

Labor Man of the Year:

President Nixon's Labor Deacon Gets
Free Hand in Toughest Crises Coming

By Victor Riesel

(Editors Note: Each year Victor Riesel picks the Labor Man of the Year. For 1970 the columnist's choice is Bill Usery, Pres. Nixon's newest troubleshooter.)

Washington, D.C: -- It was on Jan. 12 a year ago, when Richard Nixon was picking Cabinet members instead of football teams, that the Jets crushed the Colts in Miami's Orange Bowl. One of the disconsolate thousands in the stands wandered back to the Skyways Motel, found some 20 messages to call someone in Washington, put the slips in his pocket and went off to a banquet.

The spectator, 6-foot, 45-year-old gray-blondish Willie (W.J.) Usery Jr. little realized that both he -- and the nation -- had something to cheer about in those telephone message slips. They were from Secretary of Labor-designate George Shultz. When Mr. Usery, then chairman of the Cape Kennedy Labor Management Relations Council, called the next morning, Mr. Shultz asked him to join the team -- though he was a Humphrey Democrat, active in the Machinists' Non-Partisan Political League and had always been a class-conscious union machinist and labor leader.

By Jan. 17 (1969) he was in Washington. He joined the team. But first he had asked Mr. Shultz, "Why don't you wait until you learn everything about me?" The Labor Secretary replied: "I have. If not you wouldn't be here. And you're the only fellow about whom no one has been critical."

Thus Bill Usery, a maintenance machinist since the days he left Georgia Military College and Mercer U., served aboard a U.S. Navy repair ship, worked for his home state of Georgia and a private company, went down to Cape Canaveral and built the 17-member International Assn. of Machinists' space center lodge there into a 4,600-member union complex, became Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor-Management Services.

For him, 14 to 18 hours a day, 6 to 7 days a week as the lone union chief in the Nixon Administration it has been a grueling year -- but a year in which he says his advice has been sought by Mr. Shultz and Mr. Nixon, a year in which he has never been ordered to be anti-union, a year in which he has had a "free hand and free road."

But neither he nor this country has seen anything yet.

The talents of Mr. Usery will be strained. There are 5 million workers covered by labor-management contracts expiring in 1970. The toughest crisis? This will come in trucking on the night of March 31, says Bill Usery who has prevented transportation strikes by keeping both sides grinding out a settlement over 28 continuous hours. For that President Nixon personally telephoned congratulations.

Next toughest crisis? This will break on the "construction front." Mr. Usery, of whom the Machinists union still is exceptionally proud, though being proud of Republican administration officials is not one of its specialities, hopes to calm this building field by improving the collective bargaining climate. He and Secretary Shultz believe "in preventing fires rather than in being forced to put them out," says W.J.

As for "auto," a field in which 660,000 workers will be demanding a heavy package in early September, "it's too early to tell."

Trucking and auto will be "Bill's" (everybody calls him Bill) Armageddon. The Teamsters-auto union, Fitzsimmons-Reuther Alliance for Labor Action have been raiding Mr. Usery's Machinists at considerable expense albeit futilely. They may not see him as a fraternal addition to their bargaining tables later this year.

How does Bill Usery feel about all this fire fighting?

"Well, this will be a tougher run," said the Assistant Secretary in his cavernous third-floor office. "This is a political election year. Things get tighter. Strikes and settlements come harder."

What else is there to being Assistant Secretary of Labor for Labor-Management Services? Well, under a new ruling he now becomes a sort of one-man court for unions and departmental units covering 2.5 million federal employes. He also oversees the Office of Labor Management Reports and the Office of Welfare and Pension Reports. Thus he is the J. Edgar Hoover of the Labor Department. It is the Office of Labor Management Reports which is probing the United Mine Workers and searching into the Yablonski triple murder. It is he who must guard the \$45 billion worth of pension funds which are either union self-insured or under joint labor management control. There also is a flow of some \$14 billion annually in welfare money.

"I feel very strongly about law and the fight on organized crime," he said when we talked the other day as we did when I covered his activities at Cape Canaveral to which he was assigned by the Machinists in 1956.

But then he snapped back into the authoritative tone of his new-found officialdom which has done so much for labor-management peace this past year.

"I have a responsibility now," he added, "to eliminate organized crime from the free trade union movement. I must stop the criminal effort to infiltrate the unions. I consider it a privilege to eliminate this criminal force seeking to move in on the movement."

How could he, a militant unionist, a representative of the "Grand Lodge" (national headquarters) of the Machinists which have shut down everything from vital gunpowder plants to airlines, go to work for Mr. Nixon and the Republicans whom they fought so strenuously and criticized so strongly?

"There is no reason, and I have not found any reason," said he, "why we cannot work with the administration. It is trying to be fair. I have not been asked to do anything against my belief."

"All my years in the labor movement I have believed and sought to teach that when a union by secret ballot elects officers, it is the duty and responsibility of every member to support and work with those elected."

"President Nixon was elected by secret ballot in the greatest union of all -- the United States of America. He has asked me to serve. It is an honor, a challenge and a great opportunity to serve my country. I intend to work diligently and honestly to advance good sound labor-management relations."

Bill Usery, who is the White House conduit to the House of Labor via AFL-CIO national secretary-treasurer, Lane Kirkland, labor's own intellectual, feels the year has gone well. When was it toughest?

There was that moment in Pittsburgh when 20 building and construction union leaders and some contractors associations faced the black coalition over the black job issue.

"This was the tensest moment of the year," said Bill Usery who is still chairman of the Board of Deacons of the Houston Heights (Ca.) Baptist Church. "There was foul language, hatred, malice and much misunderstanding. We quieted it for a while. We feel strongly on this equal opportunity issue. We hope to keep the solution voluntary."

That's Bill Usery's theme. That's Mr. Nixon's theme. We'll soon see if this teamwork will be successful.

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