

AFL-CIO union federation pledges support to Iraq war

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With the launch of the first cruise missiles the AFL-CIO trade union federation dropped any pretense of opposition and lined up squarely behind the Bush administration's war on Iraq. With its fulsome support for this criminal and unprovoked war, the American trade union bureaucracy has once again revealed its social and political essence: it is an arm of the US ruling elite and an instrument of American imperialism.

In an official statement issued shortly after the start of the war, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney declared, "The AFL-CIO has maintained that the best way to disarm Saddam Hussein would be with a broad international coalition sanctioned by the United Nations, but we are unequivocal in support of our country and America's men and women on the front lines as well as their families here at home."

The call by the AFL-CIO to support the US troops is cynical. The rank-and-file soldiers in the US military did not choose to invade Iraq. The decision to launch this war in defiance of world opinion and international law was made by the White House. The AFL-CIO hacks have decided once again to employ the ruse of invoking the American soldiers on the battlefield in an attempt to line up workers behind an imperialist war.

An article posted on the AFL-CIO web site boasted that leaders of the International Longshoreman's Association in Florida responded energetically to a government request to mobilize experienced dock workers to load military cargo ships carrying tanks and other equipment for the war. It went on to note that "4,000 members of the maritime unions—International Longshore and Warehouse Union, ILA, Seafarers, Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association and Masters, Mates & Pilots—are loading and transporting equipment, supplies and materiel to support the troops in the Persian Gulf."

In mobilizing dock workers to aid the Bush administration's military deployment, the AFL-CIO leadership chose to forget the union-busting role played by the White House when West Coast longshoremen were locked in a contract dispute with the shippers last fall. Bush administration officials conspired with the shippers to impose a job-cutting contract, encouraging the employers to take a hard line by threatening dockworkers with the mobilization of troops as strikebreakers. Eventually, Bush imposed an injunction under the anti-union Taft-Hartley law and threatened the union with prosecution if it failed to cave in to the concessionary demands of the shipping companies.

The AFL-CIO's support for the brutal war against the Iraqi people comes as no surprise. The union federation has endorsed every military action by the US government, from Vietnam, to Kosovo and Afghanistan. It has, moreover, colluded with the CIA for decades to subvert militant and socialist labor movements around the world, and has worked in tandem with the US government to topple left-wing governments in Latin America, Asia and Africa and replace them with torture regimes subservient to US corporate interests.

Nor should anyone be surprised by the reaction of Teamsters President James Hoffa, who was hardly able to contain his enthusiasm for the war. In a statement issued March 20 he parroted the propaganda of George Bush, declaring the US invasion the beginning of "the battle for the liberation of Iraq". The outlook of the Teamsters bureaucracy, a union leadership with notorious Mafia ties, dovetails perfectly with the policies of the political gangsters in Washington.

The unions' official embrace of the invasion of Iraq, a war opposed by tens of millions of workers in the United States, underscores the role of the trade union

apparatus as an agency of corporate America, both overseas and at home.

War demolishes many fictions. The invasion of Iraq has put to rest the myth, cultivated for years by so-called “left” organizations, that the 1995 installation of Sweeney as AFL-CIO president represented a step toward the revitalization of the trade unions.

Many of the “left” groups that orient to the trade union bureaucracy predicted that the AFL-CIO would not repeat the position it took in support of the war in Vietnam and instead come out against an invasion of Iraq, at least against one not sanctioned by the United Nations. However, the AFL-CIO remained silent for months, even as mass opposition to the impending war became evident.

After the huge international demonstrations of February 15, 2003 the AFL-CIO Executive Council finally issued a tepid statement expressing concern. However, instead of condemning the lies of the White House, it endorsed the Bush administration’s claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction: a contention refuted by UN inspectors. Sweeney & Co. merely advised the US government to assemble a large international coalition and attempt to obtain the sanction of the United Nations before launching a war. When the US and Britain went ahead and launched war against Iraq in the face of UN opposition, the AFL-CIO immediately fell into line behind the White House.

The AFL-CIO’s embrace of the war exposes its contempt not only for the fate of working people in Iraq and internationally, but also its indifference to the mounting crisis facing workers within the US. The labor bureaucracy is well aware that the Bush administration will use the cover provided by the war to step up its attacks on the working class.

The White House is seeking to push its tax cut plan for the wealthy through Congress, a giveaway to the rich that will necessitate further destruction of social programs and threaten the solvency of Social Security and Medicare. At the same time the Bush administration wants to change rules regarding overtime compensation that will effectively abolish the 40-hour week for hundreds of thousands of workers. It has already pushed through legislation denying union rights to hundreds of thousands of government workers employed by the new Department of Homeland Security.

In the wake of the invasion of Iraq, major US airlines announced thousands of layoffs, and tens of thousands of additional jobs are threatened by the impending bankruptcy of American Airlines and other carriers. Throughout the industry, companies are ripping up union contracts and imposing further drastic concessions.

The cost of the war will necessitate further austerity measures, inevitably directed in the first place at the most vulnerable layers of society. The Bush administration has already announced that the first installment of the war against Iraq will be \$75 billion. The Pentagon will soon demand additional billions.

The AFL-CIO does not defend the interests of the workers it claims to represent. It defends the narrow interests of the trade union officialdom, whose perks and bloated income are based on collaboration with corporate management and the state. It is a moribund organization, incapable of articulating the needs and aspirations of the broad masses of the working class.

The union officialdom views the war in the Gulf as an opportunity to once again demonstrate its usefulness to American capitalism by promoting patriotism and subservience to the big business political establishment. However, these efforts will prove futile. The working class is heading toward a settling of accounts with big business, its political representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties, and their servants in the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.



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