



## Reuniting to win: How local union movements overcame the AFL-CIO split

A surprising thing happened after the defection of four major unions fractured the national AFL-CIO last summer. Back home, in state after state, our local unions held together. Or, if they began to disassemble themselves, as happened here in Oregon, they soon found a way to reassemble themselves and are now close to full strength again.

This is what I hoped would happen. But, for many months last year, it is not what I expected would happen. And the fact that the fissures from the national split ultimately did little or no damage to the AFL-CIO's institutions at the local level tells an important story about the importance of old-fashioned solidarity and the endurance of well-organized state federations and central labor councils. It's a story worth remembering as we prepare for the battles of 2006. Here's my summary.

**Chapter I, November 2004-June 2005.** As the debate about the future of the AFL-CIO takes hold, leaders of central labor councils and state federations weigh in with a strong reminder that solidarity at the local level is the key to success at the national level. The Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board adopts a resolution in December 2004 stating, "All politics is local. And all organizing, even in a global economy, begins in local workplaces ...if we didn't have a local union movement, we would have to create it, state by state."

But, as consensus develops within the AFL-CIO for strengthening its local institutions, dissent polarizes its unions over structure and strategy at the national level. When defection at the national level appears likely, the Service Employees International Union offers a local option for the continued affiliation of breakaway unions at the local level, which the AFL-CIO rejects as unworkable.

**Chapter II, July-August 2005.** SEIU, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Teamsters and UNITE HERE boycott the AFL-CIO convention in Chicago. Then, they announce their disaffiliation from the national AFL-CIO. But they all say that they would like their local unions to remain part of the AFL-CIO's state federations and labor councils. The AFL-CIO dismisses that approach as "pick-and-choose solidarity" and directs its local labor bodies to expel the breakaway unions. The Oregon AFL-CIO sheds 40 percent of its affiliated members within a week after the national convention. The Northwest Oregon Labor Council follows suit, losing close to 25 percent of its members. Similar actions are taken in other states, including Washington. But local leaders in most states take a wait-and-see approach, reluctant to diminish their state federations and labor councils in the face of growing political threats.

**Chapter III, September-November 2005.** Leaders of the AFL-CIO and national unions on both sides of the split realize that they need state federations and labor councils to wage effective campaigns in high-stakes political contests at the local level. There are key governors' elections in Virginia and New Jersey, a government spending measure in Colorado, and a ballot initiative in California that threatens to restrict the freedom of unions to engage the political process. Recognizing these threats, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney announces three successive grace periods to allow locals of the breakaway unions to continue to participate in state federations and labor councils. Our campaigns are victorious in all four battleground states. And Sweeney eventually reaches an agreement with the breakaway unions to adopt the local option idea, now

called "Solidarity Charters," through December 2006.

**Chapter IV, December 2005.** SEIU rejoins the Oregon AFL-CIO. UFCW rejoins the Northwest Oregon Labor Council. Oregon's union movement, although not completely healed, is back to fighting strength. And the national AFL-CIO goes a step further with the local option approach as a way to rebuild the union movement from the bottom up: It offers special charters not just to the breakaway unions, but to any non-AFL-CIO union that chooses to affiliate with a state federation or labor council.

**Epilogue.** What produced this reunification of our union movement at the local level?

Certainly, personal solidarity was a critical factor. At labor councils, in particular, union members march under common banners; they picket together; and, they campaign door-to-door and over the phones to talk to each other's members. These kinds of relationships — and the institutions that sustain them — are not easy to dismantle. Further, at the national level, union leaders recognized that all politics is local — and that our best federations and labor councils do their most effective work in high-stakes electoral campaigns at the local level.

The unraveling that occurred at the national AFL-CIO stopped short of untying the bindings of solidarity forged at the local level. In most state federations and labor councils, the center held. And now it appears that our local institutions may offer new centers of growth for a more inclusive union movement. Re-uniting to win at the local level, it turns out, is as important as changing to win at the national level.

*Tim Nesbitt is a former president of the Oregon AFL-CIO.*

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