

AFL-CIO President Sweeney Steps Down

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PITTSBURGH (AP) -- John Sweeney, stepping down after 14 years at the helm of the AFL-CIO, urged union leaders Sunday to keep up the fight to reform health care and overhaul labor laws so workers can form unions more easily.

"We're on the cusp of the greatest advance in labor law reform in 70 years, but we're taking heavy fire from the corporate captains of deceit," Sweeney told about 1,000 union members at the federation's convention.

He said efforts to pass health care legislation have been met with "a firestorm of meanness, stoked by politicians playing on fear, racism, nativism and greed."

Health care and labor laws lie at the forefront of the AFL-CIO's political agenda as it welcomes new leadership for the first time since 1995. Sweeney's longtime deputy, Richard Trumka, is expected to be named AFL-CIO president on Wednesday.

In his keynote address, Sweeney reflected on his legacy of building the AFL-CIO into a political powerhouse for workers' rights and social change. He noted the major role union activists played in electing President Barack Obama and a Democratic-controlled Congress.

But he sidestepped any mention of the steady decline in union membership under his tenure, as millions of U.S. manufacturing jobs disappeared and businesses grew more adept at fending off union organizers.

An internal dispute over whether Sweeney was doing enough to bring in new members led several of the AFL-CIO's largest unions to split from the federation four years ago.

Trumka, the former head of the United Mine Workers, has pledged to make the AFL-CIO even more aggressive politically and spend more resources wooing younger workers.

While there is little drama at the convention this year -- Trumka is running unopposed -- labor leaders believe they have a historic chance to swell their ranks after decades of decline. The federation plans to ramp up efforts in Congress to pass the Employee Free Choice Act, which would make it easier for workers to organize unions.

The measure has long been atop labor's agenda, but leaders say there has never been a better chance to pass it. Business groups strongly oppose the bill and it has stalled this year without the support of some moderate Democrats.

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In other action, the federation could make official its push for Obama to pass a second economic stimulus package. The AFL-CIO may also pass a resolution seeking a government-run option for health care reform. Some labor leaders, including Trumka, have criticized Democratic lawmakers for backing away from earlier plans for a public option.

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