

U.S. labor movement revived as a real social movement

by Marianna Wertz

America Needs a Raise: Fighting for Economic Security and Social Justice

by John J. Sweeney with David Kusnet
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The importance, and uniqueness, of this book, is that its author, AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney, is attempting to change history for the good. It is written with the avowed purpose of mobilizing that vast majority of Americans who work for a living, to stand up and fight for economic security and social justice for all Americans, and for the unions that can guarantee their rights.

Sweeney is himself living proof that it is possible, with guts and determination, to intervene in history to effect a real change. Just since last October, Sweeney has transformed the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations from a moribund institution into a fighting machine, which already has under its belt the passage of a much-needed rise in the minimum wage, the defeat of numerous anti-labor measures pushed by Congressional Gingrichites' "Contract on Americans," and an unprecedented mobilization of union members for the November elections.

Because Sweeney is a tested leader, and not a Hollywood fabrication, his words have a greater ring of truth than almost anything outside of Lyndon LaRouche's political movement. In fact, readers of *EIR* will recognize the similarity in outlook between Sweeney and LaRouche: Both men are products of the World War II/Depression experience; and both were raised to believe, as Sweeney says, that "the economy exists for the human person, not the other way around."

The central premise of *America Needs a Raise* is that vibrant trade unions are the *sine qua non* of a nation that respects the rights of workers and guarantees to all its citizens a decent living standard. It has been so long since labor unions were a fighting institution in the United States, that most Americans have forgotten, or never knew, what function they are supposed to serve. *America Needs a Raise*, released on Labor Day, is a shocking reminder of what the world was like when trade unions fought for the rights of working people—and of how far we have strayed from those times.

In October 1995, John J. Sweeney won the first contested election for the AFL-CIO presidency since the labor federation was founded in 1955. He presents here, for the first time since his election, the reasons that motivated him to dare to break with tradition, to act boldly in the face of a crying need, and, what is more important, to present a new vision of the labor movement, as a broad social movement capable of representing the interests of all working people in America.

Church, family, and union

John Sweeney is no accident. The world that shaped him had three crucial elements: church, family, and union. As Sweeney writes, "Without the church, there would have been no hope of redemption. Without the family, there would have been no love. And without the union, there would have been no food on the table."

Sweeney's parents were Irish immigrants, Roman Catholics, and hard workers. His mother was a domestic worker. His father was a bus driver in the East Bronx in New York City, and was a loyal member of the Transport Workers Union. The union, Sweeney says, won his father the wage increases that let him buy a home for his family of six and a few extra days of vacation on the beach at Rockaway—something nearly unrealizable for blue-collar workers then,

or today, without a union.

Born in 1934, Sweeney grew up during the postwar industrial boom. He credits his early training to the combination of his father's trade union activism and the Catholic social teaching he got in school. "I studied Catholic social teaching. In many ways, I learned a more detailed version of the values I'd been taught at home. Since men and women are created in God's image, their dignity must be respected. Working people have the right to a living wage—in fact, we used to say that breadwinners should earn a 'family wage' so that they could support their households. And though there will always be some churning in the economy, working people should not be cast aside like disposable parts when the last drop of energy and effort has been wrung out of them.

"Human dignity," Sweeney continues, "demands that workers have a voice on the job, and the papal encyclicals we studied recognized the role of unions. Several priests and teaching brothers . . . taught me a lesson I try never to forget: A union must be a movement and a mission, not a business or a bureaucracy. In particular, they taught that organizing new members is not only an institutional necessity but an ethical imperative. It is a practical example of the fortunate helping their less fortunate sisters and brothers."

Sweeney is also careful to differentiate his own religious training from those who today claim the imprimatur of faith for the policies of the Gingrichite: "Whenever I hear the voices of prejudice and privilege claim scriptural sanction for their views, I wonder how they managed to read the Bible without coming across the words 'justice' and 'love.'"

A new social contract

The ultimate goal of a renewed labor movement, Sweeney writes, "is a new social contract, by which workers will share not only in prosperity but in power. The old social contract that made America so successful during the postwar era was based on a simple but profound truth: For the economy to grow and prosper, working people must be able to buy the goods and services they produce. . . . Business people knew that 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. And our leaders in government understood that, as President Kennedy said, 'a rising tide lifts all boats.' They saw their purpose as raising the standard of living for all, not accumulating enormous wealth for just a few."

As an example of the sweeping change that has occurred in the "social contract" in just the past two decades, Sweeney cites the personnel manual from the beginning of the 1980s at IBM, where he had his first full-time job: "In nearly 40 years, no person employed on a regular basis by IBM has lost as much as one hour of working time because of a layoff. . . . It's hardly a surprise that one of the main reasons people like to work for IBM is the company's all-out effort to maintain full employment."



AFL-CIO President John Sweeney: "The economy exists for the human person, not the other way around."

Tens of thousands of downsized employees later, this "social contract" reads like "an ancient archeological artifact . . . something from an earlier civilization," Sweeney comments.

Sweeney's campaign for a new social contract began long before he fought his way to the top of the labor movement. Indeed, much of what he is implementing today has been tested since 1980, when he won the presidency of the Service Employees International Union. The SEIU represents the most menial workers in America—the janitors, hospital workers, custodians, busboys—and the lowest paid. A large percentage are African-American and Hispanic, and many are recent immigrants. They are the people who most need a union.

As president of the SEIU, Sweeney conducted the most sweeping union organizing drive in the nation. While overall union membership declined during the 1980s, from a low 22% of the workforce to only about 18%, the SEIU doubled its membership. Its strategy was simple: "to make every contract battle into a campaign that would inspire our allies and embarrass our adversaries."

The question of wage rates

Because he's in touch with real people, Sweeney provides statistics which actually approximate the reality of falling wage and benefit levels since the 1970s (see box). The 20% drop in real wages which he cites is closer to what *EIR* has published than most other sources.

However, to set the record straight, we quote briefly from Lyndon LaRouche's Sept. 4 interview with "EIR Talks," on how to determine what the drop has really been. "We do what's called a Market Basket Study. We look at per capita, per household, per square kilometer of area. We look at infrastructure, we look at industry, we look at agriculture, we look

Why America needs a raise

The following is a selection of key statistics from America Needs a Raise.

- Between 1978 and 1995, the buying power of workers' hourly earnings fell 12%.
- Hourly wages for nonsupervisory employees have fallen (in 1995 dollars) from \$12.85 in 1978 to \$11.46 in 1995, a drop of 11%.
- Over the last 20 years, the real incomes of workers without four-year college degrees dropped by at least 20%. From 1979 to 1995, average weekly earnings dropped by 17% in construction, 16% in transportation, and 7% in manufacturing. Retail workers' earnings dropped by 22%.
- Corporate profits jumped by 205% between 1980 and 1995, and executive salaries have soared. In 1960, the average CEO earned 41 times more than the average worker. By 1995, the average CEO earned 145 times more

than the average worker.

- In 1990, 59% of mothers with young children held jobs outside the home, compared with 45% in 1980.
- From 1979 to 1989, the number of workers with more than one job jumped from 4.7 million to 7.2 million. Today, more than 6% of all American workers (8 million) hold two or more jobs.
- The total "contingent workforce" (including temps, part-timers, and independent contractors) has increased 193% from 1985 to 1995. About 25% of all workers are part of the "contingent workforce." Contingent workers generally earn low wages, lack health insurance and pension benefits, and have few, if any, basic legal protections for their health and safety on the job, their retirement security, their right to overtime pay, and their right to organize unions and bargain with their employers.
- At their high-water mark in the mid-1950s, unions represented 35% of all American workers and 80 to 90% of those in major industries, such as auto, steel, and coal mining. Unions represented only 28% of American workers in the mid-1970s. Today, they represent only 15% of the entire workforce and a mere 11% in private industry.

at services such as education, medical care; and scientific services generally. We count the physical and service ingredients of these categories: we count them in market baskets.

"What does it take to keep investment in that shop, to employ one employee? What does that employee get for his family, in terms of market basket of goods, including education, leisure, and all these kinds of things that are needed to maintain the quality of life of that household? Then, all the way down.

"Now, if you look at those figures, the United States today, per capita, per square kilometer, per household . . . (remember, it takes two or three incomes in a household, where one would suffice, or one and a half would suffice before)—per capita, per square kilometer, the income and productivity of the United States today, is about *half* of what it was in 1969, 1970, that period."

The danger of weak unions

Beyond providing the evidence of decline in living standards, and reviewing the "war on labor" which the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations waged over the decade of the 1980s, Sweeney actually begins to tell the truth about labor's misleadership in this period. He charges that the weakness of the labor movement has itself been a major contributing factor to declining wage levels, and warns that the weakness of labor, and the absence of a progressive social movement, have created "a dangerous vacuum that's being filled by demagoguery and division."

John Sweeney ran for the presidency of the AFL-CIO to fill that vacuum. As for the cause of the vacuum, Sweeney points, in words far too polite, at his predecessor, Lane Kirkland, who assumed the presidency of the AFL-CIO from George Meany in November 1979. "While Meany's AFL-CIO had brandished power, the AFL-CIO of the 1980s and early 1990s too often seemed content to generate position papers—thoughtful ones, to be sure, but with little effect on workers' lives beyond the Washington Beltway. . . .

"Our sense of alarm increased with the November 1994 elections, when Republicans, intent on repealing 60 years of social progress, captured control of both houses of Congress. Working Americans had come to a critical point—with corporations downsizing, wages stagnating, unions declining, and our enemies seizing control of Congress. We waited for the top leader of the AFL-CIO to raise his voice or sound his trumpet—but the silence was deafening."

What Sweeney doesn't say, is that Lane Kirkland was an asset of the bankers' Trilateral Commission. While the labor movement was smothered for 16 crucial years under Kirkland's misleadership, Lyndon LaRouche, often alone, waged a battle for social justice in America, a battle which often pitted him directly against Kirkland.

It is thus a truly welcome occurrence to have organized labor once again directed by a fighter for social justice. Perhaps, as Sweeney concludes in this book, his leadership will indeed help inspire a social movement that can, as the Irish poet Seamus Heaney wrote, "make hope and history rhyme."