

# The media and the New York City construction workers' protest

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The New York City media have reacted to the June 30 demonstration by 40,000 construction workers with a combination of fear and outrage. This incident, lasting barely five hours, provided a brief glimpse of the raw power of the working class, and the spokesmen for the status quo did not like what they saw.

The workers turned out at the headquarters of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in midtown Manhattan to protest its award of a major project to a nonunion contractor. The demonstration quickly got out of the control of the union bureaucrats.

Workers marched through the streets and clashed with the police, chanting 'police state' when cops in riot gear blocked them from the nonunion construction site at 54th Street and Ninth Avenue. Eighteen police officers and three workers were reported injured, and 38 protesters were arrested. As traffic was halted or disrupted, wealthy lawyers and businessmen looked on with a mixture of disbelief and fury.

Rupert Murdoch's *New York Post* screamed 'Mob Rule in Midtown.' Ignoring the fact that the demonstration was far larger than the union officials had expected or wanted, and the decision to march from MTA headquarters across town to the nonunion construction site was taken by the workers in opposition to the pleas of union officials, the *Post* suggested that the mass action could be explained by the union leaders' alleged mob connections and the authorities' recent moves against Mafia influence in the industry.

The *Daily News* concluded that the demonstration showed the need to ban all protests in midtown.

The *New York Times*, articulating the venomous thoughts of the Wall Street crowd and the most spoiled layers of the yuppie set, titled its editorial 'Labor's Abuse of the City.' It accused the workers of 'an illegal

assault on civic life.'

The newspapers are sensitive to the danger that recent protests by taxi drivers, street vendors and now construction workers are showing signs of becoming contagious. These are quite disparate layers of the working class, but they share many grievances. They are struggling to make a living and they are not sure how long they will keep their jobs. While the media have been celebrating the declining crime rate and the bull market on Wall Street, frustration and anger have been building up among the large majority who inhabit the nether regions of New York society.

The outburst by the building workers revealed, suddenly, the explosive state of class relations beneath the surface appearance--carefully cultivated by the media--of prosperity and, if not contentment, at least acquiescence. The workers' action showed little signs of a politically conscious opposition to the status quo. There was the predictable supply of American flags, for example. But the event had one attribute essential to the development of a politically conscious movement of the working class--defiance of the union leadership and a move by the workers to take matters into their own hands.

This, no doubt, was the most shocking and disturbing aspect of the incident, as far as the powers-that-be were concerned. Their initial disarray and subsequent outrage indicate the enormous extent to which they depend on the trade union bureaucracy to keep the workers in line. If the tried and trusted bureaucracy is losing its grip, what then?

In this connection, the *Times*' denunciation of the workers is particularly significant. This newspaper has been unstinting in its praise of the new leadership of the AFL-CIO under John Sweeney. Its labor reporters and editorial writers have characterized the AFL-CIO

leadership as 'progressive,' 'militant' and 'democratic,' and gone to great lengths to depict the rather dismal record of the Sweeney group as a major success story for the working man.

But as the *Times*' frothing reaction to the building workers' action underscores, its affinity for Sweeney has nothing to do with a desire to unleash the power and fighting capacity of the working class. Quite the opposite. That the *Times* can simultaneously be the biggest fan of the AFL-CIO and the most vicious enemy of workers in struggle points to the chasm that separates the trade union apparatus from the real interests and aspirations of the working class.

See Also:

*Police attack march against nonunion contractor*

40,000 building workers halt rush hour traffic in Manhattan

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