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## THE AFL-CIO'S FIRST NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

By Arthur S. Leonard

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Except for its endorsement of Robert LaFollette in 1924, the AFL studiously avoided forming permanent alliances with the major parties prior to the New Deal. Even then, its support for the Roosevelt Administration was of an informal nature; many union leaders were Republicans, and there was uneasiness in the organization about becoming too closely tied to one party. The influence of the activist CIO and the passage of Taft-Hartley by a Republican Congress over Democrat Truman's veto helped to persuade AFL leaders to make an endorsement in 1952. By the time of the 1956 election, the AFL-CIO merger had taken place, with a consequent liberalization of the political philosophy of the older organization.

In this article, Arthur Leonard discusses organized labor's role in the precedent-setting 1956 campaign. The processes of assessment and endorsement are examined, as well as labor's influence on the election results. The crucial tactical decision of 1956, in the author's opinion, was the move to endorse the head of the Democratic ticket in order to strengthen the campaign for a Democratic Congress. The author sees the resultant Democratic Congress in the light of a Republican Presidential landslide as evidence of the political sophistication developed by organized labor in the 1950's.

Labor endorsed the Democratic nominees routinely in 1960, 1964, and 1968. The activities of the 1956 campaign established precedents that were to guide Labor through almost two decades of close involvement with the Democratic Party.

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## Introduction: The Special Significance of the 1956 Election

On September 23, 1952, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) broke with a long-standing tradition and officially endorsed the national ticket of a major party for the first time in its history.<sup>1</sup> As the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) has already endorsed the same candidates on August 14, the two major labor confederations of the nation were in the race together for the first time.<sup>2</sup> That the favored ticket of Stevenson and Sparkman (Democratic) suffered a decisive electoral loss (442-89),<sup>3</sup> and that a silent group -- representing about ten per cent of the AFL's membership -- had not supported the convention's endorsement,<sup>4</sup> combined with the 1955 AFL-CIO merger to produce a unique situation in 1956.

What would the newly united labor movement do? Would the leaders recommend support for the Stevenson-Kefauver ticket in view of President Eisenhower's overwhelming victory in 1952 and continued popularity? Would the addition of CIO representatives to the more conservative AFL Executive Council and General Board make a decisive difference in the decision? Would labor's leaders be willing to make an endorsement without the approval of a full-scale convention, which was not scheduled in 1956?

These were among the questions facing political analysts as the presidential year began, and before the year was over the labor movement had established patterns for political action that were to be followed for at least three more national campaigns.

### The Preconvention Political Situation in 1956

In 1952, Dwight D. Eisenhower broke a chain of twenty years of Democratic administrations in a landslide victory. On February 29, 1956, the President announced that, despite his illnesses of the past year, he would run for re-election.<sup>5</sup> Adlai Stevenson had announced his own candidacy for renomination in mid-November, 1955, but he was opposed by Estes Kefauver and Averell Harriman, with Harriman receiving the support of ex-President Harry S Truman.<sup>6</sup>

COPE, the newly-formed Committee on Political Education of the AFL-CIO, published its first election year Handbook early in the year, articulating the positions voted in resolutions by the merger convention of

the AFL-CIO in December 1955.<sup>7</sup> The disenchantment of organized labor with the Eisenhower Administration is evident throughout the Handbook, and a final section, "The Problem With Eisenhower," gives labor's case against the President:

A list of the bills passed or beaten by Congress reveals a basic difference in the "philosophy" of the President and the Democrats that makes effective action, under the threat of possible veto, difficult...In reality, there is scarcely a single major program where the basic approach of the...Democrats and the...businessmen surrounding Eisenhower are not in conflict. This is the real reason we got no action in either 1955 or 1956 on bills to expand coverage of the federal minimum wage to...20 million workers now unprotected, grossly underpaid and seriously overworked.<sup>8</sup>

However, tacitly admitting that Ike would probably be unbeatable if he decided to run again, COPE's remedy for the problem was to elect a more liberal Congress that might be able to override Presidential vetos.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, this was very much the mood of labor in early 1956, if the analysts of the time can be trusted. A Newsweek poll of analysts revealed that labor leaders preferred Stevenson over Eisenhower,<sup>10</sup> but indicated that

(some) will (really work for Stevenson) but not so strongly as in the past. The reason: Many union leaders do not believe Mr. Eisenhower can be beaten, and they will concentrate on trying to elect local candidates favorable to labor.<sup>11</sup>

This feeling was reflected in a resolution passed by the ILGWU in mid-May, recommending no Presidential endorsement in 1956 unless there was a really clear-cut choice between candidates.<sup>12</sup> In July, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer William Schnitzler reflected the same feeling when he told a COPE gathering not to expect too much in the November election.<sup>13</sup>

On August 10, George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, appeared before the Democratic Platform Committee with the AFL-CIO's official platform recommendations, which were basically a 50-page summary of the COPE Handbook.<sup>14</sup> Schnitzler had been delegated to perform the same duties at the Republican convention, in line with labor's official "non-partisan" goal of getting both parties to adopt pro-labor planks.<sup>15</sup>

The resulting platforms were presented in the AFL-CIO News, a bi-weekly newspaper published by the AFL-CIO, along with a detailed analysis of each and articles comparing them to labor's recommended platforms.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the stage was set for the dual processes of assessment and endorsement as the Executive Council met soon after the conventions had nominated Eisenhower and Stevenson.

### Assessment

COPE undertook a thorough examination of the platforms and past records on which both candidates for President would run, in line with the traditional labor policy of "non-partisan" support predicated solely upon a candidate's stand on the issues. The outcome, in terms of assessment, was never seriously in doubt. The Democratic platform conformed in large measure with the recommendations Meany had presented, insofar as labor-related issues were concerned.<sup>17</sup> The Democrats declared for repeal of Taft-Hartley, while the Republicans supported a series of amendments which had been opposed by the AFL and the CIO when they were first introduced unsuccessfully in Congress in 1953.<sup>18</sup>

In the vital area of civil rights, COPE found both platforms to be weak, although the Democrats were commended for proposing an end to Senate filibustering which had been used to stall civil rights legislation.<sup>19</sup> This objection to the civil rights planks was to play an important role in the debate of the Executive Council. The foreign policy and economic planks of the Democrats were favored by COPE over those of the Republicans.<sup>20</sup>

The assessment of candidates involved not only a study of their public records and statements, but also a consideration of the intangible elements of a warm relationship between labor and the White House that is desired by labor's leaders, as Monroe Berkowitz explained in a contemporary publication:

Recognizing the dangers involved in generalizing, still it might be said that on the national scale unions want a "friendly" administration in Washington...one that understands something of the crisis nature of collective bargaining and provides a Washington platform for the dramatization of issues. A Roosevelt or a Truman could be counted upon to invite deadlocked participants in a...dispute to the White House...the press would publish pictures of the parties on

the White House lawn and the rank and file were assured that their elected leaders had carried the fight to the top. Today (1956), the names of union leaders are not conspicuous on the White House calling list...

Sometimes, ... as far as labor is concerned, it is as important how a thing is done as what is done.<sup>21</sup>

Berkowitz's comments reveal the underlying reasons for the pro-Democratic bias of most of the big labor leaders, at least in 1956.

In evaluating the candidates themselves, COPE found that, while Eisenhower may have had good intentions in regard to workers, when it came to actions rather than promises the President didn't seem to follow through as eagerly as when he was faced with a pro-business matter. He consulted only infrequently with union leaders about sensitive appointments or legislation affecting labor -- such as the proposed Taft-Hartley amendments -- and, as noted above, labor leaders just did not feel comfortable in the White House when visiting Eisenhower; they felt like outsiders, intruders in some business inner sanctum.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps a bigger issue, as far as COPE was concerned, was the Vice-Presidential candidacy of Richard M. Nixon, given the recent serious illnesses of the President. Said COPE:

The voters must also take more seriously into account this year... the candidates for Vice-President. If President Eisenhower is re-elected and does not survive another four years in the White House, ... Nixon would become President. His record... shows that Nixon voted consistently against measures supported by labor.<sup>23</sup>

The assessment of the Democratic Presidential candidate emphasized Stevenson's humanism, idealism, pro-labor record as Illinois governor, and the stands he took on current issues, which were in many cases to the left of the Democratic platform in just those areas, such as civil rights, where labor had found the platform to be lacking.<sup>24</sup>

The Vice-Presidential candidacy of Estes Kefauver was rated a distinct plus for the Democrats. COPE described him as "consistently support(ing) progressive measures" and "well qualified to serve as President himself, if necessary."<sup>25</sup>

From the assessment standpoint, then, COPE's conclusions were rather obvious and clearcut: the Democratic platform was preferable to the

Republican one, even if it was far from ideal; the Democratic candidates were clearly superior to the Republicans in their stands on labor issues, particularly in the case of Vice-Presidential candidates; and, as COPE took care to point out, a remedy to labor's legislative problems would be to elect an overwhelmingly liberal (read mostly Democratic) Congress, which could be most effectively achieved by backing the top of the Democratic ticket.<sup>26</sup>

### Endorsement

COPE's endorsement of the Democrats notwithstanding, endorsement by the AFL-CIO remained a point of contention. The election of 1952 had been a debacle for labor, and one might reasonably expect that the silent ten per cent from that year's convention would have swelled into greater opposition in 1956.

The Executive Council met on August 27, 1956, and the immediate question at the meeting was not whom to endorse, but whether to make any endorsement at all.<sup>27</sup> Meany, citing his disappointment with the planks of both parties regarding civil rights, was against making an endorsement of either ticket.<sup>28</sup> UAW President Walter Reuther, leading the new CIO contingent, had participated actively in the Democratic convention, and now urged an endorsement to protect labor's position with the party, and, by implication, the Congress.<sup>29</sup> When the question was put to a vote, endorsement carried by 14-8.<sup>30</sup> Eight of the pro-endorsement votes were cast by the CIO contingent, while the AFL leaders were against the endorsement 6-8; if the merger hadn't taken place, the AFL might not have made any endorsement in 1956.<sup>31</sup>

Once the question of whether to endorse was settled, the choice of a candidate was clearcut, and Stevenson-Kefauver won approval by a more decisive 17-5. Meany's announcement to the press did not, however, convey great enthusiasm for the Democrats:

Mr. Meany seemed carefully to avoid saying that the council had recommended endorsement of the Democratic ticket. Instead, he always referred to the Stevenson-Kefauver ticket.<sup>32</sup>

The rationale of supporting the top of the ticket in order to strengthen the Congressional campaign, suggested in COPE's assessment report, was invoked by Meany as a main reason for endorsement:

A failure to recommend endorsement of Stevenson-Kefauver would have had the effect of weakening support for liberal, pro-labor candidates for the Senate and House, in the viewpoint of the supporters of endorsement, Meany declared.<sup>33</sup>

The question of endorsement was submitted to the General Board on September 12. Not surprisingly, in view of Eisenhower's rank and file popularity, there was renewed opposition to a Stevenson endorsement, or any endorsement at all, and Vice-President Stevenson of the Carpenters spoke for total neutrality. On the final voice vote, a handful of persistent no votes were heard.<sup>34</sup>

Soon after the Executive Council announcement, many individual unions holding conventions during the campaign months passed their own resolutions for Stevenson and Kefauver, and the Democratic candidates were invited to address several convention sessions.<sup>35</sup>

### The Campaign

The campaign, or at least labor's part in it, centered around the Congressional races.<sup>36</sup> Raymond Moley, a political scientist and one-time Brain Truster, observed that labor, and not the Democratic party, was actually running the Democratic Congressional campaign machinery:

It is worthy of note that the Eisenhower-Nixon speeches and the activities of the Republican National Committee give much more attention to Congressional candidates than do Stevenson-Kefauver and the official Democratic organization. The Democrats have virtually turned over the campaign for Congressional seats to COPE. Thus the President, a strong and popular candidate, is really fighting two parties.<sup>37</sup>

In terms of finance, the old charges of a labor slush fund were met by statements that a financial commitment had not been made by labor when it endorsed the Stevenson ticket; COPE money was being spread around to individual Democratic Congressional races:<sup>38</sup>

The AFL-CIO's committee (COPE) reported no donations to the campaign funds for...Stevenson, although the AFL-CIO...endorsed the Democratic candidate.<sup>39</sup>

An estimated \$1.8 million was collected by COPE, and of that \$970,000 reportedly went to individual Congressional races, with the rest going for general support of the Democrats, including financing of distribution of voting records of Congressmen.<sup>40</sup> Reporting to a Senate subcommittee headed by Senator Gore on their September outlays, COPE leaders noted that about 70% of their spending that month went directly to Congressional campaigns, with the remainder being spent on generalized activities like printing and distributing the voting records noted above.<sup>41</sup> Lack of confidence in the ability of the Democratic ticket to beat Eisenhower may explain why organized labor, by some estimates, collected less in the form of political contributions than it had in 1952.<sup>42</sup>

On the propaganda front, the AFL-CIO News was a chief means of reaching the membership, and it printed analyses of campaign speeches, pro-Stevenson editorials, and a column called "Adlai Says," excerpting the more memorable statements from the candidate's campaign oratory.<sup>43</sup>

A main focus of the propaganda effort was against Nixon rather than the popular Eisenhower, who was infrequently but generally respectfully mentioned. In the issue of September 29, the News printed a large box on page two, headed "Kefauver Right, Nixon Wrong," containing a comparison of the voting records of both men as Senators.<sup>44</sup> The October 20 issue devoted a full page to several articles discussing Nixon, some describing his campaign efforts in sarcastic tones.<sup>45</sup>

The Republican were running on the twin claims of peace and prosperity in 1956. AFL-CIO spokesmen attempted to refute at least the latter claim in public interviews and newspaper articles. Said COPE co-director James McDevitt of the Eisenhower prosperity:

Well, this picture of general prosperity is very much overdone to say the least. There have been some very bad spots in employment this year, like anthracite coal and textiles, and the farm machinery industry. Such prosperity we have is due first to the need for production of defense materials and to built-in supports like social security, which are in the main the work of the labor movement. And above all to labor's constant fight for higher wage levels which sustain buying power and keep business going. Stevenson-Kefauver want to keep labor strong. The Eisenhower-Nixon policies deliberately intend to weaken labor. And so we endorsed Stevenson and Kefauver.<sup>46</sup>

The argument was that any existing prosperity was due to the work of

twenty years by the Democrats and the continuing efforts of labor, and the only way to get back up to "real" prosperity would be a return to Democratic rule and labor power.

During the final weeks of the campaign, the News ran several stories about campaigns which had been decided by a mere handful of votes, and predicted a close race both nationally and for Congressional control. Some articles claimed Stevenson had a good chance for election, citing Eisenhower's late decision to enter the speechmaking rounds and Stevenson's vigorous campaigning, probably in hopes of stimulating a large turnout of voters who might have stayed home thinking their votes wouldn't matter.<sup>47</sup>

The results of the election were an Eisenhower landslide, a virtual repeat of 1952, but the situation in Congress remained basically unchanged, with the Democrats retaining a slim margin of control, and the ideological balance resting with a coalition of Southern Democratic conservatives and Republicans.<sup>48</sup>

#### Labor Interprets the Election Results

A post-election analysis by U.S. News and World Report concluded:

Rank and file members, by the hundreds of thousands, voted independently of their leaders... Stevenson had the backing of the big AFL-CIO organizations, but President Eisenhower drew heavy support from working men and women.<sup>49</sup>

Eisenhower could not have won such an overwhelming victory without a sizable segment of the labor vote. This was interpreted by Meany to indicate a personal triumph for Eisenhower but a public rebuke to the Republicans by not giving like the Republican Congress he had asked for:

Meany told reporters that labor's vigorous campaigning for "liberal progressive candidates" helped the Democrats retain control of Congress -- a development "little short of a miracle" in the face of the Eisenhower vote... Statements across the country stressed that union concentration on Congressional and state races staved off a Republican sweep...<sup>50</sup>

Thus the old rationale for supporting the top of the ticket was brushed off and trotted out to rationalize labor's campaign tactics:

The fact that millions of union members used their ballots for a... repudiation of the Stevenson endorsement has not upset the conviction of most union chiefs that they did the right thing.

Few expected that the Democratic Presidential candidate would win. Their basic belief was that they could not hope to run a forceful drive for the election of Congressional and state candidates in a Presidential year if they ignored the head of the ticket.<sup>51</sup>

There was good news for the AFL-CIO buried under the election results. It appeared that in the few districts where COPE had been able to count on already merged local AFL and CIO organizations, it had been very effective. The expectation of the leaders had been that a merger would avoid the feeling of working at cross purposes that had pervaded the 1952 campaign. This seemed true early in the campaign, but in the tense final weeks unity had broken down badly:<sup>52</sup>

...the spectacle of unity at the top was impressive, but highly misleading. In politics... most of the work is done down at the state, city, and ward level. And down there the spectacle of unity was less impressive. In fact, in most cases it just didn't exist.<sup>53</sup>

While CIO and AFL organizations have been merged in some states, few were states where organized labor is an important political force. And at the grass-roots, or shop-and-precinct, level of political action, CIO and AFL unions for the most part worked independently or even at cross-purposes.<sup>54</sup>

There were, however, a few districts in which mergers were an accomplished fact by campaign time, and in those districts, particularly in the west, the results were good enough to give real hope for the future when unity might be expected to pervade most levels.<sup>55</sup>

A concise summary of the election results from labor's viewpoint is provided by John Cort:

Matters could have been a great deal worse... In fact, there is a good deal of evidence to show that, without Eisenhower, labor and the Democrats would have swept to a crashing victory on all fronts. Well, almost all fronts -- in the

South the Democrats usually win and labor loses.<sup>50</sup>

A less sympathetic but perhaps equally accurate summary of labor's role was enunciated by National Association of Manufacturers President Cola Parker, who said:

...in view of yesterday's results, I suspect they saw the handwriting on the wall early in the game and instead of contributing manpower and money to a hopeless cause, they concentrated their efforts on congressional and local candidates who would do their bidding.<sup>57</sup>

The evidence is that Parker was exactly right, and, furthermore, that labor may have won that game in 1956.

### Conclusions

The united labor movement learned many lessons in the 1956 campaign that were to serve as guidelines, or precedents, for future political action. An important precedent set by the new confederation was the act of endorsement itself. This was the third time in its history that the AFL had endorsed a Presidential candidate (the first being the La-Follette campaign in 1924), but it was the second time in as many elections, and it seemed to make firmer the outright commitment to the Democrats made by both the AFL and the CIO in 1952.<sup>58</sup> The vote in the Executive Council indicated to many that the merger had the overall effect of politically activating the AFL, rather than de-activating the CIO, as had been feared by some in the junior organization. When it came time to make an endorsement in 1960, the trend became clear, as there was no opposition to the concept of taking a partisan position in regard to Presidential politics within the Executive Council.<sup>59</sup> The virtually automatic endorsements in 1964 and 1968 further strengthened this tie to the Democrats. The events of the summer of 1972, however, may signal a new phase in labor's political participation.

In addition, labor learned in 1956 that unity pays. The best results in Congressional races had occurred in districts where there were well-coordinated efforts, with both AFL and CIO unions contributing to a COPE-run campaign. This was seen as an impetus to beat the 1957 convention deadline for local mergers to take place.<sup>60</sup>

Early dire predictions that a Democratic presidential disaster would cause division over political action in the labor movement<sup>61</sup> were

not borne out by the results, and in retrospect, it appears that the AFL took an important step forward in political sophistication in 1956, using its Presidential endorsement as a tool to get what it really wanted, a Democratic Congress. The efficacy of the device was illustrated in an inverse way by the election experience of the United Mine Workers. John L. Lewis, UMW leader and a Republican at heart, decided to ignore the Presidential race and concentrate his union's efforts in the coal districts on local races. Voter turnout was small and the results were adverse, demonstrating that the excitement of Presidential politicking was an essential element of a successful labor campaign.<sup>62</sup>

The 1956 campaign was an important milestone in the story of labor and politics, a decisive point on the road to labor's strong and unquestioned commitment to the Democratic Party characteristic of the national politics of the 1960s.

## Notes

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- 5 - Charles A. H. Thomson and Frances M. Shattuck, *The 1956 Presidential Campaign*, Brookings Institution, Washington, D. C., 1960, p. 22.
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- 7 - *AFL-CIO COPE Handbook*, Committee on Political Education of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, Washington, D. C., 1956.
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- 9 - *Ibid.*, p. 374.
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- 13 - *Daily Labor Report*, Washington Daily Reporter System, Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., Washington, D. C., July 13, 1956, p. A-2.
- 14 - Thomson, *supra* note 5, pp. 104-5; *COPE Handbook*, *supra* note 7; *AFL-CIO News*, "Labor's Platform Recommendations," August 11, 1956, pp. 2-3.
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- 18 - *Ibid.*; also, *COPE Handbook*, *supra* note 7, p. 147.
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- 27 - Daily Labor Report, August 27, 1956, p. A-1; also, "Division at Unity House," Time Magazine, September 10, 1956, pp. 33-4.
- 28 - "Division at Unity House," supra note 27, p. 34.
- 29 - Ibid., p. 34.
- 30 - Joseph A. Loftus, "Labor Heads Vote to Back Stevenson-Kefauver Ticket," New York Times, August 29, 1956, pp. 1, 16. Those voting against making any endorsement were Dave Beck (Teamsters), Hutcheson (Carpenters), McPetridge (Building Services), Bates (Bricklayers), Randolph (Sleeping Car Porters), MacGowen (Boilermakers), Petrillo (Musicians), and Winter (Bakery Workers). The last three changed to Stevenson on the 17-5 vote. Meany did not vote in Council decisions unless there was a tie. It is interesting to note that Beck actually decided to give his personal public endorsement to Eisenhower in October. ("Dave Beck, of Teamsters, Endorses Ike," AFL-CIO News, October 20, 1956, p. 5.)
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