

AFL-CIO conference passes pro-war resolution

Joseph Kay
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Before its 25th Constitutional Convention ended on Thursday, the AFL-CIO passed a resolution on the war in Iraq that buttresses the basic lies used by the US government to justify its continued occupation of the country. While the resolution calls for US troops to be withdrawn “rapidly,” it goes on to support the political process installed under the supervision of the occupying forces, under the guise of promoting “democracy.”

Combining naïveté, self-delusion and willful deception, sections of the protest movement in the United States have seized on the resolution as an indication of a major shift in the position of the bureaucratic assembly that gathered in Chicago this past week. It is nothing of the sort. This is a two-faced resolution that, while making a slight nod to growing antiwar sentiment within the working class, lies completely within the framework of the pro-imperialist policies of the AFL-CIO.

The resolution begins with the statement, “The AFL-CIO supports the brave men and women deployed in Iraq.... They deserve leadership that fully values their courage and sacrifice. Most importantly, they deserve a commitment from our country’s leaders to bring them home rapidly.”

It is the word “rapidly” that has drawn the most attention. The original resolution as proposed by the AFL-CIO executive council called for an end to the occupation “as soon as possible.” Apparently under the advice of members of the group US Labor Against the War (USLAW), this phrase was replaced by “rapidly,” while the rest of the resolution was kept as it was. According to David Bacon, in an article posted on left website ZNet, the original phrase “was the same position as that put forward by the Bush administration” while the new phrase put the trade union organization squarely on the side of those opposed to the war.

David Moberg, writing for *The Nation* magazine, called the resolution “historic.” In a press release, USLAW declared, “Adoption of this resolution represents the first time in its 50 year history that the federation has taken a position squarely in opposition to a major US foreign policy

or military action.”

It is difficult to see how the one phrase voices greater opposition than the other. After all, in general parlance, “as soon as possible” is considered to be before something that is done merely “rapidly.” Leaving aside the semantics, in considering the actual document passed at the conference, one wonders whether Moberg, Bacon and others who have praised it were reading with their eyes closed.

The AFL-CIO declares its complete solidarity with the governmental structure set up by American and British troops. Referring to the elections held at American gunpoint earlier this year, the unions declare that, in the face of an “insurgency that has increasingly focused its terror on the Iraqi people,” these elections expressed the aspirations of Iraqis “to control their own destiny.”

The resolution promotes the big lie currently favored by the Bush administration, that the American-led war has brought democracy to Iraq. It supports the identification of the resistance with the terrorist actions of a minority, thereby justifying the repressive, police-state measures used by the American military and the Iraqi security forces against those opposed to the occupation of their country.

As significant as what the resolution says is what it does not say. There is no mention of Abu Ghraib, the systematic torture and abuse of Iraqi prisoners by both US and Iraqi forces, the mass roundups and physical intimidation of Iraqi citizens, the razing of Fallujah and other Iraqi cities. The resolution refers to the death and destruction inflicted upon the Iraqi people only by noting that “Iraqi civilian casualties are in the thousands.” This directly precedes a statement about attacks on Iraqis from insurgents, falsely implying that the resistance, not the American military, is responsible for the bulk of Iraqi deaths.

The resolution goes on to counsel the Bush administration to be frank with the American people “about the reality on the ground and the very difficult challenges ahead.” This is a refrain often voiced by sections of the Democrats who criticize the administration for not committing sufficient resources and troops to the war effort.

“The AFL-CIO,” it continues, “supports the call from members of Congress for the establishment of benchmarks in the key areas of security, governance, reconstruction and internationalization.” By benchmarks, the resolution can only refer to benchmarks for withdrawal of US troops. In other words, by “rapidly,” the AFL-CIO means as soon as security is established and the Iraqi government is capable of repressing the insurgency on its own. This is the same position that the Bush administration holds.

Like the Democrats, the union bureaucracy criticizes the administration for not winning enough allies in prosecuting the war. It “calls on the international community to help the Iraqi people build its capacity to maintain law and order through a concerted international effort to train Iraqi security and police forces.” Further, it demands the “cancellation of Saddam Hussein’s foreign debt without any conditions imposed upon the people of Iraq....” This is an aim of the Bush administration as well. Countries other than the United States supplied most of these loans, so Washington has a strategic interest in having them cancelled.

Finally, the resolution ends with a statement of support for “efforts of Iraqi workers to form independent labor unions.... The AFL-CIO has a proud history of solidarity with worker movements around the world in their opposition to tyranny. In concert with the international trade union movement, the AFL-CIO will continue to provide our full solidarity to Iraq’s workers as they lead the struggle for an end to the violence and a more just and democratic nation.”

This statement can only be understood within the framework of the union bureaucracy’s historical role in promoting the interests of American imperialism around the world. Openly through such institutions as the National Endowment for Democracy and covertly through its collaboration with the CIA, the AFL-CIO has backed right-wing, anti-communist trade unions in different countries as part of the effort of the US ruling elite to suppress militant and socialist workers’ movements. It is continuing this work now in Iraq.

What the AFL-CIO means by “independent trade unions” is evident if one considers the Iraqi “unionists” at the conference who voiced support for the resolution. Prominent among them was Abdullah Muhsin, the foreign representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). The IFTU has worked closely with the former interim government of Iyad Allawi, and the president of the federation is a leader in Allawi’s party. Allawi has had long and close ties with the American CIA.

Muhsin’s main role has been to present himself and his union as the true independent voice of Iraqi working people, while supporting the continued occupation of the country. While nominally opposing the war, he had denounced those

who would advocate a timetable for withdrawal of American and British troops, let alone an immediate pullout.

In an open letter to a British Labour Party conference in July 2004, Muhsin counseled the delegates that “an early date for the unilateral withdrawal of troops...would be bad for my country, bad for the emerging progressive forces, a terrible bow for free trade unionism, and would play into the hands of extremists and terrorists.”

There is, no doubt, growing opposition to the war within the American working class, including among members of the AFL-CIO trade unions. This opposition was to a certain extent reflected in some of the resolutions proposed by individual unions to the conference. Some of these called for an immediate withdrawal of all US troops and denounced the Bush administration for lying to the American people.

However, this sentiment was in no way expressed in the final resolution. The way that the resolution has been treated by the left press such as *The Nation* and groups like Labor Against the War highlights the role they play in fostering illusions in such a thoroughly rotten institution as the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. They are constantly looking for some sign that this moribund organization is finally moving to the left; they are constantly looking for new reasons to channel growing oppositional sentiment back into the old bankrupt channels.

In providing support for the US occupation of Iraq, the AFL-CIO has no differences with the Change to Win coalition, which includes the Service Employees Industrial Union (SEIU), the Teamsters and others. While the Teamsters and the SEIU have pulled out of the AFL-CIO, and two other unions boycotted the convention, the war in Iraq has not been an issue in the split. Both factions of the union bureaucracy are united in their defense of the interests of American imperialism.



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