

NAFTA vote presages political realignment

by Edward Spannaus

While President Clinton won passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Nov. 17 by rallying more House Republicans than Democrats, and by massive pressure and pork-barrel payoffs to wavering congressmen, the battle over NAFTA will have far-reaching implications for the two-party system in the United States. Both parties were deeply divided over NAFTA, and the battle lines which emerged during the fight could indicate an incipient realignment of political forces in the nation.

The Nov. 18 *Wall Street Journal* put it bluntly: "Indeed, the NAFTA debate came down to a kind of class struggle, with the American working people on one side and the business and political establishment on the other."

Probably the most impassioned anti-NAFTA speech during the House debate was that given by Rep. David Bonior (D-Mich.). "The working people who stand against this treaty don't have degrees from Harvard," he told his colleagues. "They don't study economic models. And most of them have never heard of Adam Smith. But they know when the deck is stacked against them. They know it's not fair to ask American workers to compete against Mexican workers who earn \$1 an hour. The work of America is still done by people who pack a lunch, punch a clock and pour their heart and soul into every paycheck. And we can't afford to leave them behind."

Profiles of public sentiment toward NAFTA showed the nature of divisions over the issue. According to polls published a few days before the House vote, people with incomes over \$75,000 a year, college graduates, and people who were optimistic about the economy were more likely to support NAFTA, while high school graduates, blue-collar workers, and union members were more likely to oppose it. The geographical distribution was also of interest. Opposition to NAFTA ran highest in the industrial Midwest, opposition and support was about evenly split in the East, and support ran higher in the South and West. This is in contrast to other "populist" campaigns (like Ross Perot's), which usually draw their greatest support from the South and West. But this is lawful, because the Midwest is the hardest hit by the economic collapse of U.S. industry; in many respects, the popular opposition to NAFTA was more opposition to the depression than opposition to "free trade" as such.

The split within the Democratic Party is especially bitter, with union members believing themselves betrayed and abandoned. Clinton's promise to issue "comfort letters" to Republicans, saying that their support for NAFTA should not

be held against them by Democratic voters, was particularly galling to pro-labor Democrats.

Within the Republican Party, the divisions over NAFTA also run deep. While over three-quarters of House Republicans voted for the NAFTA bill, some were adamantly opposed. Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-Calif.) pointed out that the Republican Party used to support the interests of working people, and he pointed to Abraham Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt's opposition to free trade.

Republican presidential hopefuls Pat Buchanan and Jack Kemp went at each other in a debate on Cable News Network on Nov. 15 which was every bit as fractious as that between Perot and Vice President Al Gore the previous week, or that between Bonior and Sen. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) on Nov. 14. Buchanan called the NAFTA agreement "immoral" and a "sellout of the American worker." At one point he told Kemp to "hold the utopian globaloney." Kemp, in turn, aptly pointed out that Buchanan is normally not someone who speaks for the American worker. At the close of the House debate on Nov. 17, Minority Leader Bob Michel (R-Ill.) called Perot, Buchanan, and Ralph Nader the "Groucho, Chico, and Harpo" of the NAFTA opposition.

A third party?

Several observers predict that a third party could emerge out of the ferment around the NAFTA issue. Rep. James Traficant (D-Ohio) proclaimed that "it is time for a third major political party" because the two major parties are so much alike. Perot predicted a "sea change" in U.S. politics in the 1994 and 1996 elections because of the NAFTA vote, and also said that his "United We Stand America" organization could emerge as a third party. Many labor officials have begun talking about the need to run independent candidates in upcoming elections.

Clinton's victory may turn out to be pyrrhic indeed. He has alienated a majority of his own party, and every increase in unemployment and every lost U.S. industrial job will now be blamed on him. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Clinton's chief economist Laura Tyson "consoles herself with the notion that the anti-trade movement will peter out once the economy improves." But there is absolutely no perspective for any improvement in the industrial sectors of the U.S. economy—without the sort of financial and credit reorganization proposed by economist and presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche.

The LaRouche wing of the Democratic Party has announced that it intends to field a full slate of candidates in the 1994 elections, running under the umbrella of LaRouche's exploratory committee for the 1996 presidential campaign. The anger against NAFTA and the Democratic leadership will surely fuel the growing support for the LaRouche candidates, especially since every politically aware citizen knows that LaRouche has been consistently right on his economic forecasts, where everyone else has been consistently wrong.