

## Labor today

David Moberg | Sep. 1, 2009



John Sweeney, head of the AFL-CIO, addresses a rally in support of car wash workers in Los Angeles Aug. 19. (AFP/Mark Ralston)

### Analysis

After winning the first contested election as president of the AFL-CIO in the fall of 1995, John Sweeney opened the important winter meeting of the labor federation's executive council with a long discussion of plans to organize more workers into unions. For decades the union share of the work force had been shrinking, but Sweeney's predecessors had given the decline only scant attention.

Sweeney, who had dramatically increased organizing as president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), wanted to send a signal that his "new voice" slate was serious about changing and renewing the labor movement across the board.

The signals continued. In his first year Sweeney revamped and expanded the federation's political mobilization of workers and launched grass-roots legislative campaigns (including fights with newly ascendant Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich). He joined strikers' picket lines and organizing marches for workers, such as strawberry pickers, occasionally getting arrested for civil disobedience.

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### [Commentary: Dangerous honesty about labor](#)[1]

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Departing from labor's defensive, inward orientation to a more assertive turn outward, in the words of Stewart Acuff, his current assistant for organizing, Sweeney also reached out to the public and to potential allies who had been neglected (academics, students, the political left, environmentalists, women, the faith community and others). And he began to shift labor's foreign policy from Cold War neoconservatism toward greater solidarity with unions around the world.

Fourteen years later, Sweeney, now 75, is stepping down, to be succeeded in all likelihood at the quadrennial convention in September by his 1995 running mate, secretary-treasurer Richard Trumka.

In many ways, argues University of Illinois at Chicago labor historian Leon Fink, "the promise of those early years remains his best legacy." Fink said he sees the following years marked by "dashed hopes" and "loss of momentum," despite some noteworthy accomplishments. Similarly, Bill Fletcher, a former Sweeney aide and coauthor of the upcoming book *Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path Toward Social Justice*, said, "I look at the Sweeney administration as a reform effort that stalled, not failed, and that laid the foundation for the crisis and split," when seven unions left the AFL-CIO in 2005 to set up a rival federation, Change to Win (CTW).

Yet others think Sweeney's difficulties stem less from his personal failings and more from working for most of his tenure under a hostile Bush regime, laying the groundwork for success later on two important fronts -- organizing and politics.

For the past two years, the union share of the work force has edged upwards, nowhere near the million-plus-a-year imagined 14 years ago, but the first uptick in decades.

And labor-assisted political victories have brought labor tantalizingly close to winning at least some version of long-sought goals.

"I really think what we've been able to accomplish has been significant during some tough years, with an antiworker national administration for eight years, with all the roadblocks placed in the way of workers trying to organize and achieve collective bargaining," Sweeney said. "But I'm really proud of where we're at today. It's so heartening to know we have a president in the White House who thinks and cares about workers and their issues."

Despite current political difficulties, Sweeney said he remains hopeful that "we're on the cusp of passing major labor law reform" and health care reform, two of organized labor's top political objectives for decades.

Even one of the Change to Win leaders, Terry O'Sullivan, hails Sweeney's accomplishments as "immeasurable" and says, "I don't lay the blame [for the tough times for workers and unions] at the feet of John Sweeney."

"He's one of the finest, most decent human beings I have ever had the privilege to meet and one of the greatest labor leaders I've ever been around," O'Sullivan said. "He has one of the toughest jobs in the labor movement, when you have 50-plus unions and try to coordinate actions and channel everyone in the same direction. It's a difficult task, and John did it with dignity, inclusion and sense of what was in the best interests of the unions and workers we represent."

Sweeney, born in the Bronx, N.Y., to Irish working-class Catholic parents, credits his upbringing with shaping his life in the labor movement. "Throughout my whole career I've had the impression there's no greater honor than representing working people, who are the real heroes of this country," he said. "I think I've been blessed with a career doing that work. It's work that grew out of the Catholic social teachings I grew up with as well as the lessons about labor that I learned from my earliest days from my father's experience as a member of the Transport Workers Union. I realized early on in life there was a big difference between my father's work in a unionized bus driver's job and my mother's as a nonunion domestic worker."

After a stint with the Ladies Garment Workers, Sweeney rose to presidency of New York's powerful janitors' union, then to president of all of the Service Employees International Union. In that position Sweeney chose to

get along with many conservative, even corrupt, local leaders while at the same time strengthening the national union and bringing in a talented staff, often university-educated and generally more militant and progressive. Besides merging many unions into SEIU, Sweeney also increased union membership with new organizing campaigns, such as Justice for Janitors.



When a growing number of union leaders became unhappy with AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland's lackluster performance, they rebelled, leading Kirkland to resign and his secretary-treasurer to take over. But the rebels recruited Sweeney to run for president and win. Although not a "revolution" from the grass roots, it was not just a "palace coup," argues University of California at Santa Barbara labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, but a "leftish shift," putting organized labor more firmly on the moderate left, as in most industrial societies.

Sweeney expanded the staff and mission of the AFL-CIO, starting a labor college and retirees group, for example, but more importantly, he tapped into local reform movements to revive the often moribund counterparts of the labor federation at the state and local level.

Among these innovations:

- Young people were recruited for Union Summer internships, helping to accelerate a new explosion of union-sympathetic college campus activism.
- Working with Interfaith Worker Justice, unions deepened ties with faith communities, instituting programs like Seminary Summer and Labor in the Pulpits on Labor Day.
- The AFL-CIO encouraged union pension funds to use their clout, becoming the leading advocates of reforming corporate governance.
- Pressed by unions such as the hotel workers (HERE), the AFL-CIO shifted its stance to emphasize worker rights for all regardless of immigration status.
- The AFL-CIO continued as a critic of corporate globalization, despite worries that Sweeney -- coming from the service sector -- might back off. Sweeney emphasized securing rights for workers everywhere and led large antiglobalization protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and the hemispheric trade talks in Miami.
- With Voice at Work and other campaigns, the AFL-CIO made Democratic politicians and the public more aware of violations of workers' right to organize, then in the depressing nadir of the Bush years, launched a campaign for labor law reform. Now that work is coming to a head with the fight for the Employee Free Choice Act, which Acuff calls the biggest conflict between labor and capital since passage of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act in 1947.

Not all of Sweeney's innovations succeeded. For example, he assigned a top aide to arrange meetings of union officials and environmentalists to work toward a common understanding on climate change. But a few unions were so opposed, even denying that climate change is a problem, that the initiative fizzled.

That exemplifies one of the structural limits Sweeney faced. Despite being titular head of the labor movement, he lamented he had more power as president of SEIU than as president of the AFL-CIO. As leader of a federation of autonomous affiliates, he couldn't make them do much, if anything, but could only persuade, beg and cajole. And by tradition, the executive council deferred to an effective veto if one union felt its core interest was at stake.

Sweeney's own personal style had clear strengths and weaknesses in this environment. He was genial, likeable

and inclined to seek compromises, but he did not always exude passion in his positions or a willingness to push people.

United Steelworkers president Leo Gerard, a strong Sweeney supporter, said, "John is a very, very nice man, who tries to find good in everyone and has more patience than God. His failure is not that he was not able to hold the federation together or bring it back together. I'm not sure anyone could have. ... [But] he could have been lot tougher. I don't mean that he's not tough. But I only heard him raise his voice once. I raise my voice every meeting. It's both a strength and a weakness."

Sweeney was also not the forceful public voice for labor Kirkland critics had sought. "I don't think John Sweeney was as effective a public communicator as we need," said Georgetown University labor historian Joseph McCartin. "He's not that compelling a speaker or dynamic personality."



Many union leaders liked Sweeney but were irritated by his senior staff, whom they saw as too controlling, incommunicative and inclined to run meetings in a scripted fashion without meaningful discussion. That chilly relationship didn't help when some leaders criticized Sweeney's AFL-CIO for spending too much or trying to do too many things, rather than focusing on, say, politics and organizing.

Sweeney faced other constraints. The Democrats under Clinton were moving away from labor, while Republicans were moving right and towards even more anti-labor policies under Bush. Globalization was weakening union strongholds, and employer opposition made new organizing harder and costlier. Although public support for unions was growing, Lichtenstein notes there was no working-class upsurge, despite growing insecurity and inequality. And Fletcher argues that Sweeney was constrained, ideologically and organizationally, from trying to foment more class-conscious mobilization.

But Sweeney, with some talented staff, did transform labor's political operation, putting more emphasis on issues, doing more direct member-to-member education at home and work, and running more ambitious, professional operations. Even as the union share of the population shrank, the union household share of voters grew or remained disproportionately high.

"One of John's great accomplishments is re-establishing the labor movement in the political arena," said Gerard. "I don't know of any other central labor body that has as good a political program leading up to and during election periods." Even most CTW local and national unions remained involved with the AFL-CIO political program, and the big, independent National Education Association has recently begun working more closely with the AFL-CIO.

Sweeney has also worked to expand the notion of the labor movement, working in recent years with independent worker centers and groups of taxi drivers, farm workers and domestic workers who fight for their rights but have no union or contract. In 2003 the AFL-CIO launched Working America, now an organization of more than 2.5 million union sympathizers without a union at work, mostly recruited door-to-door in working-class neighborhoods.

Union political work paid off, mainly for Democrats. White, male, Protestant, rural, Southern, churchgoing gun owners overwhelming vote Republican. But if they're union members, they tend to vote Democratic. But the Democrats elected with labor's grass-roots work and money, despite Sweeney's efforts to educate them on workers' issues, all too often abandon unions on key issues.

The AFL-CIO has struggled under Sweeney to define its role in fostering organizing, going through exhortation,

education, subsidization, coordination, counseling and more. Unions jealously insist they, not the federation, organize, but not all of them do a very energetic job. But AFL-CIO staff have helped some unions gear up new efforts and have encouraged global union cooperation on organizing.

Why has labor not changed faster to hit Sweeney's target of 1 million new members a year? "It really takes a long time," he said, citing his 15 years changing SEIU. "I believe we helped lead the change for unions, making organizing a central priority. We changed the culture of the labor movement, and we put resources into all those efforts. That's going to pay off after we pass labor law reform."

The CTW unions split supposedly because the AFL-CIO was not sufficiently focused on organizing and too involved in politics. Yet since the split the AFL-CIO and its members have increased organizing efforts (so there's little difference in growth rates between the two federations), and both factions have worked hard on politics.

The split still hangs like a dark cloud over Sweeney's legacy, especially as reunification talks have reached a temporary dead end. But CTW has even more internal problems than the AFL-CIO now -- including a wide-open fight between SEIU and Unite HERE (the remnant of a merger of hotel and garment unions).

As a result, McCartin argues, "the rationale of the split seems less compelling, and the future of Change to Win seems less certain," suggesting that "it wasn't the federation or Sweeney personally that was the cause of the labor movement not doing well." Compared with other labor federation leaders over a century, McCartin says, Sweeney is retiring on a high note: "He left the labor movement stronger than it was."

But the split exacerbated financial problems, leading to cutbacks and layoffs. That diminished some of the energy and initiative of Sweeney's final term. With deficits mounting again, more cuts are certain.

In his final year as AFL-CIO president, Sweeney said, he was personally pleased not only by Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* encyclical, which reaffirmed the importance of labor unions, but also by the agreement on guidelines for union organizing negotiated between the labor movement and Catholic Health Association. As a Catholic, he said, he had been particularly upset by the Resurrection Hospital network in Chicago, which he says has "been guilty of some of the worst labor practices that one could imagine."

"I think I have been blessed with the ability to live out my values through my work for working families on social justice issues," Sweeney said. "These have included a living wage, health benefits, [anti-]discrimination, and the rights of immigrant workers. Through our unions we've worked to extend Catholic social teachings to the political fiber of our country." Whatever the frustrations and shortcomings in reaching that goal, the lessons from his working-class childhood seem to have stuck with him through a long career, which he -- typically for John Sweeney -- sees ending on a hopeful note.

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