

The US election

AFL-CIO rally in Tallahassee: unions offer no strategy to fight denial of voting rights

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The AFL-CIO union federation organized a rally at the state capitol in Tallahassee Wednesday to oppose the moves by Republican leaders in the state legislature to override the November 7 election and select their own slate of pro-Bush presidential electors.

The demonstration mobilized some 4,000 workers and students. The union leadership did little or nothing to bring out the hundreds of thousands of union members in the state, or, for that matter, workers and students in Tallahassee. Most students at Tallahassee's Florida A&M University, a center of earlier protests against Republican efforts to hijack the election, were not even aware that the rally was being held.

In their remarks, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and other top union officials acknowledged that the Bush campaign and its agents in the Florida state government were carrying out a fundamental assault on the right to vote. "Republican partisans have tried in a hundred ways to muffle the voices of voters, to bend and weaken and stomp on the most precious principle of our democracy—one person, one vote," Sweeney said.

Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), stated, "At the beginning of the twenty-first century democratic rights are still under attack. We have come so far to fight for the right to vote. Women marched for it. African Americans spilt their blood for it."

But while acknowledging the drive by the Republican right to roll back basic democratic rights, the union leaders offered no explanation as to how or why this grave situation had arisen, what social forces and individuals were responsible, whose interests they were

serving, and what, if any, political conclusions working people had to draw in order to mount a counteroffensive.

What should workers conclude from the fact that all of the institutions of government—from Congress, to the courts, to the White House—were either actively involved in the conspiracy to strip the people of their rights, or unwilling to stop it? On this, the union leaders had nothing to say.

None of the speakers—union officials, Democratic Party politicians, feminist leaders—dared to speak the plain truth: that the attack on the principle of popular sovereignty raised the specter of authoritarian and dictatorial forms of rule.

Not one of the speakers related the assault on democratic rights to the increasingly oligarchic structure of American society, in which economic and political power is concentrated in the hands of a wealthy elite. For all the rhetoric and hand-waving, no one on the platform even hinted that there could any connection between the attack on democratic rights and the social inequities that are built into the profit system.

To raise such issues would call into question the entire political perspective promoted by the trade union bureaucracy for the last 65 years, which is based on the claim that the social interests and democratic rights of the working class can be defended by supporting the Democratic Party.

As far as the AFL-CIO leadership was concerned, the protest at the state capitol had two main purposes: to vent the mounting anger and alarm of working people in a harmless manner, and appeal to the political establishment to reign in the Republican right before its actions unleashed social forces that the labor

bureaucracy would be unable to control. The union officials warned that the institutions of capitalist rule were being discredited in the eyes of the working class. Sweeney appealed to the Florida legislature to “stand clear and let the democratic process work.” He added, “When power listens, justice is heard.”

The only action proposed by the AFL-CIO was for workers to send letters to their US Congressmen and the news media to pressure Florida officials to count the disputed ballots and stop the Republican legislature from intervening. In the event, the Republican leaders of the Florida legislature announced a few hours after the union protest that they would convene a special session Friday to begin the process of choosing their own slate of electors.

The various speakers who joined the AFL-CIO leaders on Wednesday sought to reinforce illusions that the Democratic Party would fight the extreme right-wing elements that control the Republican Party. At the same time, their speeches made it clear that they were prepared to accept the theft of a national election and they would seek to work with the Republicans.

Florida's House Minority leader Lois Frankel referred to the Republican state legislators who were preparing to usurp the voters of Florida as her “friends on the other side.” Jesse Jackson acknowledged that behind George W. Bush stood Tom Delay, Bob Barr and other ultra-right Republicans, who would “reinforce ‘states’ rights,’ fly the Confederate flag, impose anti-union laws, gut children's health insurance, eliminate workers' safety protections and end affirmative action.” But, he said, workers must be “better, not bitter” and pray for the “power to heal this land.”

At the rally, Sweeney and McEntee invoked the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. But it should be recalled that, with few exceptions, the AFL-CIO leadership at the time refused to support the civil rights movement.

In contrast to the AFL-CIO leaders and Democratic politicians, the workers and youth at the rally expressed determination to prevent the installation of a reactionary government against the will of the majority. The protest was racially integrated, comprised of workers from throughout Florida, as well as from Georgia and South Carolina.

Denise Duvernay, a graduate student and teaching assistant at Florida State University in Tallahassee,

said, “I have students who had problems at the polls, including one who was hassled by police at a roadblock near the polls. I know that if this can happen to minority voters, it can happen to anyone. I wish the courts would give justice. But Bush has the money and the power behind him—that's how the president is picked.

“Then there is the media, like CNN and FOX, which are intolerably and obviously swayed in favor of the Republicans. Some friends of mine say if Bush gets to the White House that will lead to a backlash for the Democrats in four years. But I'm afraid of what he could do in four years. Just look at the damage that the Bushes have done in Texas and Florida.”

Greg Allen, a school bus driver in Miami, said, “It's obvious that there are all sorts of power plays involved in the court system. Jeb Bush [governor of Florida and brother of Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush] can offer all sorts of positions if judges rule the right way. How could Judge Sauls say the contested votes were not enough to change the outcome of the election? They know that the votes are supposed to be counted, but it's like the Haitians say in Miami: this is a coup d'etat.

“The Republicans want to take over and they are saying, ‘I don't care how you voted, how many people died fighting for the right to vote—we are going to make sure the vote goes our way.’ Then they sent that mob to stop the count in Miami. If that had been a group of minorities, not professional Republican operatives, every body would have been arrested.

“After Martin Luther King was killed a few doors opened and people got complacent. The working class is going to have to stand up to these people. We have to do it by any means necessary to show them that we mean business.”



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