

Can Labor Confront Obama Over Jobs?

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As the seeds of Obama's 2012 electoral campaign begin to sprout, labor unions are being forced either to pledge their allegiance or distance themselves from the incumbent president. There has already emerged some hefty splits in the labor movement over the issue, based on the President's complete lack of action on creating jobs combined with his false promises in the 2008 election.

In fact, Obama has presided over the worst atmosphere for U.S. labor unions since the Reagan Administration. He has remained silent over the massive attack on public employee unions while aggressively pushing his union-busting education program, Race to the Top. Obama's 2012 electoral campaign offers enormous potential for U.S. labor unions to stand in opposition to these policies by refusing to endorse or campaign for the President.

Some large unions will attempt to mobilize their members in favor of Obama's re-election, regardless of his anti-worker policies. The National Education Association has already — shamefully — endorsed the President, even as his policies aim to cut off at the knees the teachers' unions. The Service Employee International Union (SEIU) will certainly endorse Obama too, since they seem totally incapable of voicing any criticism of the President, wrongly placing blame solely on the Republicans for the deterioration of their union via public-sector job loss and benefit cuts.

Fortunately, the AFL-CIO has finally distanced itself from the attitude of uncritically worshipping the anti-labor President. Unlike the above unions, the AFL-CIO realizes that there is a major jobs' crisis in the country that the President has done virtually nothing to fix. Many in the AFL-CIO also recognize it has a duty to intervene in the matter. But the level of intervention will come into conflict with the AFL-CIO's cozy and subservient relationship with the President. For an effective jobs campaign to be waged, the AFL-CIO will have to sever their mostly-positive attitude toward the President, since Obama will be the target of anger among union members who want jobs and real "change."

When they announced their nationwide October jobs protest, The AFL-CIO Executive Committee stated:

"The American labor movement, together with our community partners and allies, is committed to changing the national debate from the right wing's destructive focus on deficits, budget cuts and austerity measures — which undermine workers' rights, living standards and communities — to a clear focus on the creation of good jobs that ensure workers' rights, support families and build strong communities."

An effective protest campaign cannot be aimed only at the Republicans, since such a

campaign would be addressing only half the problem. All workers have watched as President Obama shares with Republicans the exclusive focus on deficits, budget cuts and austerity measures, while he puts forth zero effective plans to create jobs. His pitiful job-creation ideas — presented on his farcical “bus tour” — are limited to reducing taxes for corporations along with other ways to aid private sector businesses, in the vain hope that they will suddenly start hiring workers. In other words, even when he pretends to help workers he is really helping corporations. This plan first came into existence with the Bush/Obama bank bailouts, and for four years now workers have watched corporate profits soar while layoffs continue and wages shrink. Labor can no longer attach itself to such a blatantly anti-worker approach to politics and economics and expect to survive.

If the October AFL-CIO protests are to be effective, they must be massive. Symbolic protests aimed solely at Republicans, Teabaggers, or other fiscal conservatives, will not serve the labor movement at all; on the contrary, they will further demoralize it because they are really secretly aimed at helping the Democrats. The protest must also target the President and the rest of the political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike. Labor cannot “encourage” Obama to create jobs; it must demand them. And demands are not meant for friends, but enemies. Anything less will not be taken seriously by workers, especially while failing to reach out to and help mobilize the broader community to put up a fight. If the AFL-CIO is serious about their jobs’ campaign and puts forth serious demands on Obama, they will be unable to legitimately support his election campaign, since, as a general rule, you shouldn’t financially support the person or party you are engaged in battle against.

Another promising sign of labor unions finding an independent voice is the decision by the 2.5 million member AFL-CIO building trades division to boycott the Democratic National Convention. The AFL-CIO building trades chief of staff, Michael Monroe, explains:

“There is broad frustration with the [Democratic] party and all elected officials, broad frustration with the lack of a union agenda... people are looking for outlets to express that frustration.”¹

The head of the AFL-CIO, Richard Trumka, has voiced similar sentiments in response to the Democrats non-action on pro-labor legislation:

“You’ll see more of labor’s money put into its own structure right now, and less being set aside for candidates and party structure... We’ll start running some of our own [candidates], in state races.”²

These words have enormous implications; but words must be followed with actions. The situation for working people is so desperate that half-measures and verbal threats instantly fall flat. Action on a massive scale is desperately needed and cannot be effectively deployed if these actions are to remain safe or acceptable to the Democratic Party. An especially bold action would be for the AFL-CIO to run a presidential candidate; perhaps Richard Trumka himself could be convinced to run on a pro-worker platform that would immediately change the U.S. political landscape.

Although unlikely, a labor candidate promoting a massive jobs-creating public works campaign — financed by taxing the wealthy and corporations — would instantly destroy any populist backing that the debt-reduction Tea Party receives. If a labor candidate also

promised zero cuts to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, millions of people would immediately switch party affiliations. There are historical precedents for such shifts: labor parties were created in numerous countries that quickly transformed the political establishment, based on meeting the needs of working people neglected by other parties. The Democrats and Republicans are totally incapable of putting forward a political agenda that deals with the social crisis erupting in the United States; neither party deserves the support of working people.

The unions that do support these parties in the 2012 elections will contribute to the further deterioration of the labor movement. Far fewer workers, if any, will volunteer to campaign for Obama, and consequently, he will be less willing to reward labor unions for their efforts (keeping in mind that there was no rewards last time). This absurd cycle cannot last forever, and is already breaking at the seams. Rank-and-file members will inevitably lose trust in their union leadership if dues money continues to fund the enemies of labor unions and all working people.

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Notes

1. <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheafclio/ecouncil/ec08032011d.cfm>

2. http://bostonherald.com.nyud.net/news/us_politics/view/20110813some_afl-cio-affiliated_unions_say_theyll_skip_2012_democratic_national_convention/srvc=home&position=recent

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