

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

Why is Kirkland attacking the banks?

The AFL-CIO's president is using the labor federation's winter conference as a platform to announce new Trilateral policy.

Labor Federation Beats up on Banks" is the glaring headline, reporting on the remarks of AFL-CIO chief Lane Kirkland and other labor leaders at the federation's annual winter Executive Council meeting in Bal Harbour, Florida. In a seemingly shocking reversal, Kirkland demanded that "the banks" be treated the way they are trying to treat American workers.

"Nobody yet ever figured out a way to lay off a bank, and that's the problem," Kirkland said Feb. 17. "And the banks are calling the shots," he added. "The banks insist on their full measure of payment, their full price, and you'll pay hell trying to lay them off."

Kirkland was seconded by United Steel Workers of America President Lynn Williams, whose union struck the four largest can producers the week of the Executive Council meeting. "We want to bring the banks out from the shadows" in upcoming steel negotiations, Williams said.

Both Kirkland and Williams referred to the situation at Eastern Airlines in their remarks, where major bank creditors of the airline are trying to force deep concessions from Eastern employees to keep the company from bankruptcy.

Lane Kirkland is a mouthpiece of the Trilateral Commission, the front for the New York-based money-center banks, which numbers Chase Manhattan President David Rockefeller and Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker as leading members. Why is Kirkland all of a sudden attacking his pals at the banks? Or is he?

If we examine the full scope of

Kirkland's remarks at the conference, it becomes clear that this conference is being used as a forum to disorient the American trade union movement with populist sophistry, to prevent the emergence of a real leadership capable of fighting the real enemy of labor—the International Monetary Fund and Kirkland's friends at the Trilateral Commission.

On Feb. 18, the second day of the conference, Kirkland said that the AFL-CIO is concerned about the recent rash of "corporate raids," and is looking into the possibility of "playing their own game," acquiring ownership of companies in struggling industries, where workers' jobs are at stake. The AFL-CIO's 35-member executive council met in closed session Feb. 20 with two Wall Street takeover experts. The results of the meeting are not yet public.

On the same day, Kirkland pledged the federation's support of a move under way by the unions of Eastern Airlines to buy out the current management in the stock market. He also called for a federal bailout of Eastern, like the bailout of Chrysler Corp. and New York City.

Kirkland's rhetoric is a populist appeal to the "little man" against the "big bad guys." Facing the prospect of collapsing membership, which he says he "views with regret," Kirkland is rallying his remaining members to attack their "enemy"—by exchanging places with them! Treat the bankers like they treat you! Become your own boss!

What Kirkland really means is that

since he believes that working people are going to have to sacrifice in blood to meet the demands of the international bankers, then he, Lane Kirkland wants to be sure they think the sacrifice is justified, that the misery is shared. "The problem [the depression] was not created by the working people," Kirkland said. "It does not stem from their levels of compensation, it stems from other factors, and those factors must be addressed on a comprehensive basis. The levels of interest rates, the exactions of the banks who expect everyone else to sacrifice except themselves, but they are as much a part of this society and of these firms as anyone else [emphasis added]."

What Kirkland doesn't attack is the IMF. He doesn't mention the struggle of the labor federations throughout Ibero-America who are fighting the IMF on the front lines, to save their nations and their livelihoods. He doesn't mention the successful general strike of Argentina's CGT early in February, that shut down the country in opposition to the IMF. He doesn't attack the Federal Reserve's policy.

He attacks "the banks." He attacks defense spending: "If Congress determines that some program reductions are necessary to impose budgetary restraints, defense spending must not be exempted from such cuts." And he attacks foreign workers.

Lane Kirkland's intent is to so disorient and confuse American trade unionists that they will never see the massive assault which his masters at the Trilateral Commission and the IMF have launched against them. Lane Kirkland hopes American workers will demand "equality of sacrifice" from the businesses and banks with whom they should be allied in a real international fight against the friends of Lane Kirkland.