

Interview Date: 6/21/06

Subject: Dennis Hughes; President, NYS AFL-CIO, 1999-present; Political Director and Assistant to the President, AFL-CIO, 1985-1990; Electrician and of International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, 1968-1995. Elected to Board of Directors of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, January, 2003.

Dennis Hughes has worked with CSEA in various capacities since what he called, "the start of the rebirth of the labor movement," in New York State from 1980 to the present. Hughes focused on the impressive leadership that CSEA has shown throughout the history of the organization, mentioning the qualities of its leaders, as well as the professionalism and support it has provided to the AFL-CIO and other unions over the years.

In his interview, Hughes remembered the strong relationship former CSEA President Bill McGowan had with Hughes' predecessor, Ed Cleary, stating the two were able to accomplish many things others thought would be impossible. Hughes also mentioned the feedback and support he received from former CSEA President Joe McDermott, but concentrated on Danny Donohue's accomplishments with the organization. Hughes explained that Donohue thinks of himself as a member of CSEA, rather than the President, and declared Donohue speaks from experience, especially when dealing with elected State officials. Hughes also credited Donohue and CSEA with being the "driving force" in creating the pension COLA for New York.

Mentioning the success that CSEA and the AFL-CIO have had working together on things such as budget issues, tax issues, and restructuring of the Central Labor Councils and area Labor Federations in the State, Hughes addressed the importance of the changes that CSEA brought to the AFL-CIO when they became affiliates, specifically lobbying and leadership expertise, a solidarity among state workers, geographical spread across the State, as well as the financial benefits that enable them to tackle "meatier activities."

Hughes also called CSEA the "go-to union," stating the difference between CSEA and other unions is their vastness and attitude. He credited them with having a professional approach to collective bargaining and representing their members well because they understand what their members need.

Key Words

AFL-CIO

AFSCME

Budget Issues

Constitutional Convention

Electricians

Grassroots and media campaigns

Labor Federations

New York City Central Labor Council

Pension COLA

Teachers Union (NYSUT)?

Willowbrook State School

Worksite Security Act

Key People

Edward Cleary

Danny Donohue

Joseph McDermott

William McGowan

George Pataki

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CSEA HISTORY PROJECT

DENNIS HUGHES INTERVIEW

June 21, 2006

INTERVIEWER: Today is Wednesday, June the 21st, 2006. We are in Albany and we're speaking with Dennis Hughes. That's D-e-n-n-i-s H-u-g-h-e-s, president of the New York State AFL-CIO.

MR. HUGHES: Right.

INTERVIEWER: Dennis, to begin with, I wonder if you can tell me when you first remember hearing about an organization called CSEA.

MR. HUGHES: I'll tell you when. It was about '75. I was organizing electricians in Willowbrook State School. Willowbrook State School had been pretty much dismantled and they were going into home care, you know, private home care. A lot of people going out. They changed the status of it.

And I ran -- I was trying to organize these workers and I ran into a shop steward whose name I can't remember and he helped me out. He told me where -- when they were coming in, what they were doing and so forth, and I said, well, what union are you with?

He says, well, I'm with CSEA, in Civil

Service Employees Association, and he says we represent the people here and State workers, and that was the first time I really met CSEA and I realized then that they were really committed to the needs of -- even then committed to the needs of other unions around.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Now at that time when you're talking about trying to organize the electricians who were doing the work at the Willowbrook State School, CSEA was not part of the AFL-CIO.

MR. HUGHES: No, they weren't part of the AFL-CIO at that time but they still had a -- a very cooperative nature, you know, at least on Staten Island. The union on Staten Island was very cooperative.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. So then how did your relationship develop over the years with CSEA?

MR. HUGHES: Well, you know, I did a lot of political work over the years for my local union at the time and I got to know members of CSEA and then at the time of -- I guess around 1980s or so, in the 1980s, we

started to work directly with CSEA through this New York City Central Labor Council.

Then when I became part of the State AFL-CIO we started to work with CSEA in a lot of different ways and it was the start of the rebirth of the labor movement in this state from 1980 to the present.

INTERVIEWER: Now CSEA did formally become a part of the AFL-CIO in the late seventies when it affiliated with AFSCME, but there was also, it seemed, an evolution of the organization's relationship with the New York State AFL-CIO that probably took a number of years to develop.

MR. HUGHES: Yeah, it did.

INTERVIEWER: What do you remember about that time and --

MR. HUGHES: Well, I remember --

INTERVIEWER: --how the relationship developed?

MR. HUGHES: What I remember is the relationship, the really strong relationship that Bill McGowan had with Ed Cleary, who was my predecessor. Bill McGowan was, as you know, a

very, you know, easy guy to get to know and he and Ed were really able to do a lot of things that people didn't think they were able to do.

You know, they were able to work on many projects together and different things together and there was really -- at that point both of them realized that both organizations could benefit from a better relationship and the relationship was forged.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Talk a little bit about that because I think a lot of times people see policy issues and debates, particularly in places like Albany, and very often what seems to cut through the deadlock is the relationship between the individuals who are involved, their willingness to work together.

MR. HUGHES: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about what you've seen with that?

MR. HUGHES: Yeah. It's a very big part of what we do, you know. I mean you have to be -- see, labor leaders in general are people that get along with other people, you know? They like other people. If you don't

like other people, you don't like to interact with people, this is not the job for you.

And CSEA, I'll give you a quick example. My relationship with Dan Donohue. You know, we were able to do things that people didn't think we were able to do. Danny and CSEA were very, very instrumental, probably the driving force, in the creation of a pension COLA here in New York, something that never was done before.

And if it wasn't for Danny's willingness to sit down and allow all the other points of view to come into play and then work them out, if it wasn't for his willingness to do that and to direct his staff to stay with this, we never would have had that gain. So personal relationships are crucial and it -- it's just great that we have that type of relationship with CSEA today.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. While you raise the issue of COLA, talk a little bit more about how that came to pass because certainly when you talk about an issue like the New York State Pension System, it's a very complex

subject generally. It's probably more difficult to deal with reform issues because there are seven different pension systems, multiple unions involved with it, lots of different interests, and then the management entities on top of that, but even just bringing the labor side together to forge some consensus must be a very difficult task and I wonder if you'd talk about how that --

MR. HUGHES: It's very, very difficult. I mean you have to -- what you have to do, it's like -- is listen to everyone. Everyone has -- you know, when you think of it, I mean large unions, small unions, everybody has really a legitimate point of view because they're representing members.

And that's another thing about CSEA. Although, you know, they're a large, very large organization, they are sensitive to the needs of other unions around them. From my perspective I get a chance to see that and that was key because if we would have just done what was good for the large unions, AFSCME, the Teachers, CSEA, it wouldn't have been as effective because

we would have had political pressure from others to change things or maybe disrail -- you know, block it.

We were able to put together a coalition of people and it was through that type of willingness, Danny's and CSEA's willingness at the time, to share power and that's an important thing, you know, to share power. If you're a powerful organization it's very important to be able to use that power for the good; not only of your members directly, but of the Labor movement in total terms and CSEA does that really well.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think that is?

MR. HUGHES: Because it's an attitude. You know, you develop an attitude based on your take of what is around you. You develop an attitude based on your concept of solidarity, based on the labor movement as a social force. You truly see your place in this.

CSEA is a leader in what we do. The State AFL-CIO could not be the State AFL-CIO that it is without the input of CSEA, but CSEA

understands too that not only -- in my opinion, not only are they interested in the needs of their workers which is their primary focus, but they want to move everybody along with them and that's unique and it's something that makes this movement what it is.

INTERVIEWER: How did the New York State AFL-CIO change when CSEA began getting more involved? Obviously they were bringing a lot of people to the tables.

MR. HUGHES: Well, you know, there was the financial benefit, first of all. You know, the CSEA came into it and allowed us to be more financially solvent and allowed us to concentrate on some of the things that we didn't do before, some of the meatier activities; you know, the support of legislation in the general outing to the general public.

But more than that it gave us a certain expertise. It brought in a lobbying expertise. It brought in a leadership expertise. It brought in a feeling that the labor movement is one -- you know, when you -- when the leaders in the Capital look upon the

labor movement in New York State they see it representing all workers: Private sector, public sector, small locals, big locals, and CSEA rounded that out, you know, gave it that point of view.

Then on top of that CSEA has members all over the state. They have members in all parts of the state. Wherever there's State government, there's CSEA members, so it gives us a geographical spread that we didn't have before, so they're very important to the strength of this organization, my organization.

INTERVIEWER: On kind of an ongoing basis, I mean beyond specific issues, how do -- how do you forge consensus in the AFL-CIO and a lot of people on the outside tend to think of the Fed as one voice speaking for labor, but there really are lots of sometimes disparate voices within that federation and a lot that goes on behind the scenes.

MR. HUGHES: Well, first you have to lay out what the issue is and what the facts are, you know? What are the facts of the situation, what is the opportunity? And given

the pension COLA the opportunity at that point was a very strong stock market and a very strong investment portfolio for State government, so we knew that to be the fact. And we also knew that what we wanted to do was to make the State pension funds, all seven or all eight of them, all those funds be able to provide the type of security that people needed.

So what we did was, we let everybody lay out what their perspectives were and once they laid out -- once we laid out their perspectives we tried to boil it down to one particular item and once we got it down to one or two or three particular items in this case we were able to move forward.

So you have to -- you have to have a message that's common to everyone. You have to have a theme that everybody understands and you have to have a goal that raises all boats, so when you look at it that way it's not really hard to do.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Talk a little bit about some of the successes over the years in dealing with CSEA and having the AFL-CIO working

hand in hand with CSEA. Certainly, I know, in the late nineties there was a ballot question at --

MR. HUGHES: Oh, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -- the Constitutional Convention that Labor was very effective in defeating that measure that could have brought a host of problems for labor organizations.

MR. HUGHES: We did the constitutional amendment to eliminate the -- what we wanted to eliminate was a new constitutional convention and the reason for that is that everything -- all the safeguards that are in the State Constitution become in play if they were to change that: The guarantee on pensions, the prevailing rate questions for the building trades and others, the whole issue of how schools are funded, all the things -- property tax, everything was in the game, school tax.

So we wanted to make sure that, you know, we didn't lose the gains that we had so -- we'd worked so hard to put in the Constitution over the last 60 or 70 years, and we also know that, you know, it wasn't a question of reform.

It was a question of taking away the safeguards that we held dear so we beat back the Constitutional Convention in a -- with a very, very extensive media campaign and grassroots campaign and we did that.

Over the years we also did a lot of things on budget issues, tax issues, over the years with CSEA. I mean just about every budget that George Pataki put in place, we were able to amend it and beat that, some of the horrible things involved in it, and that was done with both a grassroots campaign and a media campaign that we were happy to coordinate with CSEA and others.

We also were able to restructure the Central Labor Councils and area Labor Federations in the State, which was a monumental task and an ongoing task, and we wouldn't have been able to get even close to that if it wasn't for CSEA support.

Then we go into the pension COLA piece that really is so important and just -- you know, just day-to-day legislation; day-to-day legislation where the strength of the CSEA as

the organization it is helps us out. Whether or not that organization is -- that legislation is geared directly to CSEA, CSEA has over the years helped many people achieve their goals.

INTERVIEWER: One of the very important recent pieces of legislation that Labor was successful in securing was called the Work Site Security Act.

MR. HUGHES: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Why is a fight like that so important?

MR. HUGHES: Well, you know, it sets a floor. You know, all workers should -- everybody that goes to work should have some degree of confidence that they're gonna be there in a safe environment and what legislation like this does is create that attitude across all private and public sector employers; that they have an obligation to protect the lives of working men and women while they're at the workplace, and that's why it was so easy for all of us to get behind that.

INTERVIEWER: But -- I mean a piece of legislation like that one would think is common

sense, yet it took a significant fight and a number of years to actually get it passed. Why is there --

MR. HUGHES: Well, there's financial as...there's financial implications involved in these things, but more importantly it is the -- it is the age-old struggle between trying to get management who feel that they have sort of a lock on decision-making, to do things that are right and decent for working men and women.

You know, it -- what it's about, the whole thing is about and the reason why we're all here is democracy in the workplace and we're trying to build that democracy, not only in our organized unions but in just about every workplace in the state.

INTERVIEWER: How is CSEA different or alike to other unions that you've encountered?

MR. HUGHES: Well, first of all, they're different in that they're big, they're large, they're all over the state, they're in every political jurisdiction, they're in every municipality and so forth. That's the first piece, so they have this geographic spread that

makes them very important to everyone.

The second thing is attitude. There's an attitude in CSEA that they are par... statesmen in the Labor community, that they want to make sure -- they want to use whatever power they have not only -- as I said earlier, not only for their good but for the good of all workers, so there's a -- there's a certain and a real commitment to solidarity that CSEA's exhibited.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Tell me about -- more about some of the cast of characters that you've encountered in CSEA and you mentioned Bill McGowan. I wonder if you'd give us a description of your dealings with him.

MR. HUGHES: Bill McGowan's a very smart guy, very open guy, you know, to us anyway and he really had the -- he had the leadership qualities that -- of his generation, you know, that mix of toughness and smartness and willingness to take it -- you know, to take a fight to its conclusion that marked labor leaders of his generation. He was a great guy to be around and, you know, I'm glad I had the

opportunity to work with him.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that he had a very good relationship with --

MR. HUGHES: With Ed Cleary, yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- Ed Cleary.

MR. HUGHES: Yes. Ed Cleary and Bill McGowan were both from that same generation, you know, that generation that actually was around in the heyday of the labor movement in the fifties and sixties and were really, you know, committed to make sure that whatever progress we had attained we held on to.

And they were also institution builders, both of them, you know? Cleary was an institution builder, rebuilt the institution of the State AFL-CIO, and Bill McGowan had that same attitude, that he was gonna leave that organization better than he found it.

INTERVIEWER: Certainly Bill McGowan was a very colorful --

MR. HUGHES: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- individual. Do you remember anything memorable in some of your dealings or any --

MR. HUGHES: I don't -- I didn't -- you know, I was a lot younger at that point in time and he -- I had a lot of respect for Bill so I didn't really get into the -- I wasn't really in the personal social whirlwind of Bill McGowan.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Bill McGowan's successor was Joe McDermott --

MR. HUGHES: Joe McDermott --

INTERVIEWER: Was president --

MR. HUGHES: -- was -- and he was on our executive board, came to our executive board for his whole term. Joe was a little more reserved guy in his dealings but he had a very interesting dry humor that I enjoyed and he was very helpful to me. You know, he was very helpful to me. He was -- you know, the thing about Joe is that he'd let you know how you were doing on a periodical basis, you know, which was very interesting, but after a while I got to a point where I considered him a friend.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. When you say that he let you know how you were doing, he would be critical of --

MR. HUGHES: Yeah. He -- you know, I'm not -- it could have gone a positive sense. You know, he'd call and tell me, you know, when we had some -- when he felt that things were going in a direction -- even if it wasn't, you know, on his issues. A lot of the criticism, some of the criticism was really to give me some degree of support. In other words, he'd say to me: Dennis, look, if you do this you're gonna run into a wall or whatever that was. He was good in that way.

INTERVIEWER: At that time when you were -- you were working on the political side for the AFL-CIO.

MR. HUGHES: Actually at that point I was Cleary's executive assistant so I had more and more day-to-day operation -- relationships with the executive board.

INTERVIEWER: So he was basically, you know, kind of providing some regular feedback to you --

MR. HUGHES: Yeah, he --

INTERVIEWER: -- so that --

MR. HUGHES: Yeah. He would --

INTERVIEWER: -- so that the relationship would work out.

MR. HUGHES: I really had -- I think I had a very good relationship in that respect with Bill -- or with Joe.

INTERVIEWER: With Joe.

MR. HUGHES: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Then transitioned to Danny Donohue, again very different from Joe McDermott.

MR. HUGHES: Yeah. Danny -- you know, Danny was actually the president when I became president and Danny was very helpful in me becoming the president. He -- you know, the thing about Danny is that he understands this movement very well. He came up through it. He spent a lot of time running it and he understands it very well and we both have sort of the same sense of what it is that we want to do here, you know?

It really is -- the thing about Danny is that he's selfless when it comes to this stuff, you know? He doesn't really have a -- and it's refreshing to see. He doesn't really

have an attitude of -- that it's him running -- it's Danny Donohue, member of CSEA, you know. He's the president of it but he sees himself as a member. He has the sensibilities of a member and that's a very re...both refreshing and very important thing to have.

INTERVIEWER: How have you seen that serve him in dealing with State elected officials and --

MR. HUGHES: Well, he speaks from -- he speaks really from a position of experience, you know? He knows what it's like to be a member. He knows what -- he knows what it's like to be a worker. He knows what insecurities working men and women have and he never forgot that. He brings that to the table, you know, and he sits down -- when he -- you know, he brings that sensibility to all his dealings with elected officials and others, you know, and it's an important gift.

INTERVIEWER: How have you seen CSEA change and evolve over the time that you've been watching them?

MR. HUGHES: It's become in -- over

the last 20 years, I would say over the last 10 or so, it's really become a -- much more respected in its professionalism, you know? It repre...in the way it represents its members, in the way it conducts itself legislatively both on a local level and on a state level.

It is really sort of the go-to union. It is, you know, the largest and most important public sector union. There are other lar...Teachers and others are important as well, but CSEA has a different -- a whole different pitch because it represents workers and so many levels of State government, so I think that I -- I'd have to say the professionalism is the best approach to it.

INTERVIEWER: But one of the things that -- one of the phrases that we'll often use in-house here when we talk about CSEA is that one of our strengths is our reasonableness and one of our weaknesses is our reasonableness.

How does that idea play out in terms of the struggle within the labor movement that there are always people who want to be a little bit more aggressive and those that want to go

along and get along?

MR. HUGHES: I don't -- I think first of all go along/get along doesn't describe CSEA in any way. CSEA has a very measured approach to things; that comes with their experience and professionalism as I just mentioned.

What you have to do here is recognize that you're here for the long haul, and when you're representing members it's a very serious business and that, you know, you don't want to march people off a cliff. You have to understand the circumstances around you. You have to have a professional approach to collective bargaining, which CSEA does.

I don't know if I mentioned that, but their approach to collective bargaining is -- and the successes that they've had in collective bargaining is noted and admired by I think anybody that has to do with collective bargaining in general terms.

So I would say that it comes with -- the professionalism that CSEA has put together allows it to move along at a steady pace without having like hills and valleys and, you know,

when there's a conflict CSEA is there for the conflict.

When there's a problem CSEA is there to straighten out the problem. I haven't seen them back off of anything and I know that not only that, they have lent that type of professionalism to other unions in their strikes and struggles as well.

INTERVIEWER: I've asked this of all of the participants in this project. Why do you think CSEA was able to survive for a hundred years?

MR. HUGHES: Because they do their job and they do their job well. First they represent their members well. They understand what their members need and they are willing to go out and find the best people to do the jobs that provide that safety net for their members.

That's -- that's it. They're a well-run organization. They have a tradition of being a well-run organization and when organizations like this are well-run they perpetuate.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Well, Dennis

Hughes, thank you very much. We appreciate your being here today.

MR. HUGHES: It was my pleasure.

(Conclusion of interview of Dennis Hughes.)

