

Report from the National Capital City Area

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In a time when Washington, D.C. takes on the infamous images of Republican women in fur coats and wealthy politicians going to formal parties in limousines, it is curious to observe at the same time what is happening in this city billed as the administrative center of trade unionism in this country—the site of the AFL-CIO, the fifty-odd national offices of the International Unions, and the now historic 400,000-plus Solidarity Day demonstration last September 19, 1981. To say the least, beneath the covers of high profile political conservatism lie the many labor-related activities sponsored by unions, coalition groups, and universities.

Last July 18 through August 17 the highly successful Labor History Film Series at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, featured twenty-four different films under the title “. . . The Union Makes Us Strong.” The series, organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and presented in conjunction with the exhibition “Images of Labor,” was significant in that it focussed attention culturally and historically on the American working class. Politically, it was pleasantly ironic that during the first summer of the Reagan administration a strongly pro-labor program was co-sponsored by the government’s museum, the Smithsonian Institution, and a major labor union. Not surprisingly, the response was overwhelming. This success may pave the way for more cultural programs of this nature in the future. Along with the film series, the “Images of Labor”—an impressive exhibit of original art depicting labor’s history and spirit, and organized by the Bread and Roses Cultural Project of District 1199—was featured at the Smithsonian the entire summer. For further information and posters, contact Lyn Goldfarb, Assistant Education Director of SEIU and co-producer of the film “With Babies and Banners” (202-452-8750).

A worthwhile project has been initiated through a D.C. Committee for the Humanities grant to study the local history of workers and unions in the District of Columbia. Researchers in the D.C. Labor History Project are presently unravelling the unique complexion of the working class in this area—the government and administrative office workers, the services, building and trades, printers,

domestics—in preparation for an exhibition Labor Day 1982, entitled “Working in Uncle Sam’s Company Town: A History of Workers in D.C., 1800-1980.” The project is under the direction of Dolores Janiewski of the Samuel Gompers Papers at the University of Maryland.

Of particular relevance to international labor is the coursework and research developed in this area at the Labor Studies Center of the University of the District of Columbia. In the International Labor Concentration of its graduate program in labor studies, the Center has introduced spring semester 1982 the course Labor in Western Europe, in which trade unions and labor movements are examined in both an historical and contemporary context. Its appeal and uniqueness lies in the use of selected labor attaches as guest speakers. In-depth discussion as well as individual research is emphasized. Many of the graduate students enrolled utilize the material in their positions as researchers and organizers for the International Union. Other courses in this concentration field include history of international labor movements, comparative labor movements, labor and world economy, and later, the studies of labor in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Additional information on curriculum and program may be obtained through Anatoli Ilyashov, Assistant Professor, Labor Studies Center, University of the District of Columbia, 724 Ninth St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202-727-2326).

On May 22, 1982 the Center will co-sponsor with the Greater Washington Central Labor Council a labor music conference entitled “Labor Songs for Union Building.” Featuring labor singers such as Joe Glazer, the conference will not only stress chronology and style of song in the working class tradition, but also the use of song by trade unionists for purposes of present-day organizing. Since it is open to all, the conference will be an attempt at genuine interaction between songwriters, musicians, trade unionists, and area workers.

Other labor happenings in the area include the various specialized conferences. For foreign observers of American trade unionism it may be of some interest to mention two recent conferences on the legalistic aspects of labor-management relations in this country: the American Bar Association’s Media Labor Law Seminar (February 4-5, 1982) and the American Arbitration Association’s conference on Public Sector Labor Relations (January 25-26, 1982). Although technical in nature and expensive in cost (\$200 and \$110 respectively), such conferences give us a glimpse of labor developments to come, especially in face of the new administration policies and the economic crisis. Another conference, co-sponsored by the Business and Professional Women’s Foundation, Service Employees International Union, and the Women’s Studies Department at George Washington University, brought together thirty-five scholars from all parts of the country to address the research needs and agendas of working women in service, clerical and light manufacturing. This working conference was developed in response to the critical gaps in research concerning these areas in which 80% of all women work. It marked the beginning of a larger project to encourage and gather research and to develop curricula and resource materials beneficial to working women in unions. A research agenda was specifically outlined and will be

available for distribution this spring. For further information contact Lyn Goldfarb or Phyllis Palmer, Director of the Women's Studies Department at George Washington University, 202-676-6942.

Special seminars and discussions on the labor theme have been evolving in the area. At the Institute for Policy Studies a seminar is being conducted from January to March 1982 on the topic, "The American Labor Movement: Looking Past Solidarity Day." Its many guest speakers include Nelson Lichtenstein of Catholic University and Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers' Union. At the George Meany Labor Studies Center, which is the educational institute of the AFL-CIO, continuous programs involving short courses are being run for trade unionists from all around the country. One of interest was a week-long seminar on techniques of labor education held last January 10-15. And at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Smithsonian Institution, there are continuous discussion sessions on issues affecting the United States and other countries, including such topics as Soviet or Polish labor developments. A recent conference at the Center (January 27, 1982) involved the question "The Contemporary Caribbean and Its Impact on the United States." Centering on the effect of Caribbean immigration on the U.S. economy and public policy, it featured such scholars as Jorge Dominguez of Harvard University, Franklin Knight of Johns Hopkins University, Gordon Lewis of the University of Puerto Rico, and Anthony Maingot of Florida International University.