

Labor, Rid of Nixon, Eyes Ford's Record

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When Gerald R. Ford became President two Fridays ago, the AFL-CIO drew together his cumulative voting record for the quarter-century he spent in Congress.

The labor federation found the former House minority leader voted "right" on key issues only 19 times in those 25 years — and voted "wrong" 109.

That voting record neatly symbolizes one of the larger ironies in the events of the past two weeks.

The AFL-CIO genuinely wanted Richard M. Nixon out of office. "All I want of the President is to just go away," AFL-CIO President George Meany said the Monday before Mr. Nixon's resignation. And that Thursday, in a speech before the Bakery and Confectionery Workers a few hours before Mr. Nixon went on television, AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Lane Kirkland quoted Oliver Cromwell to the President: "You have sat too long here for any good you have been doing. Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go."

Yet now the AFL-CIO has exchanged a weakened President whose policies on bread-and-butter issues it disliked for a freshly popular President whose basic policies appear to be about the same.

Civility has been restored. Meany has pledged that labor will cooperate with Mr. Ford as far as it "consistently" can, and Mr. Ford invited Meany to the White House for a talk last week, the first time Meany had been there in more than a year.

Mr. Ford could also change some of his long-held views a little now. "My constituency in Michigan was conservative in many respects, particularly on fiscal affairs," he reminded an interviewer last December

more commanding congressional majority. A "veto-proof Congress" was what labor's strategists said they were after.

They were aided in that strategy by the weakening condition of the President and the clearing of the decks in Congress for impeachment. "The other guy," a longtime labor lobbyist said contemptuously of Mr. Nixon, "didn't have any clout on the Hill at all." The new President plainly does, however. And:

- Mr. Ford said in his address to Congress last Monday night he wants the trade bill passed. The AFL-CIO does not.

- He said he wants a national health insurance bill this year. The federation wants to wait until next year.

- He made no mention of and has seemed not to be greatly interested in tax reform. The unions are.

- He wants to cut spending, but not for defense, which means he wants to cut domestic spending. They do not.

- He believes tight money and high interest rates are a correct prescription for the economy right now. They do not.

- He has called on Congress for a wage-price monitoring agency to point the finger at big wage and price increases. The finger-pointing would come after two years in which prices increased much more than wages—and just at a time when wages are starting to catch up.

Labor's economists do not really dispute the basic view of the new President, which is that the economy needs to be slowed down somewhat until inflation subsides. Their differences are over how to slow it down, and how much, and how to keep various vulnerable groups of people and industries from being too badly hurt by the process.

Thus, instead of cutting spending, the labor people favor tax reform, meaning raising the taxes of the well-to-do and corporations as a way of balancing the budget and at the same time achieving what they say would be a little more equity in society.

Similarly, they think present interest rates are extortionate, and at the very least would like the government to take special steps to cushion the effect of tight money on the depressed

after he became Vice President. "And in the new job I have I'll be surprised if I'm not broader, and I'll be disappointed if I'm not."

In the short run, though, Mr. Nixon's resignation, which the AFL-CIO so devoutly sought, could cost it dearly.

The federation's basic legislative strategy this year has been delay — to let key pieces of legislation bog down in this Congress, and try in November to elect a

housing industry, where many AFL-CIO members are employed.

Meany laid great stress on the depressed state of the housing industry in his talk with Mr. Ford last Tuesday. Labor's economists agree inflation should be fought, but not so single-mindedly as to jerk the economy into an enduring recession.

As another means of warding off that possible recession, or at least its worst effect, the AFL-CIO wants the government to revive the "public service employment" program, in effect making itself an employer of last resort when unemployment rises.

Finally, as another and domestically less painful means of fighting inflation,

the federation has called for export controls on various key commodities, to keep foreign buyers from bidding up U.S. prices.

Mr. Ford has indicated he may be disposed to go along with labor on at least some of these issues. He said in a speech the Monday of his first week as President that "certain groups—older Americans, persons on fixed incomes, the unemployed—may require special help within budgetary limitations" while the economy in general is being put through the wringer, and that the same may be true of "certain industries such as the public utilities, housing, financial institutions and others." Some of his own advisers have been advocating a government jobs program to take effect as unemployment rises.

"That would help," an aide to Meany said last week, "that and something in the housing field."

As with legislation, so with politics: the passing of power to Mr. Ford has changed the outlook. With

Mr. Nixon still in office, the unions thought they would have easy pickings in November. They were going into a lot of races they might have passed up as not worth the chance and effort in a normal year.

Now a lot of those marginal seats no longer look as winnable as they did two weeks ago. "Everybody's having to reassess," said a political strategist from one of the nation's largest unions. "We're not going to be able to spread out so much. We'll have to campaign differently, go into different campaigns."

Meany and his men foresaw all this, and they were undeterred. "Vice President Ford is a conservative, you know," Meany said that Monday before President Nixon's resignation, "but we have lived in this country with conservatives before, and the conservative with integrity is far better than what we have today in the White House."

Meany was then pressed for his assessment of then-Vice President Ford, "in a nutshell."

"In a nutshell," the old labor leader said, "he is the only Vice President we have."