

The trade unions and Obama's State of the Union speech

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The American trade union leadership can be counted on to resort to demagoguery and lies in pursuit of its narrow self-interest. In its response to Tuesday's State of the Union address by President Obama, the union brass did not disappoint.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and United Auto Workers (UAW) President Bob King hailed the speech as a boon to workers and a rebuke to big business. They gave their enthusiastic support to Obama's "economy built to last," which, the president claimed, was based on the revival of American manufacturing.

In a statement issued Wednesday, King said, "The president has demonstrated his commitment to creating an economy 'built to last' by restructuring the US auto industry for the 21st century..." King went on to boast, "All three domestic auto makers are bringing jobs back to the United States from other countries."

Trumka declared that Obama "made clear that the era of the 1 percent getting rich by looting the economy, rather than creating jobs, is over..." Trumka particularly praised Obama's trade war rhetoric: "President Obama spoke to the confidence of working people that... we can revitalize 'Made in the USA.' That commitment to American manufacturing, made possible in part by enhanced enforcement of trade laws being violated by China, is welcome news..."

The speech was actually one of the most reactionary State of the Union addresses ever delivered. Obama placed his "blueprint" for the US economy within the framework of a chilling celebration of the American military and its criminal activities around the world. Among the achievements he cited were the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and the bombing of Libya and murder of Gaddafi. He spoke with particular pride of the extra-legal drone assassinations in Africa and the Middle East and concluded with a paean to the Navy

SEALs who murdered Osama bin Laden.

These comments were interlaced with threats of economic war against China, diplomatic and political war against Syria, and military war against Iran.

Obama suggested that the American people would have to accept the militarization of social and political life in order to revive the economy and bring jobs back to the US. "Imagine what we could accomplish," he said, "if we followed [the American Armed Forces'] example."

The heart of his economic message was the claim that "the American auto industry is back." He touted the rebound of profits for America's Big Three auto makers as a model for the revival of US manufacturing as a whole, highlighted by the return of industrial jobs to the US and an expansion of American manufacturing exports.

What he did not say—but what every auto worker and everyone who has followed Obama's "restructuring" of the industry knows—is that the return of General Motors, Ford and Chrysler to profitability and the recouping of a fraction of the jobs that had been wiped out is based entirely on the abolition of decent wages and benefits. The basic wage scale is being cut in half and benefits such as pensions and health care are being gutted for the new generation of auto workers.

Wage-cutting on an unprecedented scale, the reduction of industrial workers to poverty—this is the key to Obama's "economy built to last." The plaudits for the speech by Trumka and King—who said nothing of wage-cutting—underscores a fact that must be grasped by workers fighting to resist this attempt to hurl them back to the slave-labor conditions that prevailed a century ago.

The support of the UAW and AFL-CIO (as well as the rival Change to Win union federation) for savage

wage-cutting in the 2009 bailout of GM and Chrysler was not an aberration. The official trade unions fully support the destruction of the wages of their own members and the working class as a whole, and are determined to work with the corporations and the government to achieve that goal.

Those who control these organizations and derive six- and even seven-figure compensation packages from their activities have personal and financial as well as social and political interests diametrically opposed to those of the workers. Trumka, King and the like see their role in helping to impoverish and speed up American workers as essential to convincing the corporations to bring jobs back to the US from cheap-labor countries such as China and Mexico. This is critical, from their standpoint, to halting and even reversing the decline in union membership rolls and the dues payments upon which their bank accounts depend.

For the same reason, the union leadership is wedded to the promotion of “America first” economic nationalism, trade war and imperialist aggression around the world. It ceaselessly lobbies the capitalist state to intervene against the international rivals of US corporations in order to protect its own selfish interests. In so doing, it works to block any unified struggle of American workers with their class brothers and sisters internationally and subordinate US workers to “their” employers.

A century ago, the right-wing president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, was asked what the labor movement wanted. He famously replied, “More.” Despite the anti-socialist and anti-revolutionary politics of the AFL, and the more privileged layers of workers it largely represented, the organization still sought to improve the wages conditions of its members. It could be described as a defensive organization of the working class.

That has long since ceased to be the case with the present trade unions—not only in the US, but internationally. These organizations, completely bureaucratized and outside any control by the workers, have been transformed into corporatist labor syndicates. The wealthy reactionaries who run them—Trumka is listed as receiving \$294,000 as AFL-CIO president last year (ten times the pay of a newly hired Big Three auto worker), King got \$153,000 (five times the pay of his new Big Three members)—receive a significant cut of

the profits sweated out of the workers in return for supplying a low-wage workforce.

The fight for jobs and decent wages requires a rebellion against these right-wing organizations and the building of new organizations of working class struggle based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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