

REMARKS OF CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN  
Oregon AFL-CIO State Labor Convention  
September 17, 1981

I'm very happy to be here today. I hope to take away with me a strong sense of commitment and solidarity on the part of the Oregon Labor Movement so that at the march in Washington, D.C. on Saturday we can show that organized labor in Oregon is well, on its feet, on the rise, and is going to win the ultimate battle. That's going to be Saturday's message.

I am here for a very basic reason. At a time when people seem to be bailing out on labor, I came today to tell you that I stand with you, that I support you. Despite whatever problems it may have, the labor movement remains the most important social movement in the history of the United States of America and we dare not ever forget this.

Now, you probably have seen the headlines out of Washington about some of the major labor developments back there. President Reagan is not satisfied with the budget cuts that have occurred so far. An additional \$30 billion in spending reductions are being demanded. We can fully expect the President to be on TV again telling the American people that there is something "patriotic" and almost "Godly" about cutting budgets for the sake of cutting budgets.

Well, I want to ask a couple of questions of this convention because I know we're all here to help the President. I want to hear your responses to my questions so President Reagan will know how strongly Oregon working men and women want to help out in his national crusade.

The first question is this: If cutting budgets is so "pro-America", as the President seems to think, how many of you people believe that maybe Alexander Haig can bite the bullet too -- and that we should also say "no" to military aid to Angola, Guatemala and El Salvador?

A second question: At a time when we are being told that people on Social Security must be denied those benefits they have come to expect, how many of you people believe that before we allow such a thing, the Congress of the United States can tell President Reagan's rightwing tobacco belt buddies like Senator Helms of North Carolina, that he and his southern redneck buddies can do without billions of dollars of tobacco subsidies and sugar subsidies and the oil windfall profits exemptions that President Reagan is protecting in his budget. How many of you people agree with that?

I have one other question. It's about the MX missile. It will cost \$120 billion to run missiles around railroad tracks across the deserts of Utah and Nevada. How many of you feel that maybe -- just maybe -- the military brass at the Pentagon can do without \$120 billion for missiles on railroad tracks and we can spend that money instead to restore Amtrack and Conrail and put the American people on rails, not American missiles.

Well, if the President is listening, he couldn't miss the message from this convention. And I pledge, seriously, to be your voice on these issues.

I want to talk straight with you today.

I know and you know that for the American labor movement and for progressive government in the United States, this time we live in may be the most crucial of our lifetime. I think we understand that. The threat of rightwing political and economic supremacy in this country has never been as great as it is today.

Let me give you some arithmetic on what we are up against. The Democrats control one last outpost in the federal government. That's the House of Representatives. We control the House by 26 seats. Reapportionment is going to shift 17 seats out of the heavily populated Northeast and Midwest into the Sunbelt. Seventeen of the 26.

I serve on the House Democratic Campaign Committee and have responsibility for Democratic campaigns on the West Coast and in the Northwest. We are studying these statistics and we understand the nature of the problem. Do you know how many open seats progressive candidates won in the Sunbelt in the last election? Not one. So if we are lucky and pick up two, three or four of those 17 seats, you can see just how much of an influence the other side will make on the 26 seat majority we have in the House today.

The House Republican Campaign Committee ended the last campaign with a \$6 million surplus -- money held over that they couldn't figure out how to spend in the last election. It has been collecting interest in the bank, waiting to be used against Democrats in the elections next year. Six million! That compares with the House Democrats who spent \$3 million for all purposes in the last campaign and had nothing left over.

The magnitude of the task ought to be very clear just by those statistics. And that doesn't take into account the Republican National Committee's money or any of the rest. Funds that are raised on top of that \$6 million will go into targeted campaigns from sea to sea, from border to border, all across the country to defeat the remaining defenders of progressive government in the United States -- incumbent Democrats.

These people are not going to use the money on "Boll-Weevil Democrats" that defected from our regular party and have given their votes to President Reagan. They are going to focus on the modern day Frank Churches, John Culvers, Birch Bayhs -- people who still believe in progressive government and who are still fighting in the U.S. Congress.

These are the people who still support the idea that working men and women deserve fairness in labor laws in this country and are committed to national labor law reform.

These are the people that still believe that common situs picketing is something that the building trades have a right to expect in order to achieve equality and fairness with management.

These are the same people who will fight to the mat to hold off the Strom Thurmonds of the country who even now are introducing legislation to amend the Hobbs Act that makes it a federal offense for labor to be involved in any violence, or alleged violence, in the case of a union dispute and a picket line. Do you know what that means? By lifting those areas of jurisdiction up to the federal level, the U.S. Justice Department will be unleashed on a persecution witch hunt against organized labor with the intent of tying labor's hands so much in the courts that it will have no time for political action in the precincts of this country.

That is the challenge.

If ever there was a time for labor to understand what the stakes are, it's now. And the message I leave with you is this: as you talk to the rank and file in your organizations make sure they understand that this rightwing challenge is not just a national political issue -- it extends from the halls of Congress to the bargaining tables in every state and in every community of the country. And so it's also an economic issue.

How many of you have sat down across the bargaining table and have been told that because of the state of the economy or other reasons, you've got to give up hard won benefits or else the factory, the plant or the company might pull a "Georgia-Pacific" move and close its doors and leave your workers out of work? How many of you have experienced this already? Too many of you have.

This is a pattern all over the country. I am telling you that this challenge should unite Democrats. It should unite and provide solidarity within the ranks of labor. It should bring in women and minorities and all the traditional parts of the Democratic Party because this, my friends, is a life and death struggle.

It's life or death. Do not think that this is a question of whether or not labor is going to suffer a few defeats for the next few years. Your adversaries are not out to defeat you -- your adversaries are out to destroy you.

Let me give you my analysis. They want to cut spending so that the federal government is reduced in its effectiveness as a national piece of governmental machinery. But then they want to go one step more and push through a tax cut that not only cuts taxes, but indexes those tax cuts so that forever more there won't be the money to restore budget cuts. Budget cuts alone can always be restored. But if you strangle the source of money, you can kiss off any new initiative for progressive government in the years to come. That's what this Administration's hidden agenda is.

Finally, here is the most relevant point of all. If you wanted to destroy whatever was left of progressive government, what would you do beyond cutting the budget and taxes? You would repeal the laws that don't have a budget impact but provide civil rights, worker rights, and protections for Americans that people have always needed and have come to know since the days of FDR.

You would repeal them. But how would you make sure that those laws stay repealed? You would break the back of the labor movement. Because the labor movement, beyond being a collective bargaining agent, has been the political machinery that championed those progressive laws in the first place. Labor was the organizing political effort that elected the people that got those laws passed.

So today's union-busting movement is not a question of labor versus management. The union-busting movement is designed to make certain that there is no chance the 50 years of progress we've attained will ever be restored.

That may sound depressing and it is depressing. But it's important to understand exactly what is at stake when we have a challenge of this kind to win. We cannot misunderstand or fall asleep at the switch or else we'll let them win.

My friends, with the kind of solidarity that I have seen coming together at conventions like this and working with the groups that are part of the grand coalition that made this country the best land in the world for the little guy, I am absolutely confident that the labor movement is going to respond to this challenge.

I want you to know that I stand with you as a member of the Congress from the First District of Oregon. I stand with you as a father, a husband, a human being who cares about the kind of world we're making here.

I have a feeling that this convention is going to make it clear to your rank and file and other Oregonians who may not be union members exactly what is being done to America.

They will understand if you tell them. They will take to the precincts and the streets this message: that we are not going to turn our backs on progress. That this country still believes in the little guy.

So I offer you a helping hand and hope that it will be reciprocated as it always has been in the past. I join with you, I wish you well in this convention. I hope I have given you something to think about. I want you to know that those of you that leave this convention to go back to Washington, D.C. to walk in the Solidarity March will see me there. Because I'm marching with you.