

AFL-CIO drags Verizon workers into Philadelphia rally for Democrats

A reporting team
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The AFL-CIO bureaucracy organized a rally in Philadelphia on Saturday, August 11 that attracted around 30,000 participants, largely union officials and their periphery. Called as a national “Workers Stand for America” demonstration, its content served only to expose the political impotence of the unions, their subservience to the Democratic Party and their essential role in betraying the interests of the workers they purport to represent.

Placards handed out to demonstrators carried slogans promoting the Democrats and economic nationalism: “Vote Obama” and “Buy American.”

There was little representation of the rank-and-file workers who remain trapped in these moribund labor organizations, much less from the masses of unorganized, unemployed and youth who have been hardest hit by the economic crisis.

Among the few exceptions were several thousand Verizon employees, who had staged a demonstration earlier in the day outside the company’s Philadelphia headquarters on Race Street and then marched to the AFL-CIO rally site at Eakins Oval.

None of the speakers addressed the issues confronting these workers, who have been working without a contract for a year. Last August, their unions, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), called off a strike after two weeks without any agreement by Verizon to withdraw its demands for sweeping concessions. At the time, union officials claimed that ending the walkout, which left scores of victimized strikers out in the street, was justified because the company was prepared to “bargain seriously.”

Now, with negotiations under federal mediation set to end on August 15, workers face the threat that the

company will try to unilaterally impose sweeping attacks on their health care benefits, pensions, job security and work rules.

A number of IBEW workers had come to the main rally on buses from different parts of the country, having been told that they would be demonstrating in solidarity with the Verizon workers, only to find that they—like the Verizon workers themselves—had been dragooned into serving as extras in the AFL-CIO’s promotion of the Democratic Party. IBEW President Larry Cohen, one of the main speakers, failed to even mention the confrontation at Verizon in his remarks.

The pretense of the AFL-CIO was that the rally’s purpose was to promote a “Second Bill of Rights,” a notion first advanced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944 that in addition to the political freedoms spelled out in the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the constitution, a new set of rights were required guaranteeing economic security and prosperity for all. This proposal remained a dead letter even at the height of New Deal reformism and the postwar period of the greatest growth of American capitalism. How it can be advanced today, under conditions of capitalist breakdown and crisis, together with an unrelenting assault on the social conditions of workers in the US and around the world, is something that the AFL-CIO speakers did not bother to address, outside of a few demagogic shouts about “taking the country back.”

In reality, the realization of such “Second Bill of Rights” would be possible only through the independent political mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist program to reorganize economic life to serve human needs rather than corporate profits. The anti-communist AFL-CIO officials, who defend the profit system, are violently

opposed to such a struggle. Their only intention in putting forward this document and asking politicians of both parties to sign it is to provide a fig leaf to cover the unions' complete prostration before the Democrats.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who mounted the podium to scattered boos from the crowd, put forward this pretense of the unions' political independence, claiming that the rally was "setting the tone for the national political conventions" of both political parties, and that the unions' attitude toward the election "isn't about whether a candidate has a D or an R after his or her name," and "isn't about building one party or hurting another." Instead, he claimed, it was about "our vision of the future."

It is true that the union officialdom has had no qualms about collaborating with Republicans in office. However, the Republican Party has tended to reject the services of the AFL-CIO, while the Democrats have utilized them to police the working class, impose wage cuts and suppress opposition. In return, the unions have enjoyed financial and political perks from the government, most notoriously in the auto industry, where the United Auto Workers gained a substantial share in the ownership of General Motors and Chrysler in return for cutting the wages of new-hires in half. If Trumka has a "vision," it is that this type of cooperation will continue, boosting the treasuries of the unions at the expense of the working class.

The bureaucracy's "independent" posturing, however, was completely belied by the parade of Democrats invited to address the rally. These included Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey and Florida Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the chair of the Democratic National Committee, as well as President Barack Obama, who pre-recorded remarks that failed to make any mention of the "Second Bill of Rights."

Wasserman Shultz, for her part, told reporters afterwards that she agreed with the "principles" of these rights, while claiming that they were already the policy of the Obama administration. In her remarks from the podium, shortly after Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney announced his pick of Congressman Paul Ryan as his vice president, she declared, "What a devastating impact a Romney-Ryan ticket would have on working families."

What has been the impact of the Obama-Biden ticket?

Since January 2009, it has continued and deepened the policies of the Bush administration, while presiding over the worst economic conditions for the working class since the Great Depression. Making no attempt to explain why the Obama administration has over the course of more than three and a half years in office rejected any significant public works program to create jobs—while pursuing deliberate policies, such as the GM bailout and the so-called health care reform, to drive down wages and benefits—the DNC chair urged a vote for the Democrats, claiming that "on inauguration day 2013, we'll begin to finish the change we started."

She described the Republicans' policies as "top down and backward," words that could be used to accurately describe the trade union bureaucrats with whom she shared the platform.

The Philadelphia rally only underscored the irreconcilable opposition between the interests of the high-paid executives that run the unions and those of the working class. The main objective of the AFL-CIO and the various pseudo-left outfits that serve as its cheerleaders is to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party and block the development of any independent political struggle against the profit system.



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