

Anticommunism, chauvinism and beating the drums for war: the US trade union bureaucracy shows its colors

By David Walsh
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At two rallies on Wednesday, held as part of the week of anti-IMF and World Bank demonstrations in Washington, DC, the American trade union bureaucracy revealed its reactionary essence. The two assemblies, one organized by the Teamsters union and the other by the AFL-CIO leadership of John Sweeney, were organized to protest against a bill presently before Congress that would normalize trade relations between the US and China. The AFL-CIO as a whole, and the Teamsters and United Auto Workers in particular, are vehemently opposed to the passage of the bill. The two latter unions have refused thus far to endorse Al Gore, the presumptive Democratic Party candidate for president, partly to extract more protectionist concessions.

The holding of two rallies was made necessary in part by the desire of the Teamsters bureaucracy of James Hoffa to provide a platform for Patrick Buchanan, the would-be Reform Party candidate for president. John Sweeney and the majority of the AFL-CIO executive are too intimately wedded to Gore and the Democrats at this point to make such an appearance politically acceptable. In any event, the rallies overlapped, as Hoffa addressed the main AFL-CIO rally after speaking at his own union's.

The American union bureaucracy has a history of betrayal and class collaboration. Nonetheless, in parading Buchanan, a lifelong defender of big business interests and an ultra-right demagogue, before an audience of trade union officials and union members as a friend of the working man, the Hoffa leadership has broken new ground. Hoffa told CNN Tuesday that the likely Reform Party candidate “can articulate why we need annual review of this treaty [with China]. He's the

one who's got it right.”

In his speech Wednesday afternoon Buchanan resorted to the sort of red-baiting and jingoism that he learned in his years as a supporter of Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon and other professional witch-hunters and as an official in the Reagan administration. “If I was in the White House,” he said, “and the Communist Chinese came to my office, I'd tell them to stop threatening my country, persecuting the Christians, and if you won't, you have sold your last pair of chopsticks.”

Buchanan later told his audience that, if elected, he would appoint the Teamsters president to his cabinet: “If I get there [i.e., the White House], it won't be [trade negotiator] Charlene Barshefsky sitting down in Beijing. It'll be Jim Hoffa.” The crowd began to chant “Hoffa, Hoffa, Hoffa.”

Democrat David Bonior, liberal congressman from Michigan, addressed the rally in right-wing populist language. “We're for an America where no working mom or dad ever lays awake at night worrying what's going to happen to their family because their job, their paycheck—and their future—was ripped off, boxed up and shipped away to a factory in China.”

Teamsters officials who were dispatched to lobby congressmen and senators were told by union field representative Carl DiPietro, according to the *Washington Post*, “Always say Communist China.”

The main rally, presided over by John Sweeney, sounded the same themes. President of the United Steelworkers George Becker, nearly foaming at the mouth, told the crowd that Congress was about “to betray” Americans. He said, of the bill normalizing relations with China, “It goes against everything we

stand for as a nation.” China, he went on, is “a rogue nation,” “a godless society” that is persecuting Christianity. “It does not recognize the rule of law.”

Then Becker got to his central point: “This is the same Communist China I’ve lived with all my life.” The USWA president invoked the Korean War and the thousands of Americans who had died fighting the Chinese. He noted with satisfaction that US armed forces surrounded China. This is a country, he continued, “ideologically opposed” to the US. “China has not changed.... We’re the greatest nation on earth, a beacon of liberty” to the world’s population, he asserted. The tone of Becker’s speech was bellicose and threatening.

The rally was also addressed by Republican Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey, Roopa Goona of the United Students Against Sweatshops and other union officials. Sweeney brought a variety of Democratic congressmen on stage to wave at the crowd.

Press coverage of the two events was friendly and deceptive. CNN reported that AFL-CIO organizers had predicted the crowd “would number in the tens of thousands,” but coyly neglected to indicate how many actually were in attendance. The official AFL-CIO rally was attended by officials and conservative, older workers around the bureaucracy. It was small and dispirited.

The media are active participants in the campaign to pretend that the AFL-CIO represents American workers in some way and that the union federation has enjoyed a “renaissance” under the Sweeney leadership. This notion has also been disseminated by what passes for the “left” press in the US. The deteriorating living conditions of millions and the abandonment of what remains of workers’ past gains by the unions—with strike activity at an all-time low—should disabuse anyone of that illusion. It doesn’t hurt either to watch and listen to these people.

Anyone sincere about protesting against the conditions created by the IMF and the World Bank in Washington this week must recognize that the AFL-CIO is one of the pillars of the existing order and its leadership one of the most conservative social layers in the US. We have made the point before on the WSWS and it bears repeating—in terms of class position, methods and social outlook sections of the

American trade union bureaucracy have a good deal in common with fascist thugs. Their embrace of Buchanan forcefully drives the point home.

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