

The AFL-CIO's endorsement of Al Gore: what it represents and what it doesn't

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Last week's AFL-CIO national convention was dominated by the union federation's endorsement of Vice President Al Gore for the Democratic presidential nomination. Whether Gore or his sole opponent, former Senator Bill Bradley, becomes the Democratic candidate is of far greater importance to the union leaders than to the masses of working people in whose name they claim to speak.

Neither politician seriously addresses the critical issues facing workers and their families: the corporate downsizing and resulting economic insecurity, the stagnation of living standards, ever-longer working hours, the lack of affordable health care and quality public education.

Moreover, the social weight of the union federation continues to decline. A new study released at the convention shows union membership is almost negligible in precisely those sectors of the economy that are growing most rapidly and are most closely linked to the development of modern technology. Today, fewer than one in seven workers belongs to a union, compared with roughly one in four throughout most of the 1970s, and one in three when the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations merged 44 years ago.

The influence of the labor federation within the working class is a far cry from what it was in the 1940s, 50s, 60s and even the 1970s, when big business politicians felt obliged to take into account what the unions had to say because these organizations had the active allegiance of tens of millions of workers. By contrast, few workers paid any attention to the gathering of the 700 top-ranking union officials at last week's AFL-CIO convention, notwithstanding the widespread media attention it received.

Yet for the Democratic hopefuls, especially Gore, the

official endorsement of the convention became a crucial issue. How is this apparent contradiction to be explained?

If the official endorsement of the AFL-CIO leadership has assumed increased significance in the current competition for the Democratic nomination it is not because of some resurgence of the AFL-CIO. Rather it is a particular expression of the decline in the popular base of support for the Democratic Party, the lack of genuine interest and participation in the nominating process and the growing gap between electoral politics and the masses of people.

The election process has increasingly become dominated by the corporate-controlled media, polls and other instruments to manipulate public opinion. The news media declared that a failure to obtain the AFL-CIO's endorsement would have been a major setback for Gore, who has seen his lead in the polls slip and Bradley surpass him in fundraising. Gore responded accordingly and sought the assistance of President Clinton to press the union officials for the early endorsement. This whole process took place within a very small, privileged and insulated circle of people, whose notion of what is important has nothing in common with what the vast majority of the population think.

Connected to this is the role of big money in the elections. For the media, the pollsters and the politicians themselves, the viability of a candidate is judged by the size of the contributions they receive from corporate sponsors, wealthy donors and others. In the first half of this year, the two parties raised a combined \$55 million in unregulated "soft money" contributions, up 80 percent over the same period in 1995, the year before the last presidential election. The decisions by these wealthy donors on where to send

their money are, in turn, influenced by the media and the polls.

Given the narrow base of political life in America and the lack of popular participation, the AFL-CIO apparatus became a rather attractive prize for the presidential contenders. If voter turnout for the primaries falls, as predicted, to some 20 percent of voting-age citizens, a well-funded organization with available manpower, such as the AFL-CIO, might be able to shift the vote in key districts by one or two percentage points, and that could make the difference between victory or defeat in a number of races.

The AFL-CIO has already pledged more than \$40 million to target 35 congressional districts in the 2000 elections, and millions more will be funneled behind Gore. Moreover, the labor federation can produce campaign leaflets, finance media advertising campaigns, and organize thousands of volunteers to man phone banks and register new voters.

These were the calculations behind the effort by Gore and the White House to secure the AFL-CIO's endorsement. On the eve of the convention vote President Clinton phoned several union officials who had indicated that they would not give Gore an early endorsement, and offered various political favors in exchange for their votes, or at least an abstention.

Earlier Clinton attended a dinner in New York City to honor Teamsters President James P. Hoffa, who has opposed an early endorsement of Gore. According to Teamsters officials, Clinton told Hoffa he would support the union's chauvinist demand to continue a ban on Mexican trucks, due to be lifted January 1, 2000 under the North American Free Trade Agreement. Hoffa, for his part, wants government monitoring of his union lifted.

Several weeks before, Bradley had publicly proclaimed his support for the Teamsters' anti-Mexican proposal, making it clear that he has no qualms in supporting the labor bureaucracy's most reactionary demands.

The debate at the AFL-CIO convention over the endorsement had more to do with the differing interests of various sections of big business than it did with the needs of the working class. Among Gore's biggest backers were the public sector unions, which enjoy a close relationship with the Clinton administration, even though the vice president has boasted that his

“reinventing government” plan has eliminated 250,000 public employees' jobs. Unions in industries that have benefited from the administration's trade policies and the expansion of US exports also backed Gore.

The United Auto Workers, which opposed the early endorsement, is allied with the Big Three auto companies and is pressing the Clinton administration for trade war measures against their international competitors. The United Steelworkers agreed to drop its opposition after the White House moved to restrict the import of lower-priced steel.

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