
INTERVIEW: WILLIAM WINPISINGER



Stuart Lewis/NSIPS

Social Democratic labor leader says basic change must come through violence

EIR's Stanley Ezrol interviewed William Winpisinger, President of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) on Aug. 28. We are taking the opportunity to publish the interview now because of the numerous requests we have received regarding what labor is (and is not) doing about Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker's interest-rate policy. Mr. Winpisinger began his interview by stating that he speaks only for himself and the IAM, not the labor movement or the AFL-CIO of which his union is a part. He stated that federation's President Lane Kirkland is the appropriate person to address such questions to. While Mr. Kirkland has publicly attacked the high interest rates per se, his posture with respect to Mr. Volcker, the 10-year author of those policies, has mimicked that of the Democratic Party leadership—to attempt to tar the Republican President for policies initiated under the Carter administration that Mr. Kirkland refuses to fight.

Ezrol: Can you give us your response and the IAM's response to Reagan's economic policy?

Winpisinger: First of all, we're satisfied that it will not, cannot work. . . . The same kind of an economic program has been tried before in the history of our country. The most recent time that I can recall that it was tried on quite the magnitude of the current one, was during the years of Coolidge and Hoover, and you don't have to be much of a student of history to recall what happened as an aftermath of that experience. More recent trials I think are evidenced by what's happening in Great Britain . . . and I think everyone, if they check, will quickly learn that Mrs. Thatcher—Atilla the Hen, I call her—has much the same economic program that Mr. Reagan is touting here; the architect of it was the same adviser that President Reagan uses to a great extent, namely [Milton] Friedman, and if what has happened to Mrs. Thatcher as a result of following Mr. Friedman's advice is any yard-

stick, you can see where the United States is headed by adhering to the same advice, and adopting the same policies.

I say unequivocally it will fail: I have no lingering shadow of a doubt in my mind that it will fail, and when it does, a lot of American people who are otherwise defenseless are going to be irreparably harmed, and it's going to take a long time to heal the wounds that this kind of economic injustice is going to create—principally the less well-off, the poor, single mothers, welfare mothers, dependent children—the whole gamut of those who are really defenseless in the high-powered economic stream of today.

Ezrol: What are your counter-proposals?

Winpisinger: Well, I think we need to—once and for all—make up our minds that peace in the world comes from an understanding among men that each has a right to survive on this planet irrespective of their political philosophy or anything else, and reduce this madness of escalating toward conflagration that we seem to be hell-bent to do. . . .

That suggests to me that you get to the conference table and negotiate SALT II, and SALT III, and SALT IV, and begin reducing the sustenance of the world that is squandered on the implements of destruction.

Ezrol: On the question of economic policy, are you saying that your economic policy is to negotiate SALT III or. . . .

Winpisinger: Oh, it's simply one integral. Economic policy ought to be in the main—in the round—ought to be, uh, a search for a more nearly balanced budget. I don't talk of absolute balance, every business in the world in the free-enterprise sector, so-called, borrows against its future earnings, and I don't see anything wrong with a

country doing that, for that matter. It should be prudent borrowing, however, and when it has the ability to undermine the entire economic structure, then you've got to pay attention to it. . . .

The principal factor that militates against achieving that kind of a balance is the horrendous amount of money that we squander on the defense establishment and that's why I put disarmament, or a reduction in hostilities and the attendant arming, at the top.

When I look at economic policy, at program, I look at things like the energy field, where we badly need relatively inexpensive and, reliable renewable sources and we're expending pitifully little. . . .

Nuclear to me is really a myth, because I haven't been able to find any reliable evidence anywhere yet that nuclear power is now, or ever is going to be, cheap. After all, we've permitted oil to be cartelized right under our very noses and redound substantially to the already overflowing coffers of our own oil companies, now called energy companies for convenience. There's nothing that suggests to me that uranium and other nuclear fuels, if there are any, wouldn't be cartelized on exactly the same basis. They'll be cartelized first to keep cheaper sources out of our country, and when we exhaust our own supplies, the same will happen as with oil. It'll be turned upside-down and be used as a device to force the price up on the world market, so we'll have to pay through the nose to get it. . . .

If this country had spent as many billions of dollars in the last 25 years as it has now squandered on the development of nuclear, we would have clean, safe renewable alternatives on-stream right now, and the longer we delay getting to that and abandoning this crazy nuclear path, the more we delay the ultimate solution of the problem, the more we delay our own economic welfare and participation by all of our citizens in the economic stream. . . .

The only way you're going to get people out of their automobiles and stop the traffic jams and everything else is to create decent, efficient, around-the-clock transportation on a mass basis and thereby substantially reduce the per capita fuel consumption. . . . I look at things like the rebuilding of the inner cities of the country; the rotting depths of every major metropolis in the country needs overhauling. And the high interest rates that are the product of the Reagan-type of economic program certainly militates against that happening, and if we wait for the private sector to do it, we'll be waiting when the next century rolls around. . . .

Ezrol: You've just mentioned high interest rates for the first time. Do you place interest rates toward the bottom of the list of problems with Reagan's economics, or do you see it as they key issue?

Winpisinger: I'm not going to call it the key one. It

certainly is an aggravating, nagging one. I tell you one of the most salutary developments I've seen recently, and by that I mean in the last four months or so. I seldom pick up a periodical or a newspaper, a pamphlet of any kind that doesn't, somewhere in its contents, address the problem of defense spending in a negative way, and that's the best news I've seen. Interest rates are rapidly assuming the same posture. I don't know why it took so long. Interest rates have been naggingly high for a very long time now, since before Reagan became President. . . .

Interest rates are devastating in their impacts upon progressing the social affairs of the country. It doesn't matter to profits particularly. The big guys don't even borrow money. If they get a little short on cash, they simply look around for a successful company somewhere that's got a good cash flow, they go buy it, and make a cash cow out of the goddamned thing, and away they go about their business. They got their own near banks that they establish; they borrow abroad; we legislate high interest rates to slow down the economy, and then all it does is kill all of the 11 million private employers out there that are the legitimate free-enterprise sector, and who are the engines of jobs.

Ezrol: People have talked about the need to turn the Democratic Party into more of a firmly labor-based party like the European social democracies than it is now. You're a member of the Democratic National Committee, what's your view on this?

Winpisinger: Well, if the Democratic Party continues to try to out-Republican the Republicans, it's going to go down the tubes. . . . Democrats are going to have to make up their minds first of all, whether or not they're Democrats; and those that aren't are going to have to get drummed out and get over on the other side, where in the hell they belonged in the first place—and that includes all these duplicitous Southern finks that habitually fall into lockstep, the Dixiecrats so-called, this goddamned coalition that keeps doing violence to the progress of the nation.

I don't think frankly that this is the time that we ought to be out running around shooting with a shotgun and wasting the sustenance of our political life forming other parties, or opposition movements that you expect to have a broad base. I think it's premature. The Democrats have suffered a crushing defeat for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is the goddamned incompetence of our candidate, and the refusal of Democrats to get on the bandwagon with a candidate who had the potential to win. They ought to be thinking about the country and get on with putting the best-qualified guy we've got as the head of our ticket.

Ezrol: Who's that?

Winpisinger: I'm not married to anyone at the moment.

I think right this minute, if you had to make the assessment, you'd have to say that Ted Kennedy is still the one that's most in front, with the best credentials to become a winner. But politics is so volatile that that may not last for more than three days. I'm going to wait and see what happens. Walter Mondale, it seems to me, is making more and more noises like a candidate. If he emerges as the standard-bearer of our party, as I see it right now—something could change tomorrow—I'll probably swallow very hard and support him. That's not a reality yet, so I don't worry about it. . . .

I think the Democrats ought to be concentrating on rebuilding the only goddamned thing we ever did well in the first place, and that's the doorbell-punching organization at the grassroots of the country. That's how the Republicans beat us and that's what we've got to recapture in order to prevail. Everybody got lazy. The Democratic Party today is much like the labor movement and it's faced with the same rebuilding job.

I'm not so enamored of the two-party system that I'd go to the grave with it, but I think you've got to at least give it enough rope to hang itself, if you're going to change it.

Ezrol: Isn't the problem that, to a large extent, the reform movement of the fifties and sixties has turned to issues like drug decriminalization, gay rights, and other issues which the base of the party really doesn't feel comfortable with?

Winpisinger: I think the party would be well-advised to do what I do: stop buying in on those goddamned issues and just knock the shit out of the enemy on the same single-issue basis; establish our own defensive techniques that go on the offensive of exposing high interest rates, exposing the goddamned massive budget perversions—they aren't budget cuts. Son of a bitch didn't cut the budget. He was dealing with a higher budget from Day One than Jimmy Carter's last budget; he just whacked out the whole one side of it, and took a dollar-for-dollar transfer of it over to the Pentagon and put a bonus on top of that, yet; and now, we're facing a \$60 or \$70 billion deficit again, or more, and that's what we need to work on. Democrats can work on that.

Abortion. Why the hell should we even argue about it in the national political arena? Jesse Helms makes a goddamned issue out of it, and if nobody took him on it, the goddamned thing'd die, and maybe he'd die with it maybe, hopefully. But the response he arouses on it is what creates the conflict, and he does it to arouse response. He puts his goddamned amendments in over there to force people to go to a written vote on chicken-shit stuff in order to expose them. If they can do it, we can do it. It doesn't take much to convince a union member, if you rig the scene in which the bastard blatantly votes against the union in a visible way. It gets a lot of

mileage with our people, and it can be done. The fact is most of the politicians are saying, "F--- the union members; they're no longer important." And then they come to a guy like me and say, "For Chrissakes, rally 'em. Rally 'em. Well, I can't rally a disaster. . . ."

Ezrol: A lot of people have pointed to the danger of a serious financial-economic crash situation this fall or somewhat beyond. Do you see any danger of the political scene in this country turning strongly confrontationalist?

Winpisinger: Yes. I've been predicting for nearly a year now that this state of euphoria in which we've been living can unravel very rapidly, I've been telling mostly groups that are not our members that you can stay down this furrow if you want; you can continue down it, and ride roughshod with your spurs into the hides of the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, and everything else, but remember always—and the workers, too, with their goddamned anti-union animus in this country—but remember always, the workers of this country were in the streets once before, and they can be driven there again. Just let me tell you something, it can come very rapidly, and if it needs leadership, I'm standing here telling you—and I tell this to rooms full of businessmen—I'm standing here right now to tell you, "I'll provide it, if I can. And if you push, keep down this road here you're in. I tell you, I'll be right there on the first barricade with the first goddamned rifle over the first parapet to shoot the first goddamned capitalist right between the f----- eyes that comes at me. And I'll have a lot of workers standing there with me, and don't you forget it. You can drive us back to the streets. And if the history of this country is instructive in any way at all, it is conclusive in the assessment that political groups in this country do not make progress without engaging in some form of violence, some form of unlawful conduct. It was true in the thirties with workers. World War II delayed the second installment a little bit, because the civil rights movement would have come a lot sooner in the absence of the Second World War.

"The black community, the minority community couldn't get redress until they started breaking the goddamned laws and engaging in burning the rotten cores of the cities down; and we're about ready for the third installment now in our modern history if you keep up this shit."

So I think it will boil over very goddamned rapidly, and if it doesn't, I'll be right in the forefront of it. I'll be putting the flame to the pot every minute I can and every way I know how and in every forum to which I have access. I hope it doesn't come to that, by the way. I still have enough regard for peace that I hope we can rally a political expression that gets the country back on the right track prior to Lenin's prophecy coming true. Without resorting to violence.