

US trade union bureaucracy silent as Trump launches illegal war against Iran

Jerry White
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As the Trump administration unleashed a massive bombing campaign against Iran—in open violation of the Constitution and international law—the leadership of the American trade unions has mostly remained silent.

The AFL-CIO, the national labor federation whose affiliated unions claim more than 15 million members, issued no statement. The United Auto Workers, the Communications Workers of America, the United Steelworkers, the Teamsters, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the National Education Association and scores of other unions—nothing.

The social media pages of the AFL-CIO and the major unions are filled with promotions of Democratic Party politicians, reports of the latest strikes the bureaucracy is managing or has already betrayed, the promotion of anti-Chinese propaganda and graphics about Women's History Month. But as the bombing began on February 28 and continued over the following days, the communications departments of these organizations did not issue a single post opposing the war.

The scale of what has been unleashed on the Iranian people is horrific. In the opening days of the bombing campaign, the political and military leadership of Iran was assassinated. Nearly 1,000 people were killed, including more than 100 children when US-Israeli forces deliberately targeted an all-girls school in southern Iran.

The cost of this criminal war is being imposed on the American working class, who are overwhelmingly opposed to it. Fuel prices are already rising. Food costs will follow. If ground troops are deployed to occupy Iran—and the logic of such an operation points precisely in that direction—it will be the sons and daughters of the working class, not the children of the corporate executives and financiers who profit from war, who are sent to fight and die.

The costs will be financed through savage cuts to Medicaid, Social Security, public education and every other social program workers depend on for survival. The same administration that has deployed paramilitary forces to round up immigrants and murder US citizens in the streets of Minneapolis intends to use wartime measures to criminalize political opposition to the war.

The silence of the union bureaucracy is a deliberate act of support and complicity. Those responsible include the “left-talking” sections of the apparatus—figures such as UAW President Shawn Fain, UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, Association of Flight Attendants president and Democratic Socialists of America leader Sara Nelson, and the leaders of the Chicago Teachers Union and United Teachers Los Angeles.

The exceptions that prove the rule

Knowing there is overwhelming popular opposition to the war, a small

number of unions have broken the silence and issued critical statements. Yet the political character of their statements is as revealing as the silence of the majority. Statements by the National Nurses United (NNU) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) combine radical sounding phrases with appeals to Congress and the Democratic Party.

The NNU statement condemns the attack as “yet another imperialist act of war,” invokes Trump’s “unilateral military action in Venezuela,” and declares that “this mission is an extension of Trump’s fascist allegiance to the billionaire class and a continuation of decades of U.S. intervention in Iran, beginning with the overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadegh government in 1953.”

The SEIU states:

War hurts working people, poor people, women, and children. While authoritarian rulers, would-be dictators, and the billionaires that finance endless violence conspire together to enrich themselves and grab ever more power, it is regular working people who pay the price.

It continues:

SEIU stands with the workers in Iran and all over the world fighting for better, safer lives. We know the power of working people together and we will oppose this and any other move by this administration that harms workers, our families, and our communities.

But while declaring that “nurses call for international solidarity among working people,” the NNU appeals to the US Congress “to take all necessary steps to end this war,” insisting that it alone has “the power to do so by blocking funding and passing a war powers resolution.”

The SEIU arrives at precisely the same conclusion: “Congress must act immediately to end this unconstitutional aggression and safeguard working people in America, Iran, and around the globe.”

This is the same Congress and Democratic Party that have funded military escalation for decades, backed sanctions strangling the Iranian people and repeatedly supported US aggression in the Middle East.

Bernie Sanders, whose response to the attack was to declare that “the Senate must reconvene immediately and vote on a pending War Powers Resolution, which I will strongly support.”

On Wednesday, the resolution predictably failed in the Senate, after being blocked by nearly every Republican plus one Democrat, the predictable John Fetterman. It would have been vetoed by Trump even had it passed; another resolution in the House is non-binding.

The NNU apparatus maintains the closest institutional ties to Sanders. Several NNU leaders are fellows of the Sanders Institute, where they were trained in the rhetoric of “Medicare for All” and other reformist nostrums.

It should also be recalled that NNU’s affiliate, the New York State Nurses Association, betrayed the recent strike of 15,000 New York City nurses, even violating its own bylaws in a bid to force through a pro-corporate contract.

The American Federation of Teachers provides perhaps the most instructive example.

On February 18, the AFT leadership passed a resolution expressing solidarity with demonstrations against the Tehran government, protests primarily led by right-wing forces aligned with the son of the former Shah and backing US military intervention to facilitate a coup.

Adopted before the bombing campaign began, the resolution opposed US intervention only on tactical grounds, declaring that “an invasion can only aid the cause of the authoritarian theocrats in the Iranian state and delay the day when Iranians are finally free and able to govern themselves.” In other words, not because an invasion would be a war crime, but counterproductive to US imperialism.

After the bombs fell, AFT President Randi Weingarten responded not by condemning the war but by criticizing its constitutional irregularity. Trump, she said, “has repeatedly bypassed Congress to unconstitutionally engage in acts of war, including today. That is wrong.”

Weingarten personifies the merger of the union apparatus with the State Department. Weingarten regularly travels across the world in support of regime change operations by the United States. She traveled to Ukraine in 2014 to lend support to the right-wing Maidan coup and has been a vocal supporter of the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. She is also a staunch Zionist who issued hypocritical, noncommittal statements on the genocide in Gaza months after it began.

Now she registers her objection to the bombing of Iran on procedural grounds. Had the Republican-dominated Congress formally approved the attack beforehand, she would have had no objection.

Labor lieutenants of capital

The silence of the union bureaucracy is the expression of a social layer that long ago evolved—using the phrase of socialist leader Daniel De Leon—into “labor lieutenants of capital.”

The American trade union apparatus has a long record of supporting imperialist war.

The American Federation of Labor, the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the AFL-CIO after their merger in 1955 backed US militarism through the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and the wars of the past three decades in the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

Only under immense pressure from rank-and-file workers radicalized by the Vietnam War did the UAW temporarily break with the AFL-CIO. Even then the rupture was partial and short-lived, quickly repaired once the immediate political danger had passed.

Through the American Institute for Free Labor Development—funded by the CIA and major US corporations—and its successor, the Solidarity Center, the AFL-CIO participated in decades of covert operations aimed at undermining militant unions and installing pro-US governments abroad.

In Iran, the AFL’s international apparatus led by Jay Lovestone played a role in the events leading to the CIA-organized 1953 coup—Operation Ajax—that overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.

The AFL-CIO’s fingerprints are likewise on the 1973 military coup in

Chile that drowned the socialist government of Salvador Allende in blood. Its operatives have supported destabilization campaigns in Venezuela, Ukraine and elsewhere.

President Biden openly acknowledged this relationship when he told the AFL-CIO Executive Council in July 2024 that the federation was his “domestic NATO.”

None more so than UAW President Shawn Fain, who has openly promoted the World War II “arsenal of democracy” as the model for the union apparatus’ integration into wartime production today.

In exchange for enforcing a no-strike pledge and converting unions into instruments of labor discipline in World War II, the Roosevelt administration instituted the automatic dues checkoff—what union accountants called “manna from heaven”—resolving the financial precarity of the labor bureaucracy at a stroke. The bargain then is the bargain now: the bureaucracy delivers labor peace and political loyalty; the state guarantees its institutional interests. The sons and daughters of the working class pay for this arrangement with their lives.

A mass anti-war movement based on the working class

Once again, pseudo-left organizations are promoting the lie that the union bureaucracy can be pressured into leading a movement against war. Left Voice, for example, calls for “an anti-war and anti-imperialist movement on the streets and from our workplaces and schools,” in which “labor needs to play a leading role given its strategic power to grind imperialism to a halt.

But it will not be the AFL-CIO bureaucracy that builds such a movement. A social layer that functions as a “domestic NATO” for the American ruling class, that has spent decades assisting US imperialism abroad and that responded to the mass bombing of Iran with complicit silence is incapable of leading a struggle against war.

The building of a mass anti-war movement falls to the working class itself—to the rank and file, to young people and students, and to all those who understand that this war, like every war of American imperialism, is fought in the interests of the ruling class at the expense of workers on both sides of the conflict.

Such a movement must rest on four principles.

First, it must be politically independent of both parties of American imperialism—the Republicans who launched this war and the Democrats who will attempt to manage it while posturing, if needed, as opponents.

Second, it must be free from the domination of the union apparatus—that privileged bureaucratic layer which stand on the other side of the class barricades.

Third, it must be genuinely internationalist, recognizing that the Iranian workers and youth being killed by American bombs are not enemies but class brothers and sisters in a common struggle against capitalism and war.

Fourth—and decisively—it must be socialist. Imperialist war is not an aberration of capitalism but its inevitable expression.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which has begun building independent organizations for the self-determination of the working class in workplaces across the United States and internationally, provides the framework for such a struggle.

The urgent task is to transform the widespread opposition to this war—both in the United States and internationally—into an organized political force before the costs, measured in the lives of workers in Iran and the social devastation imposed on workers in America, grow any higher.



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