

# United Students Against Sweatshops: reformist illusions in the service of the American trade union bureaucracy

Andrea Peters, Joseph Tanniru  
1 August 2000

Over the past year and a half university students, led by the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), have organized protests, marches and sit-ins on university campuses as part of a national student campaign opposing sweatshop abuses. Since the start of 2000 there have been a number of protests, including those at the University of Wisconsin, the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University and the University of Kentucky.

USAS began as the Sweat-Free Campus Campaign. The latter was formed in 1997. We are told on one of USAS's web sites that it was "the brainchild of the UNITE summer interns." UNITE (the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) is a member union of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). The advisory board of USAS consists of members of the "outside labor, anti-sweatshop movement," which has been led by UNITE.

The summer programs that helped spawn USAS were part of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's efforts to revitalize the labor federation, whose membership had dropped from a high of 35 percent of the workforce in the 1950s to 15 percent in 1995, when Sweeney replaced Lane Kirkland as AFL-CIO president. (It has since dropped below 14 percent.) Sweeney began a drive to give the AFL-CIO a more progressive image, seeking to build a new base among students and left-leaning intellectuals.

While the support USAS receives from students indicates growing opposition among young people to the effects of global capitalism on the lives of working people and youth both at home and abroad, the organization combines the most minimal demands with a political orientation that reflects its close organizational ties to the right-wing AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

## USAS's immediate objectives

The bulk of USAS's practical work on the campuses is aimed at trying to force university administrations to adopt measures to guarantee that school paraphernalia—sweatshirts, baseball caps, T-shirts with the school's logo—not be made in sweatshop factories. In a statement on its web site, USAS declares, "We believe that university standards should be brought in line with those of its students, who demand that their school's logo is emblazoned on clothing made in decent working conditions. We have fought for these beliefs by demanding that our universities adopt ethically and legally strong codes of conduct, full public disclosure of company information and truly independent verification systems to ensure that sweatshop conditions are not happening."

Alongside loosely formulated codes of conduct, USAS also asks that employees in factories receive a "living wage."

In order to insure that the codes of conduct are followed, USAS organizes protests and sit-ins demanding that universities join the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), a supposedly independent monitoring forum established by USAS. The consortium is comprised of student activists,

human rights representatives, Democratic politicians and labor union leaders, including AFL-CIO Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson.

USAS relies on the self-reform and goodwill of corporations. A suggested "Code of Conduct" states, "It shall be the responsibility of Licensees [corporations] ... to ensure their compliance with the Code."

To verify that corporations are in fact correcting violations of the code of conduct is the task of the WRC, which is to rely on worker complaints and unannounced "spot-check" visits. How often these visits will take place we are not told. However, it is suggested that companies "develop their own internal monitoring mechanisms in order to ensure that their factories do not violate code provisions."

If the WRC finds that "a Licensee has failed to self-correct a violation of the Code, the University will consult with the Licensee ... to determine appropriate corrective action." The WRC would suggest certain actions, but ultimately it would be up to the university and the corporation to decide what is to be done.

The WRC was initially billed as being "independent of garment industry interests." But recent events have provided a clear demonstration of its lack of any real independence from corporate America and the universities. Less than a month after its founding conference earlier this year, the organization was pressured by universities to change its line after Nike, a major manufacturer of school apparel and an often-cited perpetrator of sweatshop abuses, took action against schools that had joined up with the WRC.

Nike refused to renew a contract with the University of Michigan, and Phil Knight, the company's president, reneged on a planned \$30 million donation to the University of Oregon. In response, universities demanded that the WRC take heed of the interests of corporations affected by the WRC's activities.

Lawrence Mann, associate chancellor of the University of Illinois and a leader of the WRC, agreed with this demand, stating, "The college and university groups appear to be unanimous about the importance of engaging industry in the discussion. If that doesn't happen, the reality is the membership of the Workers Rights Consortium is just talking to itself."

## USAS and the nationalist politics of the AFL-CIO

The political perspective of USAS is clear from an examination of the character of the organizations with which it collaborates. Representatives from USAS took part in events sponsored by the AFL-CIO during the week-long string of protests against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) held last April in Washington DC. A student leader from USAS, Roopa Gona, spoke at a chauvinist, anti-China rally sponsored by the union bureaucracy. USAS leaders also held meetings throughout the week with functionaries from the United Steelworkers of America, a union that

has specialized in anti-Chinese demagoguery as part of its campaign to limit competition from the Chinese steel industry. At the main AFL-CIO rally held that week in the capital, Gona praised the trade union officialdom, including the Teamsters leadership, whose representatives have appeared on platforms with the chauvinist right-wing politician Patrick Buchanan.

These connections do not simply reflect political confusion among the leaders of USAS. Rather they flow logically from USAS's nationalist orientation. USAS has lined up behind the campaign of the AFL-CIO in alliance with certain sections of US industry against trade liberalization and the World Trade Organization (WTO). In a statement on its web site, USAS echoes the official pronouncements of the AFL-CIO and sections of the Democratic Party, calling for organizations of international capital such as the WTO to include provisions linking trade to workers' rights and environmental protection. Such demands are intended to lend a progressive coloration to the protectionist policies of the trade union bureaucracy and its corporate allies in steel, textiles and other industries.

While some of those promoting this economic nationalist agenda at times identify it with opposition to global capital, in reality it represents a reaction to the globalization of economic life from an essentially reactionary standpoint. The AFL-CIO epitomizes this form of opposition to the globalization of capitalism.

The AFL-CIO has from its inception defended capitalism and collaborated with government agencies, including the CIA, to subvert all attempts by the working class, both within the US and internationally, to fight for an end to social inequality and capitalist exploitation. It opposes capitalist globalization not from the standpoint of an international struggle of workers against the profit system, but rather from the standpoint of more privileged middle-class layers whose social position is being undermined by the increasing domination of the world market and the growing international mobility of capital.

The enhanced ability of capital to scour the globe in search of the cheapest sources of labor has enormously weakened the leverage of the old trade union organizations in every country. These organizations are, by dint of their origin, their structure and their political outlook, limited to a national perspective. But the use of strikes or the threat of strikes on a local, or even national scale to pressure the employers and the state has lost a great deal of its effectiveness, under conditions where the employers are far less restricted to the national labor market.

While globalization creates unprecedented objective conditions for forging the international unity of the working class in struggle against the giant transnational corporations, the old trade unions stand as an obstacle to such a development. Tied to the national economy, the national state and the defense of the existing social order, they are organically incapable of leading a struggle based on an international revolutionary strategy. Instead, they seek to reverse the process of globalization and return to an earlier and more primitive stage in the development of the productive forces, in which the national market played a more dominant role. This essentially reactionary standpoint inevitably aligns the official unions with right-wing nationalist forces, such as Pat Buchanan in the US.

Indeed, in seeking to defend national industry—in order to defend its dues base—the AFL-CIO has collaborated in lowering the wages, living standards and working conditions of its own members. It has formed a corporatist partnership with big business to make US-based corporations more competitive on the world market—at the expense of the working class.

#### **Defense of national sovereignty**

USAS reflects the nationalist politics of the AFL-CIO when it demands in one of its programmatic statements that the WTO exhibit “greater respect for national sovereignty, including respect for government's economic and ethical priorities.” This blanket defense of national sovereignty includes that of the United States. Thus USAS encourages a nationalist outlook, as opposed to a class conscious understanding of the

basic conflict between the interests of workers and capitalist owners within any nation, and the fundamental identity of interests of workers of all nations.

Because of the close ties of USAS to the AFL-CIO and its policy of economic nationalism, the anti-sweatshop campaign never questions the history of the AFL-CIO or its political alliance with the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of American big business. It does not analyze the prominent role that both the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO have played in fostering the very conditions that the students in USAS aim to ameliorate.

It is well known, for example, that the AFL-CIO, through foreign policy arms such as the American Institute for Free Labor Development, has directly promoted right-wing, pro-US trade unions and repressive regimes in South America and elsewhere, fostering the brutal exploitation of workers around the world.

USAS never analyzes why the AFL-CIO, and specifically UNITE—with which USAS is most closely affiliated—have failed to combat the spread of sweatshop conditions in the United States. In 1998, a group of garment workers in Brooklyn filed a lawsuit against UNITE, claiming that the union had failed to represent their interests after they were laid off by their employer, Mademoiselle Knitwear, Inc.

The lawsuit was a reaction to a common practice whereby corporations compensate unions if union workers lose their jobs when companies move overseas. The deal gave the union a total of \$20.5 million, while the workers themselves were compensated with less than \$2,900 each. With such monetary remuneration from big business, it is no wonder that the union fails to protect its “own” workers. Rather than attacking the industry for exploiting workers, UNITE's response to layoffs and wage cuts in the US garment industry has been to side with the corporations on the basis of a common platform of protectionism.

There are other fundamental problems with the orientation of USAS. The conception that a document signed by a university can legislate the end of exploitation and sweatshops is extremely naive. Exploitation of workers is the basis upon which profits are made. It is an inherent and necessary feature of capitalism itself, and cannot be eliminated by signing a code of conduct.

Sweatshop conditions are not, fundamentally, the result of the subjective motives of evil corporate leaders, but arise from the necessity of capital to extract ever greater amounts of surplus value, and hence profit, from the labor of the working class. This is, of course, not to absolve the corporations of responsibility for sweatshops. Nevertheless, the subjective actions of the corporations, as well as the political establishment in the United States, in fostering the increased exploitation of the working class have an objective foundation. USAS addresses the former—attempting to pressure corporations to reform—while ignoring the latter.

The tactics adopted by USAS are rooted in the naïve conception that universities can somehow function as morally responsible islands in the surrounding capitalist sea. In this sense, USAS attempts to revive the student power protest politics of the 1960s. Such an orientation ignores the intimate connection between big business and all facets of social life, including the universities.

The focus of USAS on minimal reforms is bound up with its orientation to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Any successful struggle against the effects of global capitalism must take the form of a united movement of the international working class against the capitalist system. However such a movement is inimical to the AFL-CIO. The AFL-CIO aims to foster reformist illusions among students, while directing their genuine concerns into the support of economic nationalism and its own right-wing politics.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**