

Dayton, Ohio union officials defend KKK member

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The leadership of the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1385 in Dayton, Ohio has come to the defense of a union member fired for distributing white supremacist propaganda while on the job. Clarence Webb, a bus driver, was fired by the Miami Valley Transit Authority last December after several passengers complained he was distributing membership cards for the Ku Klux Klan-associated Knights of the White Kamellia and advertisements for a rally scheduled in nearby Kettering, Ohio.

The fact that an ATU member was associated with an avowed racist organization revolted many bus drivers, black and white, particularly in the aftermath of the brutal murder of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas. A large number of transit workers and the city passengers they serve are minorities.

The attitude of the ATU leadership towards Webb was entirely different. During a February 28 union meeting ATU Local 1385 President Claude Huff spoke in defense of Webb and pushed for a vote by union members to sanction taking his case to arbitration. Anticipating opposition from the rank and file, local officials did little to inform anyone but their most loyal supporters about the meeting and what would be discussed. With less than a fourth of the membership in attendance, and many of those the union officials' handraisers, Huff succeeded in getting his motion passed.

When one bus operator began distributing anti-Klan material, Huff ordered him to stop, saying he couldn't do that at a union meeting. The worker argued that it was only right for the members to be informed about the Klan since this was what the meeting was about. Over the protest of this worker and others, the local president instructed his officers to collect and discard the leaflets that had been passed out.

One worker asked why Webb had not come to the union meeting to personally appeal to the members for support. One of the racist's supporters said Webb "felt it would be best to stay away" because of threats he had received. Huff made it clear he was speaking on Webb's behalf.

Huff presented Webb's firing as an unjust victimization by management which would set a precedent for all ATU members. At one point he compared Webb's racist activity to

a worker selling Girl Scout cookies or raffle tickets on the job. "If they can get away with this," warned Huff, "who is next?"

Huff's remarks were pure demagoguery. The local leadership is hardly noted for its defense of ATU members' rights. The transit authority tramples on the contractual rights of its employees with impunity. Most drivers elect to defend themselves in confrontations with management because union officials invariably take the side of the bosses. Among other things, the local leaders have colluded with management to establish a two- and three-tiered wage scale that discriminates against younger workers and undermines the living standards and working conditions of all bus drivers.

In 1983 when striking Greyhound bus driver Raymond Phillips was run over and killed by a scab in nearby Zanesville, Ohio, the ATU did nothing. Then during the 1989 Greyhound strike the local was asked to support Roger Cawthra, an ATU member in Connecticut who was framed up on charges that he shot at a scab bus. Huff and the local leadership refused to aid Cawthra over the wishes of the majority of Dayton bus drivers who supported the embattled worker.

Huff's defense of Webb had nothing to do with protecting the free speech rights of ATU members. A principled defense of such rights would involve opposing management's actions while condemning Webb and his organization for their racist and anti-working class politics.

Far from disassociating himself from the racist poison spread by Webb, the union leader gave every indication that he was defending the man, not in spite of his reactionary politics, but because of them.

When workers denounced the Klan one of the union bureaucracy's supporters provocatively defended the racist organization, saying, "We have members of the union in the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and that is considered OK."

A veteran bus driver said, "You can't equate selling Girl Scout cookies or belonging to the NAACP with recruiting

for the Klan. We have a trial going on right now in Texas that tells you what the Klan does," he said. Historically, the worker explained, the KKK had killed union organizers and workers and violently opposed the unity of black and white workers in Dayton and other cities.

The issue of defending union members' rights to distribute political material was one thing, the worker said, but the union had to go on record opposing Webb's racist activities before voting on whether to take his case to arbitration. When challenged to make such a condemnation of the Klan Huff refused to respond. Instead the union official called for a vote, and amidst much anger and confusion pushed through his resolution by a vote of 66 to 22. The meeting then erupted into shouts and a fistfight.

It is not necessary here to speculate how many members of the ATU Local 1385 leadership are close supporters of white supremacist organizations. It suffices to say that the support, tacit or otherwise, for racist and neo-fascistic organizations within the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is the logical outcome of its long-term embrace of anticommunism and American nationalism.

When the industrial unions were built during the social upheavals of the 1930s they were identified with a struggle against all forms of race prejudice and ethnic chauvinism. In Dayton Polish and Hungarian-American workers, inspired by the Russian Revolution and influenced by Marxism, drove the KKK, which had operated a headquarters in Dayton, across the state border into Indiana, and helped establish the city as a stronghold of industrial unionism.

Beginning in the late 1940s, even before the McCarthyite witch-hunt began, the trade union bureaucracy carried out a purge of socialists and left-wing workers. The Communist Party-led United Electrical workers union, which dominated most of Dayton's auto related factories, was expelled from the CIO and driven out of the plants in a bitter red-baiting campaign led by CIO President Philip Murray and United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther.

Over the last 25 years the American workers have paid dearly for the right-wing domination of the labor movement. When the postwar boom ended and corporate America turned decisively to a policy of class confrontation in the late 1970s the AFL-CIO, far from resisting the attack on workers' jobs and living standards, aided and abetted big business in its attack on the working class.

Plant closings, mass layoffs and the rise of the low-wage economy have ravaged cities like Dayton. At the same time, as social tensions have risen, the union bureaucracy has sought to divert the anger of workers by encouraging the most backward sentiments. During the 1980s unions like the UAW promoted anti-Asian hatred, and more recently, as seen in the 1996 strike at GM's brake plants in Dayton,

UAW officials denounced Mexican workers for stealing American jobs.

After years of collaborating with management and working to sabotage the unity of the working class, sections of the union bureaucracy have themselves embraced racial bigotry. In 1996 Keith Kaye, a UAW local president at a GM plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan, appealed to racist sentiments during an election against a black official. Kaye wrote in a newsletter, "I am going to tell you that I am both Nationalist and white. I'm proud to be both." He complained that being white in America meant having "the opportunity to pay for every conceivable giveaway program there is with no say as to where my earnings are headed." At the same time there has been no shortage of black union officials who promote reactionary black nationalist ideology.

The decay and breakup of the official unions and the decades-long promotion of class collaboration and American nationalism by the labor bureaucracy has left a legacy of political confusion in the working class. Without a political alternative to fight corporate downsizing, cuts in social programs and eroding living standards, more backward layers of the working class are susceptible to racial demagoguery.

In the 1930s socialists in the trade unions rallied working people of all races and ethnic backgrounds on the basis of a common struggle against the profit system and to guarantee the rights of all workers. Prior to this, the old labor apparatus, particularly the American Federation of Labor, were indifferent and hostile to the vast majority of the working class--the tens of millions of unskilled, minority and immigrant workers in US industries. Without the influence of socialists the mass industrial trade unions could never have been built in America.

The focal point of a struggle against racism today will not be the official trade unions. On the contrary, the labor bureaucracy has become a conduit for chauvinist and racist poison. The close affinity that the ATU leadership in Dayton feels for bigots like Clarence Webb only underscores the fact that the official unions have failed the working class and that new organizations, based on the program of socialist internationalism, must be built to unify all working people.



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