

Portrait of an organization in crisis and decline

The AFL-CIO convention

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The proceedings of the AFL-CIO quadrennial convention held this week in Los Angeles underscore the deepening crisis of this moribund and bureaucratic organization and its isolation and alienation from the broad masses of working people.

The union federation is hemorrhaging members. The convention convened in the wake of the passage of right-to-work legislation, barring the collection of union dues as a condition of employment, in Michigan and Indiana long considered bastions of the trade union movement. It also follows the enactment of anti-worker legislation by Republican Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin undermining collective bargaining rights for public employees.

The success of these measures, which the unions were unable and unwilling to seriously oppose, sent shock waves through the AFL-CIO apparatus. That is not because the measures will be used to further undermine the conditions of workers. On the contrary, it is because the elimination of the automatic dues check-off poses a direct threat to the lavish salaries and expense accounts of union executives. Those in the union hierarchy are well aware that hundreds of thousands of workers, repelled and alienated by the unions, will cease to pay dues once no longer required to do so.

With the spread of right-to-work laws the decades-long decline in union membership is threatening to become a rout. In 2012, union membership in the private sector fell to just 6.6 percent, the lowest percentage in 100 years. Overall, the percentage of workers belonging to unions fell to 11.3 percent in 2012, down from 11.8 percent in 2011.

None of this altered the mind numbing and stage managed-character of the convention proceedings. As always there was not even a hint of opposition to the pro-corporate policies that produced this disaster.

Indeed, convention delegates re-elected AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and Secretary Treasurer Liz Schuler, who both ran unopposed.

However, remarks made by Trumka to the *New York Times* before the start of the convention testify to the pessimism bordering on despair gripping the union hierarchy. “The crisis for labor has deepened,” said Trumka. “It’s at a point where we really must do something differently. We really have to experiment.” He continued, “We’re trying a lot of things, and some of them will work and some of them won’t.”

At the top of the AFL-CIO convention agenda was a proposal to shore up its income by combining with middle-class organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the environmentalist Sierra Club and Hispanic advocacy group National Council of La Raza. Facing internal opposition, the AFL-CIO retreated from plans to give these organizations full membership and governing powers. However, a convention resolution titled “A Broad, Inclusive and Effective Labor Movement,” calls for AFL-CIO affiliated unions “to innovate and experiment with new forms of membership and representation.”

The proposal to combine with conservative, upper middle-class organizations—which also function as adjuncts to the Democratic Party—is a further indication of the anti-working class character of the AFL-CIO. It is not a workers organization, but the vehicle for a privileged upper middle class layer, completely hostile to the interests of the workers that are compelled to pay dues to support it.

In addition to these alliances the AFL-CIO is looking for new ways to expand its income off the backs of millions of non-union workers.

For example, the United Auto Workers is pushing

German carmaker Volkswagen to establish a German-style works council at its plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee over the heads of VW workers. The UAW, in close collaboration with the German IG Metal trade union, has been seeking to convince VW management to bring in the union as an industrial police force at its Tennessee factory where starting pay is just \$12 an hour. As part of its credentials the UAW is pointing to its role in slashing new hire pay at American carmakers as well as touting the intervention of President Bob King to convince German Opel workers to revote on a concessions laden contract they had earlier rejected by a wide margin.

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Unfortunately for the UAW, in the event VW agrees to the deal, workers at the factory will still have to vote to ratify such an agreement. This is unlikely given the broad hostility the UAW has earned due to its unbroken record of concessions and betrayals.

A number of actions taken at the convention further underscore the utterly reactionary character of the AFL-CIO. In a political boost to the Obama administration's drive to war against Syria, Trumka uncritically accepted the unsubstantiated claims of chemical weapons use by the Syrian government, declaring "I know the international community is not responding effectively enough to help those people." He continued, "We believe that the use of chemical weapons or any kinds of weapons like that against your own people is a deplorable act." While holding back from an explicit endorsement of military action, Trumka indicated that was being considered, saying the executive council would "ultimately make a decision."

In a telling episode the AFL-CIO hastily cancelled an event featuring healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente after the National Union of Healthcare Workers threatened to picket and leaflet in protest. The company is demanding huge concessions from employees including the elimination of defined benefit pension plans and retiree healthcare. When asked why Kaiser had been invited to the convention Trumka arrogantly replied, "First of all, there has been a Kaiser Permanente partnership for some time and many of the unions have worked through that. Does that mean it is perfect and there are no problems? No, it doesn't mean that."

The disintegration of the US trade unions, highlighted by the proceedings of the AFL-CIO convention, is the product of their 60-year alliance with the capitalist politicians of the Democratic Party, their undying defense of US imperialism and organic and visceral hostility to socialism. Not only are the unions in financial difficulties but as a consequence of their bankrupt policies they are rightly despised by millions of workers, who view them as little more than arms of the corporate oppressors.

This underscores the correctness of the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* of the need for the working class to break with the unions and build new organizations of struggle. Above all the working class needs a new political orientation and strategy. This must be based on elaborating an independent socialist program aimed at unifying workers internationally, abolishing the capitalist profit system and reorganizing economic life on the basis of the democratic ownership and control of the banks and industry by the working class.



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