

The death of Ed Sadlowski and the demise of trade union reformism

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Ed Sadlowski, who led a movement to oust the United Steelworkers leadership in the 1970s, died on June 10. While largely unknown to current generations of workers, Sadlowski played a brief but significant role in the American unions. His bid to unseat the handpicked candidate of the United Steelworkers bureaucracy, Lloyd McBride, in the February 1977 election for union president garnered a great deal of rank-and-file support and media attention.

Heading the “Steelworkers Fightback” movement, Sadlowski presented himself as a fiery militant opposing the pro-management leadership of the USW. Debates between Sadlowski and McBride were televised, including a session on the nationally televised news program “Meet the Press.”

The Sadlowski-McBride contest took place in the context of mounting attacks on workers’ jobs and living standards and a rising tide of worker militancy, with mass strikes taking place in auto, the mines, the docks and across basic industry. In that period, millions of workers maintained their allegiance to the unions, despite their hostility to the corrupt and treacherous leadership, and saw these organizations as instruments that could advance their interests. The USW was at that time the largest US union, with 1.5 million members, including locals in Canada.

Movements in opposition to pro-company, anti-democratic union leaderships emerged in other industries, including among coalminers with the creation of Miners for Democracy headed by Arnold Miller, and in trucking with the creation of Teamsters for a Democratic Union headed by Pete Camarata.

In the 1977 campaign, Sadlowski made an issue of the USW’s acceptance of an Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA) with the major steel companies in 1973, which surrendered the right to strike in favor of binding arbitration. He also called for rank-and-file ratification of collective bargaining agreements and any dues increases.

Despite garnering substantial support and carrying the larger steel mills, Sadlowski lost the election by a margin of 328,000 to 249,000 and his “Steelworkers Fightback” movement subsequently disintegrated. Sadlowski later accepted an appointment to a lower level post in the USW bureaucracy and never again ran for elective office in the union.

In 1982, Sadlowski supported an agreement imposing concessions in work rules at the US Steel South Works plant in Chicago. He later presided over the closure of the South Works, ending 100 years of steel production at the site. After his retirement in 1993, he was hired to a post with the Illinois Labor Relations Board.

The collapse of “Steelworkers Fightback” paralleled the fate of the other reform movements. None of them was able to achieve any serious reforms. They did not challenge the capitalist system or

oppose the subordination of the unions to the Democratic Party. In the face of a deepening capitalist crisis by the 1980s, the unions embraced the corporatist program of union-management “partnership,” rejected any vestige of class struggle, and participated in the dismantling of the gains made by workers over past generations.

The Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party (US), called for a vote for Sadlowski in the 1977 USW election. At the same time, the Workers League stressed the complete inadequacy of his program and called on workers to reject his support for the Democratic Party, warning sharply that “the refusal to break with the Democrats means surrendering the basic rights of the working class, and transforming the unions into agencies for policing the working class.”

At that time the Workers League sought to encourage the militant movement of the working class and imbue it with a conscious political and revolutionary perspective, calling for the ousting of the trade union bureaucracy and the building of a new revolutionary Marxist leadership in the unions. This was coupled with the demand for a break with the Democratic Party and the formation of a labor party based on the trade unions and committed to socialist policies. However, this tactic lost its viability as the unions evolved into direct arms of the corporations and the state aimed at suppressing the class struggle and imposing cuts in jobs and wages and the destruction of working conditions.

Based on their nationalist and pro-capitalist program, the unions reacted to the rise of globalized production and the crisis and decline of US capitalism by abandoning the struggle for even limited gains. The nationally-based unions lined up ever more directly with American big business to shore up national industry against its overseas rivals, including through the promotion of chauvinist attacks on foreign workers.

In 1978, Democrat Jimmy Carter launched an offensive against the working class, invoking the Taft-Hartley strikebreaking law against the coal miners. In 1979, Carter appointed Paul Volcker to head the US Federal Reserve. Volcker drove up interest rates in a deliberate move to bankrupt less profitable sections of industry. One of the results was the bankruptcy of US carmaker Chrysler, which had to plead for a government loan guarantee to survive. In an unprecedented move, the United Auto Workers agreed to wage cuts, and UAW President Douglas Fraser went onto the company’s board of directors.

Attacks on workers increased following the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. In 1981, Reagan’s firing of striking air traffic controllers unleashed an unprecedented wave of union-busting. Reagan moved to fire the controllers only after being assured by US union leaders that there would be no action taken by the unions in response.

During the 1980s, the unions worked to isolate and defeat one strike after another, from the Phelps Dodge copper miners, to Greyhound bus drivers, to Wheeling Pittsburgh steelworkers to Hormel meatpackers. The Workers League intervened in all these struggles, becoming a center of opposition to the sabotage carried out by the union bureaucracy.

Throughout this period, millions of jobs were eliminated in auto, steel and mining without any opposition by the unions. To offset the loss of dues income, the unions entered into a direct partnership with the companies, setting up a myriad of joint union-management committees and slush funds that bolstered the income of the labor bureaucracy even as workers' wages were cut and factories closed.

In the USW, this took the grotesque form of the union bureaucracy working with asset strippers such as Wilbur Ross—now Trump's commerce secretary—to restructure the steel industry on the backs of steel workers. The UAW set up a series of joint “training centers” with US automakers that served as a conduit for hundreds of millions in corporate cash into the hands of the union bureaucracy.

The experience of the 1980s demonstrated that there no longer existed any possibility of reforming the unions. These organizations no longer served as even limited defensive organizations of the working class, but operated openly and shamelessly as extensions of corporate management. For the past 40 years, the unions have virtually abolished strikes or any other form of mass resistance, even as social inequality has reached historically unprecedented levels.

The evolution of the trade unions in the US was part of a global phenomenon, involving the transformation of all the nationalist labor organizations and bureaucracies, epitomized by the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991. Drawing up a balance sheet of the experiences of this period, David North, then the national secretary of the Workers League, wrote in January 1992:

All over the world the working class is confronted with the fact that the trade unions, parties and even states which they created in an earlier period have been transformed into the direct instruments of imperialism.

The days are over when the labor bureaucracies “mediated” the class struggle and played the role of buffer between the classes. Though the bureaucracies generally betrayed the historical interests of the working class, they still, in a limited sense, served its daily practical needs; and, to that extent, “justified” their existence as leaders of working class organizations. That period is over. The bureaucracy cannot play any such independent role in the present period. (“The End of the USSR”)

Based on these changes, the Workers League and its international co-thinkers concluded that the trade unions could no longer be considered workers organizations and that workers had to build new, independent organizations of struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to unite and mobilize the workers at each location and link their struggles with those of workers across the country and internationally.

Predictably, the death of Sadlowski evoked glowing obituaries from a number of pseudo-left groups oriented toward the trade unions and the Democratic Party. These organizations bitterly oppose the call by the SEP for a break with the unions, claiming that they remain

working class organizations. The pseudo-left groups not only support the bureaucracy from outside, they have largely entered its ranks, securing well-paid sinecures for themselves.

However, every experience of the working class demonstrates the urgent need for independent factory and workplace committees. In the series of strikes this year, teachers confronted the hostility and opposition of the unions, which worked to isolate their struggles and shut them down. The UAW has been revealed to be in the direct pay of the auto companies, taking bribes in exchange for pushing through pro-company contracts. The unions play the same fundamental role in every industry and in every country.

Workers looking for a way to fight back against the government-management assault should consider these experiences. Workers need new organizations to fight for their interests and unite their struggles in a common counter-offensive against the entire ruling class. The formation of factory committees will, as Trotsky wrote in the Transitional Program, create “a factual dual power” in the factories, pitting the working class against the capitalist owners. The committees will seek the widest possible mobilization of workers, youth and the unemployed.

This must be combined with the political mobilization of the working class on an internationalist and socialist perspective. As the recent strikes by teachers have once again demonstrated, any effort by workers to improve their conditions immediately runs into opposition from the state and both big business parties, the Democrats no less than the Republicans. This raises the necessity for the mobilization of the working class as an independent political force against the capitalist system and its political representatives.

The World Socialist Web Site encourages workers to contact us to discuss this perspective.

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