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Breaking Ranks: On Military Spending, Unions Hear a Different Drummer

Abstract

[Excerpt] What remains to be seen is whether the labor movement's study of military spending will uncover the unions' *material self-interest* in reducing it, and in conveying that interest to the membership. For besides its general damage to the economy, which is now recognized even by many conservatives, the big, endless military buildup also threatens to inflict fatal damage on the trade union movement and its individual unions—not just indirectly but directly and concretely, in the form of fewer members, fewer contracts, fewer organizing victories, and less political power for working people. In effect, the Reagan Administration's plan to boost military spending in the 1980s is also a program for the structural dismantling of the trade union movement.

Keywords

labor movement, union, worker rights, unionization, military spending

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Breaking Ranks

On military spending, unions hear a different drummer

BY LANCE COMPA

Something extraordinary happened when the executive council of the AFL-CIO met in Florida last February. For the first time in living memory, the top leadership of organized labor in the United States questioned a projected increase in military spending: The union chiefs charged that President Reagan's proposed \$33 billion boost in the Pentagon budget would be "taken out of the hides of the poor."

Until the executive council took that stand, the AFL-CIO's position on military spending had always stayed in line with Samuel Gompers's historic admonition, "More!" As recently as last November, the federation's convention voiced only one small quibble with last year's \$44 billion increase in Pentagon funds: It complained that simultaneous cuts in domestic social programs would undermine public support for higher military spending. Invoking both the "general welfare" and "common defense" provisions in the preamble to the Constitution, the AFL-CIO called on Reagan to maintain spending for social programs and raise Pentagon spending. That remains the official position.

But now a special eight-member panel has been named to examine the issue and recommend changes in AFL-CIO policy. Among those on the new committee are Machinists' President William Wimpisinger, a blunt advocate of reduced military spending and conversion to peaceful production, and Auto Workers' President Douglas Fraser, whose union has long been critical of unrestrained arms expenditures.

The real test for the committee will be whether it can move beyond the AFL-CIO's traditional "Guns and Butter, Too" approach and begin making some choices. The unions can no longer have it both ways, resisting social program cuts that make

workers feel threatened while supporting high military spending levels that supposedly make workers feel secure. Today, high military spending is itself as great a threat to workers and their unions as are budget cuts.

Across the political spectrum, a virtual consensus has been reached on the harmful effects of higher military spending: inflationary pressures, the diversion of material and human resources away from productive civilian pursuits, and the distortion of the country's basic research and development efforts.

What remains to be seen is whether the labor movement's study of military spending will uncover the unions' *material self-interest* in reducing it, and in conveying that interest to the membership. For besides its general damage to the economy, which is now recognized even by many conservatives, the big, endless military buildup also threatens to inflict fatal damage on the trade union movement and its individual unions—not just indirectly but directly and concretely, in the form of fewer members, fewer contracts, fewer organizing victories, and less political power for working people. In effect, the Reagan Administration's plan to boost military spending in the 1980s is also a program for the structural dismantling of the trade union movement.

But won't thousands of jobs be provided by military contracts—many of them to union members? And wouldn't the labor movement be split, therefore, on the issue of resisting military spending boosts? The answers are implicit in further questions: What kind of jobs? For what kind of workers? Where? And what *union* jobs are foregone by the shift to military production?

Funding the military budget by cuts in social programs strikes first at the fastest growing part of the labor movement—public employe and service-sector unions. Military spending creates far fewer jobs than are generated by equivalent government spending for labor-intensive pro-

grams in health, education, housing, transportation, and other domestic activities. The "reverse transfer" of funds from social programs to the Pentagon will slash jobs of state, county, and city workers, teachers, health care employes, social workers, transit workers, and others in the public and service sectors. In turn, their unions will lose membership, bargaining clout, and political strength.

Building-trades unions would seem to be unaffected by military contracts, but in fact are being decimated by high military spending. In 1981, the Federal Government absorbed 79 per cent of all U.S. savings to cover a \$60 billion deficit. It will have to muscle even deeper into the capital markets to meet deficits now projected at upwards of \$100 billion in fiscal 1983. Federal borrowing to pay for the huge investment in arms keeps interest rates at the high levels that have created the current depression in the construction industry. That crash has thrown hundreds of thousands of building trades union members out of work.

Even the manufacturing unions, likeliest beneficiaries of military contracts, suffer in terms of overall membership numbers and bargaining strength. Military projects most often involve high-technology manufacturing in a capital-intensive setting. Relatively few workers operate costly and sophisticated machinery to turn out a limited number of weapons systems, depressing employment levels in those unions. Unions of auto workers, steel workers, electrical workers, and machinists all represent workers in military plants, but the bulk of their membership is in the consumer products and industrial equipment sectors, where layoffs are heaviest. Most auto workers make cars. Most steelworkers make steel. Most machinists make and service machines.

In the smaller unions, too, most members work on civilian goods. The largest units of the United Electrical Workers make transportation equipment—locomotives, airbrakes, signal systems. The largest locals of the Allied Industrial

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Workers make small motors for home and yard equipment. The largest shops of the International Union of Electrical Workers make home appliances and electric generating equipment. Important units of all these unions make machine tools—cutters, grinders, lathes, milling machines, presses, and the like. Even Reagan's most elaborate military projects will not provide jobs for their unemployed members.

A regional bias in the patterns of military spending puts another nail in the coffin Reagan is preparing for the labor movement. A disproportionate share of Pentagon money is showered on the anti-union South and Southwest. Benefiting from military contracts are such areas as San Diego and the Silicon Valley in California, the Florida Panhandle, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Dallas-Fort Worth in Texas. For the most part, these are right-to-work, anti-union strongholds where employers resort to old-fashioned blacklisting and threats as well as new-fashioned union-busting "consultants" and psychologists to screen out potential unionists from the work force. The same military spending patterns bleed the Northeast and Midwest states, the centers of civilian manufacturing by union workers. Here, massive layoffs are the rule as the recession deepens.

The final test comes in the workplaces that turn out military equipment. Union strength in these plants is limited, and the big arms buildup can only make it worse.

In the first place, many major defense contractors are completely unorganized. Grumman Aerospace Corporation's huge Long Island jet fighter facility is non-union. IBM's missile guidance system plants are non-union. Eastman Kodak's many defense-related divisions are non-union. Texas Instruments, Control Data, Hewlett-Packard, DuPont, the Silicon Valley semiconductor makers—all are among the top 100 defense contractors, and all take pride in being "union-free." Texas Instruments' Charles Hughes is the guru of the union-busting consultant movement. DuPont recently turned back a decade-long Steel-

workers' organizing effort with a wickedly effective anti-union campaign stressing strikes, dues, and violence. IBM has a specialized SWAT team of industrial psychologists and "union avoidance" lawyers that descends on a company location at the first hint of organizing activity to snuff it out. The Silicon Valley companies are firing United Electrical Workers' organizers who raise issues of low pay, harassment, and health-safety hazards.

Other big defense contractors, even when partially organized, do much of their military production in non-union shops where they resist union encroachment. Many are on labor's "most wanted" list for union-busting and virulent campaigns against organizing efforts.

Thousands of small subcontractors making printed circuit boards, wire harnesses, gear systems, and other electronic or mechanical component parts are non-union operations, and are as ruthless as the big firms in opposing unions. Often, in fact, they are more vicious, since they lack the sophisticated in-house "preventive labor relations" departments that keep unions out of the big corporations' plants. Instead, these smaller employers turn to the type of consultants who tell them to break the law and let the organizers twist slowly in the delay-ridden puffs of National Labor Relations Board procedure.

The unions are further weakened in many defense-related manufacturing plants by the small number of hourly-paid production and maintenance workers in relation to the overall workforce. A non-union Litton Industries plant in Maryland, for example, has some 250 to 300 hourly workers assembling products for electronic warfare systems, and more than 1,000 engineers and technicians designing and debugging them.

The same ratio exists in many other companies where unions do have bargaining rights. In non-union plants, it makes workers afraid to organize, while union workers are left in a weak bargaining position. In any strike, salaried personnel could perform much of their work while they languished on picket lines.

Even as it examines the consequences of stepped-up military spending, the American labor movement should articulate an alternative vision in which a move from military to civilian production could put millions of workers, especially union workers, back on the job. Some unionists have already begun.

UAW researchers and Detroit city council staff members have developed a plan to employ laid-off auto workers in the production of machinery and equipment for energy systems. They could start by meeting the immediate demand for pumps, steam injection engines, steam compressors, and oxygenators for deep-well oil and gas drilling. They could move on to heavy co-

American labor could lead the way to an economy of peace and not of war, to an economy that would put millions back to work

generation equipment for industrial parks, single plants, and commercial centers. Another possibility: small-scale on-site coal gasification converters to turn coal into gas at the mines and pump it into the gas pipelines.

The United Electrical Workers are consulting with state planners in the Middle West on a regional high-speed passenger rail system modeled on the Japanese "bullet train" and the 160-mile-per-hour French TGV line from Paris to Lyon. UE members making locomotives, switching stations, and signal systems, as well as generators, transformers, and insulators for an electrified system would be guaranteed years of work to build such a system. So would steelworkers producing steel for track and rolling stock, auto workers and machinists making passenger cars, craft workers maintaining the system, and railroad brotherhoods operating it. The same would hold true for any stepped-up funding for Conrail, Amtrak, regional rail systems, and local mass transit.

The Sheet Metal Workers have been out front in the movement for solar energy, seeking the possibility that its members could be put to work installing solar heating systems for homes, factories, and offices. In the same way, many building-trades workers, machinists, steelworkers, electrical workers, and others could be busy manufacturing and installing mini- and micro-hydroelectric stations in lesser rivers and streams, or light cogeneration equipment for homes and apartments, or wind-driven home generators, or solar engines.

Other building trades unions are looking to the crisis of America's infrastructure for potential jobs. The interstate highway system is falling apart. City streets are a minefield for car axles and wheel rims. Important bridges are crumbling, and water tunnels and sewers are eroding. Trains are derailed on hazardous railroad rights-of-way. Public parks are weedy and littered. Aged housing and factory stock are wasting away. Decaying port and dock facilities inhibit the export of U.S. products. Waste disposal sites are filled to capacity.

Millions of workers could be busy rebuilding, rehabilitating, and maintaining these resources and producing manufactured goods for them. More importantly, such work would employ the unskilled and semi-skilled people who, for all the talk about employment training and "picking winners," are just not able to become computer programmers, electronic technicians, or word-processor repairers. But it takes the investment of public funds to do it.

The first steps taken recently by the top labor leadership to question military spending did not spring whole from the minds of the AFL-CIO executive council. That group of national union presidents cannot shake all at once its apprehensions about the Soviet Menace, its slavish adherence to a hawkish foreign policy, and its legacy of the Cold War purge of unions that didn't toe the line in the late 1940s and 1950s. There are still enormous risks in giving even a hint of being "soft on communism" or "soft on defense."

The pressure to open up a debate on military spending—a real debate, not just hand-wringing because social spending cuts undermine support for military increases—is coming from below. Local union activists have linked up with church and disarmament groups in "Jobs with Peace" campaigns in San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Chicago, Milwaukee, and other cities. Union locals cosponsored a recent Cleveland conference on military spending with the American Friends Service Committee.

In California and elsewhere, trade unionists have joined nuclear arms freeze petition campaigns. Vermont labor groups were instrumental in the overwhelming vote for a nuclear freeze in town meetings around the state.

The case should not be overstated. There is not yet a broad movement for arms reductions among rank-and-file trade unionists. But there is questioning, weighing, challenging. More and more, a genuine expression of concern is being voiced from the floor at local and regional union meetings. If union leadership fails to respond, it means one thing: Yes, we are willing to sacrifice the guts of our movement and the viability of our individual labor organizations for the sake of a Spartan America. The concrete damage being done to the unions by the explosion of military spending leads to no other conclusion.

A labor movement debate on military spending begins first with the needs of union members—their jobs, their wages and conditions, the existence of their unions. Beyond that, though, it compels working people to discuss national priorities, nuclear weapons, war and peace, life and death.

For workers and their unions, it's a debate about survival—in more ways than one. ■