

AFL-CIO mobilizes labor against 'neo-liberal' agenda

by Marianna Wertz

The traditional winter Executive Council meeting of the AFL-CIO on Feb. 16-21, was anything but "traditional" this year, as the federation's new leadership unleashed a multi-tiered offensive against what AFL-CIO President John Sweeney called the "neo-liberal" policies that are destroying the lives of most Americans.

The revolution that has swept the American labor movement since the October 1995 election of Sweeney, Secretary-Treasurer Richard Trumka, and Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson, was perhaps best characterized by the choice of locations for the convention. For the past 30 years, the winter convention has been held in the resort town of Bal Harbour, Florida. One of Sweeney's first acts, on coming into office, was to move the site of the convention to "cities around the country where national union leaders could join working families' struggles." Los Angeles was chosen because it is home to some of the most aggressive new union organizing in the nation. "I wanted to move," Sweeney said, during his speech to an AFL-CIO-sponsored teach-in at the University of California at Los Angeles after the convention, "because the resort atmosphere there had become a symbol of the past, and the labor movement needs to move into the fight for the future of workers and their families."

Sweeney set the agenda for the convention in his two speeches to the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, on Jan. 31 and Feb. 1 (see *EIR* Feb. 14, 1997) and in his speech before the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco on Feb. 7. He blasted the " 'neo-liberal' version of the American model now held out for export" to Europe and the developing sector. "Far from being a cure-all, the attempt of any advanced European social democracy to imbibe the neo-liberal U.S.

model would create social upheaval, with far greater economic costs than benefits," Sweeney warned.

In his convention speech and his address to the UCLA teach-in, Sweeney pointed to example after example of how neo-liberal policies have destroyed American lives. "For American workers and their families, these are snapshots from hell. They paint an ugly portrait of a country that has lost respect for workers and the jobs they do. American workers are running out of money, running out of options, and running out of hope. They've exhausted their savings, and they are loaded with debt. They are frustrated and bitter, and their anger is exceeded only by anxiety over keeping their jobs. They have lost faith in their government and in their employers, and their alienation is ripping at the fabric of our society."

The only solution to this, Sweeney said, is to "fundamentally change the way our country works. One of the things we need most is a strong counterbalance to the power of corporations—in the workplace, in the marketplace, and in our policy-making arenas. And the only institution that can play that role is the American labor movement."

Unions must change

The main agenda item of the convention was how to change the labor movement so that it can play that role; how, as Sweeney said, to "push our nation back onto the road to higher wages and more lofty standards and expectations."

"In order to play that role," Sweeney told the UCLA teach-in, "unions must change." In the last 20 years, "the labor movement became isolated and introverted, concerned more with our own deepening crisis than with the crisis in the world



We must “push our nation back on the road to higher wages and more lofty standards and expectations,” said AFL-CIO President John Sweeney in Los Angeles. Here, Sweeney addresses the kickoff of “Union Summer,” on May 1, 1996.

around us.” Sweeney called for building coalitions beyond the labor movement and increasing union membership. “Only by substantially increasing our membership can working families regain some control over our national agenda and our federal government,” he said. The goal set by the convention is to devote at least 30% of the AFL-CIO funds to organizing new union members; prior to Sweeney’s election, the organization had spent as little as 3% on this task.

Elected officials also addressed the conference, although not necessarily in agreement with Sweeney. While House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) tore into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), much hated by labor for having killed thousands of American jobs, Vice President Gore endorsed the free-trade treaty.

At Gore’s Feb. 18 press conference, after his speech, *EIR* reporter Ted Andromidas put the Vice President on the spot, asking the first question: “Given that John Sweeney spoke at Davos on the dangers and inequities of globalization, free trade, and other International Monetary Fund-style policies; and given that these policies have produced depression conditions globally, but especially terrible conditions in Russia and eastern Europe, did you assure the [AFL-CIO] Executive Council that the Clinton administration was aware of these problems and would reverse these policies?”

Gore lamely responded, “Good question! I can tell you that this is something that we did talk about today, that we are concerned about this.”

Resolutions

The convention passed a series of resolutions, outlining the policies for the coming year, which are intended to begin putting a stop to the neo-liberal agenda.

Specifically targetting international neo-liberal policies is a resolution on “Fast Track Trade Negotiating Authority,” which declares that the recent period of increasing trade liberalization has resulted in “falling wages, increased job insecurity, declining incomes, increasing inequality and poverty, and a disastrous decline in jobs in the manufacturing sector.” The resolution calls on Congress not to grant fast track negotiating authority unless worker rights, labor standards, and environmental protection are addressed.

Several key resolutions outline “strategic corporate campaigns,” to be targetted against corporations which are among the nation’s most anti-labor employers. The campaigns are aimed at humiliating these companies, using negative publicity and public pressure to try to force them into changing their practices without their workers having to stage a costly strike. The corporations singled out are General Electric, where a contract with 46,000 workers in 14 unions expires June 29; the American Red Cross, which is denounced for “acting more like a ruthless Wall Street firm than a time-honored national charity” toward its own workers; Sharp HealthCare of San Diego; Knight-Ridder and Gannett, owners of the *Detroit News* and *Detroit Free-Press*; Frontier Hotel in Las Vegas; American President Lines Ltd., the nation’s second

largest ocean transportation carrier; and New Otani Hotel, in Los Angeles. New Otani is Japanese-owned, and Sweeney announced that he will soon travel to Japan to organize unionists there to support the American action from across the ocean.

Another important resolution, on “Welfare Reform and Union Representation,” announces that it is the policy of the AFL-CIO to 1) preserve established collective bargaining and work relationships, encouraging affiliates to unionize successor employees when their jobs are contracted out or privatized; and 2) organize workfare recipients, encouraging affiliates to organize workfare recipients where they have established collective bargaining relationships and to seek to organize workfare recipients even where no existing relationships exist.

Unprecedented mobilization

The seriousness of the labor movement’s mobilization is perhaps best indicated by the unprecedented number of rallies and demonstrations held in the context of the convention. The convention was launched with a week-long pre-conference organizing swing by the three federation leaders. On Feb. 12, Sweeney joined hundreds of Las Vegas hotel, hospital, and construction workers at the Culinary Workers union hall to celebrate organizing victories and unprecedented union membership growth in Las Vegas in recent months. On Feb. 14, Richard Trumka led hundreds of workers in a San Francisco rally protesting anti-union tactics and downsizing by the multibillion-dollar Sutter/CHS Corporation. Over the weekend, officers of four international unions joined Linda Chavez-Thompson and United Farm Workers President Arturo Rodriguez on a visit to Watsonville, the heart of California strawberry country, where the federation is waging its largest current organizing drive among 20,000 strawberry workers.

The convention itself was kicked off Feb. 16 with a picnic for more than 1,000 workers and union activists at Los Angeles’ Union Station. On Feb. 19, an afternoon march in support of the right to organize at the New Otani Hotel drew thousands of workers to a demonstration in front of the hotel.

After the convention, Sweeney, Trumka, and Chavez-Thompson keynoted a two-day teach-in at UCLA on “Fighting for Social Justice.” The federation also announced 12 Regional Organizing Conferences to be held nationwide over the next six months, designed “to generate new thinking, new strategies, and new energy.”

EIR contributing editor Lyndon LaRouche publicly welcomed the changed labor movement at the Presidents’ Day weekend convention of the Schiller Institute. In a speech on the subject of the global mass strike now breaking out worldwide, LaRouche said, “At least now in America, we have a labor movement of which we don’t need to be ashamed.”

Starr out, then back; but can he indict?

by Edward Spannaus

As we go to press, late on the afternoon of Feb. 22, Whitewater independent counsel Kenneth Starr called a press conference to rescind his Feb. 17 announcement that he would be resigning as special prosecutor to take a position at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California. Although the initial reaction of many to Starr’s Feb. 17 announcement had been to assume that Starr was giving up on indicting the President or the First Lady, Starr’s withdrawal in fact would have had little effect on the course of the Whitewater attack on the Presidency, and his about-face, likewise, will have little effect.

The course of action that Starr, or his successor, will take, is constrained by the U.S. Constitution—something that Starr admittedly cares little about. This means that Starr probably cannot indict the President, but he has other options open to him, which would be equally destabilizing to the United States.

While there was much speculation immediately after Feb. 17 that Starr was giving up, the actions that Starr took around his announced resignation indicated otherwise. Starr sent two important signals in a Feb. 19 speech.

First, Starr warned that the Whitewater investigation was far from over. “I want to now be crystal clear. The evaluation process and the investigative process in these complex matters are still very much under way. No decisions or resolutions have been made by this office.” Starr cautioned that “those who argue that the investigation is over are wrong. It is wrong, indeed, it is dangerous, to draw any conclusions based upon my personal situation.”

Second, Starr has sent a clear message that he wanted one of his deputies to be appointed as his successor as the Whitewater independent counsel. The deputy considered most likely to succeed Starr was his chief Little Rock deputy, W. Hickman Ewing, a 20-year career federal prosecutor, with whom Starr was huddled all day on Feb. 18, following the announcement of his resignation. Ewing is a nasty creature, who previously played a prominent role in the “Operation Frühmenschen” targeting of African-American U.S. Rep. Harold Ford (D-Tenn.).¹

1. Ewing also played a key role in the cover-up of the Martin Luther King assassination. When William Pepper, the attorney for James Earl Ray, agreed to a televised mock trial for Ray in 1992, Ewing was chosen to play the chief prosecutor—an assignment he carried out with fervor and zeal. Ewing attempted to prevent the introduction of any evidence into the trial of illegal activity by the FBI directed against King, and he also tried to cut certain