

# Biden kicks off reelection bid with “America First” speech to trade union bureaucrats

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On Saturday, June 17, President Joe Biden held the first event of his reelection campaign, a rally sponsored by the trade unions in Philadelphia. Biden was introduced by Liz Shuler, president of the AFL-CIO. He addressed a crowd of 2,000, mostly union bureaucrats, who frequently interrupted his remarks with rapturous applause.

The choice of venue was significant. The trade union bureaucracy is an important element in the Democratic Party’s electoral machine, and it funnels millions of dollars and thousands of organizers every election cycle into the Democrats’ get-out-the-vote campaigns. The union operatives show far more diligence and energy trying to corral workers into supporting this capitalist party than they do in promoting turnout for their own internal elections. In the recent leadership elections in the United Auto Workers, less than 10 percent of the membership cast votes that were counted, under conditions where tens of thousands never received ballots at all.

Even more important than their role in Biden’s electoral strategy, the unions are a critical instrument in his strategy of class rule. He considers the corrupt, pro-corporate bureaucracy key to maintaining control over an angry and restive working class, as American capitalism continues to spiral downward into economic, political and social crisis. Through the unions, Biden is trying to suppress strikes and wage growth, and discipline workers as US imperialism wages war to maintain its global dominance while imposing brutal austerity to make workers pay the cost.

Last week, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) suddenly announced a tentative agreement for 22,000 west coast dockworkers. The announcement is an attempt to halt a series of job actions by rank-and-file workers that have compromised the union’s no-strike pledge, under which it has kept workers on the job without a contract for nearly a year. Biden’s acting labor secretary, Julie Su, was reportedly instrumental in finalizing the deal, and the White House has been heavily involved in talks from the start, as it has been for every major contract affecting critical infrastructure. Last summer, early on in the longshore contract talks, Biden gave a warmongering speech from the deck of a World War II-era battleship in the Port of Los Angeles.

Also last week, the United Auto Workers successfully

rammed through a sellout contract at a Clarion battery plant near Toledo, Ohio. It did so by starving workers out on the picket line. This is a preview of what the so-called “reform” administration of new union president Shawn Fain will try to do to the 150,000 autoworkers at the Big Three auto companies this fall. The UAW has not yet officially endorsed Biden, one of the few major unions not to do so, but it is fully in line with Biden’s protectionist, trade war strategy as the US prepares for war with China.

Even corporate newspapers were compelled to politely point out the disconnect between Biden’s “pro-labor” campaign rhetoric and the fact that his administration intervened to ban a strike last December on the railroads. This was done with the key support of the railroad unions, which continue to promote Biden’s claim to be the most “pro-union president in American history.” If this claim means anything, it is that Biden aspires to be the most *pro-union bureaucracy* president in US history.

Biden repeated this claim at Saturday’s rally, in the course of an accounting of the country over the last two and a half years that the average worker would find totally unrecognizable.

When he took office, “The economy was reeling,” he declared. “Barely 3 million people had been fully vaccinated. Supply chains were broken. Businesses were shutting down. Schools were closed.”

He continued: “You had cars—remember cars—not just old jalopies, cars—modern cars, new cars—lined up for miles and miles just to get a box of food put in the back of their car for their families.”

“We’ve created 13 million new jobs since I became president,” he said. “The unemployment rate is down to nearly a 50-year low at 3.7 percent. ... We’ve created 800,000 manufacturing jobs...”

“Inflation has come down 11 months in a row and [it is] going to continue to come down.”

In reality, the decades-long attack on workers’ living standards has accelerated, with wage increases far below inflation. Working hours are being stretched to 16-hour days and seven-day workweeks for many industrial workers. Across the US, around a dozen workers die every day, killed in derailments or gas explosions, incinerated by molten metal or wiped out in a wide variety of horrific accidents caused by the

breakneck push for profits.

This is the case not only among non-union, but also among unionized workers. In fact, while workers' incomes have increased far below the rate of inflation over the past two years, increases have been even lower for unionized workers, where the bureaucracy has fought tooth and nail to frustrate rank-and-file initiative.

In spite of a growing militancy, only 23 major strikes involving a total of 120,600 workers were recorded in the US last year, mostly healthcare and education workers. This year, there have been only nine major strikes, involving a total of 108,000 workers. As a result, annual wage increases for unionized workers are currently at only 4.2 percent, compared to 5.1 percent for nonunion workers. In manufacturing, the disparity is even wider.

Biden's boast that he has reversed the shutdown of the economy at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that getting industry running again, whatever the cost in human life, is his main concern. More than 1 million Americans have died of COVID, mostly during Biden's presidency, and he has scrapped all remaining safety measures, and even data collection.

The real "meat and potatoes" of the speech came when Biden turned to foreign policy. When he took office, he said, "Our allies in Europe and around the world heard the last president saying our foreign policy was 'America First.' And for the first time since the Second World War, our friends began to wonder whether the United States could be relied on."

But now, "We've united NATO once more in a way it had never been united before." The assembled bureaucrats roared their approval at this veiled reference to the US-NATO war in Ukraine, which has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and the greatest danger of a nuclear exchange in history.

Biden continued: "Now, let me tell you—let me tell you what one of the core principles is throughout everything I've done: Make it in America. We're beginning to make things again with American workers, American products, manufacturing in American plants. For too long, we exported jobs for cheaper labor costs abroad and imported more expensive products that weren't of a quality we needed."

"We're not going to do that anymore," he concluded. "Under my plan, under Bidenomics, we're creating jobs at home and exporting products abroad. Union jobs."

The principles of "Bidenomics" laid out in Biden's speech are virtually identical to Trump's pledge to "Make America Great Again," with two exceptions: The Democratic president ties his economic program to support for war against Russia as well as China—the not-so-veiled target of the attacks on "exporting jobs abroad"—and he enlists the support of the trade union bureaucracy to carry it out.

At stake is control over supply chains for emerging technologies such as electric vehicles, as well as the natural resources required for them, such as lithium and cobalt, all of

which are currently dominated by China. Creating "American jobs"—that is, reorienting supply chains away from China and other countries seen by US imperialism as strategic competitors—is a critical step in Washington's preparations for war.

While the jobs being "onshored" may be "union," in the sense of serving as a source of dues income for the bureaucracy, the process of "onshoring" is accomplished by closing what little gap remains in wages and conditions between US workers and their counterparts in China and other developing countries. Significantly, Biden immediately went on to brag about cutting the deficit by \$1 trillion, cuts that will overwhelmingly affect the poor and working class, while exempting spending on the military.

The bureaucrats in the audience greeted the end of Biden's speech with roars of "USA! USA! USA!"

Through this corporatist alliance with the union bureaucracy, Biden is seeking to whip the working class into shape for World War III, which, as China falls into Washington's cross-hairs, will be billed as a war for "American jobs."

Unfortunately for Biden, both parties to this conspiracy are deeply discredited. There is a growing rebellion among workers against this state-controlled labor framework, which is assuming its most organized and conscious form in the rapid growth of rank-and-file committees.

Biden nervously acknowledged the power of the working class toward the beginning of his speech, when he said:

If the investment—the investment bankers in this country—think about it. This is not a criticism of them, but if the investment bankers in this country went on strike tomorrow, no one would much notice in this room. ... But if this room didn't show up for work tomorrow or Monday, the whole country would come to a grinding halt.

In reality, if the room full of bureaucrats didn't show up for "work," the only result would be less of a waste of workers' dues money. But to the extent that Biden (falsely) equates workers with the union bureaucrats, his remark is an admission of serious anxiety that workers are the most powerful force in society. At the same time, it amounts to marching orders to the bureaucrats to keep workers on the job.



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