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# Counterpunch

**edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair**

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### Today's Stories

April 2, 2008

Col. Dan Smith  
The Militarization of America

Steve Early  
A Purple Uprising in Oakland

April 1, 2008

Jeff Leys  
Fracturing the Peace to End the War

Thomas P. Healy  
Restoring the Constitution: a Conversation with Daniel Ellsberg

Winslow T. Wheeler  
When Pigs Sprout Wings: Mangled Rationales for a Fatter Defense Budget

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz  
New Deal Nostalgia

Patrick Irelan  
Cocaine, Colombia and the Cartels

Andy Worthington  
The Case of Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani

April 2, 2008

## Reforming the SEIU

### A Purple Uprising in Oakland

By STEVE EARLY

As an infrequent visitor to the west coast, I've never experienced the earthquake tremors that are so familiar to millions of Californians.

But, in a union hall in downtown Oakland last Thursday (3/27), one didn't have to be a seismologist to see-and feel-the fault lines shifting in America's second-largest union.

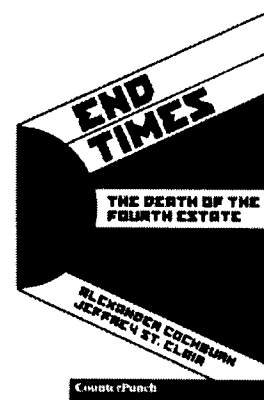
Several hundred members and staffers of United Healthcare Workers (UHW) were jammed into their local headquarters for a raucous press conference and pep rally. Arriving by bus, the BART, on foot and by car, the crowd was chanting, clapping, whistling, and making an enormous racket with union-issued yellow plastic clackers.

Almost everyone wore the signature purple T-shirts and jackets of their national organization, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The event could have easily been mistaken for an SEIU strike vote, a contract ratification meeting, or an organizing rally involving some portion of the UHW's statewide membership of 150,000. Since a few workers even wheeled in the disabled people they care for in neighboring homes, it also looked like a union protest against state budget cuts,

The gathering of African-American, Asian, and Latino home care workers, nursing home aides, and hospital employees was

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convened for another purpose, however. Their call-and-response chants were not directed at any recalcitrant employer or tight-wad Republican governor. Instead, UHW members were venting against top officials of their own union.

Michael J. Smith  
Woolly Mamet

"What do we want?" Someone with a bullhorn shouted. "Democracy!" the crowd responded. "When do we want it?" The answer, delivered by all present, was a thunderous: "Now!"

Robert Weissman  
The New Philip Morris--  
Even Worse Than the  
Old?

And that was before they broke into another spirited chant, reminiscent of Bay Area protests past: "Hey, hey, ho, ho-Andy Stern has got to go!"

Dave Lindorff  
Bush's Defining Moments

Andy Stern is, of course, the powerful, high-profile and increasingly heavy-handed president of SEIU. Much to the chagrin of many of his members, he and union democracy are like oil and water.

Martha Rosenberg  
Brain Mist Disease: Boss  
Hog's Gift to Humanity

On March 27, the day before their Oakland rally, UHW rank-and-filers awoke to a headline in The San Francisco Chronicle that read: "SEIU Leader Moves To Oust West Coast Dissident." The article reported that Stern was preparing to put UHW under "trusteeship"-a form of labor organization martial law in which local elected leaders are replaced by Stern appointees from Washington. Since he became SEIU president, in the mid-1990s, Stern has named trustees to run the affairs of many locals. Originally, his professed goal was to root out corruption and promote organizing. But, more recently, scores of SEIU affiliates have been merged, restructured, and saddled with un-elected leaders so Stern can exercise greater personal control over their dealings with politicians and employers. (For SEIU's public sector members, these are often one and the same.)

Website of the Day  
Support Briana!

March 31, 2008

Mike Whitney  
Dead on Arrival:  
Paulson's Fixit Plan for  
Wall Street

In UHW, there are no crooks in need of ousting and

Mats Svensson  
Walls, Tunnels and Daily  
Humiliations

the local's membership recruitment record has been exemplary, Between 2001 and 2006, UHW added nearly 65,000 new members-more than any other SEIU local in the country.

Paul Rockwell  
Hillary's Lies About  
Outsourcing

Nevertheless, in a March 24 letter-clearly designed to lay the legal groundwork for a take-over-Stern accused UHW of violating the national union constitution by "developing a secret plan to destabilize and decertify bargaining units." As part of this conspiracy to "sabotage" SEIU, UHW members would become part of a breakaway "independent union" formed in alliance with the AFL-CIO and the California Nurses Association. (CNA is a longtime rival of SEIU, now affiliated with the AFL; SEIU left the AFL in 2005 and formed Change To Win, a rival federation.)

Paul Craig Roberts  
A Third American War in  
the Making?

Patrick Cockburn  
Sadr Calls for Ceasefire

Peter Dale Scott  
The Showdown

The main target of any trusteeship, based on such false charges, is UHW President Sal Rosselli. He is a well-known Bay Area labor activist and past supporter of myriad progressive causes. Since resigning from SEIU's national executive committee so he could speak more freely-as he is entitled to do under the Landrum-Griffin Act-- Rosselli has turned his local into a hotbed of dissent. He has criticized Stern's leadership in Labor Notes, on Democracy Now, and in major newspapers like Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, and New York Times. Meanwhile, UHW has launched a lively website ([www.seiuvoice.org](http://www.seiuvoice.org)) to stimulate internal debate about the need for "real member participation" in SEIU and a more democratic, bottom-up approach to building the union.

Alfredo Molano  
Cultura Mafiosa in  
Colombia

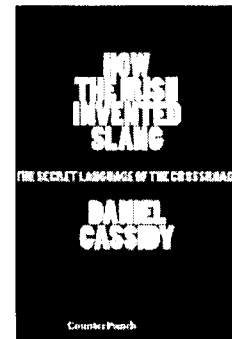
Peter Morici  
Why Paulson's Reform  
Plan Falls Short

Uri Avnery  
Day of the Land, 32  
Years Later

Michael Simmons  
The American Bard in  
New Orleans

Betsy Roberts / Karen  
Orr  
The Clorox Coup

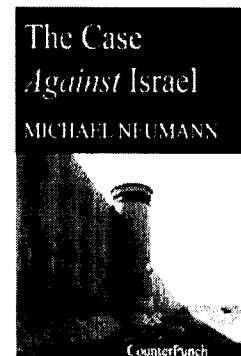
As The Chronicle noted on March 27, Rosselli is trying to generate grassroots support for reform proposals at SEIU's national convention in Puerto Rico, June 1-4. There, Stern's critics say they will push for a Teamster-style direct election of top union officers, so all 1.8 million SEIU members can vote on the leadership, instead of a just a few convention delegates every four years. UHW also wants to give local unions more protection against forced mergers which dilute membership



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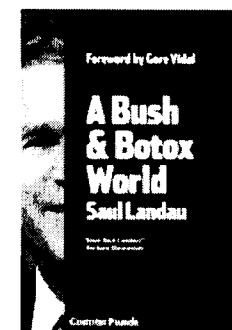
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Phyllis Pollack  
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the Moon: Scorsese Does  
the Stones

control. Critical of recent deal-making by Stern and his associates, SEIU dissidents also want to insure that workers have a stronger voice on the bargaining committees and "unity councils" that deal with large multi-state employers.

Website of the Day  
Five Years Too Many

According to Rosselli, Stern's threatened trusteeship over UHW is simply "retaliatory because we are speaking out against his ideology, his direction. The simplest way I can say it is, it's top down versus bottom-up, corporate unionism versus social unionism." Based on its size, UHW is entitled to have one the largest delegations at the convention. But, if Stern puts UHW in trusteeship between now and June, none of its 146 elected representatives will be able to attend-or lobby other delegates about democratizing the union's structure and functioning.

March 29 / 30, 2008

Alexander Cockburn  
When They Pick Up the  
Phone at 3 AM, What Will  
They Say?

Fellow SEIU dissidents, now organizing nationally in a group called SMART-SEIU Member Activists For Reform Today-would have a much more harder time getting other union officers and stewards to engage in reform activity. That's why Rosselli accuses Stern of using the UHW trusteeship threat "to eliminate his political opposition."

Patrick Cockburn  
Iraqi Police Refuse to  
Back Maliki's Attacks on  
Medhi Army

In a March 27 statement, Rosselli disclaimed any intention of encouraging membership decertification from SEIU. UHW reasserted its public position that, "despite profound disagreements" with Stern's leadership, "leaving is not an option. SEIU is OUR union, that's why we're fighting to change it." At the anti- trusteeship rally in Oakland, Rosselli proudly introduced an organizing committee member from St. Francis Medical Center in Lynwood, California, where 600 service and maintenance workers had just voted to join the union. Due its membership growth around the state, UHW is negotiating new contracts for 75,000 hospital and nursing home workers this year alone.

Mike Whitney  
Bernanke's Next Big Bail  
Out Plan

Christopher Brauchli  
The Pastor of  
Armageddon and the  
Slave Sale: McCain,  
Lieberman and Rev.  
Hagee

William Blum  
China, Tibet and the  
Propaganda Olympics

Given such a heavy bargaining calendar-and the challenges UHW faces from various employers-its elected rank-and-file board members are very concerned about the chaos, division, and disruption that will ensue if SEIU tries to oust them and Rosselli--plus purge their local's most experienced staff reps and organizers.

Robert Fantina  
Iraq Troika: McCain,  
Obama and Clinton

John Ross  
AMLO, the Comeback  
Kid? Fighting the  
Privatization of Mexico's  
Oil

Their concerns are clearly shared by others in California labor who've worked with Rosselli for years-even union officials who disagree with him and leftists who doubt his sincerity as a union reformer. For example, Mike Casey, a prominent Bay Area trade unionist who heads Local 2 of the Hotel Employees, has ignored the usual protocol that "members or leaders of other unions should not interfere in the internal disputes of another union" and issued an open letter about the UHW-SEIU rift. In his March 28 missive, Casey addresses, among others, his own UNITE-HERE national officers-Bruce Raynor and John Wilhelm. They both joined Stern in launching Change to Win three years ago, after subjecting AFL-CIO President John Sweeney to withering public criticism-of the sort Stern now objects to when directed at him by Rosselli and others within SEIU!

Allison Kilkenny  
Shady Lending Hits  
Home

Nelson P. Valdés  
Cuba, the Beatles and  
Historical Context

Suzanne Baroud  
The Great Lake of Gaza:  
a New Crisis in the  
Making

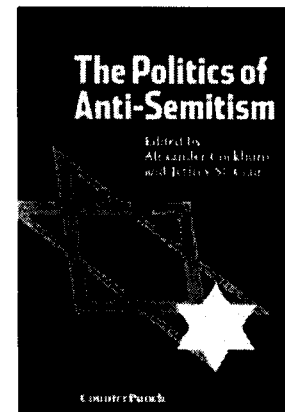
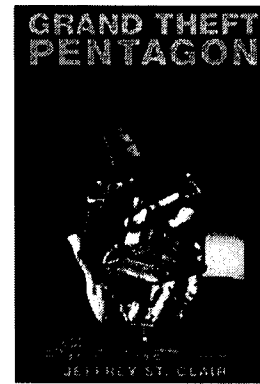
"I believe that there must always be room within organized labor for legitimate and principled dissent, if our movement is to survive and ultimately grow," Casey says.

Richard Rhames  
Social Security: Throwing  
Granny from the Gravy  
Train

"The questions and issues raised by Sal meet the threshold of such dissent[These] are matters that must be addressed by any union looking to organize on a large scale. The public discourse initiated by UHW and Sal may well be kicking up a lot of dust, but it has also provoked a closer examination of the direction of our movement."

Christopher Fons  
Transcending the 60s?  
Obama and the Baby  
Boomers

To date, Casey notes, SEIU spokespeople have responded to Rosselli largely with personal attacks and claims that "his behavior is 'shameful,' 'unprincipled,' and 'dishonest.'" Says the



The Politics of Anti-Semitism  
Edited by Alexander Cockburn  
and Jeffrey St. Clair



Carl Finamore  
Misery at 35,000 Feet:  
Mergers Stall, Fares  
Soar, Services Slump  
and Consumers Sour

Eamonn McCann  
Hillary Misremembers  
Again!

Missy Beattie  
Justice and the Monsters  
of War

Fred Gardner  
Jim Thorpe, All-American

Kim Nicolini  
Cock Chuggers and  
Cheese Curls: Richard  
Kelly's "Southland Tales"

David Yearsley  
"All the World's a  
Hospital"

Jeffrey St. Clair  
Booked Up

Poets' Basement  
Valentine and Ko Un

Website of the Weekend  
Hidden Iraq

March 28, 2008

Saul Landau  
Growing Dread About  
Iraq

Alan Farago  
Other People's Money:  
the Chop Shop Economy

Peter Morici  
Knocking Down False  
Economic Gods

Andy Worthington  
Plight of the Uyghus: a  
Chinese Muslim's  
Desperate Plea from  
Guantánamo

Felice Pace  
Ashes of Lies: Why No  
One Trusts the US Forest  
Service

Peter Montague  
Sierra Club Cleans House  
-- With Clorox!

Dave Lindorff  
The Mumia Exception

HERE leader: "The Sal Rosselli I know is anything but shameful, unprincipled, and dishonest." And he goes on to heap praise on Rosselli and UHW for their concrete expressions of solidarity and support when Local 2 members faced a "two-year war"--the strike and lock-out that roiled the local hotel industry in 2004-6.

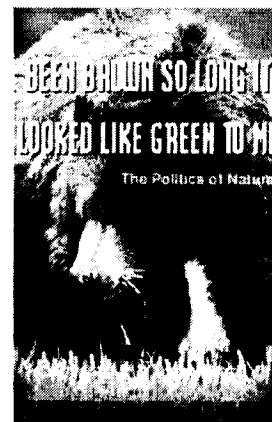
"Such a union and leader has more than earned the right to air objections to union practices without being vilified or demonized."

Nevertheless, in some daily press coverage--and the spin of SEIU media handlers--the UHW affair is still depicted as a narrow conflict between Stern and Rosselli, both veterans of Sixties student activism, now unfortunately feuding over the perks of late middle-aged institutional power. Conversations with UHW rank-and-filers suggest that they see it differently--as a much broader fight that they didn't start, but have a huge stake in. "We're on a mission to hold Andy Stern accountable" says UHW board member Eloise Reese-Burns, one of the thousands of nursing home workers that Stern wants to transfer--against their wishes--to a Los Angeles-based local. "We believe that the rank-and-file should be involved in making contract demands and helping to raise our contract standards. Andy's just a bully--but he's going to find out that it's not a good idea to piss off the union people who pay your salary."

Ella Raiford, another African-American leader in UHW who belongs to SEIU's national black caucus (AFRAM), is equally vehement. Speaking March 22 at a meeting in Berkeley attended by sixty-five SEIU dissidents from locals around California, Raiford noted that there were many in the room "who've worked long and hard over the years to have a democratic union." Now, "Andy Stern is telling us where we have to go and what we have to do--and we don't have any say in the matter. It's time for us to stand up and say, "No!"

Applauding the formation of SMART--and UHW's own alternative vision for the union--Raiford called on her fellow reformers "to make a real 'change to win' for our members, so they're have a voice in the union." "We're going to find," she predicted, "that a lot of people in SEIU want to be part of that 'change to win.' "

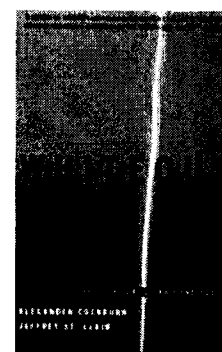
**Steve Early** worked for 27 years as a Boston-based international union representative and organizer for the Communications Workers of America. In the 1970s, he aided reform movements in the United Mine Workers, Steelworkers, and Teamsters. He is currently working on a book for Cornell ILR Press on the role of Sixties radicals in American unions. He can be reached at [Lsupport@aol.com](mailto:Lsupport@aol.com)



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