

Fighting Company Union Ideology in America

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The evolution of the company union in the U.S. is a history of both labor's progress and its missteps. It is a story that, at bottom, speaks to the battle of workers to find an independent, powerful presence on the job — and to push this clout into the community to help shape the broader public realm.

Unions came into existence organically wherever capitalism developed. As soon as workers were brought together by a small number of employers and compelled to make profits for them, the employees naturally sought to defend themselves. A living wage and decent working conditions failed to emerge through the good will of the employers, unfortunately, so workers took matters into their own hands.

They formed organizations that promoted their interests at the expense of the bosses' profits. And as soon as these fledgling unions became powerful, the owners sought to undermine them. When the unions were too powerful to be drowned in blood, the bosses sought other techniques.

The company union was typically a preventative measure initiated by the employers to lure workers away from real unions. Where workers became militant and bold in their demands, the company would offer a venue for them to voice their concerns and, sometimes, have these concerns properly addressed.

Of course, these company unions were totally controlled by the employer — they could be whisked away if the workers were impolite or too demanding. These fake unions automatically eliminated the strength workers would have had if they belonged to an independent, larger labor union. Some issues that workers sought to remedy were purposely kept "off the table."

During World War I, the growth of company unions was encouraged by the U.S. government, which sought to stem the growing surge of worker radicalism. Employer-employee councils were set up en masse, and where nothing could be agreed upon, the federal government would swoop in to try and smooth over the conflict.

The union labor upsurge before, during and after World War II was unprecedented, scaring the employer class stiff by exhibiting its organized strength and winning workers demands. F.D.R. used a combination of tactics to defuse the worker-owner conflict: compromise, the National Guard, and finally, appealing to the national patriotism needed to win workers support for WWII.

F.D.R. also set up the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in an attempt to “balance” the conflict between workers and their employers. The NLRB falsely claimed that it would remain objective in its work, but it functioned inside a government where giant corporations dominate the political system.

F.D.R.’s Labor Relations Act effectively banned the company union in practice, but the essence of the phenomenon would linger until the present, where it maintains its historic, poisonous influence. The fundamental aim of modern company union ideology is to promote the concept of identical interests between workers and the employers. It is a philosophy of cooperation and teamwork, where in reality bitter hostility and mutual distrust are accurate reflections of the attitudes of workers and owners — emotions based on the real antagonism between wages and profits.

The 1947 anti-worker amendment to the Labor Relations Act — Taft-Hartley — was a counter-attack on the organized workers’ movement. In it, a surplus of anti-worker measures are outlined that to this day render the union movement harmless in conflicts with employers (since most union officials refuse to disobey the unjust law).

In addition to making it impossible for unions to support one another during strikes, a special provision of Taft-Hartley is often incorrectly viewed by some union officials as being “pro-labor.” The bill cleverly outlined an organizational body that today encompasses bank accounts of hundreds of billions of dollars. Taft-Hartley “funds” are employer-employee financed accounts that help workers save for retirement, pay for health insurance and buy homes, etc.

These accounts are presided over by an equally-weighted labor-management team, where often the fund is managed like a corporate bank, and the employers and employees view themselves as partner shareholders. The Taft-Hartley bill was a very conscious attempt to disarm the labor movement. By merging the interests of workers and management into a pot of money, sections of the labor movement found it difficult to demand their “fund partners” pay higher wages, etc. Some workers identified themselves more and more as investors and used these funds to enrich themselves, or as stepping-stones into the

corporate world of finance. In any case, the company union philosophy blurred the interests of workers, who sometimes found difficulty in determining if they should go on strike or merely consult an investment broker.

Another modern example of company unionism is the openly “collaborationist” grouping inside of the Alliance for American Manufacturers (AAM). Here we have labor unions — the Steelworkers, for example — and giant corporations in the same organization working towards identical goals, aiming at a common enemy — China. One of the AAM’s most cherished tasks is to promote “fair trade,” which they define as U.S. corporations out-competing other nations’ companies — though most notably China — on the world market.

The AAM uses its corporate money to “lobby” Congressmen, who oblige by putting up taxes (tariffs) on Chinese imports, an action the Chinese accurately view as “economic warfare.” Of course, if workers are being taught to work with their bosses against the Chinese, the ability of workers to fight their bosses to win a good contract is greatly diminished.

A broader, political example of company unionism is labor unions’ continued involvement in the Democratic Party. The Democrats have always been dominated by big business; it’s a party where corporations come together to have their needs met, though less explicitly — and therefore more dangerously — than the Republicans.

The few crumbs that Democrats threw to the unions have long since dried up; both Clinton and Obama are blatantly pro-corporate Presidents, with Obama presiding over a very pro-corporate Democratic controlled Congress.

And although the Democrats have snubbed labor a thousand times, most top labor officials seem desperate to maintain this worthless “alliance,” something that requires them to constantly make “compromises” with the Democrats that are against the interests of the working class. The most recent one is the acceptance of the Democrats’ “Cadillac” tax on workers health care plans.

Another recent example of labor officials practicing dangerous cooperation with the corporate Democrats is the actions of the President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Randi Weingarten.

Instead of preparing teachers for a battle against Obama’s anti-public education “reform,” the AFT President has decided that “working together” would be more effective. Both the

Democrats and mainstream media are attempting to adopt many long-time conservative notions regarding education. Obama calls his plan the “Race to the Top” campaign (a name as misleading as Bush’s No Child Left Behind).

The Democrats attack on public education requires undermining the power of teachers’ unions, a task done by instituting teacher-specific, conservative reforms, including tying a teacher’s pay and job status to a student’s performance or closing down “failing schools” and opening non-union, private charter schools. Both of these schemes are integral to Obama’s education reform and have already been ruthlessly implanted in New Orleans and Chicago, to the huge detriment of both teachers and students.

In response to future, potentially crippling attacks in Obama’s plan, the AFT President is disarming her membership while walking them into a war zone.

Weingarten has not only failed to condemn the President’s plan, but has spoken positively of it, and how teachers could best work with the Obama administration.

In a recent speech to the U.S. Press Club, the AFT President cited two recent examples of teacher collective bargaining retreats — including an especially bad defeat in Detroit — and proclaimed the outcomes as victories of “collaboration”, to be mimicked throughout the country in accordance of Obama’s anti-teacher plan. Weingarten admits that one of the contracts included classic conservative reforms like “rigorous evaluations, more flexible hiring authority, and performance pay on a school-by-school basis...”

In a classic example of company union ideology, Weingarten states: “We must transform our mutual responsibility into mutual commitment. Our relationship should be a constant conversation that begins before and continues long after we meet at the bargaining table.”

This would be a fine statement if not for the fact that Weingarten’s partners in “mutual commitment” are out for teacher’s blood.

Advancing the labor movement cannot be done with friendly cooperation with management or voting for either of the corporations’ political parties. The past gains in living wages of union workers— which are now quickly shrinking— and their benefits were won in past generations through a combination of two very important factors. The first was the recognition that the interests of working people and the employers were diametrically opposite, where wages came at the expense of profits and vice versa.

Secondly, workers employed organized militant actions, for example, large demonstrations, strikes with massive picket lines and at times workplace occupations, etc. Those who

promote less confrontational solutions to labor's problems have had decades to prove their theories. They have completely failed. Labor continues a decades-long backward slide. The promised Employee Free Choice Act is being relegated to the Obama bin of betrayals.

Labor can and must change course, the sooner the better. This can be done by directly challenging the Obama administration's pro-big business policies of foreign wars, bank bailouts, cuts in needed social services, corporate health care, attacks on public education, etc. Mass demonstrations are an effective tool to organize and educate workers, while giving an explicit warning against politicians who promote anti-worker policies. Labor unions around the country have passed resolutions endorsing a march on Washington demanding jobs, peace and justice. Below is a model resolution to propose at your local union.

Workers Emergency Recovery Campaign Model Resolution

http://wercampaign.org/2010/01/07/monde_resolution/

National March on Washington for Jobs, Peace, Affordable Health Care For All and Ending Foreclosures and Evictions

Whereas — despite the so-called economic recovery — the economic crisis for working people has continued unabated with growing unemployment and rising home foreclosures and evictions,

And whereas this economic crisis has resulted in the underfunding and degrading of public education and social services,

And whereas the government has bestowed billions of dollars of bailout money on the financial institutions whose recklessness and greed created this economic crisis,

And whereas there is growing opposition to the wars and occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq by a majority of the people here in the U.S. —not to mention the great and ever-growing opposition by the citizens in Afghanistan and Iraq,

And whereas these wars are costing billions of dollars each month,

Therefore be it resolved that _____ call on the AFL-CIO and Change to Win to organize

a Solidarity Day III march on Washington D.C. in the spring of 2010 to demand jobs, housing, health care, full funding for public education and social services, and peace.

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