

Signs of decay on America's Labor Day 1999

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Events surrounding the last Labor Day of the twentieth century provided a stark picture of the semi-moribund state of the official labor movement in the United States.

There was the scene at the New York Stock Exchange, where AFL-CIO President John Sweeney rang the opening bell Friday. He came at the invitation of stock exchange chairman Richard Grasso. Wall Street's invitation to Sweeney was fitting. After all, the enormous wealth flowing into the coffers of Corporate America is due in no small part to the services of the trade union bureaucracy in smothering opposition to cost-cutting, downsizing, wage cuts and speed-up.

Labor Day festivities in the United States were overshadowed by new reports documenting the deteriorating conditions of life for the majority of working people, especially the poorest layers. The International Labor Organization released figures showing that US workers put in more hours than workers in any other advanced industrialized country.

In 1997 American workers labored for an average of 1,966 hours, 70 hours a year more than workers in Japan, the industrial nation that previously ranked first in hours on the job. On average, Americans now work 350 hours more per year than their European counterparts. The longer hours in the United States stand in opposition to the trend toward a shorter workweek in the other advanced countries. Japan, for example, has seen a decline in working hours from 2,181 in 1980 to 1,889 in 1995. Workers in France put in 1,731 hours per year and workers in Norway just 1,399.

With the rise in working hours has come a growth in productivity, which increased by 12 percent from 1989 to 1998. The US continues to lead the industrialized countries in labor productivity per person employed, with workers earning US businesses nearly \$10,000 more in terms of value added than a worker in Japan.

The ILO report did not spell out what longer hours mean in terms of the physical and psychic toll on US workers. Not much imagination is required to realize that longer and longer hours on the job must lead to increased levels of stress, heart attacks, job-related sickness and injury and sharpening tensions at home.

Another study released over the Labor Day weekend showed that inequality in the United States, already the most economically polarized of the major industrialized countries, has increased yet again. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal nonprofit group, reported that the gap between millions of working Americans and the wealthy elite widened in 1999.

The wealthiest 1 percent of the population now take home as much income as the poorest 100 million. The bottom 80 percent of the US population now earn a smaller share of total US income than they did in 1977. The richest 1 percent earned an average of \$515,600 in after-tax income, more than double their earnings in 1977.

Longer hours have done nothing to close the income gap. The study showed that parents in middle income households now work 3,335 hours per year, compared with 3,200 hours per year a decade ago and 3,000 hours per year in 1979. In other words, the typical husband and wife now spend a combined total of more than eight weeks on the job, over and above the hours worked in the late 1970s, and nearly three and a half more weeks on the job than in 1989.

However, the median annual US income is just \$300 more today than in 1989. Adjusted hourly wages for male workers are, in fact, 1.8 percent lower than in 1989. The poorest one-fifth of US workers will earn just \$8,800 this year, down from \$10,000 in 1977.

A short piece buried in the September 5 *New York Times* reports that workplace inspections by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration are running at the lowest pace since the agency was

founded in 1971. During the Clinton administration inspections have fallen far below the previous average of 40,000 to 80,000 per year, to just 25,850 inspections in 1995 and 26,393 in 1996.

In a visit to Detroit over the Labor Day weekend, Vice President Al Gore, the likely choice by the AFL-CIO in the 2000 presidential elections, never mentioned the strike by Detroit teachers, then the largest ongoing labor struggle in the United States. He chose a church service as the venue for his main public appearance, steering clear of Detroit's annual Labor Day parade and its contingent of strikers, even though the event is a traditional stomping ground for Democratic presidential candidates.

This year, as has been the case for more than a decade, an air of unreality bordering on the grotesque hovered about the Detroit Labor Day parade. There were the ever-thinning ranks of locked-out *Detroit News* and *Free Press* workers, and small contingents of strikers from other struggles isolated and abandoned by the bureaucracy. There were huge gaps between the union delegations, some composed of only a handful of workers. The marchers were generally older, most in their middle ages or above, many of them members of the trade union bureaucracy and its narrow periphery.

The march proceeded down Woodward Avenue past the hulks of abandoned and burned out buildings, through some of the poorest neighborhoods in America. As the union delegations filed past, headed up by American flags, marching bands and pompom girls, a handful of people lined the sidewalks to watch; most looked impoverished, many apparently homeless. Near its end the march passed a giant crater, the site of the former Hudson's department store, a symbol of the devastation of Detroit, which is due in no small measure to the abandonment by the unions of any struggle against plant closures and wage-cutting over the past two decades.

At Cadillac Square the march dissipated. There were no speeches. Huge banners said it all: *UAW-DaimlerChrysler*, *UAW-Ford*, *UAW-General Motors* they proclaimed. Inside three large tents the latest car models or racing vehicles were on display. If you weren't in the mood for car ogling, you could take a ride in a hot air balloon.

The teachers' union did not even bother to set up a table. A leaflet distributed by union officials apologized

to the public for the walkout. Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, a main architect of the attack on the teachers, was given a place of honor on the reviewing stand.

No wonder that most workers in Detroit and other American cities preferred to spend the weekend at home or at the beach.

This is not to suggest that there is something unique about the labor movement in the United States. Union membership is declining all over the world and most capitalist countries have seen heightened social polarization. However, the spectacular collapse of the trade union movement in the US carries important lessons for workers in every country. In no other country of the world has the official labor movement been so openly identified with support for capitalism and economic nationalism, and hostility to socialism.



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