

Obama's abbreviated Labor Day in Detroit: A sop to the bureaucracy

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On Monday, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama made a campaign stop at Detroit's annual Labor Day parade. The event took place in Hart Plaza, and drew about 10,000 people, along with about an equal number who waited outside and watched Obama's speech on a large projection screen.

For the thousands who attended, many of whom waited in line for hours only to be refused admittance, Obama's appearance was a disappointment. His remarks were inaudible to the crowd gathered outside of the plaza, which began to disperse even before he had concluded. Obama spoke for only a few minutes, and included a silent prayer for those in Hurricane Gustav's path on the Gulf Coast. This was supposedly done to put politics in the background at the time of a potential national emergency.

"There's a time for us to argue politics, but there's a time for us to come together as Americans," he said, adding "I know John McCain wants what's best for the people who have been evacuated. I know George Bush wants what's best for them, and so do I." Obama has also asked hundreds of thousands of his supporters to donate to the American Red Cross.

Obama did not explain why a campaign stop that purported to address the most pressing issues of American workers would be inadmissible politicking in the context of the approach of a natural disaster, with memories still fresh of the Bush administration's callous response to the suffering of working class people wrought by Hurricane Katrina.

There was very little of substance to the speech, but it was clearly directed to the union bureaucracy and not to the workers of the Detroit area. Obama declared that he was "a labor guy," and "that it's important to have a president who doesn't choke on the word 'union.'" He made a brief and more or less oblique reference to a

number of the policy goals dearest to the union officialdom, including an expansion of the automatic dues check-off system (the Employee Free Choice Act) and a proposal for massive financial handouts to the Big Three automakers, which reportedly face the threat of bankruptcy and dismemberment within the next one to three years.

On stage with Obama were Ron Gettelfinger, president of the United Auto Workers, John Sweeney, president of the AFL-CIO, and Jimmy Hoffa Jr., who heads the Teamsters, a component of the rival "Change to Win" federation. The bureaucrats have mobilized unprecedented resources—the dues of union workers—to support Obama's election. The AFL-CIO will spend about \$250 million this election, almost all on behalf of Democrats, and Change to Win will spend another \$70 million. In addition, tens of thousands of paid union officers and volunteers will be mobilized. Needless to say, the unions never offer a fraction of these resources to defend their own members when they strike.

The upper middle class layer that controls the unions is utterly hostile to the interests of rank-and-file workers. They hope that a Democratic administration will create a more hospitable climate for their own petty concerns, including government subsidies, positions in the government and greater influence for union-friendly think tanks, and they fear a Republican administration will do just the opposite.

Obama did not even attempt to appeal to the class anger of workers of Detroit and Michigan, who have suffered for decades under the brunt of the financial aristocracy's onslaught against the working class. Detroit, once the nation's fourth largest city and the world center of auto production, is now the poorest big city in the nation, with about a third of the population living below the official poverty level, according to

2007 census data. Scarcely more than a fifth of Detroit public school students graduate from high school. The city and state have been losing jobs and population for years, and the housing foreclosure crisis is particularly acute in metropolitan Detroit.

The unions and the Democratic Party have not only “failed to defend” the working class in Michigan and across the country. They have been indispensable accomplices in the decades-long campaign by the banks and corporations to transfer wealth from working people to a financial elite. They have consistently acted to divert, contain and, when necessary, suppress popular opposition. At every opportunity, they have fostered nationalism and xenophobia, and pressed the demands of management on workers, insisting that they have to help make America “competitive,” sustaining the profitability of US corporations through cuts in pay and benefits.

Within the last year and a half, Gettelfinger’s UAW has forced unprecedented cuts on workers at the Big Three, taking over management of their health care fund, and it has compelled striking American Axle workers to return to work with a punitive contract that ceded to management nearly everything that it asked. This was both in spite of *and because of* the combativeness among rank-and-file UAW workers. The bureaucracy senses that any significant strike movement of the working class will pose a political confrontation with the two-party system and endanger its own privileged and parasitic position.

Obama will do nothing to improve the conditions of life facing millions of workers. On the contrary, he enjoys strong support from Wall Street and big business because of the sense within the ruling elite that he will be in a better position to make assaults on the social position of the working class than McCain, who is identified with the Republicans and the hated Bush administration. Among these measures is the threat of a reinstatement of the draft (Obama’s references to “national service” are a coded reference to this.)

A team of Socialist Equality Party members distributed thousands of statements from the *World Socialist Web Site* (“Obama’s Denver speech: Populist demagoguery in the service of militarism”). Amongst the racially mixed crowd, illusions in Obama prevailed, but these illusions are based mainly on fear of McCain and the Republicans and on the thin hope—a sort of

suspension of disbelief—that Obama will bring peace, jobs, and a better life. In discussion, many of those in attendance expressed doubts that Obama would deliver any of these things.

Despite the illusions in Obama, that thousands of workers and youth show up for the campaign stop of a presidential politician suggests that a politicization of layers of the working population is underway. Any movement of masses of people into political life must come into open conflict with the Democratic Party and the unions.

It is something of a departure from recent political tradition that Obama attended the event. From the 1940s through the 1960s, the Labor Day parade in Detroit was regularly used to launch the national campaigns of Democratic presidential nominees, a practice that ended with Lyndon Johnson in 1964. Subsequent candidates avoided the event as a means of demonstrating the Democratic Party’s subservience to Wall Street and its distance from the working class. Now that the bureaucracies have transformed the unions into thoroughly corporatist organizations that serve to subordinate workers to the interests of big business, and with the pivotal “swing” and union-heavy states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Minnesota on the line, Obama has revived the older tradition.



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