

US unions promote Democrats and corporatism on Labor Day

By Shannon Jones
8 September 2015

As they have been for many years, the official Labor Day events sponsored by the American trade unions yesterday were perfunctory and demoralized affairs. After decades of corporatist degeneration, the unions neither want to nor are able to mobilize much of anyone outside the privileged upper middle class strata that mans their apparatuses.

The official Labor Day activities were given over to a celebration of union-management collaboration and the trade unions' alliance with the Democratic Party, which has produced one disaster after another for American workers.

One of the larger official celebrations was held in Pittsburgh, the former center of American steelmaking that has been ravaged by decades of mill closures. The United Steelworkers (USW), which is still headquartered in the city, is currently forcing 30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal to work without a contract, while 2,200 steelworkers at Allegheny Technologies remain on lockout and are facing draconian concession demands.

At the Pittsburgh event, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka hailed Vice President Joe Biden, who is considering a run of the Democratic presidential nomination, as "a friend and a brother." Meanwhile, Biden, the main speaker, praised the unions while making demagogic references to the decline in real wages for US workers and the growing gap between rich and poor.

This from the representative of an administration that has presided over one of the largest transfers of wealth from the working class to the upper income strata in history. Under Obama, the share of the wealth controlled by the richest 0.1 percent grew from 17 percent in 2007 to 22 percent in 2012. Meanwhile, the share of wealth controlled by the richest 400 families

has doubled.

In Detroit, the site of the headquarters of the United Auto Workers, several thousand marched downtown to a "Labor Fest" event outside the Ford-UAW Joint Training Center on the riverfront, a symbol of corporatist union-management collaboration. With the contract for 140,000 autoworkers set to expire on September 14, there were only a few hundred autoworkers in attendance and even fewer younger workers.

Most workers left immediately after the parade, so that only a few hundred people total were still on hand to listen to speeches by UAW President Dennis Williams and Teamster President James P. Hoffa. The union leaders mixed demagogic jabs at Wall Street and the banks and "do nothing" politicians with praise for supposed Democratic Party friends of labor.

Williams said virtually nothing about the ongoing auto negotiations. There is widespread opposition among autoworkers to the two-tier wage and demands for a substantial wage increase, under conditions in which the pay of senior workers has been frozen for more than a decade.

The UAW has floated a plan for taking the cost of health care off the books of the auto companies by expanding the union-run Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (VEBA), currently covering retiree health care, to include hourly white collar and blue collar workers. Such a move would inevitably be a step toward sharp cuts and the elimination of employer-paid health care benefits altogether.

The parade in Detroit passed through neighborhoods devastated by the deindustrialization of the city under the watch of a series of Democratic Party administrations over the last 30 years. Last year, the city emerged from a bankruptcy process that gutted the

pensions of retired city workers and imposed savage cuts on those still employed. This attack was presided over by a Democratic Emergency Manger and a Democratic Party city administration. It was implemented with the blessings of the Obama administration, which filed a brief in support of putting the city into bankruptcy.

A reporting team for the *World Socialist Web Site* attended the Detroit Labor Day parade and spoke to some of the workers in attendance. In contrast to the official line advanced by the unions, the comments of some gave a glimpse of the disastrous conditions facing workers as an outcome of the alliance with the Democratic Party.

John Harris, a tier-two worker at the Fiat Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly Plant outside of Detroit, criticized the two-tier wage system. "It should be eliminated. There should be equal work for equal pay," he declared. "I have guys working next to me making twice as much as I do. It is a struggle to live off that, and I have a wife who works at the Post Office."

John agreed with the call by the Socialist Equality Party for the unity of autoworkers, steelworkers, telecommunication workers and postal workers in a common struggle to defend jobs, wages and benefits. "We should all unite together to create a strong front," he said. "The corporations are trying to keep up separate." When asked about the role of the unions, he added, "I question certain things the union does."

Samantha Hales, a young letter carrier, attended the Labor Day rally with several scores of postal workers. She is a lower-tiered City Career Associate (CCA) making half the wage of full time top-tier employees. Samantha makes \$15.68 per hour, and as a CCA she does all the work everyone else does at half the wage. "We get a 40 cent raise every six months, but you cannot make the top wage until someone in the top position retires," she said.

"Mostly we are fighting against the six to five days they are pushing for, including a deal with Staples to deliver mail. We are fighting against all of the cuts on workers."

"I have been working at the Post Office for two years, and I can't get a credit card even though I'm working 60 hours a week. I could work up to 12 hours a day, and we get vacation, but I don't have the chance to use it. Also, we don't have insurance until you are a

regular employee."

When asked about the Obama administration, Samantha said she was surprised at its support for the cuts. "I was hopeful that we had leaders who care for all that the workers have won. As of now they are not doing anything. I'm a Democrat, but they don't do half of the things they say they will do.

"I have supported smaller parties because the people in power are doing things that only benefit big business."

Mike Jones Jr. is a retired Detroit city worker who was heavily impacted by the bankruptcy. He was at the demonstration with his wife, who is a postal employee.

"I worked with the Department of Public Lighting as a truck driver and retired in 2008," he said. Jones' department is one of the municipal city divisions that was slated to be phased out by Detroit's former Emergency Manager, Kevyn Orr.

"I was very upset with the bankruptcy," said Jones. "They took \$300/month out of my pension in addition to \$30,000 I had to pay back for the annuity. The only thing that saved me on my health care, [referring to the cuts carried out in the bankruptcy] is I'm on my wife's health care benefits."

Referring to the politicians who carried out the bankruptcy, Jones said, "I think it's an attack on regular people. We don't have any representation. They think they can just take our benefits and get away with it.

"They changed the state taxes so that they can tax pensions. Here they took \$175 a month out of my pension. I was getting \$2,600 a month, and now I am getting \$1,800."

The WSWS asked Mike if he was aware that the Obama administration supported the bankruptcy of Detroit. "I didn't know that. I thought he was for the poor man. That's a surprise to me."

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>