

Biden promotes unions as bulwark against growing rank-and-file rebellion

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8 September 2021

In a speech at the White House before union executives on Wednesday afternoon, President Biden pledged a series of measures to strengthen the official union apparatus. The hand-picked audience included, among others, Liz Shuler, the newly installed president of the AFL-CIO.

Biden said that he intended “to be the most pro-union president” in the history of the United States. “When Congress passed the 1935 Labor Relations Act,” he declared, “it didn’t just say you can have unions... It said that we, the government should encourage unions and collective bargaining.”

His remarks repeated the themes of his speech in March of this year, when he openly backed the efforts of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize workers at Amazon’s Bessemer, Alabama, warehouse.

Biden’s aggressive promotion of the unions expresses a growing fear within the ruling class of a rank-and-file movement from below that is beginning to escape from the control of the bureaucratic apparatus.

Wednesday’s speech comes as the coronavirus pandemic is once again surging out of control, with an average of more than 160,000 cases and more than 1,200 deaths every day. The unions, including the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, are playing an essential role in enforcing the reopening of schools for in-person learning, which has already led to a massive spike in infections among children and teachers.

Behind the scenes, moreover, the Biden administration is intensely discussing with union officials the developing rebellion of rank-and-file workers against the collaboration of the unions with management in imposing concessions contracts—first at Volvo Trucks in the summer, where workers rejected three contracts backed by the United Auto Workers (UAW), and now at auto

parts maker Dana, where workers have just overwhelmingly rejected a contract backed by the UAW and the United Steelworkers (USW). In both cases, the *World Socialist Web Site* has assisted workers in setting up rank-and-file committees to organize opposition.

In his speech, Biden presented the existing trade unions as essential instruments for raising and defending the living standards of workers. Among the gains won by workers that the unions help secure, he said, are “health care, a pension, higher wages with a safer workplace that protects us against discrimination and harassment... the eight-hour day, a weekend, time-and-a-half overtime, safety standards, sick days, victories for all of us.”

These gains were won through the bitter struggle of workers, including in the mass movement that led to the formation of the industrial unions in the first decades of the 20th century. But the corporatist organizations represented by the officials he was addressing have for decades collaborated in the destruction of all of these past conquests.

The situation at Dana is emblematic. In plants overseen by the UAW and USW, under contracts they have forced through, the eight-hour day is non-existent. Workers are regularly forced to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, for weeks at a time, in brutal sweatshop conditions.

Throughout the auto industry, the UAW has effectively abolished the eight-hour day through the imposition of “alternative work schedules,” with 10- or even 12-hour days and weekends on straight (non-overtime) pay. Last year, the UAW rammed through an agreement with Fiat Chrysler (now Stellantis) that mandates a 12-hour, seven-day schedule for skilled tradesmen at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant outside of Detroit.

The unions have also overseen the systematic elimination of defined-benefit pension plans (as opposed to retirement benefits tied to the stock market) and the destruction of health care for current workers and retirees.

Only 4 percent of private-sector workers currently have full defined benefit plans, down from 60 percent in the 1980s. The proliferation of two-tier wage and benefit plans guarantees poverty-level wages with few if any benefits for younger workers.

As for safety standards, for the past 18 months the unions have played the central role in forcing workers to labor amidst a deadly pandemic that has killed more than 670,000 people in the United States alone. When autoworkers downed tools in March 2020, it was the UAW, working closely with the auto companies, which organized the return to work. And it was the unions that helped ensure that there were only eight major strikes last year, the third lowest level since 1947.

Biden added that “workers who join unions gain power... In a simple word, a union means there is democracy.” Autoworkers at Volvo Trucks might beg to differ, after they voted in June and July to reject three concessions contracts brought back by the UAW, only to have the UAW organize a re-vote on the third contract, which it declared had been passed by 17 votes. It is routine for the unions to try to ram through agreements without giving workers the chance to even read the full contract, as the UAW and USW sought to do over the past week at Dana.

Biden’s aggressive promotion of the unions is motivated by two interrelated factors.

First, Biden represents a section of the ruling class that sees in the unions critical instruments for the suppression of class struggle. While Trump and dominant factions of the Republican Party have cultivated fascistic organizations as a spearhead against working class unrest, the Democrats have focused on utilizing the unions as a labor police force over the workers.

Decades of betrayals, however, have profoundly undermined the credibility of these organizations in the eyes of workers. In the case of the Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, the campaign of the AFL-CIO and the RWDSU failed miserably, despite the support it received from virtually the entire media and most of the political establishment. Only 13 percent of workers at the plant voted in favor of bringing in the union. The National Labor Relations Board responded last month by recommending a revote .

Second, Biden and the Democrats see in the unions important instruments for promoting national chauvinism and militarism, particularly in the wake of the humiliating debacle in Afghanistan. In his speech on Wednesday, Biden trumpeted his own variant of Trump’s “America

First” nationalism, long backed by the trade union executives in the audience: “The Buy America Act became a hollow promise,” he said. “I’m going to make it a reality.”

Biden made a point of singling out the role of the UAW in working with the auto companies in increasing the production of electric vehicles (EVs). “The Big Three have decided that along with the support of those unions... we [will] own the market.” The American ruling class sees domination of the EV market as central to its economic competition with China, which is accompanied by an increasingly confrontational military policy.

The strategy of the Biden administration is corporatism—the integration of the government with the corporations and the unions based on the defense of the capitalist system and the interests of the ruling class. Measures such as the Pro Act, which Biden championed on Wednesday, are aimed at strengthening this tripartite alliance.

The “unions” Biden was speaking of and speaking to on Wednesday bear no relationship to the function traditionally associated with the term “union.” They are corporatist syndicates, controlled by upper-middle class executives who live off of the exploitation of the workers they claim to represent. Biden said more than he perhaps intended when he declared on Wednesday in explaining his support for the unions: “When has the middle class done better than the wealthy haven’t done incredibly well?”

He concluded with a worried note. “Wall Street could go on strike,” he said, but if there was a strike movement in the working class, “we’d be in real trouble.” He added: “I say that to make a generic point. I think we significantly underestimate, and I think even you guys sometimes underestimate, the incredible value you bring to the safety, security and growth of the economy.”

Spoken to an assembly of privileged bureaucrats, the message was clear: You people play a critical role in preventing “real trouble” and defending the “safety and security” of the ruling class. Rank-and-file workers, however, will have their own say in the matter.



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