

Dennis Van Roekel
AFL-CIO Constitutional Convention Remarks
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It is such an honor to be here with you. I so appreciate President Sweeney's invitation. Thank you, Randi, for a very kind introduction.

She is some sort of leader, Randi Weingarten. Yes, she is. This is unique and special for me in a variety of ways, one I didn't anticipate. When Rich mentioned that the doors would be locked, I thought this gives new meaning to a captive audience. I was hoping he didn't have to lock the doors to keep you here.

To John Sweeney, I just want to say a huge thank you, a huge thank you, for a lifetime of advocacy and commitment to the labor movement and to working families all across this country. What a job he has done.

And just as my predecessor in my union, Reg Weaver -- John, as president of the AFL-CIO, endured eight years of the most anti-union, anti-working family administration we've seen in a long, long time. But through that he never, never wavered. He was always there. And every working person in America, whether unionized or not, owes him a debt of gratitude for what he did.

And to top it all off, he's just a plain, good guy. What a nice guy John is. And personally, I attribute some of that to his great wife Maureen, who is a former teacher in New York City, and that education influence, I know, played a big part in making him who he is.

And what a big team! John, Rich, and Arlene have positioned the AFL-CIO and the entire labor movement to be ready for this next decade.

The change in our world has been dramatic since the fall of 2008. And we must be ready, as unionists and the labor movement around this nation, to take advantage of that time.

Loretta Lynn made a lot of money being proud of being a coal miner's daughter. Now, I don't know how Rich sings, I have not heard him, I've not had that opportunity. But I know he is proud to be the son and grandson of a coal miner.

And I know he was taught well about what it means to have a work ethic, to have commitment and passion to help people, and to make this country better.

A few weeks ago Rich was talking about our need to organize young workers who work in occupations that are not traditionally unionized. And he talked about creating a vision for the 21st century unions and labor movement. I share that desire and commitment to creating a 21st century labor movement.

As you know, in the last 40 years membership in labor unions has declined. Since 1967, U.S. workers work 167 hours more every year. And that's per month. But even worse, that extra work has produced extra wealth, but it has not gone to the workers.

The Economic Policy Institute says that in 1965 a CEO's salary was 24 times an average worker's salary. By 2005, it was 262 times the average worker's salary. What that means is, if you exclude weekends, a CEO makes as much in one day as the average American worker does in a whole year. This is not acceptable in America. It is not the way to build a middle class. It is not what unions should be about.

Einstein said the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over and expect different results. What that says to me is that we must find a way to change, change this country's attitude toward unions and attitude toward the middle class.

And in order to make that change happen, we need power the ability to act, to influence, to make a difference. And that kind of power comes from unity.

You see, the power of the American dream is not that some get extraordinarily wealthy and the rest don't. The power of the American dream is that ordinary people like you and me can find a way to have decent wages and benefits so that we can provide for our own family. That is not what's happening in this nation.

And I'll make two very easy points. Number one, you cannot have a middle class without labor unions in America.

And number two, as Father O'Malley said, in these times of economic woes, the labor unions are not the problem, they are the solution to our future.

When I talk about change for my own union, the National Education Association,

much has changed in the last ten years. You've heard some of that referenced already.

You know, ten years ago if I had been at the AFL-CIO Convention, although it was in '97 -- I guess 12 years ago -- there would have been few, if any, members of the National Education Association in the room, but today there are quite a few.

Ten years ago there were less than 50,000 members in merged locals, unions that had both NEA and AFT affiliation, and they were pretty much scattered around the country.

As Randi mentioned, we now have four merged state affiliates with over 600,000 members: New York, Minnesota, Florida, and Montana.

And today there are 18 locals, some 26,000 members who are in solidarity partnerships affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Over 650,000 members of the NEA are in local unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Much has changed in ten years. And, in addition, NEA joined with the AFL-CIO and Change to Win and other unions to form the National Labor Coordinating Committee.

I can't tell you what a great sense of power and possibilities there are when we get together. When that group sat down with President Obama and Secretary Solis, we sat there collectively representing 16 million unionized workers in America. It gives us a voice, it gives us possibilities and opportunities.

And we need to use that unity and power. We need decent health care, and it should not tax our benefits. We need the Employee Free Choice Act, and we need it now, not next year, not next month. We need it now.

We need all of this all of this to build a different America.

These are tough times for our nation and its citizens. And, of course, that means us. The 2008 elections were all about change. Like your theme here, "Making Change Now." I've always been fascinated by people's reaction to change. When you read about it or listen to people who talk about it, one says that change causes stress, so you need to learn how to manage stress.

But then I read another author who says "Oh, no, no, no, it's not change that causes stress, it's resisting change that causes stress."

Because, you see, change is an ever-happening thing, you can't stop it. And I love their P.S. They said if you don't believe me, look at your high school graduation picture.

You can't stop change. Others when they talk about change say it's personality based. There are early adapters and there are resisters. Gilbert says, "Change is good. You go first."

This kind of epitomizes many people's attitudes. If only someone else would change, and they don't quite finish the sentence and say, "Then I wouldn't have to."

But the point is we all must change if we want a different future for America, if we want a different place for the middle class in America than what has happened in the last 30 years, we must change. My own theory of change is different from all of those. My own theory of change, and whether you accept it, reject it, resist it, or grab hold of it, all depends on just one thing: Your level of satisfaction.

Are you satisfied with what America's delivering to the working families of America? I'm not. I'm not satisfied at all. In fact, when you leave this convention, I hope not only are you really dissatisfied, I hope you are gloriously dissatisfied. So dissatisfied that you will absolutely do whatever it takes to change what is happening in America.

So let us be the voice of the uninsured, the unorganized, the dispossessed. Let us be the voice of the millions in the middle class, the unsung heroes who have made this country great but don't get their share of credits and rewards. I say to you right now, in 2009, this is our time. This is our opportunity. It is our responsibility to make the change. I say to you, 20 or 30 years from now, when I'm sitting on that porch in a rocker -- probably a glass of bourbon in one hand -- and I read and hear what people say about us, those of us that are here in the fall of 2009, I hope no one says that we were timid or shy.

I hope the way they describe this new, unified labor movement in America is that we had the audacity to dream big. We had the courage to act, and we had the power to make it happen.

In the words of President Obama: Yes, we can!

Thank you, brothers and sisters of the AFL-CIO. Thank you.