

# Ohio AFL-CIO president: We need to be the *voice* for working

*In April, the executive board of the Ohio AFL-CIO tapped Joe Rugola to serve as the labor federation's president. He's headed the group's political action work for several years and he replaces Bill Burga who retired after 14 years. Rugola is also the executive director of the Ohio Association of Public School Employees. (Like OCSEA, OAPSE is affiliated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.) OCSEA recently had the opportunity to interview the new "Fed" president.*

**Q: Why should the average union member care about the Ohio AFL-CIO?**

**RUGOLA:** Well, actually all working Ohioans should care about the federation. There's

not a construction worker anywhere, union or not, who shouldn't care about the fate of the public schools, the fate and status of our correction system, our county mental health agencies. The same thing is true for

any public employee looking to why organized labor should be a central part of their lives. If we don't have a healthy private sector economy, then the impact on public workers is significant. We need a strong industrial and private sector base to generate the construction that supports the building trades and the tax base that supports public services. The truth is, organized labor is the only progressive voice left that talks about the entire range of questions that ought to interest every working person.

**Q: It seems that before 2006, the press didn't really see the AFL-CIO as a voice. Have you noticed if their attitude has changed?**

**RUGOLA:** I think some members of the press understand that something is changing. But, to be honest, I'm skeptical about the ability of the press to take us anywhere in terms of shaping a dialogue about the future of our country. My sense is that particularly the print media have become more corporatized. It's inevitable that the reporting will be slanted in the direction of the outcome that the owners of the media want to see.

We deserve to be reckoned with. Everyone talks about the National Rifle Association, but the NRA only has about 3 million members. There are 15.5 million union members in this country. Frankly, we ought to be exercising influence that is five times the influence of the NRA. It's really incumbent on us to put the press in a position where they don't have any choice but to talk to us because they understand the con-

versation about the future of our country. When we do that, I think we will have all the press coverage we want - and more.

**Q: Any changes we can anticipate coming to the Ohio AFL-CIO?**

**RUGOLA:** We've reconstructed our political committee to make it broader and more inclusive. The first meeting will be held soon. Major unaffiliated unions will be attending, too, including the Autoworkers and the Education Association. The Ohio Democratic Party will also use that meeting to do their 2008 labor program roll out. The national AFL-CIO, the Democratic National Committee, the Ohio House caucus, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee will also participate.

Our approach toward the Strickland administration about economic development has been very aggressive. In keeping with that, we are re-activating our Industrial Union committee and it will soon be meeting with Lt. Gov. Lee Fisher and members of his economic development team.

Additionally, we're working with the construction trades and Steelworkers on a potential economic development package related to the building of a \$.5 billion electric steel furnace project on the Ohio River in Scioto county.

One area that we will be moving on in the not too distant future is to reactivate and reenergize the organizing committee of the federation, which ought to really serve as the sup-



# Ohioans

porting arm for individual affiliates who are having organizing campaigns in various areas.

**Q:** *The AFL-CIO has historically had significant involvement with the Bureau of Workers' Compensation. Will that continue?*

**RUGOLA:** It is my expectation that our role will become even more pronounced. As we all know, BWC is being re-vamped and the new BWC Oversight Commission is being reshaped right now. The AFL-CIO has influence over the nomination of several commission slots and we are in the process of advancing names.

At the same time, we're preparing to monitor how BWC policy gets shaped and are working with the new BWC Director to make sure that the Bureau fulfills its mission to both care for and protect injured workers, and treat its employees fairly and equitably.

**Q:** *Can we look forward to another Take Back Ohio campaign in 2008?*

**RUGOLA:** I don't know whether the Take Back Ohio "branding" question has been settled, but we are committed to repeating the kind of performance that organized labor put on in 2004 here in Ohio. It's important to remember that in 2004, organized labor accounted for 36 percent of the total votes cast. We did our part in 2004. In 2006, we more than did our part. Our emphasis now will be on building a program to make sure

that we do as well as we did two and four years ago.

**Q:** *How much do you think the victories in 2006 helped restore the confidence of union activists who were disappointed after the 2004 loss?*

**RUGOLA:** Nothing builds success like success. Now we have a new governor and a new day. We have a new Democratic Party. I believe we have a new labor movement in Ohio and I think people are reinvigorated. We have to tap that, though, and focus it. We have to make threshold decisions about what we want for our country, our state and for our members and their families. Individual unions and people are going to have to sign on and give it everything they've got.

**Q:** *Are there any other lessons from the 2004 and 2006 campaigns that need to be built upon?*

**RUGOLA:** We're still not reaching those that we consider to be "under-performing" voters, those irregular voters who would almost certainly vote our agenda if we could get them to vote at all. There are a sizeable number of labor members that fall into that category. What we do need to do is reach that significant number of under-performers, swing voters, and "persuadables" who are registered and will vote if we talk to them in the right way and motivate them.

**Q:** *Has the AFL-CIO given any thought about how to address the demographic changes going on in the workforce?*

**RUGOLA:** I want to create a subcommittee of our organizing committee to deal with the emerging workforce that does not necessarily look like traditional union members and leaders. I want OCSEA to have a seat on this subcommittee and later this summer I will be moving to activate it.

We have to do something sooner rather than later. We are behind the curve. It isn't just

## THE NEW OHIO AFL-CIO PROGRAM

- Broaden the federation's political committee
- Reestablish the federation's organizing committee
- Work with the Strickland administration on economic development and trade issues
- Reach out to irregular voters
- Connect with the new emerging workforce



*Rugola's office is decorated with many pieces of labor and family memorabilia, including a gauge (in frame) used by his father to check the thickness of glass bottles.*

young workers. It's talking to the emerging Hispanic and African-American minorities that are becoming more of a demographic consideration in our society. And frankly, we need to be talking to women of any age in the workforce who aren't connected to unions or have no idea how unions can improve their lives. □