

In endorsement of Harris for president, Association of Flight Attendants bureaucrats hail anti-strike Railroad Labor Act

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On Monday, the board of directors of the Association of Flight Attendants union voted unanimously to endorse the election of vice president Kamala Harris in the November election. The Association of Flight Attendants (AFA) is part of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and covers 55,000 flight attendants at 20 airlines.

Its endorsement of Harris, while not surprising, expresses the character of the union bureaucracy as an agency of capitalist politics.

The AFA is headed by Sara Nelson, who is also a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party that expends all of its energies on providing “left” cover for this capitalist party.

Nelson, a highly-placed bureaucrat briefly considered for AFL-CIO president, specializes in using empty demagoguery, shouting, cursing and the occasional invocation of Mother Jones and other figures in the early US labor movement to conceal the union bureaucracy’s cozy relationship with the government and the airlines.

This was on display in the 2022 *Labor Notes* conference, when Nelson argued vehemently against audience members’ suggestions that workers break from the Democratic Party, contending that workers could “make the party come to us.” Incredibly, she cited as proof the AFA’s own collaboration with the airlines to secure tens of billions of dollars in bailout money in 2020. “We had a working relationship with the airlines,” she said. “They handled the Republicans, and we handled the Democrats.”

The AFA board’s endorsement cited the Biden-Harris administration’s supposed “direct impact on safety, health, security, collective bargaining, and job security,” and warning that a Trump presidency would put it all in danger.

But the claim that the Democrats are any more friends of workers than Republicans were exposed by the “examples” they themselves cite. Incredibly, they claimed the “Biden-Harris administration has affirmed our right to strike under the Railway Labor Act leading recently to tentative agreements at Alaska, American and Gate Gourmet.”

The Railway Labor Act, whose provisions also apply to the airline industry, does not protect but effectively *abolishes* workers’ right to strike. It has been used for nearly a century to block strikes through endless, government-mandated mediation. This fact is seen in the fact that no strikes ever actually occurred at Alaska, American or Gate Gourmet.

It played a crucial role in the efforts to block a national rail strike in 2022. Once workers rebelled against a union-backed, White-House brokered deal which did not even include sick days, Biden went to Congress to pass a law to pre-emptively ban the strike and impose the contract.

Infamously, members of Congress from the DSA, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, voted in favor of the strike ban. In the Senate, Bernie Sanders cast a token vote against the deal but was crucial in the parliamentary maneuvering necessary to bring it to a rapid vote.

For workers, Biden’s use of the RLA exposed his self-serving claim to be the most “pro-labor president in American history.” But from the beginning, the union bureaucracy worked hand-in-glove with the White House against railroaders, stalling for time even after the anti-strike terms of the RLA were exhausted to give Biden a chance to pass a ban. Meanwhile, in Orwellian language identical to that used by the AFA, they claimed the RLA actually defended workers.

The “progressive” AFA and the bureaucracies of the other airline unions play the same role. In the case of

American Airlines, the Association of Professional Flight Attendants (APFA), a tentative agreement was sprung upon workers last month weeks before a legal strike deadline, similar to deal railroaders rejected in 2022.

The AFA goes on that the Biden-Harris administration “consulted our union on key nominations and appointments to positions that interface with our jobs.” This is the real concern of the bureaucracy. Biden, expanding on high-level connections between the union bureaucrats and the Democratic Party that already existed, is developing a corporatist alliance with them to beat back the class struggle. They want this to continue undisturbed.

In dealing with domestic dissent, the White House is also preparing the country for war. This came out most clearly last month when, in front of a crowd of cheering AFL-CIO officials, he called the unions his “domestic NATO.”

A particularly close relationship is being built with another so-called “progressive” union official, Shawn Fain of the United Auto Workers. Biden has appointed Fain to the Export Council, a trade war body where he sits alongside billionaires. He also invited him to a state reception for the Japanese prime minister, where preparations for war with China were the main item of discussion. Borrowing from White House talking points, Fain regularly touts the “Arsenal of Democracy”—in reality, the war economy during World War II—as the example for workers to follow.

With the support of Biden, the UAW imposed a contract last year which has greenlit thousands of job cuts. Fain and other top officials are also under investigation for corruption, and a judge recently ruled in favor of a lawsuit over massive vote fraud in the union leadership election, which was overseen by the Labor Department.

In spite of the AFA’s claims, Harris has a right-wing record, including her sending working-class kids to prison as a state prosecutor, her sponsorship of a law to send parents to jail when their kids were truant, and defended the overcrowding of the state’s prisons when the US Supreme Court ruled this a form of “cruel and unusual punishment.” In the 2020 Democratic primaries, she was considered a law-and-order candidate, but one who could also tout her personal identity as an African-American woman.

This is to say nothing of the crimes of the Biden White House of which she is the second-in-command. In a recent appearance in Detroit, Harris denounced attendees protesting her support for the genocide in Gaza, claiming that this only aided Trump.

But there are no principled obstacles separating the White House’s corporatist, pro-war policy with those of Trump. This was shown by the appearance of Teamsters general president Sean O’Brien at last month’s Republican convention. Other pro-Harris union officials have criticized his speech, not so much for its “America First” content, but his choice of venue.

When the AFA makes statements about the RLA “protecting workers’ rights,” workers should take this as a serious warning that they are preparing to emulate the betrayals at the railroads and the airline industry.

The bureaucracy and the state have very different interests from the workers they claim to represent. Union bureaucrats, who take six figure salaries drawn from dues money invested in the stock market, are closing ranks with the government and companies in order to stave off the threat of rank-and-file anger from below. They will draw ever closer the more that the social and economic consequences of the government’s policies generate opposition from workers.

The genuine interests of airline workers cannot find any expression in a “choice” between Harris and Trump? Airline workers have to organize a fight against the whole capitalist two-party system that locks them in this cycle of exploitation and abuse. This fight also has to be connected with a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy and their state-controlled police unionism, through the formation of rank-and-file committees.

Whether Trump or Harris wins in November, workers face an all-out fight in defense of their jobs and livelihoods.



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