
A Government Integrity Project Study

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OREGON ELECTION PREVIEWS AFL-CIO'S 1996 POLITICAL PLANS

“Union leaders this week said the election push was a way the new leadership could quickly demonstrate results for both the public and the AFL-CIO’s member unions.”

—*The Washington Post*, January 25, 1996¹

“The Oregon race provides a vital first chapter in a new textbook on politics we’re going to write this year, as we build the core of a powerful new grassroots movement.”

—AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, January 31, 1996²

INTRODUCTION

After decades of declining political influence, labor unions have pledged to multiply their election efforts this year with a \$35 million war chest. The first real test of organized labor’s new activism—Oregon’s special election for a United States Senate seat—resulted in a narrow victory for the candidate heavily backed by big labor. Similar efforts can be expected in numerous House and Senate races this fall.

When AFL-CIO President John Sweeney swept into leadership of the nation’s largest labor federation last fall, he did so on an agenda of action, pledging more active organization drives to help increase the union rolls in America and promising vocal political campaigns to promote the union’s movement’s liberal agenda. Every indication was that the AFL-CIO would be a major force in 1996.

Shortly after Sweeney’s election, voters went to the polls in a few political contests around the country. These November 1995 contests did yet not have the full Sweeney im-

1 Frank Swoboda, “AFL-CIO to Target 75 House Districts,” *The Washington Post*, January 25, 1996, p. A16.

2 “Democrat Wyden Wins Packwood’s Seat in Senate in Mail-Ballot Election,” *BNA Daily Labor Report*, February 1, 1996, p. A11.

print (he had been in office only for a few weeks), but organized labor nonetheless managed to demonstrate a significant presence in several states. In fact, after the elections, Sweeney attempted to take credit for the supposed public turn to the left he claimed had occurred.

Earlier this year, the AFL-CIO had its first test for 1996. In the special election to fill the seat of former Oregon Republican Senator Bob Packwood, big labor lined its horses up behind Democratic Congressman Ron Wyden. With substantial backing from organized labor, Wyden managed to beat Republican Gordon Smith narrowly in a mail-in election.

As this pivotal election year proceeds, the AFL-CIO and other labor organizations will continue to invest heavily in campaign activity. Unfortunately, much of this politicking will be funded through mandatory worker dues, and much is unreported and unregulated by federal election laws. Direct PAC donations and independent expenditure campaigns on behalf of specific candidates represent only a portion of organized labor's political activities. It behooves Members of Congress to pay careful attention to these activities. Hard-working union members should not be compelled to surrender their own pay, earned by their own sweat and toil, to finance political activity to which they may well object.

THE PRELUDE: KENTUCKY AND MISSISSIPPI '95

The AFL-CIO's claim to victory in 1995 lies in the Kentucky governor's race between Paul Patton (D) and Larry Forgy (R). The national federation's propaganda organ, the *AFL-CIO News*, bragged that "even Forgy, in a call to the Louisville Courier-Journal, conceded that labor had made the difference, not only in heavily unionized counties but in helping turn out the African-American vote through the A. Phillip Randolph Institute."³ (The A. Phillip Randolph Institute is an arm of the AFL-CIO dedicated to reaching out to African-American unionists.)

According to the *News*, 83,000 phone calls and 158,000 pieces of mail led labor's efforts. The same report went on to disclose that 7 federation employees joined 9 activists from other labor unions to put a significant political operation in place on the ground in Kentucky, and that "two members of the Electrical Workers and CWA [Communication Workers of America] also were working with the [A. Phillip Randolph Institute]."

In the end, Patton defeated Forgy by a slim 51-49 margin.

The story in Mississippi was similar, except for the outcome. Incumbent Republican Governor Kirk Fordice was pitted against Democrat Dick Molpus. The AFL-CIO and other labor groups committed 3 full-time staff and 10 part-time workers to the race. The *AFL-CIO News* reports that the unions dropped 44,000 pieces of mail and placed 20,000 phone calls in an effort to promote Molpus. While organized labor's contribution may have helped narrow what appeared to be a blowout, the end result was that Fordice won with 55 percent of the vote.

3 Larry Byrne, "Labor Helps Turn Political Tide," *AFL-CIO News*, November 17, 1995, p. 1.

THE OPENING SALVO: OREGON '96

The first meaningful test of organized labor's muscle in the new year has occurred over the past few weeks in Oregon, where voters were inundated with aggressive tactics by big labor to help influence the outcome of the special election. According to AFL-CIO documents and press reports, 37 union activists (12 from the AFL-CIO alone) worked full-time to elect a Democratic Senator⁴ —“an unusually large number of political operatives” from unions, according to *The Washington Post*.⁵

Steve Rosenthal, the AFL-CIO's political director, bragged that “We're mailing endorsement pieces to 75,000 union members and persuasion pieces to an estimated 40,000.” The AFL-CIO newsletter noted that “another 100,000 fliers comparing the candidates' records are being produced, and phone banks have been set up across the state.”⁶ Shortly after the election was complete, AFL-CIO President Sweeney announced that the union had made more than 230,000 phone calls and sent over 350,000 pieces of mail.

The AFL-CIO did not act alone, however. By joining forces with at least 11 individual unions, it was able to mount a considerable presence in this one targeted race. Among the other participants were the American Federation of Teachers, American Federation of Government Employees, National Association of Letter Carriers, and International Brotherhood of Teamsters. The considerable firepower mustered by these organizations resulted in more than \$183,000 in political action committee donations to the Democratic candidate. Not one penny of union money went to Republican Gordon Smith.

Of course, impact is not measured in direct PAC spending alone. Phone banks, direct mail, paid advertising, and grassroots organizing are all significant activities that labor used in Oregon and can be expected to use throughout this year to promote favored political candidates. Many of these activities can be funded out of forced dues. In Oregon, these efforts were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars more than direct, reported expenditures.

Union tactics played a significant role in the Oregon election. In fact, organized labor's activities themselves came under scrutiny by the media and the voters. The Teamsters were heavily criticized for an ad blaming the death of a teenage worker on the Republican candidate's business. Even the beneficiary of the Teamsters efforts, Ron Wyden, was forced to issue a public statement disavowing the ad and encouraging the union to pull it.

Union politics are nothing new. There is no question that organized labor has a right to participate in the electoral process. Unfortunately, in many states like Oregon, unions rely on coerced funding—in the form of mandatory union dues—to finance many of their political activities. Therefore, every hard-working union member in Oregon sup-

4 *Ibid.*

5 Frank Swoboda, “Labor Wants Political Focus on Wages; AFL-CIO to Mount Campaign to Keep Issue at Center of '96 Elections,” *The Washington Post*, December 16, 1995, p. A20.

6 Byrne, “Labor Helps Turn Political Tide,” *op. cit.*

ported the candidacy of Ron Wyden with his sweat and toil—even if he cast his vote against Wyden.

THE ROAD AHEAD: ELECTION '96

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney decided that his new leadership team must make its mark quickly. They have decided that their goal of organizing more than a million workers is too ambitious to be completed in the near term, and that they therefore should devote much of their resources to political action for a quick score.

The Plan. In keeping with that decision, the labor federation recently announced its intent to spend \$35 million on election activities this year—as much as 7 times the normal budget and nearly two-thirds of the cost of a presidential general election campaign. This allocation will support:

- ✓ **Targeting** 75 House districts, with 1-4 full-time staff in each;
- ✓ **Creating** a base of at least 100 activists (volunteers and paid) in every congressional district;
- ✓ **Hiring** state field directors in 36-40 states;
- ✓ **Placing** 2,500 workers in the field for the final October/November get-out-the-vote efforts;
- ✓ **Reassigning** 12-15 organizers and adding them to the 16-member political field staff, for a total of 31 traveling political operatives; and
- ✓ **Financing** a “massive media fund” to deliver the union’s political messages.⁷

Rosenthal, even before the election results were known, indicated what labor’s post-election response would be. He told the *Washington Post* that “The election in Oregon stands by itself” but that “At the same time, it’s a national election, and we hope it will be similar to Harris Wofford’s victory in 1991, and could well set the tone for 1996.”⁸

Warming up for November. The 1996 campaign is already underway in places other than Oregon. Some 400 unionists, under the banner of the AFL-CIO’s Stand Up campaign, protested outside a recent gathering of freshman Republicans in Baltimore, Maryland. While the protesters condemned all of the freshmen, a special target was Representative Bob Ehrlich (R-MD), who represents a nearby congressional district. Their signs carried messages urging voters to make Ehrlich a one-term Congressman. Similar treatment can be expected by 74 other House members who have been placed on the AFL-CIO’s national hit list.

The AFL-CIO’s renewed focus on politics is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the organization’s “Union Summer” campaign, which will use 1,000 or more college students and entry-level workers to help organize unions in non-union workplaces, will be

7 “Sweeney Announces Major Changes at AFL-CIO,” *BNA Daily Labor Report*, January 25, 1996, p. A2.

8 Thomas B. Edsall, “Candidate’s Backers Hope to Make Oregon a Liberal Proving Ground,” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 1996, p. A3.

diverted to politics in the fall. Originally, it appeared that this organizing campaign would be the crown jewel for the new leadership, but they have been forced to shift their attention to a playing field on which they believe they can win: the 1996 elections.

AFL-CIO Leadership “Impressed” with Union-Led Turmoil in France. Unfortunately, it appears that Sweeney and his new team at the AFL-CIO envision a much more aggressive and confrontational plan than previous union leaders have pursued. In a speech late last year before the Association for a Better New York, Sweeney provided the following insight into his thinking:

I was in Europe last week, traveling with President Clinton, and I couldn't help but be impressed with what is going on in France. In this country, when we're faced with cuts in vital services that benefit workers and the poor, we shut down a few parts of the government. In France, the workers shut down the country—even though only 8 percent of the work force is organized!⁹

While Sweeney expressed his hope that such a situation would not be necessary in the United States, even suggesting the idea is shameful. The chaos and violence of the national shutdown caused by French unions would not likely be admired by many Americans but appears to be a possible harbinger of the AFL-CIO's intentions.

Compelling Union Workers to Pay for Politics. The new AFL-CIO leadership has implicitly acknowledged their reliance on forced union membership and compulsory dues to promote their agenda. One of the resolutions proposed by the Sweeney slate at last year's convention lamented:

The November 1994 elections capped a decades-long decline in labor's political influence, a trend closely connected to the decline in union density. This erosion also reflects labor's regional weaknesses, the seeds of which were planted decades ago by our failure to make adequate in-roads in right-to-work states.¹⁰

By admitting a link between political weakness and voluntary fundraising, Sweeney's leadership is conceding that organized labor's strength lies where workers are compelled to pay union dues as a condition of employment.

COERCED AND HIDDEN FUNDING

Many of the AFL-CIO's political activities, like those of the federation's member unions, are financed not through voluntary PAC contributions by members, but by forced dues. Those activities that are issue-oriented (like television ads against Medicare reform, for example) often are paid for with these coerced dollars.

As Members of Congress consider campaign finance reform legislation, they should ask whether it is fair to force every union member to pay for the ideological warfare of

⁹ Sweeney's speech was made on December 6, 1995.

¹⁰ Text of resolution on “A New Voice for Workers in Politics,” October 25, 1995.

union officials. Corporations may not provide this sort of direct candidate support, and neither should their labor counterparts.

Campaign finance reform should not be entered into lightly. Meaningful reform must level the playing field and ensure that only voluntary contributions are used for politics. As the election season heats up, Members of Congress should note the activities of labor unions and remember where the money comes from.

CONCLUSION

The AFL-CIO has indicated clearly that aggressive political activities by labor unions—paid for on the backs of the union rank and file—will continue throughout this high-stakes election year. Organized labor's renewed political activism promises to be a major factor in the 1996 elections. While unions should be as free as other organizations to pursue their political goals, the coercive nature of union funding, and the regulatory advantages unions enjoy, are unjust and unfair.

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