

In Memoriam

JOHN J. SWEENEY: May 5, 1934 - February 1, 2021

John Sweeney, who led an era of transformative change in America's labor movement, died Feb. 1 at home in Bethesda, Md. He was 86.

Sweeney and his successor, current AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, ran alongside Linda Chavez-Thompson as a "New Voice" slate for the top jobs at the October 1995 AFL-CIO convention. Sweeney, who had then been president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) for 15 years and a member of the labor federation's Executive Council, de-



John Sweeney

feated former President Lane Kirkland's successor, Tom Donahue.

It was the first contested election in AFL-CIO history, and Sweeney became the third AFL-CIO president since the federation formed in 1955. (It was led by George Meany from 1955 to 1980, and Kirkland had been Meany's number two.) Two months before Sweeney's October 1995 election, Kirkland had resigned when it became clear he'd be ousted in the wake of the GOP's 1994 congressional sweep and the AFL-CIO's fail-

ure to stop the NAFTA pact or pass legislation banning the permanent replacement of strikers.

Under Sweeney's watch the AFL-CIO turned more towards organizing, activism in the streets, and alliances with progressive organizations, rather than going it alone, which hadn't worked well under Kirkland's reign. The federation beefed up its Organizing Institute, training hundreds of new organizers for affiliates, and it launched Union Summer, a program that brought in college students to support union campaigns. It expanded its Executive Council to bring more women and people of color into leadership positions.

Ironically, those same complaints about inside baseball versus organizing were among the official reasons five unions gave for leaving the AFL-CIO to form

Change to Win in 2005, during Sweeney's tenure. Change to Win now has three unions, while a fourth, the Communications Workers, belongs to both labor federations.

SEIU's departure for Change to Win forced Sweeney to personally switch unions, to the Office and Professional Employees. He retired from the AFL-CIO presidency in 2009, and Trumka succeeded him.

He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from then President Barack Obama in 2011.

JOHN JOSEPH SWEENEY was born May 5, 1934, in the Bronx, one of four children of Irish immigrants. His father was a bus driver, his mother a domestic worker. His family moved to Yonkers, N.Y., when he was 11.

As a young man, Sweeney

held jobs as a grave-digger and building porter while studying economics at Iona College in New Rochelle, New York, where he joined a union for the first time. He graduated from Iona in 1956. He worked briefly for IBM before taking a job as a researcher for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. In 1960, he went to work for a New York doormen and janitors union, Local 32BJ of the Building Service Employees International Union, the forerunner of the SEIU. He became the head of the local in 1976, led several successful citywide strikes, then moved to Washington, D.C., in 1980, when he became the union's international president. Under his tenure, SEIU devoted up to 30% of its budget to organizing and nearly doubled its membership.

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ANNE FEENEY

July 1, 1951 - February 3, 2021

Anne Feeney, a folk singer-songwriter and self-described rabble-rouser from Pittsburgh, died Feb. 3 of complications from COVID-19. She was 69.

Feeney performed for striking workers on countless picket lines, in union halls, and at many major labor movement events, including the WTO demonstrations in Seattle, Solidarity Day in Washington, D.C., and the 2004 March for Women's Lives.

Over the course of her career, she released 12 albums, played more than 4,000 shows across North America and Europe, and shared stages with Pete Seeger, Loretta Lynn, John Prine, Toshi Reagon, The Mammals, Dan Bern, the Indigo Girls, and Billy Bragg. Her biggest hit, "Have You Been to Jail for Justice?" was also recorded by Peter, Paul and Mary. She was a regular at the Oregon Country Fair and other festivals. Feeney served as president of the Pittsburgh Musician's Union from 1981 to 1997, the first and only woman to hold that position.

ANNE FEENEY was born July 1, 1951, in Charleroi, Pennsylvania, and raised in Pittsburgh's Brookline neighborhood. Her grandfather, William Patrick

Feeney, was a first-generation Irish immigrant, a mineworkers' organizer, and violinist who used music to support working-class organizing.



Anne Feeney

Feeney graduated from the University of Pittsburgh School of Law in 1978 and practiced as a trial lawyer for 12 years, primarily representing refugees and survivors of domestic violence.

She launched her professional recording career in the late 1980s and in 1991 began traveling around the country to perform at labor conventions, picket lines and festivals.

She married labor attorney Ron Berlin, and had two children, Dan and Amy. They were divorced in 1995. In 2002, she married Swedish political artist Julie Leonardsson.

In 2005, she received the Joe Hill Award from the Labor Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Her career was put on hold in 2010 when she was diagnosed with small cell lung cancer. She recovered and continued to tour until the cancer returned in 2015.

Feeney was living in a senior care facility, where she suffered a fractured vertebrae that sent her to a nursing facility. She was diagnosed with a COVID-related pneumonia in late January.

She will be buried in Mt. Olive, Illinois, next to one of her greatest heroes, Mother Jones.