

The “Strike for Black Lives” protest stunt

Tom Hall
22 July 2020

On Monday, various US trade unions, including the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), the Teamsters and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), organized what they called a “Strike for Black Lives.”

According to the event’s website, it demanded “justice for Black communities, that elected officials use their authority to rewrite the rules so that Black people can thrive [and] that corporations dismantle racism, white supremacy and economic exploitation.” Several Democratic Party-aligned groups also took part in organizing the event.

The so-called strike was a political fraud. Its purpose was to promote the Democratic Party’s attempt to divert and disorient popular opposition by injecting racial communalism into the broad multi-racial movement against police brutality. It was also aimed at covering for the role of the unions and the Democrats in endangering the lives of workers by forcing them to remain on the job during the coronavirus pandemic.

The “Strike for Black Lives” was not a real strike. It consisted for the most part in brief demonstrations held outside normal working hours, or, in some cases, during lunch breaks. Despite the nationwide character of the event, which involved the participation of unions that collectively have millions of members, only a few thousand people took part, according to the unions.

The event was fully supported by big business. Short-term rental giant Airbnb even offered its employees time off to participate.

It was promoted by the corporate press. All of the major national newspapers provided significant coverage.

These same outlets, led by the *New York Times*, have spent months attempting to condition public opinion to accept a premature return to work under conditions where the COVID-19 pandemic has not been contained and no serious measures have been taken by

corporations to protect their workers from the deadly disease. All of these media outlets are complicit in the explosive rise in infections and deaths that have resulted—and were certain to result—from the back-to-work campaign dictated by big business and carried out by Democratic governors and mayors as well as the Trump White House.

Unsurprisingly, these same publications have ignored genuine strikes that have broken out in recent months in auto, meatpacking and other industries in defiance of joint union-management attempts to keep workers on the line during the pandemic.

The demonstrations that did take place served as a backdrop for speeches by Democratic Party politicians. In New York City, at a protest of a few hundred people, the unions turned over the microphone to Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, known as the “senator from Wall Street,” who played a leading role in the passage of the CARES Act. That piece of legislation authorized a multitrillion-dollar bailout of the banks and corporations and sent stock prices soaring.

Former presidential candidates Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren tweeted their support.

The UFCW, one of the main sponsors of the event, has been instrumental in keeping hundreds of thousands of grocery and food processing workers on the job during the pandemic, even as their workplaces became centers for the spread of the disease in their communities. In response to a wildcat strike two weeks ago at the JBS beef processing plant in Greeley, Colorado, UFCW Local 7 declared the strike a violation of the contract and distributed a leaflet ordering workers to return to work. Six workers at the facility have already died of COVID-19.

The bogus character of the strike is in keeping with countless similar stunts by the American trade unions over the years, including a “general strike” at

non-union Amazon involving only a few hundred union members and actions at a handful of fast food restaurants by the SEIU and other unions as part of their “Fight for \$15” campaign to raise the minimum wage to the poverty level of \$15 an hour.

The main purpose of such events has been to encourage an expansion of the unions’ declining dues base into traditionally nonunion workplaces, while signaling to corporate America that they will do nothing that disrupts the intensifying exploitation of the working class. The demand for a starting wage of \$15, which was repeated at Monday’s protests, is so paltry that it was adopted by Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the richest person in the world, as a public relations stunt.

But the unions’ “Strike for Black Lives” serves an additional political function: to bolster the Democratic Party’s racist campaign within the working class, where it has little support as compared to the affluent layers of the upper-middle class that form the party’s core base.

The Democrats’ false portrayal of America as seething with racial hatred is a response of the ruling class to the signs of an emerging mass, multi-racial and multi-ethnic movement of the working class, powerfully foreshadowed in the nationwide and international demonstrations against police brutality. Such developments—part of a growing wave of strikes and mass protests over the past several years—terrify the ruling class.

The unions, controlled by bureaucrats whose six-figure incomes are tied to the profit interests of the corporations, feel equally threatened by such a development.

The aim of the Democratic Party-led ideological campaign is to frustrate the organic striving of workers to unite across racial and national distinctions and distract attention from the fundamental dividing line in capitalist society—class. In keeping with the age-old ruling class tactic of divide and rule, the promoters of racial politics seek to whip up a political atmosphere of communalism based on the false notion that one’s *race*, rather than social class, determines one’s social interests.

In particular, the “Strike for Black Lives” seeks to divert growing anger among low-wage retail and fast food workers over unsafe conditions, which it casts as the product of “white supremacy.” This is why it

combines a racial focus with an insistence that all initiative be left in the hands of corporate America. One of the demands on the event’s website is that “Corporations take immediate action to dismantle racism, white supremacy, and economic exploitation wherever it exists, including in our workplaces.”

A genuine fight against exploitation and unsafe working conditions can be carried out only in conscious opposition to the trade unions, which were long ago transformed into an arm of the corporations and the state, and a rejection of all forms of racial ideology.

This requires that workers form their own rank-and-file committees to fight for safe working conditions and decent wages, a task that is already being taken up by autoworkers. This must be accompanied by a political struggle to unite the working class in opposition to capitalist exploitation and social inequality through a fight for socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact