

# The Labor Movement's Maverick

By WALTER MOSSBERG

WASHINGTON—Jerry Wurf should be sitting on top of the world of organized labor.

His union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is the fastest growing in the labor movement. In 10 years, it has climbed from 220,000 to 700,000 members, becoming the fifth largest union in the AFL-CIO and the largest of six AFL-CIO unions of public employees.

This growth is made even more impressive by the fact that public workers aren't covered by the National Labor Relations Act's provisions protecting organizing and bargaining, and that only a few state laws grant them such rights.

Almost nowhere do AFSCME members have the right to strike, although Mr. Wurf has displayed head-line-grabbing millifancy in ordering walkouts and even in going to jail himself, as in the recent Baltimore police and garbage strike, to win higher pay and benefits.

Partly because of AFSCME's success, the AFL-CIO has finally set up a Public Employees Department, insuring increased attention to that segment of the federation, and Congress is nearer than ever to passing a law granting organizing and bargaining rights to public workers. Huge numbers of these workers still remain to be organized, and AFSCME's staff is growing so large trying to do it that the union has just moved into its own building in Washington.

But to his fellow union presidents Jerry Wurf is no hero. Instead, internal AFL-CIO politics, coupled with Mr. Wurf's brashness, have led many of them to decide he's an embarrassing maverick. And to labor's big boss, George Meany, he has developed into a major irritant.

The craggy-faced, sharp-tongued Mr. Wurf, 55, often speaks against positions taken by Mr. Meany and other AFL-CIO leaders, most notably on political issues such as the 1972 presidential race. Mr. Meany stayed neutral in that election—in effect helping President Nixon—while Mr. Wurf joined with some other union leaders in backing George McGovern.

Mr. Wurf is part of a distinct minority in the labor federation's 33-man Executive Council that frequently comes out on the short end of disputes there. He publicly reserves AFSCME's closest friendships for unions that aren't even in the AFL-CIO—

the liberal United Auto Workers, which seceded in 1968; the National Education Association, a union that competes with an AFL-CIO teachers union; and the newly reformed United Mine Workers.

## Airing His Criticism

Most importantly, perhaps, Mr. Wurf has taken the radical step of openly airing, in speeches and articles, criticisms of the policies and practices of the AFL-CIO and Mr. Meany. He proposed last year that the federation create an internal commission on the state of unionism, to concern itself with labor's problems; the proposal has gone nowhere. And, in a full-page article in *The Washington Post* last fall, he asserted that the AFL-CIO had allowed American labor to become fragmented, and that it was sloughing off the task of organizing the unorganized.

"To develop lasting influence for working Americans, the labor movement must deal with its fundamental shortcomings through jurisdictional reform, consolidation, and mergers," he wrote.

As a consequence of these stands, Mr. Wurf complains, AFSCME has been victimized by its opponents in the AFL-CIO, with Mr. Meany's tacit blessing. "We work with the AFL-CIO and the rest of the labor movement—but sometimes our interests are compromised," he said in a recent speech. "The needs of public employees are

sometimes subjugated to the needs of a few private sector unions."

Mr. Wurf's main gripe against Mr. Meany is that other AFL-CIO unions dealing mainly with private employers, such as the Laborers Union and Service Employees union, are allowed to go after state, county and municipal workers—who he feels should be exclusively in AFSCME's jurisdiction. Mr. Wurf is convinced, furthermore, that his outspokenness has resulted in the Meany-dominated Executive Council's settling such jurisdictional disputes against AFSCME.

He also regards as an attempt to undermine AFSCME's public-employee leadership the Executive Council's recent decision to admit to the new Public-Employee Department all unions enrolling public em-

*Jerry Wurf heads the nation's fastest growing union, but he's no hero to his fellow chiefs inside the AFL-CIO.*

ployees. Mr. Wurf had urged membership only for unions, like AFSCME and the International Association of Fire Fighters,

that are made up almost entirely of public employees.

And he chafes at Mr. Meany's appointment to the Executive Council last fall of a public-union rival, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. Jurisdictional fights, political differences, and Mr. Wurf's friendship for the AFT's rival, the NEA, have made enemies of Messrs. Wurf and Shanker. A staunch Meany backer, Mr. Shanker already has clashed with Mr. Wurf in council sessions.

Unlike Mr. Wurf, the AFL-CIO leadership isn't willing to air its internal differences in public. But privately, federation officials seethe at some of Mr. Wurf's charges. They are particularly incensed about the jurisdictional question, claiming that Mr. Wurf is never satisfied unless he wins a dispute. They point out that, although he lost a big case in San Francisco, he won an equally big one in Atlanta—even though he kept referring in speeches to the Atlanta outcome as an example of anti-AFSCME discrimination because the losing union, the Laborers, tried to appeal the decision. (The appeal failed, but AFSCME claims the Laborers still are raiding its Atlanta locals, and he filed new charges with the AFL-CIO.)

"Jerry is just a man with a little power, who'd like a lot more. The other leaders have more power and don't want to lose it," says one union official who is basically sympathetic to Mr. Wurf.

The federation leadership also contends that much of the feud results from Mr. Wurf's hunger for power, and his disdain for Mr. Meany's leadership style. Indeed, even Mr. Wurf's friends admit he tends to be brash and abrasive. "His problem is that he may be the smartest guy in a room, but he doesn't try to hide it," says one.

His colleagues are especially irritated by his public airing of complaints. That is often cited as evidence of an ego gone wild—the same sort of charge made in the mid-1960s against the late Walter Reuther, who pulled the United Auto Workers out of the federation after a policy and personality dispute with Mr. Meany and the council.

Furthermore, Mr. Wurf has done little to discourage a campaign being mounted by the NEA to woo him out of the AFL-CIO and into a proposed public workers labor federation.

Some labor observers in Washington see the secession hints as a tactic designed to win leverage from Mr. Meany. "Jerry Wurf is a shrewd man who knows how to make big claims and big bluffs," says a sympathetic official of another union.

At AFL-CIO headquarters, too, the



withdrawal rumblings are being heard, but no one seems to be taking them too seriously. One top federation official notes that there are differences between Mr. Wurf's AFSCME and the UAW of Walter Reuther. "Walter may not have intended to pull out at first, either, but no one doubted he could

survive a withdrawal. The UAW was strong, and no other union was going to raid GM. Jerry may complain we're not protecting his jurisdiction, but the raiding will be a lot worse if he leaves the AFL-CIO."

### Strained Finances

Some AFSCME officials concede the union might still be too weak to face such open raiding. AFSCME has grown so fast its staff is spread thin in places. Its finances have been strained by a \$470,000 deficit last year and a large loan it had to take to finance purchase of its new building.

What's more, the union still has much internal organizing to do. It doesn't enjoy the benefits of a union shop and many of its local units contain lots of non-members, who might be especially ripe for raid attempts.

But others in the union argue that disaffiliation from the AFL-CIO might provide some benefits in the big public-employee organizing drive that would follow passage of a bill covering public workers. They reason that severing connections with the AFL-CIO might free AFSCME of the burden of carrying the image of "greedy big labor" into organizing campaigns among workers who are skittish about unions. They also note the union would save hundreds of thousands of dollars in AFL-CIO dues.

AFSCME has alternatives other than independent status. For one thing, it could accept the NEA's proposal to form a 2.2-million member federation of public workers, an organization that certainly would have great power.

Another possibility, a long shot mused about by some in the union, is a coalition of AFSCME and its three independent allies, the NEA, the UAW and the UMW. Leaders of all three are politically to the left of the AFL-CIO. Combined, they'd have a membership of nearly four million. And if a few other liberal unions—like the 950,000-member Machinist's Union—could be persuaded to join, such a coalition would become a major competitor of the 13.5-million member AFL-CIO.

Mr. Wurf himself has never publicly broached the coalition idea. Indeed, he has expressed the conviction that a single strong "labor center," uniting workers from the public and private sectors is the best choice for unions. His dilemma is that the logical base for such a "labor center"

—Mr. Meany's AFL-CIO—isn't the sort of body he likes.

Consequently, Mr. Wurf is trying to change the AFL-CIO by broadening its membership to include his liberal allies. He is conducting a vigorous campaign, for example, to get the UAW's leaders to bring that union back into the federation. And he recently told the NEA's convention: "I wish I could wave a wand and persuade you all that the National Education Association belongs inside the AFL-CIO."

These efforts are especially important to Mr. Wurf because Mr. Meany's advanced age of 80 makes it plain that the council will be selecting his successor in the not-too-distant future. Mr. Wurf would like the council that makes that choice to be a more liberal one.

But the campaign to broaden the ranks isn't looking very successful. Although UAW president Leonard Woodcock has begun pushing reaffiliation, the idea has met strong opposition from other UAW leaders. The NEA is still pushing the idea of a separate public employe federation, and is heading into a big organizing war with Mr. Shanker's AFL-CIO American Federation of Teachers. Thus, the NEA isn't in the mood to reconsider merging with the AFT and the AFL-CIO.

So Jerry Wurf's dream may remain just that. Meanwhile, Mr. Wurf, in some ways the most successful labor leader of recent years, almost certainly will continue clashing with his colleagues, chafing at his status in labor's hierarchy, and still facing some big choices down the road.

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