

Labor (United States): Two Visions of the Way Forward

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Two quite different labor meetings have taken place this month. The labor bureaucracy organized one. Rank-and-file workers were at the center of the other.

The AFL-CIO held its convention in Philadelphia on June 12, for the first time electing as president a woman, Liz Shuler, and also for the first time a Black man, Fred Redmon, as secretary-treasurer. While some other organizations began to elect women and Blacks to leadership positions in the 1970s, the AFL-CIO has only now done so, as usual decades behind progressive developments.

Unions are in trouble. Only 10 percent of workers are organized and only 6 percent in the private sector. Shuler promised to do something about that: “Just as the AFL invested to create the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] for industrial organizing in the 1930s today, we are launching the Center for Transformational Organizing—the CTO. This is the vehicle that will accelerate and convert the energy of this moment to take our movement into the next century. The CTO will bring together the brightest organizers, technologists, and researchers.” All with the goal of organizing high tech industries. “In the next 10 years we will organize and grow our movement by more than 1 million working people,” she said. “How’s that for a goal!” As several top union officials said, in reality, it’s a pathetically small number that would not create enough momentum nor change the balance of forces.

Beyond that, the AFL did not create the CIO, rather the conservative John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, seeing that leftists were beginning to organize heavy industry, led several unions that left the AFL in 1935 to create the CIO to both organize industrial workers and keep the left in check. In 1949 the CIO expelled the Communists from the union and in 1955 the AFL and CIO merged.

The AFL-CIO with 12.5 million members is the largest labor organization in the United States, but it invited no representatives from the two most exciting labor organizing campaigns currently taking place, not the Amazon Labor Union that recently succeeded in organizing the first Amazon facility of 8,000 members, nor Starbucks Workers United, that has organized over 150 coffee shops. The AFL’s bureaucratic mentality made it impossible to invite either group of workers because they are not members of the federation, Amazon’s union being independent and Starbucks being affiliated with the two-million-member Service Employees International Union, that is not part of the AFL-CIO.

The circumvention’s featured speaker was President Joe Biden, who pledged to be the most pro-labor president ever, but whose labor legislation and social programs have been stalled in Congress.

The other labor meeting, the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago, Illinois from June 16 to June 19, represented practically the opposite approach to union matters. The Labor Notes Conference, which has no official standing with the AFL-CIO or any other labor organization, brings together union activists from scores of different unions. The conference, attended by 4,000 people with many more

watching online, opened with five speakers that included Starbucks and Amazon workers who are organizing their workplaces. Labor Notes, a labor education center, places rank-and-file workers at the center of its work and sees their role as central to a revival of unions.

A theme of this conference was reviving the strike, workers' most important tool. A good deal of the conference dealt with the issues of Black and Latino workers, with some workshops conducted in Spanish. Scores of workshops offer rank-and-file workers the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas. While most of the conference dealt with organizing workers to fight employers, there were also sessions with authors of books on labor, music, and the arts.

The featured speaker at the Labor Notes Conference was Senator Bernie Sanders, self-proclaimed democratic socialist and twice candidate for U.S. president. He called upon workers to use their power to change the political direction of the country, to make government do more for workers.

The AFL-CIO's top leaders offer a bureaucratic and technical solution to workers' problems, while Labor Notes offers a model emphasizing the initiative and creativity, the courage and struggle of rank-and-file workers.

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