

A red-baiting attack at the US Transport Workers Union convention

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In one of the first union conventions to be held in the wake of the September 11 disaster, the international leadership of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) has signaled the support of the trade union bureaucracy as a whole for the Bush administration's turn to military aggression abroad and the attack on democratic rights at home. The convention demonstrated as well that the bureaucrats welcome the war drive and its demand for ideological obedience as a useful weapon to suppress any hint of rank-and-file dissent within the unions themselves.

This was sharply manifested at the union's international convention when a red-baiting document was distributed to all the delegates condemning the new leadership of New York City's Local 100 as "bin Laden's friends." The document asserted that many of the leading members of the faction called New Directions that took control of the New York local at the beginning of the year belong to various groups that function "as a vehicle for revolutionary socialism."

The first page of the eight-page report included the assertion that the "TWU is at a crossroads similar to the one faced by Mike Quill in the late 1940s. It is one thing to advocate and practice progressive trade unionism—as TWU has done since its founding. It's another thing to attempt to use the TWU to advance a broader radical political agenda at the expense of the members' interests. That is what the Communists of the late 1940s attempted to do. And that is what New Directions 'revolutionary socialists' plan to do if they ever get to control the TWU international union."

Mike Quill, the TWU's first president, was a supporter of the Stalinist Communist Party (CP) and one of the founders of the TWU in the late 1930s. After the Second World War, he turned against his former CP comrades in what became a virtual civil war in that

union. Quill participated in the red-baiting tactics that the union bureaucracy was to utilize throughout the country. As a result, the CP members were driven out of the transit union and the labor bureaucracy nationwide warmly embraced Mike Quill as one of its own.

These repressive attacks in the trade unions anticipated the McCarthyite witch-hunt that would soon follow. Through this process, the union bureaucracy integrated itself ever more directly into the state apparatus, aiding in the suppression of workers struggles at home and the subversion of militant labor movements abroad. The result was the evolution of one of the most impotent and politically retrograde trade union movements in the world.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the bureaucracy's usefulness to the US government, its State Department and intelligence services has declined, resulting in the loss of a significant source of funds and positions for the labor hierarchy. Clearly, the bureaucrats welcome the prospect that a "global war on terrorism" will revive their old role.

At the same time, as the TWU convention demonstrates, the union officialdom is more than happy to adapt the repressive policies of the government to the task of suppressing any dissent within their own organizations. This is made clear in the document's attempt to brand anyone who questions Bush's war in Afghanistan as a friend of bin Laden.

Under the heading "New Directions and Sept. 11: Bin Laden's Friends?" the document asserts that some Local 100 officers and New Directions members belong to a group called Solidarity that issued a statement urging: "people of the United States must not give the U.S. government the free hand it desires to retaliate against the victims of U.S.-dominated global

capitalism under the catch-all claim of fighting terrorism.”

The red-baiting attack took place as TWU International President Sonny Hall was facing a challenge to his reelection from Local 100 President Roger Toussaint. This electoral spat arose not out of any principled dispute over policy or program, but rather over the division of the spoils within the bureaucracy itself. The New York local is, by far, the largest, having about one third of the convention’s 353 delegates. Toussaint apparently decided to run a slate against Hall as a result of a failure of the two men to make an agreement on giving the new Local 100 leadership a share of the posts within the international.

Hall claimed that he had nothing to do with the issuing of the red-baiting flyer. In the course of denying any responsibility, he said, “I think it’s a terrible thing to say anybody from TWU Local 100 or otherwise are friends of bin Laden.”

However, it is hard to believe his disclaimer considering the fact that the document was placed on each delegate’s desk during their lunch break just before they were to vote for international officers. Since the convention hall was guarded by the international’s security staff, clearly such a leaflet could only be distributed in this manner with the approval of the union’s top leadership. Furthermore, Hall echoed the sentiments of the document condemning New Directions as a front for radical organizations trying to take over the union.

The New Directions tendency was created in the New York local more than 15 years ago by former middle class left protesters who firmly believed that to win the support of workers it was necessary to bury themselves in the trade unions by advancing a vague platform of more union democracy and militancy. They considered it absolutely mandatory that they avoid any mention of socialist politics in the unions.

New Directions was able to gain control of Local 100 at the beginning of this year by winning more than 60 percent of the vote against the old guard that was both badly divided and discredited among the 36,000 bus and subway workers. This vote reflected a growing disgust with an entrenched and corrupt leadership that not only accepted one concession contract after another, but also willfully submitted to a court order, obtained by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, that threatened the union

and the rank and file with astronomical financial fines for even discussing strike action during the last contract fight.

The document distributed at the convention portrayed the selection of Toussaint as the presidential candidate for Local 100 as “the way in which radicals in New Directions coalesced behind a new face like Roger Toussaint in order to take power...”

In fact, Toussaint’s candidacy was warmly welcomed by the powers-that-be. During the union election, all the New York dailies ran highly laudatory articles about him. His election victory was received with great praise from Sonny Hall, the city labor bureaucracy, as well as numerous political officials.

True to form, this new leadership has done absolutely nothing to discomfort New York City’s financial and political elite. Politically speaking, since it took power it has conducted itself no differently than the previous leadership. At its most recent mass membership meeting, New York Senator Hillary Clinton was the keynote speaker. As a candidate, she solidarized herself with Mayor Giuliani’s repressive attack on transit workers during the last contract fight by declaring her own support for the state’s anti-strike Taylor Law that prohibits walkouts by public employees.

The vicious red-baiting conducted by the international leadership reveals that the bureaucratized trade unions will do everything in their power to harness the present rightward turn by the Bush administration in order to suppress any expression of workers rights against the needs of big business and the privileges of the union officials themselves. If they are willing to do this against a mere rival for posts and privileges like New Directions, one can only imagine the venom and violence that the labor bureaucracy would utilize in the face of a genuine mass rank-and-file opposition.



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