

Labor Day in America: Two unions endorse Edwards, one spews anti-Mexican poison

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This year's Labor Day events provided a particularly crude display of the degenerate character of the American trade unions. With the assault on jobs and living standards continuing unabated, home foreclosure rates reaching record highs, and both big business parties ignoring popular opposition to the Iraq war, union leaders reaffirmed their alliance with the Democratic Party and issued chauvinist pronouncements directed against workers in Mexico and other countries.

Recently released data documents the intensified exploitation of the US working class and the further concentration of wealth at the very top of society. According to a new Census report, real median earnings for both men and women who work at full-time, year-round jobs declined for the third year in a row in 2006. The Economic Policy Institute, a Washington think tank, reported that men's earnings fell an average of 0.5 percent annually from 2000 to 2006, while those of women rose an average of only 0.2 percent, and have actually fallen since 2004.

Workers, burdened with ever higher family debt and rising living costs, are working longer hours. A report by the International Labor Organization released on Monday noted that "annual working hours per person employed are considerably higher in the United States than in the majority of European economies."

Declining attendance at Labor Day events in Detroit and other cities is an indication of the further waning of the influence of the unions, which today represent barely 12 percent of America's 150 million workers and only one out of every 14 workers in private industry.

For years, the event in Detroit has had the character of a hollow ritual, with workers marching past the shuttered businesses and blighted neighborhoods of America's poorest big city—the product of the complicity of the unions with the employers' job- and wage-cutting drive. This year's march took place as the United Auto Workers, which has accepted the loss of another 85,000 jobs at General Motors, Chrysler and Ford over the last three years, was preparing to grant historic concessions to the auto bosses

when the current labor agreements expire on September 15.

In New York, the Central Labor Council simply cancelled this year's parade after years of declining attendance. New York was the site of the first Labor Day parade in US history in 1882. The event was almost cancelled last year when it was announced that the then-head of the New York City Central Labor Council, Queens Assemblyman Brain McLaughlin, was being investigated for embezzlement, bribe-taking, fraud and money laundering.

In Pittsburgh, the leaders of the United Steelworkers and United Mine Workers unions used the Labor Day parade to announce their endorsement of former North Carolina Senator John Edwards's bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. The union officials praised Edwards—a multi-millionaire who was an advisor to a hedge fund involved in subprime mortgages and other predatory lending practices—as a son of the working class who would champion workers' interests.

The president of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), Leo W. Gerard, declared, "All of the Democratic candidates in the field share our values, and any one of them would be a major improvement over the current administration. But none of them is a more forceful advocate for those values than John Edwards. Senator Edwards is committed, as he has been throughout his life, to going to bat for everyday Americans and to changing a broken political system that leaves millions of Americans without a voice in their government."

The labor bureaucracy does indeed share the core "value" of the Democratic Party—undying support for American capitalism. Its alliance with the Democrats—who serve the specific function for the US ruling elite of promoting its interests at home and abroad while posturing as a party of the working man—is the central political service the union leadership carries out for the corporate-financial aristocracy.

The United Mineworkers (UMWA) and United Steelworkers have no problem supporting a politician who voted to authorize the war in Iraq and has indicated his readiness to support its expansion into Iran, since the union

bureaucracy fully backs US imperialist aggression around the world.

Edwards, who is running a phony “populist” campaign, presenting himself as the advocate of the poor and downtrodden and hustling for union funds by promoting the labor bureaucracy as the genuine voice of the working man, told a crowd of union members in Pittsburgh, “America was not built on Wall Street. America was built by steelworkers and mine workers.”

The Steelworkers union handed over \$2.4 million to the Democrats in the 2006 House of Representatives and Senate races. The United Mine Workers gave \$496,050 in the 2006 elections, almost all going to Democrats.

The unions’ support for the Democrats, along with their policies of labor-management collaboration and nationalism, have produced nothing but disaster for workers. Former steel centers like Youngstown, Cleveland and Pittsburgh have been decimated, and hundreds of thousands of retired workers and their families have seen their pensions and medical benefits gutted.

Both the United Mineworkers and the United Steelworkers are little more than shells of their former selves, having suffered massive declines in membership. The United Mineworkers union represents fewer than one third of all US coal miners, and its reactionary policies have contributed to the deadly conditions in the mines, highlighted by a series of disasters over the last year-and-a-half from West Virginia to Utah.

The USWA and UMWA are particularly attracted to Edwards because, of all the Democratic presidential candidates, he is most identified with protectionist trade policies. In its endorsement statement, the USWA Executive Board declared, “He [Edwards] grew up in a family that worked and lived in a mill town, so he has seen first-hand the damage unregulated trade has done to people he knows and loves.”

Protectionism has long been used by the American labor bureaucracy to block any struggle against big business and the government by diverting the anger of workers away from their real enemies and blaming foreign workers for the loss of “American jobs.”

The Teamsters union used Labor Day to ratchet up its anti-Mexican campaign against a one-year pilot program planned by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration that will give Mexican trucking companies access to the US beyond the current 25-mile border restriction zone.

Denouncing the Bush administration plan as a “slap in the face to American workers,” Teamsters President James P. Hoffa said, “Dangerous trucks should not be driving all the way from Mexico to Maine and Minnesota.”

Hoffa, whose union has done nothing about the decades-

long assault on US truck drivers’ conditions—beginning with the deregulation of the industry launched by Democratic President Jimmy Carter—swore, “I will continue to fight like hell to prevent Mexican trucks from endangering lives throughout the United States,” and said he was confident that a lawsuit filed by the union in a federal appeals court would “block the program before it starts next week.”

The court rejected the lawsuit, opening the way for the program to begin this Thursday. The union reacted by saying it would take its campaign to Congress.

The reactionary nativism of the labor bureaucracy has always gone hand in hand with support for US militarism. The Teamsters union has joined in the Bush administration’s propaganda efforts to justify an expansion of the war in Iraq by attacking neighboring Iran.

At the end of August, Hoffa issued a letter to Teamster pension fund managers urging them to divest shares in companies that do business with Iran, writing that “no Teamster should have to worry that his or her money is supporting a government that helps militant groups attack our troops in Iraq. That is exactly what the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is doing, according to the US State Department.”

Hoffa echoed the White House’s assertions that Iran was developing nuclear weapons and funneling “millions of dollars to terrorist groups throughout the Middle East.”

Hoffa added that divesting Teamster pension funds from companies doing business with Iran would protect the very considerable assets of the union (i.e., the union bureaucracy). It was not only “the patriotic thing to do,” but also “a wise investment strategy.” He noted that the Securities and Exchange Commission has said that “share prices can be harmed by business ties with countries that pose a global security risk.”



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