

Bus drivers campaign for “Union members’ bill of rights” in Washington state

The political issues in the fight for workers’ democracy

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Two Seattle public bus drivers and members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) have initiated a campaign to put a “Union Members’ Bill of Rights” on the Washington state ballot. The measure, known as Initiative 702, would require unions in the state to guarantee free speech, fair elections and other basic rights for their members.

The initiative would mandate labor organizations to include in their constitutional provisions the right of union members to voice their opinions or criticize the policies or activities of the union, its officers or candidates for election, without fear of retribution or arbitrary discipline.

The measure would also give members the right to vote on all contracts and subject all union officers, from the local level, to joint labor councils, to national and international positions, to direct elections by the membership. At present unelected bodies appoint many officials, including AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

The initiative would further enable any group, caucus or party showing support of at least five percent of the membership to obtain access to the union’s mailing list so that it could send literature to all members at any time. It would also force unions to provide, at least once a year, financial reports to each member, including the salaries and expense accounts of all union officials.

Supporters of the initiative collected 50,000 signatures in three months, winning particular support from ironworkers, carpenters and other building trades workers in the Seattle area. Their effort fell short of the 179,248 signatures required by July 2 to put the initiative on the November 1999 ballot, but organizers say they will renew the petition drive next winter to place it on the ballot in the year 2000.

This campaign has had the positive benefit of smoking out the AFL-CIO and exposing its real attitude towards workers’ democracy. The Executive Board of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, voted to oppose Initiative 702 and encourage workers not to sign the petition to place in on the ballot.

In a leaflet denouncing the initiative the Washington State AFL-CIO Labor Council said, “It may sound good at first, but take a closer look and you’ll see it is unnecessary, dangerous and illegal.” It went on to say, “Initiative 702 would create massive new government regulation of how YOUR union conducts everyday business—from how officers are elected to what’s allowed in your newsletter.” Denouncing the initiative’s authors as a “few disgruntled rank-and-file members” the leaflet claimed union members already had the power to decide how unions operate.

Rick Bender, president of the state AFL-CIO, denounced the proposal to give dissident groups access to mailing lists, saying this “would cause a lot of disruption and make it difficult for local unions to function.” Other officials said the measure would turn the unions into something

comparable to governments in postwar Italy which, they said, were unable to rule effectively because there were too many contending parties and factions.

One wonders if the AFL-CIO would prefer the unions to be run like pre-war, i.e., fascist Italy. Johnny Jackson, who along with co-worker Jamie Newman initiated the campaign, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “You can’t deny democracy on the grounds that there will be 100 parties. That’s no reason to have a totalitarian state. In the unions there is only one party line and if you get out of line, they crush you.

“There should be competition in the unions, so that the best ideas survive. This makes a lot of AFL-CIO officials angry because we are seeking the total restructuring of organized labor. Just saying those words, ‘organized labor,’ makes one’s heart sink. The rank-and-file wants change. We’ve gotten e-mail from workers in Pontiac, Michigan and other parts of the country saying that they’ve been struggling to change their unions too. The unions are bureaucratized.

“Just look at the text of our initiative—voting for officials, ratification of contracts, legitimize oppositions—what’s wrong with that? It’s good for the rank-and-file. If I was [AFL-CIO President] John Sweeney and making a six-figure salary, maybe I would be angry at this initiative too.

“We debated Rick Bender, the state AFL-CIO head, at a carpenters union meeting. He ran into a problem because he didn’t want to talk about democracy. All he wanted to talk about was procedures. He said we should have talked over our concerns with the union leaders first before trying to get an initiative on the ballot. He wouldn’t answer anything about workers’ rights to elect union officials and vote on contracts.”

Jackson told the WSWs that he and Newman initiated the campaign after a struggle in their union, the 3,500-member ATU Local 587. “I hadn’t been active in the union for ten years. I didn’t take the union seriously. They weren’t doing anything for us, so I said, why get involved in this nonsense?” The growing anger of drivers towards the union’s collaboration with management led Jackson to run for shop steward. After his election three and a half years ago workers defeated a union-management plan for “team work” that would have eliminated a guaranteed eight-hour-day.

“After that the Kings County Transit Authority and local officials became much tighter because they knew there was an activist in the union,” Jackson said. The ATU local and management have now submitted negotiations for a new contract to binding arbitration, which means the bus drivers, who have been working without a contract for nine months, will not be able to vote on a new agreement.

Jackson and Newman have also pointed to the experience of ironworkers in Seattle last summer, who, after twice voting down

agreements brought back by Ironworkers Local 86 negotiators, saw their local placed under trusteeship by the international leadership. Union officials then signed a sweetheart contract with management, banned all unauthorized meetings and began a purge of local dissidents on charges of "inciting dissatisfaction and dissension."

The elementary rights advocated by the supporters of Initiative 702 should be a requirement for all organizations, above all those that purport to represent the interests of workers. It would be hard to find another institution, however, whose members have fewer democratic rights than the AFL-CIO. Trade unionists have, for all practical purposes, no voice in organizations that allegedly speak in their name.

At the top of the unions is a bureaucracy chiefly consisting of careerists who never led a significant struggle in their lives. The AFL-CIO Executive Board members have ruled their respective unions like fiefdoms for decades, even though they have lost anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of their memberships. In many cases the top union officials were never rank-and-file workers. Many were functionaries who climbed their way to the top of the union bureaucracy and have little or no more contact with workers than a typical Congressman or high-level corporate manager.

The regional and local levels are manned, with few exceptions, by the most backward and opportunistic elements who see the unions not as an instrument for struggle, but as a means of personal enrichment and advancement.

The labor bureaucracy openly and unashamedly collaborates with management to the detriment of the wages and working conditions of its members. Union officials accept plant closings, mass layoffs and concessions in exchange for positions on corporate boards and other perks. These policies have so disgusted rank-and-file workers that the vast majority does not attend union meetings, even when the union bureaucracy bothers to call them.

When vocal opposition arises invariably it is met with threats, intimidation or outright violence. Just last year a group of dissident miners in western Pennsylvania was savagely beaten by United Mine Workers officials and their goons because they were protesting against forced overtime and other concessions the UMWA granted to the coal operators in the national contract.

The desire for genuine organizations where workers can discuss their views and debate which policies best defend their interests is entirely legitimate. The Seattle workers correctly understand that the development of workers' democracy is not possible without a struggle against the present leadership in the unions.

Critical political issues and questions of perspective are posed by the struggle to develop organizations democratically controlled by the workers themselves. Determination and militancy are necessary and essential ingredients, but they are not sufficient in and of themselves.

The great problem that American workers face is a lack of historical knowledge and understanding of the political and social forces they are up against. The precondition for waging a successful struggle is a basic grasp of the history of the labor movement, including the roots and origins of the AFL-CIO, and more particularly, the bitter experiences of the last quarter century.

The mass industrial unions emerged in response to the Depression as a result of powerful working class struggles that were, in many cases, led by workers who were members of socialist organizations or deeply influenced by socialist ideals. At the same time the leadership of the newly established CIO was profoundly conservative and from the beginning sought to establish a government-sanctioned labor movement. Fearing the growing influence of socialism, CIO leaders like John L. Lewis tied the new unions to Roosevelt and the Democratic Party and sought to block the development of a political movement of the working class against American capitalism and its two-party system.

The merger of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955 marked the consolidation of a bureaucracy that was hostile to any challenge to the profit system. Left-wing and socialist-minded workers had been purged in the late 1940s and democracy in the unions greatly eroded. The politics of the unions were firmly established on the basis of Cold War anti-communism and an alliance with the Democratic Party.

Nevertheless, even into the 1970s, the union bureaucracy had to take into account an active membership. In 1971-72 a wave of militant strikes by hundreds of thousands of workers forced AFL-CIO President George Meany to resign from Nixon's pay board.

By the mid-1970s, however, fundamental economic and political changes took place that weakened the position of the working class. In 1974-75 the US was hit by the biggest recession since the 1930s and mass unemployment was used to undermine the wages offensive workers had been engaged in since the late 1960s. In 1975 the New York City unions accepted sweeping givebacks and job cuts as part of a plan backed by the Ford administration to avert municipal bankruptcy. This established the corporatist principle—that would be repeated nationally again and again—that workers had to sacrifice their hard-won gains to save big business.

In 1979-80 President Carter's Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker raised interest rates to record levels plunging the country into another recession. In exchange for a seat on Chrysler's board of directors, the United Auto Workers (UAW) imposed massive wage-cuts and other concessions on their members.

The decade of the 1980s saw an offensive against the unions unprecedented since the 1920s and 1930s. Employers hired strikebreakers and private security companies, workers were arrested, injured and killed on picket lines, and hundreds of union locals across the country were smashed. Reagan's firing of 11,000 PATCO air traffic controllers in August 1981 was a watershed in this process. The AFL-CIO and other unions played a decisive role in the isolation and defeat of PATCO, establishing a treacherous pattern that continues to this day.

Such betrayals included: Continental Airlines, Phelps Dodge and Greyhound in 1983-84; AT Massey Coal in 1985-86; United Airlines, Pan American Airlines, the *Chicago Tribune*, Hormel and Wheeling-Pittsburgh in 1985-86; TWA, Colt Firearms, USX Steel, IBP and Patrick Cudahy in 1986-87; John Morrell and International Paper in 1987-88; Pittston and Eastern Airlines in 1989; Greyhound (1990), Caterpillar (1992 and 1994), Bridgestone/Firestone (1994-95) and the Detroit newspapers (1995 to the present).

Of particular significance was the 1985-86 strike by meatpackers at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota where the United Food and Commercial Workers and AFL-CIO bureaucracy played the role of strikebreakers. UFCW Local P-9 rejected a concessionary contract which the international union had agreed to with the other meatpacking companies, and after five months on strike 1,500 workers organized mass picketing to stop the reopening of their plant with scabs and sent roving pickets to shut down other Hormel plants.

Democratic Governor Rudy Perpich called out the national guard to smash the strike and the UFCW and AFL-CIO supported Perpich's assault. When the strikers rejected a sellout contract and defied the international's order to end the strike, the UFCW and AFL-CIO Executive Council ordered a ban on all support for the strikers, and the international placed the local under trusteeship. It threw the elected leaders out, took over the union hall and treasury, signed a pro-company contract which excluded the vast majority of strikers, and then recruited the strikebreakers into the union and reorganized the local.

The defeated strikes and mass layoffs that decimated basic industry and drove millions of younger, more militant, workers out of the unions, created the conditions for the bureaucracy to establish a far greater and more open collaboration with the employers. Ultimately the unions,

spearheaded by the UAW, embraced the reactionary outlook of corporatism, i.e., the rejection of the class struggle and the claim that the interests of workers were identical to those of the employers. This led to a proliferation of joint labor-management committees and structures designed to boost productivity and corporate profits. In steel, auto and other industries the corporations laid off foremen and other shop floor supervisors because the job of squeezing more production out of the workers was now being done by union personnel.

The degeneration of the unions into instruments of management, not workers, was inseparable from the political and ideological outlook of the AFL-CIO. The purging of left-wing and socialist-minded workers in the late 1940s and the adoption of a right-wing political program set the trade unions upon a course whose logical outcome can fully be seen today.

What is the political program of the AFL-CIO? It is based on two principles: class collaboration and economic nationalism. The AFL-CIO is committed to the defense of capitalism, hostile to socialism and opposed to any challenge to the interests of big business. On the political front this has meant an alliance with the Democratic Party and opposition to the building of a political party of the working class to oppose the economic and political power of the wealthy elite in America.

Moreover, the AFL-CIO bases its policies on a nationalist perspective. This has meant aligning workers with US-based companies against foreign competition and opposing a combined struggle by the international working class in defense of its jobs and living standards.

During the postwar economic boom when American capitalism dominated the world's markets the unions were able to obtain modest gains for workers. By the 1970s and 1980s, however, Japanese and European capitalism put an end to America's unchallenged economic monopoly and threatened many of its markets, including in the US itself. This precipitated a decisive shift in the policy of the American ruling class which embarked on a campaign to cut costs and intensify its exploitation of the working class through speed-up, wage-cutting and downsizing.

The AFL-CIO responded by collaborating with US companies to lower labor costs and drive up productivity. By the 1990s, American corporations drove US labor costs below all the other major industrialized countries, except the United Kingdom, lengthened the workday for manufacturing workers to the highest levels since the end of World War II and carried out the weekly destruction of thousands of jobs without slightest resistance from the unions.

The turn by corporate America to a policy of confrontation with the working class which was adapted to by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy was bound up with fundamental changes in world economy. The unions had always based themselves on the assumption that corporations were permanently dependent on a national supply of labor and could be pressured by threatening to withhold that labor.

The nationalist policies of the labor bureaucracy were fatally undermined by the emergence of transnational corporations that organized production and distribution on a global scale, making them far less dependent on domestic labor. Corporations could now shift production anywhere in the world to take advantage of lower labor costs and continually extract concessions from workers by threatening to close operations and move elsewhere. Rejecting the perspective of a common struggle against international capital, the AFL-CIO responded by inciting hatred against foreign workers for "stealing American jobs," and, at the same time, imposing the concessions demanded by the transnational companies.

The decline of the unions and their embrace of corporatism in the US is part of an international phenomena. The US is only the most extreme example of a process going on in Europe, Canada, Japan and elsewhere. Last month the president of the Trades Union Congress (the British equivalent to the AFL-CIO) John Monks hailed the "partnership approach" that has reduced the number of strikes in England to their

lowest level since 1891. "These figures," he said, "should nail the myth that unions are adversaries and show good employers they have nothing to fear from a proper relationship with unions."

While the AFL-CIO's policies produced a disastrous decline in the position of the American working class, the labor bureaucracy insulated itself from the impact of the declining number of union members by establishing new financial relations with the corporate employers and the state that guaranteed the AFL-CIO's stream of income. These included profit-sharing arrangements, representation on corporate boards, "workers' buyouts" and "employee stock ownership plans," union-management funds and joint business ventures, and direct government subsidies.

The preservation of these privileges has depended upon the bureaucracy's continued ability to suppress resistance to the employers' demands, and above all, prevent the emergence of a politically conscious, i.e., socialist opposition to its collusion with management. For this reason the AFL-CIO bureaucracy has sought to stamp out any remnants of workers' democracy in the unions.

The labor bureaucrats have an organic hostility to democratic discussion because they correctly fear such an atmosphere might release the pent-up anger of workers against the corporations and their servants in the unions, and lead workers to seek out more radical solutions to their problems. On more than one occasion the AFL-CIO has reminded recalcitrant employers that they would be far worse off without a union to impose labor discipline.

If bureaucratization simply afflicted a few select unions, or was even just an American problem, it might be argued that the source of the problem was the bad qualities of the union leadership. Indeed the unions are run by the most narrow-minded and personally corrupt types, but that doesn't explain how these elements came to dominate and control the unions, nor why in country after country the same general process has been repeated. Therefore it is necessary to go beyond the subjective qualities of the leaders, to the more profound, objective causes for the decline of the unions.

This is rooted in the very character and socio-economic function of trade unions. Unions do not organize workers as a class to put an end to the wages system which enables the capitalist owners to appropriate the bulk of the wealth created by the working class. On the contrary they operate within the framework of capitalism and organize workers on the basis of their position as exploited sellers of labor power, or as Marx put it, wage slaves.

Even under optimum circumstances the essential role of a union is to seek the best price for labor power under the prevailing market conditions. In a contract with the employer the union fixes the price of labor power and the general conditions in which surplus value is extracted from workers. In order to guarantee that their members deliver their labor power in accordance with the terms of negotiated contracts, the union is legally responsible to prevent work stoppages and other forms of protest that threaten to disrupt this relationship.

The founders and greatest theoretical and political leaders of the early socialist movement, including Marx and Engels, long counterposed to narrow trade unionism the organization of the working class as a political force. Trade unions accept the framework of capitalist exploitation, they explained, while a political party of the working class, if guided by a scientific appraisal of the historic interests of working people, strives for the abolition of the wages system and the building of a new, socialist society.

More than a century of experience with trade unions, not only in the US, but all over the world has demonstrated that these organizations invariably develop common tendencies: class collaboration, bureaucracy, virulent nationalism and anti-communism. These retrograde tendencies have all been exacerbated by the globalization of production.

The universal degeneration of the unions has exposed all those who claimed workers could change the direction of the labor movement without rejecting the political outlook of the union bureaucracy. A case in point is the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) that told workers the unions could be democratized without challenging the labor bureaucracy's pro-capitalist policies and alliance with the Democratic Party.

On the basis of this perspective the TDU ended up becoming part of the Teamsters bureaucracy, imposing sell-out agreements on the membership and defending former Teamsters President Ron Carey, who was thrown out of office for embezzling union funds. The TDU's attitude to workers' democracy is contingent on whether or not it holds power. As its supporters in the Labor Notes magazine recently wrote: "What seems democratic to a dissident in a local union—such as filling all positions by election rather than appointment—may not look so appealing or democratic to the reformer who has just won a close election and wants to sweep out corruption."

It is not possible to maintain democracy inside of organizations that accept and perpetuate the thoroughly undemocratic relations that exist in society as a whole, i.e., the social tyranny and political monopoly of a tiny section of the population—the corporate, financial and investing elite—over the vast majority of people, the working class.

There is an irreconcilable struggle between the interests of working people and the capitalist class. The more workers become conscious of this and begin to assert their own interests the more they will be forced to challenge the system that oppresses them and fight for demands that the economic powers-that-be consider impossible to grant.

Any organization, whether or not it calls itself a workers organization, that defends the status quo will have to resort to undemocratic methods internally to suppress the aspirations of the masses of workers. Indeed real freedom can only be guaranteed within an organization that rejects the dictates of the capitalist market and places the social interests of the working people first.

In the future, workers in the unions and the tens of millions of outside the AFL-CIO should and will seek to develop more democratic organizations, such as workers' councils and rank-and-file committees to fight management abuse and for their basic rights. In such struggles, which will necessarily erupt into direct conflict with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the government, workers should not hesitate to break with the official union apparatus and set up new organizations.

In fighting against the labor bureaucracy and for democratic rights workers cannot evade fundamental political issues of perspective and strategy. Downsizing, stagnating living standards, inadequate housing, health care and education are not simply the product of this or that individual employer, but of capitalism and the political system which defends it. In so far as the struggles of the working class are limited to a trade union perspective they will remain entirely within the restrictive framework of the capitalist system.

If the decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of millions of working people are to be made by the majority and not by stock market speculators, corporate executives and financiers looking to protect their own narrow self-interests, a radical change in political and economic life must be carried out. No one can claim that the American two-party system speaks for the majority of people. Only by building their own political party, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective, can workers organize themselves as a force that can assert the will of the majority and fight for a truly democratic society, i.e., one that places economic and political power in the hands of working people.





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