

## New labor leader: Defeat the Conservative Revolution

by Anton Chaitkin

On Oct. 25, the AFL-CIO elected insurgent John Sweeney as its new president, at the labor federation's national conference. Sweeney won the first contested election in the history of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, by a 56% majority.

The campaign that put Sweeney in office began last May, as a drive by several unions to oust AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, whose 16-year reign coincided with a collapse of the U.S. industrial base, and a plunge in workers' wages and union membership. When sufficient backing by major unions was assured, Sweeney's campaign began to focus openly on mobilizing labor for a political objective: a counterattack against the Conservative Revolution and its murderous austerity agenda.

Sweeney was unambiguous in his acceptance speech. Next year, he said, "we will reelect a President and elect a Democratic Congress." In addition to working for Democratic candidates, the AFL-CIO will now start a militant union organizing drive, to reverse the setbacks of recent years. Sweeney vowed that if "anyone denies American workers their Constitutional rights to freedom of association, we will use old-fashioned mass demonstrations, as well as sophisticated corporate campaigns, to make workers' rights the civil rights issue of the 1990s."

President Bill Clinton addressed the AFL-CIO delegates before they voted, asking them to join him in a war against the forces of the Conservative Revolution in the U.S. Congress: "You have got the Capitol Hill switchboards groaning with calls from your members, and I say send more! And I know that those ads you're running have gotten some members of Congress suffering with heartburn, and we just need to pour it on a little more."

The President exhorted the nation's assembled labor leaders to fire up the population, to stop the plans of Speaker

of the House Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his fellow GOP jacobins, for crushing living standards:

"I need you in the streets," he said, "standing up for America's future. . . . I want you to go home; I want you to talk to friends in the workplace. And I want you to talk to friends who aren't in your union. I want you to talk to people at church, at the bowling alley, at the ballpark. Wherever two or more are gathered, I want you to talk to people. I want people to know about this. This is their country, just like it's your country."

Two days after the Sweeney victory, Clinton's labor secretary, Robert Reich, addressed an AFL-CIO rally in New York's garment center, asking the unionists to "organize, mobilize, and energize, to restore the American Dream to all Americans." Reich told a reporter that he "absolutely" believed that working people should join labor unions.

### A political phase-change

The AFL-CIO election took place only nine days after the stunning success of the Million Man March in Washington, the largest rally of African-Americans in history. Taken together, the two events show that a fundamental shift in U.S. politics can now take place, toward restoring the kind of constituency coalition that supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Responding to the political momentum, President Clinton met privately on Nov. 1 with black journalists. The *Washington Times* reported that Clinton asked them, "What am I to do? How can the power of the President be used to generate the same type of energy and affirmative impression generated by the march?" Clinton said he had formed a cabinet-level task force to deal with the problems of Washington, D.C. In recent months, House Speaker Gingrich has corralled that city's black leaders into bargaining with him over austerity

measures. Clinton commented, "Nobody believes the city is [Gingrich's] laboratory."

## Partnership with Clinton

Back on May 9, Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Workers (Afl-cio), announced that ten unions had begun a drive to remove Lane Kirkland from the AFL-CIO presidency. At that time, no candidate for the job was put forward; and never during the ensuing campaign was any link with President Clinton publicly discussed.

But at the very moment that McEntee went public with the AFL-CIO campaign, the Clinton administration began hitting at a new theme: the fall of workers' living standards. In a May 16 meeting with editors of the *Los Angeles Times*, Labor Secretary Reich said that the most important question in the 1996 national election campaign, would be how various candidates proposed to "reverse the decline in real wages." President Clinton, speaking to students and educators on May 17, said that the current 15-year drop in American workers' earnings underlies the problems of crime and growing pressure on families.

On May 23, McEntee announced that 21 national labor unions, representing 56% of the federation's membership, had already joined his committee opposing Kirkland's reelection. By then, John Sweeney, president of the Service Employees International Union, was being spoken of within labor ranks as the front-runner to replace Kirkland.

In June, Sweeney was chosen to run for AFL-CIO president, on a slate with United Mine Workers leader Rich Trumka as candidate for AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer, and Afl-cio Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson running for AFL-CIO executive vice president. At their June 28 campaign kickoff, the Sweeney slate launched an attack against the anti-labor Republicans, naming Gingrich, Sen. Bob Dole (R-Kan.), and Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) as among the targets.

Behind the scenes, McEntee and Sweeney had played important roles in President Clinton's initiative to bring peace to Ireland—one of several fronts in Clinton's challenge to British geopolitics. McEntee had helped arrange a U.S. visa for Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams, and had helped organize an American office for the Sinn Fein. The son of Irish immigrants, Sweeney participated in the recent White House conference on the economic development of Ireland.

With this AFL-CIO support behind him, Clinton went ahead with plans for an important diplomatic trip to the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland—which had been scheduled for a few days after Sweeney's expected election.

The London *Financial Times*, in a nervous article Oct. 26, pointed out that Sweeney is "of Irish parentage" and "often seems like an old-style U.S. union boss." The London financiers' paper sniffed that "the rank-and-file played no direct part in the presidential campaign and there are no plans to democratize the unions."

Early in the Sweeney campaign, it became apparent that

ousting Kirkland might also involve backing away from some of the global operations the AFL-CIO itself has run, in tandem with the British-dominated intelligence community.

Sweeney suggested on June 28 that some money needed for the new labor organizing drive could come from cutting funding from the AFL-CIO's International Department. He specifically mentioned in that context the American Institute for Free Labor Development, a notorious front for the "Project Democracy" dirty work of Henry Kissinger, George Bush, and friends. Sweeney and his allies may not be directly against AIFLD, but the institute is representative of the federation's "non-labor" preoccupations in intelligence and covert activities, and this is now seen as expendable, since union membership is falling and living standards are being crushed.

On a Nov. 2 Washington, D.C. radio talk-show, a caller asked Sweeney whether he planned to continue Kirkland's "support of democratic movements . . . around the world." Sweeney praised Kirkland, but replied that labor will have to "strengthen our emphasis on corporate campaigns [regarding] multinational companies . . . and work together with those trade unions there. And we have to continue to strengthen those movements that are trying to organize the Third World countries."

Wall Street is worried. In a lead editorial the day after his election, the *New York Times* warned Sweeney not to "waste his fresh start on convulsive organizing tactics," but to show a "more sophisticated understanding of the global economy and the changing workplace to which [labor] must adapt." The editorial carried a thinly veiled threat, referring to the past and possible future U.S. Justice Department trumped-up prosecutions against labor unions: Sweeney knows that "the union movement must shake off the shadow of corruption and police itself vigorously."

The *Times* worked on a weak flank of both Sweeney and President Clinton: their failure to attack the "post-industrial" national policy shift of the period since 1967. "Mr. Sweeney and his followers . . . will need to develop a new, sophisticated understanding of the economic forces that have contributed to the weakened position of American workers." That is, they must keep away from demanding a policy shift back to industrialism. As the editorial put it, "the new [AFL-CIO] regime needs to start with an analysis of whether coal-mine and steel-mill tactics are the best way to win the loyalty of high-tech workers."

The Sweeney-Clinton alliance recalls a similar political geometry a century ago, at the birth of the U.S. labor movement. Terence V. Powderly, head of the Knights of Labor in the 1880s, was also a leader in the fight to strengthen Ireland's movement for freedom from Britain. Powderly brought labor and Irish-American votes in behind the U.S. nationalists and protectionists, from President Benjamin Harrison to President William McKinley. Supporting this arrangement was Philadelphia's Catholic Archbishop Patrick Ryan, who mediated the ties of the U.S. nationalists and laborites to their ally, Pope Leo XIII.