

NEA-AFT-AFL-CIO?

"Not Just No, But HELL NO!"

Rich Gibson



In most liberal and radical circles, there is a sense of renewed hope in the labor movement. Michael Yates' article in *Monthly Review*, "Does the Labor Movement have a Future?" suggests that the answer is most certainly "Yes." His later book, *Why Unions Matter*, coupled with monthly periodicals like *Labor Notes*, and a turn in the re-emerging *IWW News* to support for reform struggle inside the AFL-CIO, lends support to the notion that labor may be stretching and flexing. The victory of the Solidarity-led Teamsters for a Democratic Union, though quickly reversed when Ron Carey and other top leaders were exposed as corrupt, spearheaded an apparent rise of reform movements inside the AFL. John Sweeney's election to the top spot in the AFL-CIO, girded by promises for a "New Labor Movement," and the beginnings of "Organizing Summers," institutes for young people led by big labor, have inspired a sense of revival.

Prominent left academics like historians Eric Foner and David Montgomery have fostered campus labor-educator-student teach-ins, while graduate student organizing has blossomed. Still, the AFL-CIO as a whole has continued to lose membership. Liberals and radicals across the spectrum leap toward building the labor federation, as if rising membership will intensify worker radicalism.

While any Marxist analysis is finally going to pin its hopes on the working class, I suggest that this flurry of talk and action from most of the left is romanticism, opportunism; reflecting a failure to study the lessons of the past with care, a moth-to-flame response to a shallow analysis of the present, and a refusal to think through what it is that people need to know and do in order to forge a better future. The relationship of reform and revolution remains unresolved, and with the absence of a sizeable left presence the U.S. labor movement, the practice that is necessary to guide or evaluate the grinding of provisional and fundamental change is also absent. What left remains in the

U.S. must face a choice of where to send its limited cadres and how it is they should operate. The relative privilege of the U.S. working class (materially as well as in consciousness) vis a vis the rest of the world, the nearly unalterable and corrupting structures of the AFL-CIO unions, compound a difficult choice about who should do what and where.

Marx's thought is that the seeds of the future are within the present. The organization of the working class is accomplished, in part, by the expansion of capital, for example. The liberal left, which may or may not want some kind of fundamental change, seems to believe that building and organizing within the AFL will lead to worker solidarity, action, and thus a better world--a connection, without a near-revolutionary assault on the AFL-CIO hierarchy, I think lacks evidence.

There is no necessary link between the growth of the AFL-CIO and worker action or solidarity. Indeed the craft-based AFL was in part created to prevent worker action and solidarity, beyond the most narrow and legalistic maneuvering, while the industrial-based CIO, a creation of the old left, set in place structures which make its reform nearly impossible. There is a relationship, early on, between employer pressure and union corruption. Today, however, the undemocratic and authoritarian structures of the AFL-CIO, coupled with deep involvement with U.S. intelligence agencies that goes back to World War I, take on a life of their own. Moreover, reformer habits and practices inside the AFL-CIO hardly lay the groundwork for radical change. The Teamsters for a Democratic Union's reliance on Carey on one hand, and the Solidarity party on another, or the liberal reformers' participation in the class-collaboration of "new unionism" addressed below; none of this adds up to a potential assault on the many structures and veils that buttress and fuel the sucking pump of capital, nor do they address or create new forms of consciousness that might lead people to never again replace an old boss with a new one.

This essay assails one of the liberals' favorite projects in the 1990's, the manufacture of a merger between the largest union in the United States, the independent National Education Association, and the AFT-AFL-CIO. It focuses on the particulars of the merger, often using the voices of proponents and opposition forces, in part because the roots of change are within the material details, and their interpretations, of history. Because there are few radicals or revolutionaries operating openly within the NEA, the critique goes mainly to the liberal drive to unite the unions from the top. Even so, the absence of radicals and revolutionaries in either union is a telling point about the state of U.S. radicalism at the turn of the century.

Also underlying the ethnography is a sense that educators and their unions are now centripetal in the recreation of production relations in the U.S., as seen in practice in the raging battles over control of public school curricula and pedagogy, and that organizing in education could easily reverberate into industrial work places and communities, and at the present moment that schools, not factories, might be the sites that initiate serious struggles, even if they are unable to carry them through to the end.

On July 5, 1998, 58 percent of the 9,741 delegates to the National Education Association's 77th annual representative assembly rejected the strident urging of their leaders to merge their national membership of 2.3 million with the 900,000 members of the American Federation of Teachers and the AFL-CIO. The vote reflected a stunning rebuff to NEA President Bob Chase, vice-president Reg Weaver, secretary-treasurer Dennis Van Roekel, and the executive director, Don Cameron. The four dapper men lead an organization whose membership is 84% women. They were the key negotiators of a merger pact which required a two-thirds favorable vote. Merger negotiations, involving massive expenditures of NEA funds, have moved sporadically since 1991.

If the NEA delegates jilted the House of Labor, they simultaneously joined it. Never before has an NEA assembly been so divided, never have delegates demonstrated such deep distrust of and alienation from their leaders. Like the rank and file of much of the labor movement, NEA delegates were met with an onslaught of crude campaigning for a leadership proposal many of them earnestly hoped to seriously critique. Like their AFL-CIO counterparts, NEA delegates, when given a chance with a secret ballot, ignored the leaders' demands. They said "yes" to their leaders and voted "no" in private on the "Principles of Unity," a brief conceptual document many delegates believed lacked the details to protect the heritage of the remarkably successful NEA in a merger with the fading AFL-CIO.

Even so, delegates did pass a proposal from Minnesota that allows states--like Florida and some locals, which are deeply involved in merger negotiations with the AFT--to continue to bargain, and perhaps to link with the AFL-CIO. In this sense, the predictions of Albert Shanker, the president of the AFT from 1968 to his death in 1997, may come true. Shanker told a top NEA official in 1989 that the national bodies of NEA and AFT could never merge. However, the AFT could gain a de facto merger by combining slowly with NEA state and local affiliates.

A merged NEA and AFT would have created the largest union in North America. With more than three million members, it would have been three times the size of the Teamsters, now the biggest union in the U.S. The slowly disintegrating AFL-CIO, representing a low of about 13 percent of the nation's work force, would have enjoyed a quick injection of nearly eight million dollars--and much needed respectability in the face of federal indictments against leaders like Ron Carey, and potential charges pending against other top officers like the United Mineworkers' Rich Trumka, who was prominent in calling for an NEA merger. The merged organization would have comprised about 20 percent of the AFL-CIO.

All of NEA's chickens came home to roost at the New Orleans assembly. A formal, if superficial dedication to internal democracy was strained by a growing gap between leaders, staff, and members at every level. All of the pieces of the NEA's history as a company union, its moments of militancy from the 1960s to the 1980's, and its sudden turn in the mid-1990's toward "new unionism," that is, a coalition of union leaders, business interests, and politicians claiming to save public education--all of the past collided with an effort to enforce NEA's leaders' view of the future. The education

community is genteel, internally tolerant, and refers to itself as a family. The "NEA Family," a term common within the union, was met by bitter leadership denunciations and threats of recrimination for "not being with the program." Pride in honest unionism was challenged by rumors of payoffs and corruption at the top. Fears of ambitious second-tier leaders were teased by both their membership base and the top leaders who can reward and punish. Years of battles with the AFT which required extensive training of the rank and file--about every AFT blemish--contradicted the sudden leadership romance with the entire AFL-CIO. The suburban base of the NEA conflicted with the urban realities of the AFT. Teachers who themselves were often blue-collar children at once rejected their past, the AFL's lack of focus on education, and the AFT's centralized structure. A stodgy schoolteacher reputation, NEA, encountered the realities of a union, the AFT, which reflects its industry and schools, including all the sensual passions of a middle-school outing.

It is not possible to categorize the overwhelming vote, characterized by one leader as "Not no, but Hell NO!", as radical or conservative. Many delegates wanted nothing to do with the AFL-CIO, some because they don't want to be connected to the working class, others because they believe the AFL-CIO is too corrupt to reform, and many because they saw no reason to give up what they know they have in NEA for what they might lose with a merger. Most delegates, according to extensive post-convention surveys of each NEA delegate, did not trust their leaders, were offended by strident leadership demands, and saw no reason for the huge decentralized NEA to adopt the structure of the smaller, notable undemocratic, AFT.

The huge New Orleans assembly took place in a microcosm when the relatively tiny Student NEA Program, composed of pre-service teachers, met the week before their parent body. The collegians were greeted by a series of emotional appeals from two key NEA leaders, Chase and Van Roekel, and sharp, sometimes nearly hysterical pressure from a past chairperson of their program exhorting that "Real leaders say yes to a merger."

Angie Whitlow, the Student NEA President from Illinois at the time of the assembly, said:

They refused to give us details. They just kept telling us to look at the "half of the glass that's full, the happy side." They appealed to egos, refused to talk the facts that everyone was clamoring for. They implied that only an outcast, a non-leader, would oppose this. Our current national chairperson was fair with the procedures, gave people a chance to talk. In the debate, we made it clear that there was another side, "Unity Without Merger," the position leaders took from Michigan, Illinois, and Alabama. Our issues were the same as the convention's: the merger with the AFL, the loss of the secret ballot, taking on the undemocratic structure from AFT, NEA's term limits for officers, our guarantees for minority representation. They really tried to force this on us. Why push this so hard now? They told us that the merger issue wouldn't come forward for years,

after the turn of the century, then suddenly here they are, ready to merge. They said they wouldn't bargain away our independence from the AFL-CIO. Then they did. They tried to ram this through the grassroots, but the grassroots won. If they keep trying to bully people, the people will boot them. We all came away more questioning, and we will be even smarter next time through.

The Student Program was not asked to vote on the merger. Ms. Whitlow said a vote was not taken because the program is simply a separate branch of the NEA. The director of communications of a large northern state said, "Hell, they would have had them vote if the leadership thought they would win by two-thirds. They couldn't even do that with the kids. Still, they (Chase and Van Roekel) plunged ahead."

16. According to Secretary Treasurer Van Roekel, the average NEA member makes about \$40,000 a year. In this sense, at least, the gap between leaders and the membership is fairly wide, though surely not as wide as many CEO's and their workforce. Van Roekel reported staff and leader salaries, allowances, and expenses to the Labor Department in 1997. Executive Director Cameron's total was \$216,593.55. (Cameron, in the NEA structure which clearly demarcates staff and governance, is staff.) Bob Chase's total was \$301,302.03. Weaver reported \$275,162. Van Roekel's predecessor tallied \$252,658. That year, while Van Roekel was on the NEA Executive Board, he collected a total of \$50,723 in expenses and allowances. NEA secretaries, who like school secretaries are often actually in charge, average nearly \$50,000 per year. A typical NEA staff person, an organizer, made a salary and expense total of \$104,669.

The NEA is not poor. In 1997, it reported assets of nearly 145 million dollars. It is the largest and most effectively organized union in North America. Its members, school personnel, have become centripetal in a de-industrialized society. Compared to the urban base of the AFT, saddled with the collapse of urban America, the suburban NEA lives fairly well within a society growing increasingly authoritarian and inequitable. The union long ago decided to travel first class, to reward its staff and leaders well. The NEA spent millions in the late eighties and early nineties to refurbish its building in downtown D.C., while many of its members lived and taught in trailers. Board of Directors members are feted with generous expense accounts. They were given around \$1800 per person for unaccounted expenses the week of the 1998 assembly. They get free trips, time out of the classroom with union-subsidized substitutes, free luggage, briefcases, dinners, trips to resorts for meetings, chances to meet with high-ranking officials, etc. For classroom teachers, this is often seen as the big time--a lot to lose if one votes wrong. Moreover, there was a lot to gain in exchange for an affirmative vote: jobs with AFL-CIO related organizations, for example. Delegates from one large southern state are convinced their president was promised a job with an insurance company controlled by the federation in exchange for the state's "yes" vote.

Money was not the only gap that was in the sights of many local leaders at the assembly. The majority of them saw an unprecedented arrogance and demagoguery that offended not simply their sense of intelligence, but the history of the organization they

helped to build. However, many delegates left the assembly wondering about the authorization of hundreds of thousands of NEA dollars on merger planning, and the expenditures from union funds that are rumored to have buttressed the pro-merger campaign. President Chase said the costs to pay for the pro-merger campaign materials came from states volunteering funds. Interviews with the financial officers of three key states supporting the merger suggest that they knew of no such expenditures.

19. Bob Haisman, president of the NEA in Illinois, a leader of the "Unity Without Merger" coalition, spoke just as the delegate vote against the merger was reported:

It's clear that there is a huge gap between the national leaders and the rank and file. They grossly overestimated their potential votes. They worked this for years, yet had no idea that they would be so completely defeated. We only worked this for a few weeks.

They bargained this without authorization, they were never to do a deal uniting with the AFL-CIO, they were never to give away the secret ballot or minority guarantees or term limits. They gave away our democracy, yet they tried to intimidate people into supporting it. It half-worked. People were intimidated. They had staff all over the country reporting on people. NEA just doesn't do that. So people covered up, then used a secret ballot to vote no. Some people thought that we were intimidating people too, that this would happen on both sides. It didn't. We kept people informed, made every detail available, urged people to make informed decisions on their own. The leadership tried to use crude right-wing tactics. They said that opposing merger was tantamount to opposing the Declaration of Independence. Then they said we united to join the AFL to combat the right wing. Makes no sense.

Indeed, convention speakers in favor of the merger did table-thump more than the delegates were prepared to accept. Prior to the balloting, nearly every issue of the assembly was used to promote a yes vote. Delegates attending the Human and Civil Rights Banquet, a fashionable annual dinner which usually honors activists in the field, complained that every honoree used the chance to make a pro-merger speech. Even keynoter Al Gore alluded to the benefits to be gained from a unity vote. On arrival at the assembly, delegates were met at every hotel by "Vote Yes for Unity" posters featuring statements from every past president of the NEA going back to 1973. A "Unity" booth dominated the entrance to the assembly hall. "Unity" buttons, T-shirts, and flyers were everywhere. An honoree from the support personnel ranks promised a brief speech, then wore on about the necessity of the merger. But delegates sported "Muck Ferger" and "Chase Bob" buttons hidden inside their lapels and winked as they passed the Unity booth. Delegates from opposition states like Michigan, New Jersey, Texas, and New Jersey, wore "UWM" buttons, for "unity without a merger"--a proposal submitted by Illinois' Haisman which suggested continuing a united relationship with the AFL and AFT, but without any legal organizational ties.

Opening speakers at the assembly included past NEA president Mary Hatwood Futrell, one of the union's most beloved leaders, now the top officer of Education International, the result of the merger of the international bodies of NEA and AFT in 1993--a harbinger of the 1998 proposal. Futrell made it simple. "I saw the light. Merger is for the children. Albert Shanker and I hugged one another. Now we have clout in a united organization with the IMF and the World Bank. My friends, and I call you my friends because you are, the children need us . . . tomorrow you will vote on the kind of America you want children to have. Vote for unity with your heart."

While the floor debate was orchestrated, most delegates believed it was fair: one speaker for, one against, with a point of information (usually a soft pitch for President Chase to answer authoritatively) in between. One pro-merger speaker compared the action to her successful marriage; another pointed out that her mother is a member of the AFL-CIO, and none the worse off for it. Another said, "Other educators are not my enemies."

But the opposition clearly drew the most applause. A student NEA leader from Illinois said, "The pressures and tactics being used to whip members into line threaten the integrity of the organization. We wouldn't give up our democracy if we were just voting internally. Why should we do that with a merger?" Mary Washington, the African-American president of the Louisiana NEA, stated, "We fear our beliefs are being diminished. We have been led to believe that an independent NEA is a good thing, that the little guy should have a right to democratic participation . . . this set of principles makes a mockery of our core beliefs. This is unacceptable, unacceptable, unacceptable!"

Bob Gilchrist, president of Iowa's NEA, which had surveyed extensively about the merger for several years, ran for the national executive committee solely on a "No to Merger" platform. He got 45% of the vote. His "it's simple, vote no!" drew loud applause.

Illinois' Haisman said, "We reject this document only after careful analysis. We are willing to work with the AFT, but we don't want to become the AFT. We don't know the details of the agreement, but details help preserve our rights, our democracy. This flawed document will not help us focus on education. It creates a top-down structure that reduces our key leaders to spectators."

A California delegate pointed to united labor's success in the defeat of a state ballot initiative which would have de-funded political action coffers. The united labor movement spent \$11 million defending its right to make donations to politicians.

A delegate from Ohio, pointing to the vote taking place on the fourth of July weekend, said, "Speaking against the principles of unity is the same as speaking against the Declaration of Independence."

A disappointed pro-merger delegate who was not called upon before debate was closed showed me her speech. "Look, I would have stuck to what I think are the facts. Unity with the AFT makes sense for these reasons: we are under attack from an

organized right-wing movement that wants to de-fund public education. We need to be together. We have bargained about this with the AFT for more than five years. We got some. They got some. We can live with this agreement. We can do it now because the time is ripe. Why wait? Some states are about to merge anyway. Why isolate them? We have locals that are already merged, and they are here supporting the merger. They have experience with this. Who else does? The AFL is the AFL. Good and bad, not the big bad wolf. Our leaders can easily hold their own with them, if they have to. I wish I could have talked. This is a shame. Honest people on both sides are set up as crooks."

Silence from some quarters was interpreted as a powerful message. A Florida delegate said, "Bob Chase's campaign manager for his presidency was one of the most prominent African-American leaders in the NEA. She was also ex-president Geiger's campaign manager. When she talks, we all listen. She hasn't said a thing."

30. Executive Director Don Cameron, originally a teacher from Michigan, compared opposition to the merger to opposition to the American Revolution. Cameron then invoked the legendary Dr. Seuss who lent his name to the "Read Across America" literacy projects. Young NEA members flooded the floor distributing tall red and white stovepipe Dr. Seuss hats. The nearly 10,000 delegates to the NEA assembly, casting the most significant ballots in the last forty years of the labor movement, voted wearing the accouterments of the beloved Dr. Seuss. While they voted, NEA showed a promotional film on universal human rights on huge screens stationed around the auditorium. When the film came to a group of children praising the secret ballot, the Illinois delegation broke into raucous cheers.

Even before they arrived, delegates were deluged with pro-merger material: a personal letter from Chase, a series of pro-merger articles and ads in the prestigious *Education Week* newspaper, support from professors who linked the merger to Chase's "new unionism," visits to most states from top NEA leaders. In late January 1998, Executive Director Cameron circulated a letter threatening staff who were not on board with the program, "There is no room on the boat of new unionism and new culture for old culture stowaways. You can ride, but you can't hide." And in May he said, "NEA is NOT neutral on this issue. Therefore, neither is NEA staff. NEA strongly supports, and is actively advocating for, the approval of the Principles of Unity by the delegates to the 1998 NEA Representative assembly. So, therefore, is the staff." This form of direction to staff is unusual inside the NEA Family. Nevertheless, staff opposition to the merger was often vocal. Staff members, usually former teachers, raised many of the same objections that came from the rank and file, and they added their own concerns about their wages and pensions should an affiliation with the AFL proceed.

More than 40 percent of the delegates were attending their first or second NEA assembly. The line-up of pro-merger past presidents meant nothing to them. One young delegate referred to the renowned Futrell as "that woman from some Educational International; what's up with that?" Pro-merger leaders were provided with lists of first-time delegates and told to contact them, one-to-one, in their hotel rooms before the vote.

The room lists were often incorrect, the new delegates gone, out on the town. Most last-minute contacts were never made.

Before the vote, people very intimate with Chase and Van Roekel predicted they would lose, 55-45, an estimate remarkably close to the actual vote. The press reported the massive rebuff as a stunning defeat. *The New York Times* ran the coverage at the top of the front page. Chase was reported as appearing shocked in a press conference immediately following the vote, although he smiled on stage when the vote was announced.

It is hard to believe the leaders were shocked. While state presidents surely mis-estimated their ability to deliver (the president from Florida assured Chase a 90% yes vote, while my survey of that delegation indicated a no vote of around at least 35%), the *Wall Street Journal* and *Education Week* had reported an uphill climb for the merger supporters, with a state-by-state analysis. Moreover, Chase's home state of Connecticut openly voted against the merger prior to the convention, as did Weaver's home state of Illinois. Michigan, which has produced so many NEA leaders that key players are known inside as the "Michigan Mafia," stood solid in opposition, as did most of the huge Texas delegation. California formally supported the merger, but many California delegates reported to me that they would vote to reject. One president said to Weaver, just before the vote, "I have several hundred delegates here. I have been telling them to think for themselves for years. Now you want me to muscle them--overnight?" Leadership actions following the rejection would indicate they were more than surprised. Perhaps they believed they had prepared for so long that nothing could truly go awry.

NEA president Bob Chase, who has distinguished himself in his fervent support for gay and lesbian rights inside the NEA, was on the merger hunt for quite some time, as were many other top NEA officials. Indeed, the AFT has almost always been ready to talk merger. NEA claims a merger with the AFT in New York was sabotaged by federation efforts to simply subsume the NEA membership in the late 1960's. A similar scenario followed in Florida in the early 1970's. In 1973 and again in 1993, NEA delegates passed New Business Items insisting that any discussions with the AFT had to take place on the grounds that there would be

- No affiliation with the AFL-CIO;
- Guaranteed minority group representation;
- Guarantees of secret balloting.

The 1993 NBI included language that promised any united organization could take positions on questions "that are in the best interests of our members." This indicates well-founded fears that the private sector domination within the AFL-CIO would cause divisions over raising and distributing public funds. The members wanted to be able to lobby for taxes for public school--above potential AFSCME member claims for mental health expenditures, for example, or cries for tax cuts from the Carpenters Union. The 2.3 million members of the NEA wanted to be sure that their voice would be loud.

In the early nineties, Chase helped steer the movement toward merger through his position as the leader of the NEA Streamlining Committee, a heavily funded group which was charged with simplifying the NEA structure. One prominent observer of that committee says, "That was just the stealth committee for merger, affiliation, and centralization. All they did was set the stage for merger, do surveys designed to support pro-merger views, and make it possible for the NEA to seize, trustee, local and state organizations--just in case they did not get in line with the move to join at the top. Well, they ate out a lot too."

In 1993, Chase, then-NEA-President Keith Geiger, and others resumed merger talks with the AFT. In 1995, bargaining for merger came to a halt, the NEA team reporting that the AFT could not bargain within the guidelines set by the convention. Among other things, the AFT had to have the AFL-CIO affiliation. In fact, however, according to NEA insiders, the talks broke down as much because of the clash of the considerable egos of Geiger and AFT's Shanker. Who would get what was a major question.

In September 1995, merger discussion resumed, presumably with the NEA negotiators being given more flexibility in a July assembly vote. The states began to sign no-raid pacts with the AFT.

In 1996, Chase was elected NEA president in a very close election. In February 1997, Shanker died. He was replaced by his protégée, Sandra Feldman. Like Shanker, Feldman has not been a classroom educator in thirty years. She supports the causes Shanker championed, though she lacks his charisma. As an Education week writer put it, "No one is rushing out to buy *The New York Times* to see what Feldman says about school." With the two competing egos absent, the move to merge rushed ahead. Van Roekel had repeatedly told close confidants that no merger vote could possibly take place before the turn of the century.

Chase served eight years as NEA vice-president under Geiger. After his 1996 election, a campaign which simply focused on electioneering, not issues, President Chase had two surprises in hand. The first was revealed in 1997. He declared himself the champion of "New Unionism," a model based on the GM Saturn plan which proposes unity between the work force and management. For teachers, Chase said this means unity with corporations, with politicians, and with school administrators. He came out in favor of intensified standardization of the curricula, for national testing, for more rigorous requirements for teacher-training, and for peer evaluation--all of which seemed to mimic the program that Al Shanker had developed for the AFT.

This was a new twist to the press, coming from NEA, posed as the more radical and militant of the unions since the mid-seventies. *Education Week* carried Chase's speeches on the front page. New Unionism, praised by Feldman, became the unspoken content of the proposed merger, a move which trailed the corporate sector by more than a decade. At the 1998 NEA assembly, delegates were treated to praise for the Saturn corporation; speeches from prominent academics and United Auto Worker officers celebrated the

cooperative Saturn contract and bargaining style. A Saturn car was offered to the winner of a political action fund-raising raffle. He took the money.

In January 1998, Chase, Van Roekel, Weaver, and Cameron reached agreement to merge the NEA with the AFT and the AFL-CIO. In February the group produced a joint AFT-NEA document, the Principles of Unity, describing the merger and declared this the final deal--"untweakable." In March, the NEA flew more than 260 top state and local leaders to Washington to discuss the Principles. Meeting complaints, the document was tweaked, changed to meet the needs of delegations from New York state among others. The May NEA Board of Directors meeting vote should have been ominous, a bare two-thirds majority: 106-53 in favor. The AFT, whose structure is more reflective of its urban base, far more centralized, took the only vote that mattered in February, their Executive Council voting in favor.

NEA leaders did conduct a reasonably open discussion on the merger issue. They established a "Unity Discussion Bulletin Board" on the NEA page of the world-wide web. Sophisticated NEA members like Bill Harshbarger took on the Principles of Unity one at a time, and disputed them: "What benefit does a merger give to NEA teachers that they can't get from forming a simple alliance with the AFT? Why wouldn't an alliance be better than a merger? It would avoid all of the "adjustment" and "realignment" and uncertainties of creating a new organization." Others asked, "If we go in, can we get out? If not, why not?" Outsiders were allowed to post as well. Mike Antonucci of Education Intelligence posted a note on his survey of the delegates, indicating that Chase getting the merger passed would be like pulling an elephant out of a hat. He accused Chase of using the "right-wing bogeyman" to try to whip up support for the AFL-CIO merger. The Pennsylvania NEA established its own www discussion site which drew extensive debate, pro and con. AFT's www site offered no opportunities for such discussion.

The NEA is more than 150 years old. It was formed and run by school administrators and remained in their hands for years. Upton Sinclair, in his "Goose-Step" and "The Goslings," documented control of the NEA by local administrators and textbook publishers. In the mid-sixties, the NEA was challenged by the more militant American Federation of Teachers, led first by David Selden and later by Albert Shanker. Shanker gained fame as a labor leader by going to jail as an advocate for the racist Ocean-Hill Brownsville AFT strike, a strike against a black community seeking greater control over its schools. The AFT made inroads in organizing urban schools, taking them from the NEA. Shanker became a celebrated conservative leader in the AFL-CIO, the mobilizing center for right-wing intelligence adventures inside the Federation, and one of the first union leaders to make massive concessions to an employer when, during a New York financial crisis, he allowed AFT pension funds to be used to buttress city coffers. Shanker dined well, cultivated close relationships with investment bankers like Felix Rohatyn. On his watch, the AFT helped organize the decay of urban schooling.

NEA responded by developing a militant organizing department and by moving rank and file educators into the leadership. The NEA organizing department, from the early seventies to the late eighties, concentrated on opposing the AFT, and trained thousands of

classroom teachers in resistance as well. On the one hand, NEA holds a deep organizational history of pride in its focus on educational issues. On the other hand, many, many NEA leaders come from the ranks of people who remember the "teacher wars" against the AFT. Overcoming that kind of history is difficult, a project both cognitive and affective.

NEA has clout. It sent more delegates to the last Democratic convention than any other organization. Its rank and file, literate, well-spoken, disciplined, are a politician's dream-force. Its staff, kept relatively separate from the vagaries of elections by the union's structure, are professionals, mostly competent and tough bargainers. There should be no wonder about why the well-financed, successful NEA should be quite a plum for the reeling AFL-CIO--and why it may have been so tempting to rush through a merger vote. Then too, Chase had been promised the presidency of the new organization. Term limits alone close his potential presidency of NEA in 2003. The merged group could have extended his presidency indefinitely. Feldman, if the merger had passed, was touted to run for the presidency of the AFL-CIO--as a conservative candidate in the Shanker mold.

The rush to merge had a steep price, a split between the rank and file and the leadership that may be impossible to mend. Chuck Agerstrand, president of the National Staff Organization, the union for NEA staff, said that the majority of delegates were unhappy with the way the leadership maneuvered to press a yes vote, and "it is also clear there are certain NEA principles that cannot be set aside. These principles are minority guarantees, one-person one-vote, secret ballot, dilution of the current governance structure, and AFL-CIO affiliation. A majority of the RA delegates strongly stated their concerns of the Principles of Unity, and that key aspects of the NEA culture were not addressed or eliminated from the Principles."

There was bitterness about nearly every aspect of the assembly. Passion probably plays a part in any national convention. Several delegates complained that at this assembly, passion played a subversive role: "NEA has been proud of its delegates' practice of work hard, play hard. We always do our business, but we also meet new and different roommates, party, drink, don't get enough sleep. Some of this lack of inhibition, discretion, judgement, may spring from exhaustion. Factor in the tugs on the heartstrings. For many of these folks, this is the only time they hear what a great job they are doing. Education employees can commiserate with 10,000 others in the same boat . . . the biggest teachers' lounge on the planet. And we know what fun those can be."

Another delegate, from Michigan, said. "I really don't care who sleeps with whom. But this year even the seating at the Civil Rights banquet was reserved for whoever was sleeping with a leader. That was true of access at many levels. This just makes people resentful. These guys are out of control--in every arena."

The Chase-Weaver-Van Roekel leadership team made little effort to patch things up. After the second critical vote, which allowed the NEA to maintain a relationship with the AFT and may allow some state of local mergers, president Bob Haisman of Illinois said:

They didn't do anything to bridge the gap. Chase's arrogance astounds me. The NEA national counsel invaded one of our meetings after the merger vote and yelled at us, he stood up front and yelled at us. We finally asked him to leave. He said he was going to ram through what he wanted. They haven't learned a thing. Chase didn't even talk to us. They took our dues money and used that to subsidize their campaign. Our delegates went one to one and stole their base because we did an honest job. We're educators. We educated people. We can do that again.

At the close of the assembly, I rode to the airport with delegates from Pennsylvania, a delegation which had reported considerable support for merger to their leadership. But, according to this group of eight, the state leadership had never seriously consulted the state board of directors. When they arrived at the assembly, their caucus voted 198 to 134 in favor, a deep split when the merger required a 2/3 favorable vote of the entire assembly. One delegate added:

I worked for Bob Chase for NEA president and voted for him, but I won't again. That slogan, "One-term Bob," makes all the sense in the world. And that Reg Weaver and Van Roekel may as well look for real work too. They just decided to do this among themselves, told the state presidents to deliver. The presidents promised they would, but none of them got around to asking us. They never paid us any attention, and I don't think they learned a thing even after we slapped them silly. They should have known better. We are a democratic group, education people, and we are not as scared as some think. That chant after the vote was announced, "NEA! NEA! NEA!," that meant we stand for some things that are not to be sold.

Ann Huberger, a Texas delegate and NEA director said:

We were being railroaded. They had no mandate to negotiate this. The opening session positioned us as being against children, against the Founding Fathers. They threw Futrell at us in our caucus. She said that opposition to merger was opposing kids. Nonsense. Texas is now allied with Michigan and New Jersey--strange bedfellows. Chase did more to divide the NEA than anyone ever has. If he had allowed a secret ballot on the second vote, the one on allowing some states to continue to bargain, he would have lost that too. Chase has no clue what the people are thinking. To see such an outpouring against the principles and come back the next day and fight for them again, well he just didn't get it. Now, on the NEA Board, there are many more people asking questions. Each of us is personally stronger now. From now on, we will question the whole Executive Committee. They just did what their bosses told them. They get a lot of perks.

After the big merger vote, at the NEA Board Forum, we (the board of directors) were lectured. They told us they wanted to heal, then came with this motion that says they can merge anyway. In that motion, the one that squeaked by, all the power goes back to the people who failed this time around, the executive committee. You can bet if he can avoid it, Chase will never allow another secret ballot.

Just think of all that we could have done for public education with all the money and staff time they threw away on this. There was incredible pressure to vote yes. The money and power Chase had, doing nothing but talk merger all year, none of that made a difference. Many people, even people from pro-merger Minnesota, told us they were going to vote no. That's the power of our secret ballot.

People are leading double lives in the NEA. That's new--bad. They used far-right language and tactics on us. But NEA also taught us to think for ourselves, and we did.

A leader of a large Michigan local summed up the assembly: "It was like Vietnam. From the top down, and back up again, everybody was lying to everyone else about the body counts. Promotions and jobs were tied to a good count, so the good counts came in. But the people were on the other side, slowly tunneling away. Then, when the decisive moment came, big surprise, the people won. Then they lost later on. We will see about that in the NEA."

The motion that did pass by a narrow roll call vote, called the Minnesota New Business Initiative by most, requires a survey of the 1998 NEA assembly delegates, before any new merger project goes forward. Some of the members of the board of directors say they will also demand a staff report, written by old hands who have studied the AFT-AFL-CIO for years, on the feasibility of a possible merger, with or without the AFL-CIO. Other national executive board members, who voted in the affirmative, say they will insist on an accounting of the origins of the budget for the "Unity" campaign.

Whether Shanker is able to reach into the NEA from his grave and gain state and local affiliations until the national organization loses its meaning remains an open issue, largely dependant on the board of directors. Minnesota NEA merged with the AFT shortly after the convention. Florida was expected to follow suit in the spring of 1999, though glitches were apparent as old Florida leaders from both NEA and AFT clashed over structure and who would be what in the new association.

A seasoned NEA staff member, a veteran of the wars against the AFT and a close observer of the latest NEA leadership said, "Sure they knew they would lose this vote, though they didn't know they would get blown away like this. In believe they went ahead to strengthen their hand in further bargaining with the AFT for the next vote. In think that they will also let several states merge and see how it goes--Florida, New Mexico, Minnesota, and I believe, maybe, Wisconsin. You can see that they don't feel restrained by directions from members."

One young delegate, Tania Kapner, from the Oakland, California, schools, brought a series of new business items on issues she thought NEA should address: support for affirmative action and a national march on Washington for equal and quality education. Ms Kapner said there is a growing sense of unity between parents, kids, and teachers in her school system--a unity that has grown through a series of struggles, that is reflected in joint student-teacher demands like caps on class size. Her motions were quickly referred to a committee by an assembly tired from days of merger debates. It is often hard to spot the potential of a movement before it fully matures.

There never has been a clear debate about the content of the merger, Chase's "New Unionism," made of GM's Saturn cloth. Many delegates who worked hard against the merger, including Illinois' Haisman, said they support the New Unionism concept in general and that they are looking closely at the possibilities for initiating at least significant parts of the program. Others were just as bitterly opposed to "New Unionism" as they were to the merger. A Michigan delegate said, "We saw the UAW lose 700,000 members talking that partner-with-your-boss trash. NEA has two million members, in part, because we know whose side we are on--education people--and that there are sides to be taken." Again, while some delegates did vote against the merger because they opposed any affiliation with the blue collar work force that they perceive to be the AFL-CIO, it is more telling that the key organized opposition to merger came from states with a great deal of experience with the AFL-CIO, northern industrial states, and they were rejecting the merger because of their experiences with the AFL-CIO; not because they want no connection with workers, which would include most of their parents, but because they saw no connection between the AFL and making gains.

On July 18, the AFT voted 1982 to 46 for merger. Opposition delegates had to stand up to vote. AFT delegates do not enjoy rights to a secret ballot. The loudest applause at the convention came for a delegate who made it clear that any talks with the NEA must be predicated on a merger with the AFL-CIO. Delegates chanted, "Union, Union, Union!"

Bitter liberal reformers who had carried the joint banners of "New Unionism" and Unity through Merger, went home wondering what happened and published articles in journals like *Rethinking Schools*, wondering why the AFT was "left at the altar." It apparently did not occur to them that this was an arranged marriage, that the folks left alone at the church were the parents who never consulted the kids. For the most part, the liberal leadership from both NEA and AFT incorrectly identified the defeat as based in the anti-working class and racist beliefs of the NEA delegates, a charge for which I find only slight foundation. And, after all, it is the same liberals in conjunction with the leadership of the AFT, like the neo-fascist Adam Urbanski of the Rochester, New York AFT, who call for racist, anti-working class practices like standardized testing and grade retention and a disingenuous focus on "safe schools." They have more in common with the teacher-chamber-of-commerce unity proposed by NEA President Chase than the rank and file of either union. Yet, at the same time, other liberals, like supporters of the Boston-based Fairtest organization which produces excellent research opposing the regulation of knowledge through standardized curricula, work hard against these forms of

intensified oppression and irrationalism in classrooms, a good indication of the complexity of the contradictions and competing interests in education. In brief, there is no simple binary of AFT progressivism within the AFL, and NEA snobbishness on the outside.

On July 19, 1998 UAW workers at Saturn's exemplary plant voted to strike, overwhelmingly. "We're not going to be part of a lie," Joseph Rypkowski, president of United Auto Workers Local 1853, said, referring to Saturn's much-promoted image as "a different kind of car company." A week later the work force returned, a majority apparently glad to be once again part of the Saturn family's lie.

U.S. labor, of which the AFL-CIO represents but 12 percent, is finally the vehicle for the fundamental change that is required in order to establish democracy and equality. The AFL's guiding idea, the unity of labor and capital on national grounds, is an important element of fascist ideology. The AFL-CIO remains structurally and ideologically racist, sexist, and authoritarian. It is simply not possible to use democratic methods to change the direction or leadership of most of the AFL-CIO's affiliate bodies. The racism that propels all of the history of craft unionism still dominates the structure and social practice of the AFL--as the failed fruits of the Detroit newspaper strike in the mid-1990's should show. The AFL-CIO disorganizes and divides workers through union corruption, proved by the repeated recent, though historically repetitive, arrests of AFL leaders for collecting multiple salaries and using member dues on lavish homes, through perfectly legal but reactionary lavish salary schedules and perks for union leaders, and through its structure which splits workers either by craft or industry--or both. The labor federation is isolated on the one hand, and its members are relatively privileged on the other.

The AFL's new leadership has no history of fighting employers--President Sweeney has insisted over and over again that he wants to be a partner with the corporate class--and there is considerable evidence that they simply do not know how. The history of organized and deliberate retreats, from Patco to P-9 at Hormel, to the UAW's massive loss of membership which came from a decision to make concessions in order to preserve U.S. capital; all of this sums up as evidence that the AFL-CIO leadership is unready to design a line of march. The sole contradiction to this, the Teamster strike at UPS in 1998, simply demonstrates that it is not tough to defeat an opponent who does not fight back--and the Teamsters were the first to declare themselves back in the fold at UPS as partners in production. Even more, there is a good deal of proof that the only people the AFL-CIO leaders do know how to fight are their own members, as shown in the long, failed, Detroit newspaper strike which was systematically disorganized by UAW functionaries.

Some elites recognize the need for unions of the AFL type as evidenced by the recent Ford contract in which the company agreed to organize future plants on the behalf of the union, and by the UAW-Ford advertising campaign which declares the unity of interest between the company and the union. Other elites, in the same business, assault their unions as bitter enemies, as evidenced by the Flint strike against GM in the summer of 1998. Uncritical support of the suited thugs of the AFL-CIO leadership, or even the reformist call for more democracy, simply misunderstands the fundamentally reactionary

nature of the top levels of the AFL, and misleads people to believe that a purely reformist organization, unwilling to challenge capital, can become something besides moribund. AFL-CIO leaders are now clearly enemies of working-class members. The AFL leadership is surely aware of this, even if their members are not. Those with memories extending back to the radical seizure of the Detroit Mack Avenue plant in Detroit, 1973, a popular sit-down strike, will remember the violence the UAW leadership launched against its members, unleashing hundreds of armed goons on the plant sit-in, dragging out the rank and file and turning them over to the police in order to "protect the contract." It will take more than a vote to move people of this caliber out of the way.

How radical reformers and revolutionaries will find their way through this bog is key to making real social change--and the kind of society that prevails afterward. At issue, in part, is a structural question. On the one hand, only a disciplined organization that functions within and without the AFL (or the NEA), a class-based organization, can possibly assume the power to either reform the unions or to fashion the solidarity and rule-breaking necessary for social change. On the other hand, successful cadres of such an organization, operating within the relatively privileged milieu of the AFL, will develop stakes in their rising positions and the internal systems that permitted them to prosper within. This, of course, is the historical fate of "underground" cadre sent into reform organizations to perform secret yet revolutionary activity, from China to the U.S.S.R. to the U.S.A.

On yet another hand, the consciousness of those involved in reform or revolution must both sweep ahead of the structures the people face; people need to be able to not merely register disgust at their current situation but also envision a better one, and to write ideas, habits, and behaviors into their present struggles that they can use in a better world. That is, in the abstract, the lines of the spirals toward the future are with us now. People who believe they can take charge of their own lives, and who are sacrificing life to do it, need to have a reasonably clear idea of what went wrong before; a question which leads not only to the shop floor but to the structures of the family and communities. Consciousness for change must become mass consciousness, egalitarian and self-actualizing, able to quickly discover and reveal the veils of capital even in a new world that might deny the veils are there. After all, capital has had 500 years to learn many disguises.

What, at least, must people know, to create a track for the leap into a better society? Surely they must know things neither the NEA nor AFL leadership wants them to know, or knows themselves. They need to know about the giant sucking pump of surplus value, the priming pump of capital, which cares not a whit who runs it nor who gains a little at the expense of others.

They need to know that surplus value must run at full steam, and when it does not, when surplus value can be better served elsewhere, when some boss can pay a worker less, work them faster or longer, somewhere else, capital will empower that boss and turn ruthlessly on its old friends in relatively privileged lands. Surplus value, mostly the difference between what a worker takes home in pay and the value that workers create for the boss, is a key veil of capital's success.

They need to know that capital, begot and fueled by surplus value, cannot allow people to even firmly believe they can understand or change their lives or their world. Nor can capital allow people to be creative, human, in determining the product or process of their work. Over time, workers under capital's hegemony can only have less and less control over the product and process of their labors, a process of production which reverberates back and creates surplus value, one recreating the other in a broadening spiral. Capital requires that people finally view their work as distinct from their pleasurable lives. In creating this distinction, people blinded to the process become instruments of their own oppression: they enrich their boss and destroy themselves. They need to know that surplus value, on the one hand, and alienation on the other, are part and parcel of capital, and that these underpin the old saw from the IWW, "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common"--itself something of a misnomer as the two surely have opposition in common. They need to know that organizations which only seek to reform capital necessarily adopt the veils of capital as working mechanisms: unions mimic the industries and hierarchies that give them birth.

The conundrum is, at base, the liberal organizations which strain to reform unions which themselves take on the impossible task of constructing gentle forms of capital lead workers down into closed canyons. Radical organizations, like Solidarity, calling for internal union democracy yet profoundly hierarchical and undemocratic themselves, may fall into the trap of creating a work force too willing to say "me too," a condition I think will ricochet back and assist in the recreation of capital's strengths. Announcing definitions of alienation and surplus value, even in the context of dramatic sacrifice and revolutionary struggle, does not inoculate people against reincarnating the desires and social forms of capitalist relations a generation later, as the Soviet and Chinese socialist history would indicate. Witness the crisis of consciousness that belies fixes on the superstructure and base when people eagerly lurch backward, past the egalitarian and democratic histories they themselves fought to create, toward the demonstrable horrors of warfare and estrangement that a dose of surplus value stimulates.

It follows that reform struggles, if they are to host anti-capitalist action (as they must today, if they are to win even modest but defensible reforms) have to creatively find ways not to merely raise the level of class struggle, or to make the objective conditions clear, but to reach into the minds of people and change the way they think and live. This, in part, goes to the need to build organizations which are simultaneously in battle and at one with their membership, developing unity and consciousness through struggle. People must be rediverted from the daily spectacular offerings of capital in crisis, from Monica to O.J. to Jean Benet Ramsey, and offered an understanding of the sensuality of the struggle of testing for what is true.

Educators, all workers in education, are well positioned to deal with these issues of domination and resistance in the classrooms, probably the most free place where people receive wage labor in the U.S. Teachers are the most organized group of workers in the country. While educators, too, are relatively privileged, among the last working people with health benefits and tenure, many if not most of them are in classrooms because they have sacrificed in order to fashion hope for other people. While it is certainly true they

play a reproductive role in recreating the relations of a capitalist society, it is also true that they play a productive role in creating the skills and hope that are necessary to see into an act for a better life. While education workers surely warehouse kids, they also demonstrate that it is possible to coherently gain and test knowledge, often in rational ways. But it is easily apparent to many educators that they face, within the state apparatus, a government that has little interest in real hope or reasoned and critical skills.

Educational work places, not the factories of decentralized and de-industrialized America, are now central to U.S. society. It is at home and at school where people first learn to read the world as a site of freedom or alienation and obeisance. This is not to say that the industrial work force is not finally the lynch-pin of change, or that teaching is the heart of productive relations, or even creates surplus value in tangible ways. Education is the center of the social communities, now, that may be the flashpoints of change. For now, it may be that the L.A. rebellion, multi-cultural and beyond the control of reformers, will be more of a storm petrel of change than the 1998 GM Flint strike. The massive Ontario teachers' strike which paralyzed the province and mobilized citizens far beyond schools in 1998, the walkouts of students in San Francisco protesting the fact that their schools are preparatory sites for prisoners in the fall of 1998, these may be better signs of what might be organized in the future than the quick Teamster action at UPS.

To return to the merger vote, there is little reason for either NEA or AFT rank and file members to celebrate--other than the fact that they know they can defeat the best laid plans of their union officials and that they won in their defense of formal democratic procedures in the larger union--no insignificant defense. The appearance of democracy is consequential, even if it is undermined by the realities of top-down control by staff with the time and resources to strategize and implement plans. The appearance of democracy--in NEA the secret ballot, the preservation of anti-racist guarantees of minority leadership, term limits, etc.--offers education workers the chance to maneuver on a wider plane, and may influence a restructure of the AFT in order to gain a future merger. A merger which would have adopted the structure of the AFT, and the domination of AFT leadership, would have narrowed the possibilities for radical action.

Nevertheless, there are only the slightest hints of insightful analysis or bold action rising in the teacher unions. Only one young rank and file member was able to articulate some of the key demands which might unite education workers, working-class parents, and students into the potentially powerful unity that they possess. Demands around class size, control of the curricula rooted in a relationship of communities and educators, and a more just tax system have a history in both the NEA and the AFT. Margaret Haley, an early leader in both unions, made these demands and often won--the last a message that people also need to hear: We can fight and not lose.

Today, the Rouge Forum, a grassroots group of k-12 educators from both unions, as well as students, parents, and community people, originating inside professional schools of education and building deep ties in communities in the mid-west, may offer illustrations of how a class-based reform group could operate in schools and demonstrate

the key lesson: Working people can win. This comes from a Rouge Forum flyer attacking standardized tests in Michigan:

We are school workers, professors, students, parents, and community people concerned about questions like these: How can we teach against racism, national chauvinism and sexism in an increasingly authoritarian and undemocratic society? How can we gain enough real power to keep our ideals and still teach and learn? We are both research and action oriented. We want to learn about equality, democracy and social justice as we simultaneously struggle to bring into practice our present understanding of what that is. We seek to build a caring inclusive community which understands that an injury to one is an injury to all. At the same time, our caring community is going to need to deal decisively with an opposition that is sometimes ruthless.

On the classroom level, I am researching the work of two untenured openly Marxist high school teachers, one working in a large inner-city school, the other working in an affluent suburban school. Without belaboring the fits and starts of our collaboration, it is noteworthy that it is possible to risk communism in classrooms these days, and gain sufficient parent, teacher, student support to carry on. Perhaps this is an indicator of the perception of the weakness of post-socialism Marxism. Still, the class struggle is sufficiently obvious in school that these are both popular educators.

Neither the NEA nor the AFT nor the AFL-CIO have a strategy to resolve the fragmentation of the working people they represent, nor does the AFL want to demonstrate to them that workers can indeed understand and transform the world. That can only be accomplished by a class-based organization, perhaps presently initiating its work in schools, willing to take the practical risks of rubbing together reform and revolution, the relationship of wanting a better life now and understanding that the ravenous demands of capital for more and more surplus value make a better life transient--that an injury to one really does precede an injury to all.
