

AFL-CIO seeks to broaden income base as membership plummets

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Amid a continued hemorrhaging in union membership, the AFL-CIO is seeking to broaden its income base by forming partnerships with middle class organizations such as the Sierra Club, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Council of La Raza, an Hispanic advocacy group.

At the AFL-CIO's upcoming convention in Los Angeles in September federation officials say they will propose that these groups be incorporated into the organization, including being given voting rights. The National Council of La Raza and the Sierra Club confirmed that they were in discussions with the AFL-CIO.

This move reeks of desperation. AFL-CIO executives admit their organization is in crisis. In a statement quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka declared, "What we have been doing hasn't been producing results that we would like to see, and we have to change."

In fact this rotten bureaucratic organization is utterly incapable of attracting workers. Under conditions of a relentless attack on jobs, wages and working conditions by big business, the unions have been unable to retain, let alone expand, their membership base. US Census Bureau figures released in January showed that in 2012 the overall percentage of workers belonging to unions dropped more than it had for the past six years, from 11.8 percent in 2011 to 11.3 percent last year. This compares to a unionization rate of 20.1 percent in 1983.

The absolute number of workers belonging to unions fell by 612,000 to 14.7 million. That represents an even greater decline than the fall in the number of those in the US who were employed, 417,000.

The percentage of private sector workers belonging to unions fell to 6.9 percent, down from 7.2 percent, the

lowest rate of private sector unionization in more than a century.

Public sector workers now account for the largest share of union membership. However, even there, membership is falling. The percentage of public sector workers in unions fell from 37.4 percent in 2011 to 36.2 percent last year.

Adding to the crisis of the AFL-CIO is the recent passage of legislation in Wisconsin undermining collective bargaining rights for public employees and the enactment of "right to work" bills in Michigan and Indiana, which bar collective bargaining agreements that require the payment of union dues as a condition of employment.

The passage of right to work laws in states that were at one time considered bastions of the organized labor movement is a testament to the bankruptcy of the unions, which were unwilling and incapable of mobilizing workers in opposition. Aware of the deep antagonism that exists between the organizations they head and the workers they nominally represent, union executives rightly fear the consequences of the elimination of the automatic dues check off. Indeed, no longer obliged to pay dues to support the bloated apparatuses of organizations that do not defend their interests, workers are leaving the unions in droves.

In Wisconsin, where the unions betrayed a mass struggle against anti-worker legislation proposed by Republican Governor Scott Walker in 2011, public sector union membership has collapsed. Two years after the passage of Public Act 10, which among other things made the payment of union dues voluntary, membership in the Wisconsin State Employees Union has fallen from 22,000 to fewer than 10,000. AFSCME Council 48, which is the bargaining agent for city and county workers in Milwaukee County, saw its

membership fall from 9,043 two years ago to 3,498 now. Last October the Wisconsin Federation of Teachers reported that its membership had fallen by 29 percent.

In a further sign of the putrefaction of the official labor movement, a recent piece in the *Los Angeles Times* reports the growth of “turf wars” between unions, in particular between unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO and the rival Change to Win coalition. At stake are millions of dollars in union dues.

The *Times* reports that in California 45,000 healthcare workers affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), part of Change to Win, were targeted by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), aligned with the AFL-CIO. “The healthcare workers in SEIU, for example, paid about \$51.74 in dues a month, according to union financial forms. That translates into some \$28 million a year,” wrote the *Times*.

The SEIU eventually won the vote. However, a lawsuit filed by the NUHW against top SEIU officials accused the union of carrying out a plan of assault, battery and intimidation against NUHW supporters, including threats to call immigration police on Hispanic workers if they did not vote for SEIU.

The turn by the AFL-CIO toward an amalgamation with groups such as the NAACP and the Sierra Club, middle class organizations with no historic connection to the struggles of the working class, further illustrates the transformation of the unions into bureaucratic apparatuses, utterly hostile to the interests of working people. These are not workers’ organizations, but the vehicle of a privileged upper middle class layer that has integrated itself into the structures of corporate management and the capitalist state.

In proposing a partnership with these organizations Trumka attempted to invoke the traditions of the 1930s, when workers carried out mass struggles, winning wide popular support, to organize the industrial unions. This assertion is laughable! Spearheading the struggles of the 1930s were socialist-minded workers who saw the fight for unionization as part of a much broader struggle against the capitalist profit system as a whole. The militant working class of the 1930s was able to attract behind its struggles wide sections of the population, including organizations of small farmers, those facing eviction, and the unemployed.

Trumka and the AFL-CIO absolutely reject this. Based on their support for the Democratic Party and defense of the capitalist system the unions work to suppress every struggle by the working class in defense of jobs, wages and working conditions. Instead of fighting for improved conditions, the unions seek to pressure workers for concessions in order to guarantee the continued flow of profits into the coffers of the corporations.

An alliance with conservative organizations oriented to privileged layers of the upper middle class—the same social layer of the union bureaucracy itself—cannot and will not do anything to benefit workers. The working class needs to build new organizations of struggle independent of and in opposition to the unions. Above all, the working class needs a new political strategy and orientation. The working class must break with the Democratic Party and construct an independent political party of its own fighting for the socialist reorganization of society.



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