

Labor in Focus by Anton Chaitkin

AFL-CIO insurgents gear up 'militancy'

The Sweeney slate is attacking Gingrich's Conservative Revolutionaries, but ignoring the Depression.

As had been expected for months, Lane Kirkland has resigned after 16 years as president of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations. Many years of falling wages, disappearing jobs, and declining union membership finally brought a serious challenge last spring to the federation's leadership. John J. Sweeney, head of the Service Employees International Union, is running to replace Kirkland. The executive board, still controlled by Kirkland's allies, has appointed Kirkland's second in command, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Thomas R. Donahue, as interim president until the election of a permanent president at the AFL-CIO national convention on Oct. 23.

Donahue, who is also seeking the AFL-CIO presidency, has responded to Sweeney's challenge with a militant tone and has pledged to put millions of dollars into a union organizing drive. Sweeney doesn't blame the old leadership for labor's disastrous decline, but says he will more quickly and effectively move American labor into increased political involvement and a new membership sign-up campaign.

Running with Sweeney are United Mine Workers President Richard Trumka, candidate for AFL-CIO secretary-treasurer; and Linda Chavez-Thompson, a vice president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, for AFL-CIO executive vice president.

The Sweeney slate now looks likely to win. An Aug. 1 Sweeney press release said 26 national unions, representing close to 60% of the AFL-CIO membership, support his slate for the October election.

Sweeney's insurgents have thrown down the gauntlet to House Speaker Newt Gingrich's (R-Ga.) "Conservative Revolutionaries." Among his recent outspoken public appearances, Sweeney led a July 21 rally in Columbus, Ohio, home of the maniacal budget-slashing Rep. John Kasich (R). Sweeney denounced Kasich, Gingrich, their Republican allies, and "turncoat Democrats" who would "destroy job training and education and Medicare and Medicaid to give another tax cut to the rich."

Three of the biggest unions supporting Sweeney, the United Auto Workers, the United Steel Workers, and International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, announced on July 27 that they will merge to form a 2 million-member unit—"the most progressive, militant labor organization" in North America. At a Washington, D.C. press conference announcing the merger, USWA President George Becker said bluntly that Democrats in Congress "should be happy about this. We're looking at our combined strength to increase their numbers."

For the moment, simply blocking Republican assaults on the poor, unemployed, and labor is the heart of the program of AFL-CIO insurgents.

The three unions have invited others to join them, looking to form a sort of labor cartel on the order of IG Metall, the 3 million-member industrial union in Germany.

With allies lined up throughout and beyond a particular industry for potential strike support, union leaders hope to be able to withstand the terrible pressure of continual factory clos-

ings and ratcheting down of living standards. Exulting at the merger of the three large national unions, Pennsylvania steel workers leader Andrew "Lefty" Palm told the July 28 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "This is the rebirth of the CIO," referring to the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations during the 1930s Great Depression.

But ironically, the insurgent unionists are not even *discussing* the current depression collapse of the U.S. economy. They have certainly not summoned up the nerve to criticize the deindustrialization policy which has collapsed America's productive industries—and drastically shrunk labor unions.

In the "Unity Declaration" adopted on July 27, the three unions said: "Throughout our history, our unions have, time and again, responded to the need to adapt to new economic and political circumstances. Now, is time to change again. . . . [We are now] in a globalized economy dominated by the mobility of capital . . . [with many] unrepresented men and women employed in the emerging new work of the information age."

Brookings Institute economist Barry Bosworth mocked the union leaders' efforts, telling the *Post-Gazette*, "They are managing the politics and economics of decline." Sadly, the Brookings Institute knows whereof it speaks. Brookings itself helped to lead the U.S. policy change to the insane hyper-speculative, utopian, anti-industrialism after President John Kennedy's 1963 murder.

The "information age" is a euphemism for the fall of production and employment. Without the courage to demand a return to the traditional American policy before the JFK assassination, of massive industrial construction and scientific progress, the labor movement will be crushed, along with the rest of the country.