

An exchange of letters on the crisis in the AFL-CIO

27 July 2005

Below is a letter sent to the WSWS in response to the article “The split in the AFL-CIO”, followed by a reply by the author of the article, Shannon Jones.

I appreciated the historical analysis in your article on the AFL-CIO, but it left me very confused as to the way forward for American workers like myself. My union goes into contract negotiations in the fall. As a socialist in the unions, I’ve always thought that, if the boss tries to take away our health care or force other concessions, I should agitate amongst my fellow workers, try and organize a rank-and-file movement independent of the union leadership, and push for a class-struggle perspective to fight the boss. According to your analysis, that makes me a national reformist, so I should give up on the union and spend my time building the Socialist Equality Party, right? Please let me know if I’m wrong on this.

JJ

Dear JJ,

From your email I get the impression that you haven’t given much thought to the analysis presented in my article. While you indicate agreement with what I write about the history of the AFL-CIO, it does not appear that you believe this history has any practical relevance for today.

To recapitulate briefly, I explained that the AFL-CIO, after decades of decline, is facing a split on a completely unprincipled basis by two rival bureaucratic factions.

My article related the present state of affairs to the founding of the AFL-CIO in 1955, which was a merger of the two previously competing union federations, the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. This unification marked the consolidation of the American trade union bureaucracy on the basis of anticommunism and support for the Cold War foreign policy of the US ruling elite.

I further noted that the explosive movement that led to the formation of the mass industrial unions in the 1930s was politically subordinated to the capitalist two-party system by John L. Lewis and other leaders of the CIO, with disastrous consequences for the long-term interests of the American working class. Despite their many heroic struggles during the 1930s, workers in the United States never organized as an independent political force. Instead, the policies of the CIO stunted the political development of the American working class.

This legacy is very much at the root of the crisis facing the US labor movement today. As I pointed out, the devil’s bargain struck by the US labor bureaucracy with American imperialism left the working class unprepared when the situation sharply changed in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly with the installation of the Reagan administration. The AFL-CIO responded by abandoning the class struggle entirely and turning to policies of out-and-out collaboration with management.

As a result of this protracted process of betrayal and degeneration, the AFL-CIO is no longer in any genuine sense an organization of the working class. Despite the fact that there are still workers in the official unions—although their numbers as a percentage of the workforce have plummeted to historic lows—these organizations have become instruments of the labor bureaucracy. This bureaucracy, in class terms, is a corrupt and parasitic layer of the privileged middle class, whose interests are hostile to those of the working class.

I stressed that the lesson to be drawn from this experience was the need for a new political orientation: a break from the two parties of big business and all forms of bourgeois politics, and the construction of a mass, independent party of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program. Such a

development cannot and will not proceed through the sclerotic, bureaucratized apparatus of the AFL-CIO.

You say you are confused by this, and assert that this analysis somehow suggests that militants and socialists in the unions should abstain from opposing wage cuts and other attacks by the employers. You write, “I should give up on the union and spend my time building the Socialist Equality Party, right?”

If by giving up on the union you mean that you should abstain from struggles in the workplace, the answer is “no.” However, if you mean that you should give up the perspective of transforming the AFL-CIO, the answer is “yes.”

Obviously, a socialist who is a member of a union should intervene and provide leadership against the bureaucracy and fight for the best possible contract. This does not, in and of itself, make someone a “national reformist,” and I never suggested that it did.

Having said that, it would be short-sighted and naive in the extreme to believe that such agitation is adequate. Anyone who thinks, after the experiences of the last 25 years, that workers can hold on to what they have, let alone make new gains, within the existing framework is deluding himself.

The critical question is what perspective and program should guide class conscious workers in the unions? For socialists, the central focus is always the development of the political consciousness of the working class, so as to enable it to break its political and ideological bondage to the ruling class and fight for its own independent interests.

The great weakness of the American working class has been its slow political and theoretical development and its difficulty in generalizing from and absorbing the lessons of its own struggles and the struggles of workers throughout the world. No amount of interventions around contract issues can overcome this problem.

Lenin put the matter clearly in his seminal work, *What is to be Done*. The work of socialists, he said, must be “to divert the working class movement from this spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.”

This means that socialists in the unions, based on an understanding of social relations of capitalism and the lessons of the past century, must tell workers the truth

about these organizations without pulling any punches. They must seek to develop the class consciousness of the workers, and instill in them the understanding of the need to break with the two parties of big business and develop their own independent political movement to fight for a workers’ government and the transformation of society on egalitarian, that is, socialist foundations.

Finally, you ask whether a socialist in the unions should concentrate on building the Socialist Equality Party. For genuine socialists, the clear answer to that question is “yes.” The American SEP and its sister organizations around the world in the International Committee of the Fourth International alone embody the critical lessons distilled from the rich experience of the working class movement over the past century. Only by basing itself consciously on the lessons of this history can the working class rise to the great challenges posed in the present period.

Fraternally,

Shannon Jones, for the *World Socialist Web Site*



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