

US union heads meet with Trump over NAFTA

By Shannon Jones
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Leaders of major US unions met with President Donald Trump last week to discuss terms of the renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). A new trade pact solely with Mexico was announced by the Trump administration on Monday. The meeting with labor officials last week demonstrated the reactionary alignment of the unions with the “American First” nationalism of the White House.

A statement by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka issued in advance of the meeting began by praising Trump. “From what we have seen up to this point,” the AFL-CIO chief declared, “it is clear that this administration has made some progress, yet there is more that must be done.” Trumka continued, “We are meeting with the president to reaffirm what a good deal for working people really looks like, starting with strong workers’ rights backed up by effective enforcement tools unlike those that have failed in the past and led to the unrelenting outsourcing of work to Mexico...”

The talk of “workers’ rights” is a cover for the anti-immigrant and nationalist program of the trade union bureaucracy. The new trade deal is aimed at giving US corporations even greater advantage and extracting concessions from Mexico and America’s other trade rivals. It will not lead to any lessening of the war on jobs and living standards of workers in the US, Mexico or any other country but an escalation of that war.

Far from defending workers’ rights, the unions have spent decades colluding with corporate America to destroy them. In the face of the globalization of capitalist production in the 1970s and 1980s, the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions abandoned any resistance to the employers and in the name of making their “own” capitalists more competitive, collaborated in the destruction of the jobs and living standards of millions of workers.

While this has been an international phenomenon, nowhere has the transformation of the unions into direct instruments of the employers been more naked than in the United States. Over the past several decades the unions have

all but banned strikes while corporate profits and income inequality have reached record levels. In return for their services, the union bureaucrats have been richly rewarded with seats on corporate and government boards and massive payoffs as the corruption scandal in the United Auto Workers shows.

The promotion of rabid nationalism takes place amid escalating social tensions in the US, reflected in the recent teacher strikes and mounting opposition by United Parcel Service workers to a sellout deal accepted by the Teamsters. The unions are attempting to deflect worker anger by channeling it away from the capitalist system and directing it against workers in other countries.

The unions have aligned themselves with the drive by the White House to extract concessions from its NAFTA partners, principally Mexico, in order to bolster American big business. This dovetails with a fascistic campaign by the Trump administration targeting Mexican immigrants, including the forced separation of children from families and Gestapo-style raids on workplaces.

The heads of major unions have generally supported the trade war measures enacted by Trump, including tariffs on steel and aluminum imports. In response to criticism of the administration’s trade measures, Trumka tweeted last month, “Some in Congress are badmouthing tariffs and grousing about ‘trade wars,’ but those who failed to act on trade threats or stop trade cheats are part of the problem.”

The foul nationalism promoted by the unions is a further demonstration that these are not working-class organizations but tools of the corporations and government. The support for trade war goes hand-in-hand with the unions’ support for new imperialist wars by the US against Russia, China and other geo-political rivals.

It adds urgency to the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party for a break with the unions and the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, democratically controlled by workers and based on the methods of the class struggle, not labor-management and collusion. The organizational break by workers from the

corporatist unions must be combined with a political break with the nationalist and pro-capitalist outlook of the unions, which have led workers down a blind path.

Trumka has left open the option of endorsing Trump's re-election in 2020. Earlier this month at a breakfast roundtable sponsored by the *Christian Science Monitor*, Trumka said in response to a question that he would not rule out supporting Trump. "I never said we wouldn't consider endorsing him (Trump)," Trumka said. "What I'm saying is we'll consider every candidate who is running and our members will help us decide which one they think will help us most effectively represent the workers of this country."

Joining Trumka at the Tuesday White House meeting were heads of other major unions including Leo Gerard of the United Steelworkers, Robert Martinez of the International Association of Machinists, Teamsters head James P. Hoffa and United Auto Workers President Gary Jones.

Both the UAW and steelworkers' union have enthusiastically embraced Trump's trade war measures, with Gerard fully backing US steel tariffs aimed against China, which the USW has demagogically blamed for unfair trade practices. Gerard has heaped effusive praise on Trump, at one point telling an interviewer that "Donald Trump was able to see the steelworker agenda, what he did is what we've been fighting for more than 30 years."

For its part the UAW has lined up behind Trump's threatened 25 percent tariff on auto and auto parts imports. At a hearing last month on the proposed tariffs the UAW was the only organization to take the side of the Trump administration, with automakers, dealers and parts suppliers all opposing trade war measures. Directly blaming Mexican workers for the loss of US jobs, Jennifer Kelly, the UAW representative at the hearing declared, "NAFTA's useful, but a job in Mexico is not a job in the US."

On the part of the UAW, the scapegoating of Mexican and other workers outside the US has been a standard fare for decades. Since the UAW launched its "Buy American" campaign in the late 1970s, it has overseen the destruction of hundreds of thousands of auto jobs and the impoverishment of workers, including the imposition of multiple wage and benefit tiers and the spread of temporary part-time workers with few if any benefits or contractual rights.

The UAW has been exposed as a bribed tool of management in the ongoing federal corruption investigation. Court documents reveal that Fiat Chrysler funneled at least \$9 million to UAW officials in a scheme to fix contract negotiations and to keep union leaders "fat, dumb and happy." Nancy Johnson, a former top aide to UAW Vice President for Fiat Chrysler Norwood Jewell, has implicated former UAW President Dennis Williams in the scandal. She

reportedly told federal investigators that Williams authorized illegal payments from joint training centers to pay for union expenses, including travel, lavish meals and designer clothes and shoes and other luxury items.

As for Hoffa, the Teamsters bureaucracy is trying to force through a sellout agreement on United Parcel Service workers that drastically erodes wages and conditions. The union has proposed the creation of a "hybrid" driver/warehouse worker position that will be paid less than current drivers and will be used to begin the transformation of drivers into part-time workers.

The nationalism promoted by the unions poses extreme dangers for the working class. Anti-immigrant hysteria is being used to divide the working class, pitting native born workers against brutally exploited immigrant workers. At the same time, the logic of trade war points to a catastrophic military conflagration. It goes hand in hand with a massive military build-up by the US and other major powers accompanied by warlike threats by the Trump administration against Iran, China and other foreign rivals of US imperialism. It is being accompanied by an equally reactionary campaign by the Democrats targeting Russia amid claims of "Russia interference."

Workers should not be fooled by the nationalist poison promoted by the trade unions in tandem with the Trump administration. The enemies of American workers are not workers overseas but the massive multi-national corporations that are reaping enormous profits off the backs of all workers whether than are in Asia, Africa or the Americas.

The transnational giants cannot be fought on a national basis. Instead, American workers can only defend their jobs, living standards and democratic rights and prevent the outbreak of new catastrophic wars by linking their struggles with their class brothers and sisters throughout the world. The development of such a movement can only be based on a socialist program challenging the capitalist profit system, which is the source of inequality, oppression and war.

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