

Biden administration enlists unions in anti-China drive, reopening policy

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In the first days of his administration President Biden has signaled that the unions will be enlisted to play a key role in enforcing important elements of his policies. This includes the continued ratcheting up of the nationalist, anti-China campaign and the suppression of opposition to the homicidal “herd immunity” policy of the ruling class which rejects any prioritization of saving lives in the pandemic over corporate profit-making.

Under conditions of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, mass unemployment and huge budget deficits, the US ruling class is calling on the unions to help force workers to pay for this disaster.

An executive order issued Monday by Biden ramped up federal regulations, making it harder for government agencies to purchase imported products, while he has appointed union officials to several federal regulatory posts. The “Buy American” provisions, embraced by the unions, mark a continuation of the hyper-nationalist policies of the Trump administration aimed at promoting trade war against China and former US allies. The move immediately evoked a worried response from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who in a phone call Friday with Biden expressed concern over the implications of the “Buy American” program.

Central to this is the attempt to divert the anger of workers over attacks on jobs and working conditions outward, directing it against workers in other countries. This runs parallel to the unions embrace of corporatist union-management collaboration aimed at driving down living standards of workers and squelching opposition. The union’s chauvinist attacks on the foreign rivals of US big business have been accompanied by continual demands for ever greater sacrifices by workers. The results have been disastrous,

the closure of countless factories, the lowering of wages and the destruction of working conditions.

The Biden administration’s promotion of economic nationalism and protectionism against China is bound up with intensified preparations for military conflict. As in World War I and World War II, the unions are seeking to line workers up behind the war drive of the US ruling class.

Noting the continuity of the anti-China policies of the Trump administration under Biden, the *Wall Street Journal* wrote Monday, “While their styles are different, Mr. Biden’s Buy American initiative has similarities to Mr. Trump’s domestic preference policy, which was part of his America First policy that featured tariff wars with China and other trading partners.”

Alongside the issuing of the “Buy American” order, Biden has named several union officials to high profile administrative posts. Biden named James Frederick as head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Frederick had previously served for 25 years in the United Steelworkers health, safety, and environment department.

Biden also named Ernest Dubester to head the Federal Labor Relations Authority (FLRA) overseeing negotiations with federal workers. Dubester previously worked as a union attorney, legislative counsel to the AFL-CIO, and a law school professor teaching collective bargaining and arbitration.

Biden chose Jessica Looman as deputy administrator of the US Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Division. Looman was the executive director of the Minnesota Building and Construction Trades Council. Before that she had been general counsel for the Laborers District Council of Minnesota and North Dakota.

As a first order of business, Biden is calling on the

unions to enforce the resumption of in-person teaching and workplace reopenings, even as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads sickness and death.

To provide a pathetic fig leaf to cover this homicidal policy, Biden instructed OSHA to review workplace safety standards for COVID-19. Nothing can be expected of such regulations, even in the unlikely event that more stringent standards are eventually issued. For decades, OSHA has served to cover up employer safety violations, issuing at most token fines even in the case of serious violations resulting in injury or death.

During the pandemic, OSHA did not issue any COVID-19-related citations for months. In the case of the meatpacking industry, OSHA did not issue any citations until September, after over 200 workers had already died from the disease. Even then, the fines only totaled \$30,000 and were quickly appealed by management.

It should be recalled that under the Obama administration, inspectors for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, whose chief is appointed by the president, allowed the continued operation of the Upper Big Branch Mine despite repeated safety violations. An explosion at the mine in April 2010 killed 29 miners. Heading the mine safety agency at the time was Joseph Main, a former safety official with the United Mine Workers of America.

The unions have already demonstrated their indifference to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people during the pandemic. During the course of the past year they have blocked opposition to the “herd immunity” program of the ruling class, insisting workplaces, including auto plants, steel mills and fulfillment centers, remain open at whatever cost to human life.

A central focus of the Biden administration is the demand for the reopening of schools in order to free up workers to return to workplaces in order to produce profits for big business. The teachers unions are being called on to enforce this deadly policy and suppress the mass opposition of parents and teachers.

One day after the presidential inauguration, Jill Biden hosted an event attended by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and Becky Pringle, head of the National Education Association. She touted President Biden’s pledge to reopen schools within 100 days, insisting that the unions were central

to this effort.

Weingarten was effusive in her praise for the Biden administration, declaring, “Today is a moment when educators feel respected.” She added, “We’re working with an educator in the White House, someone who walks in our shoes, who knows the challenges and aspirations of our children. That is more than I can ever have imagined before this moment.”

For her part Jill Biden pledged, “I promised you would always have a seat at the table and I meant it.”

Among other “pro-worker” gestures adopted by President Biden was an order to establish a \$15 per hour minimum wage for both federal workers and federal contractors. This is being presented as a step toward the realization of the unions’ “Fight for 15” demand, a ten-year-long campaign to raise the minimum wage. It should be noted that since the Fight for 15 campaign was launched, the purchasing power of the dollar has significantly eroded, further eviscerating this inadequate demand.

The installation of the Biden administration represents the continuation of the viciously anti-worker, pro-big-business policies of the Trump administration, only in slightly altered form. Workers require an independent program and policy to impose a rational and humane solution to the pandemic, defend jobs and living standards and halt the drive to world war.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to organize rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the pro-corporate unions, to fight for the shutdown of non-essential production and full support for laid off workers until the pandemic is contained. This must be combined with the fight for a socialist program to end the subordination of social needs to private profit.



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