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LABOR DISCOVERS TELEVISION

By BILL KELLER
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 12— In the A.F.L.-C.I.O. building here, where the office decor runs to Solidarity posters, Larry Kirkman's fourth-floor cubbyhole is distinguished by a placard from a Joris Ivens film festival at the Pompidou Center in Paris. Joris Ivens is a documentary film maker from Holland.

Mr. Kirkman, too, comes to the labor building from a foreign culture. He is from video.

The 39-year-old television producer was hired from the American Film Institute in 1982 to be director of the new Labor Institute of Public Affairs, which was designed to drag the camera-shy labor federation into the television age.

Two years later, there is little danger of confusing the A.F.L.-C.I.O. with "The Love Boat." But regular television viewers are beginning to see more television of, by and about organized labor.

Touting Labor's Viewpoint

This week Mr. Kirkman's staff began penetrating airwaves in 24 cities with a "Campaign for America's Future," 30-second commercials touting labor's viewpoint on taxes, jobs, equal rights and other issues. The campaign, ostensibly nonpolitical, will build over three weeks to a finale that glorifies labor's past battles for free public education, the eight-hour day, Social Security and civil rights. The effect is to portray unions as civic-minded

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instruments of social change, not the narrow, greedy interests they sometimes seem to be in press reports and political cartoons.

The spots are not gritty video- tracts accompanied by Woody Guthrie ballads about bosses and scabs. They are slickly produced and backed by the sort of hummable new anthem, "Stand With Us, America," that television viewers have come to associate with airlines and insurance companies. The effort has been accompanied by polling to shape the message and measure the results.

It is a concession to modernity for the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, where the move to television has been slowed by the high cost, the natural conservatism of an old- fashioned bureaucracy and a chip-on- the-shoulder suspicion of the medium. Most labor leaders argue that television has never given the worker's point of view a fair shake. An Expanding Empire

A measure of the federation's acceptance of television is that Mr. Kirkman's budget has grown from \$2 million to \$3 million a year, not counting an extra \$1 million this year to buy air time for the "Campaign for America's Future." Except for the political arm, it is the only department of the federation with a growing budget. Next month Mr. Kirkman will pack up his tape cassettes and his copies of Variety and move down two flights, where his video empire is expanding to take over the entire second floor of the 16th Street building in downtown Washington.

The labor federation is following a trail blazed by some individual unions. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union introduced its "Look for the Union Label" jingle in 1975. And postal workers, teachers' unions and others have increasingly turned to television in recent years as a tool for lobbying, collective bargaining, organizing and image-boosting.

"There is more TV activity in the summer of this year than in the sum total of the labor movement," said Philip Sparks of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, one of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s most media-conscious affiliates. Among the recent developments:



The Most Riveting Host in Late Night (and the Most Overlooked)



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- The state, county and municipal employees union installed a television production studio in its Washington headquarters two years ago and added a satellite "uplink" last year. It can now offer local television stations free, unedited satellite interviews with union officials or friendly politicians. Today, for example, the union is making Roy Ash, the Budget Director in the Ford Administration, available to television reporters in Montana to argue against a balanced budget referendum on the state ballot this fall. The union will also spend \$1 million this year on "image advertising," much of it to talk up the advantages of membership in states where the union has organizing drives going.

- The United Automobile Workers, which broke into broadcast with a union radio show in the 1950's, is spending \$2 million on television commercials coinciding with its bargaining at Ford and General Motors. A typical spot shows crates from Japan and Korea crashing down on an American dock as a union worker explains the need to keep American jobs at home. The advertisements have been widely praised in union circles for telegraphing the union's concerns about imports and job security while making them seem patriotic and consumer-oriented.

- The Communications Workers of America has promised to invest \$2 million to urge consumers to buy long-distance service that uses human operators. The advertisements are designed to promote unionized A.T.&T. over mechanized, non- union competitors.

The A.F.L.-C.I.O. institute produces not only commercial spots, but also a public affairs show, an experimental menu of cable television programming and training tapes to play in local union halls on such skills as lobbying members of Congress.

"America Works," the institute's 30-minute public affairs program, completed its 19th show this summer and is now carried on 150 public television stations. The program usually features a flattering profile of a union activist, followed by an edited studio debate on an issue such as the subminimum wage or plant closing laws.

Next Step: Entertainment

The next step, Mr. Kirkman said, is entertainment. The institute, which completed a test run in Atlanta, Seattle and Pittsburgh last year, hopes to offer regular programming to cable systems in 1985. The programming may include a union-oriented comedy-music-

news variety show, which Mr. Kirkman hopes will resemble "something between 'Omnibus' and 'Saturday Night Live' when it started out."

Mr. Kirkman, who taught film studies and television production at American University in Washington and was a producer of public television documentaries, is said to have support at the highest levels of the labor federation for raising labor's television profile.

Two years ago, the president of the federation, Lane Kirkland, following the example of many business executives and politicians, took a short course in how to come across on television. The most visible results were that he rid his lapels of camera-distracting union buttons and determined to avoid chain-smoking within camera range.

Mr. Kirkland came down from his office Monday to personally unveil the new advertising campaign. At a news conference, he acknowledged that labor was a latecomer to video-consciousness, but he said unions have now fully accepted the wisdom of the electronic age. "If you're not on that box," he said, "you don't exist."

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