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ORGANIZATION THEORY AND STAGES OF DECLINE: THE CASE OF THE AFL-CIO, 1955-2005

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ABSTRACT: Despite the appeal of studying successful organizations, valuable tools have also been developed by social scientists for understanding organizations that *fail*. This study applies one such tool – a model of stages of decline – to the case of the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations), an organization that has arguably been in decline for decades. The AFL-CIO is an interesting case due to the lack of agreement among key constituencies about the appropriate criteria for measuring organizational performance. Reformers and conservatives have struggled over this issue, each viewing the conflict over performance criteria as crucial in determining who will ultimately control the organization. As the AFL-CIO has moved through successive stages of decline, struggle over the organizational mission has grown increasingly intense, finally leading to the exit of major constituencies. This study confirms the value of the concept of stages of decline, and underscores the role of internal politics, especially in a non-profit organization, in setting the criteria for evaluating performance.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations in decline have rarely drawn the same scholarly or popular attention as those that are palpable successes. For both practical and ideological reasons, identifying the sources of success has held more allure than producing organizational autopsies (Whetten, 1980). Nonetheless, the field of organization theory has succeeded in recent decades in forging new tools and concepts that address the characteristic problems of organizations in peril (Lorange & Nelson, 1987; McKinley, 1993; Hambrick & D'Aveni, 1998). Among

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these tools is the idea that organizational decline is not an undifferentiated linear process, but rather one that is marked by analytically separate stages, each of which manifests a distinct set of problems and associated responses.

This article applies the concept of stages to an organization that is often viewed as having experienced decline for nearly five decades: the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations). The case of the labor federation shows that while the concept of stages is useful in understanding and even predicting the behavior of an organization in decline, the nature – and proper measure – of decline can itself be a profoundly contested issue. While a business enterprise can usually agree on a consensual definition of the bottom line, a complex federation of formally independent organizations allows many opportunities for debating, adjusting, and reinterpreting measures of performance. The recognition and acceptance of decline may thus be postponed surprisingly long if performance measures are sufficiently diverse or ambiguous.

The idea of distinct stages of organizational decline is most thoroughly developed by William Weitzel and Ellen Jonsson (1989). Decline occurs, in their view, when an organization fails to “anticipate, recognize, avoid, neutralize, or adapt to external or internal pressures that threaten the organization’s long-term survival” (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989, p. 94). In the absence of appropriate corrective measures, organizations in decline will proceed through the following five stages:

- **Blinded.** Organization is unable to recognize adverse changes; decline begins.
- **Inaction.** Organization recognizes problems, but does not take corrective action due to perceived costs of reform or confusion about appropriate responses; decline becomes noticeable.
- **Faulty Action.** Organization takes some form of action, but response is ineffective due to incorrect decisions or inadequate implementation.
- **Crisis.** Internal disunity grows as organization recognizes that drastic action is needed, but not occurring. Leaders may be

ousted, and revolutionary changes proposed; last chance for reorganization and reversal.

- **Dissolution.** Reform efforts have failed, stimulating intense internal conflict and the exit of key members and personnel. Regardless of effort level, the demise of the organization can no longer be avoided.

According to this model, each of the consecutive stages presents progressively more difficult challenges of internal or external adaptation, requiring more drastic and costly measures if decline is to be reversed. Each stage also brings with it a predictable pattern of behavior on the part of organizational actors, allowing observers to anticipate the kinds of politics the organization will experience if a downward trajectory continues.

As a framework that describes the unfolding of stages over time, the model is most relevant to an organization that has manifested symptoms of decline over a long period without undertaking effective remedial action. In the view of many scholars and union leaders, the AFL-CIO is precisely such an organization. These observers would point to numerous indicators of decline, some of which started trending negatively as early as the mid-1950s: decreasing union representation in the workforce; absence of unionization in key growth sectors of the economy; adverse collective bargaining outcomes; lower strike rates; the severe shrinkage and near-collapse of some affiliated national unions; repeated failures in the political arena; the growing irrelevance of organized labor to contemporary political, social, and cultural debates. It was, in fact, exactly such a bill of particulars that was used to justify the forced removal of Lane Kirkland as AFL-CIO president in an internal rebellion in 1995, and a decade later motivated the withdrawal of seven major unions from the AFL-CIO to form a rival labor grouping known as the Change to Win alliance.

Not all would agree, however, that the adverse developments mentioned above are necessarily indicators of a decline in the AFL-CIO *itself*, as a federation of formally autonomous organizations. Rather, they would point to the units that compose the federation – the affiliated national unions – and apportion blame to those units rather than the labor center. Such disagreement over the true locus of responsibility for the overall health of the labor movement is reflective of the formal structure of the federation, which (much like

America's own federal constitution) does not fully stipulate the allocation of functions among several possible organizational levels. The existence of debate within the federation over the proper measures of performance, and over whether the organization is even in decline *at all*, makes the AFL-CIO a particularly stimulating (albeit complex) case for the application of the stages of decline model.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF DECLINE

Starting with the initial formation of the American Federation of Labor in the 1880s, unionists have debated the proper distribution of powers and responsibilities within a federation of sovereign labor organizations. Few have disputed the key role of a national federation in developing and advancing a national political strategy and legislative agenda, and in helping to coordinate the political activities of the national unions and their local affiliates (although virtually all unions have also been determined to maintain their own – often quite imposing – political capabilities). Likewise, all affiliates have recognized that a federated body could prove useful by adjudicating jurisdictional disputes, preventing inter-union raiding of members, proscribing union corruption and communist infiltration, funding public relations efforts and educational programs, and undertaking research on appropriate organizing, bargaining, financial, and legal strategies. By assigning these functions (in part) to a central body, unions were able to lower their own operating costs while also creating an institutional means for avoiding ruinous competition.

But what about the task of organizing new workers? The federation's structure is based on the assumption that its national affiliates will do the job of enrolling new members; no individual worker can join the AFL-CIO directly. For some union leaders, often representing workers in the building trades or other skilled occupations, that arrangement is sufficient; thus the federation should stick to politics, research, and the occasional inter-union dispute, while leaving the task of organizing to the affiliates. For other unionists, however, such a policy represents an abandonment of the organizing function to unions that may be utterly uninterested or incapable of fulfilling this vital duty. These critics fear that many unions will prefer to devote their attention to enhancing the wealth and benefits of the *existing* membership rather than undertaking expensive and controversial organizing drives that are hardly

guaranteed to succeed. National union leaders may also dread the influx of new constituencies that may be politically unpredictable or even antagonistic to the union's existing leadership (Martin, 2006). From this perspective, it is essential that the federation itself play a key role in new organizing, by identifying and researching targets of opportunity, coordinating organizing efforts, training new organizers, and demanding (or requiring) that affiliates devote time and money to the recruitment of new members. It may also be necessary for the federation to encourage or force the merger of unions, and to assign particular sectors of the economy to designated unions in order to prevent the undermining of organizing and collective bargaining by rival labor groups. While the particulars of the debate have changed over time, much of the historical dispute between the AFL and CIO in the period between 1935 and 1955 hinged on such differing views of the function of the federation, with the AFL content to let the affiliates undertake new organizing while the CIO embraced the need for drives orchestrated by a national federation.

The debates about the proper functions of the federation have a direct relevance to the question of how to evaluate the success or failure of the AFL-CIO. For those who operate with a more circumscribed view of the federation's role, the AFL-CIO may be seen as operating effectively even if the percentage of union representation in the workforce (commonly known as *union density*) is actually in decline. In this view, as long as the federation continues to maintain the affiliation of the national unions (its true membership base), carries out its political functions, and satisfies the ancillary needs of the unions for research and other forms of mutual assistance, the organization is to be judged a success. Failure would be measured primarily by the defection of affiliated unions, a decline in the federation budget (based on per capita payments from each union), electoral and legislative setbacks, or unresolved conflicts among unions that disrupted organizing or political initiatives. A decline in union density, while regrettable, and perhaps worthy of the occasional research report or federation resolution encouraging new organizing, was not really the *federation's* problem. Needless to say, this limited understanding of the federation's role has been vehemently opposed by those who view the labor movement as locked into a decline that can only be reversed through coordinated national action.

Under the terms of the 1955 merger, the federation's formal structure clearly reinforced the more circumscribed view of the organization's responsibilities (Lichtenstein, 2002, pp. 147-148). The new constitution extensively described the rules for affiliation and expulsion, the per capita taxes owed the national federation, methods of election and internal governance, and the means for resolving jurisdictional and other disputes. It said precious little, however, about a distinct role for the body in fostering new organizing. Under the resulting constitution (lightly amended over the ensuing decades), the supreme governing body of the AFL-CIO is a quadrennial convention composed of delegates representing the affiliated national unions, and local and state bodies of the federation. The convention elects three officers – the president, secretary-treasurer, and executive vice-president – and 43 vice presidents (usually presidents of national unions), all of whom serve four-year terms on the executive council – the main governing body of the federation between conventions. Given the infrequency of the national conventions, it has mainly been within the executive council and other informal settings that the important decisions about the federation's policies have been made. The convention itself is usually a well-controlled affair dominated by the preferences of the federation officers, with only rare displays of public disagreement or debate (the most notable exception being the 1995 convention, at which the reforming slate of John Sweeney and his allies swept to power). As a practical matter, the main constituents of the federation are the presidents and other top leaders of the national unions, and its politics have never really been driven by pressures or demands from rank-and-file union members (Benson, 2005). With this structure in place, the federation president could have considerable influence over federation policy, but the federation itself was constrained by definite limits on its power vis-à-vis the national union affiliates.

THE CASE OF THE AFL-CIO, 1955-2005

Applying a model of stages to an organization in (apparent) decline poses a number of challenges. As noted, not all will agree on the proper measures of decline, so there is a danger that observers will mistake *adjustment* or *change* for decline. A greater problem is the temptation to squeeze a variegated empirical reality into a series

of stages, thus imposing a rigid periodization on a historical process that may be considerably more complex. Relatedly, generalizing about the extent to which an organization "recognizes" adverse change (or not) involves weighing the importance of different organizational actors, and deciding whose views really matter. As a result, determinations about when one stage has ended and another has begun are inherently controversial (and may require a book-length disquisition to fully address). Inevitably, the utilization of such a model involves a series of subjective judgments about the distribution of power and quality of change in an organization. While all these issues pose difficulties, the exercise remains worthwhile if it yields a greater appreciation of the internal dynamics of an organization and the nature of the obstacles to renewal.

The Blinded Stage

In the first stage, organizations are "unable to recognize internal or external changes that may threaten long-term survival" (Weitzel and Jonsson, 1989, p. 97). New external challenges can be difficult to recognize because they may be qualitative in character, and not immediately observable in financial reports or other data, or because they may occur in an environment that still appears largely stable and supportive. Various administrative problems – such as "excessive personnel, tolerance of incompetence, cumbersome administrative procedures, disproportionate staff power, replacement of substance with form, scarcity of clear goals and decision benchmarks, fear of embarrassment and conflict, loss of effective communication, and outdated organizational structure" – may not be noticed if methods of internal surveillance and communication are inadequate (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989, pp. 97-98). Ironically, a record of past success and recent growth can lead to overconfidence and a failure to allocate resources to the task of problem detection and effective scanning of the environment. At this early stage, however, it is still possible that decline can be reversed at relatively little cost by improving communications and monitoring, boosting employee morale, and other remedial steps.

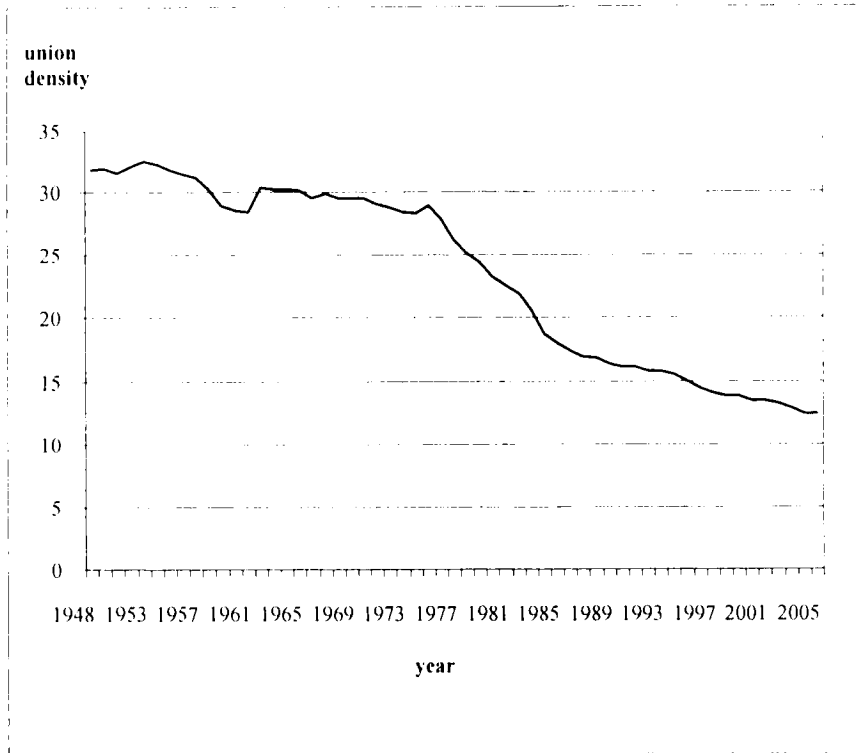
The AFL-CIO and the Blinded Stage, 1955 to 1968

"The trade union movement is a more vital, a more vigorous and a more effective force for progress today than ever before in its history," AFL-CIO President George Meany told the 1967 AFL-CIO

Convention. "At no time, within my memory, has labor been better equipped and prepared to deal with its problems and responsibilities than is the case today. . . . The evidence is there – in abundance . . . It points, not to any decline of force and vigor – but to the beginning of a new and challenging period of growth, change, and response to the needs and opportunities of our times" (Robinson, 1981, pp. 263-265). Meany's view of the health of the union movement, and by implication the AFL-CIO itself, was hardly an unusual one in mid-1960s America. The merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 had been motivated in part by growing political adversity in the years following World War II. The passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, followed by the election in 1952 of a Republican president with supportive Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, suggested that the union-friendly climate of the New Deal era might be coming to a close. It was with great relief, therefore, that AFL-CIO leaders greeted the return of unified Democratic party government in 1961 following the election of John F. Kennedy as president. The massive Democratic congressional majorities obtained in 1964, along with the remarkable political strength and acumen of President Lyndon Johnson, allowed passage of numerous bills long supported by organized labor, with the AFL-CIO playing a key part in the legislative process (Boyle, 1995; Dark, 2001). While the unions failed to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act, the extremely close ties forged between top AFL-CIO leaders and key policymakers in the White House and Congress contributed to a sense that the labor movement had arrived in the highest echelons of power and was a permanent part of a new political-economic consensus.

Beyond renewed political success, other indicators also bode well for organized labor. Economic prosperity, leading to a continued rise in real wages and incomes; the expansion of benefits from private employers; the provision of new public benefits (including an expanded social security system); the growth of public employee unionism; and an increase in total union membership – all encouraged a belief that labor was in a fundamentally stable and supportive environment (Dubofsky, 2005). Of course, the evidence of declining union density was also clear to everyone, but the extent of decline was thus far small, and the long-term trend still uncertain (Figure 1). Moreover, had not union members and workers generally done quite well in both economic and political terms even as density

FIGURE 1
Union Membership as a Percentage of the Labor Force, 1948-2005



Sources: For the period of 1930-1983 (Troy & Sheflin, 1985); For the period of 1984-1995 ("Unionstats.com Database" compiled by Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson based on the Current Population Survey. [On-line]. Available at www.unionstats.com (Retrieved July 13, 2006).

(slowly) diminished? If so, perhaps the decline in density was simply not worth worrying about; it might even be reversed in the years ahead by the natural activities of the affiliated unions. Why, then, was a federation-level response necessary?

Not all agreed, however, that the position of the union movement was so secure. Intellectuals both inside and outside of the union movement could be found arguing that, as *New York Times* labor reporter A.H. Raskin would put it in 1960, "American labor is suffering

from an advanced stage of hardening of the arteries. It is standing still in membership and organizational vigor at a time when radical changes in technology are revolutionizing industry" (Benson, 2005, p. xvi).

While the complaints of journalists could be easily dismissed, harder to ignore was the criticism of Walter Reuther, leader of the United Auto Workers and president of the CIO at the time of the 1955 merger. Reuther had hoped that the merger would foster vast new organizing drives in the South and other anti-union strongholds, enabling the recruitment of millions of new workers within just a few years (Zieger and Gall, 2002, p. 207). A decade later, however, it was abundantly clear that the AFL-CIO had utterly failed to initiate a major expansion in the ranks of union members. Reuther blamed the AFL-CIO leadership for the disappointing outcome. "The AFL-CIO lacks the social vision, the dynamic thrust, the crusading spirit that should characterize the progressive, modern labor movement," he said (Cormier & Eaton, 1970, p. 416). Moreover, "the AFL-CIO suffers from a sense of complacency and adherence to the status quo" and was clearly "stagnant and vegetating" (Boyle, 1995, p. 228).

In response to these indicators of decline, Reuther called for a \$90 million, six-year organizing drive coordinated and funded by the federation – with one-third of the budget devoted exclusively to organizing among farm workers and the working poor – along with the creation of a \$15 million fund to help striking unions. He also wanted more open discussion within the AFL-CIO's decision-making bodies, including greater use of the general board – a larger and more diverse forum (in comparison to the executive council) composed of the presidents of all of the federation's affiliated unions (then numbering nearly one-hundred). Reforms in the governance structure, Reuther argued, would improve communications and monitoring, enhance the morale of leaders and members, and enable the federation to act with greater legitimacy and effectiveness.

Reuther's message received a largely negative response, however, from the AFL-CIO leadership, which was effectively dominated by President Meany and his more conservative trade union allies. These leaders typically represented unions of skilled employees (usually in the building trades) who were more interested in limiting the entry of new workers into local labor markets than in pursuing idealistic crusades to expand the total number of dues-

paying members (Fitch, 2006; Martin, 2006). Reuther, in contrast, was still attracted to the old CIO vision of the mass organization of workers in various non-unionized regions and economic sectors, potentially in alliance with left-wing organizers from other social movements – a scenario inherently threatening to the incumbent office-holders within the AFL-CIO, most of whom were of AFL pedigree and decidedly hostile to left-wing movements of any stripe (Livesay, 1978, p. 95). It was no surprise then, that Meany was harshly critical of Reuther; for him, Reuther was simply a man on a power-trip: “He didn’t want the things he was fighting for. That was just the test of strength. I think that he is interested only in being head of an organization” (Goulden, 1972, p. 402). The AFL-CIO leader’s response to Reuther was well-captured by labor historian Robert Zieger (1987, p. 342): “Meany marshaled sycophantic majorities on the executive council of the AFL-CIO and resorted to crude public ridicule rather than addressing the substance of Reuther’s calls for reform.” For the federation president, the AFL-CIO was not even approaching decline, so there could be no explanation for Reuther’s demands other than personal ambition.

In deep frustration, in 1968 Reuther finally led the UAW out of the AFL-CIO altogether, forming a short-lived alliance with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, which had been expelled from the federation in 1957 for corruption. The Alliance for Labor Action, as the new grouping was known, pledged to fund massive new organizing drives and to establish community unions for the poor and unemployed. But little came of the initiative, in part because of the difficulty in forging an alliance between the UAW, with its social democratic and idealistic traditions, and the Teamsters, which had long been viewed as the very apotheosis of a “business union” willing to ally with both mobsters and conservative Republicans as circumstances warranted. After Reuther’s death in a plane crash in 1970, the ALA lost much of its driving force, and soon disbanded.

Reuther’s exit from the AFL-CIO and his untimely death removed one of the few voices within the federation leadership insisting that the organization was threatened by overconfidence and complacency, and required major policy change to avoid serious problems in the future. It would be many years before a comparably sophisticated and passionate critique would be heard in the councils of the federation. Nonetheless, Reuther had forcefully raised the issue of union decline, proposing both a *metric* for organizational evaluation (union density)

and a *program* for change (a federation strike fund, fresh organizing initiatives, new political coalitions, and internal governance reform). The 1968 election results – which revealed signs of growing decomposition within the New Deal electoral coalition (most notably among white males in the South and elsewhere) – signaled that the political gains of labor were also in jeopardy, and that a reversal of declining density was all the more important. However, while Reuther might be able to make other leaders “see” the evidence of declining density and incipient political peril, convincing them that these problems were the responsibility of the federation, or that his proposed solutions were worth adopting, was a far more formidable task.

The Inaction Stage

In the second stage, the organization recognizes signs of declining performance, but fails to take corrective action. At this point, the signs of decay will be manifested unambiguously in declining profits and sales or, in the case of voluntary organizations, in declining membership. There are several reasons why an organization may fail to respond adequately: the possibility that the threat may turn out to be temporary encourages hesitation to act; the pursuit of reforms is costly and disruptive; the incumbent leadership may be deeply associated with and committed to the current strategy (which previously functioned well); or the leadership may lack the knowledge and skills necessary to plan and implement reform. As decline deepens, leaders manifest signs of “denial, avoidance, resistance, or procrastination,” and are tempted to cover-up or distort negative information (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989, p. 100). Eventually, “failure paranoia” may develop as the competence of leaders is questioned, making the leadership more susceptible to authoritarianism, rigidity, and narrow vision (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989, pp. 100-101).

The AFL-CIO and the Inaction Stage, 1968 to 1979

With Reuther’s vocal challenge and the subsequent disaffiliation of the UAW, it would be hard to say that the AFL-CIO leadership was still “blinded” to the evidence that the labor movement was in decline. But while negative performance indicators were now being *recognized*, federation leaders seemed eager to play down their

significance. In an interview in 1972, Meany commented about declining density figures: "To me, it doesn't mean a thing. I have no concern about it, because the history of the trade union movement has shown that when organized workers were a very, very tiny percentage of the work force, they still accomplished and did things that were important for the entire work force" (Johnson & Kotz, 1972, p. 175). He also said: "I stopped worrying because to me it doesn't make any difference . . . The organized fellow is the one that counts. This is just human nature" (Buhle, 1999, p. 196). Of course, this interpretation was also entirely in keeping with the federation's own longstanding policy of devolving primary responsibility for new organizing to the affiliates. Thus, from the time of Reuther's exit from the AFL-CIO to Meany's own retirement in 1979, Meany and his allies embraced an entirely traditional approach to federation governance. The notion that the labor movement was "in decline" or facing a "crisis" that might require dramatic new initiatives was simply not part of the discourse of the AFL-CIO president or most members of the executive council.

Yet, the 1970s were in most people's judgments not good times for organized labor. As usual, union density continued its relentless decline. New pressures from foreign competition and changing technology emerged, threatening the steady economic gains that unionists had come to take for granted in preceding decades. In the aftermath of the "guns and butter" policies of the Johnson and Nixon administrations, inflation rates were high and seemingly intractable, generating widespread calls to cut public spending and restrain union wage demands. In politics, the narrow victory of Jimmy Carter in 1976 and the persistence of Democratic majorities in Congress raised hopes for a liberal revival after the Nixon years, but unionists were soon disappointed by key legislative failures. A major bill to reform the labor law system and a lesser one intended to ease picketing at construction sites were both defeated by a resurgent business community and the reappearance of the old conservative coalition of southern Democrats and northern Republicans. As so often in American politics, plans for a universal health care system went nowhere. Carter also disappointed when he embraced smaller increases than those advocated by the AFL-CIO in areas of the minimum wage, public works spending, and job training programs. Meany soon came to criticize the president as a "conservative" overly committed to balancing the budget, at one point declaring that Carter

deserved no better than a "C-" for his performance in office (Robinson, 1981, p. 374). In response to these signs of a declining ability to extract benefits from the political system, Meany directed his indignation entirely outward, toward politicians who in his view were lacking in character or simply misguided. Never during this period do we find any record of Meany acknowledging that the repeated political failures may have reflected labor's own diminishing size, or that recent problems required innovative efforts to revitalize labor's flagging economic and political fortunes.

By the middle of the Carter years, Meany was arguably manifesting signs of "failure paranoia," demanding continued or even increased deference from both union leaders and politicians even as the federation's own centrality was clearly on the wane. In the view of many critics inside the labor movement and elsewhere, Meany's leadership was marked by an increased authoritarianism and rigidity (Buhle, 1999; Montgomery, 1979). A notable example was his mismanagement of labor's relationship with President Carter, which Meany nearly sacrificed entirely to his own ire about not being consulted properly about several labor-related policy decisions and appointments (Dark, 2001, pp. 99-124). Carter grew increasingly frustrated by Meany's numerous and occasionally intemperate public criticisms, and by the fall of 1978 concluded that any further meetings with the AFL-CIO leader should be postponed indefinitely. The president was reportedly "absolutely livid" at Meany, and White House aides described Meany in the press as a "senile old man" (Meany was 85 years old at the time) (Dewar & Barbash, 1978). Vice President Walter Mondale believed that Meany's treatment of Carter was "almost abusive" (Puddington, 2005, p. 79). Several important union leaders also appeared inclined to blame the contretemps on Meany; Carter's top labor advisers reported in an internal memo that there was "growing criticism within the AFL-CIO Executive Council of the way Meany has handled his relationships with the Administration" (Dark, 2001; Puddington, 2005). The president of the Communications Workers of America charged publicly that Meany's attacks on the Carter Administration were "terrible" and that Meany had "done a tremendous disservice to the country and the labor movement" by allowing the "estrangement" from the administration to become so protracted (Merry, 1978). Although relations with the administration were eventually patched up in a series of meetings in early 1979, Meany remained embittered and isolated until his retirement in

November of that year, at which time the executive council, with some relief, elected Lane Kirkland as the new AFL-CIO President.

In one of his last public statements, four months before his death in 1980, Meany reiterated his belief that things were going well for organized labor: "In the eighties, I am confident that there will be a strong growth of unionism among groups previously considered not interested in representation" (Robinson, 1981, p. 404). While Meany hoped to see more union organizing, he measured his own performance by the traditional - and highly delimited - criteria that had long been adopted by federation leaders. Looking back on his years as president, Meany expressed satisfaction that he had been effective in politics and lobbying, and most importantly, had succeeded in "keeping the boys together," by which he meant maintaining the affiliation of most of the federation's diverse and often obstreperous unions (Goulden, 1972, p. 467). Consistent to the end, Meany remained wedded to the conviction that the declining membership of so many of his affiliates was, at the end of the day, simply not the problem of the national federation. As for the signs of political weakness, those reflected the poor character and judgment of the occupant of the White House far more than any deterioration in the sources of union power.

The Faulty Action Stage

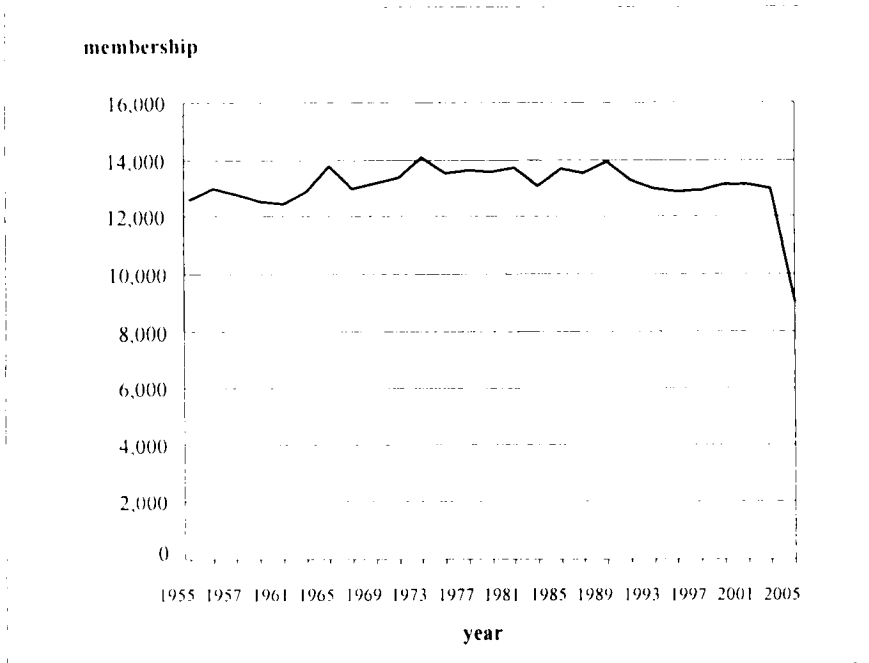
When an organization enters the third stage, overt indicators of declining performance continue to multiply, but corrective action is inappropriate or ineffective, or fails to be implemented effectively. The organizational response may fail because the leaders are drawn to quick, expedient, and incremental changes, or simply to those that are easiest and least expensive, rather than pursuing the major and costly reorientations that are needed. Leaders are likely to implement "efficiency and cutback measures, using the same structures, processes, and personnel, and retaining the same power structures" (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989, p. 103). When such incremental measures fail, the dominant coalition will experience increased conflict, as key actors compete over declining resources and the incumbent leadership is questioned. Employee morale may decline, and leaders may become more defensive and secretive, demanding greater loyalty and deference, and falling prey to forms of "group think" that only exacerbate the original faulty analysis. Top leaders may decide to concentrate more power into their own hands in order to avoid

dissension and improve the speed of decision-making. The third stage of decline may actually be the best time to make major decisions and a major reorientation because moderately high levels of stress can encourage serious examinations of alternatives. However, the costs of such change are large, and may require cutbacks in personnel, replacement of leaders, and the liquidation of failing lines and divisions.

The AFL-CIO and the Faulty Action Stage, 1979-1995

Upon his accession to the AFL-CIO presidency after Meany's departure, Lane Kirkland chose to emphasize the need for continuity in federation policy, drawing upon his merchant marine background in his first words to the national convention: "Full ahead. Steady as she goes" (Raskin, 1980). And indeed, steady she went for the next 15 years, as Kirkland defended the Meany-era approach of leaving organizing to the affiliates, and politics to the federation. This was justifiable, Kirkland argued, because the academic critics who saw a labor movement in crisis were guilty of exaggeration and undue pessimism: "It has all been said before . . . It seems we must be forever perishing so that others may be forever publishing" (Kirkland, 1986, p. 393). The decline in density was not very serious, Kirkland explained in strangely tortured reasoning: "Almost without regard to the percentage of the work force represented (though there are obviously limits), unions will continue to carry out their primary role of representing workers' interests on the job. In this role, *even at a one percent level of organization*, the union would remain the most significant force in the worklife of its members (even admitting the obvious limitations on its market power)" (Kirkland, 1986, p. 401; emphasis added). He concluded: "All in all, the prophets of doom have badly misgauged both the present strength and the future prospects of trade unionism in America" (Kirkland, 1986, p. 403). And with the federation itself experiencing little change in its own budget or resources (as its per capita membership base remained constant in absolute terms at about 13,000,000) (Figure 2), it was perhaps understandable that Kirkland would choose to approve only the most incremental of changes in the federation status quo. Whatever might be happening in society, and no matter how hostile the new administration of President Ronald Reagan might seem, the labor movement as an organized bureaucracy retained impressive

FIGURE 2
Membership in AFL-CIO Affiliated Unions, 1955-2005
(In Thousands of Members)



Source: AFL-CIO Executive Council Report (2005).

resources (Masters, 1997), and little sense of crisis permeated the halls of the AFL-CIO's imposing Washington headquarters. Judging from Kirkland's comments, the stability of these organizational resources provided a sense of reassurance to AFL-CIO leaders about the overall health of the federation, even as density continued its unyielding decline.

Nevertheless, early in his term Kirkland did reveal a willingness to engage in some limited action intended to address the signs of decay in labor's economic and political position. One prominent initiative was the establishment of an executive council committee that was charged with thinking strategically about labor's future. In three reports over a twelve-year period, the Committee on the Evolution of Work analyzed the difficulties posed by changing employment

patterns and production technologies, and encouraged affiliates to experiment with new approaches, especially better communications and organizing techniques. The report even endorsed the use of corporate campaigns, where organizing drives were supported by coordinated mass protests and publicity events, and the creation of special organizing committees, separate from the structure of specific unions that would plan organizing drives against particularly difficult targets (Puddington, 2005, p. 259). But more ambitious proposals for a major restructuring of the labor movement, such as mergers into a smaller number of unions, were rejected by the committee as "too threatening to some unions," according to industrial relations specialist Richard Hurd (2005). The AFL-CIO did eventually adopt several initiatives inspired by the report, such as new financial services for union members (including a lucrative AFL-CIO-sponsored VISA card), improved public relations efforts, and, most promising, the establishment of the Organizing Institute, an AFL-CIO-sponsored program to train new organizers in an activist grassroots approach. However, while these reports and programs reflected a greater awareness of the dangers facing the labor movement, and a willingness to take some kind of action at the federation level, they brought only *incremental* adjustments to existing federation policy, and appeared to have virtually no impact on the behavior of affiliated national unions.

In politics, the AFL-CIO continued its main strategy of working primarily through the Democratic party, but to improve labor's position, Kirkland was willing to consider steps that George Meany would have abhorred. The federation was willing to use "outsider" tactics of political mobilization, even sponsoring a "Solidarity Day" demonstration in Washington, D.C. in 1981 that drew an estimated 250,000 union members in an effort to show the continuing vitality of the movement's mass base. The federation also quietly mended fences with other liberal groups in the Democratic party, including gay rights and women's organizations that had been ignored or scorned during the 1970s. Kirkland relaxed the AFL-CIO's opposition to affirmative action for women and minorities within the Democratic party's internal structures, and eased out AFL-CIO officials from the Meany era who were most outspoken in their opposition to the liberal social movements that had now become major party constituents (Puddington, 2005, p. 101). Less controversially, Kirkland oversaw a modernization of the federation's technical capacities in politics,

including increased use of computers, direct-mail, television advertising, and polling. To enhance labor's presence on Capitol Hill, the federation and affiliated unions intensified their political spending and campaign contributions, and established new capabilities in grassroots lobbying (Dark, 2001, pp. 147-152). All these efforts were enhanced by Kirkland's success in bringing more unions into the federation. The United Auto Workers, the Mineworkers, the Teamsters, the International Longshoremen and Workers Union, and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers were all coaxed to join or rejoin the federation by Kirkland, thus briefly increasing the AFL-CIO's per capita membership to an all-time high. Of course, the increased membership also meant the AFL-CIO's total revenues would rise despite declining density overall.

Kirkland's most ambitious initiative was a new effort to enhance the unity and power of organized labor in the Democratic party's presidential nominating process (Dark, 2003). Following the party reforms of the early 1970s, the federation leadership and many national unions found it difficult to effectively intervene in the nominating system as it evolved into a process dominated by mass primaries and caucuses (in contrast to the previous system based on elite bargaining at a national convention). The result in 1972 and 1976 was the fracturing of the labor movement behind many different candidates and the selection of nominees that most union leaders considered far from their first choice. In 1980, the union movement also split bitterly between those advocating the renomination of Jimmy Carter and those seeking his replacement by Massachusetts Senator Edward M. Kennedy. To avoid such divisions in the future and to enhance labor's influence in the process, Kirkland worked with other executive council members to establish a new coordinated action plan for the primaries. Federation unions would now agree to endorse either a single candidate before the primaries began (as in the 1984 endorsement of Walter Mondale, or the endorsement of Al Gore in 2000), to remain neutral, or, less desirably, to endorse separately, but only when that was agreed upon collectively as the best choice. This improved orchestration of labor's involvement in the nominating process was controversial, especially since labor's choice in 1984 went down to such a decisive defeat in the general election, but was viewed by most union leaders and Kirkland himself as a notable advancement over the previous lack of coordination.

The AFL-CIO's efforts in the 1980s were directed mainly toward politics, with the ultimate goal being unified Democratic party governance and the adoption of pro-union public policies. With the election of Bill Clinton as president in 1992, and the persistence of Democratic majorities in Congress, it seemed that many years of effort had paid off: unions could now return to policy goals that had been tabled since the Carter years, if not before. And there is no question that labor did gain some things from the Clinton administration: pro-union appointments were made to the National Labor Relations Board, the Labor Department, and other relevant agencies, as well as the federal judiciary; labor-friendly executive orders were issued; unionists gained access to key policymakers; the president signed a family leave bill and other legislation; and union interests were advanced in tax and budget decisions. But in the views of many unionists, these benefits were outweighed by the notable setbacks: the federation failed to stop the North American Free Trade Agreement, failed to achieve health care reform, failed to pass legislation banning the permanent replacement of strikers and, ultimately, failed to shift public discourse in a more liberal, pro-union direction.

After two years of the Clinton administration, union leaders were acutely disappointed, but many could still hope to see a return to key issues on their agenda in the years ahead. Then, disaster struck. In the elections of 1994, the Democrats lost control of both the House and Senate, allowing labor's worst enemies to gain control of the legislative process. Despite Kirkland's efforts, by 1995 labor was arguably in its worst political situation since before the New Deal. Union density, of course, continued its downward slide. To be sure, some positive action had occurred during Kirkland's tenure, but it was hard to see it as anything other than *faulty*, given the predicament in which labor now found itself. Kirkland's reassurances about the "present strength and the future prospects of trade unionism" now rang hollow as unions braced themselves for a full-scale assault on their legal privileges and political status (Kirkland, 1986, p. 403).

The Crisis Stage

When an organization reaches the crisis stage, a major reorientation and revitalization must take place or the organization

will suffer drastic and certain failure. At this point, growing evidence of failure produces chaos, anger, divisiveness, and much talk of the need to get "back to basics." Increasingly, "customers, employees, suppliers, and other stakeholders begin to dissolve or restrict their relationship with the organization" (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989, p. 105). In order to reverse decline at this late date, revolutionary changes in leadership, strategy, structure, and ideology are required. Previous leaders or groups of leaders will have to be replaced, and it may be useful for those ousted to serve as scapegoats, both to relieve tension and to provide a potent symbol of the organizational commitment to a radical shake-up. Implementation of major changes will remain difficult due to an exodus of talented personnel, resistance from threatened employees, budgetary cutbacks, and the defection of formerly loyal members, clients, or customers. Energetic, experienced, and highly capable leadership is crucial if the organization is to extricate itself from its downward spiral.

The AFL-CIO and the Crisis Stage, 1995-Present

Just as political setbacks had helped to prompt the creation of the merged AFL-CIO in 1955, so the shocking defeat of labor's congressional allies in 1994 would provoke major change in the leadership of the labor federation. As the magnitude of the electoral rout became clear, a sense of crisis enveloped the organization, leading to an outbreak of open dissension in the executive council. By early 1995, a coalition of frustrated union leaders, mainly from growing public sector and service sector unions but also including several major industrial unions, was ready to demand new leadership and an increase in federation-level activism. Lane Kirkland had personally failed, in their view, to capitalize on the opportunities presented by unified Democratic party government in the preceding two years, and had neglected to chart a compelling course in response to the Republican takeover of Congress. "We waited for the top leader of the AFL-CIO to raise his voice or sound his trumpet, but the silence was deafening," recalled Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President John Sweeney (Sweeney, 1996, p. 90). Facing growing criticism and opposition, Kirkland realized that he would likely be removed from office at the AFL-CIO Convention scheduled for October 1995, and in June he announced he would resign from office. After several months of public debate and campaigning, the bloc of dissident unions that had come to be known as the "New

Voice" coalition prevailed at the October convention, electing Sweeney as president and winning all the executive offices of the federation. By any measure, the New Voice coalition was in solid control, dominating the AFL-CIO's bureaucratic apparatus based in Washington, D.C. and able to access the per capita dues payments of 13 million union members.

Sweeney and his allies presented a dire diagnosis of labor's situation. "I believe that unless we make some drastic changes, membership is going to continue to decline, and we are going to be less of a political force in this country," Sweeney said. "How long do you go before you wake up and realize that you are going to be out of business if you don't do something?" The SEIU leader insisted that "the problem with the American labor movement, the problem with unions, is that we are irrelevant to the vast majority of unorganized workers in our country, and I have deep suspicions that we are becoming irrelevant to many of our own members." Labor "had declined from a political powerhouse to a political patsy," and was "caught in a downward spiral of defeat and retreat." The federation itself deserved blame for becoming "a Washington-based institution instead of a worker-based movement." The time had come, Sweeney declared, for frame-breaking, radical change: "This is a revolutionary moment. You can hear the winds of change rattling the shuttered windows of the AFL-CIO . . . To those still on the outside, I want to say, 'You are on the wrong side of history'" (Dark, 1999, pp. 333-338).

The full reality of decline, it appeared, had now been recognized, and with a vengeance. But what was Sweeney's solution? In key respects, it bore a marked similarity to what Walter Reuther had proposed decades before. The New Voice coalition maintained that the AFL-CIO would have to train new organizers, coordinate massive unionizing drives, and directly pressure the national unions to devote more resources to recruiting new members. "We're going to pour resources into organizing at a pace and scale that is unprecedented," Sweeney predicted (Greenhouse, 1995). Without this kind of pressure and leadership from the center, Sweeney argued, the tendency of national unions to stagnate would continue. The New Voice leaders also maintained that the federation had failed in its obligation – one accepted by all – to plan and execute an effective political strategy for the labor movement. Here, too, innovative strategies would have to be adopted, and Sweeney called for labor to put more energy into a

grassroots mobilization of its members directly on behalf of labor's own agenda, rather than simply channeling money and volunteers to the campaigns of endorsed politicians. It was important, Sweeney emphasized, for the labor movement to build better ties with allies among women and minorities, gays, environmentalists, and students and faculty in higher education. Like Reuther before him, Sweeney argued that it was necessary to revamp the federation bureaucracy in order to make its departments more effective and to ensure that a wider range of union activists were consulted.

Upon gaining power, the energetic new leaders of the federation set about to implement their program. As planned, they created a new and well-funded AFL-CIO Department of Organizing, which included the Organizing Institute originally established in the Kirkland years as well as other programs intended to promote new organizing by affiliated unions. The federation asked the individual national unions to devote 30 percent or more of their budgets to new organizing efforts, and to set official organizing goals and report back to the federation on the results. To enhance both organizing and political efforts, the New Voice leaders put new emphasis on rebuilding AFL-CIO bodies at the local and state level, which they believed could help foster grassroots support and improve labor's alliance with local public employees, minorities, and the poor. A common demand of such mobilizations was that local governments adopt "living wage" policies in which they and their contractors would pay full-time workers enough to support a family at the poverty line or above. The federation also reached out to students and faculty in higher education, most notably through a "Union Summer" program that mobilized college students to help with organizing drives and strike support. In keeping with New Voice efforts to ally with other social movements, the AFL-CIO helped organize and fund protest at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in late 1999, working closely with environmentalist groups and other activists critical of the WTO's current role in regulating global trade. And, of course, New Voice dedicated itself to building labor's power in national politics, primarily by increasing the resources that the federation devotes to educating and mobilizing union members. As promised, the new leadership put increased stress on member education and grassroots mobilization rather than simply providing money to candidates in the form of campaign donations. Union expenditures devoted to mobilizing members increased, as did independent expenditures by

union political action committees (Francia, 2006, p. 51). The AFL-CIO also hired more grassroots activists, many from social movement backgrounds, and established a National Labor Political Training Center to educate union members, staff, and leaders.

Ten years later, however, the effects of all this activity on the vital signs of American unionism were rather paltry. The New Voice efforts had virtually no impact on union density, which continued its downward slide virtually unabated. The federation spent considerable sums on coordinated union organizing drives of strawberry workers in Watsonville, California and construction workers in Las Vegas, with both efforts failing miserably (Judis, 2001). Meanwhile, strike rates reached record lows, as the capacity of unions to use this most fundamental source of worker power seemed to have evaporated. In politics, the heightened effort and expenditures by the AFL-CIO did appear to increase union member turnout (although probably not by as much as the AFL-CIO claimed), and union members also seemed to be voting Democratic at a somewhat higher rate than had been the case during the Kirkland years (Freeman, 2003; Francia, 2006, pp. 70-73). These limited gains in union member participation did not, however, have much impact on the overall political environment, as the Republicans maintained their congressional majorities and prevailed in the presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. The New Voice movement had castigated Kirkland for failing to prevent the GOP takeover of Congress in 1994, but had done no better in dislodging the Republicans from power. With density continuing its unrelenting decline, even the most inventive efforts at enhancing union member participation were bound to have a limited impact. Unions did maintain their influence with Democrats in Congress, and continued to exercise a strong voice in the party's presidential nominating process, but this was more an example of *continuity* rather than *change* in labor's overall political situation, and an outcome that might well have prevailed had the New Voice team never come to power in the first place.

For an organization that no longer needed much convincing that decline was under way, the limited impact of the New Voice initiatives was a profound cause for concern. By 2005, Sweeney's successor as president of SEIU, Andrew Stern, and several other union presidents began to loudly criticize what they saw as the failures of the New Voice program and Sweeney's leadership. "If the labor movement

doesn't adopt dramatic changes today to cope with the new economy, *it will find itself marginalized into oblivion*," Stern warned (Stern, 2004). John Wilhelm, president of the UNITE HERE union, spoke with similar urgency: "Now is the time, *maybe our last opportunity*, to move the entire labor movement into a determined growth program. The current leadership of the AFL-CIO is calling for more of the same, and that won't cut it. *We need a complete change of course*" (PR Newswire, 2005; emphasis added). Looking back at the Sweeney years, James Hoffa of the Teamsters said simply: "What was being done at the AFL-CIO was not working" (Lawrence, 2005). Just as Kirkland had been blamed (and some would say scapegoated) for declining density, so too now Sweeney was portrayed as the consummate blunderer, standing in the way of necessary change.

The problem, Stern and his supporters declared, was the inherent weakness of the national federation, and its inability to force the affiliated unions to pursue a course of action that was in the best interest of the labor movement as a whole. Stern believed that the growth of unionism was hindered not just by inadequate spending on organizing, but also by the development in recent decades of "general unions" that represented workers from an unrelated hodgepodge of industries (as seen, for example, in writers, nurses, and teaching assistants all joining the UAW). The result of this kind of unplanned patchwork, Stern argued, was that powerful unions in a particular sector were undercut by the intrusion of weaker unions seeking to gain members to the detriment of unionized employees. The AFL-CIO, Stern complained, "has no enforceable standards to stop a union from conspiring with employers to keep another stronger union out – or from negotiating contracts with lower pay and standards than members of another union have spent a lifetime establishing" (Stern, 2004). The solution was to grant more power to a centralized federation that could then oversee – or force, if necessary – the creation of a smaller number of mega-unions that would be devoted to organizing exclusively within a particular sector. This industrial realignment, modernizing the structure of unionism in correspondence to the emerging structure of the economy, would allow the resulting unions to concentrate their immense resources on a designated industry without fear of being undercut by rival organizations. With this plan Stern certainly envisioned a more powerful federation, but he also foresaw a more streamlined organization that would cut political and other expenditures in favor

of a relentless, almost mono-maniacal, drive to reverse the decline in union density.

Stern's vision was one that was unlikely to ever be adopted in full by the existing federation, as it was inherently threatening to the interests of many unions and guaranteed a major disruption of the status quo. Therefore, after a period of intensive but failed negotiation in the first half of 2005, Stern and his supporters chose to leave the federation entirely. Starting in the summer of that year, seven unions – SEIU, the Teamsters, UNITE-HERE, the Laborers', the Carpenters, the United Food and Commercial Workers, and the United Farm Workers – formally disaffiliated from the AFL-CIO, establishing the new Change to Win federation. The departing unions represented approximately four million members, and took with them about 40 percent of the per capita dues base of the AFL-CIO. The exiting unions were quite diverse in background, membership, and political tradition, as well as in their own records of success in organizing, but were united by a belief that drastic measures were necessary to revive union density, and that the AFL-CIO had proven itself incapable of radical reform. For his part, Sweeney condemned the defectors with words that could just as easily have been uttered by George Meany and Lane Kirkland as they faced their own insurgencies, calling the decision to withdraw “a grievous insult to all the unions in our federation” and “a tragedy for working people” (Sweeney, 2005). And just as Meany castigated Reuther for excessive personal ambition, so Sweeney implied that Stern, too, was animated by a craving for power: “The labor movement belongs to all of us – every worker – and our future should not be dictated by the demands of any group or *the ambitions of any individual*” (Sweeney, 2005; emphasis added).

The chaos, anger, and divisiveness of 2005 left the AFL-CIO in a far weaker position than it had ever been previously. For five decades, the per capita dues base of the federation had remained constant at around 13 million members. With the sudden plunge down to approximately nine million, this formerly reassuring indicator of stability, continuity, and financial plenitude was now precarious. Already facing increased budgetary problems, the federation laid off nearly 100 workers, eliminated or consolidated programs, and prepared for harsher times ahead (Meyerson, 2005). The federation's monthly magazine, created by the Sweeney team to

replace the AFL-CIO's weekly newspaper, was eliminated entirely (leaving the AFL-CIO with no official printed periodical for the first time in its history), and the much-touted Union Summer program was put on hold indefinitely. These cutbacks would make it all the more difficult for the federation to maintain the level of spending on politics and organizing it had attained over the past decade (although dues increases could, in principle, make up much of the difference). Fifty years after its founding, the federation was smaller than ever before, and faced a rival organization that had as its stated goal the displacement of the AFL-CIO as the dominant labor grouping in the United States. By any measure, the organization's decline had continued, and there was little reason to expect that the federation, or the union movement more generally, was headed for significant revival.

The Dissolution Stage

In the final stage, the organization has exhausted its reform efforts, and is forced to dissolve. Although new leaders may have been installed to pursue radical change, the loss of markets and reputation, the lack of capital and other resources, the reduction in employees and members, and perhaps the inexperience of new administrators, are all too much to overcome. Bitter and pervasive conflict breaks out within the organization. Some members seek to apportion blame, while others make futile calls for a last-ditch, heroic effort at renewal. At this stage, however, decline is irreversible, and the only hope is to effectively and fairly manage the organization's dissolution. In unforgiving environments, deterioration will be rapid and chaotic, but less stressful settings may allow an orderly closing and rational dispensation of the organization's residual assets.

The AFL-CIO and the Dissolution Stage?

With the exit of the CTW unions in 2005, questions began to be raised about whether the AFL-CIO could actually continue to survive as an organization. In truth, though, the prospects of dissolution were very low. As long as the new, small-scale AFL-CIO held together, it was perfectly capable of surviving indefinitely, although not without serious budgetary cutbacks (or dues increases). Perhaps the greatest threat would come if the CTW unions really did find the formula for major gains in organizing across the economy. In this case, the vibrant new federation would not only grow faster than its old rival, it

might also find it easier to elicit further disaffiliations of AFL-CIO unions. The prospects of this occurring, however, were minimal; virtually no scholars of industrial relations were seriously predicting a replay of the 1935 CIO-led surge in union membership. It is more likely that there will be continued stagnation in the total membership base of both federations, allowing the AFL-CIO to continue on under Sweeney's leadership in much the same way it has for the last decade. The viability of the CTW federation is perhaps more in doubt, given its recent origin and the unlikely coalition of unions at its core. While Stern has gone much further than Reuther's short-lived experiment with the Alliance for Labor Action, it is not difficult to imagine circumstances in which CTW unions may return to the AFL-CIO, especially after Sweeney has left the federation presidency.

CONCLUSION

There are inherent difficulties in fitting the diverse behavior of a large and complex organization into a model based on discrete chronological stages. Is the "New Voice" rebellion of 1995 best seen as a case of the AFL-CIO entering the "crisis" stage, or as an instance of "faulty action?" A reasonable argument could be made for either placement, and this is undoubtedly a characteristic problem of all periodization schemes. Still, when the overall trajectory of the AFL-CIO over this time period is reviewed, a remarkable fit does appear between the basic model set out by Weitzel and Jonsson and the historical record. At first, there was blindness, denial, and inaction. Then, there was a belated, grudging, and only partial recognition of the very real problems. Finally, some remedial political and economic action took place that, however, soon proved faulty. At last, the organization entered into a crisis, the previous leadership was removed and scapegoated, and a new leadership came to power intent on radical change in federation policies, structures, and ideologies. When this effort at revolutionary change failed, the organizational crisis deepened, prompting further scapegoating, the embittered exit of major constituencies, and even the specter (albeit unlikely) of full-scale dissolution.

At the present juncture, the model predicts that battles will continue over the appropriate measures of organizational performance and the correct interpretation of the organization's health. As five decades of internal conflict in the AFL-CIO have shown,

an organization's definition of decline is constituted through a process of political and ideological contention. To the extent that a broad definition of the AFL-CIO's mission is embraced, it is likely that a diagnosis of decline will also prevail, provoking further challenges to the current leadership and perhaps even further withdrawals from the organization. Yet, there is little reason to believe that this parade of internal conflicts will lead to policies that can reverse the decline in union density; indeed, it is highly questionable whether union actions are central determinants of the rates of union growth in the first place (Freeman, 1998). What is more likely is that through improved policies the AFL-CIO may be able to maintain and perhaps enhance its *political* power. The elections of 2006, in which Democrats regained majorities in both the House and Senate, confirmed that political action could hold greater promise of immediate results than many investments in new organizing. The path from political revival, however, to true organizational renewal remained both treacherous and uncertain. For now, the labor federation remains deeply immersed in its own time of troubles.

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