

AFL-CIO's Sweeney voices solidarity with Bush's wars

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John Sweeney, the president of the AFL-CIO, appeared Wednesday before the Detroit Economic Club, a forum organized by the city's establishment to unveil what was touted as a new "jobs initiative." As it turned out, the US union federation's plan amounted to little more than a political scam aimed at saving some of the jobs, salaries and perks of its own officialdom at the expense of the unemployed.

The general indifference to what Sweeney had to say was made plain by the absence of invited executives from the Big Three automakers, prominent local politicians and even leading union officials.

Nonetheless, his remarks in Detroit deserve careful consideration for what they reveal about the social and political physiognomy of this organization that bills itself as the "American labor movement."

Sweeney began by declaring that, two days after Labor Day, "we have a lot to celebrate." He continued: "Worker productivity in our country is the highest ever, and the working class heroes who pulled us through 9/11 and its aftermath are doing so again in Afghanistan and Iraq."

Why record "worker productivity" is something an organization that claims to represent the interests of workers should celebrate, the AFL-CIO head did not explain. The dramatic increase in productivity by US corporations—at an annual rate of 6.8 percent according to the latest Labor Department figures—has translated into layoffs on the one hand and speedup on the other. Sweeney's remark, delivered to a largely corporate audience, amounts to boasting about the role of the AFL-CIO unions in facilitating this whipsawing of the American workforce.

But it is on the issue of war where the real reactionary character of the American trade union bureaucracy comes through most clearly.

In the weeks leading up to the US invasion of Iraq, the AFL-CIO issued a timid statement questioning the timing—not the criminality—of the war and stating its tactical preference for an "international coalition sanctioned by the United Nations" to carry out the attack. This mealy-mouthed declaration was hailed by some of the "left" protest outfits as a powerful step forward for the antiwar movement.

Once bombs and cruise missiles began falling on Baghdad,

however, the labor bureaucrats dropped any pretense of opposition and declared themselves "unequivocal in support of our country and America's men and women on the front lines."

More recently, the AFL-CIO has taken a vow of silence in relation to the war—not a single reference to Iraq can be found on the organization's web site—with the labor bureaucrats insisting the issue is too "divisive." At the meeting of its executive council last month, the labor federation announced it would focus solely on domestic issues in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election.

As Sweeney's remarks in Detroit make clear, however, this is not a matter of neutrality on the continuing US war and colonial occupation in Iraq. He equates the "working class heroes" of September 11, 2001 and the military forces carrying out brutal occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The former consisted of firefighters and other workers who responded to a sudden and massive attack, sacrificing their lives in the effort to save others.

The illegal and unprovoked wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have claimed many thousands of lives, most of them unarmed civilians, to further an effort by America's ruling elite to seize oilfields and strategic advantage in the Middle East. For the Iraqi workers, the invasion has proven a catastrophe, with hundreds of thousands losing their jobs and the entire society left in ruin. The occupation has also proven a disaster for US working class youth in uniform, who are being sacrificed in increasing numbers as a result of growing popular resistance. Many of the soldiers themselves have questioned the purpose of the occupation and demanded to be brought home.

His rhetoric about "heroes" notwithstanding, Sweeney speaks not for these soldiers, including many National Guardsmen and reservists who are members of AFL-CIO unions, but for the Bush administration and its lies that the long-planned US wars of aggression represent justifiable retaliation for September 11.

The AFL-CIO president's speech was ostensibly the occasion for announcing a new initiative that the trade union bureaucracy has dubbed "Working America." He referred to this proposed entity as a "new national union" that would recruit nonunion workers and the unemployed "who would like to be part of the AFL-CIO's efforts for social justice."

Not that long ago, the watchword of the trade union

movement was “organize the unorganized.” Today, it appears, it is “con the unorganized.”

The resolution passed last month by the AFL-CIO executive council creating the organization was somewhat more sober than Sweeney in its presentation: “Working America will not be employment-based or workplace-based in any way; nor will it deal with employers for the purposes of collective bargaining, grievance handling, or any other type of job-related representation; nor will its members receive any benefits or privileges associated with employment-based representation.”

The resolution went on to specify, however, that the trade union federation would establish a “dues structure” for its new “national union.”

Thus, the AFL-CIO will offer membership in an organization that provides none of the usual services associated with a union, but manages still to collect dues. Sweeney claimed that the union federation would send people out “knocking on doors” to build support for “Working America.” To the extent that they hit the streets of shattered industrial centers like Detroit—where tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs without the UAW and other unions lifting a finger in their defense—they will be in for a rude welcome.

There is a decidedly material connection between this something-for-nothing scam and the strident pro-war policy advanced by the labor bureaucracy. Both are designed to prop up a declining organization by tapping new resources for an AFL-CIO treasury that has been steadily depleted by the decline in union membership. The last 20 years have seen the unionized share of the US workforce fall from over 20 percent to barely 13 percent.

The war and occupation in Iraq have provided the AFL-CIO officialdom with an opportunity to prove its subservience to US corporate interests, promoting patriotism under the guise of the counterfeit slogan “support our troops.” This “support” consists of justifying a war in which these soldiers are dying every day to further a cause that is totally inimical to those of American working people.

During the period of Washington’s Cold War against the Soviet Union, such labor support for US foreign policy brought the AFL-CIO bureaucracy substantial government support and monies. It was entrusted with the running of various “labor fronts” for the CIA, such as the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) in Latin America and similar outfits in Africa and Asia. Its “advisers” participated directly in the organization of military coups and the propping up of right-wing dictatorships.

The US labor bureaucracy has continued its involvement in these operations, as demonstrated in its role in aiding the CIA-backed forces that carried out the abortive coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in April of last year. It no doubt sees in the eruption of US militarism far greater opportunities. Who, for instance, will be assigned the task of organizing a “responsible” labor movement in Iraq?

That such collaboration with US imperialist aggression abroad precludes any struggle on behalf of working people at home is self-evident. Just last week, the Bush administration justified the slashing of pay raises approved for 1.8 million federal government employees by citing the demands of the global “war on terrorism.”

Under conditions in which it will not defend even its own members, the AFL-CIO’s pretense that it is building a movement to represent the unemployed and unorganized is absurd. The hundreds of billions of dollars that will be spent on war and occupation will be paid for through even deeper cuts in health, education and social budgets and by forcing even more workers onto the unemployment lines.

Whatever limited money it manages to collect from those naïve enough to affiliate to its Working America front will be bundled together with money taken from the dues of unionized workers and handed over to big business politicians with the aim of winning new perks and privileges for the bureaucracy itself.

Sweeney’s trip to Detroit came just two days after Labor Day, marked in the Motor City by the Michigan state AFL-CIO’s cancellation of its annual parade. In the period of the AFL-CIO’s heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, this event was symbolic of the influence of the official labor movement, used by every Democratic presidential candidate to kick off his campaign.

Revived in the 1980s, it had become an ever more dispirited walk through an urban landscape left devastated in no small part due to the betrayals carried out by the union bureaucracy itself, through its acceptance of endless rounds of layoffs and concessions in the auto industry. It served primarily to illustrate the isolation and irrelevance of the unions in relation to the lives of most people living in the city. Sensibly, the local bureaucrats have decided to put the parade out its misery.

Sweeney’s speech is of a piece with this action. They both express an organization that politically speaking has become a walking corpse. The defense of the rights of workers and unemployed can be carried forward only by throwing off the dead weight of the AFL-CIO and building new organizations of industrial and political struggle in opposition to this bureaucratic apparatus.

Above all, the struggle for jobs and the defense of social conditions cannot be carried forward apart from a repudiation of the labor bureaucracy’s reactionary nationalism and a fight for an end to the US occupation of Iraq and to all US military aggression abroad.



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