

10 WAYS

HOW MEMBERS CAN

TO REFORM AN

RECLAIM THEIR RIGHTS AND

UNDEMOCRATIC

HAVE A VOICE AND

AFL-CIO

A ROLE IN THEIR UNIONS



By Harry Kelber

Editor, The Labor Educator

**A union is only as strong
as its members.**



**Seek the truth and
have the courage
to defend it.**

10 Ways to Reform an Undemocratic AFL-CIO

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10 Ways to Reform an Undemocratic AFL-CIO

It's a fact beyond dispute that workers who belong to unions earn a lot more than those who don't. The wage gap amounts to an average \$154 a week.

For African-Americans, the union edge is \$140 a week, while for Hispanic workers, it's an additional \$180. For women, a union card is worth an extra \$149 in weekly pay. These figures come from the latest (2002) report of the U.S. Labor Department.

Union members usually enjoy better benefits in terms of paid vacations, health insurance and pensions, guaranteed in a legally-binding contract. Their union fights to improve their wages and working conditions and strives to remedy their grievances on the job. They're much better off than non-union workers who are at the mercy of their employers.

So why aren't workers rushing to union headquarters to join? Why are unions spending millions of dollars and an endless amount of time to beg them to join—and getting such a limited response? Why does union membership continue to decline?

Labor leaders have several answers. They say that millions of workers would like to belong to a union, but they fear reprisals from their employers, even though the National Labor Relations Act gives them a legal right to join a union. But thus far, the AFL-CIO, with its 13 million members, has been unable to overcome their fears or to make it a lot tougher for employers to violate a worker's basic civil rights.

Labor leaders say it's tougher to organize in hard times. But unions made their greatest gains during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Why wasn't the AFL-CIO able to increase its membership in the good times of the early 90s when the economy was booming?

Whatever reasons the AFL-CIO leaders give for labor's failures, they never blame themselves.

National union leaders, and a great many local ones, are rarely challenged, no matter how many costly blunders they make. Even if they are incompetent, it does not prevent them from remaining in office indefinitely.

They do not feel any obligation to be accountable to their rank-and-file or even listen to what they have to say, because they have developed a system that guarantees their automatic re-election. They suppress dissenting opinions in the name of labor unity. They make sure that nothing critical about them or their policies appears in their union publications. They deal with their critics, either by ignoring them or punishing them, even to the point of ending their careers in the labor movement. They do whatever is necessary to maintain their tight grip over their union.

Leaders Who Won't Identify Themselves

The 54-members of the Executive Council hold their meetings behind closed doors and never report what really goes on there. The average union member has no idea what their leaders look like, what their background is or what they do or say at Council meetings and elsewhere. You could not recognize any of them if they passed you on the street or sat near you at a restaurant. They never had to campaign to get re-elected to the Council, and they prefer to remain incognito.

To the outside world, union leaders present themselves as champions of abused, disadvantaged workers. Their sincerity and moral purpose are seldom questioned, despite their insistence on conformity and obedience from their members.

Most of them are staunch Democrats and their unions contribute huge sums of money and brigades of volunteers to Democratic candidates, but they have gotten almost nothing in return from the politicians, even in those years when the Democrats controlled Congress and the White House.

The dirty, little secret about the AFL-CIO and many of its affiliated unions is that they are undemocratic by any significant definition of that term. Their leaders discourage free speech by their members. They suppress criticism and all forms of dissent. They censor their publications to reflect only the official viewpoint. They conduct sham elections in which the incumbents are guaranteed to win, again and again.

The seeds of autocratic union leadership were planted as far back as 1886, when the American Federation of Labor, predecessor to the AFL-CIO, was founded. From that date until 1995—a span of 109

years—organized labor has had only four presidents. In that same period, there were 29 American Presidents, 30 British Prime Ministers and nine Popes, all of whom had at least as weighty responsibilities as those of an AFL-CIO president.

Samuel Gompers, the first AFL president, held the post for 38 years until his death in 1924. He was succeeded by William Green, who also died in office after 28 years of service. Then came George Meany, who occupied the position for 28 years until he became terminally ill. Meany passed the presidency to his heir-apparent, Lane Kirkland, who at age 73, had reigned over the AFL-CIO for 17 years and had expected to remain in power for many more, before he was forced to resign. (Now that's job security!)

Did Sweeney Make a Difference?

In 1995, John J. Sweeney, then president of the Service Employees International Union, became president of the AFL-CIO in the first publicly-debated labor election in nearly a century. He achieved his victory by the bloc votes of the leaders of 36 international unions, without much involvement from the rank-and-file.

Sweeney won the backing of labor activists by staffing AFL-CIO's headquarters and field operations with more women and minorities. He spent large sums in support of organizing campaigns and urged affiliated unions to allocate 30% of their budget for organizing. He worked hard to build coalitions with religious groups, women, minorities and young people. His statements on the economy and labor's political role were usually on target, even though they never led to any effective action.

Unfortunately, Sweeney dared not, or would not, move against the electoral system that had transformed the Executive Council into a self-perpetuating oligarchy. In fact, he supported the system and has benefitted from it.

That was made clear on the very day that Sweeney won the presidency. The two leaders of the rival groups, that had fought so furiously with each other during the pre-election period, announced they had agreed on a joint "Unity" slate for a 54-member Executive Council,

whom they had personally selected. The names were read off, revealing that all Council members who had served under Lane Kirkland were still on their list and would be re-elected. For sweeteners, the Unity promoters hand-picked three women and eight people of color for seats on the expanded Council.

The Unity candidates were never brought up to the stage to be introduced to the delegates, who knew nothing about them except their names and the unions they came from. There was no discussion of the historic change in the AFL-CIO's leadership structure and no questions were asked.

Staying Remote from the Rank-and-File

After only two years in office, Sweeney and the heavy-hitters on the Executive Council conspired to increase their term of office from two years to four. They kept their plan secret until the opening of the 1997 convention for fear of arousing widespread debate and strong opposition from critics. The amendment for a four-year term was rushed through by the voice vote of the delegates, sandwiched between several non-controversial amendments. The voice vote was in clear violation of the AFL-CIO Constitution, which requires a two-thirds vote of convention delegates to approve any amendment. Not one delegate dared to challenge the illegal vote.

Embarrassed but not apologetic, the AFL-CIO leadership, at the 1999 convention, quietly changed the constitution so that it can also be amended by a voice vote.

At the 2001 convention in Las Vegas, Sweeney and the Executive Council took still another step in distancing themselves from the union membership, approving an amendment by voice vote that allows the AFL-CIO to hold conventions every four years instead of every two. The number of Executive Council meetings has also been reduced from the traditional three times a year to only two.

Labor Publications: Less Frequent and Less Honest

For 86 years, the labor movement had a monthly magazine, *American Federationist*, started by the AFL in 1896. It ran articles by experts that offered useful information and insights about the

economic, political and social problems of the times. The AFL-CIO discontinued it in 1982.

Until 1989, the AFL-CIO published a weekly tabloid newspaper. *AFL-CIO News*. That year it was turned into a semi-monthly. After Sweeney became president, the AFL-CIO changed to publishing a monthly magazine, *America @ Work*, a flashy, full-color publication that devotes lots of space to photos of union members and preachy articles at the expense of solid information and analysis.

A half century ago, there were dozens of weekly labor newspapers; today, there are less than a handful. Increasingly, unions are publishing their official organs every two or three months a year, instead of monthly. Members now know even less about what their union and others are doing than they used to.

All official labor publications suffer from the same disease: their editors won't carry any news item that criticizes or embarrasses union leaders. And, of course, they flatly refuse to give any space to dissident groups or critics. There is no mystery why most members distrust their union publications and, by extension, their leaders.

Does Suppressing Criticism Build Unity?

For many labor leaders, democracy in their own union is a luxury they can't afford. In their view, unions must function like military organizations to ensure success. Members must speak with one voice, they say, to show they are united behind their elected leaders.

Critics, when they are not ignored, are denounced as disrupters, accused of "giving aid and comfort to the enemy." Even when the criticism has validity, they are attacked for "washing the union's dirty linen in public." Quite often, corrupt or incompetent union officials use the "unity" mantra to shield themselves from criticism. Worker unity is very important, but union leaders can build it by being honest with their members and winning their confidence.

Union Members Have No Voice Within AFL-CIO

Union members get little information about what goes on in the upper reaches of the AFL-CIO. They're not told how their dues money is spent, and get a runaround when they try to find out. They don't hear

from their officers except when they are running for re-election. It's hard to reach them by phone or letter, because we can't get past their secretaries. All they want us to do is pay our dues, follow their orders and shut up.

It's no wonder that millions of workers have become apathetic, cynical, angry and disinterested in their unions. The result is a serious weakening of labor's strength at the bargaining table and in the political arena, because employers and politicians don't believe that union leaders have the support of their members.

The truth is that the AFL-CIO can never regain its former strength unless thousands of union members are inspired to become active volunteers in both organizing and political campaigns.

Many union leaders realize this, but few have shown the ability or desire to undertake the daunting task of organizing the already organized. So, if there are to be any changes for the better inside the labor movement, it will be the rank-and-file leaders who will have to show the way.

In the following pages are 10 ways by which union members can reclaim their right to a voice and a role in their organizations by building a grass-roots movement.

1. AFL-CIO Websites must allow union members to talk to each other and their officers.

It's a sad fact that union dues payers have no voice at all on the AFL-CIO's two Web sites, which are installed as one-way communications systems: from leaders to members, but not the reverse. Our leaders tell us about specific labor campaigns they want us to support, but are not interested in our comments or suggestions. Any forum where members can speak freely makes them nervous.

The technology is available to allow members to have their say on the Web through the use of "message boards" and "chat rooms" that also serve to stimulate discussion groups. Yet the AFL-CIO technical staff has been ordered not to install any type of open forum, on the lame excuse that members haven't asked for them.

It's worth noting that in the early 1990's, when the AFL-CIO

started its first Web site through CompuServe, more than 4,000 activists, including many local officials and staffers from several dozen unions, were engaged in lively discussions about a wide range of labor issues. It gave members from different unions a ready-made forum to get acquainted with each other and build cooperative relations, while they exchanged views and experiences.

On at least two occasions, then AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, a subscriber to the open forum, held press conferences on the Web, during which he answered a series of questions put to him by union members. (Why won't Sweeney do the same?)

Top AFL-CIO leaders apparently did not like the idea of backtalk from rank-and-filers, even though it supplied them with valuable feedback about the effectiveness of their policies and programs, so they had the message boards eliminated in 1999, when they added the *workingfamilies* Web site to their official one.

AFL-CIO's Web Sites Are Boring and Humorless

Another common complaint about the AFL-CIO's Web sites is that they are consistently dull and humorless. There's never a clever one-liner or wisecrack to make us smile. They don't poke fun at politicians who attack unions. They don't use cartoons to make a sharp point. The writing, while always politically correct, is stodgy and studded with clichés.

The way we learn about the AFL-CIO's policy positions is through statements on the Web by President Sweeney (written by staff people) on issues like prescription drugs, unemployment benefits and President Bush's tax cuts. There's always something to complain about, but it's rare to be given a victory to celebrate. The AFL-CIO is perpetually on the defensive, and we're always being asked to write to the White House and members of Congress on one issue or another.

One of the glaring omissions in its news coverage is the lack of information about President Bush's war against terrorism and what's been happening in Iraq and Afghanistan, as though the issues of war and peace are irrelevant for working families. Controversial subjects are routinely ignored, as well as news that might cause

embarrassment to labor leaders.

The two Webs contain a substantial amount of basic information about the AFL-CIO that would be useful to any worker who may be interested in joining a union, but they offer very little to labor activists and long-standing union members.

The sites could be made more interesting and informative if a few Executive Council members were willing to take on their critics in an open debate. Most union leaders prefer to keep a low profile.

Creating a voice for union members on labor's Web sites is one of the most important reforms that must be achieved. The labor movement cannot possibly regain its former strength unless tens of thousands of rank-and-filers are given a real opportunity to become well-informed and involved.

2. AFL-CIO's financial reports should be made available to members on a regular basis.

It's amazing how little union members know about the finances of the AFL-CIO and their international unions. They pay their union dues, usually through a checkoff by the employer, and have no idea how their money, totaling millions of dollars, is spent.

Members are never informed about major expenditures, such as the salaries of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's 12 titled assistants, much less about what they do. Nor are we told about the cost of the Federation's 19 departments or what their staffs do to earn their salaries. Aren't we entitled to know how much money is contributed to the Democratic and Republican Parties, and what we've received in return for our hard-earned money?

By withholding financial information from us, it's difficult to judge whether our leaders are spending our money wisely or recklessly. For example, we ought to know the pension plans that cover the AFL-CIO's current and retired officers and staff members, so we can compare them to those in private industry.

Financial data about the cost of organizing campaigns should be

made available to union members. Qualified labor activists might be interested in finding out about the salaries and benefits the AFL-CIO pays its organizers, as well as its hiring policies.

Is Our Dues Money Being Spent Wisely?

The AFL-CIO Constitution requires the Secretary-Treasurer to print an annual financial statement, copies of which go to affiliated national unions and state and local labor bodies. Union publications rarely, if ever, print official financial reports, much less allow criticism of their contents. Those reports are not available to members.

The only place where the AFL-CIO's financial reports can be challenged is at its conventions, but, those meetings will now be held every four years, instead of two.

If the shareholders of a corporation receive annual financial statements, and have a right to discuss them, certainly we dues payers are entitled to the same right. Our demands are legitimate and reasonable:

(1) The AFL-CIO must publish its annual financial statement on its Web sites; (2) Any member who requests a printed copy shall receive one, and (3) Questions and comments on the statement should appear as a special Web feature. The same demands apply to international unions.

3. AFL-CIO Departments must become more open and keep members informed.

The directors of the AFL-CIO's major departments operate mostly in secret, rarely sharing information with union members or treating us with respect when we call with questions or comments. It's hard to be active if we don't know what's going on.

Take the International Affairs Department, for example. It does not publish regular bulletins or press releases or any announcements of its activities on the AFL-CIO two Web sites. It makes reports only to the Executive Council, but won't let us know what's in those reports.

We have no idea what the department's staff of about a dozen specialists does, or what commitments are being made in our name.

Although Sweeney talks about the need for international labor solidarity in a global economy, we get almost no information about what's happening to unions in Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. How are we going to strengthen our ties with the labor movement in other countries if the department refuses to share its information with us?

Members Have No Input in Policy Decisions

The Organizing Department suffers from the same practices: keeping the rank-and-file out of the information loop. The department brags about victories (there have been hardly any major ones), but remains silent about lost campaigns. We're not told about the progress or difficulties of union organizing efforts, nor are our suggestions seriously considered or publicized.

Reliance on a tight inner circle for new organizing strategies has thus far yielded disappointing results. Yet the fact is that without a well-informed membership, unions can't get the mass support they need to grow.

The same criticism can be leveled at the Legislation Department, which seldom encourages input from the rank-and-file, even though it has yet to score even one modest victory in Congress.

The Political Department can boast that 26% of the nation's total vote in the 2000 elections came from union households, but it has failed to capitalize on its electoral strength. With its demonstrated vote-getting power, why does labor get so little attention and respect from Congress? Shouldn't we have a voice in labor's political decisions?

The Sweeney administration, in its early years, killed the Information Department, which answered a wide range of questions from labor researchers and members. More recently, it abolished two other departments, Education and Working Women, allegedly for reasons of economy.

Most union members agree that the Working Women's Department was the most productive within the AFL-CIO, and the decision to eliminate it encountered strong opposition, not only from

women's groups. But why wipe out the Education Department? Is educating our members a luxury we can no longer afford?

We have to change the behavior of AFL-CIO's departments by insisting that they (1) issue monthly reports of their activities on the AFL-CIO Web sites; (2) furnish printed copies to members who request them, and (3) respond to questions and comments from union members. The same requests apply to international unions.

4. Change convention voting rules, so that every delegate has one, and only one, vote.

The most undemocratic practice of the AFL-CIO is the way it elects its three top officers and the 51 members of its Executive Council. In a sham election that lasts less than five minutes, all incumbents are automatically re-elected for an additional four-year term by the voice vote of convention delegates. There are never any opposing candidates, because whoever would dare to run would suffer a certain humiliating defeat.

That's how, the Executive Council maintains its perpetual control of the AFL-CIO. If members retire or die, they are replaced within the Council, never by an open election. As a result, there is no opportunity for new leaders with fresh ideas to ever hold seats on the policy-making Council. The continuing deep freeze in leadership is undoubtedly a major factor for the AFL-CIO's failure to grow.

The Answer: One Delegate, One Vote

The Executive Council's unchallenged power is based on Article IV, Section 4 of the AFL-CIO Constitution, which deals with the voting strengths of convention delegates. It permits international unions to cast as many votes at conventions as they have members, based on their per capita payments to the Federation, while State Federations and Central Labor Councils are each limited to a single vote.

Under this voting system, a small international union like the Federation of Professional Athletes, with 1,700 members, can cast nearly three times the votes of all 50 State Federations and the 600

Central Labor Councils combined.

As a result, no officer or member of any State Federation or Central Labor Council has ever been elected to the AFL-CIO's top leadership since the AFL-CIO was formed in 1955. Delegates from state and local bodies are little more than window-dressing at conventions, denied any meaningful role in policy decisions and elections.

The Executive Council relies on state and local affiliates, which are closer to the rank-and-file, to conduct labor's economic and political campaigns. To deny them a voice in decision-making is not only unjust, but does incalculable harm to the labor movement.

To ensure fair and free election of officers at conventions, the AFL-CIO Constitution must be amended so that every delegate will have only one vote. This provision has been in effect for a long time at conventions of the Canadian Labour Congress, to which many U.S. international unions are affiliated. In most organizations, it is standard practice for delegates to have equal voting rights.

A coordinated national campaign by State Federations and Central Labor Councils should be initiated to give them a rightful voice within the AFL-CIO through a "one delegate, one vote" constitutional amendment. Pressure should be put on international unions to agree to the amendment.

5. Candidates for high office must declare their qualifications and views on labor issues.

For decades, members of the Executive Council have been automatically re-elected by voice vote of convention delegates without the necessity of declaring their qualifications or their views about issues confronting workers and their unions.

The traditional practice is for incumbents to announce their candidacy on the day the election takes place and then endure a five-minute ritual that passes for an election contest. Many delegates have never met the candidates and don't know what they stand for, but vote for them, nevertheless. Delegates know that it's risky to vote against an incumbent who is sure of being elected anyhow.

During the years that Council incumbents have held office, they have consistently maintained such a low profile that union members don't know what they look like or what they've said or done on the Council.

Even though Council members have been unable to reverse the decline in AFL-CIO membership and have failed to win a single piece of pro-worker legislation in Congress since the 1970s, they expect to be re-elected by acclamation when their term of office expires in 2005.

We're in a time of crisis when the labor movement needs its "best and brightest" in positions of national leadership. We can't afford to have a "glass ceiling" within the AFL-CIO, where qualified state and local leaders are denied an opportunity to compete for high office. If incumbents wish to seek re-election, they have to prove they deserve it in a free and open election.

At least one month before the election, all candidates for Executive Council should be required to publish a statement about their qualifications in printed literature or on the AFL-CIO Web sites. The same rule shall apply to candidates for international union offices.

Candidates should make themselves available for questioning by rank-and-file members. Failure to meet these requirements should disqualify a candidate.

6. All union members should receive AFL-CIO's official publications as part of their dues.

The AFL-CIO's monthly magazine, *America@Work*, has a circulation of 165,000--that is less than 2% of its 13 million members. Most of its copies are distributed in bundles to international union affiliates on the basis of 2% of their respective memberships.

This means that most of us don't know what's going on within the AFL-CIO or other unions. (Some may go to the trouble of downloading labor news from the Internet, but that's not the same as reading a publication.)

Some time ago, the Federation decided to solicit individual subscriptions at a price of \$14.95 a year, but thus far it has received only 6,000 new subscribers.

There's very little news about the AFL-CIO in the publications of affiliated unions, which devote most of their space to their own affairs.

How can national leaders expect loyalty and participation from the rank-and-file if no serious effort is made to keep them informed? And how do they expect to organize the millions of non-union workers if they have no means (such as weekly radio and television programs) of communicating with them?

Critics of *America@Work* complain that its editors won't print news unfavorable or embarrassing to labor leaders. For example, the magazine never said a word about the ULLICO insiders' stock- trading scandal involving some 20 current and retired national labor leaders. There are no open debates about problems within the labor movement or about controversial questions of public policy.

Union member should be entitled to receive a mailed copy of America@Work as part of their per capita payments to the Federation. And a committee of qualified editors should study how to make the magazine a fairer and more useful publication.

7. National leaders should be elected by vote of the membership, not by convention delegates.

Most international unions elect their top officers at their conventions by votes of the delegates. Only a relatively few allow elections by the entire membership.

Incumbents naturally prefer convention elections. They know most of the delegates, who are usually local union officers with whom they have developed friendly working relations over the years. When necessary, they can use favors and threats to win a delegate's support.

Incumbents have considerable authority they can use to their advantage, including control over the agenda and committee assignments at the convention. Unless incumbents make some egregious blunders, there's rarely a problem of getting re-elected, again and again by convention delegates.

When the entire union membership is allowed to vote for their

officers, it creates problems for incumbents. While it's normally easy for them to deal with a thousand or more mostly like-minded delegates, they cannot predict, with any degree of certainty, how tens of thousands of union members, most of whom don't know them, will vote. They have to conduct an actual campaign to win the votes of their members, who now have an important voice in the outcome of the elections.

It's worth noting that members are not allowed to vote for their national leaders even in unions that consider themselves progressive and democratic. Their claim is that national elections are too costly and time-consuming. Yet the 1.4 million members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the 800,000 members of the Laborers' International Union vote for their national officers.

Rank-and-filers must fight for the right to vote in national union elections. It offers them a way to influence the choice and conduct of their officers. It's an important step toward making them accountable.

8. The right of free speech must also include the freedom to criticize and dissent.

Today's unions function as one-party systems, where members are expected to support their leaders uncritically, on the assumption that "in unity there is strength." It can also serve as a protective shield for union officials who are corrupt or incompetent.

In the business world, when sales and profits are declining, when public demand for the product is decreasing, when employee productivity is dropping and the managers and board of directors have failed to come up with a practical rebuilding program, shareholders would be up in arms, demanding a new management team or, at the least, insisting on the overhaul of the company's policies and operations.

That's not how it works in the world of organized labor. There is virtually no open criticism of the AFL-CIO leadership, even though membership has declined to only 13.2% of the nation's work force (less than half of what it was a couple of decades ago); and when unions are perpetually on the defensive and losing legislative battles; when pro-union workers are fired by the thousands every year; when

workers' wages remain stagnant, and health-care costs are rising; when union members have become demoralized and their leaders are incapable of dealing with their problems or offering them a hopeful vision of the future. Why is there no outcry from the rank-and-file?

Because the AFL-CIO hierarchy has various ways to discourage criticism or any expression of dissent. They can conveniently ignore most protests from within their ranks, knowing that dissident groups have neither the money nor the resources to conduct a sustained national campaign against them. They make sure that the views of dissidents are never mentioned in union publications. And they demand unswerving loyalty from their staffs and other appointees.

Using Fear to Suppress Opposition

If, however, an opposition movement appears to be making headway, the officialdom may try to “co-opt” its leaders by offering them jobs or special favors. But if that doesn't work, they will not hesitate to take vindictive actions against effective critics by harassing or firing them from their jobs or treating them as pariahs within the labor movement. The message to critics and their followers is clear: keep your mouth shut if you want to avoid trouble.

That explains why many honest and capable local union leaders turn a blind eye toward undemocratic and wrong-headed policies of their national officers. They know that whistleblowers can be blackballed and their careers in the labor movement ended, so why take that risk? It's much easier to feel secure by being a conformist time-server, waiting for your superior to retire or die so you can replace him or her.

Most labor activists long ago gave up the idea of reforming the AFL-CIO because they considered it a waste of their time and energy “to fight city hall.” Instead, they have been focusing on local labor problems where they can succeed in effecting change.

The deafening silence about the AFL-CIO's uninspiring, self-serving leadership comes from the millions of members who don't know what their unions are doing and don't care. Cynicism, apathy, passivity and resentment are the prevailing moods within the labor movement, and there is no evidence that the labor leadership in Washington is

interested in doing something about the problem.

An important test for union leaders is how they respond to criticism from their members. If they show they have an open mind and are willing to engage in a dialogue with their critics, they will gain loyalty and cooperation. By suppressing freedom of speech, they won't get members' support during crises when they need them most.

Are Democratic Unions Weaker or Stronger?

Take the case of the International Typographical Union, one of the oldest and probably the most democratic union in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, before computers made most printer jobs obsolete. For more than a century, the ITU elected its officers by national referendum. It was the only union that had a two-party system—Progressives and Independents—that operated openly within the union and competed with each other for elected office.

When the “Progs” ran the union, the “Indies” served as watchdogs for the membership, and it was also true when their roles were reversed. There were many heated debates over policies at the monthly meetings and weekly executive board sessions.

The ITU proved that unions are stronger under a democratic system where members are encouraged to speak their minds. Its New York Local 6 conducted a citywide strike in 1962-63, during which it shut down *The New York Times* and other major dailies for 114 days to gain a favorable contract.

The ITU model is one that labor activists and their supporters should strive to emulate in their international and local unions. A functioning two-party structure within unions is the best way to ensure that elected officials will be accountable to their members.

9. The Ethical Practices Committee should draft a Code of Conduct for union officers.

Back in 1957, at the recommendation of the AFL-CIO Ethical Practices Committee, the convention expelled three international unions—the teamsters, bakery workers and laundry workers—on multiple charges of corruption, including racketeering and embezzlement of union funds. It ordered two other unions—the textile workers and distillery workers—to “clean up their act” or face expulsion.

The AFL-CIO, then just two years old, was embarrassed by the disclosures of the U.S. Senate McClellan investigations that revealed criminal behavior by a number of national labor leaders. The Executive Council adopted a resolution that labor must “keep its own house in order,” and that union officials had the responsibility of cooperating with the government and other public agencies who were seeking “fairly and objectively” to root out corruption.

The Ethical Practices Committee has not functioned for the past 45 years. It ignored the rampant corruption that existed in three international unions—teamsters, laborers and hotel and restaurant employees—even after they had to sign an agreement to allow the Justice Department to supervise and oversee their operations.

When more than twenty current and retired national union leaders were involved in an insiders’ stock-trading scheme as directors of ULLICO, a union-owned insurance company, that netted some of them a total profit of \$7.5 million, the Ethical Practices Committee, if it still existed, had nothing to say. Nor did the AFL-CIO Executive Council condemn their behavior in what is clearly the worst labor scandal in decades.

It is difficult for unions to organize if they are perceived as tolerating racketeers and criminal elements within their ranks. Employers use whatever evidence they can get on corrupt labor leaders to dissuade their workers from joining a union. Even unions that operate squeaky clean can be smeared with the broad brush of corruption by hostile employers and politicians.

The AFL-CIO's Ethical Practices Committee should be revived and instructed to draft a Code of Conduct that all elected or appointed union officers will be required to comply with.

10. The right of members to a referendum to remove incompetent and corrupt officers.

When we elect our officers in either a local or national union, we expect them to live up to their promises and our expectations, to behave with honesty and integrity, and to run the union in a democratic manner, with due regard for our rights.

But once elected, far too many officers act as though the union is their personal property. They make important decisions without asking our approval. They hand out cushy jobs to their cronies. They spend union funds lavishly on themselves and don't report their expenses to the members. They try to adopt a lifestyle that is more like the employers they deal with than ours.

They often do very little to earn their substantial salaries. As negotiators, they are too willing to make concessions and accept an inferior contract in order to avoid conflicts with employers. They let grievances pile up without doing much to resolve them. They don't bother to talk to us, except when they're running for re-election. If we criticize them, they shrug it off or see to it that we're fired or harassed on the job.

What can we do when we're stuck with officers who prove to be incompetent, corrupt and abusive? Not much. No matter how sharply we criticize them, we can't oust them from office, which they can hold onto until their term expires, and that may take another couple of years. In the meantime, they can pretty much do as they please without feeling their job is in jeopardy.

We could get back at these characters if we had the right to hold a referendum to remove them from office. Many democratic organizations have a provision in their constitutions giving members the power to recall their officers by a referendum under specified conditions. The U.S. Constitution provides for the removal of the President, Vice-

President and federal civil officers by means of impeachment and conviction.

However, neither the AFL-CIO nor most international unions have a recall provision in their constitutions. One of the few exceptions is the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, an AFL-CIO affiliate. The BLE provides that when 25% of the active union members (or locals representing 25% of the members) sign a petition calling for a referendum to remove one or more officers, the international president is required to call a referendum within 30 days of the filing of the petition.

The petition may contain the names of one or more favored candidates who are to be added to the ballot. If the union president is the object of the removal process, the vice-president will arrange for the referendum.

Our right to remove incompetent and corrupt officers and those who neglect their responsibilities or abuse their authority is a bedrock principle of union democracy. Members must be mobilized to press the AFL-CIO and every affiliated union to provide for a recall process.

Using Internet to Organize Rank-and-File for Action

The Internet offers labor activists a powerful set of tools to build a national rank-and-file movement that can achieve the reforms that are so urgently needed.

Reactionary union leaders can no longer suppress the views of those who disagree with them, because we can exercise our right to free speech on the Internet and have an audience of union members to hear what we have to say.

The electronic technology is readily available (and every union has members who know how to use it) to make online organizing of a rank-and-file movement easier, speedier and inexpensive. Messages to and from individuals or groups can be transmitted almost instantaneously, rather than through “snail mail.” So can “alerts” in response to critical situations.

Through the Internet, we can exchange information and views with

members of other unions and break down the walls that now separate us. We can begin building inter-union coalitions of rank-and-file groups.

A Voice and a Role for Union Members

In the past two decades, AFL-CIO leaders have been unable to reverse the continuing decline in union strength, despite the huge amounts of our dues money spent on organizing and political action. The way our leaders are now functioning, it is unlikely they will do any better in the years ahead.

The AFL-CIO Executive Council refuses to accept the obvious: that even the best of campaigns can't succeed unless they have the whole-hearted support of the membership. However, our leaders have been unable—or unwilling—to inspire the millions of union members to become involved in struggles that affect the lives of all working people.

If the AFL-CIO is to halt its slide toward irrelevancy, it is up to the thousands of dedicated labor activists to work together to mobilize the rank-and-file for long-overdue reforms.

The suggested reforms are hardly extremist. They are in effect in most organizations that are conducted on democratic principles. They should be acceptable to at least some Council members who worry about labor's future.

It's worth repeating the old adage:

A union is only as strong as its members!

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About the Author

Harry Kelber has been a frontline observer and active participant in labor struggles for seven decades. He started his labor career in 1933 as an organizer at one of the largest retail food stores in Brooklyn, N.Y. and led a four-month strike that reduced the workweek from 78 hours to 54.

In 1937, at age 23, he was editor of an independent weekly labor paper, the *Trade Union Record*, which reported the historic organizing campaigns of the CIO.

As a union printer, he was involved in the 1962-63 strike which shut down New York City's major daily newspapers for 114 days, serving as editor of the union's daily strike bulletin.

In 1968, after earning a Doctorate in American Civilization at New York University, he created and directed Cornell University's Two-Year Labor/Liberal Arts Program. Three years later, he played a principal role in founding a four-year accredited labor college in New York City, where he was senior professor until his retirement in 1984.

From 1985-90, he was education and cultural director of the 36,000-member Electrical Workers Local 3, IBEW. In that same period, he was the coordinator and principal instructor of the Trade Union Leadership Institute of the New York City Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO.

In 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he directed a week-long seminar for 125 top-ranking labor leaders of Russia and the Commonwealth States on the theme, "Democratic Unions in a Market Economy."

Kelber is the founder and editor of a bimonthly newsletter, *The Labor Educator*, which since 1990 has advocated a series of reforms to revitalize organized labor. In 1995, at age 81, and as a rank-and-file member of the Communications Workers of America, he was the only independent candidate in 30 years to run for a seat on the AFL-CIO Executive Council.

He is the author of a novel, "The Labor Leader," and has written a dozen pamphlets on labor-related subjects, which have been used by hundreds of unions in their organizing campaigns and leadership training programs.

For the past eight years, he has posted a weekly column, "LaborTalk," on the Internet. His Web site is <www.laboreducator.org>. His e-mail address is <hkelber@igc.org>.

Kelber lives with his wife, Mim, a feminist writer, in Brooklyn Heights, N.Y. He has three daughters and seven grandchildren.