

JOHN J. SWEENEY
President, AFL-CIO

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Plenary Session: A Program for a New Majority

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Thank you, Chellie (Pingree) for those words of introduction and I want you to know that all of us in this room are tempted to establish residency in Maine just so we can vote for you next time. And, on behalf of all of organized labor, I want you to know that we're ready for the next time.

If I've been able to accomplish some things over the past few years, it's because I have 13 million union members marching right beside me, 40 million people from union households marching with me, 65 union presidents marching way up front, and millions upon millions of allies marching with linked arms --- so thanks to all of you.

My thanks also to Bob Borosage and Roger Hickey and the Campaign for America's Future for sponsoring this terrific forum and for building one of the best organizations we have for "Taking Back America."

This is just what those of us who were in from the beginning hoped for from the Campaign for America's Future -- and Roger and Bob; their staff members deserve an incredibly big round of applause, they are our progressive heroes.

When I heard I'd be on a panel this afternoon with Reg Weaver, Jan Schakowsky, Nancy Pelosi, Bob Reich and Marc Morial, I did what any courageous labor leader would do: I demanded to go first. I knew that Reg would say all that needed to be said about education, that Marc would cover civil rights and our civil society, that Jan and Nancy would appropriately steal all the Capitol Hill Thunder, and that Bob would cover economics, the unemployment crisis, politics, health care, the environment, deindustrialization, labor law reform, immigration reform, and tort reform . . .

Knowing what a good job Bob and Reg and Nancy and Jan and Marc will do, I'm going to limit my remarks on these crucially important issues and talk about what we can do to bring the progressive movement together and up to warp speed over the coming weeks and

months. And I'm going to make an appeal to all of you to help us in the labor movement with a problem working families and our unions are encountering – a problem that poses a deep threat to our entire country and to everything that the people in this room care about.

It's the tidal wave of anti-unionism that is undermining the ability of working families to lift themselves up, a wave that keeps more children in poverty, more working adults and family members without health care, more families without economic security, more Americans without a dignified retirement, that keeps ours two Americas – separate and unequal -- despite our nation's scandalous wealth.

Worker-bashing and the union-baiting that's the new vogue in this town is an ugly virus that infects the tissue and muscle of our very society. And it undermines the labor movement's ability to be the glue that helps progressives in our country stick together without getting stuck together.

House majority Leader Tom Delay calls unions a “clear and present danger to the security of the United States.”

The President of the United States says we're a threat to homeland defense if we properly represent our members in the federal workforce.

Rep. Charlie Norwood from Georgia accuses us of requiring our members to support “causes and activities condemned by the Bible.”

The Wall Street Journal attacks me personally, saying “John Sweeney joined France and Germany” by insisting on multi-lateral support for our invasion of Iraq.

Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska faults us for disagreeing with the notion that our members who are New York City firefighters and police officers should work without overtime pay as a “wartime sacrifice.”

Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao says we're just plain “obstinate,” which shows that if anything, we're consistent, because that's the same thing Secretary of Labor Robert Reich used to say.

I agree with Secretary Chao, and I think she captured the essence of America's union movement. We are indeed obstinate and I think that perhaps our greatest attribute is that we refuse to give in or go away. We're obstinate about our vision of an America with opportunity and justice for all. We're obstinate about the freedoms we in this country hold dear --- Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Expression, and Freedom of Assembly foremost among them.

We are also obstinate about the basic rights of every American citizen --- the right to privacy, the right to protest, the right to health care, the right to a good education, the right to a decent job, the right to a free choice to join a union.

And we are sure as hell obstinate about one fundamental right . . . and that's the freedom to elect men and women who will represent working families at every level of government ... and the right to replace them if they don't.

The legendary community organizer Saul Alinsky once outlined rules for dangerous radicals like all of us to follow. One of those rules declared that ridicule is the most powerful weapon we have for dealing with big shots who are running amuck.

When it comes to George W. Bush, we don't even have to use that weapon because he ridicules himself and holds himself up for public scorn every day.

He promises to "leave no child behind," then refuses to fund his own education legislation, and cuts 8 million of them out of his latest tax break scam.

He lays waste to worker rights, and civil rights and environmental protections, then poses arrogantly alongside the giants who brought us those safeguards in the first place.

He fails to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 or the anthrax killers to justice, then slashes war veterans' benefits, conveniently neglects to condemn the use of homeland security funds to round up Democratic legislators in Texas. And then, hypocritically mocks the memory of our war dead by becoming the first non-combatant president in U.S. history to land in an F-16 on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Brothers and sisters, the man is shameless!

We don't have to ridicule George W. Bush, he does that job for us.

Our task over the next 18 months is not to ridicule George Bush, but to tell the George Bush story to the American voters --- over and over and over again.

I won't itemize all of our president's offenses here, but I do believe, as Bob Borosage so eloquently laid out, that George Bush's domestic jihad against working families presents our progressive movement with an enormous archway of opportunity --- but one that we can only walk through if we do it together.

Undoubtedly there will be chapters of the Bush story that each of us will play a special part in telling. But there are two parts that I believe everybody in this room needs to tell --- the tragedy of what's being done to jobs in this country and the horrors of health care.

The storyline on jobs is as simple as it is shameful. It's a story of politics that gives

generous favors to the rich and powerful while allowing economic growth and jobs to shrivel and be shipped away. A story of politics that favors the big corporate interests with attacks on job standards --- like the proposal to allow employers to get around overtime pay that's been scheduled for a vote in the House tomorrow.

The storyline about health care is about politics too --- politics and greed, the politics of standing by the big pharmaceutical companies, the greed of protecting the special interests in the face of unbelievable suffering and punishing cost increases for working families.

Those are the stories we have to tell, over and over, together. But there's a third area that I want to return to before I close.

It's the help I want to ask you for in the sometimes lonely war that working men and women all over our country are fighting, a battle with severe consequences for our progressive movement.

I've asked two people to come with me here today to tell you more about it. Carol Farel works under back-breaking conditions for Cintas, the biggest uniform provider and industrial uniform laundry in America. Stephen White is a cable worker who's being victimized by Comcast.

What do Carol and Stephen have in common? For one thing, they're a common target for the Bush administration and the corporate interests who control our country.

The role unions play in helping working families lift themselves up and demanding a share of the success they create hasn't been lost on the Bush crowd, and neither has the success of our unions in politics. Big corporations and the Bush administration don't have to be reminded that union household members accounted for 26% of the voters at the polls in the last presidential election, or that 70% of our members voted for the progressive candidates who support all of our issues and values.

They don't have to be reminded that we brought 550,000 new members into our unions last year --- they keep book on every move we make. That's why we've been hit by anti-union edicts and executive orders from day one.

When Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers, he made it socially acceptable to break union drives --- but Bush and his corporate-driven agenda have made it compulsory.

Carol and Stephen also share a common fate --- when they began trying to form unions so they could have a voice at work, their employers took a cue from Bush and launched campaigns to stifle them once and for all. But they can tell you about it better than I can.

Carol Farel, Cintas worker:

“When I started at Cintas, I was making \$8.50 an hour. Three years later, I was making \$9.28. In all that time I made my quota, made it to work on time, and trained all my supervisors. And I barely got a second look from any of them.

“Conditions in the plant were dirty and dangerous- we handled uniforms from a slaughterhouse that had blood and gore from dead chickens, all without gloves.

“Women couldn’t make it into management. My African-American coworkers made less money than I did, and did the same job.

“When we decided that it was time to fight back and get the respect and pay that we deserve, I suddenly became management’s top priority. Every time I passed out leaflets I wound up in the office with two or three bosses.

“We had daily captive meetings with videos. Cintas had outside consultants walk the floor talking to workers. They threatened to take away shifts and change people’s hours. They even accused me of things I didn’t do.

“And all this time, Cintas has been accusing the union of terrorism. I’m no terrorist. I’m just one more working person who wants justice.”

Stephen White, Comcast worker:

“Thank you for your concern for working people.

“I’m a cable technician and I have worked in a union shop. Now, I’m working in a non-union shop for Comcast - the largest cable company in the country. I want a union because I want to continue to grow as the company grows.

“Comcast does not want workers to have a voice in the workplace and they are willing to go to any lengths to deny us our legal rights to a union.

“If you want a union at Comcast you must to be willing to withstand threats, intimidation and coercion. I have had my motives questioned and I have been humiliated by management in front of my co-workers. I have had my workload increased and the time to get the work done shortened.

“Some of my co-workers have been followed throughout the workday and spied on at their home at night. With all of the threats of job loss, my co-workers are very fearful.

"Two members of our organizing committee have been forced out by Comcast. One was terminated by Comcast for a minor violation and another employee was suspended pending an investigation. He resigned rather than face continued harassment.

"This is wrong and it must be stopped. We need your help. Comcast workers across the country need your help.

"Thank You."

I wanted you to hear from Stephen and Carol so you could appreciate the situation we're in.

Support for unions is at its highest point since 1967 and that's great news for our progressive vision of America --- communities with higher percentages of union members are better communities... wage rates are better, right along with educational achievement, health care and pension coverage, and rates of poverty, crime and dependency on government are lower. And union members vote for progressive candidates.

The trouble is that when workers try to organize, they get hammered like Stephen and Carol, and only the very strongest survive --- so-called "democratic" elections run through the National Labor Relations Board and the National Mediation Board are bogus shams.

Sometimes the hammering is done by Democrats like the former chief of staff for Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania who is now Executive Vice President of Comcast. Governor Rendell should call his former employee, David Cohen, and tell him that Comcast workers should have the freedom to form a union and the right to have collective bargaining."

Our answer is a major new campaign to protect the freedom of every worker to make his/her own decision to join a union and to expose the strategies of employers who stomp out workers' choices and their dreams of a better life --- and for that we need the help of our allies. Just as we succeed in politics when we stand together, we succeed in union organizing drives when we confront employers together.

So as we come together at this conference and pledge ourselves to a new and stronger progressive alliance at the ballot box, we in labor ask for a new and stronger progressive coalition in our workplaces.

Let's stand together, let's fight together, let's stick together and let's win together.

Thank you and God bless the America we're fighting for.