

Labor in Focus by Anton Chaitkin

Challenge to the AFL-CIO old guard

The fight over the leadership of the U.S. trade union federation places labor at a crossroads.

A new leadership group is bidding to take over the helm of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations. John Sweeney, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), is running for AFL-CIO president against federation officer Thomas Donahue, the chosen successor of retiring president Lane Kirkland. The election will occur at the AFL-CIO convention in October.

The challenge is a reflection of the process of breakdown collapse of the U.S. industrial economy over the past quarter-century, which has weakened the structure and defenses of the labor movement.

Running with Sweeney for other federation posts are United Mine Workers President Rich Trumka and Linda Chavez-Thompson, a vice president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (Aflsme).

The Sweeney slate wants a \$20 million per year "emergency" union organizing drive, targeting the unorganized and the states with anti-labor ("right-to-work") laws, in particular Texas and the South.

At a June 28 rally in Washington, D.C., the three challengers attacked anti-labor Republicans, singling out Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (Ga.) and Sens. Jesse Helms (N.C.) and Bob Dole (Kan.). They vowed to train and support candidates who can defeat them, and said the AFL-CIO should create counter-institutions to the neo-conservative think-tanks.

AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Donahue, Sweeney's opponent, has

recently made similar attacks against Gingrich and company. Sweeney welcomes the current leadership's stance, but suggests that his slate's campaign has forced their hand.

Aflsme President Gerald W. McEntee first announced on May 9 that he, Sweeney, Trumka, and their allies had pulled together nine large national unions to oppose Kirkland's re-election. Kirkland subsequently said he would step aside. As of late June, the Sweeney slate was backed by 23 unions, comprising 7.3 million members, or about 56% of the AFL-CIO membership.

The challenge to the AFL-CIO old guard roughly coincided with statements in May by President Clinton that a long-term drop in living standards underlies U.S. social problems, and by Labor Secretary Robert Reich that reversing the wage decline would be the most important issue in the 1996 election campaign.

Sweeney, the Catholic son of Irish immigrants, and Gerald McEntee have aided in President Clinton's initiatives for peace in Ireland. McEntee played a key role in arranging a visa for Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, and helped organize an American office for the Sinn Fein.

Sweeney says that all AFL-CIO operations would be subject to his budget-axe scrutiny, including the formerly sacrosanct International Affairs Department. That department's American Institute for Free Labor Development, notorious as a "Project Democracy" front for British intelligence and the Socialist International, now could be on the chopping block

as an unnecessary "non-labor" commitment of the federation's resources.

Backers of the Donahue ticket include the Amalgamated Textile Workers and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (these have merged); the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers (they are merging); and the Newspaper Guild and the Communications Workers of America (also merging). These groups historically have supported the federation's British-inspired geopolitical involvements.

Sweeney recently told a protest rally that his SEIU is ready to put national resources into a fight against any Los Angeles County plans for mass layoffs. But Sweeney also told the L.A. Board of Supervisors that they should make less stringent austerity plans, similar to the 1975 "Big Mac" financial control board arrangements in New York. "Big Mac" looted union pension funds on behalf of the money center banks, leading to the layoffs of tens of thousands of city workers, and the further collapse of the trade union movement.

Despite the best intentions of the Sweeney group, should they come to power they will find that militancy alone and exhortations to union organizing cannot reverse the decline in trade union membership and the plunge in wages. After President John Kennedy's murder, national policy changes demolished the industrial economy, eliminated high-wage jobs, and set the stage for the disintegration of the financial system.

At this point, labor's only hope is a top-down bankruptcy reorganization of the banking system and a national reconstruction program based on energy-intensive, high-wage 21st-century technology. So far, neither the Sweeney nor the Donahue slate has even begun to deal with national economic policy.