

# Growth of Labor Anti-War Action Tied to Bush's Anti-Worker Moves

by Michael Letwin

On February 28 a CNN headline reported that the AFL-CIO Executive Council had unanimously voted to "oppose...war with Iraq."

At first glance, the federation's February 27 resolution looks more pro-war than anti-war. It lauds the 1991 Gulf War, when "the United States organized a broad coalition of our allies to stand united against this aggression" and "call[s] upon the administration to pursue a broad global consensus to apply the maximum pressure on Iraq, ensuring that war[will be] supported by both our allies and nations united."

Given official labor's unbroken support for U.S. wars prior to, during, and since Vietnam, this language is not surprising. What is surprising is the resolution's acknowledgment that "people are taking to the streets to speak out against a war in Iraq" and its conclusion that "the president has not fulfilled his responsibility to make a compelling and coherent explanation to the American people and the world about the need for military action against Iraq at this time."

Though the resolution fails to note that hundreds of labor bodies are among those who have protested the war, in dissenting from Bush's war plans it marks a landmark break with the administration and from the federation's own past.

This break reflects both anti-war efforts that began within the labor movement immediately after 9/11 and the administration's increasingly obvious use of 9/11 as a pretext for both war abroad and attacks on labor at home.

## EARLY EFFORTS

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the AFL-CIO and virtually all of its member unions endorsed the Bush administration's war on terror, including the invasion and bombing of Afghanistan. On October 8, President John Sweeney announced, "We support the aggressive, considered military action ordered by President Bush" in Afghanistan.

At best, international unions remained silent about the war abroad, while expressing concern about civil liberties and labor and immigrant rights. Only a handful of regular labor bodies opposed the war in Afghanistan: San Francisco's Labor Council, Washington State Jobs with Justice, and New York City's AFSCME



DC 1707 and 1199SEIU.

In response to official labor's overwhelming support for the war, unionists in several cities established ad hoc, local, cross-union antiwar groups. On September 27, 2001, one such group, New York City Labor Against the War (NYCLAW), issued a statement, initially signed by eight local union presidents and 130 other unionists, that condemned the World Trade Center attack as a "crime against humanity" and condemned the war both abroad and at home. Within a few weeks, "Labor Committees for Peace and Justice" were established in the San Francisco Bay Area, Washington, D.C., and Albany, New York.

These committees and those that followed elsewhere were relatively small and were virtually ignored by the media. But during the time when nearly all of official labor was either pro-war or silent, these groups served as both anti-war poles within labor and as representatives of labor within the broader anti-war movement.

Meanwhile, the administration launched a fierce attack on immigrant rights and civil liberties. It withdrew collective bargaining rights from thousands of Department of Homeland Security workers, made plans to privatize half the federal workforce, and imposed Taft-Hartley against the longshore workers.

The administration also responded to Enron-type scandals by enacting new tax cuts for the rich. And they

found the hundreds of billions to attack Iraq by callously slashing domestic programs and demanding austerity of public employees.

In these circumstances, more labor activists began to find it easier to oppose Bush's war plans and to convince other union members that war abroad could not be separated from the war on labor at home. In fall 2002, this growing sentiment resulted in a spate of anti-war resolutions passed by locals, central labor councils, and larger bodies and in the founding, on January 11, 2003, of U.S. Labor Against the War.

By the time of the huge worldwide antiwar protests on February 15, USLAW's efforts had helped generate anti-war resolutions from labor bodies representing five million union members—one-third of organized labor in the U.S.—among them the international unions of AFSCME, APWU, CWA, SEIU, UE, UFW, and UNITE. Less than two weeks later, the AFL-CIO adopted its resolution against immediate war on Iraq.

## WHAT NOW?

By the time this article appears, the United States may well have launched an all-out war, with or without UN approval. Railway workers in Scotland and Italy have already refused to move materials for war on Iraq, and unions in Britain, France, Italy, Australia, and elsewhere have vowed massive anti-war

(continued on page 13)

## Steward's Corner

(continued from page 12)

[www.ire.org/resourcecenter](http://www.ire.org/resourcecenter). You have to join to get full access to materials, which your union or community organization may want to consider.

A number of unions have put together their own resource lists for doing basic corporate research. See for example the one put together by AFSMCE, at [www.afscme.org/wrkplace/ftips02.htm](http://www.afscme.org/wrkplace/ftips02.htm), which can walk you through some of the steps. The AFL-CIO has a section called "Eye on Corporate America" on their website, [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org), which includes CEO salary data. Find out the political campaign contributions of corporate execs at [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org), under the "individual donor" search.

Finally, if you enjoy research, consider taking a class. Your local labor extension program may offer research courses, or enroll in the week-long program at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, taught by Kate Bronfenbrenner, Tom Juravich, and Keith Westrich in June each year. For more information contact Robert Glase, 607-254-4749 or [rsg28@cornell.edu](mailto:rsg28@cornell.edu). □

## Organizing

(continued from page 7)

at Verizon, it has been difficult to maintain that focus because of mass layoffs last fall.

Gaining card check at Cingular was an incremental process that took nearly a decade. With Verizon we have had the language only two years. Clearly, the actual language of any card check agreement makes less difference. More important is the day-to-day behavior of the company. In the telecom industry, experience shows that it takes continuous worker mobilization plus good faith bargaining by management to make organizing rights a reality. □

[Erin Bowie is an organizer with CWA in Connecticut.]

## Anti-War Action

(continued from page 11)

strikes.

If such strikes were to happen on a big scale in this country, could they bring the war—at home and abroad—to a halt? Such strikes are unlikely any time soon, but USLAW called for more modest activity—a March 12 day of action at the workplace. Much more leadership and action are needed from the labor movement, linked to the immediate battles against the war at home. □

[Michael Letwin is a co-convenor of NYC Labor Against the War and on the Continuations Committee of USLAW.]

# RESOURCES

If you're looking for creative strategies to put the "zing" in your organizing, check out the Labor Heritage Foundation's sixth annual **Conference on Creative Organizing**. The conference will be held at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies in Silver Spring, Maryland June 22-24. This is an opportunity for organizers and activists to be introduced to tools such as music, song-writing, street theater, storytelling, and the visual arts and to apply them to specific campaigns. The Great Labor Arts Exchange, a gathering of labor artists and performers from all across the country, is being held concurrently, so both groups will have a chance to interact and work together. For information visit [www.laborheritage.org](http://www.laborheritage.org) or contact Julie McCall at 202-974-8041, or [jmccall@aflcio.org](mailto:jmccall@aflcio.org). ■ ■ ■

"Collective bargaining in U.S. private-sector industries is under siege." So say the authors of **Collective Bargaining in the Private Sector**, a new book in Cornell University's Industrial Relations Research Association Series. This book examines the state of collective bargaining in eight different industries, including airlines, trucking, and health care, describing how bargaining has come under attack in these industries. The authors conclude with two chapters on bargaining strategies, geared towards increasing union density. This book is available from Cornell University Press for \$29.95. Call 607-277-2211, fax 800-688-2877, or go to [www.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrpress](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/ilrpress). ■ ■ ■

The **AFL-CIO Communities@Work Toolbox** is a new 200-page guide for union organizers, communications staff, elected leaders, and activists who are enlisting their communities to help workers form unions. A compilation of talking points, fact sheets, and tips for working with community allies, the guide includes sections on working with the media, elected leaders, immigrants' rights groups, students, religious leaders, and more. It features a section on building a community strategy and a blueprint for gaining community support for card-check, employer neutrality, and local and state initiatives. To order, call 800-442-5645, or in the Washington, D.C., area, call 202-637-5034. The first copy is free; additional copies are \$15 each. ■ ■ ■

Join hundreds of clergy and lay leaders, labor activists, and seminarians for **The Prophetic Work: Religion & Labor Uniting for Worker Justice**, a gathering of people and organizations concerned about improving conditions for workers. Religious and union allies will participate in this **National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice** conference May 18-20 in Washington, D.C. The three-day meeting will include discussion forums, skill building for religious and labor organizing, strategizing on specific worker campaigns, and visits to lawmakers on Capitol Hill. For information, visit [www.nicwj.org](http://www.nicwj.org), or contact Bridget Olusesi or Sara Spoonheim at 773-728-8400, or [2003conference@nicwj.org](mailto:2003conference@nicwj.org). ■ ■ ■

**Uprooted: Refugees of the Global Economy** is a new documentary video put out by the **National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights**. It tells the story of three immigrants who left their homes in Bolivia, Haiti, and the Philippines, countries that have been devastated by the forces of economic globalization. It traces the hardships these workers suffered in the immigrant labor market here in the U.S. This powerful documentary raises critical questions about U.S. immigration policy in an era when corporations cross borders at will. It is available from the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights for \$20 (plus \$3.50 shipping). To order a copy, call 510-465-1984 or go to [www.nnirr.org/get/get\\_video.html](http://www.nnirr.org/get/get_video.html). ■ ■ ■

Not many books make connections between religious beliefs and the labor movement. In **A New Protestant Labor Ethic at Work**, Ken Estey explores how workers might build a new work ethic, one that opposes "a Protestant work ethic that values hard work but devalues workers." Estey proposes a new work ethic which would "place the accent on the 'protest' in Protestantism" by confronting authorities who seek to exploit and degrade workers. Though this book primarily discusses Protestantism, it is written for workers and readers of any religious persuasion who wish to "explore the positive possibilities of worker resistance and struggle." It is available from Pilgrim Press for \$14. To order, contact Pilgrim Press at 800-537-3394 or [www.pilgrimpress.com](http://www.pilgrimpress.com). ■ ■ ■

Want to publish your own newsletter? **Creating Newsletters** is a hands-on workshop designed to provide union members with the basic tools and information to start up a union newsletter. It will include presentations on editing, design, and libel and copyright rules. The workshop will be held in New York City on April 12, at the Cornell University ILR School, 16 East 34th Street, 6th Floor. The cost is \$10 per person and includes lunch. To register, email Leyla Vural at [lvural@uniteunion.org](mailto:lvural@uniteunion.org) or call 646-872-1605. ■ ■ ■

Political Organizer Wanted: the **King County Labor Council** is looking for an organizer to help create a more powerful political voice for workers in Seattle and King County. The successful candidate will have a commitment to workers' rights and empowerment, skills in fundraising and campaign communications, and demonstrated leadership and organizing experience. Starting salary is \$51,916.80, plus benefits. To apply, send a cover letter, resume, three job references, and a sample of your work to King County Labor Council, 2800 First Ave., #206, Seattle, WA 98121, or fax to 206-441-7103, or email [Klcc@igc.org](mailto:Klcc@igc.org). Applications should be submitted as soon as possible. ■ ■ ■

**STITCH**, a network which supports and connects Central American and U.S. women organizing for economic justice, is looking for a **Central American Program Coordinator**. This position is full-time and based in Guatemala City. The program coordinator will be in charge of workshops, language school delegations, and campaign support work. Applicants must be bilingual in English and Spanish and have three-five years hands-on experience in labor or community organizing. Salary is competitive with benefits; preferred start date is May 1. Please send a resume and cover letter to STITCH, 1525 Newton St. NW, Washington, DC 20010, or email [stitchdc@earthlink.net](mailto:stitchdc@earthlink.net). ■ ■ ■