

G.O.P. Loss of Labor

Watergate Alienates Workers Who Left the Democrats for Nixon in '72

By PHILIP SHABECOFF

Special to The New York Times

BAL HARBOUR, Fla., Feb. 24 — Lying among the debris

of the Watergate scandal are the wrecked Republican hopes — fanned by President Nixon's sweeping electoral success in

News

Analysis

1972 — of wresting a permanent labor constituency away from the Democratic party.

Just how far those hopes have gone aglimmering is aptly symbolized by the politicians who have and have not appeared at the winter meeting of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, being held at the Americana Hotel here.

Only one year ago, when the council met at this same hotel, President Nixon came as an invited guest and was received with cordiality, if not great warmth.

This year, however, the President was not invited. Neither Mr. Nixon nor any member of his Administration appeared at the council meeting, not even the Secretary of Labor.

In 1973 the council welcomed President Nixon as a powerful national leader who had been overwhelmingly re-elected and had received the votes of more than half of its own union rank and file. In 1974 the council mentioned the President only to attack his record and demand his impeachment.

Wallace Appears

But a surprising visitor did show up at the Americana—Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama, once called a "bigot" and "demagogue" by George Meany, president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.

It was Governor Wallace who asked for the meeting and Mr. Meany who granted it. Mr. Meany and his aides spoke of Mr. Wallace as "mellowing" and of "moving toward the center."

But as a Presidential candidate in 1968 and before the attempted assassination that crippled him in 1972, Governor Wallace attracted the support of hundreds of thousands of workers. Most of these workers were said to have voted for President Nixon in 1972 after Mr. Wallace was forced out of the race.

In his re-election campaign in 1972, Mr. Nixon received endorsements from dozens of national and local labor leaders, the first time in recent history that there had been wholesale defections from the Democratic Presidential nominee among

the hierarchy of organized labor.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. adopted a posture of benign neutrality toward the Republican candidate, and more than half of the nation's blue-collar workers voted to re-elect him. The labor vote as much as anything turned the election into a landslide for Mr. Nixon.

At the time, officials at the Committee for the Re-election of the President and their labor allies believed that they had ended the traditional close alliance of labor with the Democratic party. At least some in the labor movement, particularly the more affluent and supposedly conservative workers in the building and maritime trades, many Southern workers and "ethnic" blue-collar workers in the North had found a new home with the Republicans, these officials said.

As a symbol of this new relationship, Peter J. Brennan, the "hard hat" building trades leader from New York City, was installed as Secretary of Labor.

But the Republican gains among labor, if indeed they ever were more than a one-election wonder, appear to have evaporated with the continued Watergate disclosures.

"We are right back at ground zero," conceded a labor official in Washington who had worked with the re-election committee to woo the workers' vote and labor endorsements (and who was rewarded with a fairly high Administration post).

Deny Defection

Officials of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., argue that labor did not really defect to the Republican party.

The endorsements of union leaders and the votes of rank-and-file workers for President Nixon in 1972, these officials said, against the Democratic candidate, Senator George McGovern.

But if the union leaders believe that the labor shift to the Republican party was transitory from the start, Republican strategists are convinced that they made permanent gains among workers in 1972.

However, the A.F.L.-C.I.O. is working actively within the national Democratic party to make sure that organized labor has a major voice in the selection of the party's Presidential candidate in 1972. Labor wants to make sure the Democrats have a nominee it can support with enthusiasm.

As one union leader attending the winter meeting commented, "The Democratic party would have to be suicidal if it did not make a good peace with labor."