

AFL-CIO leaders pledge \$200 million to Democratic Party campaigns

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At an executive council meeting last week in Washington, D.C., leaders of the AFL-CIO announced a \$200 million effort aimed at Democratic Party victories in the 2008 elections. This pledged payout stands at complete odds with the needs and interests of the 10 million rank-and-file members who remain in the labor federation, and who did not vote on the decision to bankroll this pro-war, big-business party.

The pledge amounts to record campaign spending for the federation, \$50 million more than in the 2004 elections. More than a year before the 2008 elections, the entire US campaign process is awash in cash. With the unions' contributions, the Democrats' war chests may surpass those of the Republicans for the first time in decades.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney told the press Friday, "Today the AFL-CIO is sending a powerful message that we are going to change the course of our country in 2008 by electing a president and candidates at all levels who are committed to restoring the promise of America to working people." These words echo the ringing endorsement the AFL-CIO general board gave in 2004 to the pro-war Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, describing him as "all of the best things America has to offer."

The AFL-CIO spent \$40 million to support Democratic congressional candidates in the 2006 midterm elections. Since gaining the majority in Congress—an expression of growing opposition to the Bush administration's war policies—Democratic candidates' promises for improvements in health care, education and other social programs have not materialized. Instead, working people have seen their standard of living deteriorate, while the Democrats continually vote to authorize Bush administration requests to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This state of affairs, however, has not deterred the AFL-CIO executive council from pledging record amounts for the big-business party this electoral cycle. For 2008, the federation has committed \$53 million to a so-called grassroots campaign initiative. Press releases suggest this will entail the largest mobilization of union members in history for purely electoral purposes. According to *Atlantic Monthly* blogger Marc Ambinder, the AFL-CIO plans to "partner with other groups and use reams of consumer data to market precise political messages neighborhood-by-neighborhood." The AFL-CIO said it would "activate and deploy more than 200,000 volunteers in 2008."

AFL-CIO Political Committee Chair Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), told the press, "Our members are building an army to make more calls, knock on more doors and turn out more voters than ever. We're going for the trifecta: the House, the Senate and the White House."

By pouring resources into districts in the Midwest with heavy concentrations of union workers, AFL-CIO leaders hope to secure the presidency for the Democrats and widen the Democratic majorities in the Senate and House. AFL-CIO political director Karen Ackerman stated in a press release that the federation was particularly determined to hand Ohio to the Democrats, given that in 2004 the questionable results within the state were decisive in Bush's re-election.

Federation leaders say the initiative will engage "union voters about the issues they're concerned with: health care, retirement security, good jobs, economic equality, trade policy and the freedom to form and join unions."

Nowhere to be found in their 2008 agenda is a mention of the *other* issues of the most pressing

concern: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, aggression against Iran, domestic spying, and the stripping of habeas corpus and other fundamental democratic protections. The Democrats, who are complicit in all of these crimes and others, represent no alternative for working people as this political crisis escalates.

The record \$200 million allocation comes only two years after seven major unions broke away from the AFL-CIO, taking with them 6 million union members to form the rival Change to Win coalition, reducing the federation to 10 million members. The split was not a product of principled differences, but chiefly involved infighting over union dues income and influence with the employers and the state. The rupture signaled nothing progressive, but marked a further degeneration of the rotten bureaucratic apparatus.

Since parting ways, each of the rival groups has continued to pursue the policies of economic nationalism, labor-management collaboration and support for the Democratic Party that produced the collapse in the labor movement in the first place. The largest union within the split-off, the Service Employees International Union, has already announced it will spend more than \$30 million on the 2008 campaigns. Change to Win convenes next week to announce its electoral spending and will undoubtedly pledge funding to the Democrats.

The Democratic Party victory in the 2006 mid-term elections expressed widespread antiwar sentiment within the American population. However, in the wake of this victory, while posturing as opponents of the war, Democrats in Congress have refused to cut off funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Far from representing any alternative to the Bush administration and the Republicans, the Democrats have played an instrumental role in facilitating the most reactionary and pro-business policies throughout Bush's two terms.

Fearing being seen as "soft on terror," the Democrats recently provided the key votes to make permanent and expand provisions of the "Protect America Act of 2007," which grants vast powers to the government to spy on Americans. They have repeatedly provided the votes necessary to eliminate fundamental protections against secret detentions, and have played a crucial role in sanctioning torture.

On domestic issues, the Democrats have collaborated with the Bush administration time and again to cut

funding and dismantle basic social, health and safety programs. Health care costs, the issue most heavily stressed by the AFL-CIO, have skyrocketed under loosened regulations on the pharmaceutical and medical industries. Since the Clinton administration, the Democrats have allowed the social safety net to unravel, leaving tens of millions of Americans uninsured and in poverty. The Democrats are also in lockstep with the most reactionary, chauvinistic elements on the issue of immigration, by refusing to oppose militarization of the borders and criminalization of undocumented workers.

The AFL-CIO executive council's pledge of \$200 million to support the Democrats' 2008 electoral bid is a betrayal of the interests of union members. It is another indication that this upper-middle-class layer is motivated by protecting its income and privileges at the expense of the living standards of the working class as a whole. Defense of the interests of working people requires a complete break with the Democratic Party and all its financial backers, allies and apologists.



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