



May 10, 2010

Henry's agenda

New SEIU President Mary Kay Henry, treading cautiously in her new post, said in an interview today that her victory was "not so much about a change in program or direction" as in "refocusing" successful programs.

"There's a huge sense of pride in all that the union has accomplished," she said.

But Henry also hinted at some areas of change, including leaving the door open to rejoining the AFL-CIO, expanding into some of the gaps in non-union community organizing left by the damaged group ACORN, and intensifying the union's focus on the rights of immigrants.

Henry began to outline her vision this weekend, in a [conference call](#) with reporters and in an [interview](#) with Steve Greenhouse, sticking closely to prepared remarks honoring her predecessor, Andy Stern, and indicating she plans only to intensify the union's commitment to politics and organizing, while defusing at least one intra-labor conflict.

Henry has been careful to say she's not currently considering a return to the AFL, and to pledge continued commitment to the flagging, rival Change to Win federation. But in the interview, she refused to rule out rejoining the larger federation, saying she was focused more broadly on the "crisis that American workers are facing."

"I refuse to accept that whether or not we do or don't join the AFL addresses that question," she said, saying she is "deeply committed to our Change to Win partners."

"We want to have a conversation with those partners before I make any proclamation" about rejoining -- or ruling out rejoining -- the AFL, she said.

Henry also expanded on a vision she outlined Saturday of investing in community-based organizations structured along ethnic or other non-workplace lines.

"We want to build community organizations that are sustained between election cycles," she said, saying SEIU would be "investing in organizations that already exist, and in other cases partnering with people in that community" to create new ones.

"In some communities there's the need for the rebirth of a community organization that touches the lives of the people that organization used to serve," she said of ACORN.

Henry also said the union would continue and intensify its engagement on the issues around immigration, calling the new Arizona legislation "an incredible injustice."

SEIU endorsed a boycott of the state Saturday, she said, and said the union would push comprehensive immigration reform at a political level while making the case against restrictive immigration laws to its own members.

"Fighting on behalf of immigrants is in our union's DNA," she said.

Henry also dismissed the notion that her election marked a rejection of Stern, who had recruited her in 1983 when he was running the SEIU's national organizing efforts.

"There was an amazing moment at our executive board meeting on Saturday when Andy formally retired where the floor was opened up," Henry said. "People spoke from the heart about the difference he had made to their personal leadership and the profound change he had made to our organization."