

The US Labor Party holds its convention

A political fraud in Pittsburgh

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What was billed as the first constitutional convention of the Labor Party took place last month in Pittsburgh. Few workers attended. Few even knew the convention was taking place, despite the fact that six national unions with a combined membership of several hundred thousand sponsored the gathering.

This anomaly is not difficult to fathom. The convention organizers had no desire to involve the working class in the deliberations of their 'labor party.' The meeting was an in-house affair, to which the union officials invited their friends in the media, who, they hoped, would lend the event an air of importance. The assembly was rounded out by the attendance of a number of middle class 'left' groups that hover around the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

This Labor Party is a strange political animal. It calls itself a party, but does not run candidates. It pays little attention to questions of policy. Over the four days of the November 13-15 convention, only 30 minutes on the last day were set aside for a perfunctory discussion on the party's program. When a WSWs reporter asked Labor Party founder Anthony Mazzocchi what his party's position was on Washington's then-imminent war threat against Iraq, Mazzocchi replied, 'We have no foreign policy.'

This party does not have a democratically elected leadership. The convention was supposed to elect officers, but no vote was held. Instead delegates authorized the 'interim leadership,' consisting of Mazzocchi and his clique, to retain control over the organization.

The very fact that Mazzocchi and company can present such a miserable excuse for a party as the embodiment of the aspirations of the American working class says much about the trade union bureaucracy's obtuseness and contempt for working people. As the convention demonstrated, this party is nothing more than a political maneuver mounted by a section of the AFL-CIO leadership.

Those who presided over the meeting utilized the same hamfisted methods they use to stifle rank-and-file opposition inside their unions. The entire affair was stage-managed to insure that only the proposals and policies of the Labor Party leadership could be discussed and voted on.

The delegates included 149 international union officers and other leading officials from the six endorsing unions--the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW), United Electrical Workers, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, California Nurses Association, American Federation of Government

Employees, and United Mine Workers.

The leaders of these unions controlled 100 votes apiece. Another 600 delegates, wielding 1,138 votes, were the heads of central labor councils and union locals, including many from the same six unions. These lower-level officers voted in block with their international officers, giving the high-level bureaucrats control of the majority of votes, and veto power over every decision.

In contrast, each Labor Party chapter (which must have a minimum of 50 members to be recognized) was given between one and three votes. In other words, each top union bureaucrat had roughly 1,250 times the voting power of the average member of a local chapter.

The convention rules were designed to suppress democratic discussion. No resolution could be introduced from the floor unless it was first approved by a two-thirds vote of the delegates. One of the first votes was to reject an amendment that would have allowed resolutions to be brought from the floor if seconded by another delegate. At one point the chair of the constitution committee admitted that dozens of resolutions submitted in advance of the convention by members and chapters had been summarily rejected by the leadership.

There was virtually no opposition from the assembled delegates. The one time a delegate attempted to raise issues outside of the confines of the official resolutions, the chair ruled the speaker out of order and cut off his microphone. Whenever the platform wanted to end discussion, it called on its cronies positioned around the microphones to move the issue to a vote.

The rights of Labor Party members in the local chapters, which are largely populated by members of middle class 'left' organizations, were further curtailed by a decision to raise the minimum number of members required to form a chapter from 50 to 250. While this was done under the pretext of encouraging recruitment, it will have the effect of reducing most of the chapters to the status of 'organizing committees' and stripping them of their minimal voting rights. Some 90 percent of the 39 existing chapters fall short of the new membership requirement.

Chapter delegates complained that the national leadership was already withholding the names of people who sent in membership applications from the local chapters where the applicants lived. In some cases, even when all the requirements for charters had been met, the national leadership refused to grant them because they feared opposition.

In light of what has been described, let us pose a question: what

type of government would be in place if those who run the Labor Party held state power? The phrase 'police state' comes to mind.

Right-wing politics

On questions of foreign policy and important social issues, the Labor Party would fit somewhere in the center-right of the Democratic Party. This should come as no surprise, since the Labor Party is an instrument of a sociopolitical layer--the American labor bureaucracy--that exhibits the most frenzied economic nationalism and pig-headed anticommunism.

The reactionary tone was set by United Steel Workers of America President George Becker, whose opening address featured a denunciation of trade agreements like NAFTA for destroying 'our jobs, lifestyles and the American dream.' Becker called for trade sanctions against Asian and Russian steel imports. Implicitly alluding to US preparations for war against Iraq (at their highpoint during the weekend of the Labor Party convention), and in the language of an old Cold Warrior, Becker asked, 'Do you want to go to war and have to get our steel from Russia? Do you want to have to rely upon China for our missile technologies?'

Other campaigns the Labor Party voted to pursue reflected the weak-kneed reformism of the AFL-CIO: a Canadian-style 'single-payer' healthcare system, a Workers Bill of Rights and opposition to the privatization of Social Security. The Workers Bill of Rights is particularly dear to the union officials because it calls on the government and employers to facilitate unionization, thereby increasing the flow of dues money into union bank accounts.

In a bit of unintended irony, Cecil Roberts, the president of the United Mine Workers union, was chosen to move the resolution on workers' rights. Last April members of Roberts's staff physically assaulted a group of dissident rank-and-file miners in Pennsylvania who were protesting against the contract signed by the UMWA with the coal operators. Roberts has publicly defended the attack and organized a witch-hunt against the victims, threatening to throw them out of the union.

Lobbying the Democrats

All of the unions that endorsed the Labor Party campaigned vigorously for Clinton and the congressional Democrats in 1996 and 1998. The convention's decision not to run candidates in the 2000 elections once again exposed as a fraud the Labor Party's claim of political independence from the Democrats.

The delegates voted not to hold their next convention until the spring of 2002. Mazzocchi intervened to oppose an amendment calling for an earlier convention, saying that he did not want his hands tied while seeking further union endorsements for the party. In other words, the Labor Party will do nothing to cut across the AFL-CIO's campaign for a Democratic presidential candidate in the next election.

The resolution passed on electoral strategy is designed to prevent chapters from running candidates, even on a local level. Chapters must clear a set of hurdles before posting a candidate. These include making sure that endorsing unions represent a large

portion of an area's union membership; that there are a significant number of members in the district; that candidates submit, one year in advance, a campaign financing plan, 'including cash in hand.' Even if a local chapter fulfills these and a half dozen other requirements, the national leadership 'reserves final approval for itself.'

Several speakers asserted that such provisions were needed to run 'credible' rather than 'third party' campaigns. The unstated but clear meaning of this was to exclude any candidates who might raise socialist policies. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader emphasized this point when he warned the delegates not to allow the 'infiltration and subversion' of the Labor Party ranks.

The middle class left and the Labor Party

Special note should be taken of the role of the various middle class 'left' groups at the convention, in particular, Labor Militant, Solidarity, and a group around the *Organizer* newspaper. The union officials who ran the show went out of their way to humiliate these 'radicals,' who in turn evinced an apparently limitless capacity for self-debasement.

All three organizations supported the resolutions on elections, trade policy and party organization, and opposed any amendments that challenged the officials. Labor Militant and Solidarity had representatives on various leading committees. None of these supposed 'lefts' had the political backbone to raise the question of US war preparations against Iraq.

The convergence of these organizations and a section of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy in the Labor Party is no accident. They share an overriding political concern, which is very much summed up in the career and politics of Labor Party founder Anthony Mazzocchi.

This man, the former secretary-treasurer of the OCAW, has been a trade union bureaucrat his entire adult life. For many years he was the OCAW's chief lobbyist in Washington, i.e., its point man in the Democratic Party.

A right-wing social democrat, he has set for himself the task of preventing the development of a broad-based movement for socialism in the American working class. The spectacle in Pittsburgh reflects the rather crude efforts of the labor bureaucracy to fashion an instrument for this purpose.

See Also:

The SEP and the Labor Party: Reply to a reader
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