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## Labor's pain may be workers' gain

July 27, 2005

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Have you shopped at a Walgreens lately? I have, I'm ashamed to say. Why would I be ashamed to admit shopping at a store that I normally would shop in three or four times a week? Because shopping there last week meant I was crossing a picket line. True, no one was walking in circles in front of the store carrying signs and asking me not to shop there. But the pharmacists were on strike, nonetheless. I knew it, but I went in anyway.

I have my excuses. We were in the final throes of packing my son for summer camp and discovered we had forgotten to buy a rain poncho. I knew just where they were displayed at my neighborhood Walgreens. Sure, I could have gotten in the car, driven to the Kmart and walked around looking for one. But who has the time for that?

For that matter, who has time to think about organized labor these days? In our too busy world, we're already trying to cram 25 hours worth of living into our 24-hour days.

That's why I think the split in the AFL-CIO may be just the tonic organized labor needs.

Why should we care? Because the success or failure of organized labor will have a huge impact on the future of all workers, even those of us who aren't members.

Much has been said about the decision by two of its most powerful members -- the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the Service Employees International Union -- to secede from the AFL-CIO. That alone is good. I can't remember the last time labor news made the front page.

Speculation is rife about what effect this split will have on workers in the next decade.

So far it is nothing more than that -- speculation. Only time will tell whether the formation of a separate organization called the Change to Win Coalition will ensure the future of organized labor or kill it off altogether. The coalition includes five other unions --the United Food and Commercial Workers, Laborers International Union of North America, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, United Farm Workers and UNITE HERE, a group of textile, hotel and restaurant employees --although only SEIU and the Teamsters have resigned from the AFL-CIO so far.

The founders of the Change to Win Coalition are making big promises. Its Web site says the new labor organization will:

1. Win access to affordable health care and a retirement with dignity for everyone in America.
2. Stop the Wal-Marting of good jobs in America -- and make the Wal-Marts of the world accountable to the communities they profit from.
3. Give new hope to those hit hardest by the anti-worker tactics of global corporations, including working women and people of color.

We can only hope they achieve those lofty goals. If they do, it will help all of us, not just the workers at Wal-Mart or those who work low-wage jobs that lack health insurance. This idea that unions fight for the rights of all workers, not just for their members, is the reason so many of us now work eight-hour work days and take paid vacations.

But neither eight-hour days nor paid vacations are the reality for all workers. As organized labor has slipped into mediocrity, life for all

workers in America has slipped into despair. Today, with fewer than one in 12 workers unionized, 45 million Americans are without health insurance, jobs are fleeing our shores, and the Bush administration has Social Security in the cross hairs.

Success will require some amount of cooperation between the two labor giants. They'll have to find common political ground to improve the chances of electing politicians more sympathetic to workers than bosses, and they will have to stick to a promise to organize new workers, not raid other unions for members.

Those things can -- and must -- be done to ensure this break in the ranks does more good than harm. But this move is worth the risk. The status quo was no longer working.

This shakeup might be just the awakening this sleeping giant needs, no matter how rude it is.

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