

US: Behind the AFL-CIO's call for a "a new labor code for Iraq"

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A January 22 statement issued by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney calling for a "new labor code for Iraq" would at first glance appear to be a long overdue defense of Iraqi workers, who are suffering even greater privations under the US/British occupation than they faced under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

With unemployment reaching as high as 70 percent, workers have taken to the streets in defiance of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to demand jobs. Leaders of such protests have been arrested. When British troops were called out early last month to help Iraqi police put down the demonstrations, a number of protesters were shot and killed.

Most who have jobs are being given an "emergency" wage of a mere \$60 a month, with no overtime pay, even though they often must work 12-hour or longer shifts daily. The CPA has abolished previously existing bonuses that constituted as much as half of most workers' overall compensation. Those who are working are usually required to support large extended families that are without jobs. Prices are constantly rising.

Visitors to the Al Daura oil refinery near Baghdad report workers have none of the required safety equipment, such as hard-toed shoes, gloves and goggles. At times they have to turn valves using only rags. A similar lack of basic safety precautions is typical throughout Iraqi industry.

Meanwhile, an injury is a disaster for the worker, who loses pay for the time he cannot work and also runs up bills for any medical care, if he is lucky enough to obtain it. There is no system of compensation for the costs of workplace injuries.

For an organization that purports to represent American workers to come to the defense of the embattled Iraqi working class would clearly be appropriate. Such a gesture is hardly characteristic, however, of the AFL-CIO officialdom, which usually spends its energies fulminating against foreign workers for "stealing" American jobs.

A closer reading of Sweeney's statement suggests that something other than solidarity is motivating the AFL-CIO. He condemns neither the occupation nor the war itself, nor

even the deplorable conditions of life and work in Iraq. Rather, he singles out the policy of CPA administrator Paul Bremer in enforcing a 1987 law passed under Saddam Hussein prohibiting the organization of trade unions in the public sector, which encompasses the large majority of the Iraqi workforce.

No doubt, the continuing use of this 1987 law against workers demonstrates the fraud of US claims to be bringing "freedom" and "democracy" to the Iraqi people, and deserves to be condemned.

Sweeney's point, however, is not to stand up for the democratic rights of Iraqi workers, but to create room for the AFL-CIO—in return for a handsome fee—to play the rule of adjunct and advisor to the US occupation authority in Iraq.

Sweeney hints at his real purpose when he writes in his letter, "Training and other kinds of support from the international trade union movement should be encouraged."

The timing of Sweeney's letter is no coincidence. It came only two days after the State of the Union speech, in which President Bush proposed to double funding for the government-financed National Endowment for Democracy (NED). The additional \$40 million is to go entirely to programs in the Middle East.

One week before Bush's speech, Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards made a nearly identical appeal to double the NED funding.

The AFL-CIO, through its American Center for International Labor Solidarity, or "Solidarity Center," is a constituent element of the NED, competing with fronts for the Democratic and Republican parties and the "Center for International Private Enterprise," which represents big business, for the government funding.

Congress created the NED in 1983 as a means of influencing and financing various groups around the world seen as capable of countering popular opposition to US policies. It became a conduit for funds that previously were funneled covertly from the CIA. It immediately played a prominent part in Washington's efforts to subvert and overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The NED used AFL-CIO affiliates to provide money and technical support to conservative, pro-US trade unions in countries like Korea, as an alternative to the more radical unions that organized the strikes and factory occupations that led to the overthrow of the US-backed military dictatorship there.

These efforts were a continuation of the activities previously carried out by the AFL-CIO through various “labor fronts” created in collaboration with the CIA. The most infamous was the one in Latin America, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which was deeply implicated in the overthrow of governments deemed inimical to US interests.

The AIFLD advised the so-called “labor” opposition to the Chilean Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende, helping to sow the confusion and unrest that provided a critical backdrop to the bloody coup by General Pinochet in 1973. The AFL-CIO has never acknowledged its role in those events.

Such interventions are by no means a thing of the distant past. Using NED money, the AFL-CIO worked hand-in-glove with the CIA and the US State Department in preparing the aborted April 2002 coup against Venezuela’s populist president Hugo Chavez. The US union bureaucrats provided financial aid and “technical advisors” to Venezuela’s CTV union federation, which worked together with the main big business association in organizing “strikes” aimed at destabilizing the regime and preparing the coup attempt.

Last November 6, Bush spoke before the NED to proclaim a new US policy towards the Middle East. The conquest of Iraq, he said, was only the first step in a war for “democracy” that would continue for “decades to come.”

On the same day, Sweeney issued a special statement on the 20th anniversary of the founding of the NED. He solidarized himself with Bush’s war against “the threat of global terrorism” and went on to express support for the US occupation of Iraq, stating, “The AFL-CIO, in concert with the international trade union movement, stands ready to participate in the Iraq reconstruction effort.”

A recent report posted on the NED’s web site entitled “NED expands work in Iraq” indicates that while the Democratic, Republican and big business-affiliated organizations have been brought into Iraq—helping to create the framework for a US-backed puppet regime, participating in the drafting of a new constitution and advising on “economic reforms” and “market values”—the AFL-CIO’s front group thus far has been frozen out.

Sweeney is making a pitch for some of the contract work. Having presided over a long string of betrayals, concessions and layoffs for workers in the US itself, the AFL-CIO is

offering to use its expertise in cobbling together a servile Iraqi union organization. Such an organization would support continued US control over the country, oppose any militant struggles and act to subordinate Iraqi workers to the interests of the US oil companies and other American business interests seeking to profit off the country’s subjugation.

Maintaining its sources of government funding—including from the right-wing administration of George W. Bush—has become all the more important as the AFL-CIO has seen its membership dues base sink to historic lows.

Well before the war started, in October 2002, when a war resolution was being debated in Congress, Sweeney indicated his acceptance of the basis for the impending slaughter. He wrote to US lawmakers then, “Saddam Hussein is a menace—to his own people, to stability in a critical region of the world and potentially to America and our allies.”

On the day the bombing began, he wrote again, “The Iraqi regime is a brutal dictatorship that is a threat to its neighbors and its own citizens. We support fully the goal of ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. We sincerely hope this conflict will result in a more democratic and prosperous Iraq...” Echoing Bush’s own phony appeal to patriotism, he continued, “[W]e are unequivocal in our support of our country.”

Only five days later, Sweeney issued another statement endorsing Bush’s request to Congress for a supplemental \$79 billion in order to carry out the onslaught.

There are elements within the antiwar protest milieu who have hailed Sweeney’s January 22 statement as an important sign of growing US labor opposition to the occupation of Iraq. Such a viewpoint can be explained in some cases by naiveté and ignorance of the AFL-CIO’s long record of betrayal and collaboration. Others, however, have sought to make political careers providing a “left” cover for the trade union officialdom. Whatever the reason, the attempt to cast this moribund labor bureaucracy as an instrument for struggle against war flies in the face of reality.

The mobilization of American working people against the occupation and future wars is possible only in direct opposition to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which shares political responsibility for the killing in Iraq and is seeking to fatten its expense accounts by collaborating in the occupation.



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