

New York, New York
November 16, 1967

Report on Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace

Chicago, November 11-12

[Following is the transcript of a report to the Political Committee by Fred Halstead.]

One of the first things I noticed about this conference, which was called under the auspices of the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, was that SANE appeared to play little or no role, unlike the previous conference, except for having its name on the list, there were no SANE officials or speakers or representatives sitting on the platform or anything like that. Just Gottlieb, one of the SANE national officers, present in the audience and he looked a little lost. It was entirely a trade union officials' show. They had obviously organized it themselves and they got a larger turnout than they had expected, although they were trying to keep the thing on a low key and discouraged rank-and-file attendance. They had rented small rooms, etc., people had to sit on the floor at the plenary sessions.

There were 520 union officials registered, from 38 states and some 50 international unions. Over 50 were of the secretary-treasurer, vice president, and international executive board level. They came mostly from the former CIO unions, but also included Harold Gibbons from the teamsters, Bridges and UE officials, so that unlike the previous gathering, where the organizers were rather chary about having those people around, this included many that had been expelled from the CIO or AFL-CIO.

The particular international unions that were the heaviest in attendance were the UAW, which really played a big role this time, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Meat Cutters, Woodworkers and then a sprinkling from others.

There were two themes that dominated throughout. One was the UAW fight inside the AFL-CIO. This was extremely sharp and the speeches of Mazey and Victor Reuther were in the language of split. I don't know if they are about to split or not, but that is the kind of language they used. Mazey, for example, used words like "vulgar" in relation to Meany.

The second theme was opposition to the war. As I say, the UAW speakers tended to speak less about the war than about their dispute with Meany's AFL-CIO, although they did connect it with the war and they did come out against the war. The thing was set up for a lot of speeches. There was no time allotted at all for discussion except one afternoon in various panels, which separated the body up into various groups and they had different kinds of experts and so on at these panels. That was the only time there was any discussion, to speak of, though in the final plenary session some unplanned discussion broke out. There were many big-name speakers like

Senators McCarthy and Hartke; John Gailbraith; Martin Luther King; David Schoenbrunn, the CBS correspondent, and so on, in addition to a few labor leaders.

The theme of all speakers, as if they had all been briefed beforehand, was to plead with the audience to please get the labor movement off its bottom and make it become a factor in the decisions of the administration. The UAW speakers, for example, were very explicit about this. They refused to criticize Johnson very strongly, aiming most of their criticism at Meany, and practically said in so many words: "Look, the labor movement is in trouble and Johnson is in trouble unless the labor movement becomes a factor which Johnson has to recognize, and which will make him change his policies to some extent. Otherwise, where are we going to go?" There were some, of course, in the panels who made much sharper criticisms of the administration.

John Conyers, the Democratic Congressman from Michigan, led one panel. He opened up with a description of how difficult it is to get any social legislation through this Congress and how Democrats as well as Republicans were blocking it. A woman from the Amalgamated got up in the audience after he finished and said (I paraphrase), "Well, obviously, I'm not speaking for my organization, but this is just another proof of what I've been saying for a long time. Obviously the friends of labor are not in the Democratic Party and labor needs its own political party." This same question was raised in the other panels, at least once, in some way, and shunted aside by the chairmen.

The fact that an underlying discussion exists on this matter is indicated by the prepared remarks of Victor Reuther. He didn't read a written speech, but he did have some remarks printed beforehand which gave his formula for ending the war. In these remarks he specifically says: "The objective of the National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace Conference should not be to build a caucus within the AFL, not to launch a 'dump Johnson movement,' not to make of U.S. labor the tail to the kite of any political party, old or new. Rather our objective should be to stimulate discussion," and so on. But the fact that he had to make that point is an indication that this is being discussed.

Cleveland Robinson took the floor at the Conyers panel and made the following point (from shorthand notes): "I believe that as trade unionists, when we discuss Vietnam and its effect on social and domestic programs [that was the title of the panel], it would be bad to think only in terms of foreign policy as it pertains to Vietnam, because my contention is that our policy long before Vietnam was entirely wrong. We in the labor movement started feeling the real pinch of reaction right after World War II, in the late 1940's and through the 1950's. Many in labor succumbed to the witch-hunt and laid the groundwork for the condition we are now in where the labor movement as a whole is not a clear progressive force. It should be way ahead of the administration but is

not, and we have a situation where in the Western Hemisphere, as well as in Europe and Africa, the administration had made a bugaboo out of Communism and used it to effectively stop unionists from being militant. We have cornered ourselves into the situation called patriotism, which is not patriotism, and gotten ourselves into a situation where the labor movement backs a stand more right-wing than even the administration. Our foreign policy has been based on racism, that's what the anti-Communism means. Our government to this day has failed to do what is right in South Africa, Rhodesia and other nations of Africa and our labor movement has kept silent. We are victims of a phony policy supposedly based on fighting against Communism whereas it is really based on racism. We have had the problems of the poor and dispossessed and the ill and nothing has been done. I believe the labor movement must ask not what they believe they can get, but what they believe is right. Labor as a force is not respected today because we have not taken a position on the above questions."

This was a theme in that panel which nobody there voiced disagreement with. They got up one after another after that and attacked the whole foreign policy of the United States and the whole policy of the labor leadership in going along with this anti-Communism, within and without the labor movement.

I wasn't at the other panels but rejection of the old witchhunt policy tended to be an underlying attitude. To some extent others touched on this, too, even some of the big-name speakers. That was Schoenbrunn's theme, not as regards the labor movement, but as regards American foreign policy. He said our mistake in Vietnam began immediately with the cold war, that Ho Chi Minh had been an ally before and should have remained an ally throughout, even in the fight against the French. The U.S. got wrapped up in this anti-Communism, and the whole thing is wrong, he said. Then he pleaded with the labor movement to make a change in the situation, otherwise the country was in bad shape.

Even John Gailbraith, not strongly, but by and large, touched on that point. Gailbraith's exposition was as I described the UAW line: You've got to convince the administration to change its line, and the only way you can do that is to get the labor movement to stop just going along, it's got to go out and change public opinion, change the opinion within the labor movement and make it different. He also described some dirt about how they got into this war, and so on. He was a part of the Kennedy administration and he told how even at that time elements within the Kennedy administration who are now working with Johnson were proposing fancy lies about how to justify the intervention; like sending troops as "flood-control workers" -- he spilled some stuff like that.

Martin Luther King also made the big pitch about how the labor movement has to get off its bottom. He made a big point about the labor parties in Great Britain, Australia and New

Zealand, that they all opposed the war and that's what our labor movement ought to do. He ended his speech with a long quote from Eugene Debs' speech when he was sentenced for opposing World War I, the Bending Cross speech.

Mazey spoke the night of the first plenary session, Victor Reuther the next morning. Mazey attacked Meany and the AFL-CIO policy on the civil liberties question. He said: "The statement of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO [on Vietnam] followed the disgraceful and vulgar conduct of AFL-CIO president George Meany when he ordered the sergeant at arms at the 1965 San Francisco Convention to 'throw the kooks out.' I believe the greatest patriots in our country are those who have the courage to speak out. . . . I believe that the best way to help the President of the United States and to help our country is to try to change the course of our nation and the President's actions, which I think are wrong." That line was very strong in all the UAW stuff. He also made his little criticism of the antiwar movement: "I believe that the march on the Pentagon, the burning of American flags, burning of draft cards, carrying of the Vietcong flag, sitins at draft boards, demonstrations and disturbances at induction centers, play into the hands of the hawks and weaken our efforts to change improper foreign policy on the part of our government."

But Mazey did take a stand against the war, appealing for a negotiations line but declaring in so many words that the United States was wrong, was the aggressor in the situation and ought not to be there.

Galbraith even said that he found logic in the withdrawal position. He said that in so many words, but he added that the political realities of the country are such that we move through stages, and then he gave his plan for getting out -- which is the "enclave plan."

Victor Reuther came on with the strongest speech against the AFL-CIO. I found out later that he'd been making the same speech elsewhere, to a small gathering of the UAW in Detroit, for example. But apparently it's never been published and never been picked up by the newspapers. The papers didn't pick it up this time either. Unfortunately it was not distributed as was Mazey's speech and I have only incomplete shorthand notes. But what it contains is a description of the trade union reasons, according to Reuther, for the differences with the AFL-CIO. And a lot of dirt spilled on Meany and the AFL-CIO International Affairs Department. Essentially, what he said was this: That the character of U.S. industry has become international through the emergence of multi-national corporations which even interchange parts. He described Ford and GM complexes around the world. He said even Chrysler had these connections although not in its own name. Some parts of cars sold in the U.S., he said, are being made in Mexico and other places in Latin America, taking advantage of low wages, etc., and they find this necessitates some kind of international collective bargaining arrangements. But this is interfered with and in a sense made

impossible by the activities of the AFL-CIO International Affairs Department which goes around helping break strikes of auto workers and weakening auto unions and metal trades unions in various countries as a result of their connections with the ultra-right, professional anti-Communist forces in those countries.

Then he stated flatly that the AFL-CIO participated in the overthrow of the Goulart regime in Brazil. That its agents were instrumental in the coup and in the course of this they weakened the auto unions there and this is one of the reasons for the difficulties that developed between the UAW and the AFL-CIO. He said that a listing of organizations with which the AFL-CIO, under Meany, has allied itself (from shorthand notes) "comprises almost all major rightist groups in the U.S. and in South American affairs." The AFL-CIO, he said has affiliated itself with the American Security Council which is an ultra-right organization dedicated to helping corporations screen personnel for alleged or suspected Communist affiliation. This organization operates a black list for "reported leftist connections" which is very broadly interpreted.

Jay Lovestone, he said, is a director of the American Security Council. And U.S. political intervention in Latin America through AFL-CIO connections and training units have been instrumental in helping overthrow constitutionally elected governments such as that in Brazil. These people were trained specifically by the AFL-CIO for that purpose. In Uruguay, he continued, the AFL-CIO offered aid to the trade unions for workers' housing. But when the Uruguayan leadership came to the bargaining table to sign a contract they were asked to give to the AFL-CIO responsibility for selection of the tenants. The Uruguayans refused to sign that. At this point, Reuther went on, the AFL-CIO intervened in the internal union affairs and accomplished the splitting of the Uruguayan union movement, destroying the solidarity of those unions until this day.

Then he explained how the UAW is setting up a World GM Council and a World Ford Council to coordinate action and collective bargaining between various interlocking elements. He said they had succeeded in that in some places like Japan, where they do have such councils. But, he said, unless the UAW representatives declared themselves to have absolutely no connection with the International Affairs Department of the AFL-CIO they couldn't even get inside some of these overseas union offices. Otherwise they are treated like some kind of assassins and thrown the hell out.

These are more or less Reuther's points on his differences with the AFL-CIO. As regards the war itself, he made a very strong appeal to start discussion within the union movement. This is what he said: "Our objective should be to stimulate free discussion of all aspects of foreign policy within each and every trade union in the land. This is a worker right which has been all but stifled by the attitudes

of the current AFL-CIO leadership. The determination of foreign policy within the labor movement must not be permitted to remain the vest-pocket operation of any individual or small leadership group. As with union collective bargaining objectives and legislative goals, foreign policy decisions should flow upward from the membership following the widest possible discussion in depth by the rank and file." That, of course, is just what we'd like to see. Maybe we can make good use of his statement.

After Reuther spoke a discussion broke out on the proposed statement of policy which had obviously been written beforehand, and which nobody that I know of got any chance to discuss before they threw it on the floor at the last session. In the course of this discussion, Frank Rosenblum, who is one of the leading lights of this outfit and Secretary-Treasurer of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, took issue with Victor Reuther for making that sort of a speech at this conference. He said he found the speech interesting, that a lot of new facts were in it, and, although he was pretty knowledgeable as far as people in the labor movement go, he found out things that he didn't know before. But, he said, the purpose of this conference was to stimulate opposition to the war in Vietnam and it should stick to that single issue. His appeal was to keep the conference narrowed in on that one point. He seemed rather disturbed about the split perspective implied in the talks of the UAW leaders.

The official resolution on the war which was adopted is a better statement than these types have ever put out before -- up to a certain point we could agree with it fully. It described the effects of the war; sky-rocketing living costs, taxes, and so on, and went on: "To remain silent in this crucial period would constitute a betrayal of the finest traditions of independence, forthrightness and moral leadership which are the heritage of the American labor movement. . . . We believe this war is immoral. We believe our continued involvement in the war is contrary to the best interests of our country. We believe there can be no justification for expending the precious lives of our American youth and destroying ever-larger numbers of Vietnamese men, women and children." If you stopped right there, it wouldn't be bad, fairly close to a withdrawal statement. But then it goes on: "We therefore urge an immediate and unconditional end to the bombings of North Vietnam . . . We urge further that our government accompany a bombing halt with a clear and unambiguous statement of intention to negotiate a settlement of the war with the parties directly involved in the conflict, including the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. . . . We call upon the United Nations, after a halt in the bombing, to initiate discussions aimed at achieving a permanent cease-fire and permanent peace."

One woman, a vice president of the Restaurant Workers, got up and took issue with that resolution, saying (I paraphrase): "Well, when I talk with the women in my union, they express concern about their relatives who are in Vietnam."

You talk about a bombing halt and these kind of things, but what they want to make sure of is that the lives of their young men aren't affected. They want an immediate cease-fire and to bring the boys home, and we should put in something here to the effect that there should be an immediate cease-fire, unless fired upon, so that they can protect themselves."

This opened up quite a discussion. Absolutely nobody got up and defended on its merits any kind of negotiations position, they all got up and said, yes, yes, we're for that, but we have to have negotiations somewhere in there. There were four or five speakers who in one way or another thought that even this document ought to have the demand, "Bring the Troops Home," these were all women. They just made the point that the women want their kids out of there. It was good. But the end result was that all these suggestions were sort of deferred and the resolution was adopted without any changes. They just banged it through.

In the course of this discussion the question of the youth in the antiwar movement came up. Somebody got up and said, "Well, we're sticking our neck out by coming out against the war, coming out for withdrawal," and Abe Feinglass, who's taken a pretty strong position against the war for some time now, got up and made a big speech along these lines: "Yeah, we've got to put our heads on the block," and then he said, "Now I'm going to do it. It was mentioned before, the disgraceful conduct of Meany at the AFL-CIO convention. I want to say that I sat through that convention and I was proud of the kids in the balcony who demonstrated against the war at our convention."

While it wasn't discussed, except in this way, and indirectly by Mazey, there was an underlying concern -- a lot of corridor talk -- about how the labor movement had lost touch with the young people and radicalizing youth. Kipp, who was there for the Student Mobilization Committee, went around very boldly, approaching all types to get their names to help out with the SMC. She would say, "I come from the Student Mobilization Committee. We're having a discussion among the students in the antiwar movement about whether the labor movement is an entirely reactionary force in this country, and some of us want to show that it isn't. But I want to tell you that we are in a minority. Could you help us out a little?" She got a very good response. Some bigwig in the UAW, an assistant to Reuther, even offered to write and exchange speakers, etc.

A continuations committee was set up composed of about 30 people, two or three from each major area, and a very small working committee of six people, the key ones being Moe Foner of Local 1199 and Murray Finley of the ACW in Chicago.

One other thing: Harry Bridges spoke at one of the panels. All he said was that the ILWU thought Proposition P in California should have been worded "negotiations" instead of "withdrawal." He thought it would have gotten more votes. So

he didn't play a very good role there. However, he spoke again in the main session, in the discussion on the resolution. He didn't say much, something about the title of the organization. He thought "Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace" implies that the rank and file won't be invited, but that they should be invited. The interesting thing was that when he got up to speak and identified himself, before he said anything, there was a spontaneous round of sincere applause. And it wasn't for Harry Bridges in person. You could sense that, it was for the unions which had been expelled from the CIO and were now being involved in this new unity around the war issue. I was glad to see that.

My impression is that these guys are serious in their desire to get the labor movement off the dead center of just going along with Meany. They're afraid of a lot of things -- afraid of the rank and file, afraid of a faction fight, God knows what, but they're also very much afraid of the course things are now taking politically. They constantly express in the corridors their real political impasse: "What the hell are we going to do in '68 if Johnson continues this policy?" It's a real problem.

The other side is that some are beginning to worry that there's a big burgeoning radical movement taking place that they don't have any control over and they'd like to find some way to connect with it, without starting another movement underneath themselves. A very contradictory situation which they don't quite know how to deal with -- "We've got to start this discussion in the rank and file," they say, but when somebody makes a concrete proposal like a leaflet distribution at the factory gates, they say, "Ugh, we don't want that!" What they finally decided to do was reproduce all the speeches made at this gathering and get them around.

There may be a problem with Reuther's speech because of Rosenblum's objections. The chairman at the last session said they'd all be printed but offered to let the UAW print Victor's speech if they wanted and save the conference some money. This could be a rather slick way of gattling off the hook because, of course, the UAW may not reproduce the speech. It was taped, however, and there is a good chance we will be able to get a transcript.

* * *