

# A resurgent AFL-CIO is key to defeating Conservative Revolution

by Marianna Wertz

If the jacobin Conservative Revolutionaries who seized control of the U.S. Congress are to be defeated in November, a key factor will be the fight being waged by the AFL-CIO. Under the dynamic direction of the labor federation's new president, John J. Sweeney, the once-moribund labor movement has transformed itself, virtually overnight, into a powerful voice for the rights of all working people and, most importantly, for the harmony of labor and industry—based on those rights—which built this nation. It is precisely that harmony which the Gingrichites have tossed to the wind in their embrace of “free trade” and unbridled greed.

On Oct. 26, 1995, Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO, in the first contested election for that office since the founding of the labor federation. His insurgent candidacy won by a margin of 7.3 million to 5.7 million votes, after a six-month, high-profile campaign to reverse the decline of the union movement which occurred under the presidency of Trilateral Commission member Lane Kirkland, whose hand-picked successor, Thomas R. Donahue, Sweeney defeated.

From day one of his presidency, Sweeney, together with Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson and Secretary-Treasurer Rich Trumka, has been working to forge a movement that will fulfill Sweeney's campaign pledge to “rebuild the labor movement and organize at a pace and scale that is unprecedented.” Indeed, hardly a day passes that one or all of the AFL-CIO officers isn't hitting the pavement somewhere in the nation, leading protests, holding town meetings, or confronting Gingrichites.

Though the AFL-CIO has endorsed Clinton's reelection, Sweeney has made it clear that he is rebuilding the labor movement, not as a tool of the Democratic Party, or of Clinton's campaign, but as a uniquely crucial factor in rebuilding the American economy. Speaking June 3 at the New York New School for Social Research (see *Documentation*), Sweeney identified the key role of a strong union movement in America: “When companies squeeze the last possible ounce of productivity out of their workers, and then throw them on the scrap-heap of unemployment or old age, with reduced pensions and health coverage . . . who else are they hurting? This is a case where what goes around is going to come around! Only a healthy American economy that raises workers and consumers up can sustain the long-run profitability companies need and the prosperity America needs. . . .

“And the solution is a larger, stronger, smarter labor

movement, one that forcefully articulates and works to achieve the idea that the common path to long-term value—for companies, for workers, for the nation itself—lies in the investment in those things which benefit the common good. . . .

“Most of all, the AFL-CIO is going to work for the American worker by rebuilding our labor movement. . . . Yes, the truth is, our weakness encouraged employers to take the low road. Only by rebuilding our strength can we bring American business back to the high road of high wages.”

## Reviving the ‘social compact’

From the beginning of his presidency, Sweeney has repeatedly identified himself as a product of the post-World War II “social compact” built under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Like Lyndon LaRouche, *EIR*'s contributing editor and a candidate for the Democratic Presidential nomination, who identified the World War II mobilization following the Great Depression as a model for what must be done today in his June 2 nationwide television broadcast, Sweeney points to that experience, hard as it was, as that on which the nation must draw today if it is to build itself out of this depression.

Sweeney, whose father was an Irish immigrant, described that experience in a June 7 speech to the Cleveland City Club. “I, like many of you, am a product of the social compact that lifted America out of the Great Depression and lifted working Americans into the middle class. . . . Here's what working people knew: If we got up every morning and did our jobs, then we could earn a better life for ourselves and a better chance for our children. Here's what business people knew: If they paid their workers fairly and plowed some of their profits back into their communities, they could count on loyal employees and loyal consumers. For companies back then, good citizenship was good business.”

The basis of Sweeney's philosophy is the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, first enunciated in Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which established the church's backing for the rights of labor to a decent wage and to organize in trade unions. In a Feb. 27 speech to the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C., Sweeney called on the Catholic Church to publicly support the labor movement's drive to “reclaim America” and “rebuild the labor movement,” and, most crucially, to “restore the ability to



*AFL-CIO President John Sweeney kicks off Union Summer at union headquarters in Washington, D.C., May 1. Sweeney is emphasizing the idea of harmony between labor and industry to build the nation: the cornerstone of "American System" economics, as against British free-market liberalism.*

strike." He concluded, "My idea of America is a country where honest labor raises the standard for all," a reference to Sweeney's favorite and most-used quote from President John Kennedy, "a rising tide lifts all boats."

This philosophy is also explicitly anti-British. In his New School speech, Sweeney identified the Conservative Revolutionaries' philosophy as the Hobbesian "war of all against all," wherein "security belongs to those who can buy it." His high-profile trip with President Clinton to Ireland last December also served to underscore his anti-British sentiments, as does his staunch opposition to the doctrine of "free trade," as that is expressed in such anti-labor pacts as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

### **Unprecedented organizing**

As they pledged they would do from the start, Sweeney's team is conducting an unprecedented organizing drive, both in voter education and union organizing. Beginning in early December 1995, the month after his election, Sweeney announced a multimillion-dollar advertising and grass-roots lobbying campaign against the "Gingrich budget," to "hold members of Congress individually and jointly accountable for the choices they are making—and to demand that they vote *with* working families, and *against* special interests." In addition to radio and television ads targeting members of Congress who voted for the Gingrich budget, the labor federation sent out 1 million pieces of direct mail to union members and retirees in the 55 targetted districts, and staged rallies in those districts at the congressmen's headquarters.

Then, on Feb. 21, the AFL-CIO's annual winter Executive Council meeting convened a press conference to announce one of the boldest initiatives in its history—and one which has driven the Gingrichites to a rug-chewing rage. Sweeney announced that the AFL-CIO will spend as much as \$15 million in 1996—up from \$2 million in 1995—to expand organizing efforts. "We cannot obtain public policies that protect working families, unless we can build a substantially larger labor movement," Sweeney explained.

The plan also included spending up to \$20 million to retake the U.S. Congress from the Conservative Revolutionaries: for advertising, to train up to 100 union activists in every congressional district, and to deploy 2,500 activists in key districts in the six weeks before the November election.

In addition, the winter meeting resolved to launch a "Union Summer" drive, modelled on the civil rights "Freedom Summer" in 1964, in which 1,000 young people will seek to organize new union shops, help out in voter registration, and demonstrate for fundamental rights for all working people. Union Summer was officially launched on June 1 and is now up and running in 13 cities nationwide.

Finally, the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting set into motion a series of Town Hall meetings across the country, on the theme "America Needs a Raise," running from the beginning of May to the end of June. A total of nearly 20 meetings to date has drawn close to 10,000 participants in such key cities as Birmingham, Los Angeles, Columbus, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Houston, and Baltimore. With the limited focus of taking "testimonials" from workers and unemployed people, whose lives have been devastated

by the policies of corporate downsizing and welfare “reform,” the meetings have proven to be a useful tool in organizing the population to begin to stand up for their legitimate rights.

One of the best of these meetings was held June 6 as a lunch-time demonstration on Wall Street. Sweeney addressed thousands of cheering workers, enunciating his own “Contract with America” against what he called the “Wall Street wizards who are gambling away our future”: If you don’t raise the level of wages for working people, Sweeney warned, “with our bodies and our brains, American workers and their families will rise up and take back from you what you have taken from us! That’s a promise, that’s a contract, that’s a commitment” (see *Documentation*).

### Drawing the wrath of the Gingrichites

Perhaps the thing that has most irritated their Gingrichite opponents was the fact that Sweeney and the Executive Council announced plans for an unprecedented special delegated convention of all affiliated unions to endorse and provide funds for carrying out this organizing drive. Meeting in Washington, D.C. on March 25, the delegates from 79 unions voted up this plan and approved a special assessment of 15¢ per member per month to fund it. That convention also gave the Clinton-Gore ticket its endorsement for the Presidential election.

On Feb. 22, one day after the AFL-CIO’s Executive Council press conference, House Speaker Newt Gingrich (D-Ga.) melted down in public. This is “the most extraordinary open public commitment to buy the Congress in American history,” Gingrich told reporters in Atlanta. He vowed to stop “Boss Sweeney.”

This was the signal for launching a McCarthy-style witch-hunt against the leadership of organized labor, which has now begun in full force. Under the direction of Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Republican Conference and right-hand man to Gingrich, a number of leading labor officials who are connected to Clinton, including Sweeney, are being targetted in Congressional hearings for “mafia ties” and “corruption.”

An April-May HRC report series, titled “Washington Union Boss Watch,” viciously slanders Sweeney, Laborers union President Arthur Coia, and Teamsters President Ron Carey, employing outright red-baiting and similar McCarthyite tactics.

But the Sweeney-led labor movement appears to be enjoying the fight. A recent release proclaimed victoriously, “We have hit the nerve center of the Gingrich extremists.” When a dozen freshmen Republican congressmen attempted to stage a press conference outside AFL-CIO headquarters in early June, they were met by 500 chanting workers, who presented flowers and violin music to the Gingrichites, while turning their press conference into a rally for raising the minimum wage.

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## Documentation

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*The following are excerpts from a speech by John J. Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, at the “America Needs a Raise” rally on Wall Street on June 6:*

... From the West Coast to the East Coast, we’ve heard the same story, from workers who make \$12,000 a year to workers who make \$50,000 a year, to workers who make zero dollars a year, from white collar, to blue collar, to new collar, to no collar: “We’re working harder and harder for less and less and *America needs a raise!*”

Answer this, Wall Street: If corporate profits are up 200% and executive compensation is up 400%, why are working family incomes *down* 12%? Answer this, corporate America: If productivity is up 24% and the Dow Jones is up 401%, why are working families running out of money, running out of credit and *running out of hope?*

Answer this, American government: If family values are what this election year is all about, why don’t we value working families, why are moms and dads having to work three jobs just to stay even, why do workers have *no time left over* for their kids and their parents?

I’ll answer them all: Because for the past 20 years Wall Street and corporate America have been putting profits before people. Because for the past 20 years, the politicians we send to Washington have been pandering to the rich and the big corporations and pounding on the middle class and the poor. Because for the past 20 years, 97% of the income increase in our country has gone to the top 20% of wage earners. . . .

Here’s our challenge to Wall Street: Stop jacking up the stocks of companies who gain short-term profits from laying off long-term employees, stop rewarding CEOs who run their companies into the ground by running workers into the unemployment line.

Here’s our challenge to corporate America: Start exporting products instead of jobs, start consulting your employees when it comes to productivity, quality, and competitiveness, start paying them enough to afford the goods and services they produce.

Here’s our challenge to American government: Stop raising taxes on the middle class and the working poor, stop giving tax breaks to the wealthy and the big corporations, stop the Wall Street wizards who are gambling away our future, and *stop stalling around on the minimum wage!*

Our message to business: Low wages are bad business and they are bad for business—put some confidence in our ideas, put some dollars in our pockets, and we’ll put you on the map *anywhere in the world!*

Our message if you don’t: With our bodies and our brains, American workers and their families will rise up and take back from you what you have taken from us! . . .

## A new social compact

*Excerpts from a speech by Sweeney on June 3 in New York City at the New School for Social Research:*

... In those years after World War II, working people, business people, and public officials shared a certain understanding—a “social compact.” Working people knew that if they did their jobs, the businesses which employed them would prosper, and they could earn a better life for themselves and a better chance for their children. And government officials understood that a compact between business and labor, in which each side contributed to the well-being of the other, was good for the society as a whole. This was the proof that, as President Kennedy put it, “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

That social compact held despite the differences between us and the bumps along the way, and produced a tremendous increase in the standard of living for millions and millions of Americans, not just a fortunate few. That was the reason that, when things went broke, we fixed them—together. It was a social compact that produced the strongest economy, the largest middle class, and the most successful society the world has ever seen.

Now, however, the stresses of global economic competition in the era after the oil shocks of the 1970s, of the new technologies, and of the deregulation of the domestic econo-

mies, have led some to think that the way for businesses to compete is to shred that compact, to use workers up and then throw them away. . . .

Some politicians and business leaders today advocate an atomized, divided society, one in which the rule is a war of all against all. They offer a world where security belongs to those who can buy it. Where hard work and loyalty are merely weaknesses to be exploited by the quick and well-connected. Where the only hope offered to the downsized is the chance to hate those even less well off. . . .

As president of the AFL-CIO, I stand with many others in offering a humane and profitable alternative to the noxious ideas of the apostles of downsizing and the apologists for the low-wage economy.

I offer the idea of a corporate economy guided by the proven truth that a productive partnership produces greater stability and greater profitability in the long term for companies and for the economy as a whole.

I propose an economy made up of companies that give workers tangible, positive incentives to produce to their maximum efforts. An economy where workers and other consumers can feel a sense of loyalty to American companies—loyalty that translates into the purchase of those companies’ products—because all are contributing to the strengthening of American society. . . .

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Casablanca . . . . .	2200	Rome . . . . .	2300
Chattanooga . . . . .	1700	St. Louis . . . . .	1600
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