

## What Will Revitalize the Labor Movement?

"When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run, there can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun."

The opening words to the famous union ballad have a haunting echo these days. One would be hard pressed to find any Labor Day commentaries, from either side of the class barricades, that used such words as "inspiration" or "power" to describe the state of the U.S. labor movement in 1984.

The bourgeoisie, of course, is not at all displeased by the growing list of labor's troubles: the falling percentage of the workforce that is unionized; the unions' losing record in representation elections; the concessionary agreements and wage settlements that average out to a record low, and the mixed blessing of the AFL-CIO's early endorsement of Walter Mondale.

More thoughtful bourgeois commentators grant that unions once played an important historical role, but argue that the need for these "most basic of workers' organizations" is rapidly ebbing in the face of a technological society. The unions are scored as outmoded relics, obstacles to the future with their attempts to "restrict markets" and "hamper productivity." That paragon of ruling class liberalism, the *New York Times*, typifies this trend, editorially looking to the day when it will finally be clear to all in labor "that the old game is over."

### VITAL NECESSITY

On the other hand, for those of us not blinded by the myopia of bourgeois class position, there rests the understanding that the "basic and fundamental principles of trade unionism" are not confined to smokestack industries or bygone eras, but continually flow from the wellspring of capitalist production relations. Whether in high-tech or basic steel, computerized office or inner city sweatshop, the fundamental relation of exploitation between capital and labor remains—and so does the need for collective organization to defend workers' rights.

We, therefore, look at labor's current difficulties with a different eye. For us the question is what course and policy will revitalize the trade union movement, making it once again a force to be reckoned with not only in immediate economic battles with employers, but in the broader fight to advance the interests of the entire working class.

### VIEWS ON THE LEFT

A number of different answers to this question now have currency on the left.

One is the position that the key to labor's revival lies in economic militancy—more resistance to concessionary agreements, more strikes and job actions, broader inter-union solidarity. This viewpoint has particularly gained adherents among activists in traditionally strong unions in the smokestack industries, hard hit by company efforts to weaken or even bust the unions and impose concessionary agreements.

To be sure, there will be no revitalization of the U.S. trade union movement unless a more aggressive approach to the bargaining table and picket line takes hold, and unless the active support of one union by another once again becomes the rule rather than the exception. Conducting the economic struggle is, after all, the impetus to form unions, and it remains the foundation on which trade unionism exists.

Even so, calls to step up unions' militance in the face-off with employers cannot be the centerpiece of a strategy to rebuild labor's clout today. This perspective is too one-sided, losing sight of the fact that labor's revival cannot for one moment be separated from changing the overall political climate in which the unions function, and, in particular, reaching out to the vast bulk of the working class that is unorganized (and heavily minority) to give this sector a concrete stake in trade union victories. A strategy built around economic militance per se can too easily degenerate into a narrow defense of the already stronger sectors of the working class, where the political and ideological assumptions that justify capital's attack on the most oppressed workers at home and abroad are accepted as long as the unionized workers get a better share of the pie.

The past year has seen far too many examples of militant strikes lost and opportunities to stem the tide of contract concessions missed due to a general political atmosphere that condones scabbing, encourages the violation of labor laws, and holds workers' wages responsible for the decline of industries that have suffered as the result of years of profit-gouging. Phelps Dodge, McDonnell Douglas, Greyhound, Continental Airlines are only the most visible examples.

In a number of these strikes—especially Phelps Dodge and Greyhound—serious efforts were made to mobilize broad community support. (It is no accident that the percentage of minority workers in these particular walkouts was quite high.) But such efforts have been on far too small a scale to reverse the prevailing right-wing climate in the country and qualitatively

dent the perception in broad sectors of the working class that unions are, indeed, "special interests" looking out only for their own members.

### DUMP REAGAN

A second view, associated principally with the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), improves on the tunnel vision of the "economic militancy" advocates and grasps the centrality of both political action and broad alliances to labor's revitalization. This position argues that dumping Reagan is the top priority, and that labor must take the initiative in leading a broader "all-people's front" against both the President and the monopoly interests he represents. Because the AFL-CIO has taken a new, aggressive posture in this year's election campaign—especially with its early endorsement of Walter Mondale—advocates of this position hold that labor's revival is already considerably underway. In fact, the CPUSA argues that the AFL-CIO is taking "independent" political action and has made an initial step toward a new labor-led political party.

Again, there is no question that full-scale involvement in the political arena is a key factor in regaining the trade unions' lost clout, and ousting Reagan is indeed a crucial step for the progress of all the people's movements. The trade unions' recognition that they must, on some level, practice coalition politics is also a necessity for advances in the years ahead.

The problem with the CPUSA view, then, is *what level of politics are required and on what basis alliances must be built*. The CPUSA's position misassesses both, and thus claims victories when they have not yet been won.

Opposition to Reagan is simply not a sufficient outlook to serve as the cornerstone for labor's revival. The proof is in the fact that the AFL-CIO executive council itself can be both among the most dedicated opponents of the President's reelection and *at the same time*, the bitterest opponents of policies that would break labor out of its present narrow vision and political impasse. These are the very forces in the unions who are fighting to keep labor backing imperialist policy in the arms race, Central America and the Middle East, who are the most fervent enemies of affirmative action (especially in layoffs), and whose contribution to organizing the unorganized amounts to a gust of hot air.

As for alliances—not even the most backward of Lane Kirkland's cohorts is against them, even alliances with leaders in the specially oppressed Black commun-

ity. But those alliances are cultivated with those accommodationists who are willing to pick no bones with the backwardness of the current trade union leadership. Meanwhile, Jesse Jackson and the progressive Rainbow Coalition—the real motion toward independent working class politics today—is undermined at every possible opportunity.

The endorsement of Mondale does represent the degree the labor leadership is angry at Reagan for his attacks on their immediate social base in the traditionally better off sector of the working class. But it is *not* a major transformation that will revitalize the trade union movement, only the motion of opportunism in a new and more difficult period.

### WAR, RACISM, ORGANIZING

So the road to labor's rejuvenation must start with economic militancy and the effort to dump Reagan, but it cannot stop there.

Economic militancy must be first and foremost in the service of the most oppressed strata of the working class. Concretely, this means an all-out effort—not lip service, but the allocation of considerable human and financial resources—to organize the unorganized, particularly the poor and minority workers who have the fewest illusions that there is any way forward except through determined struggle.

Opposition to Reagan must be extended to identifying and opposing the cutting edge political questions on which his reactionary policies are based. This means taking up the protracted fight to win the unions to firm opposition to the U.S. war drive and to the intensification of racism, the twin pivots around which U.S. capital's efforts to shore up its power and profit-making capacity now revolve. A direct corollary to this point is fighting for the recognition that it is the program of Jesse Jackson, not Walter Mondale, that most closely approximates the interests of working people.

Basing a strategy for labor's revival on such an outlook will certainly lead, in an immediate sense, to polarization and division within the trade union ranks. But this battle itself is the pre-condition for bringing the most oppressed workers into labor's fold, a process which will in turn strengthen the hand of labor's left wing. The challenge to opportunism has always been the only road to a trade union movement united on a basis worth much to the working class, and the situation on Labor Day 1984 is no exception. □

## letters...

We encourage our readers to submit letters to *Frontline*. Please keep them brief. We reserve the right to edit for length and clarity, and will withhold names upon request.

### CONVENTION COVERAGE

I thought the August 6 issue of *Frontline* was the all-round very best summary of events of the Democratic National Convention that I have seen. I found myself just hoo-eying through several stories and editorials, and agreeing with practically every point. I thought the summary of DSO (whoa—I mean DSA now) was masterful and I thought the review of the July 20th Berkeley Symposium (which we just couldn't stay for) was very heartening. The only thing I had a little trouble with was Silber's column "Speculating on a Capitalist Crash" because he didn't mention the millions of unemployed who have disappeared when their unemployment

insurance finally ran out and they were struck off the statistics rolls. Has anything like the Workers' Alliance of the Depression Years, which set about organizing the unemployed, shown up in—say—Auto or Steel or Toolmaking?

Anyway, I got your paper at the Hiroshima Day March (which was good—maybe 6,500-7,000 people showed... many of them Chicano and Latino families who may never have participated in political action doings as far west as MacArthur Park before). So, please find my check for a year's subscription. —Harry Hay, Los Angeles, Calif.

### OLYMPIC FIX

It seems to me that *Frontline's* article on the Olympics (Aug. 20, 1984) left out one very important subject. It was bad enough that foreign athletes had to put up with virulently chauvinistic media and audience pressure. But, what made the situation even worse was the chauvinistic judging (I think that "fixing" is a much better term). It was very noticeable in the boxing competition. Notably the Italian, South Korean and Romanian boxers

who "one-sidedly lost" their bouts left shaking their heads and crying their tears because they felt they had been judged by "political considerations." Even the boxing team from the U.S. puppet South Korea threatened to leave because they felt the judging so one-sidedly favored the U.S. Finally, even some U.S. athletes stated that they could not believe some of the (heavily weighted toward the U.S.) votes.

Some people may deem this "conspiratorial," but it is easy to believe that the judging was fixed. We recognize that the U.S. imperialists saw these games as being very important in pushing forward patriotism and jingoism. To do this it was necessary for the U.S. to make a strong showing as "we're number one!" Therefore, first they forced out the real "number one" Olympic team, the Soviets, figuring the other major challengers to the U.S.—the East Germans—would also not show up (not to forget strong teams from Cuba, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, etc.). Then, to make its certain "number one" finish even stronger—and the patriotism and jingoism even stronger along with it—they go and fix the judging. Remember, the U.S. imperialists are very skilled and experienced at fixing

votes in the international arena...

Also remember that this is a country where the rich folks are used to and skilled at fixing sports events. Like publicized political "fixes"—i.e. vote frauds, Watergate, etc.—publicized sports fixes (in basketball, boxing and horse racing) are only the tip of the iceberg. Remember, sports

creates millions and millions of dollars in profit for television, advertisers, owners, concessionaires, bookmakers, etc. . . .

With all of the above in mind, it seems quite reasonable that a judging fix was on in this extremely visible "international showcase" of sports. —Phil Green, Brooklyn, N.Y. □

## FRONTLINE

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*Frontline* is published in order to popularize a Marxist-Leninist perspective within U.S. political life. Its editorial policy is based on the assessment that the interests of the U.S. working class lie in peace, equality and socialism; further that the key to building a united working class movement that can achieve these goals is unbending opposition to war and racism. Building a United Front Against War and Racism, then, is central to *Frontline's* political perspective.

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