

Why Sweeney Should Retire (June 12, 2006)

What John Sweeney Said in His 2001 Interview; A 'Reality Check' on His Role Five Years Later

By Harry Kelber

(Second of three articles)

Five years ago (Feb. 5, 2001), I interviewed AFL-CIO President John Sweeney at the federation's headquarters in Washington. Here is the verbatim text of the interview, plus an appraisal of his comments five years later:

Q: How do you respond to the new Bureau of Labor Statistics survey that shows unions lost 200,000 members last year; their percentage of the work force dropped from 13.9% to 13.5%, and private sector union membership fell to only 9%?

Sweeney: Frankly, we're disappointed. Our affiliates are doing a lot of organizing. Last year, we organized 400,000 new members, but with all the layoffs, plant closings and retirements, especially in basic industries, it makes it tough for us to show much growth.

Comment: By 2005, the AFL-CIO had lost an additional 475,000 members and its percentage of the nation's work force had plunged to 12.5%, with the private sector at only 8%, the lowest in decades.

Q: What do you plan to do differently in light of these heavy losses?

Sweeney: Well, we're experimenting. We're trying to find and do things that work. We're now focusing on high-tech industries. SEIU has major campaigns in the health care field. The building trades are organizing temporary workers in construction, and other unions are also upgrading their organizing campaigns.

Comment: Sweeney has not found "things that work." SEIU is no longer in the AFL-CIO. The building trades' campaign to organize temporary workers never got off the ground. With a couple of exceptions, AFL-CIO unions are not upgrading their organizing campaigns.

Q: Do you think the goal of a million new members a year is realistic?

Sweeney: It's a target that our affiliates are aiming for and working hard to achieve. You know we've had an important initiative under way the past two years, the New Alliance, to make our state federations and central labor councils stronger economic and political organizations in their communities. They're becoming more involved in organizing and we expect good results from their efforts.

One of our major objectives is to get our members involved in political activity the year 'round and not just in the few months before a national election. Our organizing efforts are taking many forms and we hope they'll succeed.

Comment: There's little evidence that state federations and central labor councils have become stronger economic and political organizations. In fact, they've become frustrated over the uncertainty as to whether to admit locals of the

Change to Win coalition as members, and under what terms. And despite repeated promises, Sweeney has not been able to institute “year-round” political activity.

Q: Do you plan to introduce legislation in Congress to protect the right to join a union?

Sweeney: Of course we favor such legislation. But this is not the right time to push for it. There’s not much chance for success in the current political climate.

Q: But isn’t that the same argument we heard from the AFL-CIO for the past 24 years — even when Democrats controlled Congress and the White House? When will it be the right time?

Sweeney: Our main job right now is to continue building public sentiment for worker rights. For the past three years, we’ve had very successful “Seven Days in June” demonstrations in which scores of unions participated.

The issues we are now concerned with affect working families, such as Social Security, Medicare, education, prescription drugs and the environment. And we have to do our utmost to elect a Democratic Congress. All of these are stepping stones toward an effective worker rights law.

Comment: So why did Sweeney change his mind several years later and decide to introduce the Employee Free Choice Act? Certainly, with 9/11 and the war in Iraq, the “climate” had not improved. He has never bothered to explain the turnabout. As for “Seven Days in June” yearly demonstrations, which Sweeney brags about, its admittedly main purpose was to “shine a spotlight” on the many ways that employers use to intimidate workers from joining unions. Now, isn’t that a great organizing message?

Q: The BLS figures are bound to be discouraging. What are you going to do to regain some organizing momentum?

Sweeney: One of our new efforts will be to find ways to transform the great political clout we showed during the 2000 election into economic power in terms of organizing and collective bargaining. If we can apply the energy of union households to our struggle for worker rights, we can move forward with greater strength.

Comment: The AFL-CIO’s political clout in the 2000 elections didn’t improve organizing and collective bargaining in the following years. Neither did it increase after the big union voter turnout in the 2004 election. So what new effort will Sweeney recommend that has any chance of success?

Q: When you first became AFL-CIO president, you used the slogan, “America Needs a Raise.” Do you have any such slogan to spur a national movement for worker rights?

Sweeney: We haven’t set on a particular slogan, but we’re working on it. Our *Voice@Work* staff is conducting an effective educational campaign. We’re strengthening our ties with religious groups, minorities, environmentalists and communities across the nation.

Comment: “America Needs a Raise” was a silly slogan, which Sweeney parlayed into a book (written by his staff). Working families saw no determined AFL-CIO

effort to make it a reality. The only ones who took the slogan seriously were the top corporate executives, who added millions to their inflated earnings. So Sweeney and his staff are hoping to come up with an inspiring slogan, as though that's what needed to revitalize the labor movement.

Q. As you know, it takes years before a bill becomes a law, so why not sponsor a reform bill now that would guarantee the right of free speech and assembly, as provided in the Constitution? The AFL-CIO has everything to gain and nothing to lose by acting now.

Sweeney: We're looking at whatever we think can work and falls within the limits of our resources. Organizing is still our top priority and we are committed as ever to fight for working families. There is no one solution that will solve our problems. I've made some notes on what you're proposing and I'll think about them.

Comment: Does that sound like a decisive labor leader?

Article 3: "Damaging Questions About Sweeney's Behavior" will be posted on Monday, June 19, 2006 at my website: <www.laboreducator.org>.

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