UNITE HERE REJOINS AFL-CIO

Asserting that his union’s members belong in the “house of labor,” UNITE HERE President John Wilhelm announces that the union is rejoining the AFL-CIO. On the last day of the AFL-CIO’s quadrennial convention, Wilhelm told delegates that at this “time of great promise,” with new leaders in the White House and the AFL-CIO, it is time to reunify the labor movement. He pledges to act as a bridge to the other unions, which along with UNITE HERE left the AFL-CIO in 2005 to form the Change to Win (CTW) federation, to “bring everyone back together.”

On his first day in office after being elected AFL-CIO President, Trumka presented a charter to Wilhelm and welcomed the 265,000-member union back into the federation. He also announced that the newly elected executive council had already voted to add Wilhelm as a member of both the executive council, and the smaller executive committee, which is the governing body between meetings of the executive council. Earlier in the week, delegates amended the constitution to allow the expansion of the executive council and the executive committee in the event of an affiliation of a presently unaffiliated union.

Wilhelm says that he had no regrets in leaving the AFL-CIO to help create CTW, adding that sometimes it is “worth the risks.” In 2004, “we believed that the house of labor needed to be shaken up.” Now, however, he says it is a “different moment in history. It is time to get back into the house of labor.” He also says this was the right moment to rejoin the AFL-CIO with the election of Trumka, who he described as “strong, aggressive, articulate, and passionate.” While not a criticism of the former President Sweeney, he adds that Sweeney built a foundation, and Trumka is the “leader to build on that foundation.”

When asked how he plans to build a bridge to the other CTW unions, Wilhelm says he plans to talk to the presidents of the CTW affiliates about the “warm reception we received here.” He adds that each president will have to decide if reunification makes sense in best serving the members.

In response to a question about what impact the reaffiliation will have on the dispute between UNITE HERE and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Wilhelm responds there will be no impact. For at least a year, the two factions of UNITE HERE, one representing the former UNITE members and the other representing the former HERE members, have been at odds over the direction of the union. In March, the UNITE faction disaffiliated from the union, formed Workers United and then immediately affiliated with the SEIU. Since then the two unions have been fighting over who represents workers in various cities and some employers have been seeking to withdraw recognition, saying they do not know which organization represents the workers. “SEIU has tried to hijack UNITE HERE and they have failed,” Wilhelm says. He disputes claims made by the SEIU, as recently as September 16, that the union has ceased its raids against UNITE HERE.

While Trumka did not specifically address the UNITE HERE/SEIU dispute, he vows to create a “strike force of 1,000 professional organizers whose only goal is to see that every worker who wants a union contract gets a union contract.” He adds that the strike force would be called upon if any union tries to raid another union’s membership.