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Ehrenreich on Unions

Kevin Carson

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Barbara Ehrenreich has an interesting piece of analysis at The Progressive.

In the fifty years of the AFL-CIO's existence, Big Labor has shrunk to a third of its former size, but it's been clinging to its outsized clothes and outmoded habits. While membership dwindles, the AFL-CIO has continued to act like a big shot—doling out tens of millions to the Democratic Party and occupying a palatial spread located within kiss-blowing distance of the White House.

Nor has it budged from the style of “business unionism” developed by Samuel Gompers in the early twentieth century, in which unions act much like big insurance companies, offering their “consumers” the prospect of better wages and job security. It's Tiny Labor today, and—split or not—the challenge is to make it also lean, mean, and scrappy as a starving terrier.

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She has a list of recommendations for doing just that. Some of them, she says, come second-hand from labor lawyer Tom Geoghegan, author of the excellent *Whose Side Are You On?* Among my favorites:

Organize, don't subsidize. The amount spent on organizing is one of the key issues separating Change to Win from the rest of the AFL-CIO. Stern and the other dissidents want to boost the federation's organizing to \$72 million; Sweeney would increase it to \$30 million out of a total budget of \$125 million. Where does the rest of that money go now? Well, a lot goes to subsidize the Democratic Party...

Open up membership to every pro-union American. If I want to support the women's movement, all I have to do is send in my dues to NOW. But to join a union, most people have to go through the trial-by-fire of a union organizing drive in their workplace. This isn't so in Germany, for example, where individuals can join a union whether their workplace is organized or not. Here, the Steelworkers have started opening up their union to unorganized individuals, but for most Americans the unions remain a distant, inaccessible fortress. Individual members wouldn't be just dues-payers and supporters; they could be the seeds of organizing drives in their workplaces.

That sounds a lot like Alexis Buss's "minority unionism," in which people interested in forming a union in their workplace just do it, without bothering to get a majority local certified by the NLRB.

I strongly agree with the main point of Ehrenreich's next recommendation—"Advance the class, not just the membership"—but strongly disagree with the particulars of her class war agenda. As

you might expect, she pushes a lot of corporate liberal/socdem goo-gooism about national health care, subsidized housing, and the like. But it really would be nice to see union lobbyists fighting corporate welfare and other aspects of state capitalism, as well as pushing for green tax-shifting from labor to the access rights to natural resources, cutting the bottom tax rungs, shifting local sales taxes and property taxes on buildings to taxes on land value alone, etc. Instead of new income redistributions and new state interventions, why not just stop the state-subsidized transfer of income from poor to rich that's already taking place, and translate the savings into bottom-up tax cuts? Shee-it, if the Roman Empire has survived into the present day, there'd probably be Social Security and workplace safety regulations for slaves. Instead of assuming a system based on absentee ownership and wage labor, and then regulating the position of labor to make it more humanly tolerable, why not just let the laborer keep his full product in the first place, instead of working to feed capitalists, landlords, and bureaucrats in addition to himself? Ehrenreich, like the kindly farmer in Tolstoy's parable, doesn't want to set the cattle free—she just wants the capitalists to treat them better so they'll be easier to milk.

And further down the list...

Lose those buildings. Big Labor might have been able to afford them, but it's unseemly for Tiny Labor to be sitting on hundreds of millions of dollars worth of elegant real estate in D.C., and I mean the Teamsters' building as well as the AFL-CIO headquarters. Sell off the buildings right now, at the height of the real estate bubble, and fan out into storefronts and church basements around the country.

And what's this with holding this summer's AFL-CIO convention in a hotel that charges at least \$186 a night? Ever heard of Motel 6?

Hmmm... I wonder if the I.W.W.'s former headquarters at Wobbly Hall in Chicago is still around.