

The new face of organized labor

Iain Murray

Any student of socialism will recognize that organized labor and leftist politics have marched hand in hand since their inception. Early labor union organizers saw their goal as not only to improve the lot of the worker but also to give the workers political muscle. Karl Marx himself said in 1866 that the future role of labor unions was to consolidate their power to "aid every social and political movement" aimed at the "complete emancipation" of the working man.

So what to make of the recent split from the AFL-CIO of two of its most powerful unions? A look at the recent aims and tactics of the dissident Service Employees International Union — America's largest private sector union and until recently the largest in the AFL-CIO — suggests that union politics are about to get a lot more sophisticated.

SEIU reached its current prominence through an unapologetic use of bully-boy tactics. The union's membership has grown from 625,000 members in 1980 to a whopping 1.8 million today, bucking a trend that has seen union membership decline from 20 percent of salaried workers to about 13 percent over the same time period. SEIU has managed this by targeting employers through aggressive campaigns premised on the simple message: "Let us unionize your workforce or we will destroy your reputation." Wal-Mart, Kaiser Permanente and even the nuns who founded the hospital chain Catholic Health-

care West have been the target of SEIU's smear campaigns.

SEIU is no stranger to politics either. It gave more than \$2.5 million in campaign contributions during the 2004 election cycle. Most of that went to Democrats, yet a closer look at SEIU's funding tactics reveals a much more targeted strategy.

SEIU gives money regularly to 29 out of the 50 members of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce and to seven of the 13 members of the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections, which oversees SEIU issues. On the Senate side, it gives to 11 of the 20 senators who sit on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and to seven of the 13 members of the Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety.

Yet perhaps the best return for SEIU money has come from Rep. Lane Evans, D-Ill., who has received \$40,000 from SEIU's Committee on Political Education since 1997. Evans never shies away from an issue SEIU is interested in, voting the union's "preferred position" on those issues 100 percent of the time.

But the relationship goes further than just votes. In 1997, for instance, Evans singled out nursing home proprietor Beverly Enterprises as the best example for why Congress should pass his Federal Procurement and Assistance Integrity Act, which would have denied federal contracts to companies deemed to have violated federal health and labor laws. At the time, SEIU was waging an aggressive campaign to unionize the company.

More recently, Evans has called for hearings



From left, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka and Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson take the stage at a rally in Chicago on July 24.

Sally Ryan/MTT

and Government Accountability Office investigations relating to another company SEIU just happens to be targeting, Wackenhut, a security company, has vigorously resisted SEIU's attempts to degrade its reputation, but SEIU has found a national security angle.

On April 7, 2004, Evans called for Armed Services Committee hearings on Wackenhut's conduct at nuclear facilities. Within 24 hours of this call, SEIU put out a 21-page, professionally designed paper alleging lax conduct by Wackenhut at those facilities. The language in this document, obviously in preparation for some time, was strikingly similar to Evans' letter to the Armed Services chairman.

Another interesting coincidence is the union's and the congressman's concurrent attacks against Alutiiq Security & Technology, a small, native Alaskan Wackenhut subcontractor. SEIU has suggested that Alutiiq does not deserve its contract and is somehow profiting inappropriately, a suggestion impoverished native Alaskans may be surprised to hear. Meanwhile, Evans has asked the GAO to investigate military installation security contracting, which would make Alutiiq a subject of federal investigation and threaten its eligibility

as a contractor.

And earlier this year, Evans helped criticize SEIU's biggest target, Wal-Mart, when he wrote along with colleagues to ask ABC to drop the company as a sponsor of "Good Morning America" on the specious grounds that, "more and more Americans are asking about the price that we have to pay when Wal-Mart comes into a community." SEIU has joined with other organizations like the Sierra Club to form walmartwatch.com, a Web site aimed at delegitimizing a company that has brought great benefits to American communities in the form of greater consumer choice, lower prices and new development.

Perhaps this is the future of union politics in America. Rather than spending millions to back candidates, as the AFL-CIO has done for decades, the breakaway unions will take a more targeted approach to furthering their interests via politics. As Lord Acton said, power corrupts — and SEIU is one of the most powerful unions in America today.

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