

AFL-CIO leaders offer demagoguery, nationalism at convention in St. Louis

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From October 22-25, the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) held its quadrennial convention in St. Louis, Missouri.

The gathering of the highly paid union executives was hardly noticed by US workers, who do not look to these organizations, which long ago abandoned any defense of their interests and have lost millions of members. The percentage of workers in the unions is down to only 10.4 percent, compared to 20.1 percent in 1983 and 32.5 percent in 1953.

Insofar as the AFL-CIO plays any significant role, it is to prop up the Democratic Party and promote the domestic and foreign policy aims of US imperialism. Far from opposing the corporate attack on the working class, the unions have spent the last four decades suppressing the class struggle and reducing the living standards of workers in the name of making American capitalism globally competitive.

The AFL-CIO's top figures, including president Richard Trumka, have a long record of betraying working-class struggles and colluding with the employers to reduce the share of national income that goes to workers. During the eight years of the Obama administration, the unions limited the number of strikes to their lowest level in US history, facilitating an unprecedented transfer of wealth to the top.

The creation of untold suffering for the working class, however, has not undermined the material interests of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which continues to prosper from its control of multibillion-dollar pension and health care investment vehicles and a myriad of other labor-management business schemes. The revelations earlier this year of the multimillion-dollar payoffs to top United Auto Workers officials, funneled through the UAW-Chrysler National Training Centers, are only the tip of the iceberg.

The St. Louis convention was a stage-managed and bureaucratic affair from beginning to end. The handpicked delegates voted unanimously to reelect Trumka to a third four-year term and reinstall Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler and Executive Vice President Tefere Gebre, who were unopposed.

Significantly, the AFL-CIO did not invite leading Democrats to its convention, as they have in the past. In his opening remarks, Trumka stated, "We'll find hope and opportunity for working people, not inside the major political parties, but inside our movement and our communities..."

"I don't care if you're Democrat or Republican or anything in between, if you do right by us, we'll do right by you," he said.

In reality, the AFL-CIO chief's talk about "political independence" refers to the moves by a section of the unions to ally themselves with the Trump administration and sections of the Republican Party. While the unions have traditionally subordinated the working class to the needs of the ruling class through the vehicle of the Democrats, they have seen in Trump a kindred spirit who embraces their program of "Buy American, hire American" to divert social opposition outward.

After their disastrous support for Hillary Clinton in 2016, the building trades unions, the United Auto Workers, United Steelworkers and other unions allied themselves with Trump based on his moves to renegotiate or cancel the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), building the Keystone XL pipeline and increasing infrastructure spending.

During this week's convention, United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard railed against "Chinese steel" and promoted trade war measures, which the unions, along with Trump and his fascistic former aide Stephen

Bannon falsely claim will defend American workers' jobs and living standards. Gerard was at Trump's side in the Oval Office earlier this year when the president signed a trade war measure declaring that steel imports from China and other countries were undermining US "national security."

Trump's open embrace of neo-Nazis, however, has been a source of some embarrassment, in particular, for the retail and service unions, which are trying to recruit low-paid immigrant workers to bolster their membership. In August, Trumka decided to resign from the president's Manufacturing Council after Trump defended neo-Nazis and KKK members behind the riots in Charlottesville, Virginia that left 19 injured and resulted in the death of 32-year-old antifascist protester Heather Heyer. At the time, Trumka said, "I cannot sit on a council for a President that tolerates bigotry and domestic terrorism."

Trumka's dismay over the discovery of fascistic elements in the White House was entirely fraudulent. Far from being shocked by their presence, the AFL-CIO executives have a natural affinity for Trump and Bannon. Just a week after resigning from the council, Trumka praised the president's efforts to renegotiate NAFTA.

Speaking about union members supporting Trump in 2016, Trumka stated, "My members, just like most Americans, are angry that the system isn't working for them. That it keeps moving them further and further behind," adding, "while the country is the richest country on the face of the earth." He further added, "[workers] were willing to take a risk on Trump because he promised to shake up the system."

Insofar as some sections of workers looked in desperation to the billionaire president, it is only because the unions and the Democrats have shown nothing but contempt towards workers, who have suffered a historic decline in their living standards due to decades of deindustrialization, social service cuts and chronic poverty. This was aided and abetted by the unions, which spewed nationalist poison to block any unified struggle by American workers and their class brothers and sisters internationally.

Far from opposing Trump, the AFL-CIO, along with the Democratic Party, fears nothing more than the emergence of a powerful movement of the working class against the administration and its program of

massive tax cuts for the rich, the destruction of health care and other vital social programs, and its expansion of militarism and threats of dictatorship. That is because such a movement would quickly develop into a direct confrontation with all those who defend the rule of the corporate and financial elite, including the Democrats and the AFL-CIO itself.



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