

Kroger installs anti-worker reactionary Elaine Chao on company board of directors

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The Kroger Company announcement August 2 that arch-reactionary Elaine Chao, wife of Republican Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, had been elected to its board of directors has evoked widespread revulsion and anger.

Chao, Secretary of Transportation under Donald Trump, has a long record in the service of corporate interests, including eight full years as Secretary of Labor in the administration of George W. Bush, where she oversaw the further evisceration of workplace safety. She was the longest-serving Secretary of Labor since Frances Perkins, whose tenure spanned 1933 to 1945 under President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The election of Chao is a crass example of the intertwining of US corporations and the very government “regulators” who are supposed to monitor them. In announcing the election of Chao, Kroger’s chairman and CEO Rodney McMullen could scarcely contain his enthusiasm.

“We are pleased to welcome Elaine to Kroger,” he said. “She’s an experienced national and global leader who brings to Kroger’s board deep knowledge of corporate governance, strategic and workforce management, and public-private partnerships as well as extensive experience at the highest levels of US government.” He added ominously, “Kroger’s board is committed to creating value for all of our stakeholders, including our shareholders, customers, associates, and communities.”

In a nod to identity politics, McCullen even tried to suggest that the appointment of Chao, an Asian American woman, was somehow progressive by creating a “diverse” board of directors.

Chao is currently at the center of a scandal involving claims by the Transportation Department that she improperly used her office to aid family members, who run a New York-based shipping business with assets of over \$1 billion.

Kroger’s announcement sparked immediate outrage, as thousands took to Twitter opposing the installation of Chao, accompanying their Tweets with the following hashtag, #BoycottKroger. Many noted the provocative nature of the appointment, following close on the heels of the tragic

suicide of 19-year Kroger employee Evan Seyfried, whose family says he faced vicious harassment for wearing a face mask from Kroger manager Shannon Frazee.

Criticizing the silence and inaction of the United Food and Commercial Workers, one person wrote on Twitter:

“@UFCW I ask that you investigate why #ShannonFrazee is still employed by @kroger & why your Union Reps failed to stand by #EvanSeyfried who was bullied to death for wearing a mask on the job. #boycottkroger #justiceforevan @justiceforevan #UFCW”

Another tweeted: “Yes, it’s me. I temp changed pic to highlight family’s fight [referring to Evan Seyfried] to hold Kroger accountable for loved one’s death. This plus their attitude re masking/vaccinated? And Elaine Chao? Kroger doesn’t care! #BoycottKroger”

And another: “Elaine Chao, eh? Oh, that reminds me, there’s this smaller, locally-owned grocery I’ve been wondering about. I think I’ll check them out next time I need groceries. Who knows? Might like them better. #BoycottKroger”

While elements around the Democratic Party have attempted to capitalize on anger over Chao’s installation on Kroger’s board, the fact is she was confirmed as Trump’s transportation secretary with overwhelming bipartisan support in a 93-6 vote.

A look at Chao’s political history puts light on the intentions of McMullen and fellow board members.

Throughout her career she has held numerous high-ranking government positions and posts with Fortune 500 companies. This includes as president and CEO of the United Way of America; chair of the Federal Maritime Commission; deputy Maritime administrator; director of the Peace Corps; board of directors for Wells Fargo; high-level positions with Citicorp and Bank of America.

As Peace Corps director in the administration of the senior Bush, Chao signed an agreement with acting Russian Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar in 1992 that established a program in the Russian Federation to promote and facilitate the restoration of capitalism.

One month after Chao's appointment as labor secretary in February 2001, President Bush and Congress repealed the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's Ergonomics Standard. The following month on March 6, 2001 Chao issued a statement justifying the change, cynically claiming, "[I]f we really are going to protect workers, we must put more emphasis than ever before on prevention and compliance assistance—rather than just after-the-fact enforcement."

In 2003, as more than 11 million workers in the US remained jobless, Chao placed emphasis on the blue-collar job sectors, saying that job-retraining programs could convert white collar workers, such as software developers, into plumbers and carpenters.

In 2005, as part of a crackdown on immigrants, the Bush administration granted the Department of Homeland Security \$31 billion in an appropriations bill, wherein \$7.5 billion was allocated to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), \$90 million to construct new prisons with a capacity of over 20,000 and spare resources to employ an additional 1,000 US-Mexico Border Patrol agents.

In an October 18, 2005 hearing, Chao lent her support to the escalating war against immigrants, saying undocumented immigrants that were already (without legal residence) in the US would need to pay a fee to enter the guest worker program—failing to clarify that it would not represent an amnesty for the undocumented—and obtain a temporary three-year visa. Furthermore, the undocumented, after the first visa application, would be eligible to renew for a second three-year visa, which would be their last but then subject to being forcibly removed from the country.

In addition to the extreme limitations placed on undocumented immigrants, those applying for the three-year visa would need the blessing of an American employer willing to sponsor them and attest that no US citizens would take any job offered by said American employer. "At a minimum, those who come forward will not be offered an automatic pass to citizenship and should be expected to pay a substantial fine or penalty to take part in the temporary program," said Chao.

There is no record of Chao opposing Trump during his entire term notwithstanding the president's repeated fascist threats. Later, in an attempt to slightly distance herself from Trump, she resigned her cabinet post on the Monday following the January 6 coup attempt by Trump as part of an effort by some top administration officials to feign concern over the actions of the would-be Führer.

One voice that has been markedly silent on Chao's election to the Kroger board is the UFCW, which has been silent on the tragedy of Evan Seyfried. The union failed to

act on complaints of harassment and even failed to send a representative to Seyfried's memorial.

In the wake of Seyfried's death Kroger has only now belatedly made changes to its mask policy, recently recommending customers wear masks as the Delta variant of COVID-19 spreads unchecked.

Thanks to services of the UFCW, which has helped suppress demands for the prioritization of worker safety during pandemic, Kroger sales surged 8.4 percent to \$132.5 billion in 2020. The company reported a \$2.6 billion profit for the year, up 5.4 percent.

While Kroger awarded McMullen a \$22.4 million pay package, the average income for Kroger's employee fell 8 percent to \$24,617. Meanwhile, 3,000 grocery workers employed by Kroger in the state of Arkansas have worked a year without a new contract with the UFCW refusing to call for strike action.

Chao's appoint underscores what German Marxist Clara Zetkin wrote in 1896 about the Elaine Chaos of her day: "... the liberation struggle of the proletarian woman cannot be similar to the struggle that the bourgeois woman wages against the male of her class. On the contrary, it must be a joint struggle with the male of her class against the entire class of capitalists."

In the midst of the resurgence of the pandemic and escalating attacks on workers, the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party for the building of independent rank-and-file committees is more urgent than ever. Workers must build their own democratic workplace organizations to defend the right to safe and healthy working conditions and decent compensation. The silence of the UFCW on the appointment of Chao is not accidental. It is a further demonstration of the complete identification of the union apparatus with corporate management.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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