An exchange on "US union leaders seek closer ties to Bush"

27 July 2001

The following is an exchange between a reader and WSWS *reporter Shannon Jones on his July 2 article* "US union leaders seek closer ties to Bush".

Dear *WSWS* and Shannon Jones,

I read your article with interest. I am on the Board of Directors of the Motion Picture Editors Guild, IATSE, Local 700, in Los Angeles. I write a labor column for our bimonthly magazine and avidly follow the progressive labor press.

When I first saw this story, about the AFL-CIO shifting its outreach and alliances, it was in *Roll Call*, several months ago. At the time it was presented as a means to break out of the orbit of the lumbering Democratic Leadership Council/Democratic Party, long unresponsive to labor's core needs. My understanding was that it was something of an incrementalist way to encourage Republicans to lean toward a more populist stance on issues like health care, tax policy and employment. Not a capitulation.

What gives? Do you really believe the AFL-CIO is as corrupt as you say? Sweeney, if you read his speeches and press releases, is a bonafide class-conscious, progressive leader. A breath of fresh air, compared to the ossified Lane Kirkland and the racist George Meany.

Who's the real demagogue?

JB

5 July 2001

Dear JB:

I find it remarkable that you can seriously put forward the claim that the turn by the AFL-CIO, or major sections of it, toward a closer alliance with the Republican Party represents a viable political strategy for the working class. I do not know what is worse, if you are advancing such an orientation as a smokescreen to cover up the political bankruptcy of the AFL-CIO's alliance with the Democrats, or if you seriously believe that the Bush administration can be cajoled into addressing the needs of workers.

Let's take you at your word. Let's assume you truly believe that an orientation toward the Bush administration, among the most right-wing this century, is "an incrementalist way to encourage Republicans to lean toward a more populist stance." This can hardly be called a strategy. Groveling would better describe it. It simply confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* has been saying for quite some time: the AFL-CIO is a hide-bound apparatus, distant from and hostile to the working class, and organically incapable of advancing a viable perspective for working people.

What is the "populist stance" that the AFL-CIO seeks the Republicans to adopt? As used by the AFL-CIO, the term "populist" is largely a code word for protectionism and economic nationalism. This is an area where there has indeed been a certain convergence between the line of the AFL-CIO and sections of the Republicans—witness the alliance between the United Steelworkers and the Bush administration on the issue of punitive tariffs against imported steel. What this demonstrates is that the common ground between the AFL-CIO and Bush is not based on a left-wing turn by the current administration. Rather, it represents a convergence of the right-wing American nationalism of the trade union leadership and the White House.

Our movement—the Socialist Equality Party and its predecessor, the Workers League—-has a decades-long record of opposing the alliance of the American trade union movement with the Democrats. We have fought for the working class to break politically with the Democrats and Republicans and establish its own independent political party. Our starting point has always been the need to prepare the working class for struggle by raising its political consciousness, not the search for gimmicks or short cuts.

The claim that the antidote to the attacks carried out by the Clinton administration on the working class is to line up with Bush and the Republicans would be laughable if it were not so reactionary. What is the social base of the Bush administration? Corporate owners, the wealthiest 1 percent, and a layer of the upper middle class, perhaps no more than 5 to 10 percent of the population, that enriched itself during the stock market boom.

Among the most enthusiastic backers of Bush are millionaire corporate executives, individuals who have seen their salaries skyrocket over the past decade at the expense

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of the jobs and living standards of the working class. Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, former chairman of Alcoa, is a typical example—a man who says the corporate income tax should be abolished and suggests that senior citizens who collect Social Security and Medicare are chiselers who ought to be put to work.

As you must be aware, the Republican Party has become a haven for extreme-right and fascistic elements—the Religious Right, anti-abortionists, the militia movement. Bush's Attorney General John Ashcroft, a Christian fundamentalist opponent of civil rights legislation, gays and abortion, is representative of these forces.

Those union officials who are considering an alliance with the Republicans are not doing so from the standpoint of defending the working class. They are seeking a new means of defending their own social position and that of the trade union apparatus as a whole under conditions of an ongoing shift to the right by big business and its political representatives in both parties. The AFL-CIO chiefs hope to convince the ruling elite that the services of the trade unions can still be useful in diffusing social discontent. On this basis a large section of AFL-CIO officials are supporting Bush's reactionary energy and environmental policies, falsely telling their membership that they represent a viable means to defend jobs.

In your letter you did not address any of the specific issues I raised about the right-wing orientation of the AFL-CIO—its American nationalism and defense of the profit system. You simply professed shock that we consider the AFL-CIO "corrupt" and do not share your view of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney as "class-conscious" and "progressive."

Our criticism of the AFL-CIO is not primarily based on its corruption, though that is well documented—for example, the recent indictment of 29 leaders of AFSCME District Council 37, the main municipal workers' union in New York City. The corruption of the trade union officialdom flows ultimately from its social being—it is a privileged middle-class social layer that derives its fat salaries and expense accounts from its role in suppressing the class struggle and defending the American profit system. In no other advanced industrialized country do the unions function so shamelessly as agents of the bosses as in the United States.

Over the past quarter century, moreover, the official US labor movement has undergone a vast degeneration. The AFL-CIO has shed all vestiges of the militant traditions of the past and integrated itself into the structure of corporate management.

You compare Sweeney favorably with former AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland and his predecessor George Meany. But there is no record that Sweeney, during his entire tenure in the leadership of the Service Employees International Union, ever criticized Kirkland or Meany. He remained silent while Kirkland and the AFL-CIO isolated and abandoned workers fighting union-busting—from PATCO to Eastern Airlines to Caterpillar. Nor did Sweeney speak out against the violent anticommunism of the AFL-CIO and its collaboration with the CIA and US State Department in subverting workers struggles overseas.

The impetus to replace Kirkland came as much from big business as from Sweeney or other AFL-CIO officials. Ruling class journals like the *New York Times* and *Businessweek* began writing about the need for a leadership change in the AFL-CIO well before opposition to Kirkland surfaced among the union tops. What united them was the common concern that unless some way was found to refurbish the credibility of the official labor movement, the AFL-CIO stood to lose its grip on the working class, setting the stage for the emergence of more radical organizations that might actually fight for workers' interests.

You imply that our criticism of the AFL-CIO is demagogic. What have the policies of Sweeney & Co. produced? More defeated struggles, such as the five-year battle by the Detroit newspaper workers, and the continued erosion of jobs, wages and benefits. Meanwhile, the number of strikes remains at an historic low. No wonder union membership has continued to decline and is now at its lowest ebb in 60 years .

If the present policies of the AFL-CIO are, as you claim, "progressive," how do you explain this abysmal record?

Sincerely,

Shannon Jones, for the *World Socialist Web Site*

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