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The President's Allies

American labor, like the nation at large, is divided in its views on the war in Vietnam and President Nixon's policies toward ending it. Jacob Potofsky, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, this week described the American involvement in Southeast Asia as a mortal threat to the nation's democratic processes; two days later, leaders of the building trades, longshoremen's and other unions called on Mr. Nixon to praise his military policies and promise continuing demonstrations in their support.

It is therefore as misleading to see in the unionists' White House visit a blanket labor endorsement of the Administration's war policy as it would be to conclude from Mr. Potofsky's impassioned antiwar plea that it is he who speaks for the wage-earners.

An embattled President, whose own official family is divided over the war, is understandably comforted by an expression of confidence as symbolically visible as the presentation of a construction worker's hard hat. It nevertheless cannot be overlooked that, in the construction workers' initial counter-demonstrations against antiwar protesters, the hats were temporarily turned into implements of savage physical attack which matched in violence the lawless use of force by extremists on the other side of the controversy.

Of more fundamental concern to the President ought to be the fact that some of the very same unions that support his Asian policies have long persisted in a domestic course that has only deepened the social and economic crisis. They have been insensitive to the rightful claims of ethnic minorities. They often ignore the need for restraint on the wage front, thus sabotaging the battle against inflation. They have obstructed the road toward greater productivity through automation and other reforms.

The right to emphatic public expression, in support of, or dissent from, national policies belongs alike to everyone, whether under the sign of the dove or of the hard hat. There can be honest disagreement concerning the best path toward peace abroad. But those who agree with the President's action in Vietnam and Cambodia are dubious allies in the battle for a strong and healthy America if they fail to recognize that peace at home requires devotion to individual rights, economic rationality and social justice.