

## INTERVIEW

### Msgr. George G. Higgins, 'chaplain of the AFL-CIO'

# 'Things are moving slowly . . . but fast'

*Msgr. George G. Higgins, born Jan. 21, 1916 in Chicago, served for thirty-six years in the Social Action Department of the United States Catholic Conference, twenty-five of those years, from 1955 to 1980, as its director. After his retirement from the Conference in 1980, he has continued to serve as "the chaplain of the AFL-CIO." He serves as chairman of the United Auto Workers' Public Review Board and the United Farm Workers' Martin Luther King, Jr., Fund. A review of his 1993 book, "Organized Labor and the Church: Reflections of a 'Labor Priest'," appeared in the Winter 1996 issue of Fidelio.*

*This interview was conducted Aug. 27, at Msgr. Higgins residence at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. by Nina Ogden and William F. Wertz, Jr.*

**Fidelio:** After the victory in the Teamsters' strike against UPS, what is your view of the prospects for the labor movement?

**Msgr. Higgins:** Well, the UPS victory, I think, is an extremely hopeful sign. I don't fully agree with those who are saying that it is the beginning of a major breakthrough for labor. That remains to be seen. When I came back from Europe, I was astounded by the number of articles on the UPS strike, not just news stories, but articles, the majority of them saying that this was a major breakthrough for labor, some of them going far out in that prediction. And I have never seen anything like that in the last twenty years.

The other thing that struck me when I came back was, that the very day that I got back, the *New York Times* had a front-page story, Sunday edition, lead story, saying that public opinion was running strongly in favor of the Teamsters. I said to myself then, the strike is over: they're going to win. UPS can't stand up against that, because the Teamsters are not supposed to win public opinion.

The conservative press, quite pre-



Courtesy of George Higgins

**The conservative press said the labor movement is dying; that it should die, it is not doing any good for anybody. But I think they are whistling in the dark.**

**The UPS victory is an extremely hopeful sign.**

dictably, tried to play it down. The *Wall Street Journal* said, well, if they want to enjoy this as a victory, let them do it, but there won't be many more. Other columnists said, well, the labor movement is dying; it should die; it is not doing any good for anybody. That was quite predictable. But I think they are whistling in the dark.

**Fidelio:** In your book, *Organized Labor and the Church*, you said that, if labor wants to make breakthroughs now, it has to organize the unorganized, women and immigrants.

**Msgr. Higgins:** Well, of course, they did not do that in the UPS case. The odd thing about this case was, that by and large, this company has a good record. They're not a union-breaking company.

They have a bad record on these part-time workers. But they have never tried to break the union. They have always been organized. They didn't bring in strike replacements. They threatened to, but they didn't do it. They backed off. Their record up to now has been, in comparison to most companies, quite good. By comparison with their competitors, very good. Their competitors are completely unorganized. So the challenge now for the Teamsters, it seems to me, is to organize those other companies, because this was an easy one for them, in the sense that there were no strike replacements. And they

had public opinion going for them.

The blindness of some of the conservatives is appalling. George Will had a column the other day saying that this was a battle to protect people who didn't need protection, didn't want it; these are all part-time workers who want to work part-

time. The *Times* story which came out the next day said that the poll the union took, showed that ninety percent of the part-time workers said, that is the one issue we want to bring up. The Teamsters had planned it very carefully, which surprised me, because I didn't think they were that efficient. They had apparently done a lot of homework.

**Fidelio:** In your book, you pointed out that the labor movement had declined before the year 1932 and that we have had a similar decline over the last twenty

to thirty years, where about one-third of the labor force was organized and now it is down to about seventeen percent . . .

**Msgr. Higgins:** And only about ten percent in the private sector.

**Fidelio:** . . . and you had indicated, that you thought that the prospects were good for a rebirth of the labor movement similar to what occurred in the 1930's.

**Msgr. Higgins:** Well, I said that, but of course, that was wishful thinking. It was a hope. But I never anticipated anything like the UPS strike. That was a complete surprise to me. I am glad it happened in an industry where they could win. They could have lost this, and that would have been very bad. The strike was unquestionably a big shot in the arm for them. Now, how they will cash in on it or build on it, we will have to wait and see.

**Fidelio:** Would you say something about your history in the labor movement?

**Msgr. Higgins:** I came to Washington in 1940, right after I was ordained. I came here to study economics, with the thought that I would go back and teach in the seminary. That was the plan. But, when in 1944 I finished, the old National Catholic Welfare Conference, which is now the United States Catholic Conference, had a temporary opening in what they called the Social Action Department. The priest who had been doing the kind of work that I had been doing became ill. So they asked me to come down and fill in for him for the summer, until they could find somebody. Well, I never left. So I am still here. I am not at the Conference anymore, but I stayed at the Conference for thirty-six years. And our department at the Conference at that time, was interested in a wide variety of social issues, but they traditionally had a special interest in the labor movement. And I had also from my studies, so I gave most of my time, or a good part of my time, in those years to the labor field.

**Fidelio:** During the 1930's, there used to be labor schools sponsored by the Church. Could you discuss the phenomenon of labor schools in the previous period, and whether you think there is a potential for that kind of orientation by the Church today?

**Msgr. Higgins:** I doubt it. The phenom-

enon of labor schools is an historical thing. That is gone. It was a particular time, with a particular need. That was when the industrial unions were getting going. Some of it, on the part of some of the directors of labor schools, involved anti-communism, anti-racketeering. But it was a passing phase. I don't think we will ever go back to it. Some of them were run by the Association of Catholic Trade Unions (ACTU). We will never have anything like that again. And I would be opposed to anything like that again.

But what we are likely to have in the future, is more Inter-faith activity on the part of Church people. A good bit of it is going on now. There is a new organization in Chicago with a splendid executive secretary, a woman

by the name of Kim Bobo, who is a genius in organizing. She is bringing together, with a good strong board of directors, a group from various religious traditions, working together, doing an excellent job. I am on their board.

**Fidelio:** One of the key things we have been studying is the role of the social encyclicals. Whenever you read anything by John Sweeney, he really stresses this.

**Msgr. Higgins:** Yes, John came out of this tradition. He went to a Catholic college, where he was exposed to the Catholic encyclicals to some extent. He may have gone to one of those labor schools, I don't know. I wouldn't be surprised if he did, because he lived in New York, and there were a number of them in New York. John has that tradition; it is in his blood stream. That is his philosophy.

John, like many people, came by his interest in labor through his family, his

father. He is like John O'Connor; Cardinal O'Connor is very strongly pro-labor, because of his father. That is how most people come by their views, I think. John Sweeney's father was an active member of Mike Quill's union. He was a bus driver. That's where he got it. And, because John is very Irish, and the Quill group at that time was a nationalist Irish group, a particular type of Irish that existed only in New York, as far as I can see, that's where he came from.



Courtesy of George Higgins

*Msgr. Higgins with Eleanor Roosevelt and Richard Nixon (above), and with former AFL-CIO president George Meany (right).*

As soon as I came back from Europe, I had to go down to a meeting in South Carolina. On the plane coming back, I sat next to Denise Mitchell, who, as you know, is John Sweeney's communications director, and I said, I'm worried about John. She said, "Why?" And I said, "I'm afraid he is going to kill himself, he's working so hard." I said, "I read the daily clipping service and I get the impression that he is on the road three or four times a week." She said, "How about seven times?" They're really working hard down there. He's going night and day. They're spending an awful lot of money on television and other things.

**Fidelio:** They are spending a lot of money on organizing. That is really

tremendous.

**Msgr. Higgins:** That's Sweeney's main interest. He wants them to increase the percentage of money they spend on organizing. That was his experience in the SEIU, and he wants them all to move in that direction. Some will, some

**I came to Washington in 1940, to study economics. When in 1944 I finished, the old National Catholic Welfare Conference had a temporary opening in what they called the Social Action Department. They asked me to fill in for the summer. Well, I never left. I stayed at the Conference for thirty-six years. I gave most of my time to the labor field.**



Courtesy of George Higgins

won't, it depends on the industry, and the leadership of the industry. But a few more victories will make them all more interested.

**Fidelio:** We attended the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference last November, and attended the Church-labor dialogue reception, where they released a ten-point program, on the tenth anniversary of the "Economic Justice For All" docu-

ment issued by the Bishops. We thought this was a hopeful sign. On the other side, within the Catholic Church, you have these neo-conservatives like Michael Novak, Richard Neuhaus, and so forth.

**Msgr. Higgins:** George Weigel . . .

**Fidelio:** We were wondering how you think this conflict will work itself out.

**Msgr. Higgins:** Who knows? I would say that, on the average, the bishops are better than the clergy, the clergy are better than the conservative laity. The bishops are quite conservative on other issues, but on this issue they hold the fort. There is a bi-annual meeting of about ten labor leaders and about ten bishops. There is another one coming up soon. It is just for a couple of hours, just to get to know one another, talk about things that are on their mind, raise questions where they can cooperate. Very good sign. And these are prominent bishops and prominent labor leaders. It is not done in any way to separate Catholics from others. It just happens that there are enough Catholics who are anxious to talk about it, that it makes it possible.

So I don't know what the future of the neo-conservatives is. I was absolutely, truly shocked at the book that the American Enterprise Institute put out recently under their own auspices, on *The Epitaph for American Labor*, published by the A.E.I. There were ridiculous blurbs by neo-conservatives, including Michael Novak. The book is written by an ex-

socialist, typical New York ex-socialist, who has become neo-conservative, saying that the labor movement is finished, and that it is a good thing that it is finished. When the A.E.I. will say that under their own auspices, that is terrible, scary.

**Fidelio:** Well, that is really their direction.

**Msgr. Higgins:** It is their direction, but has not been Michael Novak's direction

up to now. Michael has always said, that there is a place for the labor movement. He has never gone away from that, and his blurb is very carefully worded. It is not an all-out attack. But the book as a whole is just a disaster, and especially coming from the A.E.I. I wouldn't have been surprised if it had come from the Heritage Foundation, or some group like that, but the A.E.I. is supposed to be a little above that sort of thing. So, where they are going, I don't know. But my own impression is that they are talking to one another. I read widely in the field of economics, and I never see them quoted in serious books. I haven't seen Michael Novak quoted in a serious economics book in years. Their influence may be exaggerated.

**Fidelio:** Lyndon LaRouche has just written an article called "Michael Novak, Calvinist?— Not by the Marketplace Alone!" in which he goes after the underlying fallacy in his thinking, the whole question of free trade.

**Msgr. Higgins:** Michael is a good friend of mine, but I haven't seen him in years, except to say hello. He is repeating himself. His books are rehashing the last one. Neuhaus is influential, because he has a magazine, with a sizable circulation, *First Things*. But there is nothing about labor in there. I don't think Neuhaus has any grasp at all of the labor field. I remember many, many years ago, when he was an active and rather socially-minded Lutheran pastor up in New York, in Brooklyn. He wrote quite a good book, I thought. I wrote him a letter and said that I liked the book, but your chapter on labor was awful. And I could tell from the answer, that he wasn't interested in it. He didn't know anything about it. It wasn't within his ken.

**Fidelio:** One of the things that you had traced was the role of some of the priests who were associated with labor, leading into some of the best policies of the New Deal, social security, etc.

**Msgr. Higgins:** That was mainly Msgr. Ryan. I have always thought, however, that there has been a certain mythology built around his influence on Franklin Roosevelt. Franklin Roosevelt didn't read books. He might have read the newspa-

pers, but he worked by instinct. He knew who Ryan was, but I can't imagine Roosevelt ever sat down and read one of Ryan's books from cover to cover.

The one famous incident in their relationship, was when Father Charles Coughlin started after Roosevelt. Msgr. Ryan, I think on a program paid for by the Democratic National Committee, went on national radio to defend Roosevelt. That was a big incident at the time, when radio was still the popular medium. If it happened today on television, it would be a national scandal, because the Democratic National Committee paid for it. But Ryan had great influence. We haven't had anybody like Ryan before or since. He was the most original thinker we have had in the American Church.

**Fidelio:** Could you say something about his contribution?

**Msgr. Higgins:** He wrote an enormous amount, so it would be hard to summarize it. I would think that the influence he had on the Roosevelt era probably was his insistence on the right and the need for government activity in the economic field. He was very strongly in favor of government intervention, the minimum wage. He wrote the first minimum wage law in Minnesota, and so his name became associated with that. He was a strong supporter, of course, of social security, a strong supporter of unions.

**Fidelio:** In your thirty-six years in the Catholic Conference, what was the role that the Church played to expand the capability of labor?

**Msgr. Higgins:** We had a very small staff, only two or three of us on the staff. My own interest was just keeping in touch with the labor movement. I used to go to labor conventions and got to know everybody and gave an occasional talk. I would say that during that period, because that was the thing that needed to be done, the major emphasis was on the right of workers to organize. That was still being strongly opposed. And especially in the period when the industrial unions were being organized.

Father McGowan, who was the deputy to Msgr. Ryan, and who was my boss, organized regional meetings all

over the country. We used to have five or six a year on the Catholic Conference and Industrial Problems, which would bring together in a public forum, for two or three days, businessmen, labor leaders, church people, social workers, etc., to discuss Catholic social teaching. Those were very helpful meetings and that is how a number of the priests got involved. They attended those regional meetings. I used to attend all of those.

But then the times changed, of course. Nobody needs to go to Detroit and tell the auto workers that they have a right to organize. They don't need the Church standing around. At that time they did, in the early days, because they were being accused of being communist-controlled, etc. But we then went on to another phase. I would say that after the farm-workers got organized, there was a major shift of emphasis to that kind of work, not only on our part, but on the part of many clergy around the country of all faiths. But again, that subsided.

Now it is coming back with the strawberry workers. I was out to California about two months ago for a meeting of the committee working on the strawberry campaign, and there were a great number of clergy there. So it goes in cycles. Farm-workers seem to be on the move again. Artie Rodriguez, the new president, the son-in-law of Chavez, is doing very well. He very wisely doesn't think of himself as being another Chavez. He is his own man, doing his own thing in his own way, a very orderly way. And he has got strong support from the AFL-CIO.

**Fidelio:** Now, everyone is talking about how good things are, but because of this emphasis on labor recycling and downsizing—

**Msgr. Higgins:** Well, I thought that is what caught public opinion. Again, to my surprise, I think there was something out there in the public mood that they had not counted on. People said, wait a minute, maybe there is a problem with downsizing. If such a large percentage of the workers in UPS are part-time, where is this going to stop?

**Fidelio:** Over the last thirty years there has been a real, negative shift into speculative investment, away from investment

in the real economy. This is coming to a head. We have seen financial turmoil not only in the U.S., but all over Southeast Asia and into Eastern Europe.

**Msgr. Higgins:** That is why I am cautious about these cosmic predictions about the future, because UPS doesn't fit into that problem. UPS can't move to Asia. But textile firms, automobile firms, can.

That is why there is going to be a terrible fight over the extension of NAFTA. Obviously [Teamster president Ron] Carey is going to make that

**The neo-conservatives, Novak and Weigel, and probably Neuhaus also, think that they have more influence in the Vatican, than they really have. It is an easy thing to say, 'I had lunch with the Pope.' That doesn't prove a thing. There is a lot of name-dropping going on.**

*Msgr. Higgins with Pope Paul VI, whose encyclical 'Populorum Progressio' stated, 'Development is the new name for peace.'*

his number one issue. He may lose it. But I am glad he is going to make a fight. That is the main reason why I am cautious about these cosmic predictions, because it was not a typical strike in that sense. There was nothing UPS could do to move. They had to get those packages delivered within the continental United States. But manufacturers don't. And other service industries don't.

Walter Reuther at one time was a complete free-trader. There was no competition. There were no other cars coming in. I remember Doug Fraser, who succeeded Walter, the second time around, he laughed about it—he had a good sense of humor—and said, "I can remember the magnificent speeches I gave in favor of free trade, unlimited free trade. But I wouldn't be elected today if I said that."

It is going to be a long uphill battle. That is why I repeat, that I don't subscribe to these easy predictions.

It's going to be a long haul.

**Fidelio:** Our assessment is that we are heading into a financial disintegration. If you look at Europe, the unemployment rate in Germany is as high as the 1930's. You have had this whole mass strike process in Europe, shortly after John Sweeney gave a speech at Davos warning that, if the American neo-conservative model is exported, there would be a mass strike.

**Msgr. Higgins:** One of the labor federations in Paris, France, took great delight in the UPS victory, because they were so upset about Clinton bragging about the

effective labor legislation for the next decade, I'm sure, unless there is a revolution in the political scene. And they supported Clinton, put a lot of money into it, but I think they did it with their fingers crossed.

I said to Denise Mitchell on the plane—she winced, but I said, I wouldn't want to be in your position a year or two from now, when you have to decide between Al Gore and Gephardt. It is going to be a terrible decision. Both of them are obviously running for the labor vote. And Gore will have to be in favor of NAFTA. Gephardt will oppose it of course. So, I don't know what they will do.

They will make a pragmatic judgment as to who has the better chance of winning.

**Fidelio:** Why do you think they will have to focus on the banks?

**Msgr. Higgins:** In the sense of putting pressure on the banks, as they have in a number of strikes, to put pressures on boards of directors. If you

take the famous J.P. Stevens boycott, I never really did believe that that boycott settled that strike. That was done by pressure on the banks, who put pressure on the board of directors.

I always thought that while Cesar [Chavez] was right in boycotting grapes and lettuce, that it left a false impression that boycotts were easy. But they are not. They are very difficult. The boycott was successful for Cesar, but it became a snare and delusion. People thought that is all you have to do.

Artie Rodriguez, the new president, has not written off the boycott, but is deemphasizing it. The first thing is to organize the workers, then you can maybe have a boycott. They are not even threatening a boycott of strawberries. They

don't want that. They want the contracts.

So, it is going to be an interesting period ahead. Things are moving slowly, but fast. Fast, in the sense of the globalization problem, but slowly in the U.S. I wouldn't think that a man like Gephardt would have a ghost of a chance of being elected, even if they supported him, in the present climate.

**Fidelio:** On the other hand, Gore supports free trade with NAFTA.

**Msgr. Higgins:** His great claim in the last election was, that he won in the debate with Perot over NAFTA.

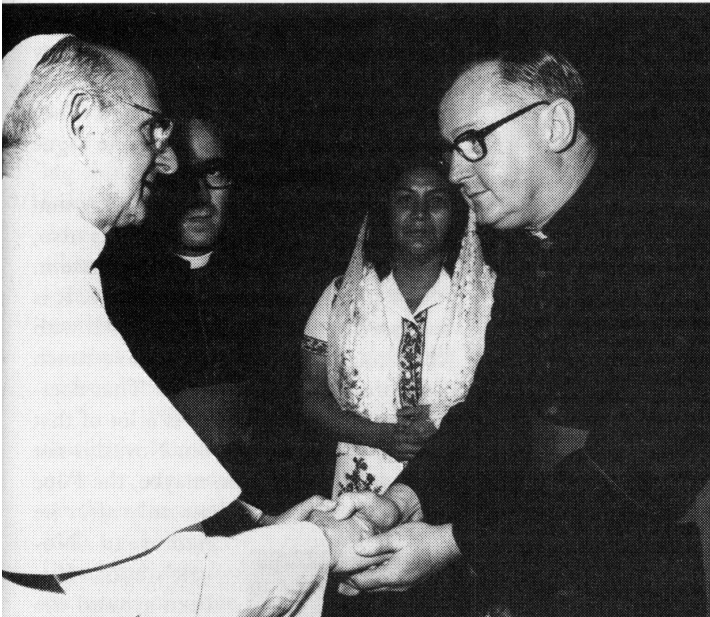
**Fidelio:** We are looking towards a certain conjuncture because of the financial crisis, which will speed up the whole process way beyond what one would think normally. Essentially, what we are looking at, is the fact that if we are in such a crisis, we are going to need Clinton to act in some manner similar to F.D.R. to deal with the financial crisis.

**Msgr. Higgins:** He won't do it. He is not capable of that. I don't say that meanly about him. He doesn't strike me as a man with that kind of leadership. Maybe I'm wrong, but he seems to me to be too superficial for that. He is not an F.D.R.

**Fidelio:** You have seen in labor struggles, that it is always emergencies that bring out a providential role in people, that you wouldn't see otherwise.

**Msgr. Higgins:** I just don't see him as that kind of a leader. His time is running out on him. He doesn't have long to go. My fear is, that if Gore is elected, he will put us all to sleep. He is without doubt the dullest speaker in the world.

**Fidelio:** Recently, LaRouche announced his candidacy for the year 2000, with the idea of trying to free Clinton and labor from the attachment to Gore during this immediate period of crisis, and, realizing Clinton's weaknesses, to try to create the conditions under which he could be changed in a moment of crisis. If you look at the world situation, it is disastrous, including Eastern Europe, the shock therapy directed at countries such as Poland, all of Eastern Europe, Russia. These are nations that freed themselves from communism with our help, and then looked to us, and what do they get?



Courtesy of George Higgins

American economy. However, the labor movement in France is very weak. German workers are different. They have a stronger labor movement. In France, I doubt if eight percent of the workers in France are organized.

**Fidelio:** It was interesting that, in the German strikes, and then again in the Wheeling Pitt strike, rather than going to the point of production, the strike target, for example in the Wheeling Pitt case, was the Mellon bank.

**Msgr. Higgins:** I think increasingly the labor movement will direct its attention to banks. But, the labor movement is quite limited. They live in a very mixed economy. The government has so much control. There is not going to be any

They get this shock therapy. So, we are trying to create a situation in which, despite the limitations of Clinton, the U.S. Presidency, which is still the most powerful office in the world, can be used for the good at such a moment.

**Msgr. Higgins:** Well, I hope so. Clinton is a man I don't see emerging as a great leader. There is something very superficial about the man. I have heard him speak five or six times at labor conventions, and I never heard him mention unions. He talks about training, about workers. The same thing was true about Bob Reich for the first two years. He talked about training. But, training for what? And all of a sudden Bob began to speak out. I think he became disappointed in Clinton, as he proved in that silly book.

**Fidelio:** Obviously, he is disappointed in Clinton, in terms of Clinton's tendency to compromise, which led him to work with Dick Morris. He says, that if there is no crisis Clinton will be mediocre, but he also identified within Clinton, the potential to act like F.D.R. under conditions of crisis. We are hoping that he will, because we think the crisis is upon us.

**Msgr. Higgins:** What got into him [Reich], to manufacture so many conversations? It was ridiculous. He must be an actor at heart.

**Fidelio:** You were very active in supporting the Solidarity movement in Poland. What do you think about the situation there now?

**Msgr. Higgins:** I haven't been back there in two or three years, so I really don't know what is going on there now. I read about it. But Solidarity is finished. It doesn't amount to much, any more. Poor Walesa is floundering around. I think Walesa is one of those men, who didn't know that he should have quit when he was ahead. He never should have become president. It would be like Cesar Chavez, going from the farmworkers, to become President of the U.S. He didn't have the qualities for it. From that point of view, it's a human tragedy.

I think the most significant role in building Solidarity, was the AFL-CIO. That is why Quitley [in his new book on Pope John Paul II] is driving people crazy, when he demonstrates that Reagan did nothing to help Solidarity. The Administration did nothing. Most of the money and typewriters and printing presses came from the AFL-CIO and the international labor movement. So, I can't wait to see the reviews by the neo-conservatives, because he takes up *Centesimus Annus*, and proves to my satisfaction that they badly misrepresented it by selective quotes. I feel sorry for Weigel, because Weigel is a bright fellow, but he

is not an investigative journalist. He will try to write a book [on the Pope], which will be highly philosophical, proving that the Pope is the greatest Pope in the last thousand years. But, he doesn't have the ability or the experience to do the digging that a man like Quitley has done.

I would guess that, for all practical purposes, Weigel's book is already written, the conclusion certainly. He got a two-year grant. The Bernstein thesis about the Holy Alliance [between the Vatican and the Reagan Administration]—I don't think we will ever hear much about that, after Quitley's book.

**Fidelio:** Novak is an adviser to the Pontifical Council on the Family, as is Gary Becker, the follower of Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago. They use the excuse of family values, to argue for free trade.

**Msgr. Higgins:** I think that Novak and Weigel, and probably Neuhaus also, think that they have more influence in the Vatican, than they really have. It is an easy thing to say, "I had lunch with the Pope." Lots of people have lunch with the Pope. Maybe once. That doesn't prove a thing. There is a lot of that name-dropping going on. Novak is not above suggesting that, maybe, the Pope wrote *Centesimus Annus* only after he

had read Novak's book. I've been around too long: whether it was a good encyclical or not, it wasn't written on the basis of that.

**Fidelio:** Thank you, Msgr. Higgins.

**I think increasingly the labor movement will direct its attention to banks. But, the labor movement is quite limited. They live in a very mixed economy. The government has so much control. There is not going to be any effective labor legislation for the next decade, unless there is a revolution in the political scene.**



*Labor Secretary Robert Reich and Sen. Edward Kennedy (seated right and center) appreciate Msgr. Higgins' remarks to a Labor Department gathering.*

Courtesy of George Higgins