

The Nation on the Detroit march for “Jobs, Justice and Peace”: Deceit and self-delusion

David Walsh
6 September 2010

On August 28, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, United Auto Workers (UAW) President Bob King and a host of other union leaders and Democratic Party politicians addressed a crowd of several thousand people in Detroit. The march and rally were held in the name of “Jobs, Justice and Peace.”

More than 40 organizations—which *on paper* still have hundreds of thousands of members and supporters—sponsored the rally, but it was largely boycotted by the population. The participants, for the most part, were lower-ranking union officials, officials of the Michigan Democratic Party (which was holding its convention in Detroit), and representatives of the local African-American elite.

In the most impoverished city in America, with a real jobless rate of about 50 percent, the fact that only a few thousand turned out to hear Jackson and King, despite a major buildup for the event by the local media, testifies to the lack of significant popular support for or belief in the two figures and the organizations they represent.

And for good reason. Why should anyone have the slightest confidence in millionaire charlatans such as Jackson, with a record of defending the profit system that goes back decades, or union officials like King, who has helped preside over the destruction of tens of thousands of auto jobs and the halving of auto workers’ pay?

The August 28 event was, in fact, an effort by a section of the American political establishment to bolster the credibility of the Democrats—and the UAW—in advance of the November midterm elections, which may very well see a significant Republican victory.

None of the speakers advanced any concrete proposals to win either jobs, justice or peace. There was no hint of sincerity or determination in the speeches. Everyone was going through the motions, and everyone on stage, and many in the crowd, knew it.

The various officials brought out their holiday “populist” rhetoric, denouncing corporate greed in suitably vague and meaningless language, complaining about the loss of “American jobs,” and imploring the people to turn out in

November and vote for the Democrats.

What passes for the American “left,” however, is treating the August 28 rally as though it marked the historic rebirth of the labor and civil rights movements.

John Nichols in the *Nation* (August 28) counterposed the Detroit march to right-winger Glenn Beck’s rally the same day at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, where the latter laid claim to the heritage of the massive civil rights march in August 1963 famously addressed by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nichols asserted that “anyone who was paying attention Saturday knew that the continuation of the 1963 ‘March on Washington for Jobs and Justice’...was not the slick, right-wing spin-dominated event in Washington. It was the serious, issue-oriented march organized by the United Auto Workers union, a key supporter of the 1963 march, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a former aide to King.”

Nichols continued, “Jackson and the new activist president of the UAW, Bob King, led the march, which marks the beginning of what the union head describes as a ‘massive campaign that brings so many concerned citizens together in the name of peace and mobilizing forces for change.’”

What proportions of self-delusion and deliberate deception are involved in such a comment is not entirely clear, but it is a secondary matter. Nichols treats the UAW under King and Jackson’s traveling “Keep Hope Alive” circus as the legitimate leadership of a new popular movement.

This is the opposite of the truth. Under conditions of widespread economic suffering, growing anger and great disillusionment with Obama, Jackson and King are intervening to block the emergence of an independent movement of the working class against big business and its political representatives.

Nichols’ vision of the Detroit march as the restaging of the 1963 Washington rally is a fantasy and has an almost farcical element. Hundreds of thousands rallied in Washington in August 1963, as part of a vast movement for equal rights. Black and white youth, in particular, turned out in massive numbers.

Much water has flowed under the bridge since then.

American liberalism and the AFL-CIO have turned sharply to the right, long ago abandoning even token opposition to the status quo. The less than half-hearted and cynical character of the Jesse Jackson-Bob King march and rally communicated itself to the population. Almost no one showed up.

In the *Washington Post* August 31, *Nation* editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel repeated Nichols' claims, commenting, "Last Saturday in Washington, Glenn Beck tried to lay claim to the civil rights movement. That same day in Detroit, we saw the real thing: the UAW, SEIU and AFSCME joining with the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, the NAACP, the Urban League, ministers and civil rights activists to march for jobs and justice."

In a follow-up September 2, headlined "The UAW Hits the Streets," Nichols went further in singling out King for praise. He claimed that the new UAW president "has dusted off the still-substantial union and renewed its activist tradition by building coalitions...and supporting mass-movement projects like the August 28 Jobs, Justice and Peace march in Detroit."

Nichols went on, "King's election in June signaled a [former UAW President Walter] Reuther turn for the union, with the new president declaring, 'Our mission is social justice.... The only way we can have social justice for our membership is to fight for social justice for everybody in society.' That's not just rhetoric for King, who comes out of historically militant UAW Local 600 in the Detroit area."

Again, this is sheer fantasy on Nichols' part. King is a longtime American union official of the most conventional type, whose personal history and background were not in any manner associated with workers' struggles. Only one month before he was selected by the UAW hierarchy in December 2009 to become the next head of the union, 70 percent of Ford workers voted against a concessions contract that King had negotiated.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time, "It was the first rejection of a national auto contract recommended by the UAW since 1982 and at Ford since 1976. In the days leading up to the vote, King was repeatedly booed and driven off the stage when he sought to sell the deal to workers in Michigan, Missouri and other states."

In a speech August 2 to an industry gathering, King promised to scrap any and all restrictions imposed on the car companies by previous UAW contracts, announcing that the union was "ready, willing and able to do what it takes" to make the auto firms profitable.

Nichols' praise of King, even as the latter and the entire UAW officialdom try to beat back opposition to a 50 percent wage cut at a GM plant in Indianapolis, expresses how distant he and the rest of the liberal left are from the lives

and concerns of the working population. These are upper-middle class types, contemptuous of workers and naturally drawn to the well-heeled, petty-bourgeois caste of union leaders. There is no other way to explain Nichols' false and dishonest account of the August 28 march in Detroit and the present state of the UAW.

The accounts in the *Nation* echo the press coverage the King and Jackson show received in the big business media in Detroit. The *Detroit News* published an extremely friendly story on the August 28 march, opening as follows: "The chants of thousands of people demanding jobs filled the air downtown as UAW President Bob King and the Rev. Jesse Jackson led the crowd to Grand Circus Park."

On September 5, the *Detroit Free Press* ran a large front-page photo of Bob King under the headline "Labor of Hope." The same edition carried a pre-Labor Day article by its business writer with the headline "UAW's Plan: Tap into Worker Discontent, Focus on Social Justice—Union Makes a Bid to Reinvent Itself." The piece began, "On this Labor Day weekend, the role of those who advocate for workers and those who want to work—such as the UAW—has never been more important." This is lying nonsense.

The August 28 march in Detroit, and other similar events planned nationwide for September and October, are in line with the belated efforts by Obama and the Democrats to present themselves as the defenders of the "middle class." They are hoping to forestall a Republican landslide, or at least save face. These are grotesque efforts.

Having kicked the working class in the teeth for more than a year and a half, bailing out the bankers, promoting war and militarism, continuing the assault on democratic rights, and carrying out a frontal assault on workers' jobs and living standards, the Obama administration now offers itself as the apostle of the little man and woman.

Bob King and Jesse Jackson put on a "left" face on August 28, but there is no oppositional content to their campaign for "Jobs, Justice and Peace." They had nothing but hot air for those assembled, who for the most part expected nothing else. In promoting Obama and the Democrats, they are promoting the administration's agenda, which is that of the ruling elite—the permanent lowering of the living standards of the mass of the population in the service of America's financial and corporate aristocracy.



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