

# Is the AFL-CIO Kicking Itself in the Teeth Again? *Labor is abandoning its role as protector of jobs*

by Miles D. Wolpin

**J**ohn Sweeney's election as President of the AFL-CIO hierarchy nearly five years ago was supposed to bring new life to a labor "movement" in decline. This is epitomized by added federation resources to stimulate organizing by affiliates as it is by the AFL-CIO's salience in the recent Seattle protest against World Trade Organization policies.

But there is another side to the picture. The federation's autumn decision to aid Gore's faltering campaign by endorsing him was, in the view of UAW and Teamsters' leaders, "premature." Not only does he appear to be weaker than his Democratic rival Bradley, but delay would have facilitated greater bargaining leverage *visa a vis* these candidates. Thus the AFL-CIO's endorsement could have been conditioned upon more concrete job protection commitments for union members threatened by free trade imports from low wage countries.

Even worse, the AFL-CIO seems to be moving from unbenign neglect of approximately four million illegal aliens who for the most part compete with Americans for unskilled jobs, to an open embrace. At its October Los Angeles convention, the SEIU, UNITE, Hotel and Restaurant Workers, UFW and Teamster affiliates backed a Los Angeles Labor Federation resolution that would strengthen the magnet for illegals to further swamp our labor markets.

This included a sweeping amnesty for millions who

often boast of defying American law. The resolution also called for an end to employer sanctions for hiring--and often favoring--migrants. Why? Because they--regardless of legal status--frequently undercut American workers by accepting inferior working conditions and pay. Finally, the resolution would also promote open borders by calling for a reallocation of INS staff from enforcement to expedite visa and status adjustment processing.

Pushed at the convention by vehement ethnic militants, culturally radical staff and other union officials, the rationale for the new policy was that it would facilitate organization of aliens.

The aforementioned unions have already organized thousands of illegals and adopted the role of seeking to prevent INS enforcement of our immigration laws in the name of "immigrant rights." Thus the resolution—tabled until February because some labor leaders objected that it was "not in the interests of their members"—marks a new posture only for the AFL-CIO, but not for some of its major affiliates.

Opposition within the federation to a major departure from its historical protectionist role for the economic opportunities and security of American workers was based upon a perception of likely costs. These in turn could further weaken a labor movement which continues to represent an ever smaller percentage of workers in the private sector. In 1998, for example, union density declined to 9.5% from 9.8% a year earlier.

Among the short-term costs will be alienation of American trade unionists (and even many legal immigrants) who perceive that their "leaders" are getting in bed with management. Employers were the key opposing special interest when the AFL-CIO successfully lobbied for employer sanctions in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Nevertheless at that time Congress acceded to employer and militant ethnic demands for a one-time amnesty. The latter

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resulted in almost three million illegal aliens becoming eligible for citizenship. Since the 1960s — as frequently before employers have fiercely opposed restrictive immigration reforms that would tighten labor markets.

They have also ubiquitously violated — often with impunity — labor laws. Trade unions have complained bitterly of this. Yet by organizing, protecting and seeking amnesty for illegals, labor is vitiating its own appeals to the rule of law vis a vis employers. Similarly its intimacy with the scandal-ridden Clinton Administration which has failed to enforce or faithfully implement existing immigration laws, further reinforces perceptions by American workers of a legal double standard. Again constituent alienation is exacerbated!

Beyond these short-term costs, by gratuitously flooding the labor market and increasing competition for proliferating "bad jobs," Labor will make organizing more rather than less difficult in the unskilled sector where unemployment is double the national average. The same holds with a vengeance for real contractual gains via

bargaining leverage. Precisely why most employers favor open borders!

Other long-term costs include intensified resentment by American workers who are frequently discriminated against in favor of Third World migrants. This affects not only whites, but ironically Afro-Americans even more so in skilled as well as unskilled sectors. Already, according to an August Zogby poll, middle age workers are far less supportive of unions than youths with little work experience.

Not only is citizenship being further denuded of its obligatory dimension, but the naked disrespect for our laws in a context of ethnic as well as racial group preferences by unions and employers are likely to reinforce ascriptive polarization of our society. Already characterized by the quasi-violent politics of group extortion, it seems only a matter of time before America becomes genuinely ungovernable short of Balkanization.