At its 2022 conference, Labor Notes promotes Democratic Party, trade union apparatus

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21 June 2022

Labor Notes, which has presented itself as the "voice of union activists," held its biennial conference last weekend in Chicago, Illinois.

No doubt that among the 4,000 individuals who attended the conference, including many youth, there were those who believed the conference provided them with a mechanism for mobilizing the working class. A number of young organizers for Starbucks Workers United, which has won union elections at more than 100 stores, participated in multiple panel discussions.

The motivations of the conference organizers, however, were entirely different. Labor Notes exists as a mechanism for promoting the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus. Any association that it once had with labor radicalism is long gone.

Among those featured as major speakers was Senator Bernie Sanders, the former Democratic Party presidential candidate and now close ally of the Biden administration. It was the first time that Sanders has attended a conference since 1993, when he was a political unknown. Sanders has converted his "political revolution" into the position of Chair of the Senate Budget Committee, where he oversees the finances of the ruling class, including support for war.

Also featured were the presidents of several major unions and local functionaries. Many of the bureaucrats at Labor Notes were at the AFL-CIO convention one week before, where they warmly received President Biden and reaffirmed the commitment of the bureaucracy to the NATO proxy war in Ukraine.

Labor Notes sought deliberately to whitewash the record of union officials who appeared at its conference, which included Stacy Davis Gates of the Chicago Teachers Union, Sara Nelson of the Association of Flight Attendants, and Sean O'Brien of the Teamsters. They were all falsely presented to the audience as militant working class leaders. In reality, the CTU, which Labor Notes Editor Alexandra Bradbury called "one of our favorite unions," is widely hated by teachers for its betrayals to force the reopening of schools during the pandemic. The ruling Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators, a "reform" group which took office more than a decade ago, is so discredited that it is breaking apart.

Nelson was a leading candidate last year for AFL-CIO president, a post which eventually went to Liz Shuler. O'Brien is a former acolyte of the notorious corrupt ex-Teamsters President James Hoffa Jr. (son of the more famous Hoffa who led the union in the 1960s). He was elected president amid the lowest turnout since the union moved to direct elections of the national leadership in the 1990s, as a result of a federal takeover of the union under anti-racketeering statutes.

Indeed, O'Brien threatened violence against Labor Notes-backed candidates from Teamsters for a Democratic Union in 2014. Now, however, they have buried the hatchet and appeared as friends on the platform in Chicago, while Labor Notes presented them in the best possible light.

There was no discussion, except in the most perfunctory and dishonest way, of any significant political issues facing workers throughout the world.

There was no discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed more than 1 million people in the US, or the role of the unions in enforcing the back-to-work policy of the ruling class. There was no discussion of the US-NATO war against Russia, which threatens to develop into a nuclear world war. Most presentations focused on personal anecdotes and practical organizing tips, and a significant portion of the conference was taken up by singing and chanting.

Panelists responded with extreme defensiveness when audience members went "off message" and asked inconvenient questions. One significant episode took place in an early workshop Friday morning, "STRIKE! Reviving Labor's Most Powerful Weapon," chaired by Nelson of the AFA (who has never called a meaningful strike of flight attendants).

In the course of the 90-minute discussion, the panelists singled out for praise local Democrats who made occasional appearances at the picket line or passed toothless local bills requiring five days' notice for forced overtime. One audience member, unimpressed, rose and said both parties serve the rich. Why not a new workers' party, she asked? The question was also repeated by audience members at other workshops throughout the weekend.

The three panelists, clearly embarrassed by the question, hemmed and hawed. Nelson then took the mic. We can't divide ourselves with politics, she said, because that only serves the

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“owner class.”

“If we start seeing ourselves as a working class, then we don’t need a party. The party [Democrats, as well as Republicans] will come to us.” Incredibly, she cited as proof of this as the multibillion dollar COVID bailout of the airline industry, which the AFA helped get passed. The airline industry held workers’ jobs for ransom if Congress did not give them their cut of the trillion-dollar bailout package. “We had a working relationship with the airlines” in lobbying for it, she said. “They handled the Republicans, and we handled the Democrats.”

Her own argument, the logic of which she sought to conceal by shouting and using radical sounding phrases like “fighting capitalism,” proves that the phrase “no politics” always means the subordination of workers to capitalist politics.

In another session, a member of the audience addressed what he called the “elephant in the room,” the “traitorous labor bureaucracy.” An official from the Stalinist-dominated UE union declared that “the main fight is against the boss. It’s not against the labor bureaucracy. They can stand in the way and catch some bullets, but that main fight is against the boss.” He also pointed to various “reform” factions as examples of “movements that are beginning to assert member control.” But these same movements were at the conference rubbing elbows with the top echelons of the bureaucracy.

Above all, there was no serious acknowledgment of the actual role of the unions in suppressing the class struggle. When betrayals were raised, they were minimized and presented as merely the product of the conservative mindset of entrenched officials, to be resolved through union elections. There was no reference to the tens of billions of dollars in assets and tens of millions in salary outlays, which constitute the real social foundation for the bureaucracy and its hostility to the class struggle.

This is not accidental but expresses the basic outlook of Labor Notes since its inception. Labor Notes was founded in the 1970s by members of the International Socialists, followers of Max Shachtman, an ex-Trotskyist who became a Cold War anticommunist and adviser to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. It relegated to the distant future a fight for the political independence of working class and socialist politics. Instead, it sought to organize campaigns for union “democracy” that left untouched the pro-capitalist program of the unions, its allegiance to the Democratic Party and its support for American imperialism, which were producing a transformation at that time of the unions into open adjuncts of management, jointly collaborating in slashing wages and closing plants.

This perspective of replacing bad, “bureaucratic” leaders with good, “democratic” ones led repeatedly to shipwreck. “Democratic” caucuses backed by Labor Notes that entered into the leadership of the unions, such as Miners for Democracy and Teamsters for a Democratic Union (which previously entered the leadership of the Teamsters in the 1990s under Ron Carey), proved to be no less hostile to the interests of workers than the bureaucrats they replaced.

This record makes Labor Notes ideally suited to help bolster the credibility of the unions by developing “rank-and-file” groupings that are in reality controlled entirely by the apparatus. To accomplish this, Labor Notes is preying upon a layer of politically inexperienced youth and workers, such as those involved in the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), which was able to appeal to Amazon workers at JFK8 by presenting itself as an “independent” union different from the established union bureaucracy.

Among those featured at the conference was Chris Smalls, president of the upstart Amazon Labor Union, which won a union election at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island this year.

After their election victory, Smalls and other ALU leaders were quickly overwhelmed by the flood of money and media attention and adapted themselves to their newfound “allies.” Within a few weeks, the ALU abandoned its “independence,” and a second campaign at the neighboring LDJ5 warehouse, this time centered on ALU’s new support in the media, the Democratic Party and union officialdom, ended in defeat. Smalls, for his part, was greeted warmly by Biden at the White House.

The development of a powerful movement in the working class must be based not on taking over the existing structures and replacing the current bureaucrats with would-be bureaucrats, but on the organization of rank-and-file workers to shatter the influence of the bureaucracy as a whole.

This is why the *World Socialist Web Site* fights for the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus, to organize rank-and-file workers to oppose the sabotage and isolation of their struggles by the union bureaucracy.

Such a struggle must be connected to the fight against the Democratic Party and the unions’ integration with the capitalist state, through which they function as a critical prop of capitalist rule.

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