August 10, 2011

Dear AFT Colleague:

This email has more information than I normally distribute all at once but the issue is so important that I feel compelled to do that now. We all need to be more informed about the political process if we have any hope of maintaining our key benefits and making improvements where possible. I am going into some detail describing what happened at the recent NJ AFL-CIO political endorsement convention in the hopes it will help AFT unit members better understand how their union works and how they can help it be more effective.

Last Thursday, more than 600 member-delegates of the NJ AFL-CIO met in Trenton for an endorsement convention, where they discussed the records of candidates for this fall's NJ Assembly and Senate elections and decided who should be endorsed by their organization. (http://www.njaflcio.org/pages/news/423)

I was fortunate to be selected as one of the 59 delegates representing the AFT-NJ, State Federation, and I remarked to a brother that it was the first one of these I had ever attended. He responded that it was the first Committee on Political Education (COPE) endorsement convention ever held by the NJ AFL-CIO. In previous years, a brief session at the NJ AFL-CIO's annual convention held in June in Atlantic City was spent on making candidate endorsements but this year, because of the furor over how many Democrats supported and voted for the health care and pension bill passed a few weeks ago, it was appropriate to hold a special COPE convention this year.

A bit of background on the COPE endorsement process is necessary before I describe this tumultuous and raucous meeting. There are those who might feel that a decision by the NJ AFL-CIO to either endorse or not endorse a particular candidate makes no difference in the grand scheme of things, but it is important to many, particularly the candidates standing for election. If there ever was a time when the union members voted for whomever their union endorsed, that does not happen today. However, many politicians feel it is important to have endorsements that they use in both their campaign literature and in their speeches. An endorsement doesn't translate directly into votes, money or campaign workers, but it certainly contributes to those areas.

Because of the number of union members represented by the Council, we were entitled to 11 of the 59 votes allocated to the AFT-NJ SF and our collective decision was that a candidate who voted to legislate our health benefits instead of negotiating must not receive an endorsement from the NJ AFL-CIO.

To be clear, that did not mean we would be working for or donating to Republicans, all of whom voted for the bill that passed both the Assembly and Senate. If even one of the two houses goes to the Republicans we will face a major crisis. Our decision was intended to send a message to those legislators, many of who claim to be unionists and supporters of our right to negotiate, that they cannot ignore one of the core principals of trade unionism without paying a price.

The NJ AFL-CIO is comprised of 148 individual unions and central labor councils across NJ. The size of the organization has declined as fewer and fewer workers were in unions but it still represents more than one million workers in NJ and has had a significant influence on politics in our State. The leadership of the NJ AFL-CIO has had a working relationship with every
previous NJ governor, whether Democrat or Republican, which was beneficial to not only union members but all citizens of our state. As you know, that is no longer the case.

Given our current governor's attitude toward unions in general and public-employee unions in particular, we never expected any support from him. But, much to our surprise, in the recent battle, he managed to not only co-opt Senate President Steve Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Shelia Oliver, but also enough other Democrats to support and ram through legislation which imposed rather than negotiated changes in our health benefits and pension plans. Our willingness to accept reasonable and responsible changes to our benefits made no difference to all Republican legislators and too many Democrats as well.

Our overtures were rejected by both Sweeney and Oliver, despite the fact that we made clear our intention to do whatever was necessary to communicate our displeasure if those individuals did not support the position of public workers. They did not heed our pleas and the results of the endorsement conference proved that we followed through on our promise.

The by-laws of the national AFL-CIO require a 2/3 vote of delegates to endorse a candidate for election and achieving that level of support was critical at yesterday’s meeting. The AFL-CIO executive committee was supposed to meet for 1 hour before yesterday’s general meeting to prepare their recommendations but it took them 4 hours to generate the list. When the meeting was called to order at 3 pm instead of the scheduled starting time of 2, there was a lot of anticipation in the air.

The NJ AFL-CIO is comprised of 2 major groups, the private and public sector unions and the private sector is made up of the building trades unions and others such as the service employees, musicians, and bakers. The building trades unions have been the very vocal about the state workers and supported efforts to reduce our benefits and pay increases. It was anticipated that their group would be strongly opposed to any efforts to block the endorsement of key Democrats such as Senators Steve Sweeney and Donald Norcross, brother of the South Jersey Democratic power broker George Norcross.

After all 3 hours had elapsed and the smoke cleared, Democrats running for either the Senate or Assembly were endorsed in 74 individual races but none of the 22 Democrats who supported the Christie-Sweeney-Oliver pension and health benefits bill were endorsed by the conference.

There was no controversy when Assembly Speaker Oliver was not endorsed by the delegates without even a roll call vote, but that was not the case with Senate President Sweeney and Senator Donald Norcross.

The AFL-CIO executive committee recommendation that Senate President Steve Sweeney of the 3rd legislative district be endorsed was moved and seconded and the floor opened for discussion. CWA leader Rae Rader's strong comments against endorsing him were greeted by both loud boos and shouts of support. Following her, Senator Sweeney, a delegate from his South Jersey ironworker's union, explained why he deserved the endorsement of the NJ AFL-CIO and what he has done for unions as a legislator. He neglected to mention the fact that in 2006 he teamed up with 2 Democratic Assemblymen to support significant reductions to the salaries and benefits of state workers. In addition to that anti-union position, he opposed paying state workers for the days they were furloughed in July of that year when the State shut down for financial reasons. Although Sweeney has been the business agent and treasurer for the Ironworker's union, Local 399, in Gloucester county, many public sector unions felt he did not represent their interests and needed to be sent a message.
A roll call vote of the 600+ delegates resulted in 61% recommending endorsement of Sweeney, short of the 2/3 required. Sweeney left the meeting after his defeat. Donald Norcross, another turn-coat Democrat, Sweeney friend and powerful politician from South Jersey also fell short of endorsement with 56%. He too left the hall shortly after being rebuked.

Immediately following the failure of the Norcross endorsement by the convention, a large number of delegates, representing primarily the building trades unions such as laborers, sheetrockers, sheetmetal workers, etc, walked out of the hall. Many of those unions had already endorsed Democrats such as Oliver, Sweeney and Norcross who were opposed by public worker unions. This was further evidence of the divide amongst different unions in the AFL-CIO and an issue which will be very difficult to address. The unions which walked out have opinions similar to those held by too many voters that NJ public workers have it "too good" and need to be willing to settle for less. It is up to us to convince them they are wrong but it will not be an easy task.

The NJ AFL-CIO represents 1,000,000+ workers and is made up of a number of unions such as those representing sectors such as public employees, building trades, transportation, health care, service and industrial and manufacturing. Because many unions are amalgamated today, meaning that they represent workers from different occupational categories, it is not possible to divide up the AFL-CIO into clearly defined groups of workers. For example, our group, AFT-NJ has public workers as well as health-care workers, not all of whom are public sector employees. The United Auto Workers (UAW) in NJ also represents workers in other areas besides manufacturing.

The NJEA, which is not a part of the NJ AFL-CIO, endorsed 68 candidates for this fall's legislative election but also refused to endorse any Democrat who failed to support unions in this recent battle although it did endorse 2 Republicans at its convention last week.

Given the diverse nature of workers represented by the AFL-CIO, it is not possible there will always be 100% agreement on every issue. But we need to be united on the core principles such as collective bargaining and solidarity to the extent possible. Resolving this issue will be difficult but it must be done if workers are to continue having a positive influence in NJ.

The Council’s COPE committee will meet this Thursday to identify candidates felt to be deserving of the our endorsement. The decisions will be presented to Council delegates at the September 16th meeting when list of candidates who deserve our endorsement and support will be identified.

I plan on having the Local's executive committee review legislative candidates and prepare recommendations for our membership to consider at our first meeting at 3 pm on Wednesday, September 21. After discussing the recommendations and the voting records of the candidates, we will identify those to endorse and support financially. Information on this matter will be distributed prior to the meeting for your review.

On a personal note, I found the endorsement convention to be invigorating but frustrating as well. It pointed up the difficulty of focusing the energy and efforts of an organization given the diverse interests of the various constituencies. Somehow more of us need to be willing to being involved and committed to the cause if we are to have any hope of prevailing in the battles ahead. A small group of dedicated people will not be sufficient.

In Solidarity,
Ralph Edelbach, President, TCNJFT, Local 2364 AFT (AFL-CIO)

News articles related to AFL-CIO endorsements -
dorsement.html
http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/11/0805/0245/