

Obama Coopts the Labor Movement

Mass Demonstrations Needed for a Real Jobs Program

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When governments fall deaf to social reality, it's up to working people to get loud. Obama's jobs speech proved that the Democrats — like the Republicans — suffer from massive hearing loss, unable to listen to the millions of people suffering from the intractable jobs depression.

After mounting pressure from labor and community groups, Obama promised a paltry \$447 billion for his American Jobs Act, much of it going to corporations as tax giveaways while the program is to be paid for, in part, by “deficit reduction” — cuts to Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and other social programs. Such an insulting “solution” to the deepening recession must be shouted down in the streets, but labor and community groups don't seem up for the challenge.

With so many millions of unemployed and a labor movement under assault, rage can be easily channeled into massive, pro-worker demonstrations, assuming that inspiring solutions are put forward as demands. Unfortunately, the far-right Tea Party has taken much of the initiative, using the bait of fake-populist rhetoric while switching to pro-corporate solutions.

Sadly, labor's complete lack of action to organize their constituents and wider community is directly responsible for much of the Tea Party's success, with big corporate money being the other prop. This dynamic will become more volatile as the jobs depression lurches on; more working people will be lured by anti-immigrant and anti-Islam and anti-union “solutions” to the recession unless an alternative is put forward.

So what's holding labor back? Predictably, it's the old ball and chain Democrats that continues to crush any initiative from organized labor. As long as labor leaders hold the delusional belief that they are listened to and a respected “partner” of the Democrats— a party controlled by the rich and the big corporations— they will continue to give inflammatory speeches against corporations and Republicans, while attaching themselves to any pathetic jobs program proposed by the President.

Before Obama's so-called big job speech, the AFL-CIO was demanding — as part of their America Wants to Work Action Plan — a job program that would put to work the “...25 million people in America who need full-time work...” This was to be done by investing “...at least \$2.2 trillion in repairing our crumbling 20th century infrastructure and another \$2 trillion building a modern clean energy infrastructure for the 21st century.” These numbers accurately reflect the needs of millions of working people while taking into consideration the gigantic shift in our economy necessary to help prevent future environmental disasters.

By comparison, Obama's jobs program is laughable, were not the situation so serious. Economists have estimated that Obama's program will create, at most, 2 million jobs; of course the program will not receive even the small sums Obama is proposing, if it's even passed at all.

Labor's response to Obama's jobs farce was unparalleled praise; as if their above-cited Action Plan never existed; as if the economy could be jump-started by such weak investments. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka remarked:

"The President took an important and necessary step tonight: he started a serious national conversation about how to solve our jobs crisis. He showed working people that he is willing to go to the mat to create new jobs on a substantial scale."

Shamefully, the AFL-CIO website also quoted numerous labor leaders responding favorably to Obama's plan, some gushing with admiration. However, all of them kept silent about the elephant in the room.

The two critical parts of Obama's job program that demand immediate condemnation are; 1) employer payroll tax cut (which is used to fund Social Security and Medicare); 2) funding the Jobs Program by taking away from Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security — and other programs— through Obama's deficit reduction "super congress." As these social programs become depleted, the jobs attached to them — in the health care field — will also go away, increasing unemployment through the backdoor.

The inability of labor leaders to come out publicly against this anti-worker agenda may be a historic low for organized labor. For labor leaders to praise Obama as he takes from Medicare to give tax breaks to corporations is simply a disgrace; it's also unsustainable.

Labor leaders are respected by the rank and file so long as they appear to be effective in fighting for the interests of working people. Pathetically clinging to the Democrats' policies has proven ineffective for years, though lately it has become criminal. For workers experiencing historic concessions and soaring unemployment, the sight of labor leaders back-patting the Democrats can only bring disgust. New leaders will inevitably emerge to give voice to this increasingly popular feeling.

What will the new crop of serious labor and community leaders advocate? Simply a return to the past; a return to what worked. Since pandering to politicians is a proven failure, organizing independently to challenge the political status-quo is the obvious answer. In fact, the AFL-CIO was traveling down this path when they announced demonstrations for jobs in October; however, it seems likely that Obama's jobs program will deflate these demonstrations, since many labor leaders seem to think the problem is solved (there is no mention of the protests on the AFL-CIO website or blog).

Sadly, such demonstrations are exactly what working people need at this time. Not a single demonstration, nor a small, symbolic one, but a sustained campaign of huge mass demonstrations that demand a real jobs program that will employ the 25 million people who need full-time jobs, while re-building the country's infrastructure to cope with the looming environmental disasters.

Mass demonstrations are especially important at this time because they prove to working people that the plight of each is shared by many others and that if all were organized

together, they could become a powerful force of change. People are exposed to new ideas and given hope that there exists a power to remedy their situation as they meet like-minded individuals and groups that are working towards similar goals.

One such goal that should be immediately adopted by working class organizations is to drastically increase taxes on the rich and corporations. Shockingly, the jobs speech that labor leaders liked so much also included a bit about lowering the corporate tax rate. The inequality in wealth is perhaps the most important social phenomenon in the United States over the last 30 years, representing a gigantic transfer of wealth from working people to the very rich. Tax rates for the country's richest have fallen from 90 percent to 35 percent, creating multi-billionaires who are able to buy politicians that eagerly serve their benefactors, including Democrats and President Obama.

Without substantially raising taxes on the rich — not simply eliminating the Bush tax cuts — enough jobs cannot be created for all who need them. Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid cannot be salvaged either, without raising taxes on the rich, not to mention dealing with the federal, state and local budget deficits. Massive demonstrations must be organized to demand these actions; pleading with Democrats has failed miserably and consequently has weakened the labor movement at a time when there is no time to waste. The only way to bypass the “bi-partisan bickering” in Washington, D.C. is to hit the streets with solid demands; politicians will either follow suit or be trampled on.

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<http://www.aflcio.org/issues/jobseconomy/jobs/jobsagenda.cfm>

<http://blog.aflcio.org/2011/09/08/trumka-in-speech-obama-goes-to-the-mat-to-create-new-jobs/#more-59928>

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