

Occupy Wall Street: The ISO promotes the unions against workers' interests

David Walsh
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The International Socialist Organization (ISO) is one of the most relentless advocates of the American trade unions anywhere on the political spectrum. Since the eruption of the Occupy Wall Street protests against social inequality, the ISO has consistently argued that this movement should seek out the support of the unions and, in effect, accept their leadership. According to this argument, the connection to the unions' apparatuses would mean establishing stronger ties to the working class.

An October 5 *ISO/Socialist Worker* editorial, for example, asserted, "The entry of major unions ... points to the potential for the Occupy movement to deepen its social roots." *Socialist Worker* on October 6 cited the comment of ISO member Doug Singsen, "If unions link up with occupations in other cities then this whole movement will deepen a great deal."

In its October 12 editorial, *Socialist Worker* returned to the issue, declaring that it was "crucial for Occupy activists to reach out to labor and offer their solidarity." The thrust of an October 25 piece on the same web site is indicated by its headline, "Deepening OWS [Occupy Wall Street] ties to labor," which praises the efforts of unnamed "Occupy activists" who have been "reaching out" to the unions.

The unstated assumption of this general line of reasoning, one accepted by the entire pseudo-left in the US, is that the AFL-CIO and Change to Win federations and their local representatives are legitimate working class organizations, although under weak or inadequate leadership at present.

Here the ISO counts on the political inexperience of the mostly youthful anti-Wall Street protesters and also on an inevitable degree of inertia, or lag, in popular thinking. The use of the word "union" or "labor" by the ISO and others on the so-called left is deliberately meant to conjure up images of mass struggles from the 1930s through the early 1970s, of pitched battles between strikers and police or company thugs, of events associated with a broad social movement against big business and the establishment in general.

However, this does not square at all with contemporary realities. The global integration of the world economy in recent decades, above all, rendered impotent and reactionary the efforts of nationally based labor organizations. The AFL-CIO, and its offshoot in Change to Win, hardly resisted that transformation. Saturated with national chauvinism and corporatist class collaboration, the American trade unions decades ago abandoned the defense of the conditions and rights of their unfortunate members.

The unions in the US have facilitated and presided over the precipitous decline in decent jobs and living standards and consequent growth in social inequality that sparked the current protest movement. A recent report indicating that median US household income plunged

9.8 percent in only four years, from December 2007, the official start of the recession, to June of 2011, is some measure of the worthlessness of the existing "labor movement" for the purposes of defending the working population from the predations of capitalism.

The American unions at present are only good for policing their members, imposing sell-out contracts, enriching their own officialdom and launching verbal and physical attacks on their critics. They are business organizations that fully identify with corporate America and subordinate workers politically to the present system through their support of the Democratic Party (and, most immediately, the 2012 Obama re-election effort).

It is this image—of complacent, well-heeled officials raking in six-figure incomes and making backroom deals with the employers and the government—that should come to mind today when the words "union" and "labor" appear in the articles and speeches of the ISO. (A look at these faces and an investigation of the incomes associated with them should help the unwary: <http://aflcio.com/aboutus/thisistheaflcio/leaders/ecmembers.cfm>) In the existing unions, the "left" is promoting organizations whose social interests are *objectively hostile* to those of the working population and that fear like death an upsurge against big business and the two-party system.

The ISO operates in the present context, and this accords with its upper middle class composition and orientation, as a kind of political filter or buffer. The AFL-CIO and other unions go about the business of helping corporate America impoverish workers inside and outside their ranks, and promoting the big business Democratic Party, to which they contribute tens of millions of dollars in dues money. Meanwhile the ISO, addressing sections of the student youth in particular, acts like a public relations firm engaged in "spin," painting the unions as credible, progressive organizations, to be sure in need of somewhat different priorities, generally pursuing the interests of ordinary workers.

Thus, the ISO chooses to cite the empty comments of numerous leading union officials at Occupy Wall Street protests and similar gatherings, but omits to detail the role of these same figures in imposing concessions and other attacks on their members.

A telling instance involves Communication Workers of America (CWA) officials, a number of whom have appeared at Occupy Wall Street protests, and their role in this summer's Verizon strike. CWA leaders abruptly called off the walkout by 45,000 Verizon employees in August after two weeks, although they had failed to reach agreement on a new contract and the company was continuing to make enormous concessions demands. Even by AFL-CIO standards, the betrayal stood out for its cynicism and brazenness.

CWA leaders, in serious need of credibility, find it convenient to denounce corporate greed at the anti-Wall Street protest rallies. It costs them and commits them to nothing. And the speechifying is almost certain to be cited favorably by *Socialist Worker*, *In These Times*, the *Nation* and other such publications.

On October 6, *Socialist Worker* quoted Bob Master, CWA District 1 legislative/political director, who told Occupy Wall Street protesters that their movement was “what democracy looks like.” We noted (See “The Nation, ISO seek to channel Wall Street protests back to the Democratic Party”) the part played by Master in the Verizon betrayal and added, “Imposing concessions and job cuts on a hostile membership is what ‘democracy looks like’ at the CWA.”

In “Deepening OWS ties to labor,” the ISO/*Socialist Worker* goes even farther. The article notes that on October 20 the protest movement “expanded its labor participation to the struggle of Verizon workers.” Hundreds of Occupy Wall Street supporters, the article claims, joined a march organized by the CWA and International Brotherhood of Electrical Worker (IBEW) on Verizon headquarters in lower Manhattan.

This “expansion” of “labor participation,” in other words, amounted to an effort by the CWA and IBEW to draw a section of the young protesters into a stunt meant to divert attention from the unions’ miserable treachery at Verizon. In the event, relatively few responded (the *Nation* described organizers’ “disappointment” at the “comparatively modest” numbers of protesters who participated). The CWA-IBEW rally was primarily made up of union officials, workers close to the official structures and supporters of the unions in the “left” groups. Many anti-Wall Street protesters exhibit a healthy, instinctive distrust for the union leaders, which helps explain the ISO’s persistent and slightly exasperated tone.

Undaunted, *Socialist Worker* dutifully cites the remarks of CWA Vice President Chris Shelton to those assembled October 20: “Verizon is the absolute symbol of corporate greed in this country.” This was Shelton speaking to the media August 21, 2011 as the CWA was throwing in the towel at Verizon: “We’re going back to work Tuesday. We’re going to sit down. We’re going to bargain with these folks and if they don’t keep their word, we have the option to go out and do exactly what we did before only it will be a lot worse.”

Two and a half months later, the CWA’s Master admits to the *Nation*, Verizon officials are maintaining “pretty much the same position they had when we went on strike,” and who could blame them, considering the unions have already given up their only serious weapon, strike action?! The misnamed *Socialist Worker* makes no mention of the sell-out of the August strike, nor does it warn Verizon workers about the rotten deal the CWA and IBEW intend to impose on them.

One derives a blunter and more honest assessment of what the unions are up to in relation to the Occupy Wall Street movement (and, by extension, what the ISO is up to!) in the mainstream media, which is seeking, among other things, to reassure the establishment that the present movement can be brought under control.

The *Washington Post* on October 20 (“Occupy Wall Street, unions get their activism together”) notes that unions are providing “office space, meeting rooms, photocopying services, legal help, food and other necessities to the protesters” and generally “lending some institutional heft to a movement that has prided itself on its freewheeling, non-institutional character.”

Getting to the heart of the matter, the unions’ attempt to channel the protests into support for the Democrats, the *Post* points to the

“sensitive” relationship between the unions and the Occupy Wall Street movement: “Occupy activists have made it clear that they would reject any efforts by union officials to draw the new movement into the get-out-the-vote efforts that labor wages in election campaigns. Unions mobilized in 2008 to help elect Obama, and, despite frustrations with the administration, unions are expected to follow suit again next year.”

The *Post* refers to George Gresham, vice president of the Executive Board of the Service Employees Internal Union and president of 1199 SEIU (health care workers), who “hopes the coordination with Occupy Wall Street will eventually push the activists toward a focus on the 2012 election. He said it was ‘the reality of the world we’re living in now’ that ‘there is going to be an election in a year and a half, and someone is going to come out of that election to lead this country.’”

Gerald McEntee, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, told the *Post* that his union is once again planning to spend \$100 million to help Obama and the Democrats. “He also said he expected the activists to turn their energy toward the campaign. ‘What’s the alternative?’ he asked.”

The AFL-CIO’s Richard Trumka insisted that the unions would “not try to guide the protesters down the path. ‘This is an organized movement, and we’re not attempting in any way to try to harness it,’ he said. ‘We’re just riding along with it.’ Still, Trumka’s recent schedule illustrates the challenge of trying to balance the establishment and the anti-establishment. Two weeks ago, he was charming Occupy activists with a personal visit and a delivery of hundreds of fresh bagels. But this week, he sat down for a private meeting with the ultimate insider: Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner.”

There one has it, neatly summed up. The process of political manipulation in the interests of the ruling elite begins in the White House, passes through the AFL-CIO and the other unions, and terminates in the columns of the *Socialist Worker*.



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