

What's Behind the One Nation Rally

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An enthusiastic crowd estimated at 175,000 people attended the four-hour rally in Washington Oct. 2 at Lincoln Memorial — a mass action by the labor movement and African American rights groups, supported by the Latino, environmental, LGBT and other liberal and progressive movements. The main purpose was to increase the Democratic vote next month.

The event was organized by a new coalition, One Nation Working Together, which is supported by some 400 groups, primarily led by the two labor federations, AFL-CIO and Change To Win/SEIU, and the NAACP. The rally was addressed by a couple of dozen speakers, mostly from supporting liberal advocacy organizations.

A constant theme reiterated by the union leaders who spoke was the need for jobs — the absence of which is probably one of the main reasons a number of voters who went Democratic in the presidential election may not vote in November. Among these leaders, and a sign of the strength of labor at the rally, was AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, Service Employees International Union president Mary Kay Henry, UAW president Bob King, AFT chief Randi Weingarten, NEA President Dennis Van Roakel, and CWA's Larry Cohen.

President/CEO Ben Jealous of the NAACP told the crowd — which included a large proportion of African Americans — that “We’ve come too far to turn back now,” evoking the long struggle for equal rights. “We’ve got to go home and ask our friends and ask our neighbors to vote. Get up off the couch and get out and vote November 2.”

Up to 2,000 chartered buses — largely financed by the unions — brought participants to the demonstration from the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic and Midwestern states. Others arrived by car, commercial bus, railroad and planes from as far away as the West Coast.

The crowd reached its height around 2:30 p.m. when it extended from the Memorial along each side of the long Reflecting Pool to the end. The attendance was not as large as the Aug. 28 right wing “non-political” religious manifestation organized by TV personality Glen Beck, but the two events were so different in character that comparing size determines nothing.

The historic rally and its feeder marches in Washington Oct. 2 had several pluses accompanied by minuses, the most important being these two:

- The unity achieved at the rally between the working class, people of color and progressives in various social advocacy groups is very important in terms of the political struggle for needed progressive social change in the United States.

However, the rally's singular purpose was to increase the popular vote for Democratic

candidates in the Nov. 2 Congressional election and local offices, not to build an independent liberal/progressive/left coalition to agitate for needed programs that go beyond the limited possibilities of the Obama Administration's center/center right political agenda.

- Rally speakers supported a number of relatively progressive policy initiatives, including a massive and comprehensive jobs program, advancement of civil rights and liberties, immigration reform, education reform, and union rights to mention a few. This was a major liberal event and were it the actual intention of the Obama Administration to fight for such initiatives it would be transformational.

However, not one of the speakers criticized the Obama Administration's failure to seriously embrace many such programs or to mount the political fight required to attain even watered down versions, blaming everything on "The Party of No." Even the Blue Dog conservative Democrats in Congress were off the hook.

Clearly, the administration's weak jobs program has fallen far short of making a significant dent in unemployment, which remains around 10% officially and 17% unofficially. Its anti-foreclosure efforts have failed. Civil liberties are being eroded because of White House decisions. Immigration reform is piecemeal. Education reform, based on President Obama's \$4.35 billion "Race to the Top" initiative, is actually opposed by the two teacher unions that so strongly support the Democrats. The labor movement's main legislative goal —Employee Free Choice Act — can't even be introduced in Congress, in part because of conservative Democrat opposition.

One of the reasons the Democratic Party may lose a more than usual number of House and Senate seats in the midterm contest is that a number of 2008 Obama voters are disappointed that the Democrats didn't fight harder and compromise less for "the change they believe in."

It appeared that President Obama's massive escalation of the Afghan war, extending the fighting into western Pakistan and Yemen, and continuing the occupation of Iraq would also be unchallenged by the speakers — despite the fact that the majority of Democratic voters are against the war — until Harry Belafonte shattered the silence.

Charging that "the wars that we wage today in far away lands are immoral, unconscionable and unwinnable," the famous musician, social activist and civil rights leader delivered a stunning denunciation of a top Obama Administration priority. The crowd seemed momentarily taken aback by this sharp criticism of Obama's wars (though the president's name was not mentioned) and the reception was somewhat muted, though at the finish, just after he said "let us put an end to war," he received prolonged applause.

Could it be that rally leaders were unaware Belafonte intended to deliver a strong antiwar message? His speech was the highlight of the afternoon as far the peace movement and left were concerned.

The only other reference to the military — aside from some patriotic comments to the troops — was Jesse Jackson's call to "Cut the military budget," but even Defense Secretary Gates says that. The rest of Rev. Jackson's talk was essentially "vote Democratic" in November because "The president can't bear this cross alone."

One of the more moving presentations was by outspoken progressive Marian Wright Edelman, founder/president of the Children's Defense Fund, who sharply criticized politicians that promote "massive tax giveaways to the rich when 50% of our children are living in poverty," and called for increased education funding.

Van Jones, a well known environmental and civil rights activist and an expert on "Green Jobs," noted that "We can empower America by looking up for our sources of energy instead of looking down," referring to wind and solar power. Rev. Al Sharpton earned applause when he declared: "We bailed out the banks. We bailed out the insurance companies. Now it's time to bail out the American people."

The only Congressman to speak was Chicago immigrant rights advocate Democratic Rep. Luis Gutierrez, who declared: "The Latino and immigrant struggle is a continuation of the civil rights struggle in this nation. There would be no Cesar Chavez without Dr. Martin Luther King, no Sonia Sotomayor without Thurgood Marshal and no Roberto Clemente without Jackie Robinson."

The absence of Democratic Party leaders and office holders on the podium as endorsers or rally officials was intentional. Rally leaders did not wish to convey the impression that One Nation Working Together was simply organizing a campaign event to elect a fairly unimpressive collection of center/center right office holders and a small minority of liberals.

The Democrats are worried that independent voters, young voters and liberal supporters who voted Democratic in 2008 are not going to come out in large enough number to prevent the Republicans from making major gains in the House and Senate. A good proportion of these voters are disappointed in the Obama Administration's performance over the past two years, including some union workers who voted for the Democrats in the last election.

One Nation has positioned itself as independently promoting a relatively liberal agenda and is asking Democrats — who are told that the only obstacle to real progress is the GOP and the dreaded Tea Party — to vote in sufficient number to make it possible for the Democratic members of Congress to score major victories in the next two years. The disinclination of many of these politicians to consider aligning with center/center left progressive programs is notorious.

This event cost the union movement plenty. Most of the buses allowed union members — and in some cases the general public — to travel free. Our New York State United Teachers-sponsored bus from New Paltz cost a paltry \$20 to D.C. and back for non-union riders, in return for which we received a bagged breakfast, dinner snack, a blue and orange AFT jersey proclaiming One Nation Working Together plus a \$5 roundtrip metro fare to and from the Lincoln Memorial.

Charter buses began arriving in the huge parking lot of RFK Stadium starting around 9 a.m. on what turned out to be a day of blue skies, sunshine and comfortable temperatures. Up to 700 buses were said to be coming from New York State alone. According to local union sources buses brought perhaps 1,000 demonstrators from the Upper Hudson Valley cities and towns of Albany, Amsterdam, Latham, Schenectady, Saratoga and Troy and 500 from Mid-Hudson Valley communities of Kingston, New Paltz, Middletown, Newburgh, Poughkeepsie, Fishkill and Beacon. An unknown number took other transportation.

Thousands more probably would have attended the Washington event but there were

serious bus problems in Boston, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and on Long Island. Through a mix-up, some scheduled buses never arrived to pick up passengers, and some got to the nation's capital just about in time to return home.

Many buses, including ours, arrived too late to attend the scheduled 11 a.m. antiwar feeder march from 14th St. and Constitution Ave., where there were two speaking platforms, one organized by United for Peace and Justice and the other by the United National Antiwar Conference. After a while both groups agreed to use the same stage. In addition there was a Socialist Contingent nearby. When the three groups marched together to the Memorial there were about 500-600 people, we're told.

Some Union contingents, each wearing their own colored t-shirts, marched in separate feeder marches.

A number of peace and left wing groups attended the rally but not all marched, including several socialist and communist organizations which carried their own signs in the crowd and distributed leaflets and free publications. The ANSWER antiwar coalition (Act Now to Stop War and End Racism) handed out a great many large yellow and black peace posters on sticks with a photo of Martin Luther King that predominated in a large part of the rally where we were situated, and hundreds of demonstrators took them home on buses that evening. The Party for Socialism and Liberation decided to charge a donation for their paper, Liberation, and sold 1,200 copies.

This was a positive aspect of the way the One Nation event was organized. Antiwar and socialist or communist groups were welcomed to join the rally just like every other group, to arrange feeder marches of their own, to set up tables, distribute literature, and to become one of the hundreds of endorsers if they wished.

The Communist Party USA, Democratic Socialists of America and the International Socialist Organization were among the endorsers, though most left organizations did not wish to be associated at that level. It has not always been this way in union or liberal dominated events, when the left has often been discouraged from attending or excluded. Hopefully it's a new trend. Of course, the left was not invited to speak at the main rally, and didn't expect to be.

Right wing websites and blogs howled with red-baiting denunciations about the presence of the left Oct. 2, which was actually quite small — but since they already call Obama a "socialist" and believe the Democratic Party is a front for a Bolshevik conspiracy it's not a big deal.

To sum up: The various liberal groups that gathered in Washington for the One Nation rally are a positive factor on the political landscape, mainly because of their working class, multinational and progressive orientation.

Unfortunately their heightened political consciousness remains to be developed vis-à-vis (1) the inherent political limitations of the Democratic Party to which they are presently wedded; (2) their acceptance of a restrictive, closed circuit two-party system extending from the center to the far right without a mass left entity; and (3) their adherence to "lesser evil" politics that insures that "evil" in one guise or another is the only result.

Lastly, the notion of "one nation" sounds good, even inspiring, and entirely useful in the

present situation. But most of us know that in reality the U.S. remains, in effect, two nations: one representing the interests of the minority — the big corporations, big banks, big stockholders, and big money that tend to rule; and the other the interests of the great majority — the working class, middle class and lower class that tend to be ruled.

The real issue is which “nation” does one support, and out of that support help to create one real nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

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