

Organized labor snubs Al Gore, tells its members to 'organize'

by Marianna Wertz and Carl Osgood

Organized labor sent a strong message to Al Gore at the Miami convention of the AFL-CIO Executive Council on Feb. 16-18. A resolution approved on Feb. 18 urged "all its national affiliates to refrain from making any endorsements of candidates" for the Presidency until the Council's meeting in Chicago in early August.

The resolution reads, "Providing leadership as we begin the next millennium will require someone with a compelling vision for our nation and a commitment to the values of democracy and equality. The AFL-CIO will support the candidate for President who will exert the strongest leadership on behalf of working Americans, especially in the critical areas of jobs, fair trade, health care, retirement security, equal opportunity and education." It urges its member unions to get their members' views and to "refrain from making any endorsements of candidates during this period of member education and input, at least prior to the meeting of the Executive Council now scheduled for early August 1999 in Chicago."

Had the AFL-CIO supported Gore, he would have been endorsed at the Convention, to which both he and Democratic Presidential contender Bill Bradley were invited. But AFL-CIO President John Sweeney carefully explained, at the press conference releasing the resolution, that Gore's out-front support for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and similar free-trade policies was absolute anathema to the unions. Labor is going to "fight as hard as we can" to get a trade proposal it likes, Sweeney said, making it clear that, if Clinton goes with NAFTA, Gore will have to break with NAFTA and Clinton if he wants labor's endorsement. "I would hope that to the extent the differences go our way," Sweeney said, "he [Gore] would speak out if he wants to get the support of American workers."

Absent a Presidential candidate whom they are willing to back now, the Executive Council meeting focussed on an unprecedented two-year effort to win back control of the House of Representatives in 2000 for pro-labor Democrats. The effort will represent the first time that the labor federation has not disbanded its political operations at the end of an election cycle. They will focus on 40 to 60 key Congressional districts in about 20 states, including a major effort in California to build up union support. The "member-to-member out-

reach model" pioneered in last fall's election, and the defeat of the anti-labor Proposition 226 in California, where 25,000 activists were mobilized in the Golden State alone, will be the model for the two-year drive.

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) President Gerald McEntee, chairman of the AFL-CIO political committee, made the announcement on the campaign to retake the House. He said that they will focus on get-out-the-vote efforts, and will try to spend roughly double what they did in 1998, which was \$21.5 million. Sweeney added that the primary focus of the political effort over the next two years "is going to be on grass-roots mobilization. If we can do it in California, we can certainly do it in other states." The education and mobilization effort will also spread the word about key issues affecting working families—such as strengthening Social Security and Medicare, increasing the minimum wage, passing a Patients' Bill of Rights, and stopping the expansion of ruinous free-trade policies.

A second resolution, on "Trade and Deindustrialization," warns that the financial crisis is spreading, that the United States is not immune, and that "many American workers are already paying a high price for global turmoil." It denounces "speculative, hot money explosions" and "the so-called Washington consensus on 'economic reform'—trade and investment liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and extreme austerity," as "a recipe for instability, social strife, environmental degradation, and growing inequality." However, the only solution to the crisis offered by the lengthy resolution is various ameliorations of free-trade practices.

A resolution on the "Crackdown in China" reflects the AFL-CIO's disorientation with respect to foreign policy. Project Democracy agents within the AFL-CIO are steering organized labor toward the British-American-Commonwealth crowd's attempt to use China-bashing to destroy Clinton's efforts at global development. The resolution denounces China's "crackdown on the fledgling pro-democracy movement," comparing it to "China's decision in 1989 to end the Democracy Wall campaign and jail its leaders." It calls on the United States to condemn China at the March 1999 UN Human Rights meeting (something labor's bitterest enemies

are also trying to accomplish), to withhold support for China's entry into the World Trade Organization, and to more actively enforce trade agreements against China.

Unification conference

Following the Miami convention, the labor mobilization outlined there was put into motion in Washington, D.C., where 3,500 auto workers, machinists, and steel workers met at the Convention Center for the three unions' first Unification Legislative Conference on Feb. 21-24. Organizers from the LaRouche political movement, who were circulating a petition calling on President Clinton to appoint Lyndon LaRouche as his economic adviser and distributing hundreds of pieces of literature, met with a very warm reception from the trade unionists.

When the unification of the three unions is complete, it will create the nation's biggest industrial union, with 2 million active and 1 million retired workers—a real challenge to union-busting companies here and abroad.

Sweeney and Machinists President Tom Buffenbarger addressed the delegates on Feb. 22. Buffenbarger defined "fair trade," fighting against the privatization of Social Security, and for the right to organize as the key issues facing the labor movement this year, leading into the 2000 Congressional elections. After reporting on the AFL-CIO's Executive Council meeting and emphasizing the importance of the trade issue, Sweeney told the delegates that "our message for our elected officials is: There will be no more NAFTAs and there will be no fast track." His enthusiastic conclusion praised the unification of the United Auto Workers, United Steel Workers of America, and the International Association of Machinists: "We're rebuilding our unions at a record pace," he said. "That's the message your actions are sending to all other unions and to every working family in America."

Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.), a stalwart in the fight against Clinton's impeachment, told the delegates that "anyone who pursues a mindless witch-hunt of destruction against Bill Clinton doesn't deserve to be in Federal office!" This alone got him a standing ovation from the 3,500 delegates, but he went on: "In 200 years, despite fierce partisanship, no political party has purposely misinterpreted a provision of the U.S. Constitution for partisan political gain. The question before you is, do you want political leaders deciding on the future security of American pensions, American trade policy, deciding on the future of Social Security, the standards of American education? Do you want people making these judgments who are the same people who had so little respect for our country, its history, its Constitution, as to misuse the United States Constitution for their own purposeful personal and political gain? I don't want them in office."

The U.S. industrial economy is in depression, declared Jeff Faux, president of the Economic Policy Institute, in his address to the conference on Feb. 23. The EPI notably employs several former associates of Lyndon LaRouche, whose

work tends to reflect the reality they learned from him—if not LaRouche's solutions. Faux pointed to the loss of 285,000 manufacturing jobs during 1998 and laid blame squarely on trade policies that benefit Wall Street financial interests. These policies demand that countries open up their financial markets to foreign banks, and U.S. markets were opened up to their goods in return. When those economies collapsed, Faux said, the bank loans were bailed out by the International Monetary Fund, and those countries are now repaying those IMF loans by exporting everything they produce to the United States and driving down the wages of their own workers, which causes the U.S. trade deficit to skyrocket. The result, Faux said, has been 285,000 jobs lost.

"The geniuses who did this" (who make \$3,000 an hour, he pointed out), "now want to privatize Social Security. 'Give us the money,' they say, 'and let us gamble it in the world casino,'" Faux said. He called on the delegates, when they lobby their Congressmen, to demand: "Where is your bill to ban striker replacements? Where is your industrial plan to keep jobs in the U.S.?" He told them that if their Congressmen respond by saying that government can't interfere in the free market, that the delegates should raise the issue of Long Term Capital Management, whose bailout was organized by the Federal Reserve.

Steel Workers President George Becker, who has been leading a battle for protectionism for America's steel industry, spoke on the final day of the conference. He put the forces of globalization on notice that the new, 2-million-strong, unified union would be targetting them. "We're revitalizing the union movement" in both the United States and Canada, he declared, and "we're sending a message to corporate America, to Wall Street, to Bay Street [Toronto's financial district], to the international financiers, to Congress and to the White House," and that message is: "We're going to challenge their anti-union strategies, and defend the rights of working families in both countries and across the globe."

Becker also pointed to the loss of manufacturing jobs in America and compared the de-industrialization that's going on today with what happened to the steel industry in the 1980s, when 65% of the industry shut down and 300,000 jobs were lost. Today, he said, there's a "much more deadly challenge," that of the rapid-fire movement of capital around the globe. NAFTA and other free-trade agreements "have literally put management on a frantic search throughout the world, for the lowest-cost producer, the cheapest possible wages that they can find . . . where people can't share in the wealth that they produce."

Becker said that the unification of the three unions was about all of the basic economic issues, including the declining standard of living, the disappearance of the middle class, the rebuilding of the industrial base, and the hopes and aspirations of union members. "Organized labor is the only institution," he said, "that stands for social and economic justice for all workers, in and out of unions."