
THEME

NOTE

One of the achievements of the Reagan administration has been its ability to create a crisis atmosphere around so many important issues. Its disarmingly casual attitude toward nuclear war aided and abetted the growth of the anti-nuclear-weapons movement on two continents, while the callous anticommunism of Jeane Kirkpatrick and Thomas O. Enders has helped turn Central America into a staging-ground for a renewed Cold War and an experimental laboratory for human rights. The administration's domestic counterrevolution has fueled the stock market's steep climb by relaxing safety and environmental regulations, instituting regressive tax policies, boosting defense outlays, and trading off unemployment for lower inflation. And the administration took the hot air out of the American labor movement with a judicious bit of union busting in the air traffic controllers strike that signaled management's free hand in dealing with potentially disruptive workers.

It would be hard to argue that the opposition has made the most out of this opportunity to rethink its premises and organize alternatives. The record has been mixed, with the anti-nuclear-weapons movement the main success story. But the gains here have been channeled toward the freeze campaign, a middle-of-the-road approach that has not yet shown itself capable of successfully putting a damper on the arms race or redirecting national resources away from militarization. A challenge has been mounted to the need for a nuclear arsenal of doomsday proportions, but no consensus has emerged on redefining national interests in such a way as to contain the build-up of conventional forces. Until such a new perspective is adopted, the freeze campaign will be unable to avoid cooptation by non-nuclear hawks. The fact that many of the same members of the House and Senate who have endorsed the freeze resolution have also expressed support for the administration's policies in Central America, carried out in the name of national interests, is evidence of the campaign's limitations.

The environmental movement, after losing some skirmishes and pitched battles with the Interior Department, showed that it is still alive when the Environmental Protection Agency scandal broke, exposing the administration's business-ethic antienvironmentalism and showing that there, at least, Americans are prepared to draw the line on profits. But elsewhere, the left, perhaps misled by expected warfare over the so-called social issues, has not been able to mount a serious challenge to Reagan economic programs. The AFL-CIO has contented itself with support of various versions of a jobs bill that provides some

work for some workers but little or none for minorities or women — the worst hit by the unemployment juggernaut — or for non-union labor. At the same time, the union leadership has endorsed reindustrialization plans that would mean new investment in capital-intensive industries, and therefore declining long-term employment. The labor movement, after years of half-hearted organizing in new industries and little interest in issues of worker control of technology and investment, now finds itself isolated between a middle class satisfied with slowed inflation and an underclass long shunned by labor. It is as if unemployment has become a special-interest issue.

Of course, it is not. Unemployment — whether of the technological, recessionary, or structural variety — is a fundamental concern for our society, and it is uniquely a political issue for the left. But, as Paul Sweezy suggested recently at a symposium on the future of the left, the issue must not be simply jobs, but work itself. Certainly for the unemployed, deprived of their self-regard as well as their health benefits and thrown into the same dependency upon meager state services as has long been the burden of the impoverished, any job might be better than none. But programs aimed at short-term alleviation of unemployment do not address the basic question of how this society should live — of what should be produced and how. A program with work at its core raises questions about technology, relationships within the workplace, and relationships between workplaces and communities. Jobs programs too often subsidize cheap labor for corporations, or provide short-term employment spurts keyed to national elections. A work-oriented program, by contrast, challenges corporate power at every level and over the long term, since decisions on investment, technological innovation, plant location, etc., are all central to determining the location, skill level, and character of work.

What the left faces today is a challenge to provide and act on an alternative vision of the political community and its constituents. Such a vision must extend from Youngstown to San Salvador, and only it can make the basis for a radical politics.

This issue takes up some of the political strategies open to the left today. Robert B. Reich is one of a group of influential neoliberal-Democratic proponents of a national industrial policy. His article analyzes some of the important causes of the decline in competitiveness of the U.S. economy in world trade, and suggests the kind of policies that would restore American economic vigor. Unlike many others, Reich is concerned that an industrial policy embody American democratic traditions. But Staughton Lynd argues that policies like Reich's start out from a misplaced emphasis. Lynd asks not what kind of an economic structure do we need in order to compete effectively, but what political values do we hold dear, and what kind of economic structure is compatible with

them? In Lynd's view, industrial policy is another form of undemocratic economics, and, using the example of the midwest communities laid low by steel industry desertion, advocates a community-based approach to economic and social renewal.

Tony Mazzocchi, too, thinks a new direction is needed in our political economy, and he argues that this fundamental change requires the establishment of a new labor party to break the AFL-CIO-Democratic-party dominance of left-labor politics. Jerry J. Berman, on the contrary, thinks that the survival and promotion of the community organizations that serve as models of a decentralized politics is dependent upon vigorous support of national programs that owe their lives to the Democratic party. Now is not the time, he says, to abandon mainstream politics. James Livingston agrees, but, on the eve of another presidential campaign, he argues that the left has placed a mistaken emphasis on the powers of the presidency and not enough on congressional politics. And Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward see a record of success in the advances of the welfare state that the left should not ignore.

—N.X.