

Cheerleaders for the AFL-CIO

The pseudo-left and the October 2 Washington rally

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Last Saturday's rally in Washington mounted by the AFL-CIO unions, the NAACP, and other liberal groups, called to bolster the Democratic Party in the November 2 congressional elections, had the enthusiastic support of the various pseudo-socialist organizations that comprise of middle-class "left" in America.

These groups and their publications bear a variety of names: International Socialist Organization, Workers World Party, *Labor Notes*, Solidarity, Socialist Action, *In These Times*, the Party of Socialism and Liberation, etc. They have different organizational histories, and combine the outlooks of Stalinism, revisionism and reformism in various proportions. But in relation to the October 2 march, and in their overall attitude to the contemporary US political situation, they have a remarkably common approach—one that is diametrically opposed to the perspective and program of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The pseudo-left groups applauded the rally, while, to one degree or another, criticizing the AFL-CIO leadership for its abject subordination to the Democratic Party. They portrayed the rally as a definite step forward for the unions, a turn towards greater militancy and mobilization of the working class and minorities, one that should be repeated on an expanded scale.

A few samples:

According to the ISO, the rally brought as many as 175,000 people to Washington and "provided an opportunity to speak out for those who feel the urgent need to challenge the rightward shift in US politics."

Labor Notes gushed, "Saturday's One Nation rally on the Mall in Washington, DC, proved one important point: unions can still turn out. The overwhelming majority of the tens of thousands present were union people. Service Employees, Teachers, Auto Workers, Communications Workers—these unions came big."

The lead article in *Workers World* declared, "Getting 200,000 workers to Washington for anything is no small thing, and it's something that happens far too seldom. The organizers of the Oct. 2 rally are to be commended. The fightback, however imperfect, has to start somewhere, and here was an attempt, however contradictory, at starting it."

It is highly significant that all these groups accept without question the crowd estimate provided by the rally organizers themselves, which is a flat-out lie. Any truthful account of the rally would concede that this was perhaps the most poorly attended event ever backed by the AFL-CIO, let alone by myriad other groups listed as sponsors. Never have so few turned out at the call

of so many organizations.

This writer walked through the UAW contingent, one of the largest, spread along the Reflecting Pool in the National Mall, and it numbered no more than a few thousand. The UAW and five other major unions—SEIU, AFSCME, CWA, AFT and NEA—brought the majority of the demonstrators, with the NAACP and similar groups bringing a few thousand more.

A generous estimate of the crowd size would put it between 20,000 and 40,000, and press accounts the next day generally conceded that the rally was far smaller than the crowd that assembled to hear ultra-right talk show host Glenn Beck in the same location a month earlier.

Nearly 30 years ago, the AFL-CIO sponsored a Solidarity Day rally on the National Mall, one month into the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike. In that era, the unions still commanded considerable support in the working class, despite the rightwing, pro-capitalist politics of the AFL-CIO. The crowd that turned out in September 1981 was huge, perhaps one million strong.

The dismal turnout on October 2, 2010, was an important indicator of the historical collapse of the American labor movement, and the transformation of the unions into nothing more than an apparatus for suppressing workers' struggles and mounting electoral campaigns for the Democratic Party. It was a rally of, by and for this apparatus, not the working class.

The refusal of the pseudo-left organizations to acknowledge this political fact, or draw any conclusions from it, testifies to their fundamentally bankrupt political character. They make the supposed strength and power of the AFL-CIO the starting point of their political line, hypnotized by the claimed membership of millions of workers, without any examination of the actual relationship between the union apparatus and the working class, which is of an entirely hostile character.

The decline and fall of the American labor movement over the past three decades is a closed book to these groups. It is worth noting the curious fact that during the period when the unions did command a mass following in the working class, and the task of revolutionaries was to conduct a vigorous struggle inside the unions for a socialist perspective, the various revisionist tendencies were adamantly opposed. They denounced the unions as racist "white job trusts," and oriented instead to demands for student, black and Latino power as well as women's and gay rights.

Now that the unions have lost any genuine connection to the working class, becoming nothing more than instruments of

corporate management to discipline workers and suppress any actual expression of the class struggle, the pseudo-left has rallied to the labor bureaucracy and actually entered it, frequently obtaining full-time paid positions in the union apparatus. This demonstrates their fundamental class character: these are organizations of the middle class, whatever their verbal paeans to socialism and workers.

In return, the union leaders have embraced the bourgeois “identity” politics that characterizes the pseudo-socialist organizations. This was expressed in the politics and structure of the October 2 rally. Union leader after union leader pledged from the platform their solidarity with blacks, Hispanics, women, gays and the transgendered. Representatives of these “identity” groups pledged their support for the unions. And the middle-class ex-radicals applauded.

The “left” organizations, in their coverage of the rally, were at pains to criticize the AFL-CIO for its orientation to the Democratic Party. But this criticism is merely for show. At heart, the ex-radicals are Democratic Party supporters once removed. They support the unions, and the unions support the Democrats.

They don’t criticize the politics of the AFL-CIO from the standpoint of a struggle to establish the political independence of the working class from all forms of bourgeois politics, which means the struggle for a socialist program. Rather they counterpose some other form of bourgeois politics, or different tactics for pressuring the bourgeois political establishment, to the AFL-CIO’s policy of all-out electoral support for the Democratic Party.

Socialist Action was among the groups that proposed further protests as an alternative to the AFL-CIO’s get-out-the-vote drive. In a statement issued before the march, the group hailed the equally bankrupt and relatively small protest organized by the UAW and Jesse Jackson in Detroit August 28, as well as the larger demonstration on October 2.

The statement declared, “The significance of these events cannot be emphasized enough. Here, working people are not sitting back passively, hoping the politicians will throw them a few leftover crumbs after bestowing bountiful favors on the banks and corporations. Rather, workers are relying first and foremost on themselves. They are acting independently of the two major political parties, which are controlled above all by corporate and Wall Street interests.

For all the radical-sounding rhetoric, this is a slavish defense of bureaucracy. In no sense whatsoever was the October 2 demonstration “acting independently” of the two-party system. It was devoted entirely to using the threat of the Republicans to scare workers into voting for the Democrats.

A commentary by Lee Sustar of the ISO praised the speech by UAW President Bob King, declaring, “King, to his credit, called for diverting federal funds from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to education and the creation of green jobs.”

One would hardly know from this reference that King is the most rightwing figure ever to head the UAW, one who has pledged to the auto bosses to bury forever any hint of adversarial relationship and make the union a full partner with the companies in driving down wages and boosting corporate profits.

The ISO commentary also glorified protest demonstrations, but

added an electoral component as well. After tut-tutting over King’s support for the Democrats, Sustar noted, “In Illinois, in fact, there’s a progressive alternative to the Democrats: Rich Whitney, the candidate of the Green Party, who got 10 percent of the vote for governor in 2006, when organized labor was mobilizing for the now disgraced Blagoevich.”

The Green Party in the United States, like its counterparts around the world, is a capitalist party that supports the profit system. When the political conditions permit, the American Greens would follow the example of those in Germany, Australia, Sweden and elsewhere in supporting and joining bourgeois governments, supporting imperialist wars, and implementing austerity policies against the working class.

To say there was a united front of the pseudo-socialists behind the AFL-CIO is not a polemical exaggeration but a literal truth. The ISO, Solidarity, Socialist Action, Socialist Alternative, the branches of the Socialist Party in several states, and individuals associated with the *Nation* and the Democratic Socialists of America all signed a common statement and participated in a common “socialist contingent” at the pro-Obama demonstration.

The joint statement cited the need to “help create a counterweight to Glenn Beck, the Tea Party and Republicans, their reactionary politics, ruthless economics and their racism,” the same argument made by the AFL-CIO and NAACP to argue for a vote for the Democrats.

While declaring, for the record, that they did not share the AFL-CIO’s political goal of electing Democrats on November 2, the statement nonetheless expressed unreserved support for those who called the demonstration solely for that purpose.

“We join the movement for this march, excited and enthused to see the labor unions, the African American and Latino populations, the women’s, gay and lesbian and environmental movements taking to the streets,” the statement declares.

The joint statement makes vague reference to the need “to create an independent political force,” without calling for a break with the Democratic Party, or for a socialist program, or for the building of a new leadership in the working class in struggle against the old, corrupt organizations. Without these three elements, there can be no genuinely independent working class political movement.

The newly issued program of the Socialist Equality Party declares, “The fight for the political independence of the working class means a struggle against all those middle-class organizations, including nominally ‘socialist’ groups, which claim the Democratic Party can be pushed to the left through mass pressure. This position is aimed at preventing the working class from establishing its own independent political party.”

The October 2 demonstration supplied another verification of the correctness of this political assessment.



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