

Labor Day 2001: US workers without a voice

By Jerry White
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Labor Day 2001 is above all characterized by the lack of resistance to the assault on workers' jobs and basic rights by what can be only charitably called the American labor movement. Despite the fact that US workers are facing the largest wave of job cutting in nearly two decades—with more than one million jobs wiped out in the last eight months—the AFL-CIO and its affiliated unions have not only failed to organize any strikes or mass demonstrations, they have hardly uttered a word of protest.

For years the AFL-CIO leadership has demanded that workers accept speedup, longer working hours and other concessions to make US companies competitive. This was the only way, the bureaucrats argued, that workers could protect their jobs. But now that their corporate masters have found it necessary, because of the collapse in profitability and the onset of recession, to destroy jobs wholesale, the same bureaucrats say and do nothing.

The union bureaucracy played a pivotal role in creating the conditions for the boom in corporate profits and the stock markets during the 1990s, by isolating and betraying strikes and struggles against concessions and wage cutting, thus aiding management in increasing the exploitation of the working class. Now as the US and world economy have tilted towards recession, multinational corporations are utilizing the lack of virtually any protections to throw tens of thousands of American workers out of their jobs.

Many transnational corporations find that it is far easier to lay off workers in the United States than in production facilities in Europe and Japan, in part because of the lack of any legal protection of the right to a job, and in part because American unions outstrip all others in their indifference to the interests of their own members.

American workers trail behind their class brothers and sisters in Europe and Japan not only in job security, but in a wide range of working conditions and benefits. A report issued last week by the UN's International Labor Organization confirmed that US workers now labor longer than their counterparts in any other major industrial country.

According to the ILO, Americans added nearly a full week (36 hours) to their work year since 1990, bringing the total to nearly 49½ weeks a year on the job. In the mid-1990s the US surpassed Japan—which had long been at the top for the number of hours worked—and American workers now work 137 hours (3½ weeks) more a year than Japanese workers, 260 hours (about 6½ weeks) more a year than British workers and 499 hours (about 12½ weeks) more a year than German workers, the report said.

Labor Day finds American workers without any organized voice to defend their interests. Far from encouraging any opposition to big business, the parades organized by the AFL-CIO today are

once again paying homage to the “partnership” of labor and management and making flag-waving appeals to “Buy American.”

The fact that the Bush administration is one of the most right-wing in US history, and was installed through the suppression of voting rights in Florida, has prompted no opposition from the AFL-CIO. The union bureaucracy, of course, has no quarrel with antidemocratic methods, including ballot-stuffing and denial of the right to vote. Such practices prevail, not only in many union locals, but in virtually all international unions. Most top officials are elected, not by the membership, but by other top officials—many of them appointed staff members—at hand-picked union conventions.

Sections of the AFL-CIO, including the Teamsters and the Steelworkers, have cozied up to Bush on the basis of their reactionary chauvinist policies—calling for protectionist measures against foreign imports. Today, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa is hosting President Bush at a Labor Day picnic at the union's Detroit headquarters.

Despite the economic expansion of the last decade and the close relations the AFL-CIO enjoyed with the Clinton administration, the percentage of workers who belonged to the unions fell, from 16 percent of the workforce to 13.5 percent, its lowest level in 64 years. At the same time, the number of strikes called by the unions reached historic lows.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy has been preoccupied with other concerns, which far outweigh, in the eyes of the union officialdom, such trifles as the jobs and livelihoods of their members, let alone wider layers of the working population.

The United Auto Workers union is a good example. In recent months the UAW has been involved in an all-out campaign to boost the fortunes of Ford Motor Company, which has seen declining sales because of the slowing economy and safety concerns over its top-selling Explorer sport utility vehicle. In June, the UAW organized a demonstration in Washington DC to praise the Explorer and oppose a Congressional investigation into possible safety flaws in the vehicle, which may have resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries in rollover accidents. With its “Ford Explorer Confidence” rally the UAW felt no compunction in joining Ford's campaign to destroy Firestone, which, if successful, would eliminate the jobs of thousands of tire workers, the bulk of whom are members of the United Steelworkers of America.

Last month Ford CEO Jacques Nasser announced that the company was eliminating 4,000 to 5,000 white collar jobs in North America. He said sweeping restructuring plans were being considered that could involve the shutting of plants and the

elimination of thousands of production workers' jobs. The UAW said nothing about the threat to jobs. Instead it embarked on a multimillion-dollar ad campaign praising the "UAW-Ford" partnership and promoting the automaker's vehicles.

In the last year alone the Big Three companies have eliminated 46,000 jobs. The UAW bureaucracy, through a myriad of labor-management committees, joint company-union funds and the investment income from the gargantuan, but little-used, strike fund, has been able to increase its income despite a decline in union membership of 50 percent over the last two decades. According to the latest statistics, although the number of union members declined by 12 percent last year—from 762,439 in 1999 to 671,853 in 2000—the UAW bureaucracy's assets rose about 6 percent—from \$1.032 billion in 1999 to \$1.096 billion in 2000.

The union has taken on many of the functions of a large corporation, which allows the bureaucracy to protect its privileges and perks regardless of the conditions of rank-and-file auto workers. Following its forays into a Florida-based TV and radio station, the ProAir commuter airline and various real estate ventures, the UAW is currently negotiating to buy a lavish resort in Palm Springs, California at a price of around \$10 million.

According to a UAW document leaked to the *Detroit Free Press*, the union's governing board authorized UAW President Stephen Yokich to buy the gated and walled La Mancha Resort, a 100-room facility with nightly rates between \$185 and \$1,250, frequented by Hollywood celebrities. According to the document, Yokich "reported annual revenues are good and noted during a tour while in Palm Springs the property was booked to capacity."

Last year, the UAW opened an upscale golf course on Black Lake, near Onaway, Michigan, at an estimated cost of at least \$6 million, according to annual reports filed with the US Labor Department. The course was designed by Rees Jones, one of the country's better-known golf course designers, on property that is part of the union's Walter and May Reuther Family Education Center, a getaway for union bureaucrats.

One of the chief preoccupations of the UAW bureaucracy these days is defending itself against workers who are suing it for embezzlement and other corrupt practices. In one lawsuit, which has also prompted a federal probe into the UAW, 142 union members have charged that top officials in UAW Local 594 in Pontiac, Michigan conspired to prolong a 1997 strike at GM's Truck and Bus plant by two months in order to get bogus overtime payments worth \$200,000 and jobs for relatives. The lawsuit, which a federal judge has ruled can proceed, also implicates UAW Vice President Richard Shoemaker, whose son was one of those hired under the scheme. The younger Shoemaker worked at the plant for one year and then was hired into a \$75,000-a-year job with the international union, a job for which he needed one year's plant experience.

The Pontiac lawsuit is one of many complaints by workers in Michigan, Kentucky and Ohio that is being investigated by the Justice Department. In several cases the whistle-blowing workers have been threatened with violence.

The stench of corruption at the UAW is hardly unique. Last week the federal trial began for former Teamsters President Ron Carey, who is charged with using union funds to finance his

reelection campaign in 1996. Top AFL-CIO officials, including secretary-treasurer and former United Mine Workers union president Richard Trumka, have been implicated in the illegal scheme.

The rotting of the American trade unions has a tragic character to it. Workers made tremendous sacrifices to build the UAW and other industrial unions in the 1930s and heroically defied the violence of the corporations and the government. While the upsurge of the 1930s revealed the revolutionary potential of the American working class, however, the pro-capitalist labor officials, aided by the Stalinists of the Communist Party USA, prevented this movement from taking a politically independent and socialist direction. Instead the workers movement was tied to the Democratic Party and through it to the fortunes of American capitalism.

The result of decades of betrayed strikes and corporatist propaganda has been a sharp erosion of the most elementary forms of class consciousness. This in turn has facilitated the attack on the living standards and democratic rights of the working class.

The undermining of the political influence of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, however, also has positive ramifications. As the economic downturn deepens and experience demonstrates to American workers that they confront a common enemy in an economic and political system that exploits workers in every part of the globe, they will not look to these pro-capitalist organizations to speak or fight for them. They will turn instead to a movement that champions the international struggle for social equality.

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