Labor for Peace meeting in Detroit: a platform for union fakers

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Last month a meeting under the banner "Labor for Peace" was held at the United Auto Workers Local 600 union hall in Dearborn, Michigan. The February 22 meeting illustrated the efforts of a section of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy to pose as opponents of the impending war against Iraq in order to orient the antiwar movement toward the Democratic Party. These maneuvers are being assisted by the Green Party and certain "left" tendencies that provide political cover for the trade union officialdom.

After remaining silent for months as the war drive of the Bush administration escalated, some in the AFL-CIO leadership have taken note of the development of a mass antiwar movement. The labor bureaucrats instinctively fear any genuinely popular movement. They are concerned that opposition to the war against Iraq will intersect with worker discontent over attacks on jobs, education, health care and democratic rights, threatening the union hierarchy's relations with management and exposing the bankruptcy of their alliance with the Democratic Party.

The AFL-CIO leadership has given full support to the past military interventions of the United States, from the war in Viet Nam to the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the bombing of Yugoslavia and the invasion of Afghanistan. The AFL-CIO Executive Council at a meeting held after the Detroit rally passed a resolution criticizing a war against Iraq without UN sanction, but its opposition lacks any principled basis. It echoes recent statements against an early war by leading Democratic politicians, many of whom voted last October to give Bush authorization to launch a pre-emptive attack on the Persian Gulf country.

The "Labor for Peace" meeting was organized by Detroit Labor for Peace and Justice, a loose alliance of union officials in the Detroit area with ties to the Greens and a number of ex-radical groups. It mirrors similar formations in San Francisco, New York and other parts of the US.

Participating alongside the union officials at the February 22 meeting in Dearborn were the Green Party, the Spark tendency, Solidarity and the Democratic Socialists of America, all of which set up literature tables inside the Local 600 hall.

The featured speakers, who included Michigan AFL-CIO President Mark Gaffney and UAW International Vice President Bob King, were for the most part hardened union bureaucrats. The meeting provided these defenders of the corporate status quo an opportunity to posture as opponents of war before a relatively receptive and docile audience.

The small turnout at the meeting, less than 150, was an expression of the isolation of the union hierarchy from the mass of rank-and-file workers. The majority in attendance were older workers and retirees, mostly those in or around the union apparatus, or members of middle-class protest groups.

One of the first to speak was Noel Beasley, international vice president of the Union of Needle Trades, Industrial and Textile Workers (UNITE). Beasley identified himself as a supporter of the Labor Party. Founded in 1996 by a section of union officials with the participation of various "left" tendencies close to the union bureaucracy, the essentially stillborn Labor Party is not a genuine political party at all. It does not run candidates and serves as little more than a pressure group on the Democratic Party.

Beasley spoke as a representative of the loyal opposition to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, offering friendly advice on how to restore "credibility" to the trade union movement. He argued it was necessary to "position our trade union movement to lead the opposition to war." Speaking the language of a veteran of political maneuvers, he advised, "We have to make that curve."

Similarly, Al Benchich, president of United Auto Workers Local 909 at the General Motors Powertrain

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plant in Warren, Michigan, adopted an apologetic attitude toward the AFL-CIO leadership. While he made a number of radical sounding denunciations of the Bush administration, which he at one point declared was "drifting toward fascism," he commented favorably on a servile telegram sent by Sweeney and John Monks, general secretary of the British Trades Union Congress, to Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair. In their letter, the American and British union leaders solidarized themselves with the goal of "disarming" Saddam Hussein, but cautioned against going to war without a "broad coalition" of allied countries.

Paul Felton, a local official with the American Postal Workers Union and vice chair of Detroit branch of the Green Party, was the only speaker to raise even a mild criticism of the Democratic Party. However, Felton insisted that criticism of the role of the Democratic Party had to be suppressed for the sake of the "unity" of the antiwar movement. In response to a question pointing out the conflict between professing opposition to war and supporting the Democratic Party, Felton declared, "We should not let those views divide us."

Felton's remarks underscore the fraudulent character of the Greens' claim to represent an independent alternative to the Democratic Party. While appealing to those disaffected by the Democrats, the Greens remain within the camp of bourgeois politics and operate essentially as a pressure group on the Democratic Party.

The lineup of the Greens with the union bureaucracy on subordinating the antiwar movement to the Democrats was explicit. Mark Gaffney, the Michigan AFL-CIO president, said, "I don't think it is a waste of time to try to change this party. We need to let the Democrats know how we feel."

Bob King from the UAW was the final speaker. He gave the most unashamedly right-wing speech. He not only praised the top AFL-CIO leadership, but professed agreement with the basic lie on which the Bush administration's war drive is based—that Iraq poses a threat to the people of the United States. "Don't get caught in arguing the position that Saddam Hussein doesn't have weapons of mass destruction," he warned. He went on to make it clear that his differences with the Bush administration were only tactical. "Saddam Hussein can be contained by the UN inspectors," he said, "it is only a question of the best way."

Not a single speaker made reference to the huge world-wide protests against the war drive, let alone suggested that American workers should forge a united international opposition to war with workers in other countries. This is in line with the American nationalism of the AFL-CIO, which blames workers overseas for "stealing" American jobs and supports trade war measures against the foreign rivals of US capitalism.

The role of the "left" defenders of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy was further demonstrated in the open mike session following the meeting. A supporter of the Socialist Equality Party spoke, insisting that the struggle against war required a clear political program. It had to be based on the international unity of the working class and directed against the capitalist profit system, he said. The first requirement was refusing to subordinate the antiwar movement to the Democratic Party. He went on to cite the disastrous results for the working class of the AFL-CIO's alliance with the Democrats.

As the union officials on the platform became increasingly nervous, the chair, Julie Hurwitz, director of the Law Center for Economic and Social Justice, intervened to ask the speaker to end his remarks. Benchich responded with a vigorous defense of the AFL-CIO's orientation to the Democrats. "I learned a long time ago, you make your alliances where you can," he declared. "The only way we are going to win this is by making alliances." Not one of the pacifists and ex-radicals in attendance rose to oppose this perspective.

This advice is a trap that the working class and all serious opponents of imperialist war must reject. The fight against militarism requires in the first place that the working class adopt an independent and critical stance, opposing the profit system, the big business parties and their defenders and apologists in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

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