

WHY UNION BIGSHOTS ARE TALKING "CLASS WAR" EVEN THOUGH THEY'RE STILL ON THE WRONG SIDE



West Coast pulp and paper strikers stop scabs. Their current strike is so strong because their union isn't controlled by the kind of sellouts who talk class war and practice treachery.

"Class war" says Doug Fraser, head of the United Auto Workers. "Class war" says Lane Kirkland, George Meany's right-hand man. "Class war" growls Meany himself. "Class war" echo half a dozen other top union bureaucrats.

These are strange words from the lips of men who have spent the last 30 years preaching the virtues of compromise and "labor-management cooperation."

Can the top union leaders have decided to switch sides and fight with the rank and file against the owners and their government? Hardly! But their militant talk does show significant changes taking place.

Accusations that "the business community, with few exceptions, have chosen to wage a one sided class war," Fraser's words, reflect the union bigshots' real concern about their slipping power and their outrage at the failure of the country's capitalists to help them out.

The whole outburst was triggered by the defeat this summer of the Labor Law Reform Act of 1978 in the Senate. The hacks had a lot at stake in the bill, which was done in by a massive big business lobbying effort.

In the last few years the top trade union leaders have had their hands full keeping down the militancy of dissatisfied workers. They have had trouble selling lousy contracts as "the best we can get." They have had trouble selling this or that politician as the cure to a society that's falling apart.

Now they fell they've been stabbed in the back by the capitalists on whose behalf they've been keeping the workers in line.

This situation is greatly to the advantage of working men and women in this country. For one thing, it provides big openings for workers to build their struggles. When the hacks are talking tough and their position is being eroded, they are less able to focus their efforts on crushing rank and file demands and militancy.

Meany, for instance, didn't just denounce big business "class warfare." He underlined his irritation by criti-

cizing the just negotiated postal contract. He said its increases--close to the 5.5% a year limit Carter wants on pay hikes--were inadequate. This provided a little more fuel for the "no" vote P.O. workers cast on the sellout and gave P.O. militants more evidence of the treachery of the misleaders of their unions.

Secondly, the situation is an education in just how worthless the union bigshots and their policies of collaborating with the capitalist class are. For 30 years, the Frasers and Meany's have told the workers, "Vote as we tell you and we'll see that the system passes laws that will gradually improve the lot of the workingman."

This is just a large-scale version of their approach to individual corporations and industries: "The bosses and you have common interests and if you work hard and help them get richer, we'll see that your contracts continue to get better."

But now the capitalist system is wracked by a persisting crisis. The hacks can't deliver even the little they have promised--either on the Senate floor or the shop floor.

LABOR LAW REFORM

Something had to give. The Labor Law Reform Bill was where it started to happen. This was part of the legislation the heads of the AFL-CIO and the UAW expected in return for getting workers to vote for Carter. As usual the package included mild social reforms--a federal health insurance program, for instance. This time, the heart of it was a series of measures to strengthen the unions' ability to organize the unorganized.

Union membership has declined. The percentage of workers in unions is the lowest it's been since the Great Depression. This is a big problem for the labor traitors. They get their fat salaries, their prestige, their influence on the government in exchange for delivering the workers up to the ruling class. The less they have to sell, the less they can get from the capitalists.

The first of their bills to come up,

the common site picketing law, which would have made it easier to organize and to defeat union busting in the construction trades, bit the dust last year. Worried, Meany and company decided to drop their second target, the repeal of section 14B of the Taft-Hartley law, which permits states to enact anti-union "right to work" laws.

Instead, they put all their efforts behind the Labor Law Reform Bill. The Bill was designed to stop some of the tactics companies were using to keep unions out. It would have given the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) the ability to 1) insure quicker elections for union recognition, 2) levy heavier penalties against employers who violate workers' rights or refuse to negotiate, and 3) give union organizers equal access to answer company propaganda on company time or property.

Eliminating roadblocks to unionizing unorganized shops could be of great value to the rank and file. This is especially true in the South, where the battle for union organizing is constant, bitter and still basically unwon, even in

basic industry. Workers at the J.P. Stevens textile company, centered in North Carolina, have been fighting for a union for 14 years. Backed by other Southern companies, the corporation has fired hundreds of activists, been held in violation by the NLRB 15 times and paid \$1,300,000 in fines for its anti-union activities.

THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST LABOR LAW REFORM

The bill passed the House of Representatives last October by a 257-163 margin. Meany was confident he had spent enough of the rank and file's COPE money on senatorial contributions that it would sail through there as well. He was also banking on support from some large unionized corporations, especially those facing non-union competitors.

But the capitalists are facing severe economic problems these days. They are out to tighten up on the workers, not give concessions. Contracts are getting worse and worse--wage increases have fallen behind inflation by 3.4% since 1974, fewer workers turn out more production, company negotiators demand more takeaways.

It's the same on the political front. Tightening up takes such forms as cutbacks in social services and attacks on affirmative action. Big corporations have been impelled to step more publicly into the political arena to defend and advance their interests, for example pushing to cut the tax on capital gains, enabling them to hold onto more of their profits.

The Labor Law Reform Bill was hit with the largest lobbying effort these vultures have put together so far. The biggest corporations in the country by and large took no public stand on the issue to avoid open conflict with their unions. Instead, most worked through the Business Roundtable, established a few years ago to coordinate such efforts. They set the wheels in motion, and provided money and resources behind the scenes.

Robert Thompson, a former J.P. Stevens attorney who is a bigshot in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and a pair of labor-relations vice presidents from Goodyear and Bethlehem Steel were the main strategists. But "the real soldiers in the campaign," reported FORTUNE magazine, "were . . . state and local chapters of such groups as the American Retail Federation, the American Bankers Association, the National Restaurant Association," and so on. The smaller scale bandits who are the majority in these groups, waged a well-coordinated lobbying campaign. Each target senator was hit with telegrams and compu-

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J.P. Stevens workers have waged a big battle for unionization. The Labor Law Reform Act could have helped them.

Class War...

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ter printed letters, as many as 10,000 in a single week, delegations, and professional lobbyists.

Meany's response was to start watering down the Bill to show how harmless it was. By the time it was killed it was a hollow shell of the original. Election periods were doubled, equal access narrowed and penalties for employer violations greatly reduced.

To top it off, the hacks threw in a section "to protect employers" from wildcats and roving pickets!

But even after it was sweetened up, the rich saw no advantage in making union organizing faster or unions stronger. The bill died on June 22 after 19 days of filibuster. Attempts to resurrect it later in the summer failed miserably.

WHY "CLASS WAR"?

With the defeat of Labor Law Reform, the silk suit crowd in the union executive offices saw that the old way of doing business with the capitalists was being shunted aside. Their words emphasized how grave they feel the situation has become. Lane Kirkland, Secretary-Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, talked of how the good old "system of sometimes cooperative, sometimes adversary, encounters between parties with a shared set of values," has been endangered by big business.

The UAW's Fraser put it even more bluntly: "The leaders of industry, commerce and finance in the United States have broken and discarded the fragile, unwritten compact previously existing during a past period of growth and progress." Like Kirkland, Fraser was addressing his remarks to an audience of big businessmen.

The talk of "class war" is to remind the capitalists that there are dangers in discarding their "fragile, unwritten compact" with the trade union bureaucracy. Remember, the corporate kingpins are being warned by their labor

lieutenants, there are a lot of workers out there and it's us who keep them in line for you. Fraser even made it a direct threat: "We in the UAW intend to reforge the links with those who believe in struggle; the kind of people who sat down in the factories in the 1930s and who marched in Selma in the 1960s."

NO REAL CHANGE

Meany and his ilk may be talking "class war" to the capitalists, but their deeds show how little they've changed. Meany's criticisms of the P.O. contract helped postal workers carry their struggle forward. Unsurprisingly, he promptly turned around and hailed the sellout negotiations/arbitration plan which has since stuck P.O. workers with an even worse deal. (See article on page .)

The Illinois AFL-CIO has endorsed some Republican candidates to "punish" the administration, and some Machinists and UAW bigwigs are pushing for Teddy Kennedy in 1980 as the cure to their problems.

Even the talk of class struggle is not intended for consumption by the rank and file, or by lower level union officials. The Labor Day issues of union newspapers this year, fat with greeting ads from locals, carried editorials which might lament the defeat of labor law reform or management's hard line approach. But they carefully steered away from references to "class warfare" or call to militant action.

The top union officials are playing things low key because they sense that they are playing with dynamite. They have been bedded down with the capitalists for so long that they stand to get blown away pretty quick in the event of a big explosion of class struggle.

And whether or not they talk about it, the class war is heating up and nothing they do can keep it from blowing.