

Editorial

IN THESE TIMES

Labor and electoral politics

We have said in our first editorials that we believe American politics is approaching an historic turning point. A significant element in this development is that the American labor movement is also entering a new stage. Labor's alliance with the Democratic party, which arose with the New Deal, was founded on a mutual commitment to fostering economic growth, high levels of employment, and the protection of collective bargaining.

These foundations have been buckling under pressure from new conditions. The easy post-World War II growth of world capitalism has come to an end. Global expansion of American corporations no longer adds jobs at home, but replaces them with lower-wage jobs abroad and drains capital and taxes needed to meet domestic needs. Collective bargaining, still a major union concern, cannot deliver essential parts of workers' everyday needs: health, housing, education, retirement, adequate real income in the face of inflation and taxes.

Under pressure of this reality, the leadership of the unions, not just left-led unions, have quietly changed political orientation since 1970-71.

For the first time in this century, the unions have withdrawn support for the bipartisan policy of corporate growth abroad. And they have returned to the CIO's mid-'40s program of planning for full employment and expansion of the public sector.

This reorientation portends a break with the imperialist consensus and a move against corporate power and profit rationality in favor of social planning, a trend that has not been sufficiently recognized or appreciated by the left. It involves concern about government policy, and, therefore, a new role in electoral politics as an indispensable complement to labor's collective bargaining position.

►A new role in politics.

Labor's new direction is indicated in several changes in the political behavior of the established union leadership.

•Since 1971, labor has begun to look to its left for allies—to the poor, the unemployed, blacks and women as essential to beefing up its political leverage. It has demanded channeling government expenditures to social programs needed by these groups, as well as by unionists. And the unions have worked to register blacks and the poor in recent elections.

•In relation to this, labor has pushed congressional as against executive economic planning in changing the tax structure, stimulating the economy, and expanding the public sector.

•Some unions supported George McGovern in 1972; their leaders and others have associated themselves with "Democracy 76" in calling for social control over investment, curbs on multinational corporations, and democratizing the economy.

•AFL-CIO president George Meany's sitting out the 1972 election aided former president Nixon, but he and the AFL-CIO executive committee early called for Nixon's impeachment. And official neutrality in 1972 helped to serve notice that the Democrats could no longer take labor for granted. Meany this year initially supported Sen. Henry M. Jackson, an old-line cold war Democrat, for the presidential nomination, but after supporting President-elect Carter in the recent election,

the AFL-CIO leadership has put him on notice that full employment planning is a top priority and a condition of continuing support.

►Public workers pushed to new activism.

The rapid increase in the organization of public sector workers—teachers, public hospital workers, state, county and municipal workers—has also affected labor's attitudes and practices. These are the fastest-growing unions and have become among the most militant.

Their position as representatives of public workers especially in the face of a growing squeeze on social services of all kinds brought about by fiscal policies that favor corporate growth over social need, have increasingly forced these unions to reevaluate the relative effectiveness of traditional strike actions in the absence of broader political action and this has led to pressure more directly to enter the political process. It is increasingly more difficult to force concessions within established budgetary frameworks by strike threats—especially when public workers' gains can be won only through increased taxes.

These unions, therefore, are being forced to challenge the budgetary priorities themselves, which means that they have to contest for control of those elected offices that are responsible for preparing city and state budgets.

►Trade unions central for left.

For the left as a whole, and particularly for socialists, the trade union movement is centrally important. Unions are the largest and most consistently active organizations of working people, and despite their limitations, they are the most democratic organizations of the working class.

This has been especially true of the various unions that had their origins in the CIO organizing drives in the 1930s—like the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers (UE), the International Long-

shoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), the United Automobile Workers (UAW).

But it is also true of many other unions, and even those with the least democratic practice, that the formal democratic structures have provided a framework within which struggles for democratic control have developed in recent years.

Furthermore—and again despite limitations, particularly in the older craft unions—the labor movement has provided and continues to provide the richest experience of working people cooperating across lines of race, ethnic origin, sex and age in a common organizational framework and toward common goals.

In the '60s, when the civil rights movement and then the antiwar movement were major areas of left social and political activity, the trade unions often appeared conservative, and by and large, supported successive administrations in support of the war.

Partly because of this and partly because of their social position, new leftists often found themselves opposing the labor movement. A significant part of the new left defined itself as a middle class movement separate from and posed against the working class.

Even then, however, unions, side by side with the blacks, played a decisive role in the passage of the civil rights acts of 1964 and 1965, as well as in many other aspects of the civil rights struggles. And a significant minority of trade unionists vocally opposed the war and supported the antiwar movement.

The increasing inability of labor unions to get what they want in traditional ways has opened up space for the emergence of left tendencies and insurgencies within many unions. Campaigns like Ed Sadlowski's for the presidency of the United Steel Workers are only one symptom of the change taking place. New opportunities for debate and socialist initiatives exist within organized labor at all levels.

If the history of the labor movement has taught us anything it is that neither militant strike actions, nor union political action, per se, necessarily results in sustained anticapitalist consciousness, much less support of socialism or a socialist movement. Like the population as a whole, union members are justly suspicious of politics and have diminishing loyalty to party. Though unions and many active unionists are looking toward contesting for legislative offices from city councils to Congress, the continued absence of a socialist electoral presence in these arenas could easily turn renewed interest back into cynicism and passivity.

The aspirations of working people and of the labor movement will never be realized within the confines of capitalism. But the alternative is not some mystical form of politics outside the established formal democratic framework. A broader political perspective, oriented to the electoral arena, is needed to transcend the narrow horizons of immediate economic demands and to speak to the deeper political consciousness already current among leaders and rank-and-file members.

All recent struggles around issues—whether ending the war in Vietnam, ecology, consumer protection, expanding employment, taxes, inflation, or increasing social services—have found themselves forced into electoral activity by the logic of events and by the process of public policymaking in our society. Social activism, no matter where it starts and no matter what the ideology of its initiators, leads either to electoral participation or to breakup and disillusion.

Socialists involved in the trade union movement or concerned about its future political direction must, therefore, see the development of a broad socialist movement throughout society and focused in the electoral arena as a continuing priority.

