

US union leaders seek closer ties to Bush

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The Bush administration, the most openly and unashamedly pro-business administration in nearly a century, has found new allies. In recent weeks a substantial section of the AFL-CIO union leadership has indicated its eagerness for closer relations with the White House and Congressional Republicans.

Last month AFL-CIO President John Sweeney held a dinner for 17 Republican House members and a dozen union leaders. The AFL-CIO's political action committee has in past months donated to eight congressional Republicans and has plans to make donations to 10 more.

"It's fair to say that there are probably more conversations now between labor and Republicans than at any time in history," said Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees International Union. "There are a lot of labor people who have become issue-driven, who want to form alliances on specific issues. A lot of people are saying that being a wing of the Democratic Party doesn't work for our members."

The Bush administration has made a number of overtures to the AFL-CIO. The week of June 18 the White House announced it was setting up the Office of the 21st Century Workplace within the Labor Department. The 12-member body will include union leaders as well as academics, businessmen and government officials.

In May Bush invited 12 union presidents to the White House to discuss his energy policy, which has been virtually dictated by the oil companies and the power industry. The promised handout of a few thousand construction jobs was enough to elicit hearty praise for the chief executive from the Teamsters and building trades unions. The bureaucrats showed not the slightest shame, even applauding the Bush administration's highly unpopular proposal to allow oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Bush's energy policy also elicited praise from the

United Mine Workers. Echoing the line of the energy monopolies, UMWA President Cecil Roberts is supporting administration plans to scrap environmental regulations. Higher sales and profits for coal operators, he claimed, would lead to better pay and more jobs for coal miners. "Now is a very advantageous time for us," Roberts declared.

The dismantling of the limited environmental regulations relating to the building and operation of coal and nuclear power plants proposed by the Bush administration threatens the health and lives of millions of working people. Moreover, eliminating restrictions on the energy monopolies is hardly likely to spark an economic revival in the Appalachian mining regions and other depressed areas of the United States

In another overture to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, Bush administration officials met with Leo Gerard, president of the United Steelworkers, to discuss protection of the American steel industry against foreign competition. Following the meeting Bush promised an investigation of claims of "unfair" trade practices by the overseas rivals of the American steel bosses that could lead to restrictions on steel imports.

During the 2000 election campaign the AFL-CIO spent millions of dollars supporting Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore, saying that a victory for Bush would have disastrous consequences for workers and their families. For the labor bureaucracy this was pure demagoguery. They supported the Clinton-Gore administration regardless of the massive growth of social inequality and initiated serious attacks on workers' rights during its eight years in office.

Nevertheless the speed in which the AFL-CIO leadership has sought a rapprochement with the Bush administration is noteworthy, and says a lot about the reactionary social interests represented by the trade union hierarchy. It speaks not for the working class, but a privileged upper middle class layer tied to the

interests of Corporate America.

The AFL-CIO is aligning itself with an administration that openly bases itself on the support of wealthy corporate owners and extreme right wing and neo-fascistic forces. Bush took office by means of a tainted election. Millions of workers and middle class people reacted with anger and horror to the Republican's theft of the presidential election and the undemocratic installation of Bush by the US Supreme Court.

But the AFL-CIO, like any bureaucratic apparatus, worships power above all else, and Bush, once in possession of the White House, has lucrative favors to dispense. The trade union officialdom is indifferent to the issues of democratic rights raised by the 2000 election. Bush's tainted victory in Florida differs only in scale from the methods habitually employed by the union hierarchy to rig elections, union conventions and contract votes to insure that the rank-and-file has no opportunity to make its democratic will felt.

Since taking office, Bush has brushed aside calls to "govern from the center" and packed his cabinet with corporate millionaires and right wing ideologues. The White House repealed ergonomics rules designed to protect workers against repetitive stress injuries then scrapped regulations setting a lower acceptable level for arsenic in drinking water. The president intervened to block strikes by Northwest airline mechanics and American Airline flight attendants.

The tax cut enacted by Congress and signed by Bush targeted the wealthiest one percent. It is designed to starve the federal government for funds and lay the basis for an assault on Medicare and Social Security.

The Bush administration has adopted a foreign policy based on militarism and unilateralism. The White House shocked world opinion by rejecting the Kyoto Protocol on global warming. It has declared its intention to build an anti-missile system in violation of existing treaties, arrogantly brushing aside protests from the other major powers, including the European allies of the United States.

None of this has restrained large sections of the AFL-CIO leadership from embracing the administration. The labor bureaucracy is guided by the narrow concern for its immediate material interests. For the sake of a few handouts it is more than willing to make common cause with a government that does not even attempt to

disguise its hatred of the working class.

Moreover, the chauvinist and pro business policies of the White House resonate with the labor bureaucrats. The leaders of the coal miners, steelworkers, auto workers and other major unions have spent the past two decades denouncing the overseas rivals of US big business. The AFL-CIO's promotion of Buy American campaigns and its attacks on foreign workers, such as the Teamster campaign to bar Mexican truck drivers from the US, brings the politics of the American trade unions close in many regards to the extreme right wing and racist elements in the Republican Party.

There is a further reason for the coming together of the AFL-CIO and Bush. The union bureaucrats sense that social and political relations in the United States are at an unprecedented level of tension. The Bush administration is widely viewed as illegitimate and rests on an extremely narrow social base. Layoffs are mounting and signs point increasingly toward a recession. Under these conditions the union bureaucracy is intent on helping to shore up the Bush administration lest an independent movement of the working class erupt from below. Such a movement would threaten not just the big business interests represented by Bush, but the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, whose income and privileges derive from its defense of corporate America.



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