

What Happened to Our Unions?

The unions have it in their power to organize a fight for a decent life for all workers. Yet today, the union leadership has completely blocked any such drive. As a result, the membership has lost confidence and lost interest in their unions. This pamphlet tries to explain how the unions got that way and what can be done about it.

Today, as wars threaten to engulf the world, and as a world environmental crisis threatens future generations, it is more important than ever that members start to come together to fight to change their unions.

This pamphlet is written in the hopes that it can help active members see more clearly how their unions got to where they are and how they can be changed. It is written by a 30-year union member who was expelled from the Carpenters' Union by its national leadership. The reason he was expelled was that he fought for the membership.

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also see: *www.worldwide-socialist.net*

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http://www.iww.org/en/blog/1411

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http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/29688

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by

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Introduction to 2009 Edition

This pamphlet, first written five years ago, focuses on the carpenters union and its president, Doug McCarron. At the time, Andy Stern, president of the SEIU, was the darling of many reformers in the labor movement. Since that time, Stern has followed directly in McCarron's footsteps. This was entirely predictable, based on Stern's acceptance of the team concept.

Also, at the time this pamphlet was written, a series of unions, first the Carpenters and then others including the SEIU, were opposing the AFL-CIO leadership. The presidents of these unions claimed that the reason was that they wanted to focus more on organizing the unorganized. As predicted by this pamphlet, their efforts have failed miserably, again because of their failed policies as explained in this pamphlet.

Now, with a Democratic congress and president, all the establishment unions are counting on them to save their bacon. The first test was the proposal to change the labor laws to make it easier for unions to win legal recognition. It is clear that no meaningful change of these laws will be passed, and Obama has refused to mount any serious campaign for such change. (It should be noted that it is questionable whether workers should have even supported the proposed changes, themselves. The result of the proposal would have made it easier for unions to win recognition, but at the same time would have further weakened the power of workers to determine their own contract.)

Meanwhile, an economic crisis is destroying the lives of tens of millions. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics recently reported that unemployment rose to 9.8%. This is based on a definition which was changed under the Clinton administration. According to Shadostats.com, under the previous definition, the rate would be 22% today. This is almost the same as the Great Depression. Yet, while happy to bail out the banks and insurance companies, the Democrats are doing almost nothing to bail out working class people. A principle reason they are not is the refusal of the labor leadership to hold the Democrats' feet to the fire.

Today, more than ever, the need for an alternative to the present-day labor leadership is crying out. In order to build such an alternative, we need to clearly understand the basis for the present leadership's failure and what the alternatives are. It is hoped that this pamphlet can contribute to that understanding.

*John Reimann
October, 2009*

About the Author

John Reimann joined the carpenters union in 1970. He was an active participant in the 1973 Bay Area carpenters wildcat strike against Nixon's wage controls and remained active in the union ever since. He served three terms as recording secretary of his local as well as representing his fellow members in other official roles. However, he always refused offers of a full-time, appointed position for the Union and always fought for a union that more aggressively fought for the members' interests.

John also worked for a time as an organizer for a socialist labor group. In that role, he travelled extensively. He did organizing work not only in his home area of Oakland, CA, but in such varied areas as South Central Los Angeles, Mexico City and he attended the first conference of the Zapatistas in the jungles of the Yucatan (Mexico).

In 1996 John returned to work as a carpenter and was once again elected as recording secretary of his local. He was again offered a full-time staff position on several occasions. In 1999, the head of the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council settled a poor contract – one on which the members were not allowed to vote. John played a key role in organizing a protest against this contract at a Regional Council meeting. This led to a wildcat strike against this contract, and John was one of the organizers of this strike and was elected as Chairman of the strike committee.

Although this wildcat did not succeed in overturning this contract, it was an enormous beacon to hundreds of carpenters. Many of these members had little experience in organizing collective action. It was also a great threat to the union officialdom, including the Carpenters General President, Doug McCarron. To this day, members remember the wildcat and speak positively about it.

Following the strike, John was brought up on charges for “disobedience to authority” by Mike Draper, a member of the General Executive Board of the International. Draper's co-conspirator, General President Doug McCarron, appointed the trial panel to hear the case. This panel served as judge, jury and executioner. In what can only be described as a kangaroo court, John was found guilty and was expelled from the union for life. Despite the fact that the membership of the local voted overwhelmingly to oppose this act, the General Executive Board upheld this finding of their appointees (as was to be expected).

John still works as a carpenter, under the union contract, but is barred from participating in the union. He has no regrets whatsoever over his role in helping working carpenters organize and fight collectively for their interests. He continues his activities in the labor movement as a whole, as well as in working class politics in general. He also continues the struggle for stronger unions, for working class unity, and for socialism. He is presently a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).

Update

Since this pamphlet was written, the “New Unity Partnership” was disbanded, then several of its members split the AFL-CIO under the banner of the “Change to Win” (CTW) coalition. McCarron later brought the Carpenters into CTW. Unfortunately, there has been very little changing and even less winning.

As this is being written, the leadership of the United Auto Workers (UAW) is in the midst of pushing major concessions onto their members. Basically, they are trying to get the employers off the hook as far as responsibility for health care for retired auto workers. They settled such a contract with GM already, but the contract that they settled with Chrysler is so bad that at this time it seems headed towards rejection by the membership. In both cases, the guiding philosophy behind these contracts is to help the uninformed auto producers compete with the non-union and also the foreign run plants. The success of this is shown by the fact that the non-union US plants (such as Honda, Nissan, etc.) typically have paid close to union scale - about \$24 per hour. However, a new non-union Honda plant opening up in Indiana is planning to pay only \$15-\$18 per hour. The more the union scale is cut, the more the non-union plants cut pay.

Such an employer-friendly approach is also making it nearly impossible to organize non-union workers. These workers look at the concessions and worsening conditions that the Union is accepting, and figure “who needs a union?” The statistics bear this out.

According to the National Labor Relations Board, “*In the decade 1997-2006, unions lost a total of 2,704 ‘decertification’ elections of the 4,045 conducted by the NLRB, with unions never receiving as much as 36 percent of the vote in any one year. During the decade, the unions lost 123,661 members through decertification elections, after spending countless millions of dollars and years of energy to organize them into functioning unions.*” (As quoted by Harry Kelbar at laboreducator.org)

Iraq War

Meanwhile, the mainstream union officials continue to support the employers on the two most critical political issues of the day. In regards to the war in Iraq, the union officialdom simply in the main follows in line with whatever the Democrats say. And where they do take a stronger position, they refuse to take that position to their membership and try to mobilize the membership around the issue.

Global Warming

As for the issue of global warming, which threatens to become the greatest disaster of the last 100 years, the union officialdom takes the same approach. The UAW leadership supports the Big Three auto makers’ resistance to requirements that they produce more gas efficient autos. The construction union officials take the same position as the contractors and the real estate speculators - build anything, anytime, anywhere.

Crisis

It is most likely that a major crisis in US society will have to occur before there is a mass rebellion against this failed, employer friendly strategy of the union officialdom. It is hard to see how such a crisis can not occur, which is

Introduction

Recently, there has been a small increase in strikes, such as the Southern California grocery workers strike and lock-out (2003-4) and the San Francisco hotel workers’ strike and lock-out (2004). These have been defensive strikes, as the employers move to take back everything that has been won over the last 50 years. It is very possible that other strikes will follow.

As workers move to defend their interests, they will be openly confronted with the barrier of their own leadership – the leadership of the trade unions. This is the same barrier they face on a daily basis. Many union members simply see their leaders as being corrupt. This is not what lies at the heart of the problem. If it were, then it would have been a simple task to replace these leaders with more honest and brave leaders long ago.

It is actually far more complex. Most important is an understanding of the guiding philosophy, the general ideas, of the leadership. Without this understanding, and without a clear alternative point of view, then any new movement is liable to fall into the same problems that it is seeking to overcome; the new leaderships that replace the current one will end up playing the same role.

This pamphlet focuses on one union leader in particular: Douglas McCarron, president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC). At present, McCarron is involved with the presidents of several other unions (UNITE/HERE, SEIU and the Laborers) in an alliance called the New Unity Partnership (NUP). The NUP seeks to reform the structure and functioning of the AFL-CIO or, if it fails in this, possibly to establish a new, rival labor body.

The NUP proposes that the AFL-CIO force the mergers of different unions to establish one union for each industry. It would also require each union to spend a certain proportion of its income on organizing. In addition, it would force the merger of the different local central labor councils into one state labor council whose full time officer would be appointed from above; there would be no elected full time officials of these super-councils.

Steps like increased organizing and forming one union for each industry may sound positive. However, if they are imposed from above by a leadership that is committed to the idea of playing ball with the employers, then this will come to nothing. McCarron has already carried out a similar program inside his union. He is the most conscious of the union presidents involved in the NUP and, as such, is playing a leading role. The other presidents all basically agree with McCarron, but they are not as clear in what they are after. Therefore, we should understand what McCarron is up to and what has happened inside the Carpenters Union in order to see the direction of the entire labor leadership.

A Little History

In 1935, John L. Lewis, President of the United Miners Union (UMW), punched Big Bill Hutcherson, Carpenters Union president, in the jaw and walked out of the convention of the American Federation of Labor. Hutcherson had been leading the

opposition to “industrial organizing” – organizing millions of factory workers into big industrial unions. It was no accident that it was the Carpenters Union President who got punched in the jaw by Lewis; the leadership of this union long stood in the very forefront of almost everything that was selfish, conservative and backwards within the union movement up until that time. (Lewis was supposed to have later received a letter from a union carpenter who wrote, “Congratulations! Hit him again.”)

Lewis, himself, was no great radical nor even a militant. However, as president of an industrial union with a militant and rebellious tradition, Lewis was more subject to the pressures of the militant, anti-capitalist forces which were developing inside his own union as well as inside the AFL as a whole. It was also especially important for the continued survival of his own union that the masses of industrial workers be organized.

Prior to the mid ‘30s, the great majority of union members were the skilled workers, divided up into “craft unions”. This means that their unions were built around the particular skill or “craft” that a worker had, rather than uniting all



Steelworkers in the 1930s - Carpenters President Huteson opposed organizing such workers.

workers in one industry into the same union. This discouraged unity between workers and encouraged the more skilled workers to look down on their less skilled sisters and brothers in heavy industry.

The major internal struggle within the American Federation of Labor (AFL – the only union federation of the time) was over whether to organize the industrial workers, and whether to organize them along

industrial lines – all workers in one industry in the same union regardless of their craft. The Carpenters Union lead the opposition to this.

This was because of the role the Carpenters Union played within the building trades unions. The stronghold of craft unionism, the building trades unions fought constantly amongst themselves over whose members would get to do what work (what is known as “jurisdiction”). Being the biggest of the building trades unions, the Carpenters’ leadership was the most aggressive in these jurisdiction battles, devoted most of their time and resources to this, and was therefore the most committed to craft unionism. Their motto was that their

minded union leadership. This runs right from the original leadership of the American Federation of Labor and its president, Samuel Gompers, who once bragged that he’d never walked on a picket line. On the other hand, there is also the fighting, militant traditions, as exemplified by the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World, who wrote in the preamble to their founding constitution (1905):

“The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among the millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the toilers come together on the political, as well as on the industrial field, and take and hold that which they produce by their labor...”

In revitalizing the labor movement, we would do well to build upon this tradition.

transforming the unions into semi-service/employment agencies. Even McCarron knows this cannot fully succeed, so he is keeping his options open by trying to base part of his income on the Union's real estate holdings.

This trend in thinking was given a major boost with the increased attacks on working class people by the employers. While they were cutting wages, benefits and working conditions, they were also carrying out a propaganda war: *"The free market is god,"* they said. *"It is perfect and all powerful, and workers must not organize against it. Any attempt to do so is doomed to being crushed."*

McCarron has not only completely accepted this position, he is putting it forward within the union movement. When he first came to power, he also put up a lot of rhetoric about organizing, but this pretty much came to naught. All that remained of his reorganization was the near total removal from control of the union of the rank and file.

There should be no illusions in the NUP. The parts that sound good on paper are nothing but window dressing. If the NUP leaders come to power in the AFL-CIO, they will end up playing the same role as McCarron has in the Carpenters. If they split from the AFL-CIO (as they are threatening to do) their new labor body would be the same thing. All the talk about organizing the unorganized will come to little or nothing.

Within the Carpenters Union, the staffers appear to have given up to the extent that even their hired organizers are demoralized. The San Francisco Bay Area was once a stronghold of union construction. The building of large-scale commercial projects non-union was unheard of. In the last few years, however this has changed completely. Large stores like Wal Mart and Albertsons are being built non union. When members ask the "organizers" about this, they are told that "there is nothing we can do about it."

At present, it is very hard going for activists within the unions. The great majority of members do not feel they can do anything to make their unions fight for them. This mood won't last forever. In the meantime, we must not look for short-cuts by seeking long term alliances with the apparently more progressive wing of the union leadership. Exactly some of these (such as Andy Stern, president of the SEIU) are closely allied with McCarron. If they can work closely with him, then what real basis is there for union activists to work with the likes of Stern and his organizers?

Instead, while continually trying to organize within the rank and file of the union, we should also be making links with workers who are in struggle outside of the unions. It may be possible to link up with non-union workers in fast food and other low wage areas. At other times, there will be community struggles over housing, etc. In one way or another, there will always be a link between these and the labor movement.

US Labor Traditions

In thinking about the future struggles, it is important to also consider the traditions of the past. There has always been a powerful tradition of conservative, corporate-

jurisdiction covered "all that is or ever was made of wood," and unofficially they took the position that they'll keep all the work that is theirs and take as much of everybody else's as they can. (This is literally what Carpenter officials used to say.)

Union Busting in the '80s

Throughout the period following WW II, the building trades were the most conservative sector of the labor movement in general. When Reagan came into office in 1980, one of his first acts was to move to destroy the air traffic controllers union (PATCO) after driving their members out onto strike. At the very height of this union busting effort, the Carpenters Union held its general convention in Chicago. Who should be invited as one of the keynote speakers at this convention? None other than the union busting President Reagan. It was "explained" to objecting delegates that we would have to "work with" this president in the years to come. In other words, let's abandon our brothers and sisters in other unions and try to cut our own deal with this president.



1981 Air Traffic Controllers' (PATCO) Strike - *While President Reagan was busting this union, the head of the Carpenters Union invited him to speak at the Carpenters' general convention.*

During this entire period, the construction industry was in the forefront of the drive to break unions. The unionized contractors went to the building trades union leaders with the following line: "We cannot compete with the non-union contractors because they pay such lower wages. You have to grant us some relief, hold wages down, in order to allow us to win bids and give your members jobs." The building trades leaders, who across the board accept the employers' views on society in general, simply accepted this position.

So the word went out to the business agents and through them to the members: "We have to help our contractors to compete", meaning hold down wages and conditions. These leaders never thought through what this really meant. One delegate used to continually challenge this view at his local building trades council meetings in Alameda County, CA, but his challenges were ignored. Finally he refused to allow this to pass, and would not allow a meeting to continue without an answer to his question: "If we take cuts, then the non-union will take cuts, and where will this all lead?" Exasperated by this delegate's insistence on an answer, the Executive Secretary of the council finally threw his hands up in the air and replied, "I don't know where it will all lead."

While strongly pushing this view of “competing”, the carpenters leadership also was one of the first to try to organize the non-union carpenters. This was because of the position of the carpenters union as the one skilled trade whose members utilized a huge variety of skills; their members are the ones with the least particular skills. Some call the Carpenters an “industrial craft union.” The strategy of simply trying to limit the number of workers with the particular skills of their members was less open to the Carpenters leadership, because those skills were less particular.

In other words, historically we have had the following situation: Due to their craft structure in great part, the Building Trades Unions have stood in the forefront of everything that is conservative in the US labor movement. Due to their role and power within the Building Trades, the United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC) has been the most aggressive fighter for this conservative, business union approach within the Building Trades and in general. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that as the top leadership of the entire labor movement turns further to the right that the president of the UBC stands in the forefront of this tendency.

McCarron and Business Unionism

This is exactly what has happened. Current UBC President Doug McCarron stands as the most conscious leader in this corporate union tendency of the entire union hierarchy.

McCarron, himself, started his union career in the Los Angeles District Council of Carpenters. During the early ‘80s, it was this Council that most aggressively pushed for organizing the unorganized within the state. Also, it was in southern California that several strikes of non-union carpenters, overwhelmingly Latino, took place. As a result, the question of non-union construction and organizing was clearly implanted in McCarron’s mind.

For McCarron, this did not result in a serious union organizing campaign. Why not?

McCarron was also closely associated with the likes of Richard Blum and Ron Tutor. Blum is a multi-millionaire investment counselor and husband of conservative US Senator Dianne Feinstein. Tutor is head of Tutor Construction. Together with Tutor, McCarron sits on the Board of Directors of Perini Construction. Partly as a result of such influences, McCarron saw the rise of non-union construction as being a threat to the Union’s alleged allies – the unionized contractors.

But the millions of workers who struggled and sacrificed to build the unions did not do so in order to be allies of the employers. They made these sacrifices in order to wring better wages and conditions out of their employer and, in so doing, increase the working and living conditions of all workers. When they battled the employers, they did not concern themselves with what the bosses’ laws said, nor with the bottom line of the boss. The present union leadership has completely rejected this approach and the result of this is that this history, this collective memory, is nearly completely wiped out in the minds millions of workers,



In May of 2004, members of Chicago’s *Carpenters for a Rank & File Union* rallied outside their District Council offices with the demand for a lowered pension age. Through their struggle, they got the age for full pension benefits lowered from 62 to 60 years old. This is but a small example of what the rank and file can accomplish by organizing.

bread-and-butter issues. This can be seen by the fact that most members do not use what few democratic rights they have (right to vote on contracts, etc.) What they are looking for is a clear direction, a program and strategy, that will make their lives materially better. It is not for nothing that the most popular union leader of the last 50 years was one who was a brutal, corrupt thug – Jimmy Hoffa, Sr. The reason that he was so popular was that he brought home the bacon – he won good contracts. In any case, if a new leadership comes to office based on democratic promises, if they are unable to deliver the goods – unable to improve their members lives – they will have to start to hide behind the same bureaucratic road blocks as the previous leadership. This is why a real fighting program against the employers must come first.

Local rank and file caucuses will rise and fall. Most times, their decline is due to the fact that in general there is not a mood to fight to change the unions right now. However, as the 1999 San Francisco Bay Area carpenters wildcat strike showed, such a mood can explode to the surface very quickly. If an organized group of union members is on hand, a group that can relate the specific issue to the more general problem, then substantial victories can be won.

Conclusions

Doug McCarron is the foremost representative of a historic trend within organized labor in the US. This trend is to try to link the unions with “their” employers, at the expense of the rest of the working class and, ultimately, at the expense of their very own members. It’s logical conclusion is total corporate unionism,

they were partial struggles for power – power over production. Production was shut down by mass picket lines of thousands and even tens of thousands and by occupying the work places (sit-down strikes). Workers physically prevented scabs from entering or from moving goods. They physically defended themselves against the police.

Today, this conservative, timid leadership only uses a strike as a last resort in order to put pressure on the employer, to make life for them a little more difficult. The idea of actually shutting the employer down is never even considered. If workers are to move forward, these old tactics will have to be brought out of the closet and put in place again.

Workers' Party

There is also the political situation to consider. Almost the entire labor leadership has linked itself to the Democratic Party – one of the two major parties of the employers. (In the case of McCarron, it is even worse: He is closely associated with George Bush, partly to keep himself out of legal trouble and partly to support Bush's even worse environmental position.) As the Democrats' sponsors, the employers, increase their attacks on wages and working conditions, the Democrats reflect this by moving to the right. Since the 2004 presidential elections, there are signs that they will accelerate this.

In any serious union struggle, especially strikes, the workers' relations to the wider community and to other working class people is always critical. It is because of this that politics comes into play. Up until now, the union leadership has relied on the Democratic Party to fight our battle in this wider arena. This is just the same as relying on the good will of the employers in the work place – what is known as the team concept (the union and management are one united team). The reliance on the Democrats is the team concept applied to politics and it has been as great a failure.

Opposition caucuses cannot ignore this issue any more than they can ignore the issue of the union leadership falling into bed with management over wage cuts. The opposition within the unions should call for the unions to link with community groups and put forward independent, working class candidates for office as a first step towards building a mass, radical party of, by and for working class people.

Local Organizing

Most times, rank and file struggles to change the union will start off over local issues. None of the above is meant to say that these local and more particular issues should in any way be ignored. Ultimately, though, rank and file union members will find that the local issues are in one way or another connected with these broader ones and that it is impossible to seriously fight for the local issues while ignoring the broader ones.

Many opposition groups within different unions focus on the issue of union democracy. This is a vital issue. However, this will not be the issue which motivates the great majority of union members. For the majority, it will be the



Founding Meeting of Carpenters' Union - 1881

These dedicated workers did not make all their sacrifices for a few high paid officials to represent the employers inside the union.

especially ⁵ younger workers.

Global Capitalism Goes on the Offensive

As with the rest of the top union leadership, McCarron has been influenced by the capitalist propaganda offensive of the 80s (under Reagan) and even

more so of the offensive that occurred after the collapse of Stalinism (what was called "Communism", but in reality had nothing in common with these ideas). Production is only possible based on private profit and "free markets" was the mantra. Once Stalinism collapsed, no new form of society was possible. We have come to "the end of history" said one capitalist propagandist.

As capitalism increased its reach globally, and as new technologies started to massively change production, distribution and marketing, competition increased between capitalist firms. This forced some of them to struggle to become more efficient. Corporate efficiency was the watchword. In the name of efficiency, corporations were restructured, jobs were cut, work tasks were redefined, and wages were reduced. The Free Market, you see, dictates this and who are we to stand up to it? In general, the labor leadership completely accepted this view, but some carried it to its logical and practical conclusion further than others. McCarron was the most clear and conscious example of this.

McCarron "Reorganizes" the UBC

When McCarron first came into office in 1991, he set about a massive "reorganizing" project which restructured the UBC. His model was corporate efficiency, and on the surface some of what he did even seemed positive. He reduced staff at the International headquarters in Washington DC, and saw to it that a larger staff of field "organizers" was appointed throughout the UBC.

He also massively centralized the power in the union. Various different carpenter district councils were merged, at McCarron's orders, into giant regional councils. Locals were forcibly merged into each other. In Northern California, for instance, all the locals in a county were merged together and in some cases a local actually spanned more than one county. The various district councils were merged into the Northern California Carpenters' Regional Council (NCCRC).

He also took it upon himself to appoint the Executive Secretary Treasurer (EST) of all these newly created regional councils. It should be understood what this means: The EST has enormous powers. He or she has the sole power to appoint the full time officers for the locals. (McCarron also banned the right for

the local membership to elect any full time staff positions.) The EST then served in office for several years before being subject to running for election. When an election occurred, it is the regional council delegates who vote. Of these, close to a third (or more) are full time staffers appointed by the EST. Given that it is extremely difficult to run against a regional council EST, it is almost a necessity that a viable candidate be a full time staffer and that they have the support of a sizeable number of fellow staffers. Yet these staffers are appointed by and serve at the pleasure of the EST. Therefore, a viable opposition candidate is almost impossible under ordinary circumstances.

McCarron claimed that by banning election of business representatives and full time financial secretaries he would “take the politics” out of the position and allow for the most qualified people to be appointed. Just the opposite happened. His claims were disproven in the first place by the fact that almost every single already serving business rep was appointed. If these officials were so unqualified in the first place, then why were they appointed if it were not for “politics”? Other, new business reps and “organizers” were appointed based purely on politics. Many of them had never demonstrated any interest in unionism until they became interested in this new, easy and lucrative union career.

In Northern California, McCarron appointed John Casey to serve as EST. Casey had his base in the rural regions of Northern California. In these regions, many carpenters only work in the trade part of the year, they are far more spread out, the union is weaker, and for all these reasons, there is a far greater tendency towards conservatism in the union. Related to this, the union staffers have even more control over their locals.

It would have been logical to appoint an EST from the Bay Area, which has the majority of the membership and where the union is stronger. The reason that McCarron did not do this was that he knew that such an EST would have a base in that area and would be more subject to the pressures of a slightly more militant membership. This leads to another issue: McCarron’s overall strategy.

From the first, McCarron started talking about “recapturing market share.” He made this term (“market share”) so common that even rank and file opponents of McCarron were using this term. In many people’s minds it meant organizing the unorganized, and this appeared to be a good thing. However, it is a peculiar term to use for a union leader, and union members should consider where it comes from. Corporations compete for a share of a market. They do so,



Union official shutting off debate at covention - Can people like these, appointed by McCarron, represent working people?

opposition group, if it is serious, is struggling for power. It is saying to the rest of the membership that it can do a better job leading the union. It is posing itself as an alternative union leadership. If it does gain the leadership, then if it lacks a clear program and strategy for how to fight for better wages and conditions, it too will end up using the same bureaucratic tricks as the old leadership.

Organize the Unorganized

McCarron has used the issue of the non-union sector of the industry as an excuse to hold down the wages and conditions of the union carpenters. He is not alone in this. Steve Byrd and the unionized grocery chains are claiming that the same is necessary to compete with Wal Mart and other such “big box” stores. It certainly seems that the UFCW leadership has accepted this view in practice.

This view plays right into the hands of the employers – *all* employers. By linking up the idea of lower wages with organizing, it makes this task unappealing to the great majority of present union members. It makes the union unattractive to both union and non-union members.

The best – the *only* way to organize the unorganized is to fight for such advances as those outlined above, build a mass movement of the union membership for them, and then link this to the issue of organizing the unorganized. Once it is clearly explained that union workers can never win and keep such wages and conditions as long as there is a huge pool of non-union labor, then rank and file union members will eagerly help the non-union workers organize. The struggle for better contracts and the struggle to organize the unorganized are one and the same.

One thing to bear in mind: It is not certain what direction unorganized workers will take when they move to fight their employer. The conservative, timid approach of the union leadership can act as such a barrier that workers may not be able to win their struggles by immediately joining an already established union. It may be that they will form new unions, or some sort of mix between a union and a rank-and-file caucus. In any case, as with the fight for better wages and conditions, the struggle to organize the unorganized and the struggle to change the unions go hand-in-hand.



1937 Flint Sit Down Strike - auto workers occupied the factory and kicked the bosses out... A return to these methods is necessary.

Fight to Win

In the past, strikes were organized in order to shut down production. As such,

last is especially important if the employed workers ever expect to unite with the unemployed, rather than see them as being used to break strikes and cross picket lines.

Union Democracy

No real change in the unions can come about as long as they are run by this privileged little clique, who prevent the membership from having its say at every turn of events. Therefore, some fundamental changes inside the unions are necessary.

- **For direct election of all officials by the members they represent.**
- **For the right to immediate recall of all union officials.** This would not be taken likely by most members, but where a union official has been found to be totally lacking, the members should be able to remove him or her immediately.
- **For all full time union officials to be on the average wages and conditions of the members they represent. Eliminate all special sick pay, vacation pay, and pensions that the rank and file do not receive.** This would help eliminate the opportunists from running for office; only the most dedicated need apply!
- **For membership ratification of all contracts at general membership meetings.** Mail-in ballots prevent the members from fully discussing the pros and cons of any contract and discourage a fighting union spirit.

Until such changes are made, no opposition group in a union should allow any of the members of its group to apply for or accept a full time paid position with the establishment leadership. The history of the last ten years proves that whoever accepts such positions, or is even looking for one, will not fight for the membership fully.

What is also clear from this history, though, is that the whittling away of the members' democratic rights has been carried out because the leadership cannot and will not fight for the members. As a result, they have to shield themselves from a membership that does not accept losing conditions year after year. Any union



Thousands of unemployed workers lining up for admission into the ILWU. The employed and the unemployed must be united.

at times, by trying to produce a better product, and at times by cutting the price of their product. Advertising is also a big factor in this competition.

Workers as a "Product"

For McCarron, matters are not any different. In his view, the union is marketing a product – the ability of its members to do a certain kind of work (a specific kind of labor power, in other words.) The union is linked with the unionized contractors in a competition with the non-unionized contractors for market share. His view is that the union is part of a team with the contractors, and what the union provides is a particular commodity, "a strong product" he called the union members in an interview with the LA Times (3/10/02).



The UBC is little but a temp employment agency, and the task of the "organizers" is to convince the non-union contractors that they can increase their profits by signing a union contract, something like a salesperson soliciting business. Some union members took to calling the Union "Carpenters, Inc."

According to McCarron, these construction workers are nothing but a "product" to be "marketed".

McCarron justified much of his reorganization of the Union on the grounds that he was going to embark on a massive union organizing campaign. In fact, shortly after the NCCRC was formed, quite a few field organizers were hired and sent out into the field to talk with the non-union carpenters – and the contractors. The organizers tried to balance the interests of the employers and the employees.

"Valley Storm"

In the summer of 1998 the NCCRC initiated an organizing drive throughout the Central Valley called "Valley Storm" (named after the Persian Gulf War's "Desert Storm"). Teams of organizers swept through a region, talking with non-union carpenters. The goal, at that time, according to both Casey and the organizers, was not to get the carpenters to strike for a union, but simply to help the carpenters organize and improve their wages and conditions as non-union carpenters. In one instance they encouraged carpenters to argue with their employer for a dollar an hour increased wages. In another, they encouraged non-union carpenters to demand drinking water on the job.

But what they did not do was seek to organize the non-union carpenters into a massive force, welded together with the active union members, and shut down the non-union contractors until they signed a union contract. Why didn't

they do this?

We can see the answer through a debate an active member and local officer had with an organizer (probably the best and most dedicated organizer in his area) a year later. Debating a proposed contract, this organizer argued that the contractors he was dealing with could not afford to pay more. It was clear that the interests of the contractors was what was first and foremost in his mind, and that he'd been trying to convince the contractors that their interests would be best served by signing a union contract. A real, serious organizing drive and a confrontation with the contractors would scare them away.

The union leadership is trying to balance between the needs and interests of the members and those of the contractors.

NCCRC Web Site

This same balancing act is revealed on the web site of the NCCRC (www.norcalcarpenters.com). At the top of the site, it reads "Northern California Carpenters – Partners in Construction." Even the fact that this is a *union* web site is downplayed. The web site reads in part:

We view our relationship with contractors as a partnership, working with you for the good of your company and for union employees....

We appreciate the importance of hiring and retaining valuable employees, and know how crucial it is for you to assemble a top-notch team that will allow your construction projects to operate smoothly and efficiently. With union carpenters on your job you won't be diverted or frustrated by hiring, training and continually replacing an unmotivated labor force....

Clearly, this web site is aimed at the contractors, not the carpenters. It then continues:

Becoming a Union Contractor

Becoming a signatory contractor with the Carpenter's Union is more than just signing some legal documents. It means building a relationship that is mutually beneficial. Once you make the decision to hire union carpenters, you can relax. Deadlines will be met, quality will be high, and inefficiencies will be eliminated we are committed to assisting you in developing relationships that will expand your business. From developers, construction managers and general contractors, having relationships is crucial to effective bidding and quality job performance. Our resources and strengths in the community are at your disposal from the initial bid process to the successful completion of your project.

Benefits of Partnership

that we think the union leadership (or those who would replace them) should fight for.

- **For a minimum wage of \$15 per hour and an immediate \$5.00 per hour raise for those already making more than this.** Especially for younger workers, the take home pay is a major issue. They can scarcely afford to buy a home or even pay rent. Vacations are practically non-existent. This increase would barely make up for past losses in real

What is Affordable?

The mouthpieces of the employers – including the union leadership – will whine and holler that demands such as these are unaffordable. But consider the following statistics:

1979 – 2000 real income growth
 Bottom 20% of households: 6.4%
 Top 20% of households: 70%
 Top 1%: 184%

1979 average income of top 1% of households was 133 times greater than the average of the bottom 20%
 In 2000 this figure was 189 times that of the bottom 20%

1979 – average real total pay of the top 100 CEO's was \$1.3 m., equal to 39 times average worker's pay.
 2000 this figure was \$37.5 m or 1,000 times the average worker's pay.

In 2001, the top 1% of households earned 20% of all income and held 33.4% of all net wealth, the largest share this elite group has held since the 1930s.
 (Source: Economist, 12/30/04)

In other words, there has been a massive redistribution of wealth over the last 30 years. This redistribution has been entirely upwards, and it has gone on with the consent of the union leadership. Any serious opposition group within any union must fight to reverse this process.

wages and is desperately needed.

- **For fully-paid, free health care for all employees, retirees and their immediate family.** Employers are moving to make their workers pay for the skyrocketing costs of health care. In 2004, 8% of employers with 1000 or more employees have eliminated health care benefits for some employees and 11% more say they plan to do so in 2005. (Source: Kaiser Family foundation)

- **For a 32 hour work week with no loss in pay.** Over 100 years ago, workers fought titanic battles to win the 40 hour week (with no loss in pay). Today, that has largely been lost for many workers, who cannot afford to live on only 40 hours work. Yet with huge increases in productivity, a shortened work week with no loss in pay is more than justified. The struggle for a shorter work week would help unite the employed with the unemployed, as it would mean more jobs for all.

These three simple demands could unite the entire US working class. They would make life immeasurably better for workers, allow them some free time, remove a huge source of insecurity (lack of health care), and help provide jobs for the unemployed (by shortening the work week). This

roadblocks, the moment will have passed. Therefore, there will be a tendency for more wildcat strikes and other such actions.

At the same time, members will increase their activity in the official structures of the unions. During the time of the carpenters wildcat strike, for instance, attendance at local union meetings increased by up to almost ten times over.

New unions and union-type structures also may be formed. In the fall of 2004, for instance, janitors in San Francisco voted to break away from the SEIU and form a new union.

Whether workers join or fight inside the existing establishment unions (which have the overwhelming majority of union members) or form new unions is not a matter of principle. What is a matter of principle is that no matter what, any new movement of workers must struggle to engage the big bulk of workers who are still in the existing unions. This is so if any new movement intends to fight the employers effectively.

Program

Along with the general disgust of the membership in how their unions are being run, there is a general demoralization, a feeling that nothing can be done. This is because, in order to do anything serious, one must organize against the union leadership. Nowadays, this often means a bitter and lonely battle. But it can be done. The 2,000 carpenters who walked off in the Bay Area showed this. Likewise for the hundreds of Chicago carpenters who participated in a successful struggle to make their union improve their pension plan.

But for a more long-term effect, these caucuses need an overall program and a strategy for how to win it.

At some point in the future, millions of union members will be prepared to move into action to fight the employers as well as the employers' representatives within the unions – the present union leadership. The existence of just a small group of members who have engaged in this struggle and have a clear idea of how to organize and along what sort of program can make a big difference in the outcome.

Towards this end, we would like to offer some ideas on a program. We emphasize the issue of the struggle with the employers, because it is around this issue that the problem starts.

Many times, opposition movements focus on a candidate or slate of candidates running for office at the national level. Most times these are symbolic campaigns which have almost no chance on winning. There is nothing wrong with such a campaign, if it is used to build a base at the local, rank and file level. This, after all, is where the forces to change the union are, with the rank and file. Therefore, the main strategy must be to organize rank and file caucuses to fight the corporate-minded strategy and program of the union leadership. Often, these caucuses will start around local issues. However, if they are to develop and grow, then they will have to take on the broader issues that their union as a whole and the rest of the labor movement confront. Below are some suggestions for demands

The Carpenter's Union of today is committed to innovative leadership and successful partnerships that deliver real business value.

Job Tracking

Jobtracking is about going after the work long before the work begins. It is a method employed by Local Union Field Representatives to gain new job opportunities for our members and for our Union Signatory contractors and sub-contractors by connecting and marketing our skills to owners, architects, and construction users early on, while the projects are in the planning process.

As a union signatory contractor or sub-contractor, you will benefit by your ability to receive additional work opportunities whether the project is competitively bid, design built or negotiated. This proactive approach benefits both labor and management.

The NCCRC is looking for "Partners in Construction."

The Carpenters Union and the Environment

As part of their "partnership" with the contractors and developers, the UBC has lead the way in opposing any environmental restrictions in construction, so long as the work is likely to go to a unionized contractors. Occasionally, the UBC leadership will hypocritically join forces with some environmental or community group in opposing construction of a building project... if the proposed contractor is non-union.

Some years ago, residents of (overwhelmingly black) West Oakland joined forces with environmental groups to push the Oakland City Council to partially limit the amount of dioxin (a powerful cancer-causing chemical waste product) into the San Francisco Bay. West Oakland residents were especially concerned because much of the soil in the area is contaminated by chemicals.

On the night of the hearing a representative of the carpenters union appeared to speak. He sought in every way he could to weaken this already-weak initiative. His reason? He was sent there by the International because some paper mills, signed to Carpenter Union contracts, produced dioxin as a waste product and they sent this poison down river into the Bay. The UBC, you see, was helping protect "jobs for the members" – in reality protecting the profits of the signatory companies.

Who cares if some residents' children have birth defects or they get asthma or cancer? Profits and the free market come first.

As they write elsewhere in the web site: ***"The bottom line is your company will profit from a partnership with the Northern California Carpenters."***

What could be clearer? The NCCRC leadership is dedicated to the

proposition that the interests of the contractors and those of the union are one and the same, that they must convince the contractors that they, the union leadership, will help them boost their profits.

“Adding Value” to the Carpenter

Another initiative of McCarron’s is to encourage “journeyman upgrade” classes. These classes help journeymen (and women) improve their skills at everything from installing “solid surface” counter tops to reading blueprints. McCarron explains the purpose clearly: As he puts it, he asks himself “how does this add value to the carpenter out in the field?” (*Engineering and News Report*, 3/18/02)

McCarron and the leadership he has assembled have completely accepted the inevitability of the capitalist “free” market and the role this cold, impersonal market relegates the worker to. The impersonal laws of the “free market” make the worker nothing but owners of a particular commodity – the ability to produce something – that is to say, the ability to work or, as it is known, “labor power.” The employer in effect rents out the use of this labor power and pays for it by the hour, day, week, etc.

According to the laws of this free market, what is the value of this commodity called labor power? When we talk about value in the capitalist “free market” we are talking about “exchange value” – how much one commodity is worth in relation to another. This exchange value is expressed in its price (relative to other prices).

And what is the (exchange) value of a worker’s labor power? It is the same as the value of any other commodity – the amount of labor that is necessary to produce this commodity. In the case of the worker’s labor power, the labor that is

“Capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.” Thus spoke Karl Marx, the great economist, philosopher, socialist and workers’ leader who explained how capitalism works. McCarron completely accepts this situation and seeks to increase the power of this vampire.

necessary to produce it is the labor needed to produce the food, clothing and shelter that goes into maintaining the worker and raising the next generation of little owners of labor power. Part of this value also includes the amount of labor necessary to train the carpenter. This is the reason for McCarron’s journeyman upgrade classes. The more labor that goes into training the worker, the stronger the product the union will be marketing.

So the individual carpenter may benefit from taking any of these classes and thus upgrading their skills. But they will not advance the membership’s interests collectively; for McCarron’s “market share” philosophy, increased skills is part of a substitute for a collective struggle to wring better wages and conditions out of the contractors. Instead, these classes are meant to give the union member an advantage in competing with the non-union carpenter for who can produce greater profits for the employer. This is just the opposite of the purpose of

making role. The official leadership does all it can to discourage and demoralize these members at every turn of events and at every union meeting. If a group of members is motivated to come to meetings in order to get the union to fight for better conditions, they are given the run around and told repeatedly why this is impossible. If a member takes the time to call his or her business rep to complain about conditions on the job, they never know if their name will be turned in to the boss and they will be fired. If a member seeks to file a grievance, at every step of the way the business reps will try to discourage that member from fighting it through to the finish, no matter how strong their case is. In many areas, there is a near open black list against the most active and principled union members. And if all else fails, the most active members are offered jobs with the union establishment in an attempt to buy them off and silence them. In one instance, where even this didn’t work, McCarron and his Executive Board had a member and local officer officially expelled from the union for “disobedience to authority”.

This situation cannot continue indefinitely.

The 1999 Northern California wildcat strike shows this. In that year, the NCCRC EST (John Casey) signed a contractor-friendly contract in the midst of one of the biggest building booms the members had seen in decades. Expecting a top rate contract and a good raise, the membership revolted, especially as they were not allowed to vote on their own contract.

They were not satisfied with the normal, abide-by-the-rules protests and staged a four day wildcat strike. Some 2000 carpenters walked off jobs throughout the Bay Area, shutting down projects like the multi-billion dollar S.F. airport expansion project. They were supported by an equal number of other trades workers who respected their unofficial picket lines. While this strike did not

achieve its goal of getting a better contract, it shook up the union from top to bottom. As well, it shined a light on future events.

In the future, when faced with a conflict and when forced to struggle, union members will not necessarily simply wait to fight through the official channels



Carpenters protesting the union give back of the shorter work week

– union elections, etc. This is in part because these channels have been so clogged up by bureaucratic roadblocks. By the time a way is found around these

organizing the unorganized (“increasing union density” they call it, showing the influence of the academics) will come to naught. Nor will there be any struggle for better contracts. All that will remain of the NUP program will be a more bureaucratically controlled union movement with a leadership that is even more free to force concessions down the throats of the members. In other words, it will end up exactly as McCarron’s “reorganization” of the Carpenters Union has.

Meanwhile, it is not possible to talk with union members without picking up on the total disgust and demoralization they feel about their union. “Sleeping with the enemy” was how one Oakland City worker described his union leadership (SEIU Local 790). “The union ain’t worth a dime” was the attitude of an Albertson’s clerk in talking about the UFCW. “I can’t tell the difference between my union leader and management,” was what a UPS worker said.

Most telling was what a school employee and former Teamster said. He was handed a leaflet against the invasion of Iraq and was very positive about the leaflet. Then he got to talking about the unions and their leadership. “They’re all corrupt,” he said. “They’re all corrupt and don’t you tell me they’re not or I’ll take your leaflet and throw it in the trash.” In other words, he was not interested in what anybody had to say about any other subject if that person was in support of the union leadership.

This brother was thinking in terms of the leadership accepting money from the employers. In fact, the situation is far worse; they have almost completely accepted *the ideas* of the employers. It is a near total corruption of the heart and mind.

First and foremost, as McCarron has expressed, the only possible way for the economy to be organized is capitalism, in which a tiny elite class of people own and control production. It is through them that “work and jobs happen” to paraphrase McCarron. No other alternative is possible. In the last analysis, therefore, workers and their unions are entirely dependent on the employers – the capitalist class.

As a result, any mass, open confrontation with them must be avoided like the plague. After all, at the end of the day we must sit down and work things out with them, and such confrontation can only lead to pure chaos. Since this is so, there must be no mass mobilization of workers to fight for better wages and working conditions, no mobilization to fight for decent jobs for all. There must be no real organizing on an international basis – to get workers to unite against the multi-national corporations. And most definitely, there must be no independent mass workers’ political party, to represent the interests of working class people in politics.

What Lies Ahead

The UBC and its president, Doug McCarron, are perfect examples of how the union leadership suppresses the potentially strongest members. These are the members who understand that unionism means a united struggle against the employers and are willing to take risks and make sacrifices in order to do so. It is exactly these members have been pretty well locked out of any decision-

unions.

McCarron has swallowed whole the propaganda about the “free market” as god; in other words it is perfect and self-correcting at all times. He sees no alternative to the capitalist free market; on the contrary, the free market will solve all problems. This is the end of history. This is what was preached in the ‘80s and ‘90s and this is what McCarron clearly believes. In McCarron’s view, as inherited from the corporate CEO’s and the likes of Ronald Reagan, it is impossible for the union to try to successfully limit this free market and there is no alternative to it; all that remains is to accept the free market and make the best of it. In practice, this means accepting cuts, just so long as they are not too severe and too sudden.

Therefore, the union must not antagonize the contractors, who are the living actor, the driving force, of all production in the free market. McCarron explains this perfectly. Speaking at the convention of the national Erectors Association in 2000 in Hawaii, McCarron explained: *“You need the freedom to assign the work based on what makes sense, what makes us all competitive on the job. Surely we’ve learned that much. While industry was demanding more for its construction dollar, our answer was to shut down your job while we argued over whether an ironworker or a millwright did your rigging. We not only refused to help solve the problem, but we refused to admit there was a problem. You need the freedom to assign the work based on what makes sense, what makes all of us competitive on the job. If there’s a dispute, let the owner settle it. It’s his money and his job. Surely, we’ve learned that much. We’re serious about reorganizing the industry. **We’re serious about customer service.**”*

Any conscious union member would have his or her hair curling reading about McCarron’s referring to the relationship of the union to the employer as being one of “customer service”.

An even more clear explanation of these views is laid out in the July/August 2003 issue of the *Carpenter* magazine, official journal of the UBC. In this issue an article appears which reports on a “Leadership Conference” the UBC hosted earlier in that year. McCarron did not write the article, but nothing passes through those pages without meeting his approval. Here is what it says in part:

“The conference was designed to... promote... marketing strategies (that is, “marketing” the labor power of the members) that bring more and better work to UBC members.... It’s in these conferences and networking venues where the UBC’s commitment to exert a positive influence on the lives of working people takes shape – and is heard by the right ears.... (the right ears being the contractors)

In today’s business environment, employers are essential; unions are not.

If this statement offends you, that’s OK. It should... Just go ahead and ask yourself a couple of questions. Can anyone complete a project non-union? Of course. It happens all the time.

Can you complete a project without a contractor and owner? Forget it. Someone has to make work happen, shoulder risk and write checks. That’s

why employers are the only player who are absolutely essential to the process... Addressing this fact is what (the conference at) Palm Springs is all about."

(There followed here a lot of comment about increased training for the members. While nobody would oppose this training, from McCarron's point of view this is all about adding value to his product, as he puts it.)



Peter J. McGuire - founder of the Carpenters Union and a socialist - He would be turning over in his grave at McCarron's approach.

"Gary Jacks is President and CEO of union contractor Raymond Interiors in Southern California. (His message:) It all boils down to productivity.

"We're always competing with the non-union side and that means we live or die by what we accomplish... We need to be the best trained workforce to survive... Our industry requires a strategic alliance between contractors and carpenters.'

If you were standing outside the conference rooms as the various sessions broke up, you'd see many nods of agreement with statements like this. And who can

argue against the need to boost productivity?

In other words, this contractor is preaching a particular view of "unionism" to these union leaders: That the union workers must compete with the non-union workers for who can be cheapest, for who can be more profitable to the contractor. This completely contradicts the entire premise of unionism, which is to eliminate that sort of competition. In the international arena this view has been pictured as the "race to the bottom." Clearly, this view was generally accepted by the union officials present.

The UBC needs to be the best-value labor force in any given market if it expects to command living wages and benefits for Brotherhood members...(In other words, the UBC "product" – the living, breathing carpenter member – must be a better "value", create more profits, than the product marketed outside the union – the non-union carpenter.)

If people are still skeptical about things like the Leadership Conferences then they need to listen to a guy named Mark Breslin. He's a self-professed management SOB who represents who represents employers in sticky issues such as lockouts, strikes, jurisdictional disputes and the like... Breslin is also well respected in union circles for his hard-hitting business savvy, and he attracted a lot of attention with the ice-water wakeup call he delivered...

"The objective of any forward-thinking union", according to Breslin, "is market recovery..."

cuts are necessary in order to help these airlines compete. His problem is that he must "look like he's properly represented his employees" in the words of Steve Burd.

Don Wright, President of the Transport Workers Union (TQU) recently agreed to a \$4.5 million concessionary agreement with the airlines that calls for a 10.3% pay cut this year and a 12% cut in 2005 as well as other cuts. TWU President Wright considers himself, *"fortunate to have settled when he did, thus avoiding the request for higher pay cuts"*, reports the Pittsburgh Post Gazette (9-24-04).

Then there is the grocery industry. From Seattle to San Diego, harsh cuts in wages and health benefits are the order of the day.

In other words, the best the union leadership expects to do is to ease the pain, moderate the rate at which workers lose their hard won gains. It would be a little easier to accept if these same leaders were willing to make the same sacrifices, but just the opposite is the case.

NUP's Plans for AFL-CIO

At present, McCarron and the rest of the New Unity Partnership seem to be planning to run a candidate against current AFL-CIO President John Sweeney. For this reason, McCarron appears to be considering taking the Carpenters back into the AFL-CIO. (Just as when he took the Union out, this is a decision made entirely by one individual; the membership has absolutely nothing to say about it.) What is their plan?

Under the guise of "reform" the reorganization of the AFL-CIO will be almost identical to what McCarron carried out within the UBC. The AFL-CIO is organized at the local level into different "Central Labor Councils". The various AFL-CIO union locals in that particular region (usually in a particular city or county) elect (or appoint) delegates to this CLC and these delegates in turn elect the officers, including the full time Executive Secretary. Theoretically, at least, these CLC's could have a good bit of autonomy. In Oakland, CA, for instance, the 1946 Oakland general strike was run by the Alameda County CLC.

The NUP leadership wants to merge these CLC's into state labor councils. All full time officers would be appointed by the President of the AFL-CIO. This is a mirror image of what McCarron has done within the Carpenters Union. It is true that McCarron is not alone in this. The SEIU, for instance, has a long record of centralizing and eliminating local control. However, none has gone as far as McCarron nor done so as sharply.

The NUP unquestioningly accepts the team concept. This means that there can be no real struggle against the employers. Therefore, all their talk about

Living on a Different Planet

"The American labor movement, measured by the loyalty and pride of our members, is the strongest in the world, and is stronger today than ever before." – Statement of the AFL-CIO on its official web site 1/2005.

recognizing that membership is liable to collapse in any serious economic recession, he is building up alternative sources of income. He has torn down the Union headquarters in Washington DC, building in its place a multi story office building. This is just the most clear example of how McCarron is seeking to diversify the Union's sources of income, thus further distancing himself from the membership. He is also moving to get further control of the hundreds of millions of dollars in the Union's various pension funds. His adventure with ULLICO shows how safe those funds are in his hands.

The Bigger Picture

Several world events have shaped these developments. The collapse of the old Soviet Union (1989) left the US standing as the world's only super power. Not only that, but there was no more threat of a different, competing economic system. As a result, Corporate America – US capitalism - adopted the view that they could completely dominate the entire planet.

Alongside of this has been the continuing “globalization” of capitalism, including the increased mobility of capital. This has been used by the corporations – the world capitalist class – to increase the competition between the working class of one country and one region of the world and another country or region.

The response of the union leaderships around the globe has been to seek to link themselves even more firmly with “their” capitalists, “their” employers. This can be clearly seen here in the US. The leadership of every single union has accepted that they must help their employers compete with the non-union and/or with foreign competitors. In the grocery industry, for instance, the leadership is convinced that they must help the unionized chains compete with WalMart and other big box stores. Steve Burd, CEO of Safeway, explained this when he commented: *“I think we have a set of objectives that we have to achieve in order to really be competitive....*



Workers in a maquiladora in Guatemala... *Either their standard of living will rise closer to ours, or ours will sink closer to theirs.*

I believe most of the union leaders understand that. They're just trying to come to the table and negotiate something that makes them look like they properly represented their employees.”

Throughout the economy, union leaders are accepting cuts - for their members (not for themselves, of course). Perry Hayes, head of the Flight Attendants union recently accepted cuts for his members working for United and US Airways. He commented that he *“still hoped to reduce the company's emergency request through negotiations.”* In other words, he accepts that some

“Simply put, it's about self-preservation and making money. It has to make financial sense for contractors to use union labor. You have let your market share slip away over decades of complacency and arrogance,” warned Breslin. “Now you must regain it...”

So there we have it. The leadership of the UBC is taking its worldview from a self-described “management SOB” and professional union buster. In a nutshell, the view is that we have to make more profits for the employers than the non-union carpenter can. They are relying on the contractors and professional union busters to do their thinking for them!

A Failing Strategy

What are the prospects of the Carpenters Union successfully organizing, even on its own terms?

The “Bureau of National Affairs” is perfectly blunt about this. This organization reports on labor issues for contractors and other businesses. They seek to provide a sober, serious assessment of the situation. In their publication, “Construction Labor Report” of Oct. 6, 1999, they explain their view when they quote Robert Gasperow, Executive Director of the Construction Labor Research Council in Washington DC. They write: *“CLRC's Gasperow said this has been a decade of missed opportunities for the union sector of the construction industry. The recent period of skilled labor shortages “should have been a golden opportunity” for the union sector to expand he said. “Holding their own in market share is the best they can hope for,” he said.... “Unionized employment will keep climbing during the next decade but will be just barely equal to the rate of growth in non-union sector,” he said...”*

At that time (1999) construction was absolutely booming and that construction boom was expected to last for a decade or more. It is exactly during the time of a building boom, when skilled construction labor is in short supply, that the unions should be most able to organize the non-union worker.

The statistics bear out Gasperow's predictions.

In 1995, when McCarron came into office, the UBC had 378,000 members (source: Statistical Abstract of the US). This increased to 523,839 members in 2002 and then declined slightly to 523,271 members in 2003 (an overall increase since 1995 of approximately 38%). (Source: UBC LM2 reports.)

Overall, a 38% increase in membership seems pretty impressive. However, figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal that the number of construction workers in the US from 1991-2003 went from 4,647,000 to 6,774,000 – a 46% increase. This shows that in fact the UBC membership has declined somewhat when viewed in terms of total number of construction workers.

In case there is any doubt whatsoever, the November, 2004 copy of the “Northern California Carpenter”, published by the NCCRC, made things clear. It contained an article by Danny Curtin, Legislative Representative of the NCCRC. Curtin wrote: *“In the last three decades union membership in the construction*

industry has dropped continually from almost 40% of the workforce to just 16% in 2003.”

By their own admission, their strategy has been a dismal failure.

Corruption

Many union members see the failings of their leadership as being due to corruption. This is not the cause in most cases, but it often is related to it. When union leaders think like corporate CEO's, they inevitably also try to live like these CEO's and to use “their” organization – the union – to enrich themselves personally. Doug McCarron is a case in point.

Take the ULLICO scandal, for instance. ULLICO (Union Labor Life Insurance Company) was originally set up by the labor movement in the 1920s.

Its supposed purpose was to provide union members with affordable life insurance. Written into its incorporation papers is the requirement that only union leaders can sit on its board of directors and only they and the unions can own ULLICO stock.

In the 1990s, Robert Georgine, former head of the AFL-CIO Building Trades Department,

became the head of ULLICO. Several other top union heads, including Doug McCarron, sat on its Board of Directors. ULLICO's internal finances were quite complex. The Board of Directors of the company set its stock price, based on the recommendation of its independent auditor. In turn, individual union leaders were invited to buy stock at this price. In addition, unions and their pension plans were also invited to buy stock at this price.

That decade saw a tremendous boom in stock market prices. Much of this boom was a result of pure fraud, and one of the prime examples of this was the stock price of Global Crossings, which along with Enron became a symbol of that decade. One of the original main investors in Global Crossings was ULLICO, whose holdings in Global Crossing were originally evaluated as being worth \$7.6 million. Within a few years, this ballooned to \$2.1 billion, thus also elevating the (paper) value of ULLICO stock itself.

In December of 1999, aware that the ULLICO auditors were about to



George Bush and Doug McCarron... They have no principled differences.

vastly upgrade the value of ULLICO stock, Georgine sent a letter to the union presidents, inviting them to buy up to 4000 shares of ULLICO stock at \$53.94 per share. Thus many presidents (including McCarron) did, while at the same time having their pension plans also make large investments in ULLICO shares. By May of the next year, Global Crossings stock price had fallen by some 50%, but the ULLICO Board of Directors increased the value of ULLICO shares to \$146 per share. That following November, ULLICO Board of Directors voted to allow a stock repurchase of up to \$30 million from the union Presidents (including McCarron) at the \$146 per share price. Bear in mind, this was six months after Global Crossings stock had collapsed, which would inevitably lead to a sharp drop in value of ULLICO stock also. But the union presidents were allowed to sell their ULLICO stock at the higher price, before it was revalued downwards. The



Cartoon of McCarron by UBC member - McCarron is despised by the active members.

union pension funds were not given this privilege and were only allowed to sell back a tiny fraction of the shares they held. In May of the next year (2001), ULLICO stock was revalued at \$74, thus causing a massive hit to the unions' pension plans (including the Carpenters). The various union Presidents, including McCarron, made out like bandits, with six figure profits from this dirty deal.

Eventually, a few of these presidents felt forced to return their ill-gotten gains. McCarron was one of these. He made \$276,000 (*Labor Watch* 2/2003), which he reportedly tried to hide by putting it in his mother's name. His return of this personal profit occurred at a time that he was moving increasingly closer to President Bush, whose administration was investigating this insider trading. There is clearly reason to believe that what McCarron did when he returned this profit was to free himself from the threat of any possible future indictments, while allowing Bush to continue to fly him around in Air Force One.

This whole sordid affair has been hushed up by both the media as well as the union leadership. It is just one of the most glaring example of how the corporate mentality in the union Board Room leads to individual self dealing at the expense of the membership.

Meanwhile, McCarron continues to act as the corporate CEO. Clearly