

Economic nationalism sets the tone for IMF protests in Washington

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The Mobilization for Global Justice in Washington, DC April 16-17 demonstrated that the protest movement which erupted only a few months ago in Seattle has already reached a political impasse. The political limitations that were evident in the Seattle demonstrations manifested themselves in Washington as an open alliance between student and environmental groups and the proponents of economic nationalism from US business and the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy.

In last fall's protests in Seattle against the World Trade Organization, the role of the AFL-CIO was less politically dominant. While there was a definite strain of nationalism in the general opposition to "globalization," there was also a very pronounced and genuine anger against the domination of the world economy by giant transnational corporations and its impact on jobs, living standards, working conditions and democratic rights. This was reflected in the tens of thousands of trade unionists and other workers in the main demonstration in Seattle, as well as the street protests that involved many thousands of young people from the US and around the world.

This element of anti-capitalist protest was far less prominent in last month's Washington demonstrations. The platform of the main rally on April 16 was dominated by AFL-CIO officials, Democratic Party politicians and spokesmen from liberal think tanks, student organizations and environmental lobby groups. The rally became the occasion for the trade union officials, with the support of allies such as Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, to cloak their protectionist policies in populist garb.

A second demonstration, organized as an alternative to the "legal" rally, involved civil disobedience protests near the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings. But hundreds of police, federal marshals and national guardsmen—trained to handle Seattle-like protests—prevented the proceedings from being disrupted. In the end, failing to achieve their stated aim of "shutting down" the IMF and World Bank, hundreds of demonstrators volunteered to be arrested.

Politically speaking, the groups that organized the street protests were heavily influenced by a combination of anarchism, anti-consumerism and hostility to technological development. For all of the apparent differences between the two demonstrations, the basic perspective of both was founded on an identification of the process of economic globalization with the capitalist institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, under which this process is unfolding.

The AFL-CIO and Nader quite crudely counterposed to the global integration of economic life a nationalist orientation which glorified the national state and demanded a strengthening of American sovereignty. But similar nationalist conceptions, in somewhat more radical garb, dominated the street demonstrations as well. Neither protest could advance a perspective of struggle for masses of people around the world looking to defend their living standards and democratic rights.

Although protest organizers sought to bring contingents from throughout the US, only 10,000 people attended. The participants were mostly middle

class youth, with few workers present. There were no significant sections of trade unionists in attendance, although the AFL-CIO endorsed the demonstration. For the vast majority of workers and youth in the Washington area, including the sizable minority and immigrant communities, the protest was little more than a curiosity, except for the disruption caused by the shutdown of a large portion of the capital by the police.

The AFL-CIO signed on late to the April 16-17 demonstration, after union officials concluded they could use the protest to bolster their lobbying efforts against trade legislation proposed by Clinton and backed by the most powerful sections of US business. The AFL-CIO is spearheading a campaign to block tariff reductions against African countries, prevent the normalization of trade with China and stop the expansion of trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The union bureaucracy is in an alliance with more backward sections of US industry, such as textiles and steel, that have been unable to adjust to the globalization of production and are seeking tariff protection against foreign competition.

This is a right-wing campaign, firmly based on economic nationalism. However, in recent years the AFL-CIO, under the leadership of President John Sweeney, has sought to disguise its nationalist orientation, portraying its protectionist program as a progressive campaign in defense of labor standards and workers' rights, particularly in Third World countries.

This pretense is demolished by any objective consideration of the record and practice of the AFL-CIO in the US and internationally. The labor federation has long worked with the most reactionary forces, including the CIA and the US State Department, to undermine every revolutionary, or even independent, struggle of the masses of the world against US imperialism. The AFL-CIO allies itself with trade union organizations which are notorious for their corruption and corporatist relations with the ruling elites in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Within the US the AFL-CIO functions more as a labor contractor and subordinate arm of corporate management than a workers' organization. Its member unions have all but abandoned the strike weapon. When walkouts are called, they are quickly isolated and betrayed by the union leadership. The AFL-CIO has overseen a continuous erosion of workers' living standards in the midst of the biggest boom in corporate profits and Wall Street share values in US history.

For all their denunciations of conditions in China and elsewhere, the union leaders have done nothing to oppose the enormous increase in sweatshops and child labor, prison labor and even slave labor within the US itself. Instead, the resources and influence of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy are concentrated on blocking any independent political organization of the working class, through its support for the Democratic Party.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy has allied itself with the most right-wing enemies of the working class. During the "Buy American" campaigns of the 1980s, while the auto and steel unions pushed anti-Japanese

chauvinism, the apparel unions joined South Carolina textile magnate and union-buster Roger Milliken in his "Crafted with Pride in the USA" campaign. This relationship with Milliken, a longtime supporter of right-wing Republican causes, continued during the campaign against NAFTA, GATT and most recently against trade with China. A section of the union bureaucracy, most notably the Teamsters, are promoting Patrick Buchanan, whose Reform Party presidential bid is being bankrolled by Milliken.

At the main Washington rally, on April 16, environmental and student groups sought to cover up the right-wing character of the AFL-CIO's "Campaign for Global Fairness." Some speakers combined denunciations of capitalism and "corporate globalization" with praise for union officials like AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Richard Trumka and Steelworkers President George Becker, whose fanatical anti-socialist credentials are well known.

The political essence of the labor bureaucracy's policies was on display a few days earlier, at two Washington rallies held on April 12 by the AFL-CIO and Teamsters union to oppose the normalization of trade relations with China. Teamsters President James Hoffa provided a platform for Buchanan, whose remarks combined anti-Asian racism with saber-rattling against "communist" China. At the AFL-CIO rally, also attended by Hoffa, Steelworkers President Becker denounced China in no less vile terms.

It should be noted that Roopa Gona, a representative of United Students Against Sweatshops, who praised the union officials at the main rally on April 16, also spoke at the AFL-CIO's anti-Chinese rally earlier in the week. That week hundreds of students met with Steelworkers officials at a Washington hotel to plan efforts to build local organizations. Whether motivated by political opportunism or naivete, these students are aligning themselves with one of the most reactionary forces in American politics.

It is understandable why young people would be repulsed by the conservative and establishment character of the April 16 demonstration in Washington. However, for all their theatrics, the civil disobedience protests were unable to present any viable political alternative to the politics of the AFL-CIO. Nor did they express any serious concern for reaching the masses of working people.

The protests were organized by the Direct Action Network, a coalition which includes Earth First!, the Ruckus Society, the Peoples Global Action and other opponents of consumerism and technology. In opposition to globalization, these groups counterpose an idealized notion of an earlier period of American capitalism when the national market and national state played a more dominant role in economic life.

What none of these groups ask is why globalization has taken place. They treat the process as either an accident or a corporate conspiracy. In fact, globalization is the result of powerful objective tendencies in which the productive forces strive to develop on a global scale and overcome the suffocating limitations of the national market. This process has the potential, as has every historical advance in the productive forces, to enormously elevate humanity's standard of living and culture.

However, insofar as global technological and economic advances remain within the framework of capitalism, and are therefore subordinated to the pursuit of profit and the competition of rival nation-states, this essentially progressive tendency finds a reactionary expression. Under capitalism, the global integration of economic life leads to the greater impoverishment and exploitation of the masses of the world's people.

The great historical task posed in the twentieth century, which must be resolved in the twenty-first, is the liberation of mankind's productive forces from the outmoded property relations of capitalism. But the environmental and student organizations involved in the Washington protests equate globalization with the capitalist social relations within which it is imprisoned.

This fundamental confusion inevitably leads to the most pessimistic

political conclusions. Overlooked are the profoundly revolutionary implications of the crisis which is being deepened by globalization. Above all, this outlook fails to recognize the existence of a social force which is capable of resolving the crisis in a progressive and revolutionary way, namely, the working class.

The "other side" of globalization is the way in which this process has enormously strengthened the international working class. There has been a massive numerical growth in the ranks of workers, both internationally and within the US. In Latin America, Africa and Asia tens of millions of people have come from the countryside to work in the factories, while in the advanced countries large sections of people previously considered middle class have been proletarianized.

At no point since Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto has it been more clear that the world is divided between two main classes—the capitalists and the vast majority of humanity that is dependent on wages for survival. Moreover, the commonality of the struggles confronting the international working class—against downsizing, falling living standards, attacks on social benefits and democratic rights—creates unprecedented conditions for the realization of Marx's maxim for workers of the world to unite.

For many of the organizations leading the street protests, such as Earth First!, the sweeping changes of the last two decades are frightening and demoralizing. Seeing no basis for transforming society in a progressive and humane fashion, they target technology, science and modern society as the enemy, and consider those living in urban centers—"the consumerist minority"—as a rapidly-multiplying mass, threatening to devour the earth's resources.

These groups base themselves on the reactionary legacy of Malthusianism, which proclaims "overpopulation" to be the source of man's problems. This deeply reactionary outlook ignores the ability of man, through the development of his productive forces, to reshape the natural world, and his own social environment, in accord with his needs.

Many of these groups attacked the IMF and World Bank for financing dams, electrification programs and other economic development projects. For them the model of the future is a return to the primitiveness of the past. In the words of Martin Kohr, president of the Third World Network, the world should "rediscover the technological and cultural wisdom of Third World systems of agriculture, industry, shelter, water and sanitation, and medicine."

In the late 1980s, while famine stalked Ethiopia, Dave Foreman, a co-founder of Earth First!, declared, "The best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance." He wrote to one critic: "Call it fascist if you like, but I am more interested in bears, rain forests, and whales than in people."

Foreman and not a few other environmentalists, including the co-founder of Earth Day, Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Gaylord Nelson, and sections of the Sierra Club, have called for curbs on further immigration to the US, claiming that the country's natural resources are already overburdened.

Notwithstanding some "left" rhetoric, the political orientation embodied in the Washington protests was thoroughly conventional, in no way representing a challenge to capitalism. That is why the Clinton administration and officials from the World Bank and IMF had no problem expressing their agreement with many of the demands put forward by the protesters.

As demonstrations were under way outside the IMF and World Bank meetings on April 17, US Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers was declaring, "The world is rightly and increasingly demanding that assistance be more effective in raising human development." World Bank and IMF officials announced they would concentrate their efforts to fight poverty and the spread of AIDS, and reduce Third World debt.

There is, in fact, a convergence between the demands of the protest

organizers and the trade policies being pursued by the Clinton administration on behalf of US transnational corporations. Clinton has picked up the call for the incorporation of labor and environmental standards within international trade agreements as a means of advancing the trade interests of the US against its foreign competitors.

The IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organization serve the interests of global capitalism at the expense of the vast majority of the world's people. What they call "free trade" is little more than a euphemism for the more effective exploitation of the working class by the transnational corporations and financial institutions that dominate the world economy. The trade agreements drawn up by these institutions have nothing to do with benefiting mankind.

But the AFL-CIO's call for "fair trade," i.e., protectionism, is retrogressive. The answer to the policies of global capital is not an attempt to reassert the dominance of the nation-state, but rather the building of an independent political party of the working class to fight for the international unification of workers and world socialism.



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