

2021-J357

Senate Resolution No. 357

BY: Senator SAVINO

MOURNING the death of John J. Sweeney, renowned President Emeritus of the National AFL-CIO, distinguished citizen and devoted member of his community

WHEREAS, This Legislative Body, representing the people of the State of New York, is moved this day to pay tribute to an eminent man of indomitable faith and dedication whose public service and countless accomplishments will forever stand as a paradigm and inspiration for others; and

WHEREAS, It is with profound sorrow and deep regret that this Legislative Body records the passing of John J. Sweeney, noting the significance of his purposeful life and accomplishments; and

WHEREAS, John J. Sweeney, a New York union researcher who climbed to the pinnacle of the American labor movement in the 1990s, leading the AFL-CIO for 14 years through an era of fading union membership but rising political influence, died on Monday, February 1, 2021, at the age of 86; and

WHEREAS, John Joseph Sweeney was born in the Bronx on May 5, 1934, to James and Agnes Sweeney, Irish-Catholic immigrants whose struggles in America shaped his social perceptions from an early age; as a boy, he

accompanied his father to many union meetings, where he learned of class and workplace inequalities and of union efforts to improve wages and working conditions; and

WHEREAS, After graduating from Cardinal Hayes High School in 1952, John J. Sweeney resolved to find a future in organized labor; he worked as a gravedigger and building porter, and joined his first union to pay his way through Iona College, a Catholic school in New Rochelle, New York, where he earned a bachelor's degree in economics in 1956; and

WHEREAS, John J. Sweeney worked briefly as a clerk for IBM but took a sharp pay cut to become a researcher for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union in Manhattan; during this time, he met Thomas R. Donahue, a union rep for the Building Service Employees International Union, Local 32B, who persuaded him to join his union as a contract director in 1960; and

WHEREAS, In 1962, John J. Sweeney and the former Maureen Power, a schoolteacher, were united in marriage, and together they raised their two children, John Jr. and Patricia; and

WHEREAS, The building employees union was one of the most progressive of its day, representing 40,000 porters, doormen and maintenance workers in 5,000 commercial and residential buildings in New York City; John J. Sweeney quickly rose through the ranks, and in 1976, was elected President of Local 32B of the renamed Service Employees International Union; and

WHEREAS, Under the able leadership of John J. Sweeney, 45,000 members of the Service Employees International Union struck thousands of buildings for 17 days and won major wage and benefit increases; he later merged Local 32B with Local 32J, representing janitors, and in 1979,

struck again for contract improvements; and

WHEREAS, In 1980, he was elected President of the 625,000-member national SEIU and, moving his base to Washington, began merging with unions of public employees and workers in office jobs, health care and food services; he pushed for stronger federal laws for health and safety, and by 1995, he represented 1.1 million union members and was a national power in the labor movement; and

WHEREAS, From 1995 to 2009, John J. Sweeney served as President of the National AFL-CIO, one of the nation's largest labor federations with 56 unions, each of which encompassed 10 million members near the end of his tenure; and

WHEREAS, With the weight of history pushing against him, this extraordinary man worked tirelessly to reinvigorate and diversify the faltering labor movement; he crusaded to bring women and minorities into the fold, often in leadership posts; he also made alliances with civil rights groups, students, college professors and the clergy, and championed low-wage workers; and

WHEREAS, Furthermore, his signature initiative encouraged the recruitment of thousands of immigrants to his unions; many members had long been hostile to undocumented workers, accusing them of stealing union jobs and dragging down wage scales; John J. Sweeney rebuked such talk as discriminatory and called for justice which included better treatment for underpaid immigrants and a path to citizenship for those in the United States illegally; and

WHEREAS, A great leader and innovator, John J. Sweeney truly left an indelible mark on the American labor movement; his ideals remain the foundation of which the AFL-CIO stands today as it takes on the

challenges of inequality, systemic racism and much more; and

WHEREAS, In addition to his extraordinary career, John J. Sweeney wrote a memoir, *Looking Back, Moving Forward: My Life in the American Labor Movement* (2017), and was the co-author of two books, *America Needs a Raise: Fighting for Economic Security and Social Justice* (1996) and *Solutions for the New Workforce: Policies for a New Social Contract* (1989); and

WHEREAS, A powerful advocate for America's workers, in 2010, President Obama awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, for revitalizing the American labor movement and for his steadfast efforts in union organizing and social justice; and

WHEREAS, In addition to his beloved wife and two children, John J. Sweeney is survived by two sisters, Cathy Hammill and Peggy King; and one granddaughter; and

WHEREAS, This extraordinary man will be remembered as one of the most significant and enduring union leaders in the history of the State of New York and the Nation; his insight and strength will forever serve

as a beacon of strength, love and hope to the countless lives he touched; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to mourn the death of John J. Sweeney, and to express its deepest condolences to his family; and be it further

RESOLVED, That a copy of this Resolution, suitably engrossed, be transmitted to the family of John J. Sweeney.

