

US trade unionists launch a labour party

Steve Zeltzer, an activist from Labor Party Advocates in the United States, was in Britain recently and talked to Martin Thomas and Paul Hampton

IN 1990, Tony Mazzochi, who was secretary-treasurer of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers union, formed an organisation called Labor Party Advocates [LPA]. After some pressure from myself and others, LPA has committed itself to calling a convention to found a labour party on 6-9 June 1996 in Cleveland, Ohio. It is the first labour party movement in our lifetime which has some important support in the trade unions.

Labor Party Advocates has grown to about five to ten thousand members across the United States. At this point, there is union support from the International Longshore and Warehousemen's Union, which organises about 60,000 West Coast dockers; Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, which is about 70,000 strong; the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, workers who repair railroads; and United Electrical Workers, a small electrical workers' union which was witch-hunted in the 1950s in the AFL-CIO. We also expect delegates from maybe fifty, sixty, a hundred union locals [branches] at the convention in June. There should be over a thousand delegates in all.

I am from the San Francisco chapter of LPA, which has about 350 members. In San Francisco, the LPA offices are in the Labor Council headquarters; most of the Bay Area Labor Councils have endorsed LPA, and the California Federation of Labor secretary, John Henning, speaks at its meetings. We have had meeting of six or seven hundred trade unionists supporting the idea of a labour party.

In Decatur, Illinois, the so-called War Zone, Bridgestone Firestone workers have been on strike, and now gone back to work without a contract. The Caterpillar workers were on strike, and have gone back to work without a contract. The Staley workers — Staley is a sugar manufacturer owned by Tate and Lyle — were locked out for over two years, and all in this one town, Decatur, Illinois. Of the 70,000 people in the town, there were seven thousand workers on strike or locked out. The workers formed a United Labor Front of the three unions and ran some labour people as candidates in elections. An electrical worker got elected to the city council.

Although most of the trade unions are still with the Democrats, things are becoming more fluid in the trade union movement. At

the AFL-CIO convention last October, for the first time in the movement's history, an opposition slate defeated the incumbent leadership.

Richard Trumka, who was the president of the mineworkers and is now secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, said: "If we get elected, this is going to be corporate America's worst nightmare. We're going to go out there on the picket lines and get those scabs." John Sweeney, the new president of the AFL-CIO, is a social-democrat. He's a member of the Democratic Socialists of America [a social-democratic grouping inside the Democratic Party]. All the top AFL-CIO leaders were saying that they had to get more women, ethnic-minority and immigrant workers into the unions — that their survival depended on it.

"We don't yet have a mass mobilisation of the working class of the sort that would force the capitalists to do deals with the unions."

The capitalists aren't giving the trade-union leadership much room to negotiate. We don't yet have a mass mobilisation of the working class in the United States, of the sort that would force the capitalists to do deals with the unions. There are exceptions, but by and large the unions are being defeated all over the country. There are more and more angry workers, and it is a very volatile situation.

Union membership is going up again. The AFL-CIO has said it will spend \$20 million on a national organising drive this summer. These organising drives are more than the glossy-leaflet flops organised by some unions in Britain. The SEIU, for example, has hired college students and sent them out to talk to workers and organise demonstrations — it produces results.

Working people are being politicised in the United States. The workers who went through the Decatur struggle, for example, have become *class-conscious*. They understand that there is a class struggle, and in the United States that is something!

There is a lot of less-defined *class hatred* in the United States. Unfortunately, because there is no labour party, it is reflected mostly through Buchanan, through a right-wing turn in the Republican Party — but it is the first time I can remember that a section of the Republican Party has attacked Wall Street and the bankers.

Buchanan is a racist, an anti-semitic, and a hypocrite, but when he attacks Wall Street and NAFTA he strikes a chord. They have to be attacked — only we have to put for-

ward a working-class solution, rather than Buchanan's racist solution.

Isn't there a danger that this could be a premature start, a blank shot, producing no more than another left group? I think not. After a while, it's difficult recruiting people to a non-existent party without a platform. And there's a volatile and dangerous situation in the United States.

I don't think the labour party will be no more than another left group. For one thing it will have some trade-union base; and it will be more democratic. Most of the left groups are undemocratic. In fact, I think one reason why the left groups don't want to be involved in the labour party is that their members would be drawn into discussion and debate.

The LPA steering committee, the LPA conference call says that the labour party is not going to run candidates. Tony Mazzochi put that out unilaterally without getting the approval of the steering committee. That issue will have to be decided at the convention, but I think the labour party will probably start off by running candidates locally.

The work done by Ron Daniels [a former organiser for Jesse Jackson who is now campaigning for a new, left-wing, third party] is more of a broad popular thing: it doesn't have a base in the unions. I don't really know what has happened with his constituency. I don't think it represents a lot. But in the Bay Area, anyway, the unions which are supporting a labour party are the unions which endorsed Jesse Jackson.

The black community support which Jackson had is not in Labor Party Advocates as yet. But a labour party has the possibility of winning that support. I think it is a weakness of Labor Party Advocates so far that it is too narrowly union-based — mostly union activists.

Tony Mazzochi thinks the labour party should be like the British Labour Party and the New Democratic Party in Canada. We have won a struggle to open up Labor Party Advocates to women's, minority, and environmental groups, so that they can endorse LPA and send delegates.

Mazzochi, I guess, is a social democrat. He comes out of a left tradition, around Trotskyism; he appoints people from Solidarity [a loose left-wing group, broadly Trotskyist/Shachtmanite] to organising jobs. The ILWU and the UE both have a strong Communist Party influence, historically, though the Communist Party is not such a force now and it supports the Democratic Party anyway.

For the most part, the left groups have pretty much boycotted Labor Party Advocates. Most of the people who are joining are union activists and people who used to be in left organisations but are not affiliated now.

How the relations between the sponsor
 ▸ bottom of facing page.