

The 'House of Labor' is a hard place to call home



William H. Young

Few things are harder to watch than family members arguing. Emotions boil out of control and an honest disagreement can become a bitter, door-slamming feud. That's why I hated being at the AFL-CIO Convention in Chicago last month.

Your seven elected delegates, Secretary-Treasurer Jane Broendel and I were NALC's representatives to the meeting. It was supposed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the merger of the Congress of Industrial Organizations with the American Federation of Labor. Instead, some of the largest unions disaffiliated and others boycotted.

Back in 1955—before half of active NALC members were born—the united labor movement was strong and sure of itself. Today, the one sure thing is we can't follow the path of pride and recrimination that made the Chicago convention a hollow event.

In June I wrote that “if the labor movement leaves the convention splintered and weakened, the power of all working people to defend their rights and seek a better life will be weaker, too.”

That forecast may have been too optimistic. The “House of Labor” isn't just splintered, it's cracked apart like a wishbone, one side with two-thirds of the membership still inside the AFL-CIO and the other, representing one-third of America's union members, on the outside.

In the simplest terms, the breakaway Change to Win Coalition says Labor's future depends on organizing by industry, the way the CIO did in the 1930s. This group, which is led by the Service Employees with the backing of the Teamsters and the UFCW, wants to direct the AFL-CIO's resources away from politics to organizing.

The “insiders,” President John Sweeney and his allies, are ready to increase organizing, but not at the expense of political action. They say the cure for Labor's ills is a relentless effort to win a congressional majority and a labor-friendly government.

As I see it, these are differences in strategy, not reasons for all-out war. Each side has good arguments. But neither side has the right to a “my way or the highway” attitude.

Since the convention, however, it's pretty clear federation President John Sweeney is trying to button up the tent. Disaffiliated unions

are to be shunned at every level, their locals banished from state and regional labor councils. Those of us still in the AFL-CIO may be ordered to join those local councils, or be pressured to merge—neither acceptable to the NALC.

For now, letter carriers remain “inside the tent,” but it is a hard place to call home. There was little feeling of family in the convention hall or within the federation's official leadership, where I serve as a vice president, re-elected on a voice vote along with the unopposed Sweeney slate.

That rubberstamp vote symbolized what was wrong in Chicago. The boycott meant delegates heard only half the story. What could have been a free-flowing debate was only a pep rally.

With the Change to Win defection, we face another issue—a handful of unions can now control the AFL-CIO. The federation leadership needs to appease only five unions (AFSCME, American Federation of Teachers, CWA, the IBEW and United Steel Workers) to create a bloc that could silence the rest of us. This point was underlined when Sweeney decided to give only the 10 largest unions seats on the new, powerful Executive Committee, not 15 as first planned. The NALC, which did not publicly endorse the Sweeney slate, is the 11th largest union, just 9,000 members smaller than No. 10.

If this were just a personal slight, I wouldn't mention it—my hide is plenty thick. But I strongly object to the insult to the members of the NALC, the suggestion that the best-organized, most politically active unionists in America don't belong in Labor's inner circle.

So, what does the future hold? I sense no willingness to seek a solution, only stubbornness. For a while at least, Labor will live in two houses. I can't say where NALC will finally call home, but I pray both sides can put aside ego and focus on what is best for working families.

As the NALC delegates were leaving Chicago, I realized the convention did have one bright point. It reminded us that our union is a big tent, open to all arguments and willing to shake hands afterwards and stand together, true brothers and sisters. No one can take that away from us—we won't let them. ☒