

Andy Stern at the Center of Union Tensions

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Another week, another sign that the labor movement is badly riven by internal dissension at exactly the time when it should be rallying to take advantage of Democratic rule to push major pro-union legislation.

This afternoon, more than 200 members of the UNITE-HERE union held a boisterous protest in downtown Washington -- not in front of a company or a pro-business lobbying group, but in front of the headquarters of the Service Employees International Union.

Many leaders and members of UNITE-HERE, which represents both hotel and casino workers and garments workers, accuse SEIU's high-profile and influential president, Andy Stern, of having played a key behind-the-scenes role in the ugly unraveling of UNITE-HERE.

The union was formed five years ago after a merger of the garment workers and hotel workers union. That merger has not worked nearly as well as hoped, as the leaders of the two halves clashed over finances and anemic organizing results.

Stern's union has over the years sought to organize some of the same workers that UNITE-HERE was after, and as UNITE-HERE headed toward a break-up, Stern was working behind the scenes to capitalize on the split.

Last month, a faction loyal to the former garment workers' chief Bruce Raynor, a Stern ally, announced that it was leaving to create a new union, called Workers United, and declared that this new union would be affiliated with SEIU. The new group, which claims about 150,000 members, or a third of UNITE-HERE, is now battling in court with the remaining union over the union's finances, which include union-own Amalgamated Bank.

Supporters of what remained of UNITE-HERE, which is now being led by hotel workers' leader John Wilhelm, accused Stern of hastening the breakup for his own advantage.

Stern's critics in the labor movement have compared his role in the UNITE-HERE breakup to the nasty civil war that Stern is now engaged in with one of SEIU's largest

chapters, a local in Northern California whose leaders have long differed with Stern.

Stern is also in the middle of trying to patch up his differences with the AFL-CIO, the grand labor coalition that Stern left four years ago to form a new coalition, Change to Win, that has fallen short of expectations. The labor movement's dissension, so much of it revolving around Stern, has proved a major obstacle as unions try to push the Employee Free Choice Act, a bill that would make it easier for unions to organize workers that is stalled without enough votes to pass the Senate.

The group picketing SEIU's headquarters today consisted mainly of workers from Atlantic City hotels and casinos who say that SEIU is behind calls and house visits to UNITE-HERE members in that city, trying to get them to leave UNITE-HERE for the new Workers United group.

"Shame on you, Andy Stern! Leave us alone!" the workers chanted. Bob McDevitt, the head of the Atlantic City local, said Stern should be focusing on organizing more workers in the health care sector that SEIU specializes in, instead of trying to claim already-organized workers in the hotel industry.

"He is a disgrace. He's not a labor leader -- he's a boss," said McDevitt. "If he's really a labor unionist, he should shut up and tend to his own garden."

SEIU spokeswoman Michelle Ringuette denied that Stern has played a major role in UNITE-HERE's breakup. "The UNITE-HERE split is not about SEIU," she said. "It goes back more than a year. It was a failed merger between two unions, and right now one of the parties is very unhappy and looking to scapegoat others."

Amanda Cooper, a spokeswoman for the new Workers United group, agreed that Stern should not be held responsible. "UNITE and HERE joined forces almost five years ago and it didn't pan out," she said. "It didn't happen for a lot of reasons but SEIU was none of them."

Cooper acknowledged that the whole battle -- inter-union picket lines included -- was not helping matters when it came to the push for labor law reform. "It's better for everybody that this dispute get over with," she said.