US election notes

30 October 1998

New York Times endorses right-wing Republican for governor

Democratic candidate for governor of Pennsylvania denounces 'coolies' and 'wetbacks'

AFL-CIO backing 27 Republican House candidates: Union bureaucrats hedge their bets

In an October 27 editorial the *New York Times* endorsed Republican Governor George Pataki's reelection bid. When Pataki won the Republican nomination for governor some four years ago he was considered an extreme right-winger on the fringes of the political establishment in New York. He ran on the anti-tax, anti-welfare, law-and-order program of the Republican Congressional leadership of Newt Gingrich and Dick Armey. As governor he pursued these policies, reinstituting the death penalty, cutting welfare benefits and slashing funding for hospitals, nursing homes, home health care services and state universities.

That the *Times* should endorse Pataki says far more about the rightward movement of the newspaper than any moderation on the part of the governor. It coincides with the *Times*'s support for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr and the political assault on the Clinton administration being carried out by extreme right-wing forces.

In its endorsement the *Times* expressed discomfort with Pataki's support for the death penalty and some of his attacks on the poor. But then, the governor's policies have benefited the well-to-do: 'Since Mr. Pataki became Governor the state has become more business-friendly, with targeted tax relief and eased regulations.... Our endorsement is based on Mr. Pataki's progress ... in improving the business climate.'

Besides, the newspaper pointed out, Pataki is a supporter of gay rights and abortion rights.

It would be difficult to find a more finished expression of what passes today for liberalism--indifference to the social conditions of the broad masses of people, and a highly selective concern for democratic rights, largely limited to those issues that impact the affluent. The *New York Times* reflects the concerns and outlook of a privileged social layer that has grown even richer in the stock market boom, and benefited from the tax breaks financed through the dismantling of social programs.

Ironically, the day before the *Times* endorsed Pataki it ran a feature story about one of the victims of the welfare cuts carried out by the Clinton administration, the Republican Congress and Pataki. It concerned the case of Tatiana Cheeks, a 21-year-old former welfare recipient in Brooklyn. Her newborn baby died of malnutrition only weeks after she was turned away from a scheduled checkup for the infant because she did not have a Medicaid card or $25 to pay for the visit.

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Ivan Itkin, the Democratic challenger to Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge, said in a radio interview last week, 'If we do what others are suggesting and accept that it's a global economy and tell the workers out there that they have to work at the same wages that a Chinese coolie is getting or a Mexican wetback is getting, that's atrocious. That's not what made America great.'

Itkin is endorsed by the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO and is generally considered an ally of the unions. His crude chauvinism expresses an outlook prevalent within the trade union bureaucracy. Currently the United Steelworkers is engaged in a joint lawsuit with USX and other major steel producers against the alleged dumping of low-priced Asian steel in the United States. The steelworkers union and steel corporations have published joint newspaper ads appealing to chauvinist sentiments, seeking to divert the concerns of US steelworkers over job losses against workers overseas.

A spokesman from the steelworkers legislative office contacted by the *WSWS* praised Itkin, noting that he supported the anti-dumping lawsuit. When asked about

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Itkin's racist remarks, he said, 'I think the candidate went to extremes because he felt so strongly about the issues. It was in the heat of the campaign.'

Another union official contacted by the *WSWS*, United Mine Workers of America District 2 President Ed Yankovich, said, 'There is not a person in this country who has not at one time or another made a disparaging remark about a person of another race.' He added, 'This thing has been taken out of context.'

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The AFL-CIO has thrown its support behind a considerable number of Republican candidates in this year's congressional elections. The labor federation is endorsing 27 Republicans running for seats in the House of Representatives, a significant shift from 1996, when the AFL-CIO spent a record $35 million to support Clinton's reelection, equating a victory for the Democrats with a victory for the working class. The National Education Association has also altered its tactics, endorsing 3 of 35 Republican candidates for governor and 18 Republican House and Senate candidates. In 1996 the NEA endorsed only one Republican House candidate.

The fact that the trade union bureaucracy backs a number of Republicans instead of Democrats does not signify a fundamental shift in its political posture, since both parties are beholden to big business and hostile to the basic interests of working people. Either way, the labor bureaucracy works to defend the profit system and block an independent political movement of the working class.

However, the electoral maneuvers of the AFL-CIO underscore the lack of any principled considerations in the politics of the bureaucracy. Its tactics are based on the most narrow calculations as to what will serve the immediate needs, not of the working masses, but the trade union officialdom itself.

Given the disarray within the Democratic Party and the seeming ascendancy of the Republicans, the labor bureaucracy is seeking to adapt itself accordingly. One of the Republicans who have the endorsement of the AFL-CIO is New York Congressman Michael Forbes. According to union spokesmen, Forbes has earned the support of the working man by improving his pro-labor voting record from 18 percent to 50 percent, i.e., he only votes against the interests of workers (as defined by the AFL-CIO) half the time!

For the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, by far the most important 'pro-labor' planks have to do with its reactionary perspective of economic nationalism and protectionism. Not surprisingly, Forbes and other Republicans who have won the backing of the labor bureaucracy are those who have broken ranks with the Republican leadership and lined up with the AFL-CIO's 'America-first' campaign against an extension of the North American Free Trade Agreement to Latin America.

'I don't think we've changed,' said AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, 'I think the Republicans have changed. We wouldn't have been able to defeat fast track without the help of moderate Republicans.'

Another consideration in the unions' endorsement of Republican candidates may be concern that the next congress will launch an investigation of campaign finance violations. AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Richard Trumka and Gerald McEntee, head of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, are under investigation for their part in illegal collusion between the Teamsters and the Democratic Party in the 1996 campaign, a scandal that has already led to the removal of Teamsters President Ron Carey. Having concluded that the Democrats will not win back a majority in the House, the AFL-CIO tops may be looking for potential allies among the Republicans in advance of such a probe.

See Also:
Why is the *New York Times* supporting Kenneth Starr? [16 October 1998]

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