

Service Employees International Union endorses Obama in 2012

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The 2.1 million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU) announced on Wednesday its unusually early endorsement of Barack Obama for re-election in 2012. Other than the timing, the statement by SEIU President Mary Kay Henry comes as no surprise, considering the longstanding alliance and increasing integration of the US trade unions into the big business Democratic Party.

However, that takes nothing away from the brazen and provocative character of Henry's announcement, from the point of view of ordinary SEIU members, many of them low-paid health care and building cleaning workers, struggling to get by from paycheck to paycheck, as well as the rest of the working class.

The Obama administration has bailed out the banks and Wall Street at the expense of the population, presided over the slashing of wages in the auto industry, carried out massive budget cuts and proposes hundreds of billions more, continued and deepened its predecessor's attack on democratic rights, continued the war in Iraq, escalated the neo-colonial intervention in Afghanistan, and spearheaded a neo-colonial war for regime-change in Libya. Obama's current saber-rattling in Australia, where he proposes to station thousands of US troops, is a reckless act aimed at China and increases the danger of world war. His government has shown itself to be an obedient servant of the financial aristocracy.

None of this bothers Henry and the other leaders of the Change to Win and AFL-CIO union federations. The SEIU officialdom's support for Obama makes perfect sense from its selfish vantage point. If one sets aside the hollow references to Henry and her fellow executives as "labor leaders," and considers them as well-heeled business figures, the years of the first Obama administration have been good to them.

In Henry's brief and preposterous statement Wednesday,

she asserted: "President Obama is the only candidate for president who shares our vision of America as a land of opportunity for everyone. We need a leader willing to fight for the needs of the 99 percent, and stand with hard-working families to say that the world's wealthiest corporations must pay their fair share."

Aside from the fact that Henry has as of yet very little idea who the other candidates for president will be, her identification with the "99 percent" rings a little hollow. According to a 2010 US Labor Department report, Henry earned \$253,660 in annual salary and other disbursements. While that does not quite put her among the top one percent (\$343,927 and above in 2009), she is comfortably situated within the wealthiest five percent (\$154,643 and above) of Americans, and presumably the top two or three percent.

A number of other SEIU officials joined her in the wealthiest five percent: Executive Vice Presidents David Regan (\$298,647), Mitchell Ackerman (\$297,133), Gerald Hudson (\$224,372) and Thomas Woodruff (\$216,168); International Secretary-Treasurer Eliseo Medina (\$250,373); Executive Board member Kirk Adams (\$199,847); George Francisco Jr., Fireman & Oilers International President (\$187,976); Bill Lloyd, Executive Board member (\$182,092); Anna Burger, International Secretary-Treasurer (now retired and a member of Obama's Economic Recovery Advisory Board, (\$180,345); Eileen Kirlin, Executive Board member (\$167,309); Thomas De Bruin, Vice President (\$166,166); Stephen Lerner, Executive Board member (\$165,498); and Deborah Schneider, Executive Board member (\$156,763). Total top SEIU officer disbursements added up to \$3,625,469.

The SEIU endorsement's timing is significant. There is enormous disillusionment with Obama among those who voted for him in 2008. Opposition to the corporate elite, bound up with that disappointment, is swelling in the US. The Occupy Wall Street movement, which set up camp in

hundreds of communities, has been met by relentless police repression from Democratic mayors and local governments, without a word of reproach from the White House. The SEIU's early announcement, a year before the 2012 election, is intended to preempt any opposition arising outside the Democratic Party, or, for that matter, within it, to the right-wing policies of the current administration.

It underscores the reactionary calculations behind the unions' professed support for the Occupy protests.

Henry's statement is full of bombast and empty assertions which she does not bother to justify or elaborate on. She declares that the US "economy and democracy have been taken over by the wealthiest one percent. These bankers and CEOs have used their wealth and excessive political influence to treat our state and federal governments like their personal cash drawer—spending lavishly on elections and then pressuring legislators to give them even more instead of creating jobs."

Yes, and the largest recipient of this corporate cash-bribery has been Barack Obama, the candidate being endorsed!

Henry touts Obama's "American Jobs Act," which, if enacted, would have little effect on the jobless rate, consisting primarily of tax breaks for the corporations and having no chance of passage anyway, which the Democrats know full well.

She goes on: "We know what's really important. We know that after a decade of tax breaks for the rich and out-of-control gambling on Wall Street, things have gotten much harder for working Americans. We know that if these problems aren't taken care of now, the next generation will have it even worse."

Again, the candidate Henry is endorsing in the statement has been in power for a third of the decade in question. Under Obama, the gap between the super-rich and everybody else has grown. Unemployment has worsened and poverty has deepened while corporate profits and Wall Street bonuses have soared.

The SEIU president concludes by suggesting, somewhat defensively, that, "President Obama is looking to turn things around," and "fighting for more jobs and less nonsense." Presenting not a shred of evidence to bolster those half-hearted claims, Henry proceeds to call on SEIU members to empty their pockets for the campaign of the millionaire Obama and the Democratic Party.

The statement—vague, unconvincing and bearing no relation to reality—could only emerge from an organization entirely out of touch with—and contemptuous toward—its supposed base in the working population. By its very obtuseness, Henry's announcement further exposes the fiction that the SEIU and other US trade unions are working class organizations.

These operators are in the business of offering up their members as cheap labor and raking in millions of dollars in the process. In regard to the political process, they carry out whatever maneuvers they think necessary to defend their positions. With Obama and the Democrats, Henry and the other union executives reason, they have a better chance of retaining a lucrative "seat at the table" than with the Republicans.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO) and other false "lefts" continue to present the unions as essentially healthy organisms, in need of a little shaking up at the top. That Henry is openly gay automatically makes her "progressive" in the eyes of the *Nation* and other liberal publications. The magazine's John Nichols, for example, found her "calm" and "thoughtful" in an interview earlier this year, a leading figure in the "progressive labor world."

The endorsement by Henry and the SEIU of this right-wing, anti-working class administration reveals what and who she is, part of the lower-level management of American capitalism.



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