

Why Sweeney Should Retire

## How Sweeney Won Three Sham Re-elections; His Role in ULLICO Scandal and Elsewhere

By Harry Kelber

(Third of three articles)

You may wonder how AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was re-elected three times without opposition or debate, despite his dismal record and hardly any contact with the union members he is supposed to serve. Let's clear up the mystery.

Sweeney owes his re-election to a group of international union presidents who have a majority of convention votes. The AFL-CIO Constitution allows each of these presidents to cast hundreds of thousands of votes, while the delegates from state federations and central labor councils are limited to one vote apiece.

For example, even a small union like the Federation of Professional Athletes, with 1,750 members, can cast 1,750 votes, which is nearly four times the combined votes of all state and local labor bodies, that are mainly responsible for carrying out the AFL-CIO's economic and political campaigns.

Sweeney has not only exploited this outrageously undemocratic convention voting rule but has even used it, illegally, to advance and consolidate his hold on the presidency. Shortly after his election in 1995 to a two-year term, he and his cabal of union presidents conspired, in a well-kept secret, to increase their term of office to four years.

It is a matter of public record that Sweeney never informed union members about his plans to double his term of office, and even the convention delegates did not find out about this historic change until the end of the first day of the convention.

Nor was that all. The amendment for the four-year term for AFL-CIO executive officers and the 51 members of the Executive Council was passed without debate by voice vote in violation of the Constitution that requires the approval of at least two thirds of the convention delegates.

At the 1997 convention, the delegates approved an amendment, also by voice vote, to hold AFL-CIO conventions every four years, instead of every two, making top leaders even more remote and less accountable to the membership. It also adopted an amendment that made it legal, retroactively, to revise the constitution by voice vote.

### ***Sweeney Never Responds to Critics or Admits Costly Failures***

No matter how poorly he performs, Sweeney feels no need to be accountable to union members. Why should he bother to answer critics who complain about his lackluster leadership? Union members don't elect him; top national labor leaders do. They are the ones he must cater to in order to ensure his "job security."

Sweeney has little contact with the rank-and-file, except at those few photo-op rallies when he appears, wearing a baseball cap and a union-made windbreaker jacket, to make the standard speeches of labor's support.

Sweeney is hardly a household name with union families. His recognition factor among millions of workers is probably not much higher than was that of Lane Kirkland, his predecessor, at a measly 3%. So Sweeney was lucky that he didn't have to depend on union members for his three re-election triumphs.

### ***Sweeney's 'Solidarity Center' Is Heavily Funded by State Dept.***

In 1997, the AFL-CIO established the American Center for International Labor Solidarity to develop strategies for international organizing campaigns and to promote cooperative relations with labor federations in other countries. Sweeney is the principal trustee of Solidarity Center.

Since its inception nine years ago, the Center has made no effort to inform American union members of its largely clandestine efforts around the world, where it has offices and staff in at least 26 countries, from Bangladesh, Bulgaria and Croatia to Sri Lanka, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

A well-kept secret about Solidarity Center is that it received 90% (nearly \$30 million) of its annual revenue from the U.S. State Department and other government agencies of the Bush administration, but it got less than 2% (\$600,000) from the AFL-CIO. These figures are from Solidarity Center's 2003-2004 Annual Report.

Surely, the Center must provide the Bush foreign affairs staff with some paybacks for the millions it receives to finance its worldwide operations. The State Department is not known for its zeal in promoting international labor solidarity, so it must demand other services that the Center is apparently committed to supplying.

Sweeney has been asked to explain what the Center is doing in those 26 countries and how it promotes international labor solidarity. Why is the Center, an AFL-CIO organization, being funded almost entirely by the Bush administration and what is the payback? Sweeney has refused to reply.

### ***Sweeney's Role in the ULLICO Stock-Trading Scandal***

In the most embarrassing labor scandal in decades, more than twenty AFL-CIO current or retired international union leaders were involved in an insiders' stock trading scheme as directors of the Union Labor Life Insurance Company (ULLICO), many of whom made substantial profits for themselves through special buying and selling stock deals between January 2000 and September 2001. About ten company directors were members of the AFL-CIO Executive Council.

While Sweeney and a few other directors didn't trade their ULLICO shares for profit, they did approve each stock transaction and the rules that enabled co-directors to reap huge profits, even voting to extend the time limit to give them five more months to cash in additional shares.

Sweeney never invoked the AFL-CIO's Ethical Practices Committee to review the ULLICO scandal (referred to by some as "Labor's Little Enron). The union officers on the company's board never apologized for their misbehavior, and the Executive Council never issued a reprimand, much less asked them to resign.

## ***Why I Wrote These Articles About Sweeney***

I decided to write these articles because the labor movement is in a mess of trouble. I became convinced that working people, with all their problems and anxieties, were being largely abandoned by a labor leadership that had become cautious, complacent and self-serving, with a magnanimous tolerance for incompetence and corruption.

I was appalled that John Sweeney, with a 10-year record of failures and an impending split within the House of Labor, could be re-elected to still another four-year term by acclamation. By acclamation! With no one daring to challenge him, as though he was the most qualified and inspiring labor leader in the country. Not a single vote against him from the many hundreds of convention delegates; not a word of criticism or protest.

I came to what seemed an obvious conclusion: Sweeney and a group of international union presidents on the Executive Council had hijacked the AFL-CIO and robbed the rank-and-file of any voice or role within the organization.

You have read my evaluation of Sweeney as a labor leader in these critical times and why I suggest that he announce his resignation as soon as possible, but no later than the November elections. I would like union members to judge whether I make a convincing case.

I think that Sweeney's defenders should come forward and state why he is best qualified to lead the AFL-CIO until the 2008 convention. If they choose to remain silent — a familiar Sweeney tactic in dealing with critics — it will serve to authenticate my analysis.

At the very least, I believe my articles shed some light on what's wrong with the AFL CIO and provide a few insights on what changes have to be made to develop new leaders that can inspire and involve the rank-and-file.