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Facts dispel Nixon abuse myth

Scarcely half an hour after President Nixon had addressed the AFL-CIO Convention in Miami, the White House staff opened a propaganda barrage directed at what it called insulting behavior on the part of George Meany in particular and the delegates in general.

The following eyewitness account of what actually happened was written by Ed. Townsend, labor correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor, and reveals a deliberate attempt to split Labor's rank and file from its elected leaders.

Pres. Nixon may prove to be the strongest single unifying force for American labor in years. The union movement thrives on causes—and the President's appearance at the recent AFL-CIO convention has developed into one.

Delegates who attended the convention in Florida are convinced by what happened there that the President and his Administration now are committed to wage war on labor.

When the convention opened Nov. 18, many AFL-CIO affiliates were not too unhappy with Phase 2 controls—they had won substantially what they wanted except for the retroactive payment of raises that were due but withheld during the Aug. 16-Nov. 14 freeze.

By the end of the convention, the attitude had changed. More than anything else this was a result of exaggerated reports of the AFL-CIO delegates "crude and insulting" treatment of the President. The White House and top Administration aides apparently had encouraged such reports, in labor's view.

Debate will go on for a long time as to just what happened at the convention. Boos and jeers were reported, but to this reporter, who was present, there were none. The President was received politely, thought not enthusiastically.

When he entered the convention hall most delegates stood and applauded him.

Others sat silently. He was lightly applauded at least eight times. He drew critical laughter on two occasions when delegates disagreed with his assessment of gains being made against price increases.

However, hardly half an hour after the speech ended, "disturbed" Nixon Administration spokesmen were advising newspaper wire services and radio and television network news departments that

Pres. Nixon had been "insulted" by labor at the convention.

According to George Meany, AFL-CIO president, Pres. Nixon was invited on Sept. 23 to address the convention. A few days later AFL-CIO was told that the President would look over his schedule, and get in touch with Mr. Meany later.

There was no word directly to AFL-CIO from the White House for seven weeks. Labor Sec. James D. Hodgson was reported as saying in Chicago that the President would not attend but would send his greeting through Sec. Hodgson.

On the evening before the convention, Mr. Meany received a telephone call advising that the President would like to address the convention at noon the next day. The AFL-CIO Executive Council had an important luncheon meeting at that time.

Mr. Meany said that the noontime hour was not practical, but that the President would be welcome to speak Thursday afternoon or anytime Friday. An alternative time was then set for 10:30 Friday morning, the second day of the convention.

Secret Service and other presidential aides took over and laid out detailed plans for the appearance. AFL-CIO cooperated except on two requests: the White House wanted the speech televised live, but to comply with the request required moving four tables on the convention floor and displacing 100 delegates; AFL-CIO said they could not do this.

Also the White House asked to have the convention orchestra play "Ruffles

and Flourishes" as the President entered the hall. But Mr. Meany said there would be "only what you might call a chamber group," and "you can't play 'Ruffles and Flourishes' on violins."

Subsequent published reports that have been echoes of comments by Republican leaders say AFL-CIO refused live coverage of the speech and sent its orchestra out of the hall so that it could not play a presidential greeting.

Reports also say that Mr. Meany refused to introduce Pres. Nixon. AFL-CIO insists that Mr. Meany's introduction was the traditional one for any president:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."

After the address during which the President was noticeably nervous, Mr. Meany went to the microphone routinely to express appreciation. According to security arrangements, he was to do this and then leave the platform with the President accompanied by an escort committee.

The President left the platform alone, while Mr. Meany was at the microphone. As he did, security officers removed the rope barrier that had been erected at their insistence to keep delegates back, and the President went into the delegates' area.

Labor sources say that a White House photographer and an assistant with floodlights appeared to take pictures of the President shaking hands with delegates.

Mr. Meany was obviously surprised. Delegates began breaking from delegations in other parts of the crowded hall. He rapped his gavel and said, "Will the delegates and guests kindly take their seats." After the President left the hall, Mr. Meany said, "Well, let's go on with the second act." These two remarks were the basis of later reports that Mr. Meany snubbed and insulted the President.

Mr. Meany and delegates who now have gone home to their union constituencies were convinced that the President's appearance was political in purpose, that it was part of the strategy aimed at splitting labor's rank-and-file.

The incidents at Bal Harbour, Fla., might have faded away quickly except for the national reaction. Treasury Sec. John B. Connally, Jr., House minority leader Gerald R. Ford, and others high in the Republican Party took occasion to attack Mr. Meany and labor for "insulting" the President.

The White House indicated mail and wire support coming in from across the country for the President.

The large question now: Can Phase 2, that depends so largely upon cooperation, succeed in an atmosphere of infighting?

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UNION LEADERS ATTENDING THE AFL-CIO CONVENTION are less than enthusiastic as President Nixon makes his intentions regarding Labor crystal clear. Among those seated on the dais are AFL-CIO President George Meany at left, and IPP&AU President Alexander J. Rohan at right.

