

John Sweeney
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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I'm interviewing John Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO, here in the national headquarters in Washington, D.C. on November 7, 2005. Tell me what was your first contact with the leaders of 9to5 as you remember it?

I became president of SEIU in 1980. I believe that my first contact, no I'm wrong, I think while I was president of local 32B/32J in New York City, prior to coming to Washington, was my first contact with 9to5--when did the Equitable campaign start?

I think that was like late 70's I'm not exactly sure. I think there had been some discussions about forming a Local 925, right?

Yes, but I think that happened after 1980 but I think 9to5 was, I guess, quasi-independent in the late seventies. I remember when they had organized a unit of Equitable Life Assurance Society at Syracuse, New York, that that was in the late '70's and since the headquarters for Equitable was located in New York City I was directly involved in some of the mobilization and activities around that in New York and that's my earliest recollection.

What issues came up in those first discussions about 9to5 forming a union and affiliating with SEIU?

There was a, you know, pretty good history in terms of how workers really organized into true, legitimate labor organizations. The history and the culture, thinking of workers in different job classifications, different industries has been very varied and you look back on teachers as an example. Teachers in their earliest days of organizing became associations, became groups focused on the issues which concerned workers but they eventually came to the point where they realized that it's one thing to band together and talk about your issues and to talk to your employer about some of your grievances and so on, but in order to really achieve satisfaction you need to have true collective bargaining. That we've seen happen in so many different industries. We saw it with teachers, we saw it with nurses, to some extent we saw it with construction workers, as an example. So, I think, 9to5 workers were going through a similar process and they realized that eventually they had to achieve some form of collective bargaining and that they had to be part of a bigger, stronger movement, that they couldn't just do it by themselves, that they needed more resources. After considering different opportunities, they decided that SEIU would be the best direction for them to go.

Of course that has something to do with your support of what they were trying to do. Who was involved in the decision to grant District 925 national jurisdiction to organize clerical workers besides yourself as president of SEIU?

Well, it was certainly encouraged and motivated by me but being a democratic organization, we reached out to local unions who represented clerical workers to find out what their feelings were about this and then we brought a recommendation to our international executive board. And I think it was the foresight of the folks at SEIU who realized that there was tremendous potential here and stronger representation for clerical workers who might have already been members of SEIU--potential in terms of organizing greater numbers of clerical workers and bringing greater strength to the bargaining table.

Was there any controversy in SEIU about embracing 9to5 with this national jurisdiction?

There's always reservations with any group and especially since office workers were not the largest number of workers organized in those days. Some question as to the judgment but I would say that enough people understood the potential and realized that you had to take some risk and you had to be bold if you were really going to reach out to new groups of workers.

Now at the same time as this was happening in the period of 1981-83, I think, you were initiating other changes at SEIU, right? You had a vision--you were bringing in other groups--you had a vision of how SEIU could grow and change. Do you want to comment a little bit on that?

Sure. SEIU, going back several years, was a union that had great vision in terms of how they could grow and how they could better represent workers. And I think the most visible of that consideration is how in the mid-'60's when Dave Sullivan was the national/international president he recommended to the board that they change their name from the Building Service Employees International Union to the Service Employees--delete the word "building"--and from that time, a union which in the early sixties was down around 250-300,000, started to grow. George Hardy was his successor. George Hardy started reaching out more and more to public employees and to health care workers certainly because he came from a health care worker background in California. And, when I became president in 1980, the membership numbers were around 600-625,000. When I left in '95 to become president of the AFL-CIO, we were over a million, 1,100,000. The expansion, some of it took place in the original jurisdiction which was building service workers, but the biggest growth was in health care and public employment and that was when a lot of the office worker organizing was going on. And I think that the openness we had in terms of realizing that to grow and to expand we had to reach into other industries that were highly unorganized and where there was great potential. I think the results prove that that was a good judgment. But it also showed how interested SEIU was in organizing new workers and growing and that's the message that I've tried to drive in the AFL-CIO, trying to build a stronger culture of organizing and focus on the need for greater resources for organizing and better strategies at organizing. I look back on the 925 operation and the work that people like Karen Nussbaum and Jackie Ruff did in those early days as an indication of the kind of commitment that was there among mostly women leaders who were involved in the 925 organizing.

What were your impressions of Karen Nussbaum, Jackie Ruff, and Debbie Schneider as leaders and organizers?

I saw great potential in all three of those young women and many others who worked with them. 925 seemed to... I was going to say attract, but I guess, develop great young trade unionists at the time and I worked with a number of them personally in their individual campaigns. I was very much impressed but I was also very encouraging, I think, to them because I recognized that it was a great opportunity .

Was there any particular campaign that was memorable to you that you remember working with them on? There were so many.

I was involved in whatever way--they did the work--I was involved in whatever way I could be helpful. I mentioned earlier about Equitable...

You said that was '80-'81?

Right, and there I got directly involved to the extent of trying to move the management representatives since I had some credibility in New York and since I was able to get a dialogue going. But it was the Karens and the Debbies and the Jackies who really carried the ball. I remember going to Brown University on a campaign that they had up there and traveled to a number of different states to lend support, to lend whatever was necessary, whatever they really wanted in terms of focusing on those individual campaigns.

In your opinion, then, what did 925 ultimately achieve?

I think that 925 really set a focus on the need for office workers to organize, the need for addressing the issues of office workers, whether it was through collective bargaining or it was through public policy and legislation, and setting a greater focus in terms of what office workers were confronted with. It varied, you know, in terms of those in the private sector, those in the public sector, those who worked for colleges and universities. While they all shared in a profession that was similar, there were differences in terms of conditions and how they were treated with different employers. During this period of time the movie, "Nine to Five," came out and it set I think an even greater focus on the identity of the 9to5 organization because of the movie about office workers and the conditions they worked under. I remember going to some events around the movie including I guess it was the premiere in New York City, and meeting the three major stars of the movie and...

We can't forget Dabney Coleman. He helped make that movie work.
(Both laughing)

Those are very good memories of the role that those talented actresses portrayed but how in a subtle way it projected the reasons why office workers should be organized.

A couple more questions. What are your thoughts on why 925 didn't succeed in organizing clerical workers in the private sector, which had been one of their original goals?

I think that 925 succeeded in many ways. Probably the most important way was that it set a focus on the needs of office workers to organize and the conditions under which they worked. It is a monumental task to organize any group of workers and in an industry that is highly unorganized it takes years and years to really achieve the kind of success that you would like to achieve. But, you cannot really give up. I mean you have to find the new ways and the new approaches. I think that 925 in their years did establish different approaches in terms of techniques for organizing white collar workers, different approaches in terms of how you really find out "what do office workers want?", how do you use the most sophisticated techniques--polling and focus groups--and all that sort of stuff. That's a lot of the work 925 did do. There certainly is no giving up in terms of the labor movement's desire to organize clerical workers and there certainly is as much a need as ever, and probably even more need than ever because of some of the changes that have taken place in our economy and some of the changes that have taken place in terms of worker's lives. You look at the situation in terms of issues like overtime, pensions, that directly impact on many workers but do impact seriously on office workers and how they need protection, legislation, regulation. I mean safety and health as an example. We fought hard to get some provisions on safety and health that directly impacted on the lives of office workers.

Like the VDT (video display terminals) campaign?

Right, right. And the business of overtime, the business of what's happening to private pension plans, all of these are issues that these workers need. And when we're fighting for legislation to this day we're fighting for unorganized workers as much as we're ... on some of these issues we're fighting more for the unorganized worker than we are fighting for the organized worker. So, the labor movement hasn't lost sight of the goals and the mission of 925. There are individual unions, who are in SEIU or who are not in SEIU, that have a focus on organizing clerical workers. I mean, we have the Office and Professional Employees as one example, and AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) constantly organizing office workers in the public employment. AFGE (American Federation of Government Employees) fighting for office workers who have been treated horribly since Homeland Security on exempting them from federal laws, from federal collective bargaining, and so on. These are thousands and thousands of workers that could potentially have been in a 925 local. I can't second guess SEIU and some of the things that they're doing including leaving AFL-CIO. And, you know, why the 925 mission became less of a focus of theirs is hard to understand but that's their business.

What do think was the impact of 925 on SEIU as a single union and then maybe, if you want to, comment on the labor movement as a whole but let's start with SEIU because you were so closely associated with that?

I think SEIU...I think 925 had a very positive impact on SEIU. I think it made more and more of the leadership and the rank and file of SEIU pay more attention to the needs of office workers, to the goals of office workers and to the importance of office workers organizing in collective bargaining campaigns. I know, from personal experience, that people who had very little to do with the conditions of office workers except maybe for the conditions of the office workers in their own office, became more and more aware of office worker conditions and office worker issues as a result of the work, of their relationship to 925 as a local. When we had a demonstration at the Equitable Life building in New York, hundreds and hundreds of workers turned out for it and I would safely say that office workers there were in the minority. It was like a noon day rally on, I guess, 7th Avenue, New York City, not far from Rockefeller Center. These were workers who were building service workers in the local office building who came out on their lunch hour, they were construction workers, they were in all different kinds of classifications of work but they understood why these office workers were trying to organize. Even though they knew they were in Syracuse, they wanted them to be successful and, I think, that had a very positive impact on SEIU as well as the broader labor community.

Did these women also represent new leadership in the labor movement, you think, I mean which...

The leadership of 925?

Yeah, I mean, they began to actually become leaders at SEIU and increase the number of women leaders in the organization. Do you think that was important?

I, for one, had striven to really increase the number of women leaders, starting with our own local union, in SEIU itself, I mean, and have continued here at the AFL-CIO. There's no question about it that that had a positive effect on the thinking and the awareness of other male leaders. I think that people, you know, there was resistance, to some extent, on recognizing the fact that more and more, as our number of women workers grew, that the faces at the top had to reflect the faces of the rank and file. While there was some resistance to this, the fact of the matter is there was strong leadership at the top pushing and pushing ahead and it became more and more widely accepted how important that was.

Final question: Anything else you'd like to add to the story of the legacy of District 925?

I just want to say that I think that 925 was great local union and did some very valuable work. I think that it opened the minds of so many people about the importance of greater emphasis on organizing, a greater emphasis on representing workers in an industry that was highly unorganized and which had a tremendous majority of female workers. I think that the contributions that were made to the goals of the labor movement were very positive, and I don't think that anyone should feel that because 925 doesn't exist as a local... it doesn't exist as a local does it?...

Well, the Seattle local that was at the university kept the name 925 so they are called Local 925. That's the only one, yeah, it's now just another SEIU local.

And while there are local organizations that are identified as 925 there is not a national 925 at the present time, but the work of 925 must go on and must continue because it is so necessary for the issues of office workers to be a major focus of the American labor movement.

And I can't help noting as somebody who knew Karen Nussbaum in 1971, and all these years, that in a way her helping to spearhead the AFL's organization of Working America seems like a continuity in her tremendous desire to organize the unorganized.

And you know when I talk with Karen and meet with her and others and she talks a little bit about Working America there is a rarely a time that I don't reflect to myself on the work of 925. I identify what she and what we are doing with Working America as the same commitment, the same kind of dedication that was part of the success of 925. And I think that we've learned a lot from the 925 experience and I think that we have to be big enough to learn from our experiences but also take the best of what we've learned and put it to the task of organizing another group of workers.

OK, that seems like a good place to stop.