

# An American Labor Party is launched

By Bruce Robinson

AS Blair tries to make the British Labour Party look more like the American Democratic Party and to break its union links, the American labour movement has taken an important step in the opposite direction — towards breaking with support for the Democrats and creating an independent working-class political organisation.

From 6-9 June, over 1,200 people attended the founding convention of the US Labor Party in Cleveland. The convention included delegations from eight national unions and several hundred local and regional union branches, representing around one million trade unionists. Delegations and individuals also attended representing the 10,000 members of local chapters (branches) of Labor Party Advocates (LPA).

LPA has been the organising force behind the new party, having campaigned over the last five years under the slogan: "The bosses have two parties. We need one of our own." The LPA leadership under Tony Mazzochi, of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union, decided to found a party as "the current political system has failed working people" and polls of their union members showed that more than half of them were sympathetic to LPA's aims.

Conditions in the USA now are in many ways favourable to the emergence of a new third party based on the unions. The traditional 'friends of Labor' in the Democratic Party have (yet again) failed to deliver on their promises. Clinton has failed to create a universal health care system, reform labour law or outlaw the replacement of striking workers with scabs. Half the respondents in a 1994 poll identified the Democrats as a 'party of the rich'. Voter abstention is high. In a period of 'downsizing' and attacks on union organisation, both of the main parties act as unashamed servants of the capitalist corporations.

In this context the foundation of an independent working class party must act as a beacon to those looking for a political alternative. However adherents of the Labor Party are still in a minority within the US trade unions, many of whom will support Clinton or individual Democrats as the 'lesser evil' against the rabid Republican Right. The 'New Voice' leadership of the AFL-CIO (the US TUC), which recently replaced the traditional right, will spend \$35 million on political education and organising, much of which will go to supporting Democratic candidates in November's elections. The fledgling Labor Party therefore faces an immense task in winning unions to independent action and also in speaking to the unorganised workers, who form the majority, after 15 years of attacks on unionisation and jobs.

Three major issues were debated at the Convention: the constitutional relationship between affiliated unions and individual



Detroit print workers fight the class struggle in the USA

members; whether and when to stand candidates; and the party's programme. On all these issues, the left in the Convention — mainly concentrated in the LPA chapters, though with support from the International Longshore (Dockers) Workers Union and some local union branches — opposed the proposals from the platform. They were defeated on all of them — once by the block vote of the major unions (numerically small by British standards). The Mazzochi leadership did make some — not very important — concessions to the left when they feared that not to do so would split the convention.

A resolution to ensure 30% representation for LPA chapters on the National Council was defeated, but it was made somewhat easier for chapters to get representation. While union dominance of the new party is not necessarily a bad thing — if representatives report back to and are accountable to their members — there is a danger that LPA activists, who will build the party at local level, will feel disenfranchised and drift off.

The issue of whether the Labor Party should stand candidates in elections has clear strategic implications for the party's development. Mazzochi had pre-empted the Convention by stating in the publicity that "the Labor Party will initially be a non-electoral body" and emphasising that it would not demand the unions drop their other political allegiances. Resolutions setting down the principle of electoral independence and specifying the conditions under which LP candidates might stand were defeated. The leadership position carried: "the Labor Party will not endorse candidates of any kind, at least until we prove capable of recruiting and organizing working people around a new agenda." This will not be reconsidered for at least another two years. The leadership's probably wants to avoid alienating the AFL-CIO and those unions which still support Democrats, though their position may be more ambiguous. For example, Jerry Brown, the Democrat ex-governor of California, was invited to speak to the Convention.

The total ban on electoral activity shuts the door on support for Democrats, but also means that the Labor Party will have little to say in the 1996 elections. In the longer term an electoral presence will be imperative if the party is to establish itself.

The programme proposed was largely uncontroversial, if couched in terms of the American Dream and the US Constitution, rather than the socialist rhetoric historically more common in the British Labour Party. It included demands for jobs at a living wage, a shorter working week, a charter of pro-union laws, free access to quality health care and education, opposition to all forms of discrimination and an overall response to the bosses' offensive.

The main argument focussed on the inclusion of explicit support for abortion rights and a woman's right to choose. The attack on abortion rights has been the main campaign of the religious right and is a central political issue in the USA. Opponents of inclusion were not themselves usually opposed to abortion, but felt that "explicit language" might scare people away from the party or divide unions; they ignored the fact that removing it might also make it more difficult to recruit women to the party. The amendment against a woman's right to choose narrowly passed on a show of hands, but lost 1723-629 on a card vote.

While the left was defeated on the major issues, this should not be used as an excuse to write the Labor Party off. Its programme provides a basis for campaigning and recruitment to a party, which is still flexible and open to influence. It took the British Labour Party 18 years from its foundation to a settled independent existence, constitution and politics. (Many of the issues debated there were very similar to those at the Cleveland convention!) The impatience and sectarianism of the Marxists ensured that control of the party was by then firmly in the hands of the right.

The creation of a Labor Party in the US, even if it is still weak, must be considered a major step forward in that there now exists an independent working class party, rooted in the unions, which can show that there is political life outside the Democrat-Republican pro-capitalist consensus. It is now up to the Marxist left to build it loyally and demonstrate in practice how their perspectives show the way forward.

● In the next issue of *Workers' Liberty* Bruce Robinson will look at the US Trotskyists response to the setting up of the Labor Party and suggest some lessons from the British Labour Party experience. ■