

At Democratic National Convention

Union bureaucrats attack their own members as “racist” for failing to back Obama

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The two main competing factions within the US trade union bureaucracy are temporarily setting aside their bitter rivalry to unite behind the presidential campaign of Barack Obama. One prominent feature of their intervention has been to attribute the lack of enthusiasm among their own members for Obama to white racism, a charge that they make no attempt to substantiate, and in fact is contradicted by polls that reveal growing anger and alienation among workers from the Democrats and the two party system.

Both AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and Anna Burger, chair of the rival Change to Win union federation, addressed Democratic National Convention delegates Tuesday night. Both union factions are participating in a series of workshops, and other events throughout the convention designed to boost the Obama campaign. Their uncritical support for Obama and the Democrats further underscores the fact that these organizations have nothing to do with defending the real needs and interests of working people.

The speeches of the two union bureaucrats were carefully scripted and, especially on the part of Sweeney, laced with religious and patriotic references. Sweeney and Burger made almost no direct reference to the actual situation facing millions of working people—the slashing of jobs, the gutting of social programs, surging gas and food prices, widening home foreclosures, eroding wages—referring merely to the fading of the “American Dream.” Predictably, the union leaders avoided any concrete reference to questions of policy, limiting themselves to abstract calls for change. They made no serious attempt to explain how the election of Obama would actually improve the social situation of workers.

This silence is understandable given that the Democrats are presenting a social agenda consisting of a few ludicrously inadequate reforms, in no way commensurate with the magnitude of the unfolding economic disaster facing working people.

Nonetheless, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win, which split from the union federation in 2005, are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to back Obama and congressional Democrats in the 2008 campaign. The AFL-CIO unveiled at the convention a \$53.4 million effort targeting undecided voters in 24 “battleground” states. The campaign’s main focus will be on members of union households in the industrial states of Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania, which are considered key to a Democratic victory.

Trade union officials make up a substantial portion of the participants in Denver, with some 25 percent of convention delegates reporting they are members of unions or union households. Over the last three decades as membership rolls have plummeted (unions now represent only 12 percent of US workers and 7 percent of private sector workers), the main function of the unions has been to serve as a virtual adjunct of the Democratic Party, supplying it with vast amounts of cash and personnel for its apparatus.

At the same time, the more the Democratic Party has lost its mass base of support in the population, the more it has come to rely on the trade union bureaucracy, even as the actual influence of the unions over this big business party has massively declined.

The fact that the Democrats allotted Sweeney and Burger a little three minutes each for their speeches reflects this marginalization of the unions. The remarks of the leaders of the two union federations, who ostensibly represent a combined total of some 15 million workers, were paid scant attention by conference delegates and all but ignored by the news media.

For the trade union bureaucracy the Democratic Party is “pro-worker” in so far as it promotes the narrow and selfish interests of the privileged middle class layer running the unions. A main focus of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win is enactment of the so-called Employee Free Choice Act, which will permit union organization when a majority of workers at a jobsite sign authorization cards, without a National Labor Relations Board election. Both Sweeney and Burger made sure to mention EFCA in their convention addresses. The SEIU alone is spending \$75 million to promote this legislation, which Obama is co-sponsoring in the US Senate.

However, even in the unlikely event Congress eventually passes some version of card check, it will do nothing to halt the decline of the official American trade union movement, which, despite the enormous pent up social anger that exists, is organically incapable of mobilizing the social power of the working class. Despite the dramatic worsening of conditions for masses of workers, strikes are rare occurrences and private sector union membership is at a 100-year low. Where the unions have achieved certain successes in organizing, such as recent campaigns by the Service Employees International Union, they have often shamelessly collaborated with employers to set up what amounts to little more than company unions, imposing contract terms stripping workers of essential

rights.

Once again, polls point to the enormous disaffection of working people with both big business parties. The trade union bureaucracy and its various middle class “left” and liberal apologists have long sought to explain the contradiction between the increasing alienation of workers from the Democratic Party and its shop worn claim to be the party of the common man with references to the supposed “backwardness” of American workers.

In the current election, the trade union bureaucracy and certain of its liberal allies are embellishing this claim in order to rationalize Obama’s problems winning working class votes, blaming the alleged racism of white workers. For example, AFL-CIO Political Director Karen Ackerman cited the “race factor” as one element in Obama’s relatively weak working class support. Other union officials, such as American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees President Gerald McEntee, have made similar claims, asserting that racial prejudice is preventing many white workers from recognizing their own best interests, i.e. voting for Obama. Along the same lines, liberal *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert wrote an August 25 comment titled “The Dog that isn’t barking.” The piece essentially asserts that white workers who are hesitant about voting for Obama are racist.

These claims are false and cynical. In fact, in so far as racial divisions exist, they are exacerbated by the Democratic Party’s embrace of identity politics, which inevitably tends toward the fragmentation of the population along race, ethnic and gender lines. Further, the Democrats and their trade union bureaucracy allies adapt to and even promote every conceivable prejudice, above all anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner chauvinism. For decades, the unions have touted the reactionary and bankrupt policy of economic nationalism, pitting American workers against workers in Latin America, Asia and Europe. There were continuing references at the convention to the foreign threat to US jobs. According to one report, the SEIU is now running a television ad “that ominously warns of foreign investors buying stakes in US-based companies.”

The contention that the trade union bureaucracy—which has promoted virulent anti-Japanese and anti-Mexican racism for decades—is waging a struggle to enlighten the working class is a farce. In the end, all the talk about a racist working class is a transparent effort to obscure the right wing and anti-worker character of the Obama campaign and the whole Democratic Party. No mention is ever made of the party’s abandonment of its past association with policies of social reformism. In attempting to explain Obama’s steady decline in the polls over the summer it is taboo to discuss the campaign’s sharp lurch to the right including: Obama’s appointment of Wall Street insiders as his top advisors; support for the anti-democratic Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act; his retreat on his earlier call for a set timetable for withdrawal from Iraq; support for faith-based funding, etc.

In fact, it is generally recognized among Obama’s left liberal backers, but usually left unsaid, that on a wide range of fundamental questions—militarism, the economy, and democratic rights—there is little to distinguish Obama from Republican John McCain. Indeed, among these layers, support for Obama is largely based on the bankrupt claim that having an African-American in

the White House will be an advance, irrespective of the actual policies Obama advocates.

Refuting the assertion that workers are preoccupied with the question of race in this election, a recent survey among predominately white working class voters in suburban Macomb County, Michigan—an area north of Detroit hard hit by the downsizing of the auto industry and rise in home foreclosures—found that the number one issue was “the off-shoring of jobs, with rising gas, food and health-care costs running a close second.” As one commentator noted, “Obama was failing to connect with voters on their economic anxieties. This seems to be a direct result of his decision to campaign on loftier goals of change and renewal, and not on unemployment and falling real incomes.”

While Obama received 38 percent of the support of white non-college-educated voters—about the same as John Kerry in 2004—significantly, the survey noted a high level of support for independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader, whose campaign has received virtually no media coverage. Nader had the support of 11 percent of the county’s working class Democrats and 12 percent of its union members. While Nader is a staunch defender of American capitalism, his mildly reformist platform is significantly to the left of anything Obama is proposing.

The course of the 2008 election campaign underscores the political dead end of the subordination of the working class by the trade unions to the Democratic Party. The main issue facing working people is the need for a political break with the Democrats and the creation of an independent party of the working class. This requires a rejection of the nationalist and pro-capitalist political orientation of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win and the adoption of an internationalist and socialist perspective.



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