

Political upheaval starts to hit U.S.

by H. Graham Lowry

The devastating effects of the U.S. economic depression may be on the verge of triggering a political upheaval of a kind not seen in this country since the 1930s. If recent developments are any indication, more and more Americans are ready to say, "Enough!"

In Illinois, 20,000 members of the United Auto Workers from all over the Midwest poured through the streets of Peoria March 22, in support of a long and bitter strike against Caterpillar, Inc., the nation's largest manufacturer of heavy equipment. In Ohio, marchers stepped off from cities across the state March 22, beginning their trek to the Statehouse in Columbus for a rally April 1, the day when 70,000 poor people are to be cut off from General Assistance statewide. In Pennsylvania, 2,700 transit workers in Pittsburgh began a protracted walkout March 16, shutting down public transportation for 285,000 daily riders. Notably, in each instance, the participants described their decision to act as their only recourse.

The UAW's show of force came shortly before negotiations were to resume to settle a selective strike which began Nov. 3 at five plants in Illinois and one in York, Pa. The company retaliated with lockouts at a number of other plants, and 10,800 remain on strike. The union wants the new contract with Caterpillar patterned after the agreement it won from John Deere & Co. following a strike and lockout in 1986 and 1987. Caterpillar has rejected that, claiming that its competition is not from Deere's tractor production, but from Japanese heavy equipment firms.

A sense of historical urgency

Although the complex of issues involves living standards, health care, foreign competition, and the principle of industry-wide bargaining, what stands out is the sense of having reached a decisive moment of history. The extraordinary demonstration in Peoria included busloads of union members from Detroit, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and other cities across the Midwest. Labor leaders from across the country jammed the rally platform to address a dispute which they see as a test of organized labor's ability to survive. Illinois AFL-CIO President Richard Walsh declared, "The labor movement in Illinois is together, and the labor movement is going to stay together until a fair contract is reached with Caterpillar."

UAW President Owen Bieber told the rally, "We believe

that involved, motivated, well-paid workers, given the tools and designs necessary to make high-quality, world-class products, are the solution—not the problem." In an election year rife with scapegoating Germany and Japan for U.S. economic woes, Bieber attacked U.S. policy instead. The U.S. is losing its competitive edge in the global market, he said, because firms in Germany and Japan "treat their work force as an asset—not a liability . . . and they have governments that don't sabotage the industrial strength of their own economies."

The rally also featured South African labor leader Edwin Maepe of the National Union of Metal Workers, which represents Caterpillar workers in South Africa. He noted his surprise that American business did not measure up to the "progressive" image it has in his country, and that "there are employers in America who are backward."

If the political establishment wants to know what will play in Peoria, it may be in for a surprise.

Union workers for private corporations are responding to years of wage and work-rule concessions, longer hours, reduced benefits, and the massive wave of layoffs and plant closings during the past year. Budget cuts have increasingly made public employees victims of the same fate. But Local 85 of the Amalgamated Transit Union in Pittsburgh decided to draw the line March 16, after Allegheny County's Port Authority Transit (PAT) rejected both a fact-finder's report and a union request for binding arbitration.

PAT said state and federal cuts in transportation funding have prevented it from accepting the fact-finder's report, accepted by the union, recommending wage and benefit increases of 1.5 to 2.5%, totaling \$70 million over three years. The union members had continued to work under their old contract since last Nov. 30. PAT instead merely offered a one-time "signing bonus" of \$500 for accepting a contract with no increase in pay, and the right to hire new workers at \$8 to \$11 an hour—against the current average of \$15.77. Ten days into the strike, a state mediator said the negotiators were at a "total impasse."

The union charges that wages are not the issue; but that the concessions demanded and the rejection of standard collective bargaining principles forced its members to strike. At a boisterous rally outside Allegheny County Courthouse March 24, 500 strikers joined by Teamster and teachers union leaders demonstrated with placards reading, "America Works Best When We Say 'Union, Yes!'" As one striker told the press, "It's taken me 11 years working 12-hour days just to get where I can make ends meet. I haven't got anything to give up."

The Ohio "Poor People's March on Columbus" includes some of the newly unemployed, who are almost reduced to dependence on the General Assistance (GA) which Gov. George Voinovich eliminated. "If they don't restore the GA," said one, "there will be a Georgeville with people living in cardboard boxes"—just like the Hoovervilles of the last depression.