

AFL-CIO convention launches organizing drive

by Marianna Wertz

Vowing to take back the U.S. Congress in 1998 for a pro-labor agenda, the AFL-CIO met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania on Sept. 22-25 in its 22nd Constitutional Convention, the first since John Sweeney assumed the presidency of the labor federation. The convention was organized under the theme "We Have a Voice, Let's Make It Heard!" Considering the high-level speakers who addressed the 1,000 delegates—from President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore to Labor Secretary Alexis Herman and the Democratic leaders of both houses of Congress—it's clear that the Democrats are hoping that the reenergized labor movement under Sweeney's leadership can do just that.

However, from the convention's start to end, Sweeney and the other labor leaders emphatically rejected the old role of the labor movement as the trusted allies of the Democratic Party, who could be taken for granted even as the politicians sold out the fundamental rights of working people. In their 23 months in office, Sweeney and his fellow officers, Rich Trumka (secretary-treasurer) and Linda Chavez-Thompson (executive vice president), have grasped the difficulties involved in rebuilding the labor movement, have sized up their friends and enemies alike, and are preparing an offensive to create an independent political force in America with the power—in numbers—to win substantive improvements in the living standards of working people and their families.

The seriousness of this effort was perhaps best reflected in the response from delegates and international guests to a team of LaRouche movement organizers, who flooded the convention with literature. Nearly 100 union leaders from the United States and around the world signed the Open Letter to President Clinton, calling for the exoneration of LaRouche (see box). Many of these signers had either been

reading the LaRouche movement's literature over the years, or knew of LaRouche's fight for economic justice against the same enemies the labor movement is now taking on.

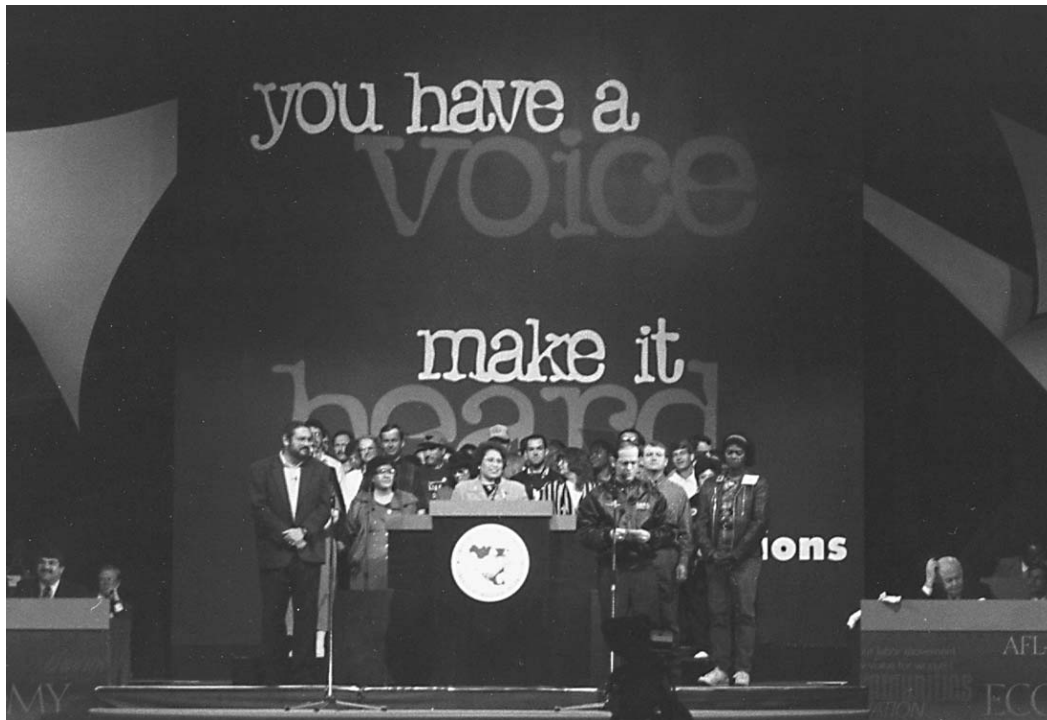
Organizing is 'everything'

The convention was preceded on Sept. 20 with an Organizing Conference addressed by Vice President Gore, and concluded with a mass march through downtown Pittsburgh, to underscore the commitment to organizing as its main theme. There were four "strategic topics," as Secretary-Treasurer Trumka told the delegates: "Building a Movement of American Workers," "Making Government Work for America's Workers," "A New Voice for Workers in the Global Economy," and "A New Voice for Workers in the Community."

The conference opened with a call for a commitment to organizing a much larger percentage of the workforce into unions, as the key to winning fundamental rights for America's workers. Organized labor's share of the workforce has plummeted in the past two decades, from approximately 30% to below 15% today.

President Sweeney stated in his keynote address: "Everything we do is connected to organizing. . . . We have to continue to . . . find ways to organize on a bigger scale and at a faster pace, because the employers we are confronting are raising the stakes by spending millions of new dollars to deny workers their legal right to organize, and because our enemies in the political arena are doing everything they can to choke off our new movement before it has a chance to live and breathe."

The AFL-CIO and its affiliates have had approximately 2,000 organizing victories since the new leadership took



AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson introduces over 100 young activists who helped organize trade unions this year.

office 23 months ago. But, with the loss of jobs to union-busting, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and other causes, there has been a net gain of only 54,000 union members in the past two years.

Before Sweeney's keynote, a lineup of some 100 young union organizers presented dramatic testimony on their battles to bring unions into their places of work. The scandal that in America, a nation which prides itself on its commitment to freedom, there is no guaranteed right to organize in union, became painfully clear, as story after story was told of beatings, harassment, and firings for those who tried to organize.

In his keynote, Sweeney pointed to the young organizers who had joined him on the stage, and told the crowd, "The real heroes of our new movement are the thousands of workers . . . who decided to put their jobs on the line and their lives on hold to help their co-workers win the dignity, rights, and respect that come only with a union contract."

Sweeney reviewed the numerous organizing initiatives undertaken over the past 23 months, saying: "We've created a new culture of organizing and begun devoting substantial new resources to organizing. We've developed an exciting new program that is helping local unions across the country change in order to organize. We're training more young people through our organizing institute and we're helping our unions take on entire industries and geographic areas."

He pointed specifically to the Strawberry Workers Campaign in California, which is "helping 20,000 workers in California reap a harvest of human dignity"; to the joint Farmworkers and Teamsters campaign to organize 15,000

fruit pickers and warehouse workers in the apple industry; and to the 15-union campaign of the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO in Las Vegas, aimed at organizing 40,000 unrepresented workers.

Elect a pro-labor Congress

Calling on organized labor to help elect a pro-labor Congress in 1998, and to hold political parties and elected officials to account, Sweeney said: "We cannot continue to decline in membership and expect our local unions to survive. We cannot bargain good contracts or pass decent legislation or have a voice in our communities without growing stronger.

"And to grow stronger, we have to find *new ways* to connect everything we do to organizing, and the place to start is by stopping something we've been doing far too long—we must stop giving money to political parties who won't give unions the respect we deserve, and we must stop supporting political candidates who won't support working families!"

He proposed a "litmus test" for every political candidate, with three questions: 1) Will you vote to support the right of workers to organize to improve their lives? 2) Will you take a stand against employers who violate our laws and interfere with a worker's free choice to join a union? 3) When a worker is fired for union organizing, will you stand with us, will you march with us, will you go to jail with us?

In addition, Sweeney noted that nearly 40% of union members are not registered to vote. If you project that into

union households and family members, he continued, “that’s as many as 16 million potential voters who are unregistered today—more than enough to put working families back in control of their lives and their future.”

Sweeney also launched a drive to recruit 2,000 union-member candidates by the year 2000. Indeed, recruitment stations were established for potential candidates in the “Union City” booths established in the convention center.

Reviving ‘the American Dream’

A major aspect of the debate was the economic policy changes required to revive “the American Dream.” The resolution on “The American Economy” states, “While the American Dream is alive and well in the hearts and minds of Americans, its reality has begun to languish in the American economy. The last 20 years have seen a steady erosion of the family wage, an erosion that has been particularly concentrated among those already earning lower-than-average wages. The average unemployment rate has increased, and there has been a wide increase in economic insecurity.”

To reverse this, the convention passed several important resolutions. One calls for a national commitment to full employment, urging that the Federal Reserve adhere to its full-employment mandate, and calling its current “single-minded pursuit of price stability with zero inflation” a

“deeply misguided goal.”

Other resolutions call for a return to the “policy agenda of Roosevelt”; for increased investment in infrastructure for America’s cities; increased spending on health care, education, job training, public safety, and environmental programs; an end to privatization; and a living minimum wage for all, including welfare recipients.

In her speech to the convention and subsequent press conference, Labor Secretary Herman pledged to fight for full labor rights for welfare recipients forced to work under the new welfare laws. She also affirmed her support for the right of these workfare workers to organize into unions. “I was a union member,” she said, “and it made a unique difference in my life.”

No to ‘free trade’

The most emotional issue of the convention was the legislation which the Clinton administration is attempting to push through Congress, to expand NAFTA globally, putting it on a “fast track,” which would give Clinton the ability to negotiate a trade treaty without Congress being able to amend it. The AFL-CIO is adamantly opposed to this legislation, as it has opposed NAFTA from the start. Fast track opponents Sen. Minority Leader Tom Daschle (S.D.) and House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt (Mo.) were showcased before Clinton

Labor leaders who signed for LaRouche’s exoneration

Leroy Trotman, president, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions; general secretary, Barbados Workers Union

Bob White, president, Canadian Labour Congress, Ottawa

Stephen Benedict, national director, International Department, Canadian Labour Congress, Ottawa

Michel Lajeunesse, Canadian director, Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Montreal

William A. Attley, general secretary, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Dublin

Alexander Sergueev, president, The All-Russian Confederation of Labor; member of the Advisory Council to the President of Russia, Moscow

Leonid Solomin, president, Confederated Trade Unions of Kazakhstan, Almaty

Evelin Toth, international coordinator, Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Croatia, Zagreb

Dr. Konstantin Trenchev, president, Confederation of

Labor “Podkrepa” (“Support”), Sofia, Bulgaria
Demitris Kittenis, deputy general secretary, Cyprus Workers Confederation, Nicosia

Kertist Augustin, general secretary, Caribbean Congress of Labour, Roseau, Dominica

José M. Torres, president, UNITE! (Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees), San Juan, Puerto Rico

Sumi Haru, vice president, National Council AFL-CIO, Los Angeles, California

Carl Huber, international executive vice president, United Food and Commercial Workers, Baltimore, Maryland

Alan B. Hughes, president, Arkansas State AFL-CIO; president, Paperworkers International Union, Little Rock, Arkansas

Clarence J. Monin, international president, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, Avon Lake, Ohio

Susan C. Pisha, international vice-president, Communication Workers of America, Littleton, Colorado

Thomas Short, international president, International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees, Cleveland, Ohio



AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and his wife, at the conference in Pittsburgh. Said Sweeney: "We cannot continue to decline in membership and expect our local unions to survive. We cannot bargain good contracts or pass decent legislation or have a voice in our communities without growing stronger."

addressed the convention, and were given standing ovations for their opposition to the proposed agreement.

Gephardt presented a slide show which he had made on a recent trip to Juárez, Mexico, showing the unbelievable poverty just south of our border. He concluded with a picture of a small Mexican girl, dirty and hungry. "If this child were American," he said, "we'd say this is a scandal. Well, this is a scandal. It's a million people, and it's on our border."

Addressing the issue most forcefully was Bob White, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, who was one of the signers on the Open Letter to President Clinton calling for LaRouche's exoneration.

NAFTA, said White, is "totally unacceptable to us." It has created "immense wealth" for some, which is "increasingly obscene," while Canada has suffered from an official unemployment rate of 9% since NAFTA began, as well as increased poverty and social dislocation. The "competitive model" has had disastrous effects, White said, while the Structural Adjustment Policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have eroded public services and living standards. The "dogma of privatization and free trade" is a "recipe for human rights violations," he said, to thunderous applause.

White stressed that the Gingrichite program in the United States and Canada is a "throwback to the 1930s." "We must never accept the idea that markets determine our destiny," he said, noting that governments interfere in markets every day, on behalf of the banks and the multinational institutions. "Just look at what they did in Mexico and Thailand," raising \$50 billion between the governments and the banks, to bail

out the banks whose losses were caused by speculators. He seconded Sweeney's earlier call for a global trade union movement, to counter the multinationals.

When President Clinton addressed the convention on Wednesday morning, the reception was decidedly cooler than it had been for Daschle or Gephardt. Clinton did everything he could to try to convince the delegates not to punish Democratic members of Congress who vote for the NAFTA fast track. "They have fought for you and for all working people, and they deserve our support," Clinton said. "If they were to lose their positions because they stood up for what they believed was right for America's future, who would replace them, and how much harder would it be to get the necessary votes in Congress to back the President when he stands by you against the majority?"

Sweeney issued a reply, making clear that Clinton hadn't succeeded: "We heard an eloquent expression of one point of view. We have an eloquent point of view as well—working families' point of view—and we need to express it loudly and clearly this afternoon.

"When we take up the trade resolution, we want the world to know how strongly we oppose NAFTA expansion and fast track. . . . We believe America should use our tremendous power in the world economy to lead a race to the top—not the bottom—and negotiate fair trade policies that protect the environment and workers' and human rights.

"Nothing else is acceptable. Nothing else does justice to the hard-working men and women who make this country work—and nothing else will work for working families when they go to the polls to vote next year!"