Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 24
Tough Questions, Fresh Ideas, and New Models: Fuel for the New Labor Movement

Article 17

1996

John Sweeney Responds

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Abstract
[Excerpt] "New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?" by Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello is just the kind of thoughtful critique the "New Voices" of the American labor movement need if we are to make the transition from campaign rhetoric to meaningful change. During the campaign last summer and fall, I ended virtually every speech with my personal commitment to such reviews and critiques by saying, "And my idea of a perfect labor movement is one which constantly re-examines itself and corrects its own imperfections."

Keywords
labor movement, organizing, union, worker rights, unionization

This article is available in Labor Research Review: http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/lrr/vol1/iss24/17

John Sweeney Responds

"New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old?" by Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello is just the kind of thoughtful critique the "New Voices" of the American labor movement need if we are to make the transition from campaign rhetoric to meaningful change. During the campaign last summer and fall, I ended virtually every speech with my personal commitment to such reviews and critiques by saying, "And my idea of a perfect labor movement is one which constantly re-examines itself and corrects its own imperfections."

For the past six months, Rich Trumka, Linda Chavez-Thompson and I have been spearheading just such a re-examination of the AFL-CIO, even as we advance the organizing and political action programs we've made a first priority in this most critical of years for organized labor. Last fall, we appointed task forces with representatives from 50 International Unions to examine the major departments and programs of the AFL-CIO. Those task forces made their reports early this year and we've been proceeding at breakneck speed to implement their recommendations.

In their article Messrs. Brecher and Costello rightly recognize the amazing performance of the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute over the past few years; we recognized it by appointing Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers' Richard Bensinger, the driving force behind the Organizing Institute, as director of the first AFL-CIO Organizing Department. They rightly recognize the enormous importance and contribution of the reformed Teamsters union; we recognized it by hiring the Teamsters' Marilyn Schneiderman as our Field Mobilization Director and we've charged her with completely renovating and rejuvenating what had been called our "Field Services Department." The authors rightly recognize the importance of greater involvement of women in the labor movement; we recognized it by naming Karen Nussbaum, the founder of 9 to 5, National Association of Working Women, and the former director of the Women's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor, as director of Women's Programs at the AFL-CIO. Brecher and Costello rightly recognize the need for regaining our political clout so we don't

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have to suffer defeats like the Workplace Fairness Bill and NAFTA; we recognized it by making Steve Rosenthal, a Communications Workers' activist by way of the Clinton Campaign, the Democratic National Committee (DNC), and the Department of Labor, as our political director.

Admittedly, we have a long way to go before we succeed in transforming the AFL-CIO from "a Washington-based institution concerned primarily with refining policy positions" into a "worker-based movement against greed, multi-national corporations, race-baiting, and labor-baiting politicians," but we are ahead of where I thought we'd be at this point—far enough ahead that I feel comfortable taking issue with the presumption of failure that is laced through the Brecher-Costello analysis. Yes, our organization needs and is getting a thorough overhaul, but don't over-rate the "fabled rigidity." There's dormant energy and potential aplenty just waiting for leadership.

And shame on us if we don't take advantage of a rare opportunity created by the over-reaching of profit-hungry corporations and opportunistic conservatives in the United States Congress. Ironically, the consequences of losing our power has made the case for the labor movement in ways not possible in many years.

As Brecher and Costello note, we need lots of new friends and allies if we are to jump-start the labor movement. So this spring we began reaching out systematically to possible coalition partners by hosting important planning sessions at our headquarters. The first was a meeting of women's organizations that included the presidents of the National Organization for Women, the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and the hundred-organization-member Council of Presidents. Another was a three-day meeting of more than 75 organizations working on local, state, and federal living-wage initiatives, organizations including ACORN, Citizen Action, several civil rights organizations, and church groups. And we hosted a planning meeting of progressive academics and journalists who are organizing a fall conference with us. The point is not that these gatherings are taking place, but that they are now commonplace.

In late March, our affiliated unions put our money where our mouth is by voting in special convention to assess themselves a total of $25 million to finance an unprecedented political education, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote effort amongst our members and the general public—a decision that has made us the target of a vicious disinformation and smear campaign on the part of right-wing political organizations. At the same time, we defied convention and made an early endorsement for the re-election of President Clinton and Vice President Gore.

In response to comments in "A New Labor Movement in the Shell of the Old" about the proper political role of the AFL-CIO, I think these two actions demonstrate where we are coming from. First, none of the $25 million—or an additional $10 million coming out of our regular operating funds—will go to the DNC. In fact, we've given less than $10,000 to the DNC this year because of our concern with their policies and practices. Second, the endorsement of Clinton and Gore should not be read as an endorsement of the DNC or of Democratic Party candidates in general. We endorsed the president and the vice president because their performance on behalf of working Americans over the past four years merits it (70 percent of our 13.1 million members agree) and because we cannot waste one moment in mounting a campaign to recapture the machinery of our government and reclaim our country—there were and are no other candidates willing to make commitments like President Clinton has made and any hesitation on our part would have reflected a death-wish.

As Brecher and Costello report, there is a budding movement within the labor movement to establish a Labor Party as a third-force in American politics. I've had experience with just such an effort while I was a labor leader in New York: It ended disastrously by splintering the progressive vote and, while I'm personally dissatisfied with the Democratic Party, I'm a bit chary about the chances for a Labor Party. I would be the last person, however, to discourage the dedicated brothers and sisters who are organizing the Labor Party movement from taking their best shot and I hope the progress they are making sends a clear signal to a Democratic Party that has moved away from working families just as surely as it has moved away from the old, the young, the disabled, and the poor. In the 1950s, the progressive forces in the labor movement, led by Walter Reuther, waged all-out war against the notion of a Labor Party. That was then and this is now, and the Democratic Party should realize that the current effort is being led by the very forces that once disdained the notion.

During May and June, we are living up to our commitment to make the wage and wealth gap the top item on the national political agenda by holding "America Needs a Raise" town hall meetings in 25 cities. The reception by the media (which has generally been fantastic since we began our campaign last June) has been gratifying and has helped propel us into increased interest in our "Union Summer" program. We started out to recruit and involve 1,000 young workers and students in organizing and political education efforts around the country; as of this writing, we've received more than 2,500 applications from these Generation Xer's who are supposed to be against everything we believe in,

and we are scrambling to expand the program.

We're going to build on this success with a "Union Fall" during which we regain control of the national agenda. We've already trained and deployed 800 aggressive new political organizers, with more to come, and our goal is to establish core groups of at least 100 union activists in every congressional district in the country. Our strategy is to use grassroots action to elect men and women at every level of government who will represent the needs of working Americans—and then hold those men and women accountable.

Will these candidates be Democrats, Republicans, or something else? Frankly, we don't care—as long as they are willing to make the commitments and live up to them. Right now, we hope to regain control of the House of Representatives by the only practical means available, and that's by electing a Democratic majority. But, as everyone now realizes, our new approach to politics has already split the conservative and moderate wings of the Republican party and we look forward to a day when we can once again support politicians like Nelson Rockefeller, Mark Hatfield, and Jacob Javits.

Finally, Brecher and Costello are on the mark when it comes to organizing. They are quite right to note that even the $20 million the AFL-CIO intends to devote to organizing over the next two years is a pittance—even though it would represent, after that period, fully one-third of our total budget. Their estimate of $300 million a year just to hold our membership even is probably right on the money. That's why it's important to understand what we are trying to do at the national level—and that is to set an example and be a catalyst for a rebirth of organizing at the local level. To paraphrase an old euphemism, money can't buy you more members. . . but it is impossible to organize without it, and the majority of the money in the labor movement lies with local unions. In my old union, for instance, our local unions receive an average of $21 per member per month in dues. They, in turn, pay $5.80 of that amount to their International union, which, in turn, pays $ .43 per member per month to the AFL-CIO. What we're trying to do with the $ .43 we get is set an example for our affiliates and their local unions to follow: if every local and every International union spent one-third of its dues dollar on organizing we'd have more than enough money to reorganize the American workforce, with change left over to dominate the political arena.

We're making progress, faster than some people think. I've told my staff and I've told my members, "I'm going to put myself way out front—then I want you to push me." It's great to have Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello adding their shoulders to the wagon. ■