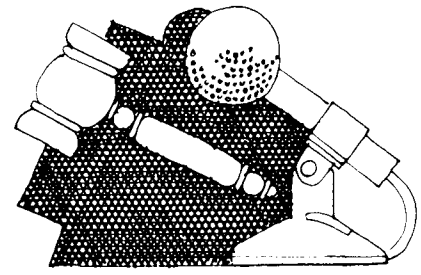


# Conventions

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## Steelworkers press organizing and coordinated bargaining

Joy K. REYNOLDS

The United Steelworkers of America (AFL-CIO, CLC) held its 23rd constitutional convention in Las Vegas, NV, August 25-29, 1986. Some 2,800 delegates took action to implement the two major themes of the convention: celebrating the union's 50th anniversary (the Steel Workers Organizing Committee was formed in June 1936) and addressing future challenges. Delegates enacted constitutional changes that, among other things, broadened the categories of persons eligible for membership and clarified the power to merge small locals. They elected five international tellers to 4-year terms to perform duties in connection with the 1989 referendum election of international officers and passed resolutions dealing with numerous topics, including collective bargaining, plant closings, and employee stock ownership plans. The convention heard speeches from Steelworkers International President Lynn Williams, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, former Steelworkers President I.W. Abel, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union President Murray Finley, Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) President Shirley Carr, and numerous national and State or provincial politicians from both the United States and Canada.

### Speech highlights

In the keynote address, Steelworkers President Williams, who was reelected to that post in a November 1985 referendum, outlined the results of this year's bargaining in major industries, including containers, aluminum, nonferrous metals, and steel. Williams emphasized that the union intends to maintain its coordinated approach to bargaining despite the breakdown of coordinated strategies on the employer side. He admitted that the steel agreements reached with LTV, Bethlehem, National, and Inland involve sacrifices, but praised the employment security guarantees and profit-sharing aspects of those settlements. He charged that the union's high priority on preserving jobs and limiting contracting out was one major reason that USX (formerly U.S. Steel Corp.) locked out more than 22,000 workers on August 1. Williams thanked the AFL-CIO for its recently

formed committee to support the USX workers, about whose efforts Clothing and Textile Workers President Murray Finley later addressed the convention. Williams criticized the trade policies of the U.S. and Canadian governments, arguing that "there is no such thing as free trade"; the union seeks "managed" trade, aimed at raising the standard of living in both seller and buyer nations.

Regarding developments within the Steelworkers "family," Williams cited the union's success in organizing new members, not only in its traditional membership base but also in public sector and other service industry units; the pace of organizing in 1986 was reported to be more than five new units a week. He noted the completion of the merger with the 34,000-member Upholsterers International Union, which became a division of the Steelworkers, with former Upholsterers President John Serembus serving as director.

The continued connection of retirees with the Steelworkers was personified by the appearance at the convention of former union president I.W. Abel, who has been appointed to head SOAR, the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees. According to its bylaws, SOAR will "deal with the social, economic, educational, legislative, and political developments and concerns of its members and spouses, the United Steelworkers of America, and the labor movement." President emeritus Abel, whose address anchored that portion of the convention celebrating the Steelworkers' jubilee, reviewed the history of the struggle to organize the steel industry and highlighted accomplishments of the union gained through both collective bargaining and involvement in the legislative process (for example, supporting enactment of the Occupational Safety and Health Act and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act).

In his address to the convention, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland pledged the Federation's support to the Steelworkers in its struggle against USX. He urged Government trade and employment policies that would help to preserve the Nation's industrial base, noting that "silicon chips cannot be sold over the counter in a 7-Eleven." He lauded the cooperative efforts of the union in attempting to meet the challenges facing the industry, but warned that such cooperation must be met by reciprocal actions on the part of employers.

### Constitutional changes

The convention adopted constitutional changes and policy recommendations in many areas. Among the amendments enacted were the following:

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- Replacement of references to membership in “a plant or mill or any other place” with the words “an enterprise, public or private,” to reflect the union’s expanding jurisdiction.
- Amendment of Article III to permit membership by supervisors, including those empowered to hire or fire, subject to terms established by the International Executive Board. (Previous language had provided that only supervisors without such powers could join, subject to the specific approval of the local union and the Board). Those opposing this change argued that the union should not rush to embrace persons who are firing their fellow workers. But the amendment carried on a standing vote after members of the constitution committee explained that the language was not intended to apply to mill foremen and supervisors, but is largely aimed at expanding recruitment in the public sector, where, for example, a recently organized unit of middle managers in Boston brought in more than 400 members through the Salaried Employees of North America, a division of the Steelworkers.
- Amendment of Article IV to provide for annual, instead of semiannual, audits of the international union finances.
- Amendment of Article V to provide, in part, that protests regarding local union voting for national officers must be “received” by the international tellers within 15 days of the election. Prior language had required such protests to be “filed” with the tellers no later than 10 days after the election.
- Amendment of Article VII to provide that 100 or more persons (formerly 10) eligible for membership shall constitute a local union upon receipt of a charter from the international secretary. Smaller groups may be chartered upon the authority of the international president. Further, language was added to provide for International Executive Board rules governing transfer of jurisdiction of one local to another. Supporters of these changes cited the large number of small locals (of 4,232 locals, 557 have nine or fewer members and 2,692 have fewer than 100 members) and the strength that comes from amalgamation. They argued that the amendment reflects existing Board power to combine locals and promised that mergers would be accomplished in consultation with district directors and the affected locals. According to Williams, “Obviously those that are functioning properly will continue.” Floor discussion was closed before opponents of the measure spoke, as a delegate later took the floor to point out. The outcome of the voice vote being in doubt, a standing vote was held, and the change was adopted.
- Amendment of Article XIV to provide that when the assets of the strike and defense fund exceed \$200 million in any month, payments to it shall cease until the balance falls below \$150 million, instead of \$180 million as previously provided. (Interim payments will be divided equally between the international and local unions.) In response to a resolution that a mechanism be established

to enforce local affiliation with State and provincial central bodies, Article XIV was amended to provide for deduction for dues to such bodies from local per capita refunds by the international treasurer with the approval of the international president.

- Addition of Article XVIII to provide an associate membership aimed at organizing new membership and also to provide a means for continued affiliation by laid-off members who have gone beyond the 24-month period provided for continued membership status under Article XI, as well as for persons organized in units that subsequently fail to vote for union representation. The new article provides that associate members shall not be eligible to run or vote for international or local office but may participate in organizations of associates to the extent and under rules provided by the International Executive Board. These members will be eligible for benefits such as prepaid legal services, credit cards, and insurance coverage. Adoption of this category of membership parallels a recommendation of the AFL-CIO’s Committee on the Evolution of Work.

Among the constitutional amendments proposed but not adopted were those reducing or capping members’ dues and salaries of international officers and district directors, providing full voting membership for retirees, providing mail ballots in elections of international officers, expanding the access of members to absentee ballots in such elections, permitting locals to hold quarterly rather than monthly meetings, and providing for removal of local officers without “costly” trial procedures. In the collective bargaining area, amendments considered but not adopted included those to postpone conventions in years of major contract negotiations, to hold conventions in cities most affected by layoffs of members, to increase the amount of strike benefits, and to provide for strike benefits payment as a matter of right rather than after determination of need by the local union.

### Other actions

As the union’s “court of last resort,” the convention heard appeals on matters such as local elections and trial procedures. The convention also adopted resolutions in the areas of politics, collective bargaining strategies and specific disputes, and legislative policies. For example, the union endorsed new strategies in collective bargaining, including consumer boycotts and corporate campaigns; adopted standards for the negotiation of Employee Stock Ownership Plans (they must be part of the labor agreement, must never be used as a substitute for an adequate, funded, Government-guaranteed pension plan, and should be based on thorough analysis of the company’s finances and prospects for survival); and endorsed legislation to require advance notice of plant closings and bargaining over alternatives to closings or layoffs. □