

2 years after labor split, Change to Win reflects

LABOR | Boosting membership remains job No. 1

September 24, 2007

BY [FRANCINE KNOWLES](mailto:fknowles@suntimes.com) fknowles@suntimes.com

Two years after its controversial birth, Change to Win labor federation is making good on its pledge to reinvigorate the labor movement with more expansive and comprehensive organizing targeting tens of thousands of workers, its leaders contend.

But as the group prepares to kick off its second convention here Tuesday, those efforts haven't yet produced a payoff in increased union membership or deeper penetration in existing business sectors.

But as the group prepares to kick off its second convention here Tuesday, those efforts haven't yet produced a payoff in increased union membership or deeper penetration in existing business sectors.

Change to Win, formed by seven unions that broke from the AFL-CIO after disagreements on how to best organize, says it is targeting several major organizing campaigns:

Change to Win, formed by seven unions that broke from the AFL-CIO after disagreements on how to best organize, says it is targeting several major organizing campaigns:

- • 90,000 ports drivers in California, Florida and Washington, led by the Teamsters.
- • More than 30,000 school bus drivers led by the Teamsters and Service Employees International Union.
- • More than 10,000 Bashas' grocery store workers in Phoenix, led by the United Food and Commercial Workers.
- • 60,000 residential home construction workers in Arizona, California and Nevada, led by the Laborers' International Union.
- • Thousands of hotel workers across the country, led by Unite Here.

The campaigns have received assistance from Change to Win's strategic organizing center, which receives \$12 million of the federation's \$16 million budget.

"We've been focused on major campaigns in our core industries, and other unions have been supporting those efforts so we can do campaigns bigger," said Anna Burger, chair of the federation.

The federation's affiliates are committing several hundred million dollars annually to organizing, in addition to teaming up on campaigns, said Tom Woodruff, head of the organizing center.

Last month 300 organizers from all of the affiliates participated in a Teamsters blitz at the Port of Los Angeles, contacting 15,000 workers during a one-week period, said federation Executive Director Gregory Tarpinian.

In the Chicago area, the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1546 President Ken Boyd says the union has received help from the Teamsters in organizing food-industry workers here.

"You see cooperation among these various unions," said Robert Bruno, an associate professor of labor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "But they promised a centralization of resources and of strategizing, and while on the plus side I do see cases of that, there's certainly far less of it than was promised two years ago."

Kate Bronfenbrenner, director of labor education research at Cornell University, shared similar views.

"If you look at the organizing numbers, there has been no significant change in who's organizing and who's not," she said.

The unions that were making the most significant gains organizing before and after Change to Win was formed are the same unions, she said. SEIU and Unite Here, which represents hotel, restaurant, textile and laundry workers, remain the most aggressive.

But Woodruff and other labor leaders said the two-year-old organization and its affiliates have been focused on putting the infrastructure in place to support bigger and better campaigns. That is key to increasing density, they said, adding that more campaigns will be forthcoming.

"What we're seeing now in all our affiliates is in many cases a doubling or tripling of the number of people working in their strategic research operations, said Tarpinian.

Three years ago the Teamsters had fewer than 20 organizers on the ground from the national union, today it employs 200 such organizers, noted Tarpinian. The union's membership, which stood at nearly 1.4 million at the end of 2006, organized more than 20,000 new members last year, and is on track to double that this year, said spokeswoman Leigh Strobe.

The Laborers', meanwhile, have committed to increasing per capita payments by 25 cents per hour by 2009 to fund organizing. That will create more than \$100 million a year for organizing

to help it achieve its goal of boosting its membership by 20 percent over the next five years, said General President Terence O'Sullivan.

At UFCW 1546, one third of the budget now goes to organizing, up from about 10 percent three years ago, said Boyd.

"We're spending more money on organizing, developing and training organizers, developing capacity to do research, and to understand our industries in a much larger way," said Burger, in assessing the group's progress. "That has been very dramatic."

Henry Tamarin, president of Unite Here Local 1, says it's premature to judge the success of the still young federations, but noted the clock is ticking. Indeed, union membership has continued its downward slide, falling from 12.5 percent of wage and salary workers to 12 percent last year.

"At the end of the day, the only real measure that can apply is whether we have more workers organized and greater density in the industries that we represent," Tamarin said. "We can get an A for effort, but that doesn't change the equation."



Helping organize and raise the pay and benefits of thousands of hotel workers across the country, in an effort led by Unite Here, is among Change to Win's campaigns. (Scott Stewart/Sun-Times file ph

Steps toward 50 million

The seven-union affiliates of Change to Win labor federation have a long-term goal of organizing 50 million workers. What have they done to help achieve that?

- Targeted industries that can't be outsourced, including construction, retail, hotels and hospitality, food production, manufacturing, transportation, health care and real estate.
- Committed 75 percent of the federation's resources to organizing through the establishment of a strategic organizing center.
- Each affiliate has developed an organizing plan to bring about net growth in each of their core industries by next year. That would translate into 250,000 newly organized workers next year.<

- Affiliates have committed more resources to strategic research and training more organizers.
- Put in place capital stewardship programs focused on using union pension funds to help pressure employers.
- Focused on organizing through majority card-check instead of National Labor Relations Board secret ballot elections.