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USA

Will the Drive to War Kill International Labor Solidarity?

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We are all horrified by the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington. Thousands of working men and women were senselessly murdered, and unions across the world have joined to condemn the act.

We are proud of how working people, and unions in particular, have responded to support the victims of terror. The fire-fighters who died in the rescue attempt, the volunteers searching for survivors, the nurses tending the wounded, the Ironworkers sent to shore up buildings, the locals that organized gate collections and blood drives have shown the generosity of spirit that is our best hope for a collective and humane solution to these horrors and others still to come.

CROSSROADS

As the U.S. government prepares for war, the labour movement should reflect on what the impact of the attacks will be, and proceed with caution. The labour movement has been trying to rebuild itself, in fits and starts, for the past six years, and the new situation places us at a crossroads.

Will we continue to fight against corporate globalisation and deepen ties to workers in other countries, or will we fall in with an "America First" attitude? Will we continue to fight for immigrant rights, or will we fall out along national fault lines? Will we continue to search for new organizing strategies if union campaigns in certain industries are labelled divisive and "un-American"? Will we fight concessions when corporations promise layoffs?

In short, will we step up to our responsibility to be the voice for what's best in American workers' hearts? Or will we slip further into irrelevancy, as corporate America wishes, by giving up our right to challenge the consensus?

The early responses from labour offer both possibilities.

The AFL-CIO quickly declared full support for any actions President Bush chose to carry out, and the UAW followed suit. The Teamsters recovered their Reagan-era fervour and immediately called for war against all states harbouring terrorists. John Sweeney said he had called President Bush to offer support and said, "We stand fully behind the President and the leadership of our nation in this time of national crisis. We will fully support the appropriate American response."

The Steelworkers called for justice, but added that the U.S. should not harm innocent civilians and pointed to the poverty and injustice that provides "recruits for the armies of the intolerant."

The SEIU, with a large immigrant membership, called for all appropriate measures to be taken but strongly warned against scapegoating immigrants and Arabs in particular. The United Farm Workers also called for retribution, but tempered it by drawing on the memory of Cesar Chavez and his legacy of non-violence. The UFW has continued its corporate campaign against Pict-Sweet through prayer vigils, and the UFW and SEIU have called unity marches to help fight anti-Arab and anti-immigrant backlash.

BACK BURNER

Perhaps the greatest danger facing the labour movement in the coming months will be the government's attempt to manufacture a consensus around war and all the ugly things that go with it. In wartime all the legitimate demands of labour or of any other group in society (save the corporations that make the weapons) are deemed to be selfishâ€”note the immediate calls for raiding workers' Social Security funds.

Any questioning of our leaders-even on issues unrelated to the war- is seen as wrong. This is how the government defends curtailment of the right not to be spied upon and how some Congressmen can justify their attempt to ram a "bipartisan" Fast Track bill through Congress in the coming weeks.

RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

This tragedy is a challenge for the American labour movement to deepen its internationalist stance. The AFL-CIO is unique among labour in industrialized nations in the degree to which it has joined, if not always consistently, in the broader movement against globalisation.

Many union members have responded warmly to calls for international solidarity, as evidenced in campaigns for justice in sweatshops and maquiladoras. In the United States recently some rank and file activists have been pushing for the AFL-CIO to open its Cold War files to repudiate its past actions against labour movements in other countries and to strengthen trust with workers there.

Union activists who are shocked by the rush to war should call for a rethinking of U.S. international priorities and actions, and deepen their solidarity with labour across the globe. The human costs of war will be borne first and foremost by the dispossessed and the working class in each country. Leo Gerard, the Steelworkers' new president, has noted that poverty and injustice swell the ranks of fanatic organizations. It is labour's duty, now more than ever, to push for a new social order.

WHY THE HATRED?

Hatred of America abroad is based largely on the behaviour of U.S. corporations in other countries and the military might that the U.S. government uses to back up the existing order. But corporations are not "America." They are the same forces with the same dog-eat-dog values that labour and the global justice movement are fighting.

Our movements are, in a very real sense, the only alternative to the irrational forces that arise from frustration combined with fanaticism. International organized labour and the global justice movement can be the alternative beacon that says to the world: There is another way that is democratic to the core and whose power derives from our numbersâ€”not wealth, terror, or military might. There is hope.

To put aside our oppositional character is to surrender that alternative, that hope. To offer a blank check to the Bush Administration, the most anti-labour administration in decades, is to invite the drowning of any alternative in the tide of military might and terrorist escalation.

The globalised economy means that both the terrorist attacks on September 11 and the actions the U.S. takes in

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response will affect workers the world over. American labour has made progress in throwing in its lot with workers across the globe. Can labour step back up to the plate, or will only peace activists do that now?

International solidarity is the high road, and it is the course that should be followed ever more resolutely in the months ahead.