

Use Our Power

A debate is underway over how the U.S. labor movement should respond to declining membership numbers and a shifting political landscape. Some union leaders within the AFL-CIO are proposing a radical makeover for the House of Labor that would centralize power and sharply limit the autonomy and independence of smaller unions.

On January 10, 2005, the IAM issued "*Use Our Power*," a sweeping seven-point strategy document in response that provides concrete suggestions about how the AFL-CIO can better use its \$6.7 billion in overall assets and 13.3 million members.

"We believe the current fight for control of the AFL-CIO is a waste of time, money and resources," said the IAM report, which rejects proposals that would force smaller unions to merge with larger AFL-CIO affiliates. The report also draws insights from the debate that led up to the 1955 merger of the AFL and CIO.

"In the first place, the Labor Movement is not a highly centralized institution," said former IAM International President Al Hayes in 1955. "It is made up of millions of men and women, organized into thousands of local unions, joined into hundreds of national and international unions."

What was true 50 years ago is true today. Labor's strength cannot and should not be measured by numbers alone. For more than a half-century, labor's success has been a testament to how we *used our power* rather than a reflection of our size or numbers.

Among the key recommendations in *Use Our Power* are to invest \$200 million to create a labor-owned cable network that projects a positive image of union members and the labor movement. Other suggestions include wiser use of political expenditures and establishing a national health care database to leverage the purchasing power of over 50 million union members and retirees.

"The American Labor Movement may be a lot of things," says the IAM report, which aims to inform and direct the debate over the future of the AFL-CIO. "But it is not politically impotent, financially bankrupt or lacking in allies. Its power base is considerable and the potential energy in that power base is incredible."

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