

Unions collaborate with Trump to push trade war and militarism

Jerry White
21 April 2017

The Trump administration is closely collaborating with the trade unions to push its chauvinist “Buy American, Hire American” campaign and increasingly aggressive trade war and militarist measures. The unions, which have long peddled the snake oil of economic nationalism to disorient and divide the working class, are providing the deeply-hated president with critical political support as he prepares for even bloodier wars.

On Thursday, Trump signed an executive memorandum directing the Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to investigate whether Chinese and other foreign-made imports were undermining US military preparedness. Declaring that the maintenance of American steel production was “extremely important to our national security and our defense industrial base,” Trump said he would investigate “such practices as steel dumping” and “other foreign strategies designed to undermine American industry as a whole.”

Ross, a billionaire financier and former steel magnate, told reporters that his focus would be on whether US steel production could quickly scale up to meet the needs of the military. “One of the factors relating to national security would be if you needed a very rapid buildup, are the skill sets there, particularly are the skill sets there for the very complex alloys that are needed for armor plate and things of that sort,” Ross said. He added that he could issue tariffs on a “broad range of products” from a “broad range of countries.”

After signing the measure, Trump handed his pen to a smiling Leo Gerard, head of the United Steelworkers (USW), who was at the White House event along with the bosses of US Steel, Arcelor-Mittal and other steelmakers. The USW has long alleged that China and other countries have been “dumping” low-cost steel in the US.

Just last week, Gerard issued a statement, saying, “Overcapacity in steel, aluminum, tires and other critical sectors demands quick and resolute action. Dumping and

subsidies are still ravaging our manufacturing sector. China’s cyberespionage is still rampant. China has already been rewarded with millions of our jobs and tens of thousands of factories built at our expense. It’s time for a real change.”

The threat of trade tariffs boosted steel stocks on Wall Street Thursday, with US Steel up 7.35 percent, AK Steel soaring 8.6 percent and Nucor Corporation gaining 4.74 percent. US Steel issued a statement that was indistinguishable from that of the USW: “For too long, China and other nations have been conducting economic warfare against the American steel industry by subsidizing their steel industries, distorting global markets, and dumping excess steel into the United States.”

Trump, the steel bosses and the USW executives all support the attack on the jobs and living standards of steelworkers. The corollary of economic nationalism has always been corporatism, which preaches class collaboration and the subordination of the interests of the working class to the profit needs of their “own” capitalist exploiters. Far from defending a single job, nationalism has been used to disarm workers, block them from uniting with their class brothers and sisters around the world, and pave the way for the destruction of the gains made by generations of struggle.

Today, this poison of economic nationalism is once again being used to line up workers for world war, with all the terrible consequences that entails.

Wilbur Ross is no stranger to the USW. In the early 2000s, the USW and its Wall Street advisors collaborated with the venture capitalist and asset stripper in the restructuring of the steel industry. Ross bought up Bethlehem, LTV and other bankrupt steel firms, destroyed the jobs, wages, conditions and pensions of thousands of steelworkers. He made an estimated \$1 billion in profits when he sold his International Steel Group in 2005 to

Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal.

In January, USW President Gerard sent a letter urging Congress to confirm Ross—also known as “Mr. Protectionism”—citing his collaboration with the union and support for anti-Chinese tariffs. The USW also hailed Trump’s selection of other trade warriors, including Peter Navarro to head the White House National Trade Council and his nominee for US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer, who imposed anti-Japanese tariffs as a Reagan trade official.

Last week, as the USW bureaucrats assembled for a convention in Las Vegas, Gerard praised Trump, saying he was “giving speeches against unfair trade that sound like tape recordings of speeches I made.” So far, he added, the president “has talked about our jobs, trade and infrastructure, named a trade representative that we have worked closely with to stop the flood of cheap Chinese steel and a commerce secretary who bargained with us in good faith. Even though he has said and done a lot of things we don’t like, when it comes to trade and manufacturing, I’m prepared to give credit where credit is due.”

The unions, however, appear to have been somewhat blind-sided by Trump’s rapid shift towards a confrontation with Russia, after the cruise missile strikes against Syria, and, at least, a temporary delay in a direct conflict with China.

At the end of the USW convention Gerard criticized Trump for backing away from his pledge to label China as a “currency manipulator.” The president, he said, “appears to be placating China to get them to help with the threat of North Korea in return for ignoring China’s economic attacks on the United States. Appeasing and rewarding China is not the answer,” Gerard said. He added that Trump was backing away from his promises not to trade away economic interests for foreign policy goals. “Business as usual appears to be infiltrating the policy approach of the administration, and workers are still not interested in having their jobs used to incent China to help deal with the nuclear threat of North Korea.”

There is widespread hostility to war in the working class after 16 years of military adventures that have exacted a massive financial and human cost, with no end in sight. The upper middle class executives and aspiring capitalists that man the union apparatus are pro-imperialist and are joining Trump to dragoon workers into even bloodier wars.

On Wednesday Trump signed an executive order,

dubbed “Buy American, Hire American,” that instructed all government agencies to use domestic-made steel and other products for all federally-funded projects and contracted work. The measure also imposed stiffer restrictions on skilled and college-educated workers seeking temporary visas under the government’s H-1B visa program.

In addition to the USW, the AFL-CIO, Teamsters and other unions immediately hailed the reactionary measure. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, a frequent White House guest, said, “We welcome efforts to improve the effectiveness of ‘Buy American’ and ‘Hire American,’ both of which commit taxpayer funds to support good jobs and businesses in America... With respect to immigration, the labor movement consistently has called for reform, rather than expansion, of temporary work visa programs that make US and foreign workers more vulnerable to discrimination, displacement and exploitation.”

Speaking at the USW convention in Las Vegas last week, the AFL-CIO head Trumka repeated his claim that the new administration was deeply divided by a “Wall Street wing” and a pro-worker wing. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last month, Trumka made it clear the supposed pro-worker faction the unions were looking to includes anti-Chinese trade hawk Peter Navarro and Trump’s fascistic aide Stephen Bannon.

For decades, the unions worked closely with the Democratic Party in overseeing the destruction of jobs and living conditions of the workers they claim to represent. Now they are offering their services to Trump in the promotion of nationalism and war. In both cases, they prove that they have absolutely nothing to do with the defense of the interests of the working class, and in fact function as instruments of corporate management and the capitalist ruling class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact