

# Democratic Party Advocates Found 'Labor Party'

by Bob Wolfe

Close to 1400 delegates met in Cleveland in June to proclaim Tony Mazzocchi's Labor Party Advocates the "Labor Party." Despite LPA's failure to attain Mazzocchi's goal of 100,000 members, this not-yet-ready-for-prime-time outfit of union officials and leftist hangers-on apparently feels it has sufficient support within the labor bureaucracy to take this bold step forward — with the permission of the pro-Democratic AFL-CIO leadership, of course.

While the new "party" claims endorsements from unions representing a million members, the convention showed the bureaucratic nature of the organization and the absence of any serious following among the workers. This "Labor Party" is not a product of a mass movement but a reform current within the union apparatus.

If the Labor Party is not based on mass struggles, if it doesn't lead class battles against the capitalists, what interest do revolutionaries have in it? A good question, one which occurred to us often while listening to one speech after another that evaded the fundamental political questions facing the working class. Any serious worker looking for answers to the capitalist crisis, for a real alternative to the barbarism of the system, would have been completely turned off by the reformist claptrap and posturing that dominated in Cleveland.

## A LABOR BUREAUCRACY PARTY

At a time when Clinton and the Republicans are squabbling over how to attack the working class, the AFL-CIO endorsement of Clinton is a slap in the face to all workers. It points to the need for a serious fight against the conservative labor bureaucracy which underwent only a facelift with the election of John Sweeney as AFL-CIO president.

The labor bureaucracy defends the interests of capitalism within the working class. They have repeatedly betrayed class struggles, most recently at Caterpillar and Staley in the Illinois "War Zone" conflicts. They have proved themselves unable to defend the basic economic interests of the working class, let alone lead any form of struggle against racism, imperialism, attacks on immigrants and a host of other capitalist assaults.

None of this was discussed in Cleveland. Sweeney's name was absent from the lips of the labor leaders and leftists present. There was no discussion of the crisis of leadership facing the working class. There was no open discussion of the betrayals and sellouts of the AFL-CIO leadership.

Claims by Labor Party supporters that the convention was a step toward building a working-class party independent of the Democrats are belied by reality. What kind of independent labor party can be built without challenging the bureaucracy tied hand and foot to the Democrats? A party that invited former Democratic officials like Jim Hightower and California ex-governor and 1992 presidential aspirant, Jerry ("flat tax") Brown to parade as leading fighters for

workers' interests. A party whose convention chair, OCAW president Robert Wages, conveniently avoided voting against the Clinton endorsement on the AFL-CIO Executive Council.



Former Democratic Party presidential aspirant Jerry Brown at LPA meeting. New 'Labor Party' can't break with capitalist Democrats.

A "labor party" where many of the union delegates hold posts in the Democratic Party without seeing the slightest contradiction.

What made the Cleveland convention so dangerous for working-class fighters is that it attempted to repackage the same dead-end, bureaucratic strategy of class collaboration with phony rhetoric about "a new organizing approach to politics." In reality, the Labor Party represents merely a different tactical approach to carry out the bureaucracy's strategy. Rather than a break with bourgeois politics as usual, the labor party strategy means escalating the trade unions' role as a pressure groups on the Democrats by threatening "independence." Mazzocchi and Wages speak for a wing of the labor bureaucracy that says the unions need to be more independent if they are going to cut deals with the bosses and their parties.

## FUSION CANDIDATES?

Thus the Labor Party is another weapon in the hands of the labor bureaucracy. This explains Sweeney's mixed messages about it. Sweeney tolerated Mazzocchi's labor party activity, allowing international unions to participate and endorse the convention in return for the continued pledge by the leaders not to interfere with AFL-CIO support for Clinton and the Democrats. Indeed, Sweeney left open the idea that the labor party is an option labor might pursue down the road as a pressure tactic on the Democrats. He told the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* that it would be better to use the labor party tactic in a non-election year, expressing concern that it would harm the current effort to support Clinton. "Shame on us," he said, "if we start splitting off or distracting our activists." Wages agreed:

**If we remain non-electoral for the near future, and have discussions that leave room for fusion candidates, running both on our line and that of the Democrats, I think other unions will be interested.** (*The Nation*, July 8.)

As an extension of the politics of the labor bureaucracy, the Labor Party will never win a following among oppressed

workers looking for a real alternative to the capitalist attacks, which hit hardest against Blacks, Latinos, women and immigrants as the most vulnerable sections of the working class. The majority of workers are as turned off by the labor bureaucrats as they are by the bourgeois politicians. Workers don't look to the unions for answers to the problems they face and the Labor Party offers no reason for this to change.

Nevertheless, workers interested in fighting capitalism cannot ignore the labor bureaucracy that holds power over the only mass fighting institutions of the working class in the U.S. The bureaucrats must be defeated, and the power and energy of the trade unions freed from conservative bureaucratism, if the working class is going to stop the bosses' attacks. Dismissing the Labor Party as a pile of reformist crap is insufficient.

Workers must fight every manifestation of bureaucratic power, including the Labor Party that offers the labor leadership a more left-sounding fallback position should their Democratic Party strategy collapse. Workers should not underestimate the ability of the bureaucracy to engage in even more serious left maneuvers to keep future working class explosions from moving beyond the limits of the capitalist system.

With this in mind, observers from the League for the Revolutionary Party went to Cleveland to state the case for the revolutionary party and against a reformist labor party. Our pamphlet, *The New "Labor Party": Democratic Party Advocates*, shocked many delegates with the accuracy of its analysis of the leaderships real intentions. We showed that revolutionaries are not content just to denounce our reformist opponents but are prepared to engage in political combat in defense of working-class interests.

#### **BUREAUCRACY RULES**

In the weeks leading up to the convention, Mazzocchi set the tone for what was to come when he warned the left that he would silence anyone who pushed socialist politics at the microphones. From the beginning, the bureaucrats at the podium asserted their authority, which went unchallenged by the left groups who intervened as labor party loyalists on their best behavior — Labor Militant, Socialist Organizer, Solidarity, International Socialist Organization, Socialist Action, to name a few. Socialism itself was a taboo word. The left was so docile that they couldn't even get up the nerve to attack Sweeney and the AFL-CIO leadership.

## **The New "Labor Party": Democratic Party Advocates?**

Written for the founding convention of Labor Party Advocates' new party, this pamphlet accurately called the shots on the LPA leaders' real intentions and exposed the capitulations of their "far left" supporters. It includes an analysis of Trotsky's labor party slogan, explaining why today's "Labor Party" has nothing to do with building the revolutionary working-class party that is needed.

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Every attempt by the "socialist" groups to nudge the convention to the left was quickly shot down. Mazzocchi and Wages had the votes, especially given the weighted voting in favor of the international unions. A feeble attempt to include statements opposing support for the bosses' parties was dropped when it became clear it had little support among the delegates. Indeed, it was understood that many of the unions represented at the convention would continue to support the Democrats in the elections. *Workers World* was told by AFGE President John Sturdivant that "his union's endorsement does not mean it is splitting from the Democrats or from the AFL-CIO's commitment to Clinton." So much for independent political action at this convention!

The only serious challenge to the leadership came when one of the internationals, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union, broke ranks on the question of non-electoralism. The ILWU did not challenge the AFL-CIO commitment to Clinton but merely proposed that Labor Party chapters would be allowed to field candidates at the local level where possible.

#### **NO CHALLENGE TO SWEENEY**

Despite the ILWU's conciliatory tone, Wages and Mazzocchi panicked at the idea of any resolution that would have put the Labor Party at odds with the electoral strategy of the AFL-CIO. Wages attempted to shut off debate but was forced to back down. It was one thing to silence the small left groups, it was another to smack down one of the international unions. After a recess, Wages announced a suspension of the rules and allowed an hour of debate.

What followed was a strange bit of irony. While the leftists in the back of the room argued for pursuing an electoral strategy, the bureaucrats and their supporters at the front attacked the ILWU resolution from the left, arguing that what was needed was mass action and organizing!

In reality, the leadership's talk of the need to build a mass movement was just that — talk. Nothing scares the bureaucrats more than mass action. For five years LPA avoided intervening in the class struggle, failing to lead a single working-class fight. While Wages and Mazzocchi are more willing to play with mobilizing workers than most union officials, they have no intention of leading a rank and file rebellion against the AFL-CIO tops. Absent without leave during the Staley struggle as well as others, Mazzocchi and Wages have proved they will subordinate the interests of workers for the sake of unity among the bureaucrats.

At the convention itself, Wages responded to a call for a national march to defend Detroit newspaper strikers by declaring he would bring the proposal up to Sweeney and the other international presidents. There was never a hint that the Labor Party would demand action or that it was ready to mobilize workers to march on Detroit, with or without Sweeney's support. Despite all the talk of mass action, the convention was distinguished by the absence of proposals for any such thing.

The real meaning of the talk of mass action and non-electoralism was revealed by Carl Finamore, formerly a leader of Socialist Action and now a Mazzocchi flunkey. In typical left-cynical fashion, Finamore warned that the labor party movement has come this far only because it has not challenged the AFL-CIO leadership — and that it was necessary to continue this course. Labor Party non-electoralism really means non-interference with labor's pro-Democratic strategy. While a "recovering leftist" like Finamore no doubt

believes in the need to mobilize workers, he nevertheless used the argument for "mass action" as a cover for adapting to the Sweeney leadership.

But underneath the opportunist rhetoric about mass action, Mazzocchi and the left agree on electoralism. As a reformist opposed to revolutionary politics, he believes workers can gain real power only through elections. For Mazzocchi and the Labor Party, the purpose of work among the masses is to build an electoral base. "Our organizing approach to politics will recognize that electoral action comes only after recruiting and mobilizing workers with sufficient collective resources to take on an electoral system dominated by corporations and the wealthy," they write.

Mazzocchi realizes that for now, in the absence of class motion or mass support, the Labor Party is too weak to challenge the AFL-CIO policy. Rather than directly oppose the pro-Democratic strategy, he accepts keeping the Labor Party a non-threatening pressure group on the bureaucrats.

### WOMEN'S RIGHTS SILENCED AGAIN

The utter subservience to the bureaucracy reached a low point in the debate over the party program's health care plank, which delicately omitted any reference to abortion. Instead it called for "Informed choice and unimpeded access to a full range of family planning and reproductive services for men and women."

In case anyone missed the point, speakers for the program made clear that they opposed any explicit reference to abortion, arguing that using the word would drive people away. This was refuted by the observation that the Democratic Party, supported by the unions, has an abortion plank in its platform. And now even Bob Dole is softening his anti-abortion rhetoric in preparing to meet the electorate. But the convention soundly rejected an amendment by the California Nurses Association that said straightforwardly, "The Labor Party supports safe, legal abortion and believes it is a woman's private decision."

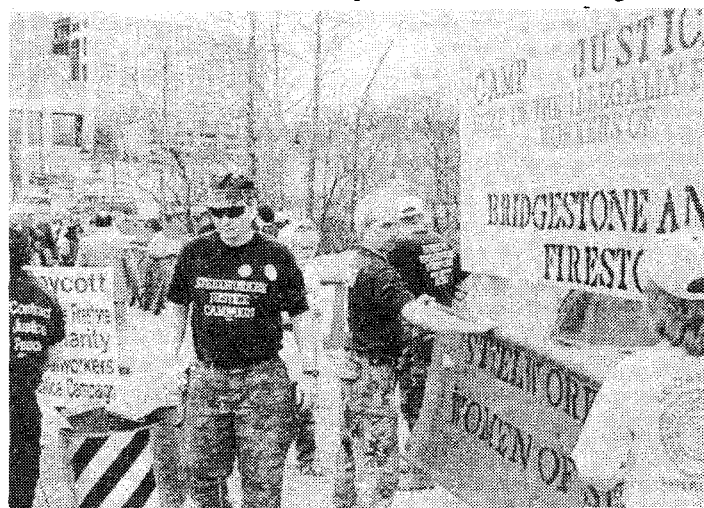
It is not fear of losing the mass of workers but rather of confronting the conservative bureaucrats and the "Reagan Democrat" wing of the labor aristocracy that made the Labor Party adopt a cowardly line to the right of the Democrats. Incredibly, some of the fake leftists supported this reactionary maneuver. Jane Slaughter of Labor Notes sided with the leadership, saying that she "assumed" they knew what they were doing in wording the platform. Others tried to argue that the plank was clearly pro-abortion; some even claimed that "unimpeded access" automatically meant free abortion. In reality, "informed choice" can mean many things that

interfere with women's rights: the 24-hour waiting periods some states require, mandatory counseling, parental consent for teenagers, notification and/or consent of the father, etc.

At a time when abortion rights are under attack, when clinics are bombed and health workers shot and killed, the Labor Party's failure to stand for a fundamental working-class need showed the pro-bureaucratic mentality much of the left caves in to.

### REVOLUTION VS. REFORM

Somehow the convention did find the courage to oppose the bombings of Black churches. But the platform gave no real answers to fundamental questions like racism against



*Steelworkers protest after long, bitter losing strike against Bridgestone-Firestone. Labor Party fiddles as workers burn.*

Blacks and Latinos, oppression of women and gays, and the anti-immigrant chauvinism of both major capitalist parties. Instead of clear positions defending abortion rights, urging armed self-defense against police repression, demanding open borders and no immigration restrictions, it offered generalities against bigotry and discrimination that would satisfy any Clinton supporter.

As to the role of the United States as the leading imperialist power, whose corporations and banks superexploit workers across the globe, the Labor Party platform is silent except for opposing "anti-labor regimes that violate human rights." (What else exists in the world today?). It does say it would "insure adequate national defense," thereby endorsing the standard euphemism for imperialist militarism and interventions abroad.

The tragedy of the Cleveland convention is that the working class does need an independent mass party. But not one that defends capitalism in any form. Serving up poverty, joblessness and overall misery, the capitalist system well deserves to be overthrown. Our slogan, *Proletarian socialist revolution is the only solution!*, points to the need for the working class to smash capitalism and take political power into its own hands.

Workers need a revolutionary working-class party, a section of a genuine communist international. Its solution would be to expropriate the capitalist banks and corporations and organize a planned economy with jobs for all, a sliding scale of hours and an escalating scale of wages to divide the necessary work among all available workers while protecting our standard of living — and a state run by the working class in the interest of all the exploited and oppressed. ●