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

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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.

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On military spending, 
unions hear a different drummer

BY LANCE COMPA

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omething extraordinary happened when the executive council of the AFL-CIO met in Florida last Feb-

ruary. For the first time in living memory, the top leadership of organized la-

bor in the United States questioned a pro-

jected 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 Sam-

uel Gompers’s historic admonition, “More!” As recently as last November, the federation’s convention voiced only one 

quibble with last year’s $44 billion in-

vestment. Instead of calling for cuts in 

military spending, the convention supported the “general welfare” and “common de-

fense” 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 Winpisinger, a blunt advocate of reduced military spend-

ing and conversion to peaceful production, and Auto Workers’ President Douglas Fraser, whose union has long been critical of 

unrestricted 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 mili-

tary 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 ma-

terial and human resources away from pro-

ductive civilian pursuits, and the distortion of the country’s basic research and develop-

ment efforts.

What remains to be seen is whether the labor movement’s study of military spend-

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tlement 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 move-

ment be split, therefore, on the issue of re-

sisting military spending boosts? The an-

swers 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 produc-

tion?

Funding the military budget by cuts in 

social programs strikes first at the fastest 

growing part of the labor movement—

public employees and service-sector unions.

Military spending creates far fewer jobs 

than are generated by equivalent govern-

ment spending for labor-intensive pro-

grams in health, education, housing, trans-

portation, 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 employees, social workers, tran-

sit workers, and others in the public and 

service sectors. In turn, their unions will 

lose membership, bargaining clout, and po-

litical strength.

Building-trades unions would seem to be 

unaffected by military contracts, but in fact 

are being decimated by high military spend-

ing. In 1981, the Federal Government ab-

sorbed 79 per cent of all U.S. savings to 

cover a $60 billion deficit. It will have to 

reduce even deeper into the capital markets 
to meet deficits now projected at upwards of 

$100 billion in fiscal 1983. Federal bor-

rowing 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 manufactur-

ing in a capital-intensive setting. Relatively 

few workers operate costly and sophis-

ticated machinery to turn out a limited num-

ber of weapons systems, depressing em-

ployment levels in those unions. Unions of 

auto workers, steel workers, electrical 

workers, and machinists all represent 

workers in military plants, yet the bulk of 

their membership is in the consumer prod-

ucts and industrial equipment sectors, 

where layoffs are heaviest. Most auto 

workers make cars. Most steel workers 

make steel. Most machinists make and serv-

ice machines.

In the smaller unions, too, most mem-

bers 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 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...
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

Millions of workers could be busy rebuilding, rehabilitating, and maintaining the factories where we manufacture the goods for them. More importantly, such work would employ the unskilled and semi-skilled people who, for all the talk about unemployment among "losers and 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 toward 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 their 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 frying given 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 undermines support for military increases—is coming from below. Local union activists have linked up with church and disarmament groups to sponsor "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, of war, to an economy that would put millions back to work.

E ven 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-

generation equipment for industrial parks, single plants, and commercial centers. An investment in this work would make good social sense, for it could help put union members—their jobs, their wages and health—back in the work force. It could provide a large number of people with jobs that are not only useful, but also pay high real wages—wages that allow workers to support their families and have a little left over to spend on cultural and recreational activities. It could also provide an alternative to the massive underemployment that exists today as a result of corporate downsizing. The labor movement should use its considerable political resources to support such proposals and to press for their implementation.