Labor Day 2025: The union apparatus covers for dictatorship

Our reporters
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In a statement published prior to Labor Day, the Socialist Equality Party and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees wrote, “in the face of the threat of a fascist dictatorship” in the United States, “The truth is that there is no labor movement worthy of the name.”

This basic political fact was evident in the Labor Day demonstrations organized by the AFL-CIO on Monday. While hundreds of protests were held across the country, attracting sections of workers and youth, they were significantly smaller than earlier nationwide protests this year, including the over 10 million who joined the largely spontaneous June 14 “No Kings” marches against Trump’s dictatorship. The entire purpose of these officially sanctioned events was to suppress opposition and conceal the real political situation confronting the working class.

The AFL-CIO organized a patchwork of small demonstrations scattered across the country, while refusing to call mass marches in Washington D.C. or New York City—the nation’s political and financial capitals. Trump has already deployed troops in D.C. and threatened to deploy more in Chicago, Los Angeles and other major cities. Yet this issue was systematically covered up and downplayed by those who claimed to speak for workers on Labor Day.

Nowhere was this clearer than in Detroit. It has been many decades since the center of American auto manufacturing was the site of significant demonstrations of workers on Labor Day. Yet even compared to last year, turnout was lower, and the character of the event revealed the chasm separating the pro-corporate union apparatus and the working class it claims to represent.

UAW President Shawn Fain delivered a speech that did not mention Trump by name and made no mention of the National Guard occupation of Washington, Trump’s threats of martial law in major cities, or the systematic destruction of democratic rights. Instead, Fain spoke out against what he referred to as “shitty trade deals” and denounced the “billionaire class” in the abstract, carefully avoiding any reference to the billionaire in the White House who is consolidating fascist rule.

Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have in fact aligned themselves with Trump’s program of economic nationalism, backing tariffs and trade war policies that pit American workers against their class brothers and sisters internationally. In doing so, they provide a crucial cover for the fascistic policies of the administration.

Michigan American Federation of Teachers President Terrence Martin belatedly mentioned the occupation of Washington, but only to argue for voting Democrat in 2026—an election Trump has already signaled may take place under military rule, if it is held at all. The event, which began with the pledge of allegiance and a military color guard, functioned as a patriotic pageant, not a mobilization of workers.

The militaristic character of the demonstrations was reflected in the omission of any mention of the ongoing US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. Yet for many protesters, this was one of the central reasons they attended the protests.

“We are disgusted with what is happening in Gaza,” a protester in Detroit told the WSWS. “I believe there is a genocide happening over there and the federal government is contributing to it,” said another.

In Chicago, some 5,000 workers rallied downtown, where Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson led chants of “No federal troops in the city of Chicago,” only to immediately pivot to empty rhetoric about “defending democracy.” The only concrete action he proposed was to file lawsuits against the Trump administration, which will lead to years of hearings and appeals, ending up in the US Supreme Court packed with fascist justices, with three of the nine appointed by Trump himself.

Taking measure of complicit Democrats and the suppressed turnout of the rallies, on Tuesday Trump made clear that the decision to deploy soldiers to Chicago had already been made.

“We’re going in,” Trump said from the Oval Office. “If the governor of Illinois would call up, call me up, I would love to do it,” he said. “Now, we’re going to do it anyway. We have the right to do it.” Trump threatened to also send troops to Baltimore saying it was his “obligation to protect this country, and that includes Baltimore.”

In Los Angeles, AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler gave perfunctory remarks that lasted all of four minutes. She referred to the “moment of crisis” created by Trump’s deployment of tanks in American cities. Her solution, however, was to urge workers to put their faith in the unions, which she claimed remained the “only institutions the American people still believe in.” While stating that nothing was won without a “struggle,” Shuler proposed no actual action by workers to stop the military-police takeover of American cities.

Ricardo, a California truck driver and a member of Teamsters for 25 years, told WSWS reporters, “It’s just corruption from top to bottom. I don’t understand how we got to this point, to where the president of the United States has so much power. He is basically…

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a dictator. I don't understand how Democrats and even Republicans don't see what's going on in this country. They don't care about us union workers or anybody."

The Pittsburgh Labor Day parade, often billed as the largest Labor Day parade in the country, was remarkable this year for the almost complete lack of political slogans or even slogans of struggle. Outside of the logos on their shirts and minus the colorful floats, one couldn't tell this parade from Thanksgiving Day or Christmas parades.

The contingent from the United Steelworkers marched by with no signs denouncing US Steel for the explosion at the nearby Clairton Coke works which left two steelworkers dead and 10 others seriously injured.

In past Labor Day parades, striking workers would march upfront in a place of honor. But in this year's parade the striking *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* workers, who have now been on strike for more than three years, were relegated to the very end.

While the official parade made no mention of the Trump administration and the threat of dictatorship this was certainly on the minds of many workers who spoke with the WSWS.

Roland, with the laborer's union, said that he sees the country moving towards dictatorship. "I don't know why people aren't protesting about what is happening in DC. You shouldn't have the military being brought into the cities.

"Masked ICE agents are arresting people, pulling people from their cars and jobs and no one sees them again. That's the kind of thing you'd see in a fiction movie, but this is not fiction this is reality," Roland said

Roland's friend Alex, also a laborer, said, "we all have to stand up together. We have the power. We make everything in this country, but the rich are the ones that benefit. They've always tried to divide us, black vs white, this is the same thing again—against immigrants or people from another country."

Peggy, who was holding a sign that read, "Defend Democracy Fight Fascism," said that she sees the country becoming authoritarian and leading to fascism.

"What I'm saying is, if we were a country founded on principles of equality and freedom, this administration is becoming more and more authoritarian and that always leads to fascism."

Referring to the National Guard occupation of Washington DC, Peggy said, "they're trying to intimidate people.

"I see the courts letting Donald Trump get away with anything he wants, having control of the legislative branch, as fascism. There is supposed to be separation between the three parts of government, and checks and balances, and those are being completely incorporated."

Laurie and Misbah were at the rally to protest the genocide in Gaza.

Laurie explained, "I'm here because I'm Jewish. My ancestors fled from the pogroms. I was taught every day to speak out against evil. I can't watch every day as our country uses our tax money to pay for atrocities like bombing, starving and shooting our Palestinian brothers and sisters. We need to speak out, that 'Never again' means Never Again!"

Misbah explained, "Every day the situation is getting worse and worse. (The people of Gaza) have no food. These people are dying: children, women, the elderly. Their homes are being destroyed. That is not just.

"All of this is connected. Trying to take over the area so they can make more money and build the area for a resort. Here people are fighting because the billionaires keep cutting the workers again to make profit for themselves."

Asked about the fact that both the Democrats and Republicans have backed the genocide in Gaza, Misbah explained that "this is despicable. They do it for money."

And she warned, "If they do it there, they will do it here. Eventually it will make its way back here. This is what ICE is doing. And they will do it to everyone."

??The basic political fact is that there is no faction of the ruling class committed to the defense of democracy. Both Republicans and Democrats represent the interests of the financial oligarchy. As the SEP and IWA-RFC statement warned, "This Labor Day, every worker must confront the gravity of this crisis: The organizations that claim to represent your interests have betrayed you; the politicians who seek your votes have deceived you; and the capitalist system is ruthlessly destroying your life and your children's lives."

The revival of a genuine workers' movement will not come through the bureaucratized union apparatus or the Democratic Party. It requires a rebellion against the union leadership, the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, and the conscious development of a revolutionary and internationalist perspective.

The decisive task is to expand the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which encourages and supports the formation of independent organizations of struggle. These committees must unite workers across industries and countries, not only to defend jobs, wages, and working conditions, but to oppose dictatorship, war and repression.

This counter-offensive of the working class must be connected to the building of a genuine socialist leadership. This means the conscious development of the Socialist Equality Party, which fights to arm the growing movement of the working class with a revolutionary and internationalist perspective.

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