

Kirkland and the Bulletin newspaper: a revealing exchange

Barry Grey
21 August 1999

An incident from 1985 involving Lane Kirkland and this reporter is worth citing, because it provides a sense of both the politics and the style of the man.

By way of preface, Kirkland always seemed to me the consummate cynic—a man who wore his cynicism on his sleeve like a badge of honor. When this rather nondescript man of middling height, with a blotchy complexion and dour visage, took the podium at a press conference or union function, one had the sense that there stood a sad and somehow twisted man.

Kirkland was the furthest thing imaginable from “a man of the people.” One of the reasons he had ultimately to be removed was his inability to conceal his misanthropy and contempt for the public.

His cynicism was combined with a sense—sharpened by professional association with followers of the ex-Trotskyist Max Shachtman—of the danger posed to the entire structure of bourgeois rule by a socialist tendency in the working class. He was well aware of the role of the Workers League and its newspaper, the *Bulletin*, (forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*), in major struggles of the working class such as the PATCO and Phelps Dodge strikes. Our party had won a significant following among the most advanced workers, due to our principled and uncompromising exposure of the treachery of the AFL-CIO, and our consistent struggle for the political independence of the working class from the capitalist parties, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

In February of 1985 I covered the annual winter retreat of the AFL-CIO Executive Council in Bal Harbour, Florida as a reporter for the *Bulletin*. The meeting occurred at a high point in the union-busting assault that had been initiated with Reagan's firing of the PATCO air traffic controllers three and a half years

before. On the eve of the union leaders' gathering, the National Labor Relations Board had decertified the unions of Arizona copper miners who were in the twentieth month of their strike against Phelps Dodge.

Reagan's budget-cutting assault on social programs was in full swing, thanks to the support of the Democratic-controlled Congress.

In an unprecedented and highly provocative attack, the Reagan administration had filed criminal charges against the presidents of the three largest federal employee unions for violations of the Hatch Act, a law restricting the political rights of federal workers.

The AFL-CIO's sole strategy for opposing the attack of Reagan and big business was to vote the Republicans out and replace them with Democrats. This approach had been badly discredited by the November 1984 elections, in which Reagan won reelection and defeated the labor-backed Democrat Walter Mondale in a landslide.

This was the political context in which a series of extraordinary exchanges occurred between this reporter and Kirkland. At the opening press conference, Kirkland was at a loss for words when one reporter asked him, “Specifically, what plans do you have to counteract the obvious plans of the administration to annihilate the labor movement?”

Kirkland mumbled about “exploring a variety of ways in which we can strengthen and improve our channels of communication,” and added, “beyond that, as I say, keep doing it until we get it right.”

I asked Kirkland: “Are you saying that workers have to wait another two years and elect more Democrats? That that's the only thing they can do?”

Kirkland replied, “What do you propose, a general strike?”

When I asked, “What do you think about a general

strike?” Kirkland shot back, “Hello, Mr. Trotsky,” and turned to the next question.

Something between a gasp and a titter ran through the roomful of journalists, who did not quite know what to make of Kirkland's retort. That, however, was only a warm-up for the next day's press conference.

I began to put a question to Kirkland: “Given the bipartisan support of the Democrats for the budget cuts and the increasingly right-wing and anti-labor positions within the Democratic Party ...”

Kirkland cut me off: “We don't want a general strike and we don't want a labor party, Comrade.”

I persisted, “How can you continue to justify support for the Democrats?...”

Again Kirkland interrupted, visibly angered: “We don't want to do that. We want to do something else. We do not believe in that proposition. We do not subscribe to the doctrines of Lenin or Trotsky. We do not believe that they're a formula for the achievement of any of the just aims of the labor movement. And we do not subscribe to the doctrine of revolutionary defeatism. I think that's a comprehensive answer to your question.”

An embarrassed silence fell over the room. Jaded as they were, the representatives of the press were astonished and puzzled by Kirkland's outburst. A few came up to me after the press conference. Who was I? What was Kirkland going on about?

Even in that milieu it was obvious that my questions were entirely legitimate. Nobody, including Kirkland, could deny that the policies of the AFL-CIO were in a shambles, and that they had produced nothing but defeat and disaster for union members and the working class as a whole.

What they did not appreciate was the depths of the decay of the official labor movement, whose alienation from the masses of workers, including the minority that remained within the AFL-CIO, had grown enormously over the previous decade. Kirkland was simply giving voice, in his inimitable way, to the arrogant belief among the labor tops that they were in no way accountable for the results of their policies, least of all to the working class.

Even more unsettling, Kirkland had unwittingly indicated the genuine alternative for workers and others looking for a way out of the impasse into which the AFL-CIO had led them.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact