

A spectacle of filth and reaction

New York union gangsters celebrate slaughter in Iraq

By the Editorial Board
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In a celebration of slaughter, some 10,000 union construction workers were assembled April 10 at “ground zero,” the site of the fallen World Trade Center towers, to demonstrate in support of the Bush administration’s illegal war in Iraq.

The rally was organized by the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York, an umbrella group that includes carpenters, painters, operating engineers, ironworkers and other construction unions. Workers were brought directly from job sites by the union to mill around while Republican politicians and union bureaucrats delivered speeches in support of the US war. American Flags were passed out, but there were few signs. Chants consisted largely of “USA, USA.”

This spectacle of corruption, ignorance and reaction was trumpeted by the media as the “largest pro-war rally yet,” even though it was less than a fifth the size promised by union organizers. It was given far more coverage than a demonstration last month that saw at least 50 times as many people march 30 blocks down Broadway to condemn the aggression against Iraq. Voice of America and the international wire services and news networks spread the images of the rally around the world, proclaiming them as proof that the “American labor movement” supports the president and his war.

While no doubt the administration sees great political value in these images, they no more capture the real mood of the working class than those of the staged toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue reveal the real state of affairs in Baghdad. If anything, the event in lower Manhattan was another verification that a corrupt, anticommunist trade union bureaucracy has over the course of several decades completely destroyed the American labor movement as an institution that in any sense represents the interests of American workers.

It has also served to further disprove the fanciful claims of various “left” organizations that the official union hierarchy had somehow reformed itself and become a bastion of antiwar sentiment. Because of their peculiar history and backward craft union tradition, the construction trades are among the most reactionary of American unions. Nevertheless, the entire AFL-CIO has lined up in support of the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The rally was organized on the basis of lies. The first was contained in the leaflet issued by the trades council calling on its members to “show your support for our men and women serving in the armed forces.” The rally was not one of solidarity with the predominantly working class and poor youth who join the military to get a job or education. No one asked them if they wanted to invade Iraq. It was organized in support of the criminal policy undertaken by the Bush

administration.

No speaker bothered to mention the Bush administration’s cuts in veterans’ benefits or the plight of more than 200,000 veterans of the first Gulf War who are suffering disabilities as a result of their exposure to toxic chemicals and depleted uranium in that intervention. It would have been more honest to call the demonstration a “sacrifice our troops” rally.

Secondly, the site for this event was deliberately chosen to promote the lie that the invasion of Iraq was somehow justified by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. The politicians and bureaucrats hypocritically exploited the deaths of nearly 3,000 people there to whip up support for the murder of tens, if not hundreds of thousands, of civilians and soldiers in Iraq.

From the bellicose rhetoric spewed from the speakers’ platform, no one would ever know that none of the alleged hijackers who flew the two passenger jets into the Twin Towers were Iraqis. Nor would they guess that the Bush administration itself was forced to acknowledge that the Baghdad regime had nothing to do with the attack.

It is particularly lamentable that a handful of firefighters turned out in their bunker gear for the affair. Having lost 343 of their members in the catastrophe of September 11, the firefighter unions have never demanded an independent investigation to determine who really was responsible for what happened that day. Rather, they have accepted the lie that attacking Iraq “evens the score.”

“The war started here on September 11, 2001,” New York Governor George Pataki told the crowd, adding the bizarre suggestion that Saddam Hussein’s statutes should be melted down and turned into girders for new construction on the site.

Patrick Lynch, the president of the Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association, one of the other “unions” participating in the rally, managed to turn the old slogan of labor solidarity, “An injury to one is an injury to all,” into a justification for the massacre of women and children in a virtually defenseless country. “We are sending a message to the world: You attack one of us, you attack all of us. And we attack back,” he bellowed.

Lynch also denounced antiwar demonstrators for what he claimed were violent acts against cops. New York City police have brutalized protesters, subjecting many to beatings, false arrests and illegal interrogations.

But the biggest lie of all was the pretense that those on the platform as well as their audience of workers—including those who were bribed, intimidated or fatally intoxicated with the jingoism promoted by the media—somehow represent the American working class and the

workers, in particular, of New York City, one of the most concentrated centers of antiwar sentiment in the country.

In both its tone and content, the rally recalled the infamous hard-hat demonstration dubbed “Bloody Friday” of May 1970, when hundreds of wrench-wielding construction workers attacked antiwar demonstrators at New York City Hall. The demonstrators were protesting the National Guard’s killing of students at Kent State University. The union-organized mob moved on to randomly bludgeon students at nearby Pace University. Seventy-five people were injured seriously enough to require hospitalization.

Later that month, Peter Brennan, who was then the head of the city’s Building and Construction Trades Council—the same outfit that organized Thursday’s rally—led a “support the troops” march of tens of thousands down Fifth Avenue.

While the construction bureaucrats claimed then that both the violent assaults and the march were “spontaneous,” they were anything but. These actions were jointly sponsored by the union officials and the construction bosses. Workers who participated got paid, while those who didn’t were docked for the day.

It later emerged that Brennan had organized the gangster attacks and the demonstrations at the behest of the Nixon administration, which was outraged and frightened by the growing movement against the war in Vietnam. Brennan was rewarded for his services with an appointment as secretary of labor, a post he held from 1973 until shortly after his benefactor was forced to resign in disgrace.

The present head of the Building and Construction Trades Council, Edward Malloy, is cut from the same cloth as Brennan. If anything, the union group has grown even more reactionary and corrupt over the past 30 years, and more directly subordinated to the interests of the employers and the government.

Former senator and failed Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole, known for his sarcasm, told the crowd, “I’d call Saddam’s rule a gangster regime, but that would be an insult to gangsters.” The construction bureaucrats on the platform no doubt appreciated the senator’s remark. Many of them have been indicted for racketeering, charged with taking Mafia kickbacks for creating “no-show” jobs and allowing cheaper nonunion labor to be used on so-called union construction sites.

There is a clear and present danger that this gangster leadership will attempt to replicate the kind of vicious attacks on opponents of the government seen during the Vietnam War era. Like their Peronist counterparts in the Argentine unions of the 1970s, this bureaucracy is prepared to act as a bulwark of fascist reaction and dictatorship.

The union officialdom’s actions are completely opposed to the genuine interests of workers in New York City and the US as a whole. As the rally was unfolding at the Ground Zero, several blocks away the city’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, and his aides were putting the finishing touches on a budget that will impose the full burden of the collapse in revenues from Wall Street onto the backs of the city’s workers. Up to 15,000 layoffs are predicted along with sharp cuts in basic services.

Newsday columnist Jimmy Breslin, a lonely, angry voice in a media otherwise given to the glorification of US militarism, drew the real connection between the war in Iraq and the mounting attacks on the working class in New York City in a column published earlier this week entitled, “Bombs Away, and Poor Pay.” Pointing to the million-dollar price tag on cruise missiles fired at Iraq, he wrote:

“They see them on television, night and day, a nation’s treasure exploding in the sky, glowing, white smoke against a night sky,

shooting from an aircraft carrier at sea and then, soon, here are the explosions in Iraq, Baghdad mostly, lighting up the night sky. A million-dollar show. School teachers fly in the explosion. Single mothers who learned how to operate a computer. Clerks in a welfare office.

“The missiles going through a sky that is undefended, aiming with precision at a small country that has no missiles that can reach any distance, not one plane in the air, and has been firing anti-aircraft at American planes for over 10 years now and hasn’t brought one down.”

Workers who participate in reactionary events like the rally at the World Trade Center site, whether because they are paid or intimidated, should be ashamed of themselves. It is not just an afternoon off to shout and drink beer. Their actions serve to discredit the American working class internationally, divide it from its class brothers in other lands and fatally undermine the ability of workers in this country to wage any independent struggle against the attacks on jobs, living standards and basic democratic rights.

Such demonstrations will only assist the Bush administration in using war and militarism as the justification for escalating the attacks on the conditions of American working people and speeding up the transfer of more and more wealth into the hands of the corporate oligarchy. The cost of war and occupation will be paid for through even more severe austerity policies and longer unemployment lines.

For the bureaucrats like the AFL-CIO’s John Sweeney, the Teamsters’ Jimmy Hoffa or Malloy and Co. of the Building and Construction Trades Council, this is not a problem. They have presided for many years over the decimation of the jobs and rights of the members they purport to represent in return for increased privileges and closer relations with the employers and politicians. Some of them no doubt hope that by howling out their patriotic support for Bush they will earn credit with the Justice Department on pending criminal indictments.

The war in Iraq marks the onset of a new period of profound crisis and shocks for working people in the US and internationally. The ability of American workers to defend their interests under these conditions depends upon their ability to cast off the reactionary domination of the AFL-CIO. Entirely new organizations of industrial and political struggle must be built that are independent of and opposed to this degenerate and bureaucratized apparatus.

Above all, the revival of a genuine workers movement in America requires a new perspective, implacably opposed to the fascistic nationalism of the labor bureaucracy. This perspective must be based upon the political independence and international unity of the working class and the struggle for socialism.

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