

Building a Progressive Labor Movement for 25 Years

It will be a bittersweet celebration, February 18, when Jim Cavanaugh retires from his post as president of the South Central Federation of Labor.

After three solid decades of organized labor taking it on the chin the South Central Federation of Labor has weathered the storm well, coming out all that much stronger and leading the way forward, in large part as a result of Cavanaugh's 25 years of leadership.

Jim shunned the limelight and the role of the 'charismatic leader' in deference to workers and their unions, preferring instead to counsel and provide meaningful support that went beyond the usual platitudes and rallying cries. Cavanaugh never liked to preach to the choir.

There were victories and heart-breaks alike, mobilizing support for a successful strike for sick pay by 200 Aramark laundry workers in 1999, and the painful defeat after a nearly year-long strike at Tyson Foods in 2003.

The labor struggles and SCFL's support for them in the Eighties and Nineties defined the word Solidarity for many local labor activists: the P-9 strike at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota; striking Pittston miners in western Virginia; and the infamous lockout at A.E. Staley in Decatur, Illinois.

Cavanaugh and SCFL brought the heartland labor wars into public view, people rallied and road-tripped, and the material aid and moral support flowed. Those years, I believe, helped to form the class consciousness we see in Wisconsin today, and growing out nationwide.

A Union City

Madison's long history of union activism led SCFL to be one of the first labor councils in the country to commit to the AFL-CIO's Union Cities program. Implementation of that program resulted in SCFL being



SCFL's Retiring President Jim Cavanaugh

one of the first 14 labor councils in the country designated a "Union City" by the AFL-CIO at its 2001 Convention.

The essence of being a Union City meant building solidarity, increasing labor's mobilization capacity, increasing the movement's diversity, having an effective political program, and building a movement that fights for workers' rights whether or not they were members of a union.

Growing the Labor Movement

"The Greater Madison Area labor community is as strong, vibrant, and effective as it is, because of the leadership and efforts of Jim Cavanaugh. That was evident in last spring's Wisconsin Uprising," say John Matthews, executive director at Madison Teachers, Inc. (MTI).

While MTI was not an "AFL-CIO" union, in 1996 Matthews sought out an interaction agreement with SCFL, seeing the obvious need for concerted solidarity and political action at the local level. Cavanaugh had similar successes adding to the SCFL fold.

In recent years SCFL's jurisdiction

has also grown to cover a six county area under the New Alliance, acquiring and developing new activists, and extending labor's sphere of influence outside of the Capital city. Cavanaugh nurtured the already active Dodge County Labor Council, as it became a SCFL Chapter and an even more powerful force in its locality.

Behind the Scenes

"Few realize that Jim Cavanaugh had a strong voice on the national level in attempting to re-fashion and re-structure the American Labor Movement and make strong Labor Councils key to rebuilding union power," remarked long-time friend and confidant David Newby, who is now President Emeritus of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO.

Truth be told, it was Cavanaugh and a small group of other like-minded labor leaders from around the U.S., who pushed the AFL-CIO to direct more resources into labor councils, and who actually "wrote the book" for both the Union Cities and New Alliance programs. Generally the terms set forward were, to win additional resources certain movement-building steps were a prerequisite, and with additional resources must come accountability. These models and ideas, stemming in part from Cavanaugh's experience in Madison, have become a progressive model for building a more cohesive boots-on-the-ground labor movement in other states.

Community Outreach

On the ropes in an increasingly blighted economic landscape at the turn of the century, labor nationwide began seeking moral backing in their communities. In Madison that took the shape of reaching out to communities of faith, whose doctrines and traditions had similar underpinnings of fairness and support for workers' rights. In that vein, Cavanaugh shep-

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herded several labor rights organizations that have broadened, deepened, and sustained labor's reach.

Formed in 2001, a chapter of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice (ICWJ) began discussing the worsening plight of immigrant workers who came to the area seeking a better life for their families.

The ICWJ launched the Latino Workers Project to gather data and workers' testimony, and to offer recommendations. The Project concluded that workers needed ways they could learn about their rights and how to redress workplace injustices.

That led to the creation of the Workers' Right Center in 2002, one of the first worker centers in a medium sized U.S. city.

"Jim always had a broad and all encompassing view, recognizing that the central labor council's role is to stand with all workers," said Patrick Hickey, director of the Workers' Rights Center.

"Over the years I have seen him push for a comprehensive approach to improving working conditions and demanding dignity for workers in every sector. His experience, strategic expertise, community contacts, and calm but firm approach to issues, has served the labor community and Madison at-large very well."

Cavanaugh and the Labor Council came out early and strong in support of the immigrant worker movement. When two dozen Latino custodians were fired at the University over questions of documentation, Cavanaugh and the local union pulled together a powerful coalition to fight back, ultimately winning a large financial settlement for the workers. Over the years SFCL has remained in the forefront of the fight for immigrant workers' rights and a path forward to citizenship.

Electoral & Legislative Action

Seeing a need for greater electoral coordination, in the mid-90s Cavanaugh brought together larger unions and other organizations into a Labor Political Coalition to plan, strategize and mobilize union votes with mailings, phone banks, and one-on-one workplace contacts.

An example of success in electing union-friendly politicians was passage, by large margins, of one of the most comprehensive Living Wage ordinances in the country by the Madison Common Council and the Dane County Board. Passed in 1999, the ordinances secured an



Cavanaugh at Amarak Laundry Workers Strike, 1999.

indexed Living Wage for employees of firms contracting with local government or receiving economic development assistance.

Cavanaugh and SCFL also fought in lengthy battles for a higher minimum wage in Madison, and an ordinance requiring employers to provide a minimum level of paid sick leave. The fight for a higher minimum wage was initially won in 2005, while the paid sick leave ordinance lost by one vote in the Madison Common Council in 2007. Since then, such local ordinances upholding better work standards have been outlawed by the Doyle and Walker administrations.

Unhappy with the growing corporate influence in the Democratic Party and in government at all levels, Cavanaugh supported nationwide efforts aimed at forming an independent pro-labor political party. While nationwide efforts were largely abandoned, Progressive Dane was formed as a result, and it continues to exert an agenda of strong support for workers' rights today.

Education, Diversity and Youth

SCFL and Cavanaugh cultivated a mutually supportive relationship with the Student Labor Action Coalition (SLAC) on the UW-Madison campus, which played a lead role anti-sweatshop activism, raising the bar for overseas makers of collegiate apparel and enlightening the public on the issue of labor rights in the global economy. As a result, dozens of SLAC alumni chose to invest their futures in the labor movement and social justice activism, and have struck out to the four corners of the world in that pursuit.

Much more could be said about Cavanaugh's efforts in the area of labor education (especially labor history), support for organizing new workers, promoting racial diversity, and more.

Last but certainly not least, there is now the finally completed Madison Labor History Mural spanning three walls at the entrance to the Madison Labor Temple, truly a testament to the labor of Jim's love.

So, props to Jim! You'll always be remembered for having a steady hand on the rudder, a clear vision forward for a better future for all, tireless dedication, and a wonderful finesse in bringing out the best of our labor movement.

Labor's Best Kept Secret, a Respected Community Asset

Few are truly aware of the behind the scenes role SCFL's retiring president Jim Cavanaugh has played in building a Progressive Movement infrastructure and in elevating the Common Good for the broader community.

As if the day-to-day duties of a labor council president weren't enough – today serving 91 unions and over 30,000 workers – Cavanaugh invested in many other projects, often working 50-60 hour work weeks and taking too few vacations (or, was that a conference?).

Here's just a flavor, with some words from those who worked most closely with Jim:

Citizen Action

Even in retirement, Cavanaugh plans to build on two decades of involvement in Citizen Action of Wisconsin, which he's served in various offices, including twice as president, and now as a member of the executive committee.

Citizen Action is the first and most sustained labor-community alliance in Wisconsin, seeking to unite all the other progressive constituencies in common purpose. Its agenda includes support for health care reform, good jobs, quality public education, campaign finance reform and support for family farmers.

"Jim believed that an essential element of a strong labor movement is the nurturing of strong labor-community alliances which unites the power of all progressives to create a more just and equitable society," says Citizen Action's executive director Robert Kraig. "That's a fundamental insight even more relevant today, as we face an unprecedented onslaught from a union busting governor."

Cavanaugh's commitment to this model says a great deal about his vision for the labor movement and a progressive society, says Kraig.

"When tens of thousands of average citizens took to the streets to defend labor rights last year, I think they were realizing a vision of democracy and solidarity that Jim Cavanaugh has been working for his entire career."

Cavanaugh has always been engaged,



says Kraig. "If I send out a strategic plan, he is typically the first to respond, and always with extremely helpful insights. His leadership and wisdom, and the generous dedication of his valuable time, has greatly improved the work of the organization in countless ways."

Institute for Wisconsin's Future

In 1994, Cavanaugh helped to found the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, a think tank dedicated to advancing a progressive agenda in the state. Most recently, IWF's work has centered on corporate tax avoidance and fair tax policies, and support for funding high quality public education and public services.

"Jim is the go-to person in every crisis and has helped IWF grapple with many challenges, including nurturing relationships among organizations to ensure that issues won out over turf fights," says IWF's executive director Karen Royster.

"Jim made sure IWF stayed focused on fighting for policies that make positive differences for working families. He's a no-nonsense, committed leader willing to work hard to achieve what he can," she said.

Madison College (MATC)

For close to 15 years Cavanaugh served in various offices on the board of Madison College (MATC), including a term as its chair.

In 2008, Cavanaugh was nominated for a statewide Board Member of the Year award. Part of the text supporting his nomination reads:

"He is often a guiding light in helping board members understand how the college has operated in the past, and has a keen perception of how the board should act in the future. When the board has dis-

agreed on how to effectively deal with critical issues, Jim has provided the leadership to bring the group together and deal with each issue as a team. He is skilled at de-escalating tension at board meetings when needed, and has served as a mentor, coach, and guide to board members during challenging times. When Jim speaks, board members listen."

United Way

The United Way of Dane County has also benefited from Cavanaugh's involvement, on its board (1987 to 1994) and serving on UWCD's Vision Council since its formation in 2002. Over the years, the Vision Council has facilitated the investment of almost one billion dollars back into Dane County through programs at United Way partner agencies.

"Jim has been a long-term, strategic partner in developing and executing on our community's Agenda for Change goals. As a former board chair who has also served in many other volunteer roles, Jim has brought his leadership capabilities to make our community a better place in which to live, work, raise a family, and retire," says Leslie Ann Howard, President and CEO of United Way of Dane County.

Working with United Way, Cavanaugh was helpful in laying the groundwork for a decision to use all union labor to build a new \$3.2 million facility, the Anderson United Way Center, in 2000. In addition, a partnership between organized labor and United Way, which has existed for over fifty years, has remained strong. As a result, labor and the United Way both benefit from the work of the AFL-CIO Community Services Liaison, a position funded by the United Way that reports to the South Central Federation of Labor.