

Teamsters president at the Republican National Convention: The bureaucracy throws its lot in with fascism

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Amid the carnival of reaction at this week's Republican National Convention, the speech given by Teamsters General President Sean O'Brien on the first night deserves special attention. It is clear evidence that a section of the union bureaucracy is prepared to openly throw its support behind fascism.

O'Brien's appearance reflected political calculations of Trump's extreme-right advisers, who are seeking to play up his campaign's right-wing pseudo-populism. It followed months of courtship between the Teamsters and the Republican extreme right, including multiple meetings between O'Brien and Trump, O'Brien's support for Missouri Senator Josh Hawley (a key co-conspirator in January 6), and tens of thousands of dollars in donations to the Republicans.

His speech called for "bipartisanship" based on nationalism, militarism and the integration of the unions with management and the capitalist state. "We are not beholden to anyone or any party," he declared. That is, the union apparatus is prepared to do business with any corporate politician, including both Biden and Trump. He pointed to the Teamsters' record in an earlier period of routinely endorsing Republican candidates for president, including Nixon, Reagan and George H.W. Bush, all arch-reactionary hated figures associated with imperialist war and massive assaults on workers.

But beneath a show of "bipartisanship," O'Brien unmistakably indicated his particular sympathy for emerging American fascism centered around Trump. Referring to the attempted assassination Saturday, O'Brien hailed Trump as "one tough S.O.B." He singled out Hawley and J.D. Vance, Trump's newly announced running mate, as supposed friends of workers who were "not funded by big money think tanks."

O'Brien argued to the assembled delegates that it is in their party's interest to dispense with "knee-jerk reactions to unions," noting the Teamsters' critical role in US supply chains and offering to build a corporatist alliance with the Republicans. In between bouts of demagoguery against "corporate greed," delivered to an audience of the most ruthless representatives of American capitalism, he singled out for praise the Teamsters' role at UPS, which he called "the most

efficient package delivery company in the world."

The cost of this "efficiency" is put entirely on the backs of workers through Teamster sellouts. Last year's contract, dishonestly hailed as a "historic" victory by O'Brien and his backers in the pseudo-left, is being used to lay off over 12,000 workers and close or automate hundreds of facilities.

This is not unique, but expresses the universal function of the bureaucracy as an industrial police force. The United Auto Workers is also helping to carry out thousands of layoffs, following a contract pushed through last year with the endorsement of the Biden White House. Similar roles are being played by the postal unions, the railroad unions and countless others.

The most reactionary part of O'Brien's speech came when he turned to the world economy. "It needs to be easier for companies to remain in America," he said. In plain language, this means even more massive austerity to complete the conversion of the United States into a cheap labor platform capable of "competing" with China, India and other "developing" countries for the worst working conditions.

He then attacked multinational corporations for their supposed "disloyalty" to the United States. "What is sickening is that Amazon has abandoned any national allegiance," he said. "Elites have no party, elites have no nation."

To be frank, this statement is ripped straight out of Hitler, who frequently railed against "rootless international"—especially Jewish—bankers without loyalty to "blood and soil." It particularly recalls an incident in 2018 when a member of the German Parliament from the neo-Nazi Alternative for Germany party was caught paraphrasing one of Hitler's speeches along these lines.

It is also, as a political fact, false to the core. As Marx and Engels explained in *The Communist Manifesto*, it is the working class, dispossessed under capitalism and united on the basis of its common international interests, that "has no country."

American capitalism, struggling to offset its massive decline, is compelled to rely heavily on its state as a weapon against both foreign and domestic enemies, launching catastrophic new

wars and lurching towards dictatorship. This was expressed particularly sharply in the Republican convention itself.

In a prepared response, Hawley fully endorsed O'Brien's speech, calling it a "watershed moment" and the beginning of a nationalist alliance of the Republicans with the union bureaucracy. "There is much that Republicans and labor can already agree on," he said, including trade war measures against China and an "America First energy policy."

Those in the corporate media accustomed to political "analysis" resting on banalities—above all, the false identification of the union bureaucracy with the workers—struggled to make sense of O'Brien's presence. But the reality is that the union bureaucracy is a natural base of support for fascism.

Completely integrated with management, dependent on its ties with the state, the bureaucracy is deeply hostile to the working class. The unions are run as bureaucratic dictatorships, never hesitating to resort to fraud and even violence to overcome resistance from the rank and file. Politically, the bureaucracy is dominated by nationalism and anticommunism, which expresses its mortal fear of the revolutionary threat posed by the working class.

Support for Trump is not a fundamental shift, but the outcome of the bureaucracy's policies, which are determined by the needs of capitalism. As Trotsky observed in 1940:

The labor bureaucrats do their level best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the "democratic" state how reliable and indispensable they are in peace-time and especially in time of war. By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism.

Had O'Brien given the same speech at the Democratic National Convention, hailing Biden instead of Trump, it would not have been out of place.

The Biden White House is entirely focused on preparing American society for war. To do this, it is building a corporatist alliance between the state, the unions and corporate management to smash the resistance of the working class and force through layoffs and austerity to free up resources for the military. This strategy was summed up last week when Biden visited the AFL-CIO headquarters and declared the unions "my domestic NATO."

Biden frequently cites the mobilization of US industry during World War II as the example for today. In itself, this shows the ruling class is preparing for World War III. But the United States is a declining, not a rising power, and Biden's corporatist policies have more in common with the social regime in Italy under Mussolini than the New Deal under FDR.

The pseudo-left, including the Democratic Socialists of America and *Labor Notes*, has played a key role in promoting these policies. They relentlessly backed O'Brien for years as one of the heads of a so-called "reform" movement within the bureaucracy. They are still in coalition with O'Brien in the Teamsters General Executive Board, where they are represented by numerous members of the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) faction.

The pseudo-left criticized O'Brien's speech—not for its ultra-nationalist content, which they endorse—but for his choice of venue. "It was understandable why Sean O'Brien was looking for leverage vis-a-vis corporate Democrats and anti-labor Republicans," *Jacobin* editor Bhaskar Sunkara tweeted. He complained only that O'Brien combined "decent class struggle talking points"—this is what Sunkara calls O'Brien's fascist demagoguery—with "fawning lines about Trump."

Others, however, were entirely on board with an alliance with the extreme right. Cenk Uygur called it "the most progressive speech I've ever seen at a Republican or Democratic convention."

For now, the Teamsters are the only major union to have thrown in with Trump. But as Biden's campaign—and Biden himself—continue to inwardly decompose, it is not inconceivable that this could change. The enthusiastic response to the RNC from the "liberal" media is a sign that significant sections of the ruling class, demoralized by internal dysfunction and terrified of the threat of social revolution, are attracted to the idea of Trump or another strongman taking power to impose "national unity."

The defense of democratic rights is only possible on the basis of a politically independent movement of the working class against capitalism and the dictatorship of the corporations, which is driving the world into the abyss. This can only be guided by a socialist and internationalist program, rejecting all attempts to subordinate workers to the national state. Connected to this must be a rebellion to smash the trade union bureaucracy, which functions as an industrial police force, and replace it with genuine organs of workers' power.



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