

The AFL-CIO and the Democrats: Friends or Foes?

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The November elections are near, and labor is gearing up. But like the rest of the country, union members are infected with an “enthusiasm gap.” The explosion of energy that labor put towards electing Barack Obama has produced only a spark of legislation for working people, while corporations continue to make out like the bandits they are. Thus, motivating union members to not only vote in November, but to campaign for Democrats is a hefty task, a burden being carried by the AFL-CIO.

For example, the President of the AFL-CIO, Richard Trumka, was recently in Portland, Oregon speaking to the labor movement in a town hall setup. Seated next to Trumka was the Democratic contender for Governor, John Kitzhaber. Trumka promoted Kitzhaber, a former Governor of Oregon, as a friend of labor, even though Oregon’s largest public workers union, SEIU 503, waged a determined, statewide strike against him in 1995.

This inconsistency was followed by others.

Trumka talked positively about the Obama Administration and its “achievements.” The list was short and, at times, false. When Trumka noted that “the Obama administration has created more jobs than Bush created in eight years,” there were more than a few confused looks. Obama himself has admitted that he has presided over the loss of millions of jobs, with already 300,000 lost in the summer months during the much-discussed “recovery.”

More perplexity followed when Trumka spoke about the need to defend Social Security against “right-wing” attacks. Yes, the Republicans are eager to reduce or eliminate Social Security, but it is Obama who is giving them the venue to accomplish this treacherous act, through his Bi-partisan Deficit Reduction Commission.

Politicians and the media have been quite open as to the future “recommendations” of this bi-partisan committee: raising the retirement age, reducing benefits, etc. The committee is so blatantly anti-Social Security that its co-chair, former Congressman Alan Simpson, referred to the social program as “a milk cow with 310 million tits.”

Trumka caused more quizzical stares when he confidently stated that the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) would be passed within a year. Democrats have made it quite clear that the legislation is too “radical” to pass in its current form, since it would make organizing unions much easier. They intend to water it down, drowning the essence of the bill. It’s also possible that the bill will continue to languish in Congress until it’s completely forgotten.

There’s yet another contradiction between the AFL-CIO and the Democrats: on October 2nd the AFL-CIO is helping organize a march on Washington through the One Nation coalition, to demand jobs, protection of Social Security, immigrants rights, peace, etc. The website for

One Nation says: “demand the change we voted for.” (www.onenationworkingtogether.org)

Demands are reserved not for friends, but foes. Friends have common interests and will implement policies without having to be asked, let alone demanded. Friends keep their promises too, even electoral ones.

The AFL-CIO is forced into the awkward position of having to “demand” that its “friends” keep their promises. Equally odd is the fact that as the Oct. 2nd march is being organized, labor is once again sending Democratic candidates large sums of money, a predictably bad investment. The corporate Wall Street Journal reports:

“The leaders of the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union have agreed to coordinate spending millions of dollars in the midterm elections to support pro-union candidates, most of them Democrats... The two labor organizations say they have a combined \$88 million or more to deploy in this year’s election cycle.” (August 25, 2010).

Throwing money at people you are demanding change from weakens your demands.

It’s absolutely necessary to demand change from the Democrats on October 2nd. Putting forth strong demands that millions of people can relate to will easily drown out the rightwing sermon that Glenn Beck preached in front of the Lincoln Memorial. One such demand would be that the government put 15 million people back to work immediately by creating a massive public works project and make Wall Street pay for it. But to be successful, the October 2nd demonstration cannot be a campaign party for Democrats, as some of the organizers would like it to be. Workers expect more; they demand more.

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