

CAMPAIGN FOR AMERICA'S FUTURE

TAKE BACK AMERICA 2006

MONDAY, JUNE 12, 2006

**WASHINGTON HILTON HOTEL
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**2:15 P.M. -3:45 P.M. PROGRESSIVE AGENDA
FOR THE COMMON GOOD**

SPEAKER:

**JOHN SWEENEY,
PRESIDENT, AFL-CIO**

*Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.*

ROGER HICKEY: John Sweeney is the elected head of the largest and most important organization fighting for economic and social justice in America, the AFL-CIO.

Now, the labor movement has always been a part on the front lines of the fight for the common good. Social Security and Medicare benefit far more people than just union members. And it turns out the labor movement has a pretty good network of organized workers in the Gulf and around the nation who responded to this crisis almost immediately.

Now, John Sweeney has a strong commitment to Catholic social justice teachings, fighting poverty and giving dignity to work, and he's combined them with his skills at moving organizations and forcing institutions to change.

Please welcome John Sweeney of the AFL-CIO. (Applause.)

JOHN SWEENEY: Thank you very much, Roger Hickey. Thanks to you and Bob Borosage and all associated with Campaign for America's Future for this great conference, and most of all, a huge thank you to everyone in this hall and to everyone attending this conference for all that you're doing to lead our progressive movement. You've been treated to an inspiring set of ideas on this panel. I think we all agree that it is our job to make them into something bigger than the parts, to make them into a movement rooted in these ideas to deliver the common good.

I think it's especially right that we've concluded with comments from Congressman Bennie Thompson and Steven Bradbury from ACORN about the devastation and the rebuilding of America on the Gulf Coast, because there is no more dramatic reminder of how far our nation has veered from the ideal of the common good.

Like all of you, I was sickened by what I saw on television after Katrina struck, and stunned that the faces were mostly those of the sick, the elderly and the African American residents who had been abandoned by the Bush administration. When I toured the devastated neighborhoods, my anger deepened as I realized that nothing, absolutely nothing, was being done to reclaim and rebuild the destroyed neighborhoods.

The most remarkable thing about the entire scene was the silence. Last fall, I asked our AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust to develop a plan to put our union pension funds to work in the restoration and rebuilding of the Gulf Coast region, and I'm pleased to be able to share the news that this Wednesday we will announce the first major private investment commitment in the Gulf.

Working with community groups, our Gulf Coast revitalization program will create low- and moderate-income housing; a huge low-cost mortgage program to help residents return and reclaim their communities -- (applause); a new major hotel; hospital and health care facilities. And it will produce thousands of high-wage jobs and a training program to put local people into those jobs.

Over the next five to seven years, our program's housing and economic development activity will total \$1 billion, but money is nowhere near enough. And I promised myself, when I saw the abandonment of New Orleans, that the American labor movement would not only take the lead in rebuilding New Orleans so its residents could come home, we would take the lead in holding our right-wing leaders accountable; not next year or the year after, but this year, this November, when we will start reclaiming and rebuilding America. (Applause.)

This isn't about one election, this is about redefining our nation's priorities. This is about building a real movement in our communities and workplaces, and on the Internet, with the power to redefine the politics of our country with a bold, progressive vision. Because what we saw so vividly in New Orleans is what's going on all across our nation. The right has been able to put its insane ideas to work, and the damage they've done sickens and angers all of us.

The seeds of bigotry have been replanted in thousands of our communities, and their ugly blooms are flourishing. The sick, the elderly, the young, the poor, our minorities, the middle class -- they've all been abandoned by our government as uncaring as it is incompetent, their safety nets shredded by tax cuts for the rich.

We see the devastation every day: poverty up 20 percent since Bush took office; millions of jobs lost by working families; health care slashed; pensions destroyed, even as CEOs' salaries have gone out of sight. The rich and powerful in our country are better off than ever, but average Americans are trapped in a corporate box with walls made of global rules that favor corporations and forget working people, walls of privatization, of deregulation, of wage stagnation.

There are those in our progressive movement, even in the labor movement, who argue that we could or we should accept the confines of that box, that we should just deal with the new reality. But for working families and our unions, I believe for all of you, working within the corporate box is not an option. It would turn the box into a coffin, and we will never accept it. (Applause.)

We have to demand and organize for real, livable wages, for creating good jobs, for energy independence and for raising the scandalously low minimum wage. We have to fight like hell for health care for every American starting at birth. We have to ensure every worker -- their golden years won't turn to lead by putting a solid-gold guarantee around Social Security and putting a defined pension benefit system on top of it, one that is portable and completely protected. We have to stop all subsidizing the export of good jobs and demand new rules for our trade agreements to make sure workers' rights

everywhere are respected and workers' living standards here at home are protected.
(Applause.)

We have to use all our might to secure a great education for every child and a safe environment for every family. We have to give working men and women the ability to confront these and the other issues they face. That means passing the Employee Free Choice Act, restoring the freedom to join unions and restoring the strength of our progressive movement, giving workers the freedom to join a union and bargain collectively for the strongest, most effective anti-poverty program available under capitalism. And it's a proven way to organize, inform progressive voters.

So we must absolutely insist on the freedom of every worker to organize for a better life. Brothers and sisters, just being for the right things and talking about the right things won't get us where we need to go. Ideas and issues are our road map, but we have to have vehicles to get us from here to there, and this year we have two.

One is President Bush's incompetence in responding to corruption and handling the economy and the war in Iraq and dealing with Katrina. The other is the confidence of our progressive movement. We have what it takes, but it won't be easy. The Bush administration has destroyed voters trust in elected leaders' ability to make things different. It is up to us, the people in this room, to break through the cynicism and organize around a new vision of the common good, and we can do it if we work together because we're the smartest, toughest progressive force in the history of the world. (Inaudible.) And when we combine our brain power and put our backsides in motion together, there is no force on Earth that can stop us.

Thank you and God bless all the great work you do. (Applause.)

(End of remarks.)