

Pro-Democratic Party rally shows bankruptcy of US unions

Patrick Martin
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Saturday's rally in Washington to support the Democratic Party in the November 2 congressional elections was a demonstration of the political bankruptcy of the AFL-CIO and the other unions that organized the event and supplied most of the participants.

While called under the slogans of "Jobs, Peace and Justice," there was no criticism of the Obama administration for continuing the rightwing policies of the Bush administration and presiding over the worst economic slump since the Great Depression, escalating the war in Afghanistan and intensifying the attacks on democratic rights. Instead, the speakers called for a vote for the Democrats to prevent the Republican Party from gaining control of Congress.

The rally drew several tens of thousands, nearly all of them union officials and their periphery. There was no significant turnout of the rank-and-file workers who remain trapped in the old labor organizations, and no representation at all of the unorganized workers who make up the vast majority of the working class, or of the tens of millions of unemployed and young people hardest hit by the economic crisis.

While every press release promoting the demonstration, and much of the press coverage after the event, mentioned the "more than 400 organizations" sponsoring the rally, the initiative came primarily from the AFL-CIO and allied groups like the NAACP and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

Six major unions supplied the vast majority of the demonstrators—the United Auto Workers, the Service Employees International Union, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees, the Communications Workers of America, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers.

Not only did the union delegations, each identified by color-coded t-shirts, dominate the rally, but the leaders of five of the six unions, along with AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, gave the main speeches, joining black and

Hispanic Democratic politicians like Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson and Congressman Luis Gutierrez.

This made the October 2 rally unusual, in that the union executives acted as the main spokesmen for their political positions, rather than ceding that role to others more skilled at demagogic tub-thumping. The result was a series of banal and tedious remarks that only underscored the political dead end of support for the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

Nearly every speaker combined warnings of the consequences of a Republican victory in the November 2 election with appeals to those attending the rally to spend the next month in all-out campaigning for a Democratic Party victory. There was no examination of the actual policies of the Democrats, still less of the relatively insignificant differences between the two big business parties.

There was no criticism of the Obama administration by name, even by speakers who criticized some of the policies for which the Democratic president is responsible. One of the first speakers at the rally, the Reverend Al Sharpton declared, "We bailed out the banks. We bailed out the insurance companies. Now it's time to bail out the American people."

The bank bailout was Obama's first act in office. The healthcare "reform" was certainly a bailout of insurance companies. But Sharpton did not identify either action with Obama, and presented his applause line as though such an appeal would receive a ready hearing from the administration.

Jesse Jackson, another featured speaker, characterized the situation in America as "midday in politics, midnight in the economy," an attempt to separate the Obama administration from the economic debacle that its policies have reinforced.

He declared that Obama was "on the right side of history," although the only action he could cite was the president's signing of legislation outlawing hate crimes against gays and lesbians. He concluded with an appeal to register and vote November 2, adding, "The president can't bear this cross alone."

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka criticized rightwing TV commentators and Tea Party activists who he said were “full of hate” and who sought to mobilize “the forces of fear and hatred.” He called for “bold action to rebuild schools, roads, bridges” and other infrastructure, without explaining why the Obama administration in its nearly two years in office has opposed any significant expansion of public works to create jobs.

UAW President Bob King was the last major speaker, by which time nearly the entire crowd, including several thousand UAW members brought in chartered buses from Detroit, Flint and other cities, had departed.

King warned that the United States “is at a crossroad,” claiming there were two opposed visions of the country, embodied in the two major parties. One, presumably the Republicans, sought to “divide by race, religion, national origin, gender, age, and exploit people’s fear by singling out an ‘other’ to be afraid of.” He continued, “We don’t believe in division. Those marching today believe in community and common humanity against divisions.”

Similar empty appeals for “unity” and against “division” and “hate” characterized many of the other speeches, most of which were brief and vacuous. There are two political considerations involved in such appeals.

The union executives chose the “One Nation” slogan under which the rally was held in a bid to gather support from those involved in various forms of identity politics, who largely comprise the active “base” of the Democratic Party. Official after official pronounced himself or herself opposed to discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, immigration status or sexual orientation.

At the same time, the warnings against “division” reflect the nervousness of the privileged bureaucracy, which feels itself increasingly isolated and despised by the workers, including the great majority of union members. As the working class enters into struggles to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, these officials will denounce every attempt to break from the straitjacket of the unions and the Democratic Party as “divisive,” “splitting,” even “rightwing.” Workers who fight back against the Obama administration will no doubt be branded “racist.”

One of the union speakers, CWA President Larry Cohen, made an unusual admission in the course of his remarks. He noted that in the 47 years since the 1963 civil rights march led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., held on the same spot, there had been significant gains in democratic rights for blacks, Hispanics, women and gays. During that same time, he said, “Workers’ rights have been all but crushed.”

This contradiction deserves consideration. There were definite concessions made by the ruling class, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s, to the demands for equality and

democratic rights made by women and minorities. But these concessions became the basis not for any fundamental change in the structure of capitalism, but for the recruitment of a thin layer of blacks, women, etc. into the exploiting class.

The culmination of this process was the installation of Barack Obama in the White House. The first African-American president is carrying out the dictates of the banks and billionaires in both domestic and foreign policy. From his escalation of the war in Afghanistan to his escalation of the attacks on democratic rights at home, Obama is the personification of the program of American imperialism: reaction all down the line.

The increased—and extremely limited—“diversity” in the ruling class has not produced any lessening of social tensions in the United States. On the contrary, the social and economic gulf is wider than ever between the working class, the vast majority of the population, and the financial aristocracy.

During the same period, the trade unions, which were built by mass struggles of the working class and served for a time as defensive organizations, were completely transformed. The unions today, tied to the corporations and the Democratic Party, function as instruments for the disruption, misdirection and outright repression of any movement from below.

The Socialist Equality Party intervened at the rally with a leaflet calling for a rebellion by the working class against the old, outlived organizations, and for “the formation of committees of action—genuinely democratic organs of working people independent of the trade unions and the two big business parties—at factories and other work locations, in schools and colleges and in working class communities to fight layoffs, home foreclosures, utility shutoffs, school closures, cuts in social services and all of the other social crimes committed against the people by the capitalist elite.” (See, “Break with Obama, the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO: Build a socialist movement against mass unemployment, war and repression”.)

The rally was a confirmation of the political perspective outlined in this leaflet. It demonstrated that the unions function not as workers’ organizations, but as instruments of the corporate-financial aristocracy to suppress the struggles of working people.



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