

A Government Reform Project Study

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FROM MEANY TO SWEENEY: LABOR'S LEFTWARD TILT

INTRODUCTION

An activist labor movement may be the most significant new force in American politics, but the agenda of labor's new leaders is radically different from that of the traditional labor movement. Curiously, much of this new agenda is unconnected with workplace issues, not generally supported among rank-and-file union members, and clearly outside the mainstream of American politics. In recent decades, organized labor has been transformed from a relatively centrist political force into a powerful lobby for liberal special interests and big government. Organized labor has decided to use its billions of dollars in dues revenue to defeat conservative Members of Congress, while also encouraging the Boy Scouts to admit homosexuals and atheists, offering financial contributions to political groups that promote abortion, and opposing welfare reform and a balanced budget.

While political parties have moved to the center and right, union activism has shifted decisively to the left. This transformation has occurred in tandem with a historic change in union membership from private-sector, largely industrial workers toward government and service employees. Unions began organizing the public sector in the 1960s and 1970s to offset a continuing decline in membership, particularly in manufacturing. New AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, the first federation leader from a government employee-dominated union, came to power when his coalition of service and public-sector unions toppled former president Lane Kirkland and his industry-based allies.

The desires of government employees, however, have proven to be in conflict with the interests of blue-collar workers, who now get billed twice for big government: Thanks to their unions' lobbying efforts, private-sector workers pay high taxes to support bloated bureaucracies in Washington and state capitals around the country. Meanwhile, union dues are used to support political causes that are irrelevant to the bread-and-butter interests of the average worker. There is no evidence that the new union leadership's radical

political campaign will do anything but accelerate the exit of union members, especially in the private sector. Workers who once formed the backbone of the American labor movement now find themselves paying higher and higher fees to unions that are paying less and less attention to the real interests of their members.

In fairness, it should be easier than it now is for union members to opt out of radical politicking by obtaining a refund of the significant portion of their dues that is used to support such efforts. In view of organized labor's growing politicization, policymakers should re-examine the unique privileges that have been granted to unions.

THE POLITICAL TRADITION OF AMERICAN LABOR

Writing over a decade ago in *Policy Review*, labor analyst Max Green decried the full-scale embrace of Walter Mondale's presidential candidacy by Lane Kirkland, the AFL-CIO's president from 1979-1995.¹ Green argued that Kirkland's actions, taken at the behest of public employee unions, represented the ultimate rejection of the ideas of American Federation of Labor founder Samuel Gompers. Gompers made sure that labor kept "its distance both from socialism and from partisan politics," focusing instead on organizing and winning concessions from business through collective bargaining. In the first half of this century, the AFL even refused to support minimum-wage legislation. In those days, labor was committed to the market economy and "opted for what Gompers and his associates called 'trade unionism pure and simple,' the collective-bargaining strategy on which workers of every political stripe could agree."²

If labor unions did take a political stand, it was generally centrist, especially on social issues. In 1968, when the United Auto Workers threatened to leave the AFL-CIO because of AFL-CIO founder George Meany's opposition to an alliance with activist left intellectuals and students, Meany bid the UAW good riddance. In 1972, labor unions joined with the Coalition for a Democratic Majority, a group established to move the Democratic Party to the center, but abandoned the effort in 1974 in order to concentrate once again on economic issues. The colorful Alan Barkan, AFL-CIO political director in 1972, denounced the McGovernites for turning the Democratic Party into the "party of acid, amnesty, and abortion."³

DECLINING MEMBERSHIP AND THE TURN TO GOVERNMENT

For all the media focus on upheaval in the AFL-CIO, the federation's political aggressiveness and renewed emphasis on organizing have neither stemmed declines in union membership nor markedly improved working conditions; "wage growth is at historically sluggish levels, and labor's share of the growing national income is currently at its lowest level in two decades."⁴ In spite of these trends, workers apparently do not see joining

1 Max Green, "Labor's Bad Bargain: The AFL-CIO Lurches Left," *Policy Review*, Fall 1984, p. 14.

2 Green continues his insightful analysis of these themes in an upcoming book from AEI Press entitled *Epitaph for American Labor*, p. 3.

3 Quoted in Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 180.

unions as a remedy. In the mid-1950s, 35 percent of America's workers were unionized; today, fewer than 15 percent belong to unions. Leo Troy, a labor economist at Rutgers University, notes that unions have lost 7.5 million members since 1970, largely in the shrinking industrial sector.⁵ In response to these declining numbers, unions have attempted to bring more public employees into the fold. Of the 16.4 million union members in America, 6.9 million work directly for federal, state, and local governments.⁶ Despite the aggressive efforts of numerous AFL-CIO affiliates to recruit government workers, however, Sweeney has been forced to admit failure: "We are still losing members as an absolute number, and as a percentage of the workforce."⁷ In fact, the number of union members fell from 16.7 million in 1994 to 16.4 million last year.⁸

The AFL-CIO altered its moderate political stance as it moved beyond the shrinking manufacturing sector. As the union movement has grown more dependent on the public sector, it has moved squarely into the liberal camp, forging the very alliances that Gompers and Meany had shunned.

In October 1995, public employee unions such as the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and Service Employees' International Union (SEIU) spearheaded a successful rebellion to depose Lane Kirkland as president of the AFL-CIO. John Sweeney, head of the SEIU, became the first AFL-CIO president from a largely public-sector union, completing the federation's transformation from a voice for workers in negotiating with management into one of the nation's principal defenders of big government.

The labor movement's efforts to organize public employees may do more for big government than for private-sector union members, who would benefit from balanced budgets, lower taxes, and less intrusive government. Although bloated bureaucracies might be in the interest of a federal employee in Washington, D.C., or a municipal employee in Cleveland, Ohio, the man or woman on the automobile assembly line in Hamtramck, Michigan, benefits directly from lower taxes. Deficit spending comes out of their paychecks. By siding disproportionately with the interests of government employees, the AFL-CIO is neglecting the millions in its ranks who work in the private sector.

LURCHING LEFTWARD

More significant than its defense of big government is organized labor's continuing leftward lurch on a broad array of issues. Liberal activists have captured the union movement and are using its influence to move the Democratic Party to the left by "controlling the debate," as AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer Richard Trumka puts it.⁹ Trumka and other AFL-CIO officials, for example, regularly denounce the so-called New Democrats who

4 Jerry Heaster, "Tough Task Lies Ahead for Unions," *Kansas City Star*, August 9, 1995, p. B1.

5 Quoted in *Austin American-Statesman*, September 2, 1996.

6 Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, press release, February 9, 1996.

7 "Sweeney Calls on State Federations to 'Roll out the Big Guns for Organizing,'" *Daily Labor Report*, July 3, 1995, p. A8.

8 Bureau of Labor Statistics press release, February 9, 1996.

9 David Moberg, "State of the Unions: Richard Trumka Discusses the AFL-CIO's Aggressive New Strategies," *In These Times*, April 1-13, 1996, pp. 22-23.

have sought to move the party away from its traditional big-government agenda. Trumka has decried the agenda of the Democratic Leadership Council, the leading organization of centrist Democrats, as “immoral ... anti-worker [and] a blueprint for political disaster.”¹⁰

The AFL-CIO’s “Union Summer” project, originally designed to train 1,000 young people to become union organizers, also is being used for “voter education and registration” as well as to fight the California Civil Rights Initiative.¹¹ This shift epitomizes the transformation from recruitment to politicking. It is not surprising, however, considering that Union Summer’s director, Andrew Levin, boasts of having made a career of “apartheid, anti-nuclear, environment, civil rights, community organizing, union organizing, and student protest” activism.¹²

The AFL-CIO has become a leading funder of liberal causes, lending its rhetoric, foot soldiers, and coffers to a variety of movements. Under Sweeney, this shift to the left has accelerated, leaving organized labor outside the political mainstream on issues ranging from racial preferences to sexual preferences, tax policy, and protecting American national interests abroad:

- The AFL-CIO has strongly opposed the \$500-per-child tax credit.
- The National Education Association, United Auto Workers, and AFL-CIO have lobbied against legislation to make English America’s official language.
- Several AFL-CIO unions have donated thousands of dollars to Emily’s List and other pro-abortion political action committees.

During the 1996 election cycle, as part of their drive to control the debate, the activists who have captured the AFL-CIO have not hesitated to use workers’ hard-earned dues money to fund their aggressive political campaign. The AFL-CIO has pledged to spend \$35 million—seven times the amount it normally spends in an election year—in an effort to unseat 75 conservative Members of Congress.

The AFL-CIO’s new leaders are pushing a cultural and economic agenda that does not represent the views of the federation’s members. In some cases, labor leaders have taken positions directly counter to the interests of working families. Often, they have chosen to highlight issues with no relevance to collective bargaining, taking advantage of their roles and organizational resources to advance their own agenda.

For instance, the leadership of the Detroit chapter of AFSCME passed an emergency resolution last year condemning the death sentence meted out to a man convicted of murdering a police officer in Pennsylvania.¹³ As leader of the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney has continued this trend. In a March 1995 address to Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, for instance, Sweeney declared “that as long as I am president of our federation, the AFL-CIO will ‘be there’ for you.”¹⁴ Yet Jackson remains one of the most controversial figures

10 United Mine Workers of America press release, “Trumka Blasts Conservative Democrats,” June 23, 1995.

11 “Sites for ‘Union Summer’ Are Announced by AFL-CIO,” *Daily Labor Report*, May 2, 1996, p. A3.

12 Quoted in *Forward*, June 7, 1996.

13 Detroit AFSCME, “Emergency Resolution to Stop the Execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal,” July 7, 1995.

in American politics; a December 1995 *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll showed that of 2,007 Americans polled, 46 percent viewed Jackson either somewhat negatively or very negatively, compared to just 26 percent who viewed him either very positively or somewhat positively.¹⁵

Consider some of organized labor's recent stances on issues wholly unrelated to collective bargaining:

Homosexuality: Joe Velasquez, Director of Community Services for the AFL-CIO, led a 1995 campaign to force the Boy Scouts of America to include homosexuals and atheists. Velasquez even lectured the Boy Scouts about the need to reexamine their views and "decide if they are living up to their mission of teaching America's children the values that made this country great."¹⁶ AFL-CIO affiliates in Colorado and Maine took leading roles in campaigns to oppose efforts in those states to outlaw ordinances that would have given homosexuals special constitutional privileges. Other unions have taken an active role in promoting homosexual rights through donations to political action committees. Since 1993, AFSCME has donated over \$5,000 to the Human Rights Campaign Fund, which promotes homosexual "marriage." The Service Employees International Union has pushed actively for spousal rights for homosexual partners.¹⁷ All of this despite the fact that over 80 percent of Americans support a law banning same-sex marriages.¹⁸

Abortion: William Hamilton, Jr., who ran the Planned Parenthood Federation of America's Washington office for 13 years, now directs the legislative and political program of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.¹⁹ Hamilton was one of 12 members of the AFL-CIO Political Action Transition Workgroup, which decided to launch the effort to defeat 75 conservative members of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1996.²⁰ Through its various political action committees, the union movement has funded several pro-abortion groups. Earlier this year, AFSCME donated \$5,000 to Americans for Freedom of Choice. Over the past three years, Emily's List has received contributions of \$2,500 from the AFL-CIO, \$5,000 from the NEA, \$10,000 from AFSCME, \$5,000 from the Communications Workers of America, \$7,500 from the SEIU, and \$7,000 from the UAW. Voters for Choice has accepted \$7,000 from AFSCME and \$4,000 from the NEA. The NEA also donated \$2,500 to the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. The Women's Campaign Fund has taken money from numerous unions, including AFSCME (\$5,000), the AFL-CIO (\$4,000), the CWA (\$7,500), the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

14 Remarks by John J. Sweeney, Rainbow Coalition Labor Breakfast, March 1, 1996.

15 NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll of 2,007 Americans, December 5, 1995, cited in Public Opinion Online, January 11, 1996. Except where otherwise indicated, polling numbers cited do not refer to the subgroup of union members in the population because their small numbers make it difficult to draw an accurate and representative sample.

16 Joe Velasquez, "The AFL-CIO and the Boy Scouts of America: Comments on the BSA's Membership Policies," speech to BSA's Relationships Committee, February 9, 1993.

17 Ramesh Ponnuru, "Labor Pains," *National Review*, October 9, 1995.

18 Ralph Z. Hallow, "Right Seems Right to Americans in Survey," *The Washington Times*, May 23, 1996, p. A1.

19 *Daily Labor Report*, January 4, 1995, p. D21.

20 *Daily Labor Report*, January 25, 1996, p. E14.

(\$15,000), the Letter Carriers (\$6,000), the UAW (\$15,000), and the UMW (\$5,500).²¹ AFSCME was sued earlier this year by Edward P. Kelly, a devout Roman Catholic who objected to the use of union funds to lobby for abortion rights.²² A federal judge ruled that AFSCME had violated Mr. Kelly's religious liberties under the 1964 Civil Rights Act and allowed him to donate part of his agency fees to a charitable organization instead.

Racial and Gender Preferences: Polls indicate that over 80 percent of Americans—black and white—oppose racial preferences,²³ but the AFL-CIO staunchly supports these measures, using union members' dues to support programs that will discriminate against members and their families.²⁴ The UAW lobbied against H.R. 2128, a bill to eliminate federal affirmative action programs,²⁵ and several unions are organizing to oppose the California Civil Rights Initiative, which would end racial preferences in public education, government hiring, and government contracts. The California Teachers Association, the United Farm Workers, the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and local affiliates of the American Federation of Teachers, the SEIU, and the AFL-CIO all plan to publish pamphlets and man phone banks to get out the vote against the CCRI.

English as Official Language: Despite the fact that eight out of ten Americans support making English the official language, several national and international unions, including the UAW, the NEA, and the AFL-CIO, have opposed legislation to implement the idea.²⁶ The AFL-CIO Executive Council declared that it was "deeply disturbed" by the U. S. House of Representatives' passage of the English as the Official Language of Government Act, claiming that the law "would weaken the federal government's ability to deal effectively with the challenges of living in a global age."²⁷

Welfare: In a recent poll of 1,000 union members, 87 percent voiced support for welfare reform that both requires recipients to work and limits the amount of time someone may receive welfare checks.²⁸ Nevertheless, labor unions have tapped into the dues of their members to assure that the indolent not have to seek employment. In its year-end report for 1995, AFSCME has bragged about its work with the American Civil Liberties Union in suing various state and local agencies concerning welfare issues.²⁹ AFSCME has been particularly aggressive in opposing time limits on cash payments and in fighting workfare, the concept that welfare recipients should work for benefits.³⁰ John Sweeney described the recently passed welfare reform bill as "anti-poor, anti-immigrants, anti-women and anti-children," and said that it was a "sad day"

21 Though union dues cannot be contributed directly to political action committees, the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 allows unions to pay for the administrative and overhead costs of their PACs.

22 *Daily Labor Report*, June 26, 1996, p. A3.

23 Hallow, "Right Seems Right to Americans in Survey."

24 Statement by AFL-CIO Executive Council on Affirmative Action, Chicago, Illinois, August 2, 1995.

25 *UAW Washington Report*, March 29, 1996.

26 English First press release, "Why is Organized Labor Against Official English?" August 20, 1996.

27 AFL-CIO Executive Council statement, Chicago, Illinois, August 7, 1996.

28 Luntz Research Companies, Americans for a Balanced Budget Union Survey, April 23-28, 1996.

29 Statement of AFSCME Public Policy Department, 1996.

30 Kirkland described workfare as "involuntary servitude" in 1987; see Green, *Epitaph for American Labor*, p. 114.

when President Clinton signed it.³¹ The AFL-CIO also has decried attempts to prohibit alcohol and drug addicts from receiving welfare through Supplemental Security Income (SSI).³²

The Federal Budget: Some 82 percent of union members surveyed support amending the Constitution to require Congress to balance the budget.³³ Yet the AFL-CIO leadership opposes a balanced budget amendment.³⁴ The average working family pays thousands of dollars a year in taxes simply to pay the interest on the national debt, but the AFL-CIO and its allies have chosen to side with the status quo and leave working families to pay the bill. According to a February 1995 AFSCME Legislative Alert, "President McEntee and Secretary-Treasurer Lucy have announced that defeat of the Balanced Budget Amendment is our number one national legislative priority. It is urgent that you call your Senators and urge them to vote 'NO' on *any* version of the balanced budget amendment."³⁵ Moreover, says the AFL-CIO, "We strongly oppose the [\$500-per-child tax credit and other] tax provisions of the 'Contract with America.'"³⁶ Given the fact that 78 percent of union members support the tax credit, one wonders just who the AFL-CIO means by "we."³⁷

Christian Conservatives and New Age Religion: As part of its efforts to "build solidarity among many kinds of movements,"³⁸ organized labor gave its blessing to an April 1996 "Summit on Ethics and Meaning" organized by Michael Lerner, a 1960s radical who has emerged more recently as a sort of New Age "politics of meaning" guru to Hillary Clinton.³⁹ AFL-CIO President Sweeney was the featured dinner speaker at the conference, which was convened by, among others, People for the American Way, the *Utne Reader*, the Institute for Policy Studies, and Planned Parenthood of America's Clergy Advisory Board. In his speech, Sweeney declared that participants in the conference were the "core of a progressive coalition that will expand the frontiers of social justice." One of key goals of the conference was to educate the public about "the deprivation of meaning in daily life and how our hunger for meaning is used and manipulated by racist, xenophobic, nationalist, fascist and fundamentalist religious groups in ways that set people against each other."⁴⁰ The AFL-CIO's bias was made even clearer by an attack in the *AFL-CIO News* on the Christian Coalition, the American Family Association, Focus on the Family, the Family Research

31 *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 28, 1996.

32 AFL-CIO "Fact Sheet on Welfare Reform," February 1995.

33 Americans for a Balanced Budget Union Survey, April 23-28, 1996.

34 AFL-CIO "Fact Sheet on Balanced Budget Amendment," February 1995.

35 AFSCME Legislative Alert, "Balanced Budget Amendment," February 1995; emphasis in original.

36 AFL-CIO Fact Sheet, "Tax Cuts," February 1995.

37 Americans for a Balanced Budget Union Survey, April 23-28, 1996.

38 Statement at conference by Joe Uehlein, Executive Assistant to the President, AFL-CIO, and Director of Organizing, Industrial Unions, AFL-CIO.

39 Typical of the conference proceedings was Lerner's response to a critical question from an attendee who described himself as an "unrepentant Marxist." Lerner answered that "first and foremost, the language you are using cannot accomplish the goals you seek," and claimed instead that the "Politics of Meaning" offers "the most effective anti-capitalist system" without "going back to the rhetoric and form of expression that have gone nowhere and achieved little."

40 Conference announcement brochure.

