

John Sweeney, AFL-CIO president between 1995 and 2009, dies at 86

Jerry White
17 February 2021

John Sweeney, who led the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) between 1995 and 2009, died February 1 at the age of 86 at his Bethesda, Maryland home. Sweeney's passing went unnoticed by the vast majority of Americans, most of whom would not even recognize his name. This in itself reflects the chasm that separates the pro-corporate organizations of the trade union bureaucracy, which have carried out decades of betrayals, and the broad mass of workers.

From the paeans by leading Democrats, friendly obituaries in the corporate media and tributes in pseudo-left publications like *Jacobin* and various left-liberal outlets, one would think Sweeney was a giant of the American labor movement.

President Biden said: "I had the honor and privilege of working closely with John Sweeney during his leadership of the AFL-CIO... I saw how lifting up the rights, voices, and dignity of working Americans was more than a job to him. It was a sacred mission. It was a calling."

Hailing Sweeney as a "crusading labor leader," the *New York Times* noted that President Obama had awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010. Obama declared that Sweeney had "revitalized the American labor movement."

In a piece entitled "The Man Who Realigned Labor," Harold Meyerson, a long-time leader of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), wrote of Sweeney in *The American Prospect*: "In his years at the helm of SEIU (Service Employees International Union), and then as president of the AFL-CIO from 1995 to 2009, Sweeney proved to be one of American labor's most progressive leaders—a change agent in disguise."

Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein, writing in *Jacobin*, noted that Sweeney "could not reverse the decline in membership and power of most US unions." Nevertheless, Lichtenstein asserted, "his presidency was not a failure because he did successfully shift the main body of American trade unionism firmly toward the left," defined by Lichtenstein as adopting a more friendly attitude toward "the new social movements, the left-wing intellectuals, and multi-racial America more generally."

In reality, Sweeney personified the falsity of all claims that the degeneration of the unions could be reversed, and the unions transformed into fighting organizations of the working class. Although he campaigned in 1995 as an "insurgent" candidate, promising to provide a "New Voice for American workers," on all essential questions he continued the policies of his predecessor, Lane Kirkland.

Sweeney was born on May 5, 1934 to an Irish immigrant family in the Bronx, New York. His father, who was a bus driver, would take him to meetings of the Transport Workers Union, Sweeney recalled, claiming that these experiences convinced him to dedicate his life to the labor movement.

From the beginning of his career, however, Sweeney, was a creature of the union apparatus. He was never associated with mass struggles, let alone socialist or left-wing politics. After graduating with a degree in economics from Iona College in New Rochelle, New York in 1956, he

worked as a clerk for IBM before taking a job as a researcher for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU).

At the time, the ILGWU and its long-time leader David Dubinsky, working with AFL-CIO President George Meany, were still engaged in their decades-long campaign to root out socialists and left-wing militants from the unions and assist the CIA in its international operations to subvert unions and overthrow governments considered inimical to the global interests of American corporations. Sweeney joined the ILGWU one year after the merger of the AFL and CIO, which was carried out on the basis of Cold War anti-communism, the political subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party and the geo-political interests of US imperialism.

In 1960, Thomas Donahue, an official in the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU), recruited Sweeney to direct contract negotiations for Local 32B in New York City, whose members included 40,000 elevator operators, doormen, custodians and repairmen at residential and commercial buildings and department stores.

Sweeney quickly moved up the ladder of the BSEIU, which was renamed the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) in 1968. He rose from assistant to the vice president and executive board member of Local 32B in 1972 to president of the local in 1976. This was a period of growing struggles against demands for pay and benefit cuts following New York City's near bankruptcy in 1975.

In 1976, Sweeney ended a three-week strike by 20,000 building service workers with a wage package imposed by a mediation panel set up by the city's Democratic mayor. In 1979, building workers struck again, joining tugboat crews, school bus drivers and dairy workers in a growing citywide movement for wage improvements and job security. After 10 days, Sweeney, who had limited the strike to Manhattan, signed a deal that was within the seven percent wage limit set by Democratic President Jimmy Carter.

In 1977, Sweeney merged SEIU Local 32B and Local 32J, forming Local 32BJ. Using his New York power base, Sweeney became president of the 625,000-member national SEIU in 1981 and moved to Washington, DC.

His later claim to fame—that he oversaw a substantial increase in SEIU membership—was largely the result of merging the SEIU with unions of public employees and office, health care and food service workers. Sweeney's chief organizer, Andrew Stern, whom he groomed to be the future SEIU president, would become notorious for his "organizing" methods, which included signing sweetheart contracts that promised nursing home operators and other employers low wages, no strike pledges and other concessions in exchange for recognizing the SEIU. In many cases, these deals were signed without a vote by the workers.

While purporting to represent workers, many of them immigrants who made \$30,000 a year or less, Sweeney collected more than \$200,000 a year as SEIU national president, plus a total of another \$449,000 over the next 13 years in "consulting fees" from his former New York local.

This was based on a quid pro quo arrangement with his successor at Local 32BJ, Gus Bevana, who Sweeney put on the SEIU's national executive board. In 1999, Bevana was forced to retire—with a \$1.5 million golden parachute—after it was revealed he had an annual salary of over \$530,000 and lived in a private penthouse on top of the SEIU local's Manhattan headquarters, which included a walk-in vault, two marble-walled bathrooms and seven stainless steel refrigerators.

Sweeney's "double-dipping" arrangement was quietly ended after he began his campaign for the AFL-CIO presidency.

Sweeney runs for AFL-CIO president

When Sweeney began his run in 1995 for the top position in the AFL-CIO, the unions were in a state of virtual collapse. The rise of powerful economic competitors from Asia and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s had severely undermined the once dominant world position of American capitalism. Exploiting new technologies and the unprecedented globalization of capitalist production, the American ruling class shut down large swathes of industry and shifted production to low-wage countries. Tax cuts and deregulation by Republicans and Democrats alike opened the way for massive financial speculation, which led to the bursting of the dot.com bubble in 2000 and the 2008 financial crash and Great Recession.

By the early 1980s, the unions had abandoned any resistance to wage- and job-cutting and adopted the corporatist program of labor-management "partnership." In the name of making US corporations more "competitive" against foreign rivals, the auto, steel and coal mining unions colluded in the shutdown of thousands of industrial sites and the destruction of millions of jobs.

When President Reagan fired 11,350 striking air traffic controllers in 1981, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland defied popular calls for a general strike and sanctioned government union-busting. Over the next decade and a half, the AFL-CIO would repeat this pattern, betraying strikes against union-busting by some of America's largest corporations, including Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, AT Massey, Hormel, International Paper, Eastern Airlines, Pittston and Caterpillar.

By 1995, the portion of American workers in unions had fallen to 13 percent overall and 10.4 in the private sector. This compared to 1958, when a third of all American workers were unionized. Strikes, which had once been a common feature of daily life, virtually disappeared. By 1995, there were only 34 work stoppages involving 1,000 workers or more in the US, compared to 187 in 1980 and 424 in 1974.

These were the conditions Sweeney and his "New Voice" slate claimed they would reverse by hiring young activists and spending 30 percent of the labor federation's budget to "organize the unorganized." Sweeney won the first contested election in the history of the AFL-CIO not as a result of a rank-and-file rebellion or even a vote by union members. He and his slate were elected by delegates, overwhelmingly union officials, to the October 1995 AFL-CIO convention in New York City.

The defeat of Kirkland's lieutenant Thomas Donahue, who had been Sweeney's mentor at Local 32BJ, was essentially a palace coup by a section of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, including the leaders of the SEIU, the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers, who were dissatisfied with Kirkland and fearful that the further decline of the unions would mean an end to their high salaries and privileged positions.

On November 6, 1995, the *International Workers Bulletin* (IWB), a precursor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, explained the significance of Sweeney's ascension to power. "The Sweeney-Trumka slate has billed itself as the agent of 'change' and the 'new voice for American workers,' all the while reaffirming its dedication to the political

foundations on which the AFL-CIO has rested since its establishment: support for the profit system, labor-management collaboration, anticommunism and subservience to the Democratic Party and the capitalist state."

The IWB continued, "The attempt to give the leadership of the AFL-CIO a face-lift—something akin to painting a smile on a corpse—reflects concerns within the bureaucracy and the ruling class about the staggering decline in the membership and influence of the official union movement."

The IWB warned that "the working class can expect nothing but more defeats and betrayals from this hidebound apparatus, which is an instrument of, by and for the trade union bureaucracy, alienated from and hostile to the working class."

The continuation of these rotten foundations was shown in the AFL-CIO's continued support for US imperialism's global operations. Although Sweeney attempted to distance himself from the AFL-CIO's association with CIA-backed coups, support for Central American death squads, and subversion of left-wing unions, he continued the AFL-CIO's support for US military aggression around the world.

In 2002, the AFL-CIO's renamed Solidarity Center channeled money to the coup plotters in Venezuela and supported union officials who locked out their own oil workers during the economic sabotage that followed the failed coup.

When President George W. Bush launched his war against Iraq in March of 2003, based on lies about "weapons of mass destruction," Sweeney declared that "we are unequivocal in support of our country and America's men and women on the front lines."

As AFL-CIO president, Sweeney opened the door to positions within the union apparatus to ex-Stalinists and former student protesters associated with the New Left. In his 2002 book *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor*, Lichtenstein explained:

The AFL-CIO staff was now marbled with New Left veterans long frozen out of responsible posts by a Cold War culture that had lingered even beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall. Thus, Sweeney appointed Barbara Shailor, for years a critic of AFL-CIO policy in Central America, head of the Federation's international affairs department, now appropriately renamed the Solidarity Center. And Bill Fletcher, a black intellectual with much organizing experience, served briefly as AFL-CIO education director...

The symbolism was impressive: when at a flagship Columbia teach-in Sweeney declared, "We need your help," the audience of intellectuals, left-wing academics, and old-time radicals gave him the kind of lusty ovation unheard from this kind of crowd for almost half a century.

It was precisely at the point that the unions were hollowed out and no longer in any sense defended the interests of the working class that these ex-radicals flocked to the defense of the AFL-CIO and obtained positions within it.

Among the recruits from the new generation of middle-class students looking for careers in the union bureaucracy was Jesse Sharkey, a member of the now defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), who graduated from Brown University in 1996 and became an organizer for the United Steelworkers before becoming vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union in 2010 and CTU president in 2014. Earlier this month, Sharkey collaborated with Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot to send teachers and students back to school during the pandemic.

The outcome of Sweeney's "insurgency"

By the end of Sweeney's five terms in office in 2009, union membership among private-sector workers had fallen to its lowest level since 1900. The income of the top 0.1 percent in the US had surged by over 33 percent, while the bottom 90 percent suffered a freeze in real wages.

Sweeney poured tens of millions of dollars into the electoral campaigns of the Democrats, including Barack Obama, who would oversee the greatest transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial oligarchy in history.

The number of strikes involving 1,000 workers or more fell even further, from 37 during Sweeney's first year in office in 1996 to only 5 when he left in 2009. The strikes that were called were isolated and defeated, including at Caterpillar, Bridgestone/Firestone, the Staley corn processing plant in Decatur, Illinois and the Detroit newspapers. The one supposed bright spot was the 1997 UPS strike called by Sweeney's ally, Teamsters President Ron Carey. But Carey shut down the powerful two-week strike by 185,000 UPS workers and accepted a deal that established a new tier of workers earning 24 percent less and sanctioned the layoff of 15,000 workers.

In 2005, the AFL-CIO faced another crisis when Sweeney protégé Andrew Stern, the SEIU president, led a breakaway and formed the "Change to Win" labor federation, consisting of the Teamsters, the SEIU and other unions. The new organization, which like Sweeney claimed it would lead a revival of the unions, was no less a stillbirth.

Sweeney retired in 2009 and was replaced by his secretary treasurer, Richard Trumka, who ran unopposed and was elected by delegates at the AFL-CIO convention in Pittsburgh. Trumka's claim to fame was that, as United Mine Workers leader, he had decimated what had once been the most militant union in America, overseeing a decline in UMW membership from 120,000 to around 40,000 between 1982 and 1995.

In an article on Sweeney's departure in September 2009, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

In the early 1990s, the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, concluded that the accumulated betrayals, particularly of the previous decade, the massive decline in union membership and suppression of strike activity, the embrace of corporatism and integration of the union officialdom into the structure of corporate management signified the completion of a protracted process of degeneration. The AFL-CIO and its affiliated organizations could no longer be considered workers' organizations and could not be reformed, let alone revolutionized, by pressure exerted by union members from below.

It continued:

The American working class needs to tear itself free of the corpse of the AFL-CIO and build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the workers and completely independent and opposed to the old union apparatus. The building of these new organizations must be linked to a new political strategy—a break with the parties of big business and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass party of the working class, to fight for workers' power and socialism.

Today, under conditions of a global pandemic that has already cost the lives of more than 2.4 million people worldwide and nearly half a million in the US, and the worst economic, social and political crisis, including the rise of fascism, since the 1930s, the political tasks confronting the working class are more urgent than ever. The debacle of the AFL-CIO under Sweeney and his successor underscores the bankruptcy of all programs and organizations based on nationalism, the defense of capitalism and the political subordination of the working class to the capitalist parties.

The defense of the democratic and social rights of the working class requires the establishment of new, genuinely democratic organizations of working class struggle—rank-and-file committees in workplaces, schools and neighborhoods that are independent of the pro-corporate unions and the political parties of the ruling class. This must be linked to a conscious struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and establishment of socialism.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact