

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

AFL-CIO backs tests of teachers

The action, initiated by Albert Shanker, has received the endorsement of EIR's LaRouche.

All beginning teachers should be tested and required to meet a standard which represents at least the average of all college graduates," according to a resolution passed Oct. 30 at the national AFL-CIO convention in California.

The resolution, passed unanimously by the nearly 1,000 delegates, is the first time that the 13.2-million-member labor federation has formally backed the idea of a uniform national teacher competency test for beginning teachers.

The resolution was introduced by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Albert Shanker, who has been fighting for the idea of a national competency test for many months, mainly within the ranks of teachers and teacher organizations.

"It is a very significant position we've taken here today," Shanker told the AFL-CIO convention. "Salaries and working conditions have been so poor recently, we have some teachers who shouldn't be there," Shanker said. "We have a strong interest in improving the quality of public education. The willingness of the public to support public education depends on how well we are doing."

Shanker's proposal was warmly greeted by Lyndon LaRouche, *EIR* contributing editor, when first announced some months ago. "Given the constraints within whose bounds you have been obliged to maneuver, most of your policies respecting education, as known to me, have been consistent

with the public interest," LaRouche told Shanker, in a 65-page memorandum to the labor leader on the subject, "Saving Our Children: Reintroducing Classical Education to the Secondary Classroom."

Implementation of such a competency test must be done on the state level, but federal funds can be used as leverage to force adoption of such a test by recalcitrant states.

The resolution also called for "higher teacher certification requirements that specifically include greater emphasis on subject matter competence and less emphasis on method courses." The federation also called for "radical increases" in beginning teachers' pay, calling for entry-level salaries averaging \$23,000 per year, to be raised from the national average of \$14,000 per year.

The AFT, affiliated with the AFL-CIO, represents 610,000 teachers nationwide. Its fight for a national teacher competency test has been opposed by the ultra-liberal National Education Association (NEA), representing 1.4 million educators, which this summer endorsed state competency tests but specifically refused to call for nationwide uniform testing of teachers. The NEA is not affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

Commenting on the NEA's position, the AFT's monthly newsletter, *The American Teacher*, says, "By not proposing a national standard, the NEA has essentially kept the status quo in which teachers are not per-

ceived as professionals who enforce a shared standard of competence. The NEA position leaves individual states with discretion to lower test cut-off scores to fill classrooms with warm bodies during the coming teacher shortage."

The question of teacher competence is central to the proper functioning of the United States, as LaRouche notes in his memorandum to Shanker. "Universal public education must foster a general level of moral and political culture consistent with the functions of the electorate in a democratic republic."

To establish competent public education, the greatest obstacles to be overcome within the classroom, LaRouche says, "will arise not from the students, but rather in terms of new requirements for preparation and continuing education of teachers. To meet the requirements of a climate of technological progress, the teacher must be guided by knowledge of the secondary-school topics from an advanced standpoint." Hence, teacher competency in subject matter, and adequate salary to attract top professionals in the subject field, are absolutely essential preconditions for the needed reform in public education.

LaRouche locates the turning point downward in American education as the "breaking of the back of the high standards once set by the New York City Board of Education," during the provoked New York Teacher's strike of 1968 and subsequent establishment of "Big MAC" austerity during New York's municipal debt crisis. This "set the precedent for erosion of education in the nation at large," LaRouche charges.

The AFT/AFL-CIO's resolution is clearly a welcome signal of change in what has been nearly two decades of collapse in the nation's educational standards.