

# *Oust the Bureaucrats—Unchain the Unions!*

## American Labor Besieged

For the American media, from the most prestigious journals to the most shameless tabloids, one subject has traditionally been taboo: class—particularly class conflict. True, the existence of a largely black and Hispanic “underclass” has been admitted, its impoverished condition attributed to cultural defects and the drug trade. But everyone else—from the file clerk, working for minimum wage, to the stockbroker or corporate executive—was said to be “middle class.”

This all-American mythology is far too useful to be dispensed with entirely. But, in the midst of the current bipartisan attack on the poor, various bourgeois commentators have begun to think about some of the long-term implications of class polarization. The 17 July 1995 *Business Week* cover story, “The Wage Squeeze” pointed out:

“Four years into a recovery, profits are at a 45-year high, unemployment remains relatively low, and the weak dollar has put foreign rivals on the defensive. Yet U.S. companies continue to drive down costs as if the economy were in a tailspin. Many are tearing up pay systems and job structures, replacing them with new ones that slice wage rates, slash raises, and subcontract work to lower-paying suppliers.”

The editors worried that the success of business in driving down employees’ living standards might ultimately lead to “chronically weak demand.” Even worse, it could call the legitimacy of the system into question: “The sight of bulging corporate coffers co-existing with a continuous stagnation in Americans’ living standards could become politically untenable.”

With voter turnout at historic lows, and bribery of politicians more blatant than at any time since the “Gilded Age” at the end of the last century, liberal social commentators—including Kevin Phillips, John Kenneth Galbraith and Lester Thurow—have produced a number of books warning that social cohesion is threatened by the widening class divide. The upset victory scored by rightist demagogue, Pat Buchanan, in the February 1996 New Hampshire Republican primary, briefly alarmed the corporate elite. Suddenly the mass media was filled with stories about the anger and resentment bubbling beneath the surface of the supposed economic recovery. *Newsweek* ran a cover story on “Corporate Killers” (26 February 1996), while *Business Week* fretted:

“In the past few years...all but the most elite employees have landed in the same leaky boat. If they all come to stress their common fate more than their differences, it could spell trouble for corporations and politicians alike.”  
—*Ibid.*

These fears are well founded. For those whose income depends on paychecks rather than dividends, “recovery” has made things worse. Wages for production workers declined 12 percent between 1978 and 1995. According to a U.S. Census Bureau report, entitled “A

Brief Look at Postwar U.S. Income Inequality,” released in July 1996, the share of national income going to the top one fifth of U.S. households increased from 40.5 percent in 1968 to 46.9 today, while everyone else’s share stagnated or declined. This same report revealed that the income of the rich grew more quickly under Clinton than at any other time in the post-war period, including the Reagan-Bush years.

As wages decline, working hours increase. Juliet Schor, a Harvard economist, has demonstrated that advances in technology and labor productivity during the past quarter century have not resulted in more leisure time, as widely predicted in the 1950s and 60s. On the contrary, the burden of work has increased: more family members are in the labor force, and each works longer hours. In 1990, 60 percent of married women were working outside the home, compared with about 30 percent in 1960; teenage participation in the workforce had jumped to 53.7 percent, a ten percent increase from twenty years earlier. The average worker, moreover, spends 163 more hours, the equivalent of one month per year, on the job than in 1969. And, for the most vulnerable, especially immigrants, there has been a return to the horrors associated with the nineteenth century—sweatshops employing child labor, and even cases of involuntary servitude.

### Every Day, In Every Way...

In the 1950s, American workers attained a level of consumption which would have been restricted to the ruling class in earlier times. Cars, household appliances, trips to Disneyland—it seemed to many that capitalism could “deliver the goods.” The massive expansion of post-secondary education in the 1960s meant that, for the first time in history, a large proportion of working-class youth were able to attend college. Of course, even then, millions were left out of the “Affluent Society.” But the prevailing liberal wisdom was that, with improved expertise, it was just a matter of time before these remaining “pockets of poverty” were eliminated.

Today, after two decades of declining real wages, and with a bipartisan assault on every government program that ameliorates social inequality, economic prospects for youth are considerably worse than they were for their parents. This phenomenon, unprecedented in American history, has explosive implications.

When Congress first started talking about balancing the federal budget at the expense of social spending, it was presented as something that would chiefly affect welfare recipients—who are identified in the public mind with blacks, Hispanics and immigrants. But with the ax now poised over Medicare and Social Security, it is becoming very clear, even to the politically backward, that the target is much broader. In New York City, which

has often served as a testing ground for austerity schemes, recipients of public assistance, outfitted with bright orange vests, are being forced to sweep streets for less than \$2.50 an hour. By replacing unionized city workers, “workfare” exerts downward pressure on all wages.

Sharp social inequality is, of course, not new in America. The ameliorative mechanisms of the “welfare state” have always been underdeveloped in the U.S. in comparison with its imperialist rivals. What is new is the *absolute* decline in real wages and living standards as a whole in a period of economic growth.

The shrinkage of real wages is largely a consequence of the dramatic decline of organized labor. However reactionary and bureaucratic their leadership, unions are the only instruments that workers possess to advance and defend their collective interests. In 1945, unions represented 35.5 percent of the workforce (*New York Times*, 29 August 1995); today, only 15.5 percent is organized. In the private sector, the percentage has now dropped below ten.

The problems of the American labor movement cannot simply be attributed to the workings of blind market forces. They are the fruit of concessions, retreats, betrayals and capitulations by the union bureaucracy, stretching back more than fifty years. Even as organized labor reached its zenith in the mid-1950s, with tens of thousands of paid functionaries, 650 weekly publications and 17.5 million members, (most of whom had “never had it so good”), the seeds for the current impasse were being sown.

### CIO: ‘Labor’s Giant Step’

The relative lack of class consciousness among American workers is usually attributed to a culture of individualism, as well as to the ethnic diversity of the proletariat. These factors also played a role in retarding the arrival of industrial unionism in America.

From the 1880s onward, repeated attempts to organize the semi- and unskilled on an industrial basis were beaten back by the bosses and their hired guns. While European workers attained an independent political existence well before World War I, their American counterparts did not assert their power until the mid-1930s, when a wave of strikes and factory occupations in the auto, rubber and steel industries created the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

Prior to this, the country’s principal labor organizations were conservative craft unions. This narrow form of business unionism—personified by the long-time head of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), Samuel Gompers—was limited to skilled workers who banded together for the exclusive purpose of driving up the wages in a particular trade. This craft focus went hand in hand with indifference to the larger interests of the working class. AFL unions routinely engaged in bitter jurisdictional disputes and scabbed on one another’s strikes. They were particularly good representatives of what Lenin called the “aristocracy of labor,” which identified its interests with those of the ruling class.

The impetus for the CIO came from an intensification of class struggle in 1934. Powerful, city-wide general

strikes erupted in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco, each sparked by the struggles of local AFL unions, and led by “reds” of one description or another. In San Francisco, the Stalinized Communist Party (CP) was in the leadership, while the initiators of the Toledo and Minneapolis strikes later formed the smaller Trotskyist Workers Party.

One radical historian explained the connection between these struggles and the rise of the CIO:

“Communists, Trotskyists, Socialists, and Left-syndicalists organized and created the social movement that came to be identified with the CIO. Traditional unionists either moved left or were by-passed by a historic campaign for social justice and collective industry, a mass movement directed against industrial peonage.

“On Labor Day, 1934, with the shock waves of the labor revolt still reverberating across the nation, [United Mine Workers President] John L. Lewis, former Gompers protégé, declared that the AFL must adopt a policy of industrial unionism in the mass production industries.”

—David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor*, 1982

Saul Alinsky, Lewis’ biographer and friend, confirmed this:

“Lewis watched the unrest and flareups of violence through the summer of 1934. He saw the [Trotskyist] Dunne Brothers in Minneapolis lead a general strike of truck drivers into a virtual civil war. Blood ran in Minneapolis.

“In San Francisco a general strike spearheaded by [Communist Party supporter] Harry Bridges’ Longshoremen’s Union paralyzed the great Western city for four days.

“Before that year was out, seven hundred thousand workers had struck. Lewis could read the revolutionary handwriting on the walls of American industry. He knew that the workers were seething and aching to be organized so they could strike back.”

—John L. Lewis, *An Unauthorized Biography*, 1970

The formation of the CIO represented a radical break with craft unionism. For the first time, tens of thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers were organized—not by craft, but by industry. This meant that all workers in the auto industry, for example—be they plumbers, carpenters, or assembly-line workers—belonged to the same union, and were covered by the same contract. Industrial unionism greatly enhanced the capacity for mass action and was hence a giant step forward.

### Taming the CIO

The CIO’s rise posed the possibility that American workers could act as an independent political force for their own class interests. However, the White House was occupied by Franklin Roosevelt, who deflected growing radical sentiment by posing as a “friend of labor.” Crucial to Roosevelt’s success was the role of the Communist Party, the hegemonic radical organization within the workers’ movement, which was thoroughly committed to the popular-front policies of its master in the Kremlin, Joseph Stalin. In the U.S., this meant allying with traditional union leaders to channel the mass labor revolt that had created the CIO into the “New Deal Coalition” with the Democrats:

“it is highly unlikely that Lewis and Hillman [the central leaders of the CIO drive] could have so easily consoli-

dated their control without aid from a third source, the Communist Party. Almost immediately after the stunning victory at Flint, [the 1937 sit-in spearheaded by CP cadres at General Motors] the CP began to...turn towards a new alliance with Lewis (and later, after Lewis's resignation in 1940 with [Philip] Murray and [Sidney] Hillman). Again it was a cold-blooded marriage of convenience: the bureaucratic integration of the CIO was an incomparably easier matter with Communist complicity, and Lewis also needed the kind of superb organizing talent which they seemed to possess in abundance. On the other side, the CP's turn toward Lewis, under the rising star of Earl Browder, was a logical part of a broader maneuver to legitimize the Communists as the left-wing of the New Deal coalition. In time they would have to pay a terrible price at the hands of their erstwhile allies for this 'center-left coalition'. Meanwhile, the Party's work in the unions began to take on a totally new character as the exigencies of intra-bureaucratic struggle assumed priority over the defense of rank-and-file democracy or the creation of a mass socialist current in the unions."

—Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*

During the first years of the Second World War, the demand for labor far outstripped the supply, and the unions were in a position of considerable strength. The CIO used this opportunity to broaden its base by organizing key companies that had successfully resisted the earlier upsurge, including Ford, Goodyear and Bethlehem Steel.

The CIO leadership also agreed to suspend strike action in favor of compulsory arbitration by a "tripartite" War Labor Board, comprised of union, business and government representatives. In exchange for surrendering the strike weapon, the unions were given certain legal concessions: a "maintenance of membership" clause which prevented workers from leaving their union during the life of a contract, and a compulsory dues check-off, administered for the union by the employers. These measures were intended to stabilize the union bureaucracy by securing the position of established unions, and loosening the leadership's dependency on the membership.

John L. Lewis was alone among major union leaders in opposing the no-strike pledge. Speaking at a United Mine Workers' (UMW) conference in October 1942, he warned:

"that the labor movement was in danger of being taken over, horse, foot and artillery into 'the bureaucratic camp at Washington.' In their turn, union officials were in danger of becoming unofficial representatives of the Administration, disciplining the rank and file, and shifting from militant independence to pliant dependence upon the good will of the Government administrators. What would happen to the movement when the war was over?....Mr. Lewis thought this compulsory element in all dealings between government and labor would not only continue after the peace, unless it was strenuously opposed during the war, but would grow ominously greater."

—MacAlister Coleman, *Men and Coal*, 1943

Between the Stalin-Hitler pact in August 1939 and the Nazis' June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, the CP reversed its earlier popular-front policies, and denounced American imperialism and Roosevelt's war preparations. CPers actively supported workers who

struck in defiance of their leaders. But when the USSR was invaded in June 1941, the CP did an abrupt about-face, and used its considerable influence, won through the heroic role played by its cadres on the front lines of the struggles of the 1930s, to help enforce the no-strike pledge. Acknowledging that the employers were raking in huge profits, CP leader Earl Browder nonetheless held that the working class had to be prepared to make the "main sacrifice" to win the war.

In mid-June 1941, Roosevelt used the U.S. Army to break a militant strike led by CPers at North American Aviation in Inglewood, California. A week later the CP switched to its new "patriotic" pro-war line and, as a result, the Stalinists did not seriously campaign against the government's strikebreaking. For the remainder of the war, CPers were the most virulent enforcers of "labor peace." Daniel Guérin reports that during this period:

"Many employers did not hide the fact that their preferences went to trade-union leaders of Communist allegiance. A journalist writing for the Chamber of Commerce wrote that some employers directed their workers to unions controlled by the Communists, since they were more reasonable on matters of wages and working conditions and maintained more discipline among their members than 'anti-Communist' unions."

—100 Years of Labor in the USA, 1979

The hegemony of the Communist Party among leftists in the unions was reinforced when, in July 1941, the Roosevelt administration ordered the arrest of 29 leaders of the CP's most credible rival, the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), for violating the anti-communist Smith Act. The CP, which applauded the jailing of the Trotskyists, was itself to be attacked under the same statute a few years later.

The Trotskyists had established themselves as the dominant force in the Minneapolis labor movement, with a strong presence in Teamsters Local 544. From this base, they had taken the lead in organizing more than 200,000 truck drivers in the North Central District Drivers' Council, which stretched from Ohio to Nebraska, and accounted for more than half the entire Teamster membership.

Because of its powerful base in Minneapolis, the SWP, which opposed the no-strike pledge, was a potentially formidable opposition to the Roosevelt administration's war preparations. It was also seen as a threat by Daniel Tobin, national president of the Teamsters (who was Roosevelt's closest ally within the union bureaucracy). The federal indictment of the Trotskyists came in the midst of Tobin's assault on Local 544. Hundreds of union goons, headed by Jimmy Hoffa, and assisted by both the trucking companies and the local police, attempted to forcibly wrest control of the local from its elected representatives. The leadership of Local 544 responded by jumping to the CIO, where Lewis' wing welcomed them with open arms.

The Trotskyists were convicted, and jailed, and Tobin was able to regain control of the Teamsters in the Midwest. Beginning in 1943, the miners staged repeated strikes, and turned out to be the only unionized workers to win substantial gains during the war. But they were not the only ones who were angry enough to act. In 1943

alone, according to Bert Cochran (*Labor and Communism*, 1977), more than half the members of the UAW participated in unauthorized walk-outs. In this situation, a competent revolutionary oppositional movement, rooted in the unions, could have quickly become a political factor of immense national importance.

The CP's role as the most vociferous opponent of class struggle fatally undermined its support among the most militant workers, and undercut its ability to resist the post-war red purge.

### 'Lions Led by Asses'

By the war's end, the deferred discontent of the workers burst forth in the biggest strike wave in American history, indeed in the history of the world up to that time. In 1945-46, while both the CIO chiefs and the Stalinists fulsomely declared their intention to maintain "industrial peace" in the post-war period, nearly five million workers were involved in work stoppages. City-wide general strikes took place across the country from Pittsburgh to Oakland.

The ruling class returned fire. President Harry Truman responded with sweeping strike-breaking legislation. In 1947, a newly elected Republican Congress proceeded to pass the most crippling anti-labor bill in U.S. history: the infamous Taft-Hartley Act. It created new and daunting obstacles to union organizing. Taft-Hartley gave the president the power to declare a "national emergency" in the event of major strikes, and to order strikers back to work for an eighty-day "cooling-off" period. In addition, it gave companies the right to sue unions in federal court for breach of contract (for example, for going on strike before a contract expired). It also allowed states to pass "right-to-work" laws outlawing the union shop, which 19 Southern, Western and Southwestern states promptly did. These laws forbade unions from acting as the exclusive bargaining agent for all workers in a given workplace; they could represent only those workers who chose, in the face of heavy employer intimidation, to join the union. Lastly, Taft-Hartley required all union officers to sign an oath swearing that they did not belong to the Communist Party or any other "subversive" organization.

"The Taft-Hartley Act codified the employers' aims of deradicalizing the CIO and of legally suppressing the most effective weapons of labor solidarity. It accomplished the former by imposing the requirement of anti-communist disclaimers for trade union officials, and the latter by outlawing sympathy strikes, supportive boycotts, wildcats and mass picketing....Recognizing the gravity of the threat posed by the implementation of Taft-Hartley, Lewis's miners and the Communist-led United Electrical Workers immediately proposed a campaign of non-compliance augmented by mass mobilizations and, perhaps, even a general strike. Murray and the other CIO chieftains were thus confronted with [a] dilemma....

"In the event, however, they....chose to reconsolidate their shaken alliance with Truman and the national Democratic Party, allowing the CIO in the process to become an integral component of the administration's escalating anti-communist crusade."

—Davis, *op. cit.*

The abject prostration of the union chiefs prompted John L. Lewis to ask the 1947 AFL convention in San Francisco:

"is it true that the leaders of our movement are to be the first of our mighty hosts of eight million members to put their tails between their legs and run like cravens before the threat of the Taft-Hartley bill? I am reminded of the Biblical parable, 'Lions led by asses.'"

—quoted in "The Taft-Hartley Decade," Bert Cochran

### Labor's Red Purge

Taft-Hartley set the stage for the purge of the union left, as the pro-capitalist "labor statesmen" who controlled the unions played a key role in the greatest reactionary offensive of the post-war era: the anti-communist witchhunt. These purges were initiated by Harry Truman, in order, as he said, to "scare the hell out of the American people"—and win popular support for the newly unleashed Cold War crusade against the Soviet Union:

"The reluctance of the CIO mainstream to accept John L. Lewis's proposal for mass action against Taft-Hartley is more understandable when it is recognized that many of the same unions were actually exploiting the anti-communist provisions of the act to raid other left-led CIO unions. In 1948, the UAW launched major piratical forays against both the Farm Equipment Union and the United Electrical Workers (UE). After the 1949 expulsion of eleven allegedly Communist-controlled unions from the CIO, these raids turned into a cannibal feast. The most tragic case was the forced dismemberment of the UE, the third largest union in the CIO and traditionally one of the most militant. In 1948, the UE had been able to negotiate from a position of strength, representing all the workers in the electrical manufacturing industry; by 1953, after five years of raids...some *eighty* different unions had parcellized the UE's jurisdiction and were bargaining for a membership only half the size of the 1948 UE rank-and-file."

—Davis *op. cit.*

It was not mainly over trade-union issues that the red purge was conducted; by this time, the CP had become virtually indistinguishable from its anti-communist opponents in its organizational methods and in its policies with respect to employers. Many CPers, it is true, had been militant and idealistic union organizers in the 1930s; they had played an important role in leading strikes, organizing the unemployed, and building the CIO. By the onset of the war, however, this had all changed. Like ordinary union bureaucrats, the CP attempted to exercise control over the unions it dominated by top-down organizational methods.

But unlike the other labor leaders, whose conservatism stemmed from pursuit of material advantage, the CP's first loyalty was to the Stalinist regime in the USSR. The CP initially attempted to ride out the witchhunt, voting in favor of a motion at the 1946 CIO convention declaring that the delegates:

"resent and reject efforts of the Communist Party or other political parties and their adherents to interfere in the affairs of the CIO. This convention serves notice that we will not tolerate such interference."

—cited in Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 1977

In the end, it proved impossible to square support for

the Cold War with fealty to Moscow. The CIO bigwigs, Philip Murray (who had replaced Lewis as CIO President in 1940) and Walter Reuther (the social-democratic head of the UAW) used support for the Marshall Plan, an American imperialist scheme for post-war European reconstruction, as a wedge with which to drive the CP out. They also made electoral support for Truman in the 1948 elections a loyalty test for all member unions. The CP backed Henry Wallace, Roosevelt's former vice president, who, for pragmatic reasons, opposed the Cold War drive.

To justify the purge, the CIO heads frequently pointed demagogically to the Stalinists' record of class collaboration:

"Having accepted the state-mediated collective bargaining principle, radical industrial unionists had few weapons with which to fight their more conservative trade union colleagues. When Matles, Emspak [leaders of the leftist United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE)] and Bridges [leader of the International Longshoremens and Warehousemen's Union] attempted to fight back against the charge of being agents of Moscow with a counterattack based on the principle of rank-and-file class-conscious unionism, Reuther countered them on purely trade union grounds, arguing that the UE leaders had settled with General Motors in the great 1946 strike before the UAW was ready to settle."

—David Milton, *The Politics of U.S. Labor*, 1982

For all the crimes of the Stalinists, their Cold-War union persecutors were worse. The purge of the CP had profoundly reactionary consequences for the union movement. It destroyed the remaining elements of rank-and-file democracy that had survived from the stormy class struggles of the 1930s. The very presence of two major factions made the CIO the venue of political discussion and argument, despite the intentions of both the anti-communist bureaucrats and the Stalinists, thus creating a margin of maneuver for smaller leftist groups, including the Trotskyists.

The purges stifled internal political debate; from that point on, the rank-and-file was depoliticized, and the only politics permitted were those of the bureaucracy. It became illegal for individuals belonging to "Communist organizations" to hold union office. Anyone who questioned the bureaucracy's support for the Cold War or the Democrats, criticized its refusal to fight racial segregation, or even proposed trade-union tactics slightly more militant than the leadership's, was red-baited and silenced. The capitalists understood, even if the small-minded labor bureaucrats did not, that the campaign to rid the unions of leftists would benefit only the employers. At the time of the AFL-CIO merger in the mid-1950s, when some bureaucrats began to talk about launching a massive new recruitment drive, *Fortune* magazine predicted that any such attempt would fail because there were not enough militant leftist cadres to carry it out!

On the international front, the bureaucracy not only offered slavish support for the Cold War, but actively collaborated with the State Department and the CIA in subverting leftist unions in Europe and the Third World. Labor officialdom had signed on as U.S. imperialism's

junior partner.

## Unions in U.S. Imperialism's 'Golden Age'

The 1950s and 60s are commonly viewed as a "golden age" for unionized workers in America. The major corporations had resigned themselves to the existence of the politically housebroken, legally hobbled unions that emerged from the post-war purges. They did not, as a rule, engage in union-busting, nor did they bring scabs in on a mass scale to break strikes. As a result, wages and benefits rose steadily. Between 1950 and 1965, average hourly earnings of production workers in manufacturing increased by 80 percent. The value of fringe benefits—pensions, health care, etc.—increased even more.

The steady rise in living standards exerted a conservatizing effect on American workers, many of whom imagined themselves to be joining the all-encompassing middle class. While there were almost as many days lost to strikes in the 1950s as in the 1930s, many improvements were achieved without striking, and, with a few notable exceptions, the strikes that did occur were tightly controlled, top-down affairs—conducted at the bureaucrats' behest, only upon the expiration of contracts, and with scrupulous regard for capitalist legality.

The "golden age," however, was built on a foundation of sand. As long as U.S. imperialist hegemony was uncontested and profits were steadily increasing, the bourgeoisie could well afford to exchange higher wages and benefits for relative class peace. But, as this hegemony waned and economic prosperity began to erode, American workers would find that the celebrated post-war *quid pro quo* between labor and capital had all the while been sapping their capacity to fight back.

## Democrats, Dixiecrats and Open Shops

One consequence of the union bureaucrats' alliance with the Democratic Party was the maintenance of the South as a bastion of the open shop. By the end of World War II, the South was the only region of the country largely untouched by industrial unionism. Organizing it was clearly the next logical step in consolidating labor's position on a national scale. In 1946, the CIO unveiled "Operation Dixie," billed as its most ambitious organizing campaign since 1936-37. The goal was to recruit a million Southern workers within a year. Four hundred organizers were sent south, backed by a million-dollar fund. Yet "Operation Dixie" fizzled, and by 1948 was, for all practical purposes, dead.

In part, the failure of the Southern organizing drive can be attributed to the deep divisions that the red purge opened in the CIO. By driving out those suspected of disloyalty to U.S. imperialism, the bureaucrats deprived the union movement of many of its most talented and motivated organizers. Even more important, the effort failed because the South could not be organized without directly confronting the system of "separate but equal" racial segregation, which would have meant a direct confrontation with the Dixiecrats, an essential component of the Democratic Party.

In 1955 40,000 blacks in Montgomery, Alabama launched a courageous bus boycott to protest racial

discrimination. The boycott was maintained for over a year, but the AFL-CIO chiefs did nothing. While many dedicated union officials, as well as important national unions, were tossed out of the AFL and CIO for resisting the red purge, no action was ever taken, or even contemplated, against any of the numerous union affiliates that banned blacks from membership or otherwise discriminated against them.

The failure to organize the South meant that throughout the 1950s and 60s, employers who did not wish to take on the unions directly could quietly transfer their operations to one of the low-wage “open-shop” states south of the Mason-Dixon line. By the 1970s, the bureaucrats were finally forced to take notice, as more and more companies deserted the “rust belt” for the “sun belt,” and union membership plummeted. But even then, few connected this development with the earlier betrayals.

The unionism that emerged during the 1950s and 60s operated entirely within the framework of capitalist ideology and institutions. This “business unionism” was encapsulated by George Meany (head of the newly fused AFL-CIO) in a December 1956 speech delivered to a convention of the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM):

“I never went on strike in my life, never ran a strike in my life, never ordered anyone else to run a strike in my life, never had anything to do with a picket line....

“In the final analysis, there is not a great difference between the things I stand for and the things that NAM leaders stand for. I stand for the profit system; I believe in the profit system. I believe it’s a wonderful incentive. I believe in the free enterprise system completely.”

—quoted in “No More Class War?” Harry Braverman

Under Meany’s leadership, collective bargaining was limited to questions of pay and benefits, conceding to management the unchallenged right to run production as it saw fit. In many cases, unions accepted deals that tied wage gains to productivity. Bargaining was narrowly concerned with the sectional interests of the workers of a particular industry, without regard to the effects on other workers. As the duration of contracts lengthened, the bureaucrats became more numerous, more firmly entrenched and more generously compensated.

Under the principle of “Work Now—Grieve Later,” contractual violations, which in the CIO’s heyday had been countered with work stoppages, now became subject to a tortuous, multi-leveled bureaucratic grievance and arbitration procedure. Shop stewards and committeemen, who stood on the lowest rungs of union officialdom, began to see themselves as, in part, enforcers of the contract for the boss. The higher echelons of the bureaucratic apparatus increasingly came to view their main role as guardians of labor peace. Under these conditions, the ranks naturally began to perceive their unions not as organizations run by and accountable to them, but rather as well-oiled machines, pursuing aims removed from their lives and struggles.

In the 1970s, the ruling class decided to rewrite the terms of the deal it had struck with the powerful unions a quarter of a century earlier. They had little to fear from a bureaucracy that did not want to fight. In 1975, when New York City teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, the

banks demanded major concessions from municipal unions in return for a bailout. Sixty thousand city workers lost their jobs, and a wage freeze was imposed on the rest. This set the scene for concessionary bargaining by the UAW four years later, supposedly to save Chrysler from bankruptcy. Once concessions were given to Chrysler, GM and Ford followed suit. Demands for “give-backs” were soon heard everywhere. During the 1970s, consulting firms specializing in union busting reappeared on a large scale after an absence of four decades.

Attacks on the shop floor were matched by increasingly class-conscious capitalist activity in the political sphere:

“During the 1970s, business refined its ability to act as a class, submerging competitive instincts in favor of joint, cooperative action in the legislative arena. Rather than individual companies seeking only special favor in the award of a contract, in the dropping of an antitrust case, or in State Department assistance in gaining exclusive franchising rights in a foreign country, the dominant theme in the political strategy of business became a shared interest in the defeat of such bills as consumer protection and labor law reform, and in the enactment of favorable tax, regulatory, and anti-trust legislation. Competitive lobbying, particularly among defense contractors...remains a major factor in very specific decisions in Congress and within the executive branch....But the willingness of a host of business interests, many of them competing for the same markets in the private sector, to join together on larger issues before Congress and before the regulatory agencies has significantly altered the balance of power in Washington, providing, when such unity emerges, a single, immensely powerful voice for the business community.”

—Thomas Byrne Edsall, *New Politics of Inequality*

Spearheading this development was the Business Roundtable, a “united front” of top corporate executives with deep pockets and an army of lawyers, economists and lobbyists. Formed in 1973, the Business Roundtable sought to further the common political purposes of its more than 1,000 major industrial, financial and commercial corporate members. It promoted political candidates with an agenda that has become all too familiar: weakening legal protection of labor and the environment; business tax “relief;” a tight monetary regime; deregulation of industry, transport and commerce; and massive reduction in social spending.

This capitalist offensive was a response to the end of the “American Century,” which had begun with the victory of the Allies in World War II. The overhead expenses incurred by U.S. imperialism’s long, losing war in Vietnam helped America’s capitalist rivals to improve their competitive position. While in 1965, net after tax returns on corporate investment in the U.S. averaged nearly ten percent, by 1974 they had fallen to a little over four percent (cited in *The Great U-Turn*, by B. Harrison and B. Bluestone, 1988). During the 1970s, it became increasingly difficult for U.S. capitalists to compete internationally. Their response was to cut wages and reconfigure economic policy to channel more wealth toward the top.

By the time Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1976, increased capitalist pressure and bribery were pro-

ducing dividends. In an era when electoral success depends not on the urban political machines of yesteryear, but on spin doctors and sound bites, campaign costs have skyrocketed, and corporate money is more than ever the lifeblood of bourgeois politics. As senators and congressmen of both parties stood with their left hands outstretched for corporate contributions during the Carter years, they raised their right hands to defeat an increase in the minimum wage (1977), to defeat a labor law reform bill backed heavily by the AFL-CIO (1978), and to pass a tax bill that increased investment credits and lowered the capital gains tax (1978). Not only was a Democrat in the White House at this time, but both houses of Congress were also firmly under Democratic control. In *An Injury to All*, a 1987 study of the decline of U.S. unions, Kim Moody (a long-time left reformist who remains active in the labor movement), notes that Carter's Council of Economic Advisers advocated "devoting a larger share of our national output to business investment than has been characteristic of recent years." Moody concludes:

"The Carter years can be seen as the period of transition from the old postwar bipolar politics of Democrats (liberal) and Republicans (moderate to conservative) to a new right-of-center discourse largely shared by both parties. Not only had Democratic politicians in Congress and at the state level made a well-financed transition to the right, but the administration had provided a measure of political leadership in that direction. Carter, as a New South moderate, was a perfect candidate for the job since Sunbelt dominance played a role in this change. The business agenda was well on its way to completion before Ronald Reagan took office. Nowhere was the change more consistent than in government policy toward labor. As if to symbolize the transition, Carter's Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) began a program of harassment of air traffic controllers on the job, and in 1980 formed the Management Strike Contingency Force twelve months before the expiration of the government's contract with the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). It was this Strike Force that prepared the plan that Reagan put into effect in order to break PATCO in 1981."

### Business Unionism's 'New' Face

The situation of American unions has become so dire that it has produced a little commotion in the normally serene precincts at the top of the labor bureaucracy. In October 1995, John Sweeney beat Tom Donahue in the first contested presidential election in the federation's history. Donahue was the loyal lieutenant of the AFL's former chief, 73-year-old Lane Kirkland, who had been forced by the executive into retirement. Sweeney, a fellow septuagenarian, was national head of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Now he poses as a more militant, activist alternative to the old regime. Upon assuming office, he hired 1,000 college students as organizers to go around the country during a much publicized "Union Summer," and has lately been running a publicity campaign under the slogan "America Needs a Raise!"

Sweeney's win was greeted with cautious enthusiasm in the demoralized radical-liberal milieu. But it is not

hard to see through the pretensions of this career bureaucrat, who waited until the eighth decade of his life to declare himself an instant "militant." Sweeney served for years under Kirkland on the AFL-CIO's executive board, and he watched, without a murmur of protest, as three of the most significant strikes of this decade—Bridgestone-Firestone, Staley and Caterpillar, all in the "war zone" of Decatur, Illinois—were betrayed by the bureaucracy.

As head of the SEIU, Sweeney was one of the most highly paid union officials in the country; yet, in addition to his regular salary, he collected a total of \$400,000 as an "executive adviser" to the New York SEIU local he had headed before winning the national presidency (*The Nation*, 25 November 1996). Gus Bevona, son of a Mafia "soldier," is Sweeney's handpicked successor in New York who "earns" an astronomical \$400,000 a year from the SEIU. When a rank-and-file New York SEIU member objected to a \$7 increase in union dues, Sweeney, in his capacity as "executive adviser," voted with Bevona and the rest of the board to hire a private detective to tail the dissident and his wife (*Village Voice*, 30 January 1996).

Last summer, when the Detroit Labor Council proposed a national march in solidarity with the workers of the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press*, who had been on strike for over a year, Sweeney did not respond. It was, after all, an election year, and the AFL-CIO's new top man was pulling out all the stops to keep a Democrat in the White House. The last thing he wanted was to embarrass Clinton with noisy street protests. In short, John Sweeney is a "militant" like Ross Perot is a "populist."

The succession fight among top AFL-CIO bureaucrats is not, however, entirely without significance. For years, the labor potentates sat with folded arms while unions were busted, because the fines incurred for the use of militant tactics were a bigger threat to their dues base than a lost shop here or there; for years, they refused to undertake new organizing efforts because the cost was greater than the added dues they could expect to collect from low-paid, service-industry workers. Now the chickens are coming home to roost.

The refusal of Clinton and the Democrats to make any serious effort on behalf of the "anti-scab" bill—the bureaucrats' pathetic, legalistic answer to union busting—was bad enough. But the crowning insult came in November 1993 when Clinton pulled out all the stops to push NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) through Congress. Once a key component of the Democratic Party coalition, "labor" has shrunk to an embarrassing "special interest" the Democrats are anxious to keep at a distance. How long could rank-and-file workers be counted on to take seriously a leadership that had lost the ability to broker even the flimsiest deals with the bosses and the government? Even the dullest bureaucrat realized that something had to be done. Sweeney is that "something."

Sweeney's efforts on behalf of the Democrats in the 1996 elections, during which he squandered \$35 million and many thousands of hours of donated labor, demonstrate once again that the AFL-CIO's new regime has no

intention of biting the hand that slaps it. The dynamic new perspectives that were alluded to during the contest with Donahue boil down to pressuring the Democrats a little harder. Commenting on the massive French public workers' strike in December 1995, Sweeney said that he hoped it wouldn't come to that in the U.S. But it *has* come to that—and worse; the difference is that the American working class has yet to get off its knees. To do so, it must break the grip of Sweeney and the rest of the corrupt labor parasites whose first and last loyalty is to the capitalist order.

Today, despite four years of economic “recovery,” the unions remain on the defensive, and fear of unemployment pervades the workplace. The few strikes that do occur are usually defensive, and frequently broken by companies who hire scabs. Lump-sum payments instead of increases in base wage rates; temporary and part-time as opposed to permanent full-time jobs; outsourcing of union work to non-union companies; two-tier wage scales; concession bargaining; downsizing—these are the norm in the 1990s, as corporate profits and stock market values hit record highs.

Because the ruling class has conquered so many positions without a fight, the spirits of working people and the poor are at their lowest ebb since the onset of the Great Depression. Many have concluded that attempts to resist are futile.

### **French Workers Show the Way!**

Yet, as the French bourgeoisie has been reminded, mass despair does not last forever. The French railway and underground workers who paralyzed the country for three weeks in November-December 1995, faced many of the same obstacles—a declining proportion of industrial workers, shrinking union membership, increased mobility of capital—usually cited to “prove” that the situation of the U.S. working class is hopeless. Nevertheless, the French working class forced the government to scrap several key provisions of its austerity

plan (see 1917 No. 18). Building upon this victory, French truckers went on strike in December 1996, blocking highways throughout the country, until employers finally gave in to their demand to lower their retirement age from 60 to 55—a concession already won by the railway workers.

In January, France's provincial bus and streetcar workers struck for one day to demand retirement at 55 as well. The idea is catching on. In fact, some unions are now pushing this demand as a way of alleviating high unemployment among the country's youth. This proposal horrifies the French bourgeoisie, because while it would create more jobs, it would create less profit. Retirement at 55 is not a defensive demand. It would mean an *improvement* in the quality of life for workers, both young and middle-aged—at the expense of capital. The fact that it has already been won by a section of the French working class, holds an important lesson for American workers: despite adverse conditions, the on-going capitalist offensive *can* be resisted and, if successful, such resistance can in turn create the possibility of a counteroffensive.

During America's imperial heyday in the 1950s, the country's rulers could afford to keep workers in check with raises and benefits dispensed through the intermediary of a servile bureaucracy. The result was a working class that grew increasingly distant from its own traditions of struggle, and a union leadership which forgot how even to pretend to fight. Today, as a consequence, the ruling class, its empire much depleted, no longer feels it has to make any concessions at all and is determined to reverse labors' remaining gains. The fight to defend those gains must therefore increasingly call into question the legitimacy of the capitalist system itself. Victory depends on forging a working-class leadership, armed with a program of consistent class struggle, which connects the immediate defensive struggles of today with the historic necessity of socialist revolution. ■

## ***Defend Chicago Anti-Klan Three!***

On 29 June 1996 a militant, integrated demonstration aborted a Ku Klux Klan “white power” provocation in Chicago. The anti-fascist protest was initiated by the Spartacist League and supported by members of the League for the Revolutionary Party, News and Letters, Refuse and Resist and other anti-fascists. The KKK thugs were intercepted on their way to Daley Plaza and, when they threatened the demonstrators, they were dealt with firmly. At that point the Chicago cops appeared on the scene and proceeded to attack the anti-fascists. Eight demonstrators were arrested on a variety of bogus charges, including assaulting police. Charges have been dropped against five of the anti-fascists, but the remaining three are scheduled to go to trial on 5 May. They are Douglas Glass, a black worker; Gene Herson, labor coordinator of the Spartacist League's

Partisan Defense Committee; and Jeff Lyons of Refuse and Resist.

A wide variety of organizations and individuals, including Chicago-area locals of the United Steelworkers, United Auto Workers and Amalgamated Transit Union have endorsed the campaign to drop the charges against the Anti-Klan Three. The International Bolshevik Tendency has sent a letter protesting the arrests, as well as a contribution to the defense fund. We urge our readers to do likewise.

*Send statements demanding that charges be dropped to Richard Devine, State's Attorney of Cook County, Richard J. Daley Center, 55 W. Randolph Street, Chicago, IL 60602. Donations (earmarked for defense of the Anti-Klan Three) can be sent to Partisan Defense Committee, PO Box 802867, Chicago, IL 60680-2867.*