

Hillary Clinton in Detroit: Democrat preaches American nationalism to union bureaucracy

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Saturday's Detroit town hall meeting for Hillary Clinton, sponsored by the Detroit and Michigan AFL-CIO, should dispel any illusion that the election of a Democratic president in 2008 will put an end to the aggressive, America-first foreign policy that produced the Bush administration's invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Democratic frontrunner told an audience of 600 people, mostly union officials and workers close to the union bureaucracy, that the solution to the problems of working people in the United States is a tougher line on trade with China, Korea, Mexico and other countries. At the same time, she portrayed the US debacle in Iraq as the fault, not of the Bush administration, but of the Iraqi people themselves.

The Detroit event is one of seven forums sponsored by the AFL-CIO nationwide to promote the Democratic presidential candidates. Clinton's appearance was her first in Michigan since she officially launched her campaign.

The AFL-CIO officials were clearly uneasy at holding a town hall meeting in the most impoverished large city in America and a metropolitan area with some of the most extreme contrasts between wealth and poverty. The audience was carefully selected to ensure that the discussion did not get out of control. Local unions distributed the tickets required for admission, and those who participated in panel discussion with Clinton or asked questions from the floor were prescreened.

One rank-and-file steelworker made reference to this vetting process as she asked Clinton about fuel efficiency standards in the automobile industry. "I'm not sure why I'm asking this," she said, before reading out the question written for her by a union official. A school teacher who spoke passionately about the need for greater equality in funding between rich and poor school districts began her remarks apologetically. "Maybe I'm not supposed to say this," she remarked.

The bulk of Clinton's speech was a litany of standard liberal promises of better jobs, better schools, better health care and a better environment. She pledged "quality, universal health care," "revitalizing our manufacturing sector," an Apollo-style government program to deal with the energy crisis, and a universal pre-kindergarten program to improve public education.

These pledges were received with rapturous applause by the

audience, consisting largely of officials and members of such unions as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the apparel, retail and hotel workers' union UNITE HERE, the postal workers, and the construction trades.

The United Auto Workers, which regards Clinton as too friendly to free trade and environmental regulations on the auto industry, was nearly invisible, although one laid-off UAW member was among a panel of three who told stories of economic and social hardship, to which Clinton responded.

The Democratic frontrunner did not bother to square her reformist pretenses with her pledge of a return to the economic policies of the 1990s, carried out by her husband's administration. The first Clinton White House focused on balancing the federal budget and satisfying the demands of the bond market, essentially precluding any significant increase in spending to meet urgent social needs.

Nor did Clinton address the impact of the enormous squandering of resources on the Bush administration's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which she and the other leading Democratic presidential candidates intend to continue. She only touched briefly on the subject of Iraq, and used language carefully crafted to sound more antiwar than it was, proposing, in substance, a policy not greatly different from options currently under consideration at the Pentagon.

Clinton set a goal to "start bringing combat troops out of the civil war" in Iraq, a formulation which suggests that tens of thousands of US troops would remain in Iraq indefinitely. (On other occasions, she has suggested combat troops exiting Iraq would be redeployed elsewhere in the Middle East or to Afghanistan, keeping them in the war zone).

She went out of her way to emphasize that there should be no criticism of the performance of the US military in Iraq. "Our troops did what they were asked to do," Clinton declared, citing the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the seizure of sites where weapons of mass destruction were located (which turned out not to exist), and the establishment of a level of security sufficient to hold elections for a new Iraqi government.

According to Clinton, the failure in Iraq is the fault of the Iraqis. "The civil war is the Iraqis' responsibility," she said, adding that she would "tell the Iraqis there will be no more aid

until they resolve their problems.” Again, the words are carefully chosen. She threatens a cutoff of “aid”—i.e., US subsidies to the Iraqi puppet regime—not a cutoff of funding for the US war, the only means by which the Democratic-controlled Congress could actually force an end to the war.

Despite the low profile Clinton gave the Iraq issue—relegating it to the 25th minute of a 30-minute speech—her suggestion that she would end the war produced the loudest ovation of the morning.

It is obvious that in downplaying the war in Iraq in her speech—only a few days after a Democratic presidential debate in New Hampshire that focused largely on that subject—Clinton was responding to the concerns of the AFL-CIO bureaucrats who organized the town hall meeting.

The union bureaucracy, steeped in chauvinism and nationalism, has no principled opposition to the war in Iraq—even now, after more than 3,500 US soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have been killed. They look at the war exclusively from the standpoint of how it may affect the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party in 2008.

In the parochial world of the privileged union bureaucrats, the issue of the war is subordinated to the far more important question of putting a Democrat in the White House—one who will look with greater favor on their own narrow concerns about increasing their dues base and income from government programs.

Clinton has clearly taken the measure of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and tailored her remarks accordingly, combining a bit of social reform demagogy with a poisonous dose of chauvinism and American nationalism. “We will do nothing to undermine American interests,” she declared, summing up her approach to all public policy matters, foreign and domestic.

Even her signature social issue, health-care reform, was presented from the standpoint of American economic interests. American corporations, particularly the Big Three automakers, are at a deep disadvantage because of legacy costs for pensions and medical care for retired workers, she said. Their competitors are based in countries with government-run or government-financed medical systems, she pointed out, calling for action to relieve the US companies of their legacy costs. Under capitalism, such action means, in one way or another, depriving retired workers of the benefits they are due.

In the world according to Clinton, not only the war in Iraq, but virtually every other problem confronting the American people is caused by foreigners, or by Bush being insufficiently tough with foreigners.

The gargantuan federal budget deficit? Bush has mortgaged the country to China, so that “we’ve had to borrow money from China to pay for body armor” for the troops in Iraq. Bush’s deficits, she declared, were undermining America’s ability to defend itself economically and diplomatically, because “you can’t be tough on your banker.”

The decline in jobs and real wages? “The Chinese don’t play

fair on trade,” Clinton said. She criticized the Bush administration as too soft on trade, saying, “You don’t give away the US market.” She called for a form of protectionism, which she labeled “smart trade,” and declared that on that basis she would vote against ratification of a free trade agreement between the United States and South Korea, because South Korea was excluding American imports, especially US-built cars, from its domestic market. She also called for the establishment of a new high-level government position, trade prosecutor, to go after countries that practiced unfair competition

In both her opening statement and subsequent remarks responding to the panel of rank-and-file unionists, Clinton resorted to a time-worn cliché of American politics, the assertion that “the American worker is the most productive, hardest working in the world.”

Such statements combine flattery and distortion in equal measure. They hark back to the days—three or four decades ago—when American capitalism dominated the world market and when trade union action, for all its intrinsic limitations, could win concessions in the form of wage and benefit increases.

That era is long gone. The long-term decline in investment in US industry (the responsibility of the capitalists, not the workers), means that American workers are far from the most productive, as measured by output per man-hour, having fallen behind much of Western Europe and Japan.

Living standards for American workers have also fallen behind. Average real wages are higher in Germany and much of Europe, and social benefits ranging from vacation time to health care are far superior to the abysmal level prevailing in the US.

More fundamentally, the globalization of the world economy means that no country any longer possesses a monopoly on advanced industrial technology, scientific technique, or labor skill. This has an enormously positive potential, creating the conditions for raising the living standards of working people everywhere to a decent level for the first time in human history.

But within the framework of capitalism, dominated by giant corporations and rival nation-states, globalization has become a means of enriching a tiny privileged elite, while systematically reducing the living standards of working people to the lowest common denominator.



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