United Students Against Sweatshops: reformist illusions in the service of the American trade union bureaucracy

By Andrea Peters and Joseph Tanniru
1 August 2000

Over the past year and a half university students, led by the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), have organized protests, marches and sit-ins on university campuses as part of a national student campaign opposing sweatshop abuses. Since the start of 2000 there have been a number of protests, including those at the University of Wisconsin, the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University and the University of Kentucky.

USAS began as the Sweat-Free Campus Campaign. The latter was formed in 1997. We are told on one of USAS's web sites that it was “the brainchild of the UNITE summer interns.” UNITE (the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees) is a member union of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). The advisory board of USAS consists of members of the “outside labor, anti-sweatshop movement,” which has been led by UNITE.

The summer programs that helped spawn USAS were part of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney’s efforts to revitalize the labor federation, whose membership had dropped from a high of 35 percent of the workforce in the 1950s to 15 percent in 1995, when Sweeney replaced Lane Kirkland as AFL-CIO president. (It has since dropped below 14 percent.) Sweeney began a drive to give the AFL-CIO a more progressive image, seeking to build a new base among students and left-leaning intellectuals.

While the support USAS receives from students indicates growing opposition among young people to the effects of global capitalism on the lives of working people and youth both at home and abroad, the organization combines the most minimal demands with a political orientation that reflects its close organizational ties to the right-wing AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

USAS's immediate objectives

The bulk of USAS's practical work on the campuses is aimed at trying to force university administrations to adopt measures to guarantee that school paraphernalia—sweatshirts, baseball caps, T-shirts with the school's logo—not be made in sweatshop factories. In a statement on its web site, USAS declares, “We believe that university standards should be brought in line with those of its students, who demand that their school’s logo is emblazoned on clothing made in decent working conditions. We have fought for these beliefs by demanding that our universities adopt ethically and legally strong codes of conduct, full public disclosure of company information and truly independent verification systems to ensure that sweatshop conditions are not happening.”

Alongside loosely formulated codes of conduct, USAS also asks that employees in factories receive a “living wage.”

In order to insure that the codes of conduct are followed, USAS organizes protests and sit-ins demanding that universities join the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), a supposedly independent monitoring forum established by USAS. The consortium is comprised of student activists, human rights representatives, Democratic politicians and labor union leaders, including AFL-CIO Executive Vice-President Linda Chavez-Thompson.

USAS relies on the self-reform and goodwill of corporations. A suggested “Code of Conduct” states, “It shall be the responsibility of Licensees [corporations] ... to ensure their compliance with the Code.”

To verify that corporations are in fact correcting violations of the code of conduct is the task of the WRC, which is to rely on worker complaints and unannounced “spot-check” visits. How often these visits will take place we are not told. However, it is suggested that companies “develop their own internal monitoring mechanisms in order to ensure that their factories do not violate code provisions.”

If the WRC finds that “a Licensee has failed to self-correct a violation of the Code, the University will consult with the Licensee ... to determine appropriate corrective action.” The WRC would suggest certain actions, but ultimately it would be up to the university and the corporation to decide what is to be done.

The WRC was initially billed as being “independent of garment industry interests.” But recent events have provided a clear demonstration of its lack of any real independence from corporate America and the universities. Less than a month after its founding conference earlier this year, the organization was pressured by universities to change its line after Nike, a major manufacturer of school apparel and an often-cited perpetrator of sweatshop abuses, took action against schools that had joined up with the WRC.

Nike refused to renew a contract with the University of Michigan, and Phil Knight, the company's president, reneged on a planned $30 million donation to the University of Oregon. In response, universities demanded that the WRC take heed of the interests of corporations affected by the WRC's activities.

Lawrence Mann, associate chancellor of the University of Illinois and a leader of the WRC, agreed with this demand, stating, “The college and university groups appear to be unanimous about the importance of engaging industry in the discussion. If that doesn't happen, the reality is that the membership of the Workers Rights Consortium is just talking to itself.”

USAS and the nationalist politics of the AFL-CIO

The political perspective of USAS is clear from an examination of the character of the organizations with which it collaborates. Representatives from USAS took part in events sponsored by the AFL-CIO during the week-long string of protests against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) held last April in Washington DC. A student leader from USAS, Roopa Gona, spoke at a chauvinist, anti-China rally sponsored by the union bureaucracy. USAS leaders also held meetings throughout the week
with functionaries from the United Steelworkers of America, a union that
has specialized in anti-Chinese demagoguery as part of its campaign to limit
competition from the Chinese steel industry. At the main AFL-CIO rally
held that week in the capital, Gona praised the trade union officialdom,
including the Teamsters leadership, whose representatives have appeared
on platforms with the chauvinist right-wing politician Patrick Buchanan.

These connections do not simply reflect political confusion among the
leaders of USAS. Rather they flow logically from USAS's nationalist
orientation. USAS has lined up behind the campaign of the AFL-CIO in
alliance with certain sections of US industry against trade liberalization
and the World Trade Organization (WTO). In a statement on its web site,
USAS echoes the official pronouncements of the AFL-CIO and sections of
the Democratic Party, calling for organizations of international capital
such as the WTO to include provisions linking trade to workers' rights and
environmental protection. Such demands are intended to lend a
progressive coloration to the protectionist policies of the trade union
bureaucracy and its corporate allies in steel, textiles and other industries.

While some of those promoting this economic nationalist agenda at
times identify it with opposition to global capital, in reality it represents a
reaction to the globalization of economic life from an essentially
reactionary standpoint. The AFL-CIO epitomizes this form of opposition
to the globalization of capitalism.

The AFL-CIO has from its inception defended capitalism and
collaborated with government agencies, including the CIA, to subvert all
toys as an end to social inequality and capitalist exploitation. It opposes
capitalist globalization not from the standpoint of an international struggle
of workers against the profit system, but rather from the standpoint of
more privileged middle-class layers whose social position is being
undermined by the increasing domination of the world market and the
growing international mobility of capital.

The enhanced ability of capital to scour the globe in search of the
cheapest sources of labor has enormously weakened the leverage of the
old trade union organizations in every country. These organizations are,
by dint of their origin, their structure and their political outlook, limited to
a national perspective. But the use of strikes or the threat of strikes on a
local, or even national scale to pressure the employers and the state has
lost a great deal of its effectiveness, under conditions where the
employers are far less restricted to the national labor market.

While globalization creates unprecedented objective conditions for
forging the international unity of the working class in struggle against the
giant transnational corporations, the old trade unions stand as an obstacle
to such a development. Tied to the national economy, the national state
and the defense of the existing social order, they are organically incapable
of leading a struggle based on an international revolutionary strategy.
Instead, they seek to reverse the process of globalization and return to an
earlier and more primitive stage in the development of the productive
forces, in which the national market played a more dominant role. This
essentially reactionary standpoint inevitably aligns the official unions
with right-wing nationalist forces, such as Pat Buchanan in the US.

Indeed, in seeking to defend national industry—in order to defend its
domains—the AFL-CIO has collaborated in lowering the wages, living
standards and working conditions of its own members. It has formed a
 corporatist partnership with big business to make US-based corporations
more competitive on the world market—at the expense of the working
class.

Defense of national sovereignty

USAS reflects the nationalist politics of the AFL-CIO when it demands
in one of its programmatic statements that the WTO exhibit “greater
respect for national sovereignty, including respect for government's
economic and ethical priorities.” This blanket defense of national
sovereignty includes that of the United States. Thus USAS encourages a
nationalist outlook, as opposed to a class conscious understanding of the
basic conflict between the interests of workers and capitalist owners
within any nation, and the fundamental identity of interests of workers of
all nations.

Because of the close ties of USAS to the AFL-CIO and its policy of
economic nationalism, the anti-sweatshop campaign never questions the
history of the AFL-CIO or its political alliance with the Democratic Party,
one of the two parties of American big business. It does not analyze the
prominent role that both the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO have
played in fostering the very conditions that the students in USAS aim to
ameliorate.

It is well known, for example, that the AFL-CIO, through foreign policy
arms such as the American Institute for Free Labor Development, has
directly promoted right-wing, pro-US trade unions and repressive regimes
in South America and elsewhere, fostering the brutal exploitation of
workers around the world.

USAS never analyzes why the AFL-CIO, and specifically UNITE—with
which USAS is most closely affiliated—have failed to combat the spread
of sweatshop conditions in the United States. In 1998, a group of garment
workers in Brooklyn filed a lawsuit against UNITE, claiming that the
union had failed to represent their interests after they were laid off by
their employer, Mademoiselle Knitwear, Inc.

The lawsuit was a reaction to a common practice whereby corporations
compensate unions if union workers lose their jobs when companies move
overseas. The deal gave the union a total of $20.5 million, while the
workers themselves were compensated with less than $2,900 each. With
such monetary remuneration from big business, it is no wonder that the
union fails to protect its “own” workers. Rather than attacking the
industry for exploiting workers, UNITE’s response to layoffs and wage
cuts in the US garment industry has been to side with the corporations on
the basis of a common platform of protectionism.

There are other fundamental problems with the orientation of USAS.
The conception that a document signed by a university can legislate the
end of exploitation and sweatshops is extremely naive. Exploitation of
workers is the basis upon which profits are made. It is an inherent and
necessary feature of capitalism itself, and cannot be eliminated by signing
a code of conduct.

Sweatshop conditions are not, fundamentally, the result of the
subjective motives of evil corporate leaders, but arise from the necessity
of capital to extract ever greater amounts of surplus value, and hence
profit, from the labor of the working class. This is, of course, not to
absolve the corporations of responsibility for sweatshops. Nevertheless,
the subjective actions of the corporations, as well as the political
establishment in the United States, in fostering the increased exploitation
of the working class have an objective foundation. USAS addresses the
former—attempting to pressure corporations to reform—while ignoring the
latter.

The tactics adopted by USAS are rooted in the naive conception that
universities can somehow function as morally responsible islands in the
surrounding capitalist sea. In this sense, USAS attempts to revive the
student power protest politics of the 1960s. Such an orientation ignores
the intimate connection between big business and all facets of social life,
including the universities.

The focus of USAS on minimal reforms is bound up with its orientation
to the AFL-CIO bureaucracy. Any successful struggle against the effects
of global capitalism must take the form of a united movement of the
international working class against the capitalist system. However such a
movement is inimical to the AFL-CIO. The AFL-CIO aims to foster
reformist illusions among students, while directing their genuine concerns
into the support of economic nationalism and its own right-wing politics.
To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

http://www.wsws.org