Union membership in US at lowest level in 60 years

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The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reported last month that trade union membership in the US had fallen by another 219,000 workers in 2000, bringing the percentage of union members in the workforce to the lowest level in six decades.

Union membership fell to 16.3 million, down from 16.5 million in 1999 and a peak of 22.2 million workers in 1975. The number of union members in the US today is the same as it was in 1952, although the workforce has more than doubled over the past five decades—from 50 million to 121 million. The decline in 2000—following a small increase in 1999—resumes a trend that has seen a yearly decline in union membership for 15 of the last 20 years.

The percentage of unionized employees also fell last year—from 13.9 in 1999 to 13.5 in 2000. The current rate of one union worker for every seven to eight employees compares with a high point of nearly one-in-three (32.5 percent) in 1953, and one-in-five (20.1 percent) as late as 1983. The rate of unionization in the private sector is even lower, where fewer than one out of every ten workers—or 9 percent—were union members in 2000, compared to a high point of 35.7 percent in 1953.

AFL-CIO union leaders cannot point to recession, high unemployment or other adverse economic conditions to explain the continued plunge in membership. In the 1990s the US experienced nearly a decade of economic expansion, the longest period of uninterrupted growth ever. Official unemployment levels in recent years have stood at near-record lows, and tight labor markets have forced employers to compete for new workers.

Nor can union officials point to a hostile administration in Washington. For the most part the AFL-CIO enjoyed the closest relations with the Democratic Clinton administration, which it supported politically.

Moreover, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney has made organizing new members a central theme of his five years in office. When they took control of the union federation, Sweeney and his top lieutenants, such as former United Mine Workers (UMWA) President Richard Trumka, presented themselves as a militant new leadership that would revitalize the unions and end the conservative policies of outgoing AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, whom they blamed for the union's dwindling membership. One of Sweeney's first acts was to set up an Organizing Department with a $20 million budget.

None of this has reversed the AFL-CIO's trajectory of decline and decay. On the contrary, on Sweeney's watch union membership has fallen from 14.9 percent to 13.5 of the workforce.

Perhaps the most telling signs of the AFL-CIO's moribund character is its failure to recruit large numbers of younger workers or employees in the fast growing high-tech and service industries. Among 16- to 24-year-old workers, only 6 percent are union members, compared to 20 percent of workers between 45 and 65 years of age.

Highly publicized campaigns such as the organizing drive at Amazon.com have been all but dropped in the face of the resistance by the dot.com industry. After Amazon announced it was laying off 1,300 workers—including hundreds who signed petitions for a union—the Communications Workers of America (CWA) had nothing to say except to demand a better severance package. Attempting to sum up the advantages of AFL-CIO membership, Erin Poh, a representative of the CWA-affiliated Northern California Media Workers Guild, boasted that with a union contract Amazon workers would be in a position to offer to take a wage cut as an alternative to layoffs.

Only 10 percent of workers in technical, sales and administrative support, 7 percent of all part-time employees, and 4 percent of those employed in sales occupations are unionized. In other significant sectors of the economy the percentage of union workers is negligible, including finance, insurance, real estate and agriculture, where only 2 percent are organized.

Even in traditionally organized industries, union membership has plummeted. In coal mining, for example, the rate of unionization has fallen to 10.6 percent, with only 57,000 out of 531,000 employees belonging to unions. Two decades ago, when Trumka was elected mine workers' president, the UMWA alone had 120,000 active members.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) has lost half its membership since the mid-1970s. The UAW now represents only 23 percent of workers in independent parts factories, down from 51 percent in 1981. The union's attempts to recruit new members at Japanese and German-owned transplants have been a dismal failure, as seen in the 2-to-1 vote against the UAW at Nissan's Smyrna, Tennessee plant in 1998. Meanwhile, the UAW continues to lose tens of thousands of older workers who are retiring or losing their jobs as a result of downsizing by GM, DaimlerChrysler and other UAW-organized employers.

There is one “growth industry,” however, where the AFL-CIO has concentrated its resources and had some success. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the occupational group that has the highest unionization rate—39.4 percent—is “protective service workers.” While firefighters make up a portion of this group, the majority are police officers, sheriff's deputies, criminal investigators, correctional officers, jailers, detectives, security guards, bailiffs and gaming surveillance officers.

This says a great deal about the social character of the AFL-CIO. The more it has lost its base in the working class, the more it has turned to the most socially backward elements to sustain its membership. The unions, which were built by militant workers who opposed the violence of strike-breaking policemen, have now come to champion the cause of cops and prison guards. AFL-CIO-affiliated unions now lobby for the construction of new prisons, enthusiastically support the hiring of new police officers and routinely oppose the prosecution of “fellow union members” facing indictment for police brutality, including the beating or even murder of minority youth or other working people.

The decline of the American trade unions has been a protracted process that spans decades. This degeneration accelerated from the mid-1970s on. Until then the unions still functioned to pressure the economic elite to

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increase the share of the national wealth going to workers. But a fundamental change took place that coincided with the decline in the global position of American capitalism and the mounting challenge to US economic dominance by Japan and Europe.

Beginning with the 1979-80 Chrysler bailout, the AFL-CIO unions embraced the outlook of corporatism, which holds that the interests of workers and capitalists are identical, rejects any conception of class struggle, and generally opposes any independent form of working class organization. In the name of making US firms more competitive internationally, the unions collaborated with big business to *reduce* the share of the national wealth going to the working class. Today, after more than two decades of such collaboration, accompanied by a growth of bureaucratism and the further suppression of internal democracy, the unions can no longer be regarded as organizations of the working class. They have become organs of, by, and for the labor bureaucracy.

The stench of corruption and betrayal surrounds these organizations. Some of the most recent and egregious examples of corruption have occurred in New York City. In AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Gus Bevona, the president of SEIU's New York Local 32B-32J for nearly two decades, was forced to leave office in 1999 amid scandal over his $530,000-a-year salary and his private penthouse on the top floor of the union headquarters building. The local represents 55,000 New York City janitors, doormen, elevator operators and other building maintenance workers, many of them immigrants, whose earnings average $30,000 a year.

New York's District Council 37, the largest single affiliate of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), is under investigation by the Manhattan district attorney's office for fraud, corruption and gangsterism. One bureaucrat, who entered a plea bargain for stealing more than $50,000, testified that AFSCME officials were involved in stuffing ballot boxes during the 1996 city workers' contract vote in order to obtain ratification for a wage freeze sought by Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

The AFL-CIO unions have severed any connection to the militant traditions of struggle upon which they were built. The loss in union membership parallels the virtual abandonment of the strike weapon. In 1999 there were only 17 major work stoppages—involving just 73,000 workers—the lowest number of strikes or lockouts affecting 1,000 or more workers since 1947. This compares to a high point of 470 strikes (involving 2.7 million workers) in 1952. Over the past three decades, the average number of major strikes has fallen from 289 in the 1970s, to 83 in the 1980s, to 35 in the 1990s.

Most of the strikes that are called are isolated and betrayed, after workers languish on picket lines for months, if not years, as the recent settlement of the five-year Detroit newspaper strike demonstrates.

As the trade union leadership has entered into joint labor-management committees in every industry and at every level of economic life, workers' wages and living standards have stagnated or declined, the working day has lengthened and job security has evaporated, while corporate profits and executive pay have skyrocketed. With the US economy now heading into recession, the unions have made it clear they will do nothing to oppose plant closings, mass layoffs or other cost-cutting measures.

The figures on the decline in union membership were issued shortly before the AFL-CIO Executive Board convened in Los Angeles for its annual winter policy-making meeting. During the three-day gathering Sweeney acknowledged the loss of members and promised to do better next year. But, he said, all was not lost because the AFL-CIO had demonstrated its vitality in the political influence it exerted in the 2000 elections.

While Sweeney presents the AFL-CIO's efforts on behalf of the Democratic Party as an expression of strength, in reality it epitomizes the bankrupt political perspective that underlies the disintegration of the unions.

The labor bureaucracy's alliance with the Democratic Party is based on their mutual defense of the profit system. As a privileged upper-middle-class stratum—whose perks and privileges are derived from capitalism—union bureaucrats have always been hostile to the political independence of the working class and socialism, and sought to prevent the emergence of a political movement of working people that would challenge the profit system.

Today Sweeney boasts of supporting a political party that is so indifferent to the democratic rights of working people that it essentially handed the election to the Republicans, who installed George W. Bush by means of fraud and the suppression of votes. Since Bush's inauguration, the Democrats have been working as virtual coalition partners with the Republican president.

To the extent that the Democrats have come to rely more heavily on the AFL-CIO bureaucracy for electoral support, even as the unions have become increasingly irrelevant in the eyes of workers, the Democrats have revealed their own isolation from the broad mass of working people, and the erosion of the Democrats' base of support in the general population.

The removal of Kirkland and the ascension of Sweeney in 1995 had far more to do with in-fighting over positions and perks in the labor bureaucracy than with any change in the direction of the labor movement. Since coming to power Sweeney has essentially followed the same failed policies as his predecessor: corporatism, economic nationalism and support for the Democratic Party. The latest figures on the loss of union membership are a devastating confirmation that organizations based on such reactionary policies are doomed to extinction.

The globalization of capitalist production has undermined the unions not only in the US, but throughout the world. The ability of transnational corporations to exploit workers in the most far-flung regions of the world has fatally undermined the trade unions that are based on a nationalist orientation and reliance on a national labor market. Union membership has also fallen sharply in Britain, Germany and other Western European nations, as well as Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Where the growth of unions has occurred, such as in South Africa, they have functioned to suppress labor unrest, cut labor costs and boost productivity in order to attract investment capital.

The revival of the workers movement must be based on an entirely new perspective—the political independence and international unity of the working class, and the struggle for socialism. To fight for such a perspective, the working class will have to overcome the retrograde influence of the AFL-CIO and build new organizations of industrial and political struggle.

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