country in the last year alone speaks for itself.

Based on our experiences in UNITE HERE, these are our critiques of the union. These are the practices that we believe must change in order for UNITE HERE to represent a real and meaningful alternative to SEIU. There are more than enough dedicated and creative members and staff in the union to grow it into a dynamic force in the labor movement. We sincerely hope that this happens.

One Standard for All Unions?

As the conflict in the movement rages on, we believe it is urgent that members, staff, unorganized workers, and volunteers resist the pressure to publicly censor their experiences in their unions. We hope that folks can share both the positive and the negative, and what their vision for the labor movement is. Specifically, with union leaders all around the country suddenly talking union democracy, we hope folks on the ground can be specific about what this means to them. Here are some of the principles that we think can help create a more objective way to analyze democratic practices in our unions. We believe we should hold all sides in the current conflict to the same standards:

## DEMOCRATIC NORMS

Specific practices that help ensure a union is run by the members:

The right to vote on all mergers, affiliations, and splits -- if a union is truly democratic, members will be able to decide for themselves if they want to join another union or split from one.

Member meetings -- monthly or regular meetings on a hotel/workplace level as well as local level, where members are able to raise issues that they choose, discuss, and debate them.

Meetings where member participation is orchestrated, as we have observed in both UNITE and HERE, don't count.

Election of stewards and other leaders -- if all union leaders are handpicked by a few elected officers, as they are in Local 2, union leadership can control and prevent dissent. Members should be able to elect council members, committee members, bargaining committees, and shop stewards. Respect for workers' opinions in new organizing campaigns -- workers should be allowed to engage in open discussions and debates about strategy for their campaigns, should not be retaliated against for having a difference of opinion from the staff, and should have the right to approve important decisions about their campaigns during group meetings. A constitution that protects all these rights and is followed.

### ORGANIZING and MOBILIZING

Workers should be organized, not simply mobilized. A paternalistic attitude towards workers has become fairly endemic in much of the labor movement and serves to further disempower members in their own unions. Treating workers as adults who can make their own decisions but may need support, training, and encouragement means not calling them just to come to the next rally but building long-term relationships based on mutual respect.

Strategy and tactics should be for the purpose of building member self-determination, not just winning short-term gains controlled by staff.

### SPACE FOR DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

Members and unorganized workers who disagree with leadership positions should not be retaliated against.

Membership meetings should have time for members to debate and discuss their positions on union issues. Staff should not be retaliated against for expressing differences of opinion with their management and should not be psychologically manipulated into agreeing with union policy. Staff should also not be retaliated against for organizing with their co-workers to defend their rights as workers within the union.

### POLITICAL EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Member political education -- regular on-going classes open to all members where they can learn about their union, its history, how to participate in it, their rights as workers and how to defend them. Training for members and unorganized workers so they can take on more of the responsibilities of their contracts and campaigns. It should be the job of the organizers to "work themselves out of a job" so that the members can run their own unions. Too many unions are becoming more staff-dependent instead of less. Raising the class consciousness of the union's membership should be a top priority. Linking struggles that working-class people are involved in outside of the workplace, like gentrification and foreclosures, with the struggle against corporate power inside the workplace might actually start to move unions into a genuine labor movement. If union members begin to see themselves as a social force capable of allying with other organized groups in their communities, they could not only win important political and economic gains but allow unorganized workers to gain trust in unions. Supporting workers in building strong relationships with the community for mutual benefit -- community organizations,

churches, etc. This is different from union staff and leaders enlisting clergy and community organizations to get on the union platform without any significant relationship built between the community and the workers.

#### TRANSPARENCY

Transparency about political activities -- UNITE HERE and SEIU are both putting significant resources into battling each other. Members have the right to know where and how their money and staff are being used in these fights. With rhetoric flying about democracy and member control, we must take this opportunity to push for tangible changes in the way our unions are run and our campaigns are conducted. This is the only way that UNITE HERE can emerge from its conflict with SEIU as a union that not only organizes workers on a large scale but empowers them in the process.

In solidarity, Sean Abbott-Klafter   Crystal Stermer

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