

US unions back Trump's ultra-right "America First" program

By Jerry White
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Major trade unions in the United States are openly supporting Donald Trump's "America First" policies of trade war and militarism. In this government of billionaires, generals and outright fascists, the American labor bureaucracy has found a kindred spirit to its own backwardness and jingoism.

Speaking to reporters last week, United Auto Workers President Dennis Williams praised Trump for his opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and his trade war rhetoric directed against Mexico and China. "He's the first president that has addressed this issue. I have to give him kudos for that," the UAW president said.

Williams announced that the UAW was renewing its "Buy American" campaign and boycott of foreign-made cars. He said the union would soon release TV ads based on the theme, "If it's not made in America, don't buy it."

The following day, at a Boeing commercial jet factory in South Carolina, Trump declared, "We believe in two simple rules: Buy American and hire American." In a nod to the United Steelworkers union, he said the Keystone and Dakota Access pipeline projects, which he restarted by executive order, would be built exclusively with American-made steel.

Trump made no mention of the stunning rebuke handed to the International Association of Machinists by the workers at the plant in a union recognition vote just three days earlier. The 3-to-1 vote against the IAM expressed the contempt workers feel towards the unions after decades of union collaboration with the corporations to destroy jobs and living standards.

As a real estate mogul in New York City and a Las Vegas casino developer, Trump has long maintained close relations with the unions. His pick for Commerce Secretary, billionaire Wilbur Ross, worked with the United Steelworkers in the early 2000s as he bought up and restructured the steel industry, making a \$1 billion profit by destroying the jobs and pensions of thousands of workers.

United Steelworkers President Leo Gerard has been among the most outspoken Trump enthusiasts, boasting that "Donald Trump used our own words" to criticize "the failed trade policies" of the past.

On his first business day at the White House, January 23, Trump hosted the leaders of several construction unions to discuss infrastructure and the renewed pipeline projects.

Following the meeting, Laborers International Union of North America President Terry O'Sullivan declared, "For thousands of hard-working men and women who have been shut out of our economy for too long, it is beginning to feel like a new day." O'Sullivan formerly led the Union Labor Life Insurance Company, which invested in Trump projects.

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka sits on Trump's Manufacturing Jobs Initiative panel, along with deputy chief of staff of the AFL-CIO and anti-China specialist Thea Mei Lee. The 28-member body includes the CEOs of Ford, GE, US Steel and other companies and is tasked with reviving US industry by slashing corporate taxes, abolishing occupational safety, environmental and labor regulations, and using trade war measures to gain market share and profits for corporate America.

In defending the administration's policy of mass deportations of undocumented Mexican immigrants, Trump's senior advisor Stephen Miller said, "We should have a program in which American workers are given jobs first. The president ran on this. It's an issue where the labor unions agree with us."

There is a long history of anti-immigrant racism in the American trade union bureaucracy. The early unions in the United States supported strict limitations on immigration, including the anti-Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and blamed foreign workers for lowering wages. At its 1900 convention in Louisville, Kentucky, the American Federation of Labor warned of the "danger threatening the American workers" from "Chinese and Japanese cheap coolie labor," and called on Congress to reenact the Chinese Exclusion Act.

It was the early socialists who opposed nativism and racism and waged a struggle to unify all workers, black and white, native-born and immigrant, against the divide-and-conquer strategy of the employers. The Industrial Workers of the World, whose founding Congress in Chicago celebrated the first Russian Revolution of 1905, led the heroic Lawrence textile and Paterson silk strikes in 1912 and 1913, which united immigrant factory workers, including child laborers, from southern and eastern Europe.

A critical component of class consciousness was the understanding that the victimization of immigrant workers, just like the racial oppression of black workers, was an attack on

the entire working class. When the working class, led by socialists and left-wing militants, finally made the breakthrough of forming mass industrial unions in the 1930s, class conscious workers rejected both the anti-communism and pro-company outlook of the AFL and the xenophobia and anti-Semitism of fascistic demagogues such as Detroit's Father Coughlin.

The anti-communist purges in the late 1940s, headed up by CIO leaders such as UAW President Walter Reuther, delivered a crushing blow and set the course of the unions toward outright betrayal of the interests of workers and corporatist partnership with big business and the state. This was institutionalized with the merger of the CIO with the AFL in 1955 on an explicitly anti-communist and pro-imperialist basis.

The catastrophic implications of a labor movement based on capitalism and nationalism were revealed when the postwar dominance of American capitalism eroded and it began its decades-long decline in the early 1970s. By 1979-80, the ruling class had jettisoned its policy of social compromise and revived its more traditional policy of class warfare, renewing the tactics of strike-breaking, union-busting, the use of company thugs and labor frame-ups.

In the 1980s, beginning with the destruction of the PATCO air traffic controllers' union in 1981, the unions isolated and betrayed scores of struggles against wage-cutting and union-busting in a deliberate effort to break the militancy of the working class and enable the ruling class to slash labor costs so as to compete more effectively with its rivals in Europe and Japan.

The collapse of the unions and their transformation into direct agencies of the corporations and the state was driven by profound objective changes in the underlying structure of the world capitalist economy. The most significant of these was the unprecedented global integration of production that developed during and after the 1980s, reflected in the emergence of the transnational corporation. The transnational corporation, utilizing revolutionary developments in computer technology, communications and transportation, organized production on a world scale and directly for the world market. As a result, it was able to locate factories in far flung locations, seeking ever cheaper sources of labor.

This completely undercut the unions and all other organizations based on national programs. The unions in the US and around the world were transformed from organizations that pressured the employers for concessions to the workers into organizations that pressured the workers to give up their past gains to boost the competitiveness and profitability of their "own" capitalists.

By 1982, the UAW officially adopted corporatism as its guiding principle. The class struggle—between the working class and the capitalist exploiters—was over, the UAW claimed, and had been superseded by the struggle of "the nation" against foreign competitors. On this basis, the UAW ended strikes and

instructed its stewards and committeemen to stop filing grievances and abandon any resistance to speed-up and exploitation. The union was integrated into the structure of corporate management, including seats on corporate boards, and oversaw the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and one concession contract after another.

This coincided with the racist campaign to boycott Japanese-made cars, which included smashing Toyotas with sledgehammers, barring foreign-made cars from factory parking lots and issuing bumper stickers reading "Remember Pearl Harbor." The atmosphere created by the UAW was so foul it led to the 1982 murder of 27-year-old Chinese-American Vincent Chin, who was beaten to death by two Chrysler foremen in Detroit who thought he was Japanese.

Pointing to the call of the UAW for the setting up of government-labor-management bodies to set national industrial policy, the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, drew a parallel to the policies implemented by Italian fascism under Mussolini. The "frantic efforts of the trade union bureaucracy to formulate a program for 'national' revival within the framework of capitalist private ownership of the means of production," we wrote in 1982, "leads the UAW to adopt economic and social conceptions which closely resemble those put into effect by fascist regimes in a last-ditch attempt to save capitalism."

It is no accident that Trump's chief aide, the fascist Stephen Bannon, is an admirer of Mussolini. Within the union apparatus there are no doubt many whose outlook is indistinguishable from Bannon's.

The membership of the unions has fallen to the lowest percentage of the workforce since the 1920s. They continue to exist solely at the behest of the corporations and a section of the political establishment, mainly in the Democratic Party, which sees their utility in suppressing the class struggle and beating the drums for World War III against Russia and China.

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