

Labor in Focus by Marianna Wertz

Unions versus Conservative Revolution

Two labor conventions in Washington, D.C. mapped out strategy to regain Democratic control of Congress.

The 104th Congress has been an unmitigated horror show for organized labor and the millions of union and non-union working Americans whose interests they represent. The Republican majority, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), has been attempting to pass legislation, including parts of the "Contract with America," which would eliminate virtually every right won by unions since the Great Depression in the 1930s—from the Davis-Bacon Act, which mandates that construction work on federal contracts be done by union workers at the prevailing wage, to the closed union shop, to a livable minimum wage.

Two large labor conventions held in Washington, D.C. during the week of April 21 took aim at defeating the self-professed Republican "revolutionaries" and reelecting President William Clinton, while giving the President the kind of policy direction the unionists think he needs. The United Auto Workers (UAW) National Community Action Program, with about 1,500 delegates, met in annual convention on April 21-24; the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO (BCTD), with about 4,000 delegates, held its annual legislative convention on April 22-24.

While the content and debate at these conventions fell woefully short of what is required, as the nation confronts what Democratic Presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche has called economic chaos and disaster, the urgency of acting now, to effect a complete shift of government in November, was communicated loudly

and clearly at both conventions.

Howard Owens, former assistant director for Region Six of the UAW (nine western states) and currently western director for the National Council of Senior Citizens, summed up the impact of the conventions in an interview with *EIR* on April 23:

"What I think they're doing here is developing a tremendous pep rally for trying to get out people to the elections next fall, get people involved and working in those and trying to generate the kind of support that will be necessary in order to have a turnaround in the elections, to reelect Clinton and try to get the Congress back. There's seems to be an awful lot of spirit and optimism here, that that can happen."

The tight coordination of the labor movement with that handful of Democrats in the administration and Congress whom *EIR* has identified as playing key roles in the fight to give competent economic policy direction to President Clinton (see *EIR*, April 26, p. 65), is evident from the overlapping speakers list at the two conventions:

Besides First Lady Hillary Clinton, who opened the UAW convention, and Vice President Al Gore, who closed the BCTD convention, the major speakers included Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and House Minority Whip David Bonior (D-Mich.), who addressed both conventions; Labor Secretary Robert Reich, who addressed the Building Trades; and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) and Senate Minority Leader Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.),

who both addressed the UAW convention.

All the speakers stressed the urgent necessity (and real possibility) of defeating the incumbent Conservative Revolution faction in Congress in the November elections. AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, addressing the BCTD convention on April 22, set the tone by declaring that "Newtie and the Blowhards" have "declared war on unions" and are "hell-bent to cripple worker organizations." He called 1996 the "most important year in the history of the labor movement," because of the necessity to defeat this Conservative Revolution crowd.

Labor Secretary Reich seconded Sweeney, saying, "This is a critical time in our nation's history." He urged the 4,000 delegates to the Building Trades convention, who were preparing to spend half a day lobbying on Capitol Hill, to fight to strengthen economic security, including guaranteeing pensions, decent wages, health care, and job safety for all Americans. He particularly emphasized the need to increase the minimum wage, calling it "an issue of simple, basic fairness."

In their addresses on April 23 to the UAW convention, Representative Gephardt and Senator Kennedy both emphasized the importance of the Democrats retaking control of Congress in the November election. Gephardt told the delegates that a Democratic majority in the House in 1997 will mean that "a lot of the things that the Republicans have been doing that harm people will never come up," because the majority party sets the agenda. He said that people will vote for the Democrats' "agenda for progress."

"Our workers are asking for help," Gephardt said, "to re-create the American dream. Families can't be families without a livable wage. That's the most important family value."