

Clinton lectures the world on labor standards—but what is the state of workers' rights in America?

By Jerry White
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At the recent World Trade Organization ministerial meeting in Seattle, President Bill Clinton argued that labor standards should be included in international trade guidelines. In an interview with a Seattle newspaper, he said countries that allowed child and compulsory labor and failed to guarantee workers the right to organize should face trade sanctions. “To deny the importance of these issues in the global economy,” Clinton told the trade ministers, “is to deny the dignity of work.”

Notwithstanding the president's assurances that labor standards are “not an instrument of protectionism,” Clinton and his allies in the AFL-CIO leadership view such provisions as part of an aggressive US trade policy, aimed at extracting concessions from other nations.

But aside from ulterior trade-related motives, there is another aspect of Clinton's pro-worker rhetoric that was passed over in silence by the hundreds of journalists who covered the tumultuous events in Seattle. Not a single reporter from the establishment media challenged the attempt of Clinton—the former governor of a southern “right-to-work” state notorious for its exploitation of workers—to present himself as a defender of workers' rights. None of them questioned the portrayal of the United States as a model of humane labor standards.

On the contrary, *New York Times* columnist William Safire hailed Clinton's efforts to depict the US as “a light unto nations by virtue of our example of enlightened free enterprise.”

Even a cursory examination of the actual state of workers' rights in the US is sufficient to expose the fraudulent character of such pronouncements. In many respects, when it comes to the social position of working people, America ranks as the most backward and brutal of all the advanced industrialized countries.

The first prerequisite for genuine “workers' rights” is economic security. No worker can plan his future and properly provide for his family unless he is assured a job with a living wage. But American workers lack the minimal legal protection against layoffs and firings that exist in Japan, most of Europe, and parts of the so-called Third World—although such provisions are increasingly under attack as part of the “Americanization” of the global economy.

Employers in Germany, Japan and elsewhere look with a combination of envy and incredulity at the ease with which US companies shed workers. Hardly a day passes in America without an announcement of massive job cuts. Millions of decent-paying jobs have been slashed in the US over the past two decades. The workers whose lives are thrown into turmoil by the downsizing decisions of corporate millionaires have absolutely no say and no recourse. At the end of the twentieth century, the relationship between the American

boss and his employees is still, in essence, that which prevailed in the heyday of the robber barons—a form of industrial despotism.

Indeed, Clinton and other US spokesmen have made a positive virtue of the ability of American employers to downsize their workers. They present this as central to the “American model” of capitalism and criticize European countries for their supposedly outmoded and misguided coddling of workers. It is no secret that the US Federal Reserve Board places at the center of its interest rate policy the maintenance of sufficient economic insecurity to undermine workers' wage demands. This relentless pressure on the working population is called “keeping inflation in check.”

The current business boom in the US has not, by and large, created secure and good-paying jobs. On the contrary, the bulk of new jobs have been in the low-paying service sector, and many have been part-time, temporary and other non-standard jobs. An entire industry has sprung up for “leasing” workers, relieving employers of the cost of pensions, unemployment and health benefits, and even payroll taxes.

What are the working conditions and wage levels of American workers? The past two decades have seen a lengthening of the workweek, with US workers laboring considerably more hours than their counterparts in western Europe and Japan. If American labor standards were imposed on German workers, for example, the latter would have to work an extra 500 hours a year. Workers in the US are compelled to work record levels of overtime either by employer fiat or economic necessity.

Wages for manufacturing workers in the US have stagnated for two decades, and they now trail behind their counterparts in western Europe and Japan. In most cases both spouses in an American family are forced to work, sometimes two or three jobs each, to make ends meet.

Then there is the appalling state of health and safety for American workers. The US ranks worst in workplace injuries compared with 15 other industrialized countries, with 6,000 workers killed annually, another 50,000 to 60,000 dying from occupational diseases, and 7 million injured on the job each year. The US spends about \$1 per citizen on worker safety programs and has one inspector for every 54,435 workers. By contrast, Norway invests about \$11.36 for every citizen on job safety and health, and Great Britain has one inspector for every 2,354 workers.

In the US, employer- and state-paid benefits, such as old age pensions, unemployment and health benefits, childcare, welfare and other programs, are notoriously inadequate or nonexistent. Most US

workers have to hold down a job for years before they get a two-week vacation, whereas French and German workers get five to six weeks off beginning their first year of employment. Women workers in the US have no paid maternity leave.

Then there is the issue of child labor, slavery and sweatshops. During the WTO conference Clinton criticized the exploitation of children, but this practice is by no means limited to Third World countries. There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of children laboring on US farms, in garment factories, at construction sites and other workplaces. It is not uncommon for a migrant worker's child—as young as four years of age—to be in the fields harvesting crops alongside his parents.

No accurate estimate of the number of working children in the US has been made because the government has no comprehensive national data collection system to count them. Nor does Washington systematically track the occupations or work locations of children. The same official indifference rules when it comes to the number of children in the US injured or killed on the job. But hospital records show that every five days a youth under 18 is killed at work in America, and every year 65,000 are injured seriously enough to require treatment in emergency hospital rooms.

Nor is the US free from incidences of outright slave labor. In recent years there have been two widely publicized discoveries of enslaved workers in the US, one involving Thai immigrants in a Los Angeles garment sweatshop, the other involving handicapped Mexican children peddling trinkets on New York City subways. It is well known, moreover, that in parts of rural Florida and other remote areas immigrant farm workers live under conditions of virtual slavery.

With much publicity Clinton signed an international treaty during the WTO conference banning the “worst forms of child labor”—practices that are already illegal in the US and nearly all other nations: slavery, prostitution, pornography, drug trafficking and dangerous work. The treaty, however, was a watered down version of the International Labor Organization's Convention 138, which bans most labor by children under age 18, a treaty that the US refuses to sign.

Finally there is the right of workers to organize, bargain collectively and strike. How does America fare on this question?

Since the 1980s there have been hundreds of strikes where major US employers have hired professional strikebreaking firms, paramilitary guards and scabs to terrorize, physically attack and even kill striking workers. Government officials, from the federal level on down, have dispatched National Guard forces, state troopers and local police to break strikes and frame up militant workers for “strike violence,” while allowing hired thugs a free hand to injure or kill strikers.

The federal government set the precedent for the assault on the unions with President Ronald Reagan's firing of 13,000 members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981 and the smashing of their union. The strikers were blacklisted, leading to the break-up of families and a number of suicides. To this day, Clinton has refused to declare a general amnesty for the former strikers.

Employers have enormous latitude to victimize or fire workers who seek to organize a union. And those workers who are members of the AFL-CIO and other officially recognized unions find themselves inside organizations that are wedded to the employers and the government, hostile to any genuine internal democracy, and concerned with defending the interests, not of the rank and file, but of

the labor bureaucrats who control the unions.

No assessment of America's real attitude toward workers' rights would be complete without an examination of how US foreign policy affects the lives of workers around the world. Clinton and the media suggest that the brutal treatment of workers in Third World countries is entirely due to local conditions. But the US has cultivated these regions as cheap labor havens, and the super-exploitation of these workers has been built into the very structure of US business, from the construction of cars and computer components, to the harvesting of coffee beans, to the production of toys and apparel for US retailers.

Through the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the US has imposed austerity policies, requiring countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America to eliminate subsidies for food and other necessities, pare back social welfare benefits, rip up legal protections, privatize state-owned enterprises and shut down noncompetitive industries. These “shock therapy” measures have been used to break down barriers to the penetration of American capital.

Moreover, the US arms and finances repressive regimes in Indonesia, Turkey and elsewhere which systematically suppress the efforts of workers to organize and fight for decent wages and working conditions, and elementary democratic rights.

Some of the most brutal conditions exist in US territorial possessions. Earlier in the year a lawsuit was filed in California on behalf of 50,000 foreign garment workers charging that US retailers, such as Wal-Mart and The Gap, were reaping huge profits from indentured workers in sweatshops on the island of Saipan, a US commonwealth in the South Pacific. Under US-backed guidelines, workers—predominantly women from China, the Philippines, Bangladesh and Thailand—are forced to labor 12-hour days, seven days a week, without overtime compensation, making clothes labeled “Made in the USA” for these retailers.

Clinton is the last one to lecture the world about workers' rights. To the extent that he can perpetrate such a fraud, he is indebted to the utterly venal and corrupt US media. As for the AFL-CIO, it is more than happy to participate in the charade, since Clinton's pursuit of labor standards within the WTO coincides with its own policies of economic nationalism.

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