

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

AFL-CIO presents domestic policy agenda

Policies focussed on improving the standard of living, including physically rebuilding the economy.

The leadership of America's labor movement presented a sweeping domestic policy agenda, in resolutions and floor debate at the AFL-CIO's Sept. 22-25 biennial convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Coupled with a commitment to fighting for continued growth in union membership, which was the main theme of the convention, the agenda is important both for what it proposes, and because of the increasing political strength of the labor movement, particularly in the wake of the highly successful Teamsters' strike against United Parcel Service.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney told the thousand delegates to the convention that his aim is to take Congress back for a pro-working family agenda in 1998. The labor federation's "top federal legislative priority," he said, is stopping the Clinton administration's proposed "fast-track" negotiating authority to expand the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At a pre-convention press conference, Sweeney said he thought "fast track" could be defeated, and that it would figure into endorsements for Congress in the 1998 election.

Calling the 1993 vote on NAFTA a "litmus test," AFL-CIO Executive Vice President Linda Chavez-Thompson told the press that, in addition to the 40% of AFL-CIO members who aren't even registered to vote, workers simply stayed home in the 1994 election, because of NAFTA. But in 1998, she said, Congressmen "who vote for 'fast track' should have fears that working people won't vote for them."

NAFTA and other "free-trade" legislation is anathema to the labor movement because its result, borne out in spades over the past two decades, is what Sweeney calls "a race to the bottom." In its resolution on "The American Economy," the AFL-CIO spells out what it sees as the "American Dream," which is being destroyed by "free trade": "A secure job with good wages and benefits for everyone who wants one remains an unfulfilled need for millions of Americans, and is the top economic policy priority of the AFL-CIO."

The resolution broadly outlines the policy requirements needed to achieve this goal:

- The AFL-CIO "is strongly opposed" to any change in the Federal Reserve's commitment to full employment, warning that the Fed "must be able to lower interest rates aggressively in order to help prevent economic downturns from spiralling into deep recessions." While far from Lyndon LaRouche's call for a new Bretton Woods system, this warning at least acknowledges the need for Federal action in the case of deep economic emergency.

- Should the private sector be unable to provide sufficient jobs to reach full employment, the AFL-CIO calls on the Federal government to step in, as the "employer of last resort."

- The resolution opposes the budget priorities contained in the GOP budget plan, saying that "more resources must be made available for the programs working families will depend upon most over the next de-

cade—Medicare, Medicaid, education, job training, infrastructure investment, public safety and the environment." It further rejects proposals such as the flat tax, value-added tax, or national sales tax, which would "further shift tax burdens away from the well-to-do."

- Calling for reversal of the growing income inequality in the nation (where the highest-paid CEOs are averaging 400 times more income than the lowest-paid workers), the AFL-CIO calls for market and tax policies that work to reduce the disparity of income and wealth, and for a "living minimum wage." Despite long-overdue increases in the minimum wage passed by Congress in June 1996, a full-time minimum-wage worker will still earn only \$10,920, well below the poverty threshold of \$12,772 for a family of three.

- The growing "contingent" workforce must be protected from exploitation, the AFL-CIO states, including the millions of new welfare workers, as well as the "employees" of the nation's largest employers—temporary agencies. "Compared with traditional employees, contingent workers lag in pay, health care and pension coverage," the resolution states. "The AFL-CIO strongly supports protection of all workers under Federal and state employment laws, including minimum wages, overtime, family and medical leave, civil rights and the right to organize unions, which itself is an essential civil right."

Other language in the resolution calls for rebuilding America's cities by renewing our commitment to infrastructure investment; an end to the "uncritical drive toward radical deregulation and unbridled competition" in the electric and other industries; and a strong commitment to the nation's maritime capability for military and economic security.