

10 Issues on Labor's Future (May 23, 2005)

Sweeney and Stern Agree on Labor in Politics, But Both Avoid Critical Strategic Problems

By Harry Kelber

(Second in a series of ten articles)

While AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), differ fiercely about what reforms are necessary to revitalize the union movement, their views on labor's role in politics are remarkably similar.

In his document, "Winning for Working Families," Sweeney outlines his proposals for labor's role in politics. Many items on his "wish list" have appeared on labor's political agenda before. He wants unions to engage in year-round political activity and expand their ties with community allies. He would "increase our efforts to recruit, train and elect union members to local, state and federal public offices."

To fund the federation's political activities, Sweeney would increase the Member Mobilization Fund by \$7.5 million to a maximum of \$47.5 million a year.

One of Sweeney's proposals, indicative of his leadership style, calls for "leading an intensive campaign in union-dense states to consolidate and expand our strength to uproot anti-worker politicians from state legislatures, governorships, the U.S. Capitol and the White House; to turn back efforts to enact right-to-work for less and paycheck deception laws, and to create models for progressive governance." (Sweeney doesn't tell us who is going to do all this, or how and when.)

Andy Stern, in SEIU's 10-point document, "Unite to Win," doesn't disagree with Sweeney's proposals. In "Build New Strength in Politics," SEIU says: "The members and unions of the AFL-CIO have in the last decade become more active and effective in political action. Using political action to create opportunities for more workers to unite with us and then using that new strength to change workers' lives through legislation is a proven and essential strategy."

Stern adds: "Member involvement and alliances with other organizations that share our goals should be the engines of our political action efforts." Sweeney has said as much.

However, both labor leaders avoid the thorny problem of the AFL-CIO's relations with the Democratic Party and how it should be resolved in the 2006 congressional and 2008 presidential elections. Although union households accounted for better than one-fourth of the total vote in 2004, organized labor was largely ignored by Democratic Party leaders in decisions about strategy, choice of candidates and issues, and the conduct of the election campaign. The AFL-CIO meekly accepted this unfair relationship because it figured it had no alternative.

Sweeney and many of his supporters still appear wedded to the idea of labor subservience to the Democrats and their candidates, but there is a rising tide of opposition to that policy. Stern and others say that labor should support any

aspirant for high public office, whether a Democrat, Republican, Third Party or independent candidate, who will best serve the interests of working families.

The problem is that there are not many Republican candidates who would embrace labor's legislative agenda. It is unclear how Stern would deal with the Democrats in forthcoming critical elections.

The AFL-CIO has an excellent political bargaining position in pre-election negotiations with Democratic Party leaders — if Sweeney and the Executive Council would only exploit it. Democrats must know they can't win local, state and national elections without union money, resources and legions of volunteers. So what are they willing to pay for labor's support?

With our proven voting strength at the polls, we can demand — and deserve — a prominent voice within the Democratic Party at every stage of an election campaign.

Both Sweeney and Stern see no need to change their 2004 election strategy, in which they limited their campaign exclusively to domestic issues, while completely ignoring the war in Iraq and global terrorism. But the causes and nature of the war in Iraq, its costs in money and lives, were very much on the minds of voters when they went to the polls. In Ohio, they gave Bush 119,000 more votes than Kerry, even though the state had the highest unemployment rate in the country.

It was difficult to explain to voters how the AFL-CIO could, at the same time, fight President Bush on his awful domestic record, while giving him a blank check in foreign policy by its silence. Are we doomed to repeat our fatal mistake in the 2006 and 2008 elections?

Sweeney's proposal for "building a year-round, year-in and year-out capacity for informing and mobilizing union members" is an old idea that never materialized, because unions failed to develop a series of political activities that would sustain the interest of their members and involve them throughout the year. But it can be done.

Long before unions start focusing on frenzied "get-out-the vote" campaigns, they should have a monthly schedule of activities that would stimulate the participation of their members. They should plan meetings where candidates for public office — incumbents and challengers — explain why they deserve labor support. Delegations of union members should be lined up for future visits to members of Congress in their home districts.

There should be rallies in communities to make the public aware of labor's political agenda. There could be monthly workshops, with a panel of experts, on current political issues. The families of union members could be invited to many of these functions. We should be made to feel that our participation in the political process can make a difference.

One device that can be helpful is a hand-held "score card," listing 10 issues of concern to working families — a yes-or-no check list to record the responses of a candidate to each issue. Polling can be used to test the views of union members on specific issues.

The still unanswered question is whether the unions can maintain their political unity, despite their bitter internal conflict over how to reform the AFL CIO. And if

they can successfully resolve their differences with the Democratic Party in their favor and adopt a more realistic election strategy, they can certainly be a more potent force in the 2006 and 2008 elections.

Article 3: Labor's Legislative Goals. (*To be posted on Monday, May 30.*)