

# US trade unions shift behind Obama

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A day after defeating Hillary Clinton in the February 19 Wisconsin primary and Hawaii caucuses, Barack Obama picked up the nomination of the 1.5 million-member Teamsters union. Support from the Teamsters was one of a number of important union endorsements received by the Illinois senator and Democratic Party presidential candidate over the past several weeks.

On Wednesday, the Change to Win federation of unions, which includes the Teamsters, also officially backed Obama. The coalition's nomination process requires that unions representing two-thirds of the federation's membership endorse the candidate. To date, four of the coalition's seven member unions have endorsed Obama.

In addition to the Teamsters endorsement, other Change to Win unions pledging their support to Obama include the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), which endorsed him last week; and UNITE Here, which gave its endorsement in early January. The United Farm Workers, which had already endorsed New York Senator Hillary Clinton, abstained on the vote, as did the Laborers' International Union and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (which had endorsed John Edwards, who has since dropped out).

The AFL-CIO and the United Auto Workers union have yet to officially endorse Obama or Clinton. Clinton presently has the endorsement of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Machinists, the Letter Carriers, the Bricklayers and the American Federation of Teachers—all AFL-CIO-member unions.

Announcing their support for Barack Obama, the various union officials sought to describe their endorsement as a bold step forward for labor. In so doing, they are attempting to foster illusions that an Obama candidacy will champion the interests of working people, and that putting a Democrat in the White House would result in a shift in government policy, improving the lives of union members and their families.

Typical of these statements were those of SEIU Secretary-Treasurer and Change to Win Chair Anna Burger, who said, "Our members and the 40 million workers in our industries are real people who work hard picking the crops, stocking the shelves, preparing and serving our food, building, cleaning and guarding the skyscrapers of our big cities. They drive our buses and trucks." For them, she said, "this election is about changing

America to win a better future for our children."

An Obama presidency, she said, would have "the power to turn that dream into reality." The SEIU official did not elaborate on what specific policies Obama would advance to counter the growing social inequality that is driving millions of working class families in America into poverty. She could not because any real struggle for social change would require a challenge to America's corporate elite and the political establishment, something both Obama and Clinton oppose. Obama offers at best token economic measures in the face of a growing social crisis.

Commenting on the Teamsters endorsement of Obama, union President James P. Hoffa claimed that Obama "will fight to rebuild our transportation infrastructure"—a key issue for the union—and "work with us to address critical issues from our ports to our highways, rails and airports." The Teamsters chief failed to elaborate that Obama is proposing to spend only \$6 billion a year on infrastructure repair, a tiny fraction of the \$1.6 trillion engineering experts say is required to repair the nation's infrastructure to decent condition.

That the unions would throw their support behind the Democratic Party in the 2008 elections was never in question. However, the speed with which a number of unions representing millions of these workers have now swung over to the Obama camp as he assumes the role of frontrunner and likely nominee is noteworthy. UFCW President Joseph Hansen expressed this perhaps most crudely, when he commented that "Obama is the frontrunner now, and we decided now was the time to make an endorsement."

A top SEIU official, speaking on condition of anonymity to the *New York Times*, also indicated that the service workers union's shift to Obama was "not an anti-Hillary move," but was aimed at avoiding a contentious fight at the Democratic convention that could weaken the party's chances in the November election.

The union bureaucracy is eager to secure the perks that will come from backing the winning candidate, and is positioning itself to play its traditional role: helping to channel the discontent of workers behind the Democrats. The support of the union leadership for the Democratic Party as a whole, and Barack Obama in particular, is an expression of the union bureaucracy's slavish support for this big business party.

As union membership shrinks and working conditions

deteriorate in the form of wage cuts and attacks on health care, retirement and other benefits, the unions have no independent perspective to offer working people to counter this assault. Instead they pour union members' dues money into the coffers of the Democratic Party campaigns.

At stake in the endorsements are millions of dollars in union funds and the mobilization of thousands of foot soldiers in the race, first for the Democratic nomination and ultimately for the presidency. The AFL-CIO, with more than 10 million members, has budgeted \$54 million for the 2008 campaign, up \$6 million from 2004, to support Democratic candidates for president and in dozens of congressional races.

The SEIU, with 1.9 million members, expects to collect more than \$30 million for the 2008 campaign, making its PAC (Political Action Committee) one of the biggest in the US. The union has contributed close to \$700,000 so far to Democratic candidates.

The UFCW is one of the largest unions in the country with 1.4 million members. Its endorsement of Obama was a blow to the Clinton campaign, as the union is seen as influential in upcoming primaries in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Texas. In Ohio, the UFCW has 70,000 members working in supermarkets and food processing; in Texas, many of its 26,000 members are Latinos working in the meatpacking industry.

With the Teamsters endorsement of Obama, the union had activated a 50-state election campaign blitz, with special emphasis on "swing" states, where the presidential race is predicted to be close between the Democrats and Republicans. The Teamsters have 60,000 members in Ohio and 17,000 in Texas, where primaries scheduled for March 4 are seen as make-or-break contests for Clinton.

Virulently chauvinist, the Teamsters bureaucracy is in the midst of a campaign to stop Mexican truckers crossing the Texan border under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Teamsters' support for Obama came only days after he declared his opposition to the pending US-Korea Free Trade Agreement.

Campaigning over the weekend in Ohio, a state hard hit by manufacturing job losses, Obama stressed his opposition to NAFTA, promoting the reactionary notion that the jobs of American workers can be saved on the basis of pitting workers in the US against their brothers and sisters in Mexico, China or other countries. In Ohio, he has attacked Clinton because NAFTA was passed during her husband's term in office.

Obama is playing the national chauvinist card not because he believes it will advance the interests of workers in Ohio or elsewhere. He is adopting the demagoguery long used by the AFL-CIO to divert workers' anger over growing economic insecurity away from big business into denunciations of foreign workers for "stealing American jobs." This stance may be problematic in the run-up to the March 4 primary as Obama courts votes from Latinos in Texas, who make up 35 percent of the state's population.

The Democrats have consistently lined up with Congressional Republicans and the Bush administration on cutbacks in social programs, tax cuts for the rich, attacks on workplace safety, and other legislation protecting corporate America and further enriching the wealthy.

The Democrats regained the majority in Congress in the 2006 mid-term elections largely on the basis of widespread antiwar sentiment within the American population. But since gaining that majority they have continued to fund the Bush administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and provided the key votes to pass legislation legalizing domestic spying and other attacks on democratic rights in the name of the "war on terror."

In speeches, Obama has pledged to be a "president who will listen to Main Street—not just Wall Street" and has promised tax cuts for working families, increased wages and a government that would "protect pensions, not CEO bonuses." But among his most powerful backers is Warren Buffett, the second-wealthiest individual in America, with a net worth of some \$52 billion. And Robert Wolf, CEO of UBS America, has been responsible for bringing in millions of dollars from other multimillionaires to finance Obama's campaign.

In their praise of Obama, the union heads have failed to mention that one of his key backers in the Virginia primary was Governor Tim Kaine, who in dealing with a \$641 million shortfall in the state budget has proposed delaying annual raises for state workers organized in the Virginia Public Service Workers Union.

In the end, the wellspring of support for Barack Obama from the trade unions is the product of their craven support for the Democratic Party and the political establishment as a whole. While they speak of the "change in the air" that accompanies the Obama campaign, union leaders are fearful of a movement within the working class and among young people that threatens to erupt into a challenge to the profit system. Above all, they want to block any break on the part of working people with the Democratic Party and any struggle that develops outside of it.

The union leaders also have a vested interest in perpetuating the myth that Barack Obama is a friend of the working class. A successful Democratic presidential campaign would reward them personally, in the form of the inevitable perks and positions that would be doled out should a Democrat be installed in the White House. They are wagering that an Obama nomination would provide the best conditions for making that happen.



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