Big Labor's Philosophic Landslide: How Unions Gained Ground in 1997

by Duane L. Knight

The year 1997 saw organized labor, led by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, make significant strides in boosting union membership and increasing labor's political clout. Thus, the union bosses' threat to businessmen continues to grow, as organized labor seeks to regain a portion of their New Deal-era dominance.

In retrospect, labor's startling successes in 1997 might have seemed improbable, given the outcome of the 1996 elections. Despite a direct investment of $35 million in House and Senate races, and hundreds of millions more in "in-kind" assistance, the majority of targeted incumbents withstood labor's electoral assault.

> The labor forces originally set their sights on more than 70 GOP-held seats but gained only 17. . . . The business coalition focused its resources in 35 districts where it could have the most impact on stemming the campaign of misinformation promulgated by the AFL-CIO. Pro-business representatives won 27 of those races, or 77 percent. The importance of that number is apparent in the 19-member margin of GOP control of the House for 1997–98." [1]

While its electoral assault fell short, however, big labor appears to have won a landslide victory where it really matters—in philosophy.

One obvious indication of this philosophic landslide can be found on Capitol Hill. Despite remaining under Republican leadership, action in the 105th Congress thus far demonstrates that the political tide has begun to shift in labor's favor. The most recent and stunning example of this shift is the defeat, last November, of bipartisan legislation to give the President "fast track" negotiating authority over trade agreements. It should be noted that the "fast track" measure itself would have had little bearing on the future content or prospects for "free trade" pacts entered into by the U.S. And from a capitalist perspective "free trade," as practiced by both political parties, is hardly free. Nevertheless, the defeat of this measure must be acknowledged as a triumph for labor. Note that the demise of "fast track" came almost exactly four years after Clinton and the GOP joined forces to pass NAFTA—over labor's objections. Thus, this reversal represents a concrete, highly visible example of labor's new-found political clout.

Much more impressive—although much lower-profile—are the various "anti-labor" measures that unions have thwarted in the 105th Congress. In the wake of the GOP's electoral victory, pundits initially predicted a "backlash" of "anti-labor" proposals. Instead, as *Business Week* reported last June,

> [GOP] threats ring increasingly hollow. An aggressive labor movement is flexing its muscle on Capitol Hill, sidetracking Republican bills and successfully parrying moves to curb union political activity. . . . Outside Washington, the AFL-CIO has mobilized a powerful grassroots lobbying machine to target vulnerable Republicans—and wayward Democrats—in their home districts. [2]

"Labor didn't lose the elections," Sweeney asserted. "Just look at the behavior of Congress this year, where you see no broadsides against working family programs." [3]

Sweeney's assertion rings true: There has been no backlash. There have been no efforts to scale back, much less repeal the absurd Davis-Bacon Act. The "Team Act"—which big labor condemned as an effort to substitute "employer-controlled" unions for "real representation"—languishes in the Senate. A measure to allow employees to receive worktime flexibility and time off rather than overtime pay has also stalled. And an attempt to legislate enforcement of the Beck decision was added only as an amendment to failed efforts to enact campaign finance reform.

Outside the "beltway," the unions' clout also continues to grow. Union organizing efforts, to which Sweeney has devoted enormous attention and massive resources, are beginning to make headway. The decades-long decline in union membership appears to have hit bottom; as of November 1997, the AFL-CIO could boast that

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> Some 1,479 NLRB union elections were held in 1997, up by 7.6 percent over 1,374 elections in 1996. Unions won 728 of those elections, up from 652 in the first half of last year. . . . the best winning percentages came in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries (60 percent of 52 elections); health care services (59 percent of 360 elections); and services excluding health care (59 percent of 815 elections). [4]

Observe that organizing efforts in the service sector are proving especially fruitful. Service-sector organization is crucial to big labor, since these jobs tend to be highly resistant to the employer countermeasures (e.g., offshore operations and automation) that employers have used in response to organizing campaigns in the traditionally unionized manufacturing sector.

But the NLRB statistics understate the successes of labor's organizing juggernaut. Union pressure—particularly the odious practice of "corporate campaigns"—has led to employers acceding to union representation based upon "card-signing" campaigns (in which workers merely sign cards stating their desire to have union representation), rather than the traditional, NLRB-monitored secret-ballot elections. The *New Republic* reports that

> Sweeney and [AFL-CIO organizing director Richard] Bensinger tell union leaders that they must learn to organize members without going through the NLRB. Specifically, they say, unions must bring pressure to bear on employers—through slick media campaigns, the manipulation of pension funds controlled by unions, peaceful [sic] trouble-making like picket lines and old-fashioned house calls to workers themselves. If the pressure gets intense enough, Sweeney and Bensinger say, then companies will come to see that recognizing unions is in their own best interest. [5]

Indeed, these rank-and-file campaigns, which bypass the NLRB and instead rely on corporate campaigns and threats against employers, have become the organizers' strategy of choice. The United Food & Commer-