

Former AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland dies: a Cold War anti-communist and servant of big business

Jerry White, Barry Grey
21 August 1999

Lane Kirkland, the president of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) from 1979 to 1995, died of lung cancer August 14 at the age of 77.

If Kirkland's predecessor George Meany is associated with the postwar consolidation of the American trade union bureaucracy, Kirkland's name is linked to the disintegration of the unions in the US. By the time Kirkland was forced to resign in a shake-up within the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the union federation was well on the way to organizational collapse, with barely 15 percent of US workers unionized, down from 35 percent after World War II.

The most damning testimony to the significance of Kirkland's career is the fact that his passing had no impact on American workers. Indeed, the vast majority of workers do not even know the name of the man who represented American labor for 16 years—a fact that speaks volumes about the real relationship between the AFL-CIO and the working class.

It is indicative of the tragedy of the American workers' movement that an insignificant reactionary and cynic like Kirkland should end up speaking in its name. Kirkland never had any personal relationship, either practically or intellectually, to the working class. After a war-time stint as a merchant marine, he groomed himself for a career as a professional anti-communist by studying at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. From there he went to work for the old AFL as a specialist in subverting anti-capitalist workers' organizations around the world.

Kirkland could just as readily have worked out of the offices of the State Department or the CIA as the Washington headquarters of the AFL-CIO. His spent his days plotting, in collaboration with his colleagues in the foreign policy and intelligence establishment, the tactics of intimidation, extortion, violence and murder that were used to quash labor insurgencies in Europe and elsewhere, and make the world safe for American big business.

He was utterly indifferent to the struggles and problems of American workers, and made no attempt to conceal his indifference. Even bourgeois journalists could not help but remark on the AFL-CIO president's obvious unconcern for the plight of ordinary workers. On the rare occasions—stage managed and ceremonial—when Kirkland found himself in the company of workers on a picket line or speaking before a section of the rank and file, the sullen and sardonic AFL-CIO president was so obviously out of his element, one's natural response was to laugh at the absurdity of the scene.

Kirkland's death evoked warm tributes in the media, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the rabidly anti-labor *Wall Street Journal*. The inevitable designation "labor statesman" was much in evidence.

Calling Kirkland "one of the towering figures in the American labor movement," President Clinton said, "... with his unflagging support for free trade unionism internationally, especially in Poland, he helped hasten

the fall of the Iron Curtain while showing Americans that it is possible to stand up to communism abroad while standing up for working men and women at home."

Clinton's remark is significant, because it asserts the exact opposite of the truth. Kirkland's career demonstrates above all the impossibility of defending the interests of workers in the United States while serving the interests of American capitalism at home and abroad.

Kirkland joins the AFL

After graduating from Georgetown, Kirkland went to work on the AFL's research staff in 1948. He joined the labor federation at a time when it was directing, with the aid of the Central Intelligence Agency, an international campaign to subvert militant labor movements and establish pro-US unions. This included funding the Marseilles Mafia to break the grip of the French Communist Party on the waterfront and channeling money to the Christian Democrats and right-wing unions to prevent the victory of the Italian CP in the 1948 elections. The AFL also set up an operation called the Free China Labor League, which carried out guerrilla warfare and sabotage after the 1949 Chinese Revolution.

At home, the leadership of both the AFL and the CIO were in the midst of a red-baiting purge of socialists and left-wingers from the unions.

Kirkland's conservative political and social upbringing made him a prime candidate for the AFL's operations. He was born March 12, 1922, the son of a middle class cotton buyer in Camden, South Carolina. His great great grandfather had signed South Carolina's Declaration of Secession and later served in the Confederate Senate. According to the obituary published in the *New York Times*, the AFL-CIO president often referred to the Civil War as the "War of Northern Aggression."

During the 1950s Kirkland worked his way up the ladder as a labor functionary while writing speeches for Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson. He impressed Meany, who chose Kirkland as his executive assistant in 1960 to direct the AFL-CIO's daily operations and represent it on Capitol Hill and at the White House. In 1969 Meany selected Kirkland to be secretary-treasurer, the number two position in the organization. He succeeded Meany as president in November of 1979 after Meany retired due to ill health.

Kirkland was a staunch supporter of the Vietnam War and began a close personal friendship with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Following the eruption of mass protests against Nixon's invasion of Cambodia and the resumption of bombing in North Vietnam in May 1970, AFL-CIO construction workers were organized to attack anti-war protesters in New

York City and elsewhere.

In 1976 Kirkland helped found the Committee on the Present Danger, which demanded larger military budgets to confront the Soviet Union. He was a specialist in the AFL-CIO's vast foreign operations in Europe, Africa, Latin America and Asia. Of particular importance was the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), a joint venture between the AFL-CIO, the US government and corporate bosses like J. Peter Grace, chairman of United Fruit. The AIFLD had been founded in 1961 under Meany's tutelage and gave direct aid to US-backed coups in Brazil, Argentina and Chile.

Under Kirkland the AIFLD stepped up its backing of right-wing unions in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, just as the Reagan administration increased its funding for the death squad regimes in Central America and the contras seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

PATCO and the decade of union-busting

For much of George Meany's reign as AFL-CIO president (1955-79), the implications of the AFL-CIO's reactionary political outlook were obscured by conditions of postwar boom and American global economic hegemony. By the time Kirkland took over, however, the trade unions were already in decline, and the American ruling class was undertaking a sharp turn in its social policy, from a general course of limited social reform and class compromise to a full-scale offensive against the working class.

The shift in ruling class policy exposed before the eyes of millions of American workers the worthlessness of the organizations to which they were wedded. Kirkland's role was to collaborate in the destruction of basic gains that had been won by previous generations of workers, in line with the new demands placed on US big business by the globalization of production and finance and the rise of powerful economic rivals in Europe and Japan. This entailed the open sabotage of workers' struggles against wage-cutting, plant closures and union-busting.

In August 1981 President Reagan fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, sending a signal to corporate America that the US government would fully support a general union-busting offensive. At the time, Kirkland and the rest of the AFL-CIO Executive Council, who were meeting in Chicago, refused to defend PATCO and allowed Reagan to smash the union and jail many of its leaders.

This pattern would be repeated throughout the 1980s. The AFL-CIO isolated and insured the defeat of strike after strike. A partial list of betrayed struggles includes: Continental Airlines, Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, AT Massey Coal, United Airlines, Pan American Airlines, the Chicago Tribune, Hormel, Wheeling-Pittsburgh, TWA, Colt Firearms, USX Steel, IBP, Patrick Cudahy, John Morrell, International Paper, Pittston, Eastern Airlines and Caterpillar.

The AFL-CIO collaborated in the smashing of strikes and mass layoffs that drove millions of younger, more militant workers out of the unions. This created more favorable conditions for the bureaucracy to establish closer and more open relations of collaboration with the employers. It was during this period that the AFL-CIO officially adopted the policy of corporatism, i.e., the identification of the interests of workers with those of their employers, the rejection of any form of independent working class organization, and the direct collaboration of the unions with corporate management and the government in the form of joint committees and other structures.

Virtually all forms of independent union representation were effaced,

and union-company joint committees were established from the shop floor to the highest levels of corporate management and union office. Kirkland personally took part in many labor-management-government boards, including one to examine Social Security "reform."

Alliance with the Democratic Party

Throughout his career Kirkland opposed any challenge to the AFL-CIO's support to the Democratic Party, despite its collaboration with the Republicans in the attack on the working class. Like his predecessor, Meany, he opposed any moves toward the independent political organization of the working class. He poured millions into Democratic election campaigns, even as the Democrats abandoned any policy of social reform and ignored the concerns of the broad mass of working people.

While ostensibly opposing Reagan, Bush and the Republicans, Kirkland collaborated with Republican administrations in pursuing US Cold War aims throughout the world. Under Reagan, the AFL-CIO became a key participant on the National Endowment for Democracy, established for the purpose of intensifying pressure on the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Kirkland's labors in support of American capitalism have left a devastating legacy to workers all over the world. In Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, capitalist restoration has produced an 800 percent increase in the poverty rate (measured by those who live on \$4 a day).

Kirkland's ouster

By the mid-1990s the relentless decline in union membership was creating growing consternation within both the AFL-CIO hierarchy and sections of the corporate and political establishment. The union officialdom had cushioned itself from the impact of the defeats which its policies had helped inflict on the working class, establishing new sources of revenue from joint operations with corporations and government grants. But the ongoing hemorrhaging of the unions' dues base was threatening to overwhelm the bureaucracy and undermine the financial basis of its privileges.

At the same time, sections of the corporate establishment were concerned over the implications of an outright collapse of labor organizations that had for decades kept the working class in check and defended the basic interests of big business. Newspapers like the *New York Times* and journals such as *BusinessWeek* began to encourage those within the AFL-CIO top leadership who were coming to the conclusion that the organization needed a face lift, and Kirkland had to be replaced.

At the highest levels of the state, there was a sense that Kirkland's utility as a Cold War asset had diminished in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

These and related considerations came together in the drive, publicly launched in early 1995, to force Kirkland to retire. None of the union leaders involved in this effort—Service Employees President John Sweeney, Mineworkers President Richard Trumka, public employees union head Gerald McEntee—had any significant political differences with Kirkland. Their "revolt" expressed not the anger of the rank and file, but rather the machinations of one faction of the bureaucracy against another, aimed at preserving the position of the trade union bureaucracy as a whole.

An incident in the waning days of Kirkland's reign sums up the combination of complacency, bureaucratic inertia and intellectual torpor that characterizes the American trade union leadership as a whole, and which found a particularly repellent expression in the person of its longtime standard bearer. At a press conference during the February 1995 AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting, held at the exclusive seaside resort of Bal Harbour, Florida, Kirkland was asked about the strategy of the AFL-CIO for the future. Kirkland replied, "Our strategy and our goals haven't changed since Gompers spelled them out as 'What Does Labor Want.'"

He proceeded to paraphrase the mildly reformist agenda which Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor, enunciated in 1893. Even then Gompers' program was reviled by advanced workers, who considered it a byword for narrow "nickel and dime" trade unionism and the politics of class collaboration. Some four decades later, in the midst of the Great Depression, millions of American workers repudiated the elitist craft unionism of Gompers, broke from the AFL and undertook a series of mass sit-down strikes that led to the organization of auto, steel, electronics and other basic industries in the new CIO.

Kirkland was impervious to this, and every other history-making convulsion of the twentieth century, exhibiting the hide-bound reaction that had led American workers from one disaster to another in the course of his presidency.

Kirkland's political senility was, in the final analysis, an expression of more than the subjective qualities of a very reactionary individual. His tenure as AFL-CIO president saw the completion of an objective process—the bureaucratization and calcification of a trade union movement organically incapable of providing leadership to the working class, all the more so under conditions of the globalization of economic life. Under Kirkland, the fundamental conflict between the interests of the working class and organizations dominated by a privileged, upper-middle-class layer—and the nationalist, pro-capitalist politics that reflect the interests of this layer—was revealed in the open transformation of the unions into instruments of big business and the capitalist state.

That this is an objective historical process is underscored by the trajectory of trade unions all over the world, whose decay has mirrored that of the AFL-CIO.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact