

'Labor Party' Auxiliary for the Democrats Stillborn in the USA

One of the axioms of Marxism is that the working class needs its own political party, independent from those of the capitalists, in order to pursue its own historic interests. The American working class, despite episodes of sharp class struggle, has never managed to separate itself from the parties of the bosses. In the 1996 elections, the AFL-CIO squandered \$35 million on the anti-labor Democrats.

In recent years, a layer of trade-union bureaucrats has come to question the utility of the AFL-CIO's political loyalty to the Democrats, and has begun talking about organizing a labor party. In 1991 Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union (OCAW) founded the Labor Party Advocates (LPA) to promote this idea. On 6 June 1996, some fourteen hundred delegates assembled in Cleveland, Ohio to launch the U.S. Labor Party (LP), promising to show American workers a "new organizing approach to politics."

But, as its founding conference revealed, there is nothing new about this "Labor Party" except the label. It is a party which discourages political discussion, which raises no criticisms of the corrupt, anti-communist labor bureaucrats who have driven the unions into the ground, and which signals its intent to continue to support the "lesser evil" Democrats.

The LP conference was tightly controlled by a handful of top union officials. The OCAW and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers Union (UE) predominated, but other unions were also represented, including the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE), the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), the California Nurses Association (CNA), the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), and the United Mine Workers (UMW).

The conference was run in the heavy-handed manner of a typical union convention. Its organizers were intent on limiting substantive political discussion. Voting was heavily weighted to favour the union leaderships, with each casting 100 votes. In order to ensure their control, both OCAW and UE had scheduled conferences in Cleveland to overlap with the "Labor Party" launch.

During the proceedings, attempts from the floor to introduce ideas different from those of the top table were routinely snuffed. Even the ILWU leadership was initially rebuffed when, in an attempt to give the LP (and itself) a little left cover, it put forward a motion proposing that this "Labor Party" might consider contesting some state and local elections. The chair simply refused to permit consideration of the motion. When the ILWU delegation threatened to walk out, OCAW President Bob Wages stepped in and proposed a "Democracy Hour" to let the ILWU present its proposal. After some discussion, the motion was soundly defeated, and the convention agreed to postpone consideration of running

candidates until 1998.

Democratic Party Advocates

The issue of running candidates is so sensitive because to do so would imply running *against* the Democrats, something that the union brass is strictly opposed to. James Weinstein's report on the conference in the social-democratic journal, *In These Times*, approvingly reported remarks from a delegate in defense of the leadership's policy:

"The non-electoral policy proposed by the leadership, he added, was designed to 'avoid a head-on clash with the main body of the labor movement.' And that is a necessity, if the Labor Party is to grow...."

—quoted by *In Defense of Marxism*, July 1996

Marilyn Vogt-Downey reported the informed speculation of some ostensible Marxists at the conference who: "feared that the ban on electoral politics was no more than the product of a deal worked out between Tony Mazzocchi and John Sweeney (president of the AFL-CIO) along the following lines: Sweeney would agree not to attack the Labor Party if the Labor Party would agree not to run candidates or attack Sweeney for squandering AFL-CIO money and resources by backing Clinton and other Democrats."

The delicate balancing act involved in calling for an "independent" workers' party while not repudiating the Democrats, has produced all kinds of contortions. At the AFL-CIO's 1996 annual meeting a few months prior to the official Labor Party launch, Bob Wages ducked out when the vote to endorse Bill Clinton came up.

The conference call explicitly assured the union tops that signing on with the LPA would *not* mean a break with the Democrats:

"Finally, Labor Party Advocates is strictly non-electoral for another very practical reason. Many of us have worked long and hard to establish good relationships with existing parties. We need these connections if we are going to represent the interests of working people in the present political system."

—LPA Conference Call

The LPA organizers invited Jerry Brown, former Democratic governor of California (and advocate of a reactionary flat tax scheme), as a keynote speaker. John Sturdivant, president of the AFGE, who sits on *both* the National Democratic Committee and the LP's Interim National Council, was reported by *Workers' World* (20 June 1996) as saying, "his union's endorsement does not mean it is splitting from the Democrats or from the AFL-CIO's commitment to Clinton." Finally, as if to underline the point, the Cleveland conference soundly *defeated* a motion repudiating support to either Democrats or Republicans.

Star-Spangled 'Socialists'

Only those who are wilfully blind can miss the politi-

cal significance of all this. Yet, while the Labor Party is invisible to most American workers, it is enthusiastically embraced by many leftists, including the remnants of the Communist Party, as well as by an assortment of Trotskyist reformists associated with journals such as *Labor Notes*, *Labor Militant*, *Solidarity* and *In Defense of Marxism*. Despite nuancial differences, they all agree that the Labor Party constitutes a bold step forward by a section of the labor establishment. This demonstrates once again that opportunists can find a “progressive” dynamic in almost anything.

The LP’s overtly pro-Democratic Party stance is paralleled by the timidity of its paper program. The conference *defeated* a motion by the California Nurses Association that, “[t]he Labor Party supports safe, legal abortion and believes it is a woman’s private decision.” At a time when even the Democrats explicitly endorse a woman’s right to abortion, the Labor Party voted it down, on the grounds that it would be “divisive,” and instead hid behind an ambiguous statement in favor of full access to “reproductive services.”

As might be expected from a would-be labor auxiliary of the Democrats, the conference reeked of American imperial patriotism. It opened with the singing of the “Star Spangled Banner,” and went on to approve a call for “adequate national defense”! A reformist proposal to trim military spending by 50 percent was defeated, while the conference endorsed a chauvinist call for economic sanctions against countries guilty of “unfair” labor practices. This thinly-disguised protectionism rests on a presumption that the State Department, which has spent decades combating militant unions throughout the Third World, can somehow be transformed into the champion of the workers in the sweatshops of its neo-colonies.

Neither does the LP program make any pretence of opposition to capitalist rule domestically. While expressing a mild preference for “protecting the public sector from corporate attack,” it doesn’t even hint at nationalizations, or any other infringement of capitalist property rights. In short, this is a “labor” program based on the proposition that, given proper regulatory oversight, corporate America can be transformed into the servant of working people at home and abroad.

The LP program does allude to the fact that immigrants, blacks and other minorities face daily violence from police, *La Migra*, as well as freelance racists. But it offers no proposals for how to meet such attacks. There is no mention of the need to uphold the fundamental

right of self-defence for the oppressed, nor does it advocate labor-minority defense guards to combat racist terrorism. Instead, the LP program merely affirms “support [for] affirmative action and anti-discrimination programs to take away the bosses’ power to divide and conquer.” Thus, once again, the LP preaches reliance on the capitalist state, whose armed thugs are the main agents of racist terror in the U.S.

‘Outlawing’ Unemployment: A Legalistic Hoax

The Labor Party program includes a bevy of standard social-democratic calls for higher taxes on the rich, increased funding for social programs, free medicare and post-secondary education, and other supportable reforms. The most “radical” plank in the platform, and the one which its leftist apologists are most enthusiastic about, is the call for a constitutional amendment to “guarantee everyone a job at a living wage.” Like many reformists before them, the Labor Party bureaucrats imagine, or pretend to imagine, that with enough pressure, prayer and popular support, they will somehow be able to wrest the state machine away from the capitalists, and turn it into a tool for advancing the interests of the oppressed and exploited.

Capitalism requires a “reserve army of the unemployed,” as Marx referred to it, to keep wages down and to discipline the working class. In the past, the U.S. Congress has occasionally passed toothless “full employment” bills, but none of them had any effect. A “constitutional amendment” would be no different. The LP leaders are a bit vague about how they plan to gain the votes of two-thirds of the corporate hirelings in Congress, as well as majorities in three-quarters of the state legislatures, required to pass a constitutional amendment. The only hint we have seen so far is contained in the second issue of *Labor Party Press*, which talks about promoting the idea with a wave of “press conferences” and “workshops.”

The emergence of a genuine independent labor-party movement among U.S. unionists would be an enormously important political development. But it will only occur in the context of a rising curve of class struggle resulting in a political revolt against the bosses, and a break with the labor aristocracy’s tradition of electoral support to the Democratic Party. This “Labor Party” is not a response to the demands of an insurgent rank and file, but rather the top-down creation of a section of the existing labor establishment, who want to increase their political leverage and raise the price of their support to the Democrats.

Various leftist apologists for the LP have compared it to the early Socialist Party under Eugene Debs. But the comparison is false. Debs began his political career as an advocate of industrial unionism, and a leader of the American Railway Union, and was sent to jail in 1894 for defying the first anti-union injunction ever handed down in the U.S. While in jail, Debs came to the realization that it was not possible to achieve social justice for working people within the framework of capitalism. So he became a socialist.

Despite his political shortcomings (particularly a fail-

REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

Vol. 6, No. 2/3

Essays on Revolutionary Marxism in Britain and Ireland from the 1930s to the 1960s

Send order to: Socialist Platform Ltd., BCM 7646,
London WC1N 3XX, England
(£3.95 per issue, £1.50 for postage)

ure to understand the importance of championing the special demands of the oppressed, and an inability to assimilate the lessons of the Bolshevik experience), Eugene Debs was always very clear that the bosses, their political parties and their cops were on the *other* side of the class line. He was not afraid to take on unpopular causes: he defended the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (“Wobblies”), embraced the Russian Revolution, and was thrown in jail for opposing American imperialism’s involvement in World War I.

In 1920 Debs won almost a million votes running for president as a socialist against the bosses’ parties. While the SP under Debs evidently lacked the capacity to lead a revolution in America, it *did* at least represent an expression of independent working-class politics. Workers who voted for Debs understood that they were casting a vote against capitalist rule.

The Labor Party hatched in Cleveland last year stands in an altogether different tradition. Its political lineage can be traced to the American Labour Party (ALP) of New York, which was created to channel the votes of socialist-minded workers to the Democrats. Art Preis, an American Trotskyist militant in the 1930s, explained the origins of the ALP:

“In the spring of 1936 AFL Teamsters President Daniel J. Tobin, a leading opponent of the Lewis-led CIO, had been reappointed by Roosevelt’s campaign manager James Farley to head the Democratic Party’s National Labor Committee. Fearful that this might place the CIO at a disadvantage, John L. Lewis, Sidney Hillman, David Dubinsky, and other leaders of the CIO set up Labor’s Non-Partisan League [LNPL] to mobilize the working-class vote for Roosevelt, thereby expecting to win his grateful reciprocity.

“...The phrase ‘Non-Partisan’ emphasized not merely that the new organization claimed no permanent ties with either of the two major parties, but that it was open to membership of all unions of whatever faction. Fifty-nine international unions did, in fact, join the LNPL in 1936,

most of them not adherents of the CIO tendency. The LNPL raised the then enormous sum of more than \$1,500,000 for Roosevelt’s 1936 campaign....

“The New York State section of the LNPL was set up in the form of a separate labor party with its own line on the ballot.... They [the leaders of the LNPL] knew that in New York hundreds of thousands of workers would refuse to mark the ballot or pull the lever for any capitalist party. The American Labor party of New York State was organized on July 16, 1936 to get these workers to vote for Roosevelt on an independent party line.”

—*Labor’s Giant Step*

The ALP nominated Roosevelt as *its* candidate for the election, so his name appeared on the ALP line on the ballot, as well as on the Democratic line. The left-liberal *Nation* (8 July 1996) quotes Bob Wages as proposing exactly the same approach for the LP in the future:

“If we remain non-electoral for the near future, and have discussions that leave room for fusion candidates, running on both our line and the Democrats, I think other unions will be interested.”

A vote for the ALP was a vote for the Democrats, the party of racism and imperialist war. This, not the tradition of Eugene Debs, is the prototype of the Labor Party launched in Cleveland.

American workers desperately need their own party, one that is based on the fundamental proposition that their interests are diametrically *opposed* to those of corporate America. While the LP no doubt includes activists who favor independent working class politics, no one in the leadership has evinced any desire to break with the Democrats. A party to represent working people must take a side in every class struggle, and uphold the interests of *all* those exploited and oppressed by capitalism. The U.S. “Labor Party” of Mazzocchi, Wages and the other bureaucrats, is *not* such a workers’ party, but a labor auxiliary for the Democrats. As such, it is part of the problem, not part of the solution. ■