

Socialism is no longer a dirty word to labor

Unions that used to bait 'commies' and 'kooks' now join forces with socialists

The 17 building-trades unions, considered the most conservative element of organized labor, have long looked upon socialists as political untouchables. But the building trades, reflecting labor's increasingly militant mood, took out a full-page, \$700 advertisement in the September issue of *Democratic Left*, the newsletter of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. The ad "proudly" salutes DSOC, a descendant of Norman Thomas' old anticommunist Socialist Party, for "its firm and militant support of the American labor movement." Says Victor S. Kamber, an official of the AFL-CIO's Building & Construction Trades Dept.: "We are tired of being beaten, so we are thanking those who help us when we need it."

Kamber was referring to legislative defeats suffered by organized labor in the last two years, most of them orchestrated by business and right-wing groups. The building trades' bow to the socialists was labor's sharpest change in attitude, but it typifies the kind of regrouping on the political left that the unions' frustration is producing. It is characterized partly by heightened rhetoric—some union leaders have accused corporate leaders of waging "class warfare"—but, more important, by a growing willingness on the part of unions to join forces with socialist groups such as DSOC (pronounced deesock) in attacking "corporate power" on a number of fronts.

These attacks take many forms, including anticorporate demonstrations, the formation of coalitions—such as the Citizen/Labor Energy Coalition, which fights the decontrol of oil prices—and legislative initiatives. Labor, socialist, and other interest groups (blacks, environmentalists, women, and Hispanics) are pushing Congress to enact bills that generally would force corporations to share decision-making. For example, they support bills that would restrict the ability of corporations to shut down

plants, force them to expand corporate boards to include more outside directors, and require them to disclose more financial information. In general, says Michael Harrington, the "chair" of DSOC, "We want more democratic and social control of business investments."

A welfare state? If this budding campaign gathers strength, it could lead the U.S. further in the direction of the welfare statism practiced by the social democratic governments of Western Europe. Labor's tentative move leftward is also manifested in an Aug. 6 resolution adopted by the AFL-CIO executive council calling for nationalization of the oil industry if "the oil monopoly fails to adequately serve the public interest." The United Auto Workers wants the federal government to buy up to 30% of Chrysler Corp. stock to solve the auto maker's financial problems. And the UAW, borrowing a concept used widely in Europe, is demanding representation on Chrysler's board of directors.

These and other moves have set alarm



DSOC's Harrington: Seeking more controls over business investments.

bells ringing in the business community. Richard L. Leshner, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and R. Heath Larry, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, have warned that organized labor is moving toward "planned socialism," as Larry puts it.

But there is no broad movement toward socialism in union ranks, either at the top or bottom, nor toward government ownership of industry. It is true that the AFL-CIO urges the creation of a government agency to import oil and allocate its use in the U.S. But the federation called for the nationalization

of oil only as a last resort. Lane Kirkland, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO and heir-apparent to the presidency now held by George Meany, sums up labor's view on nationalization this way: "We on the whole prefer to negotiate with private companies that have roughly equivalent bargaining power than with [government] corporations that control the courts, the police, the army, the navy, and the hydrogen bomb."

Nevertheless, many union leaders are working closely with socialists and interest-group representatives that they shunned for years. Until one or two years ago, socialists had been in labor's doghouse for nearly 30 years, through the McCarthyism period of the 1950s and the antiwar movement of the 1960s and 1970s. "The socialists maintained relations with dissident elements in the country at a time when the AFL-CIO was baiting kooks, commies, kids, and the antiwar crowd with a vengeance," says one unionist with ties to both camps. "Now a lot of closet socialists are ready to come out within the labor movement."

Perception. This coming-out is largely attributable to labor's perception that business has turned against the union movement. The unions are especially angry at business for beating down labor's attempt to reform federal labor law last year. Then, too, unionists complain about company attacks on federal health and safety programs in the workplace and the relocation of production from the unionized North to nonunion regions. "Call it the politics of plant closings, or the politics of cancer, you don't have to be socialist to be anticorporate," says Stephen I. Schlossberg, director of the UAW's Washington office.

Organized labor also appears to be at an economic crossroads. "Labor in the 1960s bought the new economics," says DSOC's Harrington. "So long as you had increasing aggregate demand, guaranteed by fiscal and monetary fine-tuning, there was no need to challenge corporate dominance. But that no longer works, and now there is a shift toward challenging corporations, but not in a socialist or ideological way, although I wish that were true."

DSOC was one of two rival socialist

groups that formed when the old Socialist Party collapsed in 1972. It has about 4,000 members, mainly professionals and academics, works within the Democratic Party, and is especially helpful to labor in providing links to black, women's, and environmental groups. DSOC's rival is the smaller Social Democrats USA, which is more conservative than DSOC, claims some of Meany's aides as members, and—like the AFL-CIO—is hawkish on international affairs.

Common causes. Harrington's group has strong ties to several important unions, including the UAW, Machinists, Clothing & Textile Workers, and State, County & Municipal Employees, all of which have leaders who belong to DSOC. William W. Winpisinger, president of the Machinists and an avowed socialist, is a vice-"chair" of DSOC. The group does not engage in lobbying activities, but it supports labor and social causes in speeches and literature, helps organize demonstrations, and feeds ideas on socioeconomic issues—such as full employment and worker participation in management—to unions and members of Congress.

It also works with many of the coalitions that have sprung up in recent years, particularly the Progressive Alliance, which was formed in 1978 by the UAW and consists of 85 minority, consumer, women's, liberal, and labor groups. The Alliance, DSOC, and labor are pushing hard for passage of legislation that would require employers to give financial assistance to workers and communities affected by plant closings. Business is especially worried about the effect such a law would have on the

Unions are angry at business for beating down reform of labor laws

freedom to move or discontinue production. Moreover, DSOC, the AFL-CIO, and other groups will make a major effort later this year to win passage of what is now named the Corporate Democracy Act of 1980. It will call for corporate directors who would represent social constituencies, tougher sanctions against white-collar crime, more corporate disclosure, and protection of free speech for workers.

It is very much a coalition bill, as is shown by the people who are now drafting it. They are Kamber of the building trades; Jules Bernstein, a Laborers' Union lawyer and member of DSOC; Mark Green, an associate of Ralph Nader; and Alice Tepper Marlin, of the Council on Economic Priorities. The bill is "a kind of Landrum-Griffin Act for our largest corporations," says one unionist, referring to the 1959 law, passed at business' urging, which mandated democratic procedures and disclosure rules for unions. ■