

At AFL-CIO convention, Biden looks to unions to impose his program of austerity and war

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President Biden gave the keynote address Tuesday to the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) constitutional convention in Philadelphia. The remarks by Biden, who has called himself “the most pro-union president in American history,” expressed his administration’s reliance on the union apparatus to beat back working class resistance to surging inflation and the costs of the expanding wars with Russia and China.

That is a tall order for the collection of pro-company stooges, Democratic Party hacks and die-hard enemies of the working class who assembled in Philadelphia this week. After decades of betrayals by the AFL-CIO unions, most workers in the United States had no idea the convention was even taking place and couldn’t care less.

Union membership continued to plummet last year, falling by another 240,000 workers to 14 million. Only 10.3 percent of US workers were in unions in 2021, including just 6.1 percent in the private sector and 4.2 percent of workers 24 years old and younger. In a very real sense, the unions owe their existence to the sponsorship they receive from a section of big business and the capitalist state.

The aim of his government, Biden told the AFL-CIO officials, is “to encourage unions” and “make it easier for workers to organize.” His infrastructure program and support for “union partnerships” would strengthen the unions, he declared. “I’m not just saying that to be pro-union. I’m saying it because I’m pro-American.”

Biden alluded to the dangers of rising working class militancy and the need for the unions to suppress the class struggle. “You know if investment bankers in America—they’re not all bad guys ... if they went on strike, not a whole hell of a lot would happen. ... If the IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) went on strike, everything shuts down.” He continued, “I don’t think you appreciate how critically important you are. I’m not trying to be nice to you; it’s just a fact.”

Indeed, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the United Auto Workers (UAW), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), United Steelworkers (USW) and other AFL-CIO unions have been instrumental in forcing workers into infected schools, factories and other workplaces throughout the pandemic. This has cost the lives of thousands, if not tens of thousands of union

members who contracted COVID-19 in schools, factories, transit and trucking hubs and other workplaces.

Biden boasted, “We brought down COVID deaths by 90 percent. We opened schools and businesses that were shuttered. It all created the greatest job recovery in American history.”

He had no fear of being contradicted by these union executives, who are insulated from the disastrous results of their actions. In fact, Biden has overseen more deaths (595,000) in his time in office than Trump (441,000). New variants of the deadly virus are raging through workplaces and neighborhoods despite the White House’s best effort to declare the pandemic over and conceal the real number of infections and deaths.

As for the supposed economic nirvana for workers, the 40-year high inflation rate is chewing up workers’ paychecks and making living expenses impossible. At the same time, Biden’s Federal Reserve chairman raised interest rates by three-quarters of a point Wednesday and is using the threat of mass unemployment to beat back workers’ demands for raises that keep up with inflation.

The president repeated his statement that skyrocketing living expenses for workers were due to “Putin’s price hikes.” But the inflation ripping through the economy is the direct product of the trillions of dollars both capitalist parties handed to the financial markets since the 2008 crash. The economic crisis has been exacerbated by the US-led sanctions against Russia and the massive armament of Ukraine.

Biden made it clear he needed the continued support of the unions to escalate the confrontation with Russia. “Folks, look, what Putin’s war has done is not only tried to wipe out the culture of the Ukrainians, decimate people, and commit innumerable war crimes, he’s also prevented the grain—thousands of tons of grain that are locked up in those silos, ready to be exported, but they can’t get out through the Black Sea because they’ll get blown out of the water.”

He hinted at plans by US and NATO to move grain by rail from Black Sea ports to European and world markets. This and previously floated plans to break the Russian blockade with US and NATO warships will only escalate the conflict with nuclear-armed Russia. In a call with the Ukrainian president Wednesday, Biden pledged another \$1 billion in weaponry.

Biden knows he will get nothing but support for his warmongering from the AFL-CIO, which has backed every

imperialist war and US-backed military coup since its founding in 1955. This included collaborating with Ukrainian nationalists and neo-Nazis in the 2014 coup in Ukraine which ousted the pro-Russian president and transformed the country into a military stalking horse for US imperialism.

The very first session of the convention included comments delivered by Yale Professor Timothy Snyder, the foremost academic propagandist for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. Speaking from Austria, Snyder claimed that the defense of democracy, from Ukraine to the US, depended on the actions of the unions, which he claimed were now “at the center of history.” The unions, he went on to say, were the best examples of “civil society” because they were organizations which “stood between the government and the people.” The unions, moreover, gave “people practice in representing themselves” and using and defending their “right to vote.”

These comments were made to union officials who routinely trample over the democratic will of their members, including stuffing ballot boxes to push through pro-company contracts.

As for the claim that the unions stand “between the government and the people,” this is no less a lie. The AFL-CIO is a wholly owned subsidiary of the American capitalist state. It has long been the recipient of grants from the U.S. State Department’s National Endowment for Democracy to subvert unions around the world and protect the interests of US imperialism. The Biden administration is proposing new subsidies and political structures to draw the unions even closer into the domestic and foreign operations of the US government.

In his 1940 work, “The trade unions in the epoch of imperialist decay,” Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Fourth International, pointed to the global tendency of unions to integrate themselves into capitalist governments.

Monopoly capitalism is less and less willing to reconcile itself to the independence of trade unions. It demands of the reformist bureaucracy and the labor aristocracy who pick the crumbs from its banquet table, that they become transformed into its political police before the eyes of the working class. If that is not achieved, the labor bureaucracy is driven away and replaced by the fascists.

Trotsky was writing this during the early stages of this process. The degeneration of the unions into direct tools of the state was completed by the late 1980s and early 1990s, when, in the face of the globalization of capitalist production, the AFL-CIO and nationally based unions and labor parties around the world abandoned any resistance to the worldwide capitalist offensive against the working class. The leaders of the AFL-CIO abandoned any talk of class conflict as an antiquated notion and embraced corporatism, the doctrine of unrestrained class collaboration.

Assembled at the AFL-CIO convention were a collection of smug and self-satisfied bureaucrats, most of whom earn six-figure salaries and are far more concerned about the level of the stock market than they are about the price of gasoline and food. There

were not a few millionaires in the crowd, including American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten (annual income of nearly \$500,000) who, in her own remarks, did not even mention the COVID-19 pandemic that has killed and sickened thousands of educators as the unions kept the schools open.

The American ruling class is on shaky ground if it looks to these corrupt and discredited organizations to hold back the tide of class struggle, which is being driven by the historic crisis of American and world capitalism.

In the coming weeks and months, hundreds of thousands of West Coast dockworkers, health care workers, teachers, steelworkers, truck drivers, supermarket, telecom and other workers face contract struggles. Workers are determined to reverse decades of union-backed concessions and break the de facto 2-4 percent annual wage limit the unions have imposed on behalf of big business and the government.

The explosive development of the class struggle in the US takes place in the context of an international movement of workers, including, to name just a few, an impending strike by tens of thousands of rail and other workers in the UK; strikes by airline workers throughout Europe; the mass protests against austerity and rising cost of living in Sri Lanka; and strikes by health care workers in Turkey, Germany, France, New Zealand and many other countries.

Biden’s promotion of the unions arises out of fear that the rank-and-file organizations set up by many sections of workers to prevent their struggles from being suppressed and isolated will develop into a national and international network. This is precisely what is necessary.

The International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) last year to unify all the different struggles of workers, across sectors and countries. The building and expansion of the IWA-RFC is required to defeat all efforts by the trade unions to sabotage the struggles of the working class.

American workers, like their class brothers and sisters around the world, are emerging as a powerful force. They are increasingly turning to the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Parties across the world to build new organizations of struggle and the revolutionary leadership necessary to abolish the capitalist profit system.



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