

UNITE HERE FACTION VOTE TO END MERGER; FORMS NEW UNION; UNITE HERE SEEKING AFFILIATION WITH AFL-CIO

Delegates to UNITE HERE regional joint boards representing about 150,000 union members vote in favor of disaffiliation to end the merger that formed the union in 2004. Bruce Raynor, UNITE HERE general president, issued a statement in favor of taking additional steps to end the merger. "I continue to work to negotiate an end to this failed merger. The votes cast by several thousand rank-and-file leaders of the union across the U.S. and Canada are a powerful democratic message. This is a historic and unprecedented action that indicates just how serious and deep the rift in our union is, but also how democratic trade unionism can be. Now more than ever, we need to negotiate a split for the sake of our members and for the sake of those seeking union representation in our industries," he says.

However, John Wilhelm, president of the union's hospitality division, who shares authority with Raynor in leading the union, says the vote was conducted by a "splinter group" representing less than one third of UNITE HERE members. Wilhelm maintains that those members are proposing to secede from the union in violation of the union's constitution. Calling the vote a "charade," Wilhelm says a campaign of intimidation and harassment of UNITE HERE members, orchestrated by the Service Employees International Union, backed the secession faction. The disaffiliation vote took place among labor leaders aligned with the UNITE faction of the union who have pushed to end the merger, while the HERE faction, which has the larger number of members, resists disaffiliation.

The planned vote followed a flurry of lawsuits, including one filed to end the merger of UNITE, the textile and apparel workers union, with HERE, the hotel, restaurant, and casino workers union. The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York by 14 vice presidents and one local manager previously of the UNITE union, presents arguments for release of the union's affiliated joint boards from the merger agreement and constitution. The complaint names as defendants John Wilhelm and 37 UNITE HERE vice presidents, previously of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) union.

"Our merger with the former HERE was a total failure. Their way of operating was authoritarian, secretive, and undemocratic. John Wilhelm and his faction worked to disenfranchise the workers on the UNITE side of the union and gain control of the resources those workers helped to build," Cristina Vazquez, manager of the Western State Regional Joint Board, says.

The faction withdrawing from the UNITE HERE merger forms a new union, Workers United, to be led by Edgar Romney, former executive vice president of UNITE HERE. Romney says delegates at the founding convention of Workers United adopted a vision and a platform and discussed affiliation with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

SEIU President Andy Stern says that Workers United will be a national conference of the SEIU similar to the union's health care and public sector divisions. The conference will make its own decisions about staffing and governance and will have "sole responsibility for the bank and its other assets."

According to Stern, Workers United and the SEIU will work together to build a national organizing plan in a number of targeted industries, identified by Romney as apparel, textile, laundry, food service, hospitality, and casinos.

The UNITE HERE General Executive Board (GEB), less a number of joint board officials who voted to disaffiliate from the union, vote on March 13 to seek reaffiliation with the AFL-CIO and to disaffiliate from the Change to Win federation, citing what the board calls interference by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in UNITE HERE's affairs and intrusion on its industry jurisdiction. In a meeting to discuss a vote taken six days earlier by the UNITE HERE Joint Board delegates to disaffiliate from the union, the GEB also voted to revoke the charter of joint boards that took the secession vote to seek to recover property of the joint boards, and take legal action against the joint board managers who expended union funds to pursue secession.

(Source: BNA, *Daily Labor Report*, No. 44, March 10, 2009, pp. A7-A8; No. 48, March 16, 2009, pp. A10-11; No. 54, March 24, 2009, pp A1-A2.)