

With anger mounting over pandemic response, unions make pitch to save American capitalism

Jerry White
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In a column published earlier this week in *USA Today*, the presidents of the American Federation of Teachers (Randi Weingarten), the Communications Workers of America (Chris Shelton), the Service Employees International Union (Mary Kay Henry) and the Teamsters (James P. Hoffa) offer their services to the corporations in defending the capitalist system.

Titled, “Coronavirus is a stress test for capitalism, and we see encouraging signs,” the editorial is an appeal to the American ruling class to use the services of the union bureaucracy to suppress the resistance of the working class.

“American businesses will certainly emerge from the coronavirus crisis transformed by the trials of human loss, steep recession and Wall Street collapse,” the leaders of the AFT, CWA, SEIU and Teamsters proclaim. “The social fabric of capitalism is undergoing a once-in-a-lifetime stress test.”

The fact that the unions identify capitalism as the central issue is significant. The highly paid union executives are well aware of the growth of anti-capitalist sentiment and interest in socialism among workers. They are particularly conscious of the growing influence and readership of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The political radicalization of workers is being enormously intensified by the coronavirus pandemic. While workers are dying as a result of the absence of protective equipment and overloaded health care systems, the ruling elite has handed itself trillions of dollars to drive up share values on Wall Street. Now, the political establishment, both Democrat and Republican, is campaigning for a rapid return to work, insisting that workers risk their lives and the lives of their loved ones to pump out profits.

The union executives see as their job to save capitalism and suppress opposition to the plans of the financial oligarchs.

In an effort to conceal the class character of society, they claim the pandemic has led to a sharp division in corporate

America. On the one side are those companies “evading responsibility, protecting top management and share prices, and continuing practices that put harmful economic distance between Americans.” On the other are supposedly those “well-managed companies with established relationships with workers [read unions]” that recognize that “short-term focus, financial shenanigans and corrosive labor-management relationships are not suited to the uncertain future we face.”

The supposed enlightened capitalist enterprises they cite—including Verizon, AT&T, UPS, Kroger, Safeway, General Motors, Ford, Fiat Chrysler and others—have all squandered billions on stock buybacks and other “financial shenanigans” over the last decade, while destroying the jobs, wages and conditions of workers.

But what makes them important to the authors is that they accomplished these aims while securing the financial and institutional interests of the union executives. The rise in the stock market also meant the rising wealth of these union executives, all of whom are in the top five percent of the population by income.

The four officials praise these companies for signing new deals that throw out small “hazard pay” raises for grocery and other workers, along with empty promises to provide protective equipment and safe working conditions to health care and other essential workers. All these measures amount to nothing. They are aimed at forcing workers to stay on the job despite the threat to their lives and to facilitate the ruling class’s push to “reopen the economy.”

The union executives then get to the heart of the matter: “We look forward,” they write, “to sitting down with the nation’s business leaders, as well as the leaders of governments, universities, hospitals and school systems, to hammer out agreements that will restore profits and economic growth as we emerge from this crisis, and protect as many jobs as possible as we battle it.”

In other words, these executives want to use the pandemic

as an opportunity to further cement their corporatist relationship with management. They see it as their task to “restore profits” once production resumes—that is, to suppress the opposition of workers.

In the aftermath of the 2008-09 global financial crash, the AFL-CIO and Change to Win labor federations collaborated with the Obama administration to all but end strikes and facilitate the ruling class’s restructuring of class relations.

The ruling class intends to use the pandemic to accomplish another and far more sweeping change in social relations. If they get away with it, millions of the workers who have been laid off will not be rehired, and those who have taken pay and benefit cuts will never retrieve them. The transfer of trillions in public assets to the corporations will be used to accelerate the plans to use new technologies to slash jobs and ramp up exploitation.

But these efforts, along with the efforts to force workers back to work to die for corporate profit, will produce, and are already producing, working-class opposition. Over the past month, there has been a wave of protests, walkouts and other job actions by workers throughout the US and internationally, all independently of the unions, which have done absolutely nothing.

One of their more blatant lies in the *USA Today* comment is the claim that “the United Auto Workers worked with General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler to implement social-distancing measures and minimize the risk of exposure to COVID-19.”

In reality, the only reason the auto industry was closed was because Fiat Chrysler workers in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana walked out and carried out other job actions in opposition to the UAW. The UAW, whose top officials have been indicted or are under investigation for stealing workers’ dues money, collaborated with the auto bosses to keep the factories open as the disease spread. This led to the deaths of at least 19 autoworkers.

Workers in health care, the auto industry, public transit and sanitation, and meatpacking, along with workers at Amazon, Whole Foods and Instacart, have taken matters into their own hands, prompting Bloomberg News to publish an article Tuesday, titled, “Covid-19 Has Workers Striking. Where Are the Unions?”

The unions are where they have been and will continue to be: on the side of corporate management. They long ago abandoned any of the functions historically associated with trade unions. They have spent decades colluding with the ruling class and the state to destroy the jobs, wages and conditions of workers in the name of making American capitalism more “competitive” and profitable.

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to move now to form rank-and-file factory and workplace committees. These

committees must be independent of the corrupt unions and democratically controlled by workers themselves. They will fight for what workers need and not accept the lies that “there is no money,” when trillions are being handed out to the super-rich.

In opposition to the demands of the corporations, rank-and-file committees should demand the shutdown of all nonessential production until the virus is contained. No worker should be forced to place his or her life in danger. All production must be redirected to urgent necessities to stop the pandemic, including health care equipment.

The jobs of workers unable to work because of the pandemic must be guaranteed and their wages and benefits paid in full during the shutdown. Rent and mortgage payments and interest on loans must be waived. The financial cost of the crisis must be borne by the capitalists, not the workers.

The multi-trillion-dollar bailout of the corporations and banks must be cancelled and the funds used to protect the health and living standards of the working population. Instead of bailing out the corporations, they should be nationalized and turned into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class.

All workers who continue to work must be provided with the necessary protective gear and a safe working environment, overseen by rank-and-file committees working in tandem with health care professionals.

Whether the union bureaucrats like it or not, millions of workers are coming to the realization that they are the essential force in society. The chief obstacle to a rational and humane response to the pandemic is the capitalist system and the insatiable demand for profit by the financial and corporate elite.

The growing opposition of the working class must be guided by a genuine socialist perspective aimed at establishing workers’ power and the collective ownership and direction of society’s productive capacity and resources.



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