

What is the AFL-CIO?

Barry Grey
18 September 2009

At its convention this week, the AFL-CIO chose a new president to replace the retiring John Sweeney, who had headed the organization for 14 years. One measure of the decrepitude of the trade union federation is the fact that the leadership change barely registered on the public consciousness, least of all among workers, including the small minority who are AFL-CIO members.

Another measure is the person chosen to succeed Sweeney—Richard Trumka. Like the man he replaces, Trumka personifies the petty entrepreneurs and corporatists of the American trade union apparatus. His claim to fame is that as president of the United Mine Workers from 1982 to 1995 he presided over major defeats of the miners, givebacks and concessions to the mine owners, and the virtual destruction of what had been one of the most militant of American unions. By the time he left to take a job as Sweeney's lieutenant, the United Mineworkers' active membership had been halved from its level when he became union president.

The very fact that such a person could be elevated to the top post testifies to the moribund character of the AFL-CIO.

Another is the astonishing fact that Trumka is only the fourth president in the nearly 55-year history of the organization. Given how rare a leadership change is, it is appropriate to make it the occasion for an overview of the history of the AFL-CIO.

The AFL-CIO was formed in 1955 through a merger of the previously rival union federations—the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The merger represented the coming together of different factions of the labor bureaucracy on the explicit basis of anti-communist red-baiting and support for American imperialism's Cold War agenda.

AFL President George Meany became the first president of the merged labor federation. He embodied the reactionary legacy of the old craft unionism. Shortly before he ended his tenure as president in 1979, he boasted that he had “never walked a picket line in his life.”

Meany combined class collaboration at home with chauvinism and support for US imperialism abroad. The AFL-CIO's foreign affairs department collaborated with the

CIA and the State Department to set up anti-socialist, pro-American unions around the world and prop up pro-US dictatorships in Latin America, Asia and elsewhere. Meany was a virulent supporter of the Vietnam War.

The second-in-command at the founding of the AFL-CIO was Walter Reuther, president of the CIO-affiliated United Auto Workers. He personified CIO leaders who had long since abandoned their earlier militancy and leftism, accommodated themselves to the Democratic Party, and rejected any struggle for industrial democracy or significant reform of the capitalist system.

Reuther spearheaded the purge of socialists and left-wing militants in the CIO that preceded and was the precondition for unification with the AFL. The purpose of the witch hunt was both to suppress opposition to capitalism in the labor movement and to support the expansionist agenda of US imperialism internationally.

Basing itself on the global economic supremacy of the United States in the years following World War II and the post-war economic boom, the AFL-CIO was—for a very limited period of time—able to achieve some progress in obtaining gains in wages and benefits for union members. The most important factor in winning these gains was the militancy of the American working class, which remained high despite its being politically subordinated by the AFL-CIO to the ruling class via the bureaucracy's alliance with the Democratic Party.

Within a few years of the AFL-CIO's founding, however, the growth of automation and other labor-saving technologies already signaled the beginnings of the organization's decline. Wedded to the defense of private ownership of industry and the profit system, the labor federation had no viable response to such scientific developments.

The unraveling of the post-war boom and the erosion of US capitalism's economic dominance plunged the AFL-CIO into a crisis from which it never recovered.

A deep recession in the early 1970s was followed by so-called “stagflation” and a precipitous decline in the market share controlled by American industry both internationally and within the US itself.

Meany, at death's door, retired in 1979 and was succeeded by Lane Kirkland, a career apparatus man who began working in the research department of the AFL after World War II. Kirkland had no connection to the struggles of the working class. His focus was the counterrevolutionary activities of the AFL-CIO internationally.

Kirkland headed the organization until 1995, including the crucial decade of the 1980s. In that decade, the AFL-CIO single-mindedly devoted itself to suppressing and sabotaging struggles of the working class against the Reagan and Bush senior administrations. The tone was set by the AFL-CIO's betrayal of the PATCO air traffic controllers, who struck in August of 1981. Reagan fired and blacklisted all 11,300 striking controllers and decertified the union. He was allowed to do so by Kirkland and the rest of the AFL-CIO leadership, who isolated the PATCO strikers and blocked any serious solidarity action.

The ensuing wave of corporate union-busting and strikebreaking, aided and abetted by the betrayals of the AFL-CIO, inaugurated three decades of take-backs and concessions that continue to this day and have been intensified with the Obama administration's assault on the auto workers. The defeats of militant and bitter struggles throughout the 1980s facilitated the labor bureaucracy's efforts to extinguish all traces of the class struggle traditions of the past and implement a corporatist program of union-management collaboration at every level of union organization.

Thus, for more than half of its existence, the AFL-CIO has been engaged in negotiating the lowering of wages and benefits, the elimination of jobs, and the intensification of the exploitation of its members. A generation of workers has spent its entire work life without experiencing a strike—or only losing strikes. This is a stark reality that is ignored by the middle-class “left” apologists of the trade union bureaucracy.

In the early 1990s, the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, concluded that the accumulated betrayals, particularly of the previous decade, the massive decline in union membership and suppression of strike activity, the embrace of corporatism and integration of the union officialdom into the structure of corporate management signified the completion of a protracted process of degeneration. The AFL-CIO and its affiliated organizations could no longer be considered workers' organizations and could not be reformed, let alone revolutionized, by pressure exerted by union members from below.

This analysis has been entirely vindicated by subsequent events. In 1995 John Sweeney replaced Kirkland with much fanfare from the liberal media and the middle-class “left.”

He would supposedly—without any change in the basic political orientation of the organization—revive the AFL-CIO and lead it to a new period of growth and progress.

Of course, nothing of the kind ensued. In 2005, a number of major unions, led by Sweeney's own Service Employees International Union, split from the AFL-CIO and formed the “Change to Win” coalition. Like the AFL-CIO, the Change to Win unions have continued to negotiate wage and benefit concessions and concentrate their efforts on suppressing the class struggle. In recent years, Change to Win has been battered by a series of internal splits and jurisdictional wars.

Sweeney exits with the private sector unionization rate in the United States—7.6 percent—the lowest since 1900.

The demise of the AFL-CIO is part of a broader, global phenomenon. All over the world, trade unions have undergone a similar degeneration. The globalization of production of the past quarter century was the death knell for all labor organizations based on a nationalist perspective. But the American unions, with their fanatical anti-socialism and identification with the most powerful imperialist force on the planet, have exhibited these tendencies in the most extreme and crude form—reflected in leading representatives, such as Mr. Trumka, who evince no trace of class consciousness.

The deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression is creating the conditions for a new period of class struggle. The American working class needs to tear itself free of the corpse of the AFL-CIO and build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the workers and completely independent and opposed to the old union apparatus.

The building of these new organizations must be linked to a new political strategy—a break with the parties of big business and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass party of the working class, to fight for workers' power and socialism.

Barry Grey



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact