

**Remarks by John J. Sweeney  
President of the AFL-CIO  
Coalition of Black Trade Unionists  
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Thank you, Brother Lucy, for those kind words, and my thanks to the CBTU for inviting me to be with you and for your warm welcome this morning.

Just being with all of you in this hall this morning is a real inspiration because of the unique contribution the CBTU and its members make to our movement.

The AFL-CIO may be our central core, our nerve center, and our national and local unions may be our arms and legs, but they would not carry us very far without the CBTU and our other constituency groups -- you are our heart and our soul.

This convention is also unique in our labor galaxy, because it is one of the very few times and places that elected leaders as well as rank-and-file members and activists from many different unions and labor bodies come together on a national basis. Delegates from small unions sit right beside those from large unions and discuss our challenges and develop new strategies for dealing with those challenges.

CBTU is an organization driven by equality and you've built the kind of spirit and solidarity our entire movement needs — the egos are in check here .... no top-down directives telling you what to think and do ..... just unselfish men and women who really believe that every voice should be heard .... that working together really works.

President Lucy .... Presiding Officer Baker [Willie] ..... President Beverly [James] ..... Mayor Gordon [Phil] ..... Vice Mayor Johnson [Michael] ..... distinguished CBTU Board members ..... Brothers and Sisters ....

I bring you greetings from my partners at the AFL-CIO — Secretary-Treasurer Rich Trumka and Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson and from our AFL-CIO Executive Council. Several members of that Executive Council are with us here this morning and I want to thank them for their commitment and dedication as Vice Presidents of the AFL-CIO — Bill Lucy, Nat LaCour, Clayola Brown, Clyde Rivers, Baxter Atkinson and Ron Gettelfinger. In these troubled times, we're fortunate to have you as our leaders.

The Executive Council is extremely important to the labor movement; it governs the AFL-CIO between conventions. And when I ran for president of the AFL-CIO nearly 10 years ago, I pushed to expand it so that women, and men and women of color, could have a greater voice in the decisions we make.

There are some leaders in our movement who are now suggesting that the Executive Council be reduced in size or its responsibilities diminished in the name of efficiency and control.

... John Sweeney is not among them. At the AFL-CIO, we will not turn back the clock.

I've been asked to speak this morning on "Labor in a Hostile Environment." Labor is certainly facing a hostile POLITICAL environment --- and by "labor" I mean all of our unions and constituency groups and labor organizations, as well as our 13 million members and ALL working people.

Working families in our country are under attack as never before – we all know that.

As a result of conscious government policies, wages are declining .....the ranks of the unemployed are increasing ..... wage and hour and health and safety regulations are being shredded .... our best jobs are being shipped overseas ..... and being replaced by Wal-Mart jobs .... defined benefit pensions are being eliminated .... Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are under relentless assault.

No one has suffered more than the families of black workers.

Last year, 55 percent of the good union jobs we lost were held by black workers – 55 percent. Among black workers, unemployment is scandalously high, and in 2004, 100,000 black union women — many of them single mothers — were among those who lost their jobs.

Times are tough for all working families, but they are tougher for women and people of color, and for a nation that pretends to be caring and progressive, that's outrageous and shameful.

The gap between rich and the rest of us in our country is now the largest of any industrialized nation. African-American workers rank last in median weekly earnings. Our tax burden is being shifted away from those who already pay too little onto those who already pay too much. Nearly 47 million men, women and children have no health insurance coverage.

And our unions are under the biggest assault in 80 years. President Bush has made de-unionization a major theme in his administration -- a theme played out by withdrawing union rights from hundreds of thousands of federal workers, by issuing executive orders canceling vital union protections and by hamstringing us with unfair and unnecessary financial reporting requirements.

Now the Bush Agenda is being "taken local" by, among others, Gov. Schwarzenegger in California -- who's calling for a \$70 million special election this fall to consider ballot initiatives to destroy public employee pensions and to make it more difficult for unions to raise and spend money for member legislative and political action.

With all this, I am deeply disappointed that labor is also facing a hostile environment from within our own movement -- and it is tearing at the solidarity we depend upon to deal with the awesome challenges we are facing.

The hostility from inside our movement began to bubble up prior to the elections last fall when some of our affiliates began to publicly go after the AFL-CIO just as we began planning for the most important presidential election we've ever faced.

Despite this untimely distraction, the AFL-CIO responded to its critics with the most effective, unified member mobilization in our history. We had no alternative but to keep focused. CBTU, you understood the importance of this past presidential election -- and despite any challenges, obstacles or criticism you may have faced, you moved forward to stage 30 town hall meetings and worked tirelessly in your community to beat all records for voter registration and ballot protection and G.O.T.V.

And let me say this: Just as CBTU and our communities are the heart and soul of our movement --- if America is to regain its heart and soul ... it cannot do so without the active involvement and support of African Americans and all people of color in our elections and our nation.

Despite our best political effort ever, Kerry still lost, and several of our affiliates — including my own union — took their frustration and complaints public.

I shared their frustration at the time and I share it now. I think we all do, and I think we all agree we have to make substantial changes in the way we go about our work – the challenges facing working people demand it.

But I do not share their enthusiasm for re-shaping the labor movement from the top down, forcing mergers of unions, dictating bargaining standards and dividing and weakening the AFL-CIO itself. And I certainly disagree with the threat by my own union to disaffiliate from the AFL-CIO if their demands are not met — it is one of the most destructive actions I've ever witnessed and I hope the members of my union will reject it.

The real debate is this: What kind of labor movement do we want to be?

Do we want a movement that is run like a corporation, with decisions and orders handed down from the top?

Do we run the AFL-CIO and our unions like a business and encourage bigger organizations to gobble up smaller organizations the way Wal-Mart devours traditional retailers and entire communities?

Do we substitute corporate morals and values for our union ethics and values, and assume

that the means always justifies the ends we seek? Dr. King taught us that the ends *never* justify the means.

What kind of labor movement do we *need* to be? We need a labor movement that has a strong core, as well as strong affiliates, strong state and local organizations and strong constituency groups because it takes all of us doing what we do best together to win for working families.

We want a labor movement that emphasizes organizing new members and mobilization for political and legislative action, because it takes both to defeat the forces that have created the awful, hostile environment faced by workers and our unions.

We want a labor movement that is run from the bottom up --- that derives its power from active, involved members.

We want a labor movement and a nation that are inclusive rather than exclusive, that give everybody a seat at the table

We want a labor movement and a society that listen to the voices of the people who do the work --- regardless of the color of their skin, the accident of their birth or their selection of a partner.

To get there, I decided to invite suggestions and proposals from every corner of our movement. The response was incredible — 7,000 comments and ideas from individual union members; 23 extensive proposals from national unions; 40 from state federations and central labor councils and constituency groups and dozens more from AFL-CIO trade departments, Executive Council committees, partner organizations and academics.

Some of the ideas and proposals were more creative than others. Some were more practical than others. Many of them contained clear calls to concentrate our energies and resources on new ways to do politics and organizing -- new ways to really engage and empower our members. And virtually all of the respondents voiced confidence in a strong, active, responsible union movement that is --- above all else --- united.

One of the most thoughtful proposals came from the CBTU, analyzing the hostile environment we're in and making common-sense recommendations.

The CBTU proposal urged us to integrate constituency group leadership into our political and organizing programs and strengthen our movement at the state and local levels where our AFL-CIO organizations are in close touch with our allies and constituencies.

And I appreciated the words of your president when he wrote, and I quote: "I suggest the Federation leadership resist the call to reduce the size of the Executive Council. The added size

of the Council bears no relationship to the decline in labor's fortunes.”

He wrote: “I do not believe labor's problem revolves around structure. I believe to the extent we have a problem, it is around mission . . . while the composition of the Executive Council may be large, it reflects who we want to organize, mobilize and politicalize.”

Bill Lucy, we heard you. And at the AFL-CIO, the voices of women and members and leaders of color will be heard.

CBTU's ideas were made part of the recommendations from Rich and Linda and I for strengthening our movement in a proposal called “Winning for Working Families.” I hope all of you will go to our AFL-CIO website, read it and tell us what you think.

When it comes to organizing, we believe we need to use the AFL-CIO budget — which represents only 1% of what union members pay in dues to their unions — to leverage a much, much greater investment in organizing by our affiliates. If every affiliate of the AFL-CIO were spending 30 percent of its budget on organizing, it would result in more than \$500 million a year — just from national unions -- devoted to organizing, and that's where we need to be.

We want to create Industry Coordinating Committees so we can have more coordinated strength to organize and generate global strategies within all our major industries.

We want to encourage voluntary mergers of unions. And we plan to ratchet up the work of our special task force in exposing the only real welfare queen that ever existed in America --- Wal-Mart.

We believe, as Franklin D. Roosevelt believed, that no business which depends for its existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country and we intend to hold Wal-Mart to that standard.

We also want to change the way we engage our members for legislative fights and political fights from an every 2-year GOTV operation into a permanent mobilization machine that operates all the time -- one that educates and empowers our members and their families and helps them develop and unleash their own power.

We need to use our united capacity — which includes all of our state and local affiliates as well as our constituency groups — in a year-round fight for health care, good jobs, fair trade agreements, pension protections and Social Security and the freedom of workers to form and join unions.

We also need to concentrate more on struggles at the state and local level, to defeat issues that hurt families, to remove anti-worker, anti-union public officials from office, to organize at the grassroots and to prevent any and all right-wing, racist judges from being confirmed.

And we need to expand our new community affiliate, Working America, beyond the 900,000 members we recruited in little more than our first year -- as we know, we have to expand our reach into all our communities. And the success of that expansion is dependent on the direct involvement of CBTU and our other constituency groups as a central part of our fighting labor family.

We're going to revamp our state and local organizations and help them build the power they need to help us win the fight for working families -- community by community -- because they are the closest to those communities.

And we're going to put teeth into our commitment to diversity not only by increasing leadership training and development to help people of color move up and take the positions of leadership we need them in, but by requiring the Executive Council as well as state federations and central labor councils to develop plans to achieve targeted levels of diversity. And we're going to steal a page from civil rights history and require that women and people of color are represented proportionately in union delegations to AFL-CIO conventions.

Prior to our convention in Chicago in July, we are hosting a National Summit on Diversity in Our Union Movement, and I want to thank everyone who is already hard at work on program and turnout.

This is a unique opportunity for delegates from all levels of our movement to come together in the spirit of CBTU and develop new strategies to help us achieve diversity at every level of our movement -- not just a small group of thinkers sitting down in a room and conjuring up ideas .... but a broad gathering of thinkers and doers standing up together and turning ideas into real solutions .....

Brothers and sisters, the debate we are having about what kind of union movement we want may have contributed to a hostile environment, but it has also been productive.

We've thought hard about where we want to go -- and there's a lot of unity around the big ideas for change on the table today.

The office I hold is fair game. We should always be willing to try new leadership -- but I stand on my record and our proposals for change ... and I will not shrink from a challenge. Some people say I'm too "traditional" -- and in some ways, they're probably right. I grew up in a home where three things were paramount -- family, faith, and my father's union -- and those are still the cornerstones of my life. But brothers and sisters, this is not about me. In 1995 I said, "This is not about who heads the labor movement; this is where the labor movement is headed."

On the remaining issues of "where we're headed," I look forward to a healthy debate. But dropping out of our movement in times of adversity just because you disagree is

indefensible.

We deal with the hostile environment facing working families and our unions by standing together.

That's the way we combat the corporate forces that are trying to destroy our futures -- by fighting together.

That's the way we create a labor movement leadership whose faces reflect not only those of our members, but of the workers we want to have join us -- by changing together.

In the words of the historic motto of the UAW quoted by Bill Lucy, that's the way we organize, that's the way we politicalize and that's the way we MOBILIZE.

Thank you all. God bless you and you families, and God bless America.

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