

Point of View

IS ORGANIZED LABOR A SPECIAL INTEREST?

By Bayard Rustin

An idea has crept into our nation's political discourse in recent years which is both erroneous and terribly damaging to the cause of social justice and racial equality. That idea—to date, largely unchallenged—is that organized labor is a narrow, selfish, special interest group seeking to impose its will on an unwitting American public.

Almost daily new attacks on labor are carried in our nation's newspapers. Countless papers. Countless articles decry the unions' attempts to promote an allegedly narrow agenda by backing Walter Mondale in the Democratic primaries. Some 40 percent of Democrats and independents appear to agree.

Yet the reality is far different from the shrill rhetoric. The labor movement, in contrast to the oil industry or the tobacco lobby or the American Medical Association, is not a monolith of identical special interests. It is a broad-based coalition of diverse interests seeking to coalesce around a program of jobs

and economic growth. In the labor movement we find represented an economic, racial, social, and political cross-section of America. The labor movement, after all, is the only mass-based democratic institution which includes Hispanic garment workers eking out a living on \$200 a week and middle-income black and Polish-American steelworkers struggling to hold on to their decent jobs at a time of economic decline; male and female municipal workers, grappling with the knotty problem of equal pay for comparable work and chemical workers exposed to hazardous wastes.

The labor movement includes Blacks and whites; Hispanics and Italian-Americans; men and women; 65-year-olds and teenagers; high school dropouts and Ph.D.'s; Christians, Moslems, and Jews. In short it includes a representative cross-section.

Clearly, when a single union negotiates a contract for its members, it is acting out of a special interest. It is after all con-

cerned with getting the very best wages and working conditions for its members and for assuring them job security. Yet even such interests—although nego-



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tiated for a small group of interested parties—are worthy and much needed. After all, decent, safe jobs are vital to the revitalization of our

economy.

And when organized labor acts together, as the national AFL-CIO, or when it acts in a city or state through a central labor council, the labor movement is not a narrow special interest group. It is the consensus voice of the interests

largely in behalf of its own members. For union members' wages already are protected by collective bargaining agreements. The labor movement is also on record for occupational safety and health standard-enforcement for all workers, not merely union members.

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of a broad cross-section of Americans. The ethnic, social and economic range it spans is far broader than that represented by any group of businessmen or financiers.

Frequently, as when it calls for minimum wage legislation, labor cannot even be said to be acting

And when the AFL-CIO and the trade union movement lobbies for jobs, for increased aid to education, for a national industrial policy designed to promote economic growth at home and U.S. competitiveness abroad it is acting as a voice for all of us who work for a living. If this

amounts to a narrow and special interest then it is the special interest of the vast majority of Americans.

At a time which seems like "open season" on the democratically-elected leadership of the labor movement, it might be useful to remind ourselves of these elementary truths.

The Republicans and Democrats who campaign for high office on an anti-labor plank may be playing to the misguided sympathies of some Americans. Yet they are doing a great disservice to our nation's future. For they are attacking the one democratic institution in American life which is a reliable force in the struggle for jobs and social justice at home and democracy and security abroad.

To Be Equal

TESTING THE YOUTH SUBMINIMUM

By John E. Jacob

Congress is considering new legislation that would allow employers to pay young people below the minimum wage for their labor.

Many people believe that unskilled youths are priced out of the labor market by the minimum wage law, which now

millions work for below the minimum wage.

In addition, the power of the argument in favor of cutting the minimum wage loses force by the inroads of inflation—the real purchasing power of the minimum wage is much less than \$3.35 set some years back. And employers can always

minimum wage. Do that, supporters of the idea say, and the youth unemployment problem will be solved.

So the time may be ripe to finally settle the



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question of the youth subminimum, if only to remove it as an obstacle to more realistic methods of cutting the disastrous unemployment rate among our young people.

Black youth, for

example, suffer unemployment rates in the 68 percent range. While some twenty or so years ago both black and white youth had similar low unemployment rates, today both have high rates and the black rate is well over double that for whites.

Under the bill, the youth subminimum would only apply during the summer months. It is hoped that would safeguard against employer substitution of cheaper youth labor for more expensive adult labor—the "fire the father, hire the son" syndrome feared by most people familiar with the real-world labor marketplace.

There's plenty wrong with some provisions of the bill: It would change the current law in a way whose outcome is un-

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Editorial

Just three hundred miles from Las Vegas and within one month, the Olympic games will become a reality. Young people from 142 countries will assemble in Los Angeles to compete and demonstrate that basically there are no political boundaries in the sport's world.

We regret that the young people from Russia and 13 other countries will not be able to attend these games. Their presence would have added so much to the events.

However, we must ask ourselves if the real reasons for countries' refusals to enter the games have been disclosed? Only the nations themselves and possibly some of our government knows for sure. The United States had guaranteed security for the young people. Our government had tried to assure the resisting governments that we would not make any effort to persuade any of their participants to defect to this country, and we had made concessions not normally made to any country.

In 1980, President Carter pulled out participants out of the Olympics presumably because, as he stated, the Russians had invaded Afghanistan. Can this boycott be in retaliation for this action? Possibly so. Perhaps we'll never know for sure.

Las Vegas must get behind our nation's Olympic team and support it in every possible way. After all, it may be a long, long time before we will have this opportunity again.

mandates \$3.35 per hour. They say lower rates for young people vulnerable to high unemployment would create more jobs.

But that's just a theory. It may look good on paper, but in the real world it just doesn't work that way. There are already laws on the books providing for employer subsidies for hiring the disadvantaged. And the labor standards laws are so weakly enforced that

take advantage of legal exemptions to hire youngsters at lower rates. Few do.

But the myth persists that we won't be able to make a dent in black youth unemployment unless a youth subminimum is established. Every proposal to create jobs for youth, such as a new Conservation Corps, is met with the flat assertion that it's not necessary to do anything other than cut the