

# The Rise of Trumpism and the Crisis of Labor Leadership



Above: Factory worker members of United Steel Workers union protest layoffs in Indiana. Top union leaders' refusal to mobilize workers in struggle paved the way for decades of job losses, falling wages, and the rise of Trump.

In his campaign for the presidency Donald Trump combined outrageous racism, sexism, and militaristic nationalism with demagogic claims of being a defender of this country's working class against the ravages of "free trade" economic policies supported by the "elites" of both the Democratic and Republican parties. With this racist populism, Trump has aimed to divide-and-conquer the working class by first taking aim at its most vulnerable and oppressed sections while promising white working-class people that if they support his authoritarian rule he will reward them with a return of jobs and prosperity.

However, Trump has made clear that he plans to also deal this country's interracial labor movement devastating blows. In particular, he has expressed his support for making anti-union "right-to-work" statutes the law of the land, an attack that has already been advanced in a number of states. This would overturn the right of unions to win

the requirement that all workers in an enterprise be represented by the union and to have union fees collected from workers. If this attack goes through, this country's already terribly weak unions would be financially crippled and have their ranks decimated.

The danger posed by Trump's agenda can therefore not be underestimated. Were he to succeed it would mean worsening oppression for people in the U.S. who are already subjected to capitalism's worst injustices – Blacks, Latinos and immigrants, women, LGBT people and others. And with the world economy again sliding toward a financial crisis that would this time likely trigger another Great Depression, it would mean that the working class as a whole in this country would face the crisis more divided by racism than in living memory and with the unions, virtually the only mass organizations working-class people can turn to for solidarity, devastated.



Donald Trump's capture of the White House has triggered massive protests but unions have largely failed to mobilize for them. Union members must fight their leaders' passivity and attempts to collaborate with Trump and demand united action to defeat his racist, sexist, anti-working class attacks.

But with people of color and women mobilized and playing a leading role, mass struggles of working-class and poor people could surely challenge Trump's attacks and build toward a united struggle against all the miseries and injustices that the capitalist system unleashes. Hinting at this potential, Trump's capture of the White House had triggered a massive uprising of protest, from local demonstrations across the country to protests at his inauguration and the huge "Women's March" the day after.

### **Where Were the Unions?**

So far, however, unions have been strikingly absent from playing a significant role in mobilizing for protests. Trump has betrayed his promises to address working-class suffering, doing nothing to save and create jobs – while rushing to overturn measures that to some degree protect workers and the environment. He is now breaking his promises to protect healthcare and Medicaid that millions rely on, while labor has largely remained passive.

To be sure, the union leaders have varied somewhat in their responses to Trump's rise to power. A few major unions like the Service Employees International Union – which has a large base of immigrant workers in Trump's crosshairs – have felt more obliged to engage in limited protests, such as the May Day demonstrations that took place in many cities. So have a variety of smaller union Locals with more activist-oriented memberships.

But on the other end of the spectrum there have been

union leaders who have rushed to seek a "partnership" with Trump. Witness the bureaucrats in the construction trades with their core membership based on skilled white workers, and the notoriously corrupt James Hoffa Jr. who controls the Teamsters. And there is also Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers. Instead of preparing teachers to struggle in defense of their jobs and public education against the attacks that will surely come from Trump's Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, Weingarten joined her in touring an Ohio school district and condemned teachers who protested!<sup>1</sup>

In general, the bureaucrats have kept the unions quiet. No section of the union leadership has seriously attempted to mobilize their members against Trump, let alone tried to inspire a broader mass opposition.

### **Why Don't the Union Leaders Fight?**

It is not as if the union leaders were happy about the election results. Almost all in the U.S. supported Hillary Clinton, and some had even backed self-styled "socialist" Bernie Sanders. Even the Teamsters (IBT), who had been among the last to endorse Clinton, had harsh words for Trump at first. On August 26, IBT President Hoffa stated: "Donald Trump supports national right-to-work laws that are proven to weaken the middle class [i.e. better paid workers] and has a long track of shipping jobs out of the country as a business man. He is no friend to working Americans."<sup>2</sup>

So why have the unions not been even joining the masses in the streets? We should first understand that what the union leaders are doing with Trump is not fundamentally different from what they have been doing with the Democrats for decades. The bureaucrats generally prefer Democrats, and even under Trump are still allied with them. But they prefer to make some sort of deal with the capitalist politicians in power – to gain some small concessions or simply to cut their losses – rather than to try to mobilize their members in a confrontation with those in power and the capitalists that both parties serve. This approach is even more appalling when they collaborate with a vicious enemy like Trump. But the basic strategy is the same.

The union bureaucrats enjoy a privileged position in society as powerful and generally highly-paid brokers between the workers and capitalists. In general, they recognize that economic decline drives the capitalists to ever more forcefully demand that workers toil longer and harder for less, and that the capitalists, their politicians and courts will target any union leader who tries to organize a real resistance. They also fear that the experience of being mobilized in struggle will give workers a new sense of their own power and heightened

awareness of the issues confronting them, leading to challenges to their control of the unions from new leaders emerging from the ranks that claim to offer a more militant way forward. Thus union leaders have increasingly preferred to avoid organizing fights against attacks, preferring to negotiate sellout compromises with employers and discouraging workers from pursuing a course of independent struggle by promoting the prospect of voting for favored candidates in elections and then lobbying for friendly policies as a safer alternative. And if “friendly” politicians aren’t in office, the union tops will typically try to work with whoever is in power.

Trump has dangled some bait for the union leaders, raising hopes for a few (particularly in the construction trades) that they can maintain their positions by collaborating with him and trying to secure concessions for at least some of their members. The bait has been mainly promises of a huge infrastructure program in the U.S. and the abrogation of trade agreements like NAFTA: and some union leaders have bitten.

Thus leaders of nine construction trade unions met with Trump on January 23 and declared themselves encouraged by his promises to build infrastructure. The Teamsters’ Hoffa released a statement the same month

## *Trump, Union Leaders Fail to Save Jobs in Indiana*

Trump’s efforts during his election campaign to win support among blue collar workers focused on his repeated condemnation of companies moving their production to low-wage countries and laying off workers in the U.S. And he focused attention on the plight of workers at Carrier Corporation’s factory in Indianapolis, Indiana where workers have faced layoffs as the company has planned to shift production to Mexico.

Once sworn in as president, Trump moved to meet with Carrier’s executives and then, having excluded the union from the discussions, announced that he’d saved at least 1,100 jobs – by promising the company \$7 million in tax breaks and future military contracts. It soon emerged, however, that only about 800 jobs would be saved, and 1,300 jobs lost. United Steelworkers Local 1999 President Chuck Jones, the representative for workers at the plant, quickly criticized Trump for misleading them. The president responded with a barrage of personal attacks via twitter that inspired his right-wing supporters to make death threats against Jones and his family.<sup>1</sup>

The layoffs forecast back in January have recently begun to be implemented. USW and the AFL-CIO did little to defend Jones and have done nothing to encourage the workers to take action to save all their jobs. Trump’s earlier feigned sympathy for the workers facing layoffs could have been used to encourage the workers to occupy the Carrier plant in Indianapolis. Such action could have inspired similar actions in other USW plants in the immediate area, as well as factories across the country where workers are facing layoffs and closings. But instead, the top union leaders continued their passive approach. These opportunities have to be seized upon if the long-rising assault on workers is to be reversed.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Joseph S. Pete, “USW rallies around union local president after Trump attack,” December 8, 2016, [www.nwintimes.com/business/local/usw-rallies-around-union-local-president-after-trump-attack/article\\_69449ccd-057f-5151-8abd-a10c0ff29f22.html](http://www.nwintimes.com/business/local/usw-rallies-around-union-local-president-after-trump-attack/article_69449ccd-057f-5151-8abd-a10c0ff29f22.html).

2. Kelly Weil, “Carrier Sends Jobs to Mexico, Workers Say Trump ‘Misled’ Them,” May 25, 2017, [www.thedailybeast.com/carrier-sends-jobs-to-mexico-workers-say-trump-misled-them](http://www.thedailybeast.com/carrier-sends-jobs-to-mexico-workers-say-trump-misled-them).

that reversed his previous condemnation of Trump and declared him to be a friend of working people: “Today, President Trump made good on his campaign promise to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. With this decision, the president has taken the first step toward fixing 30 years of bad trade policies that have cost working Americans millions of good-paying jobs... We take this development as a positive sign that President Trump will continue to fulfill his campaign promises in regard to trade policy reform and instruct the [United States Trade Representative] to negotiate future agreements that protect American workers and industry.”<sup>3</sup> Even the Transport Workers Union’s then-International President Harry Lombardo, speaking at a New York City transit workers’ contract rally shortly after Trump’s victory, declared that he would “take [Trump] at his word” when it came to his promise to build infrastructure and create jobs, while “[holding] him to account...”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps worst of all has been AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, who has taken every opportunity to praise Trump’s promise to work constructively with him.

He met secretly with Trump on January 13 and four days later, when he should have been warning workers not to be fooled by Trump’s promises and to instead prepare to defend themselves and all working-class people, Trumka instead “joined with other labor leaders and House Democrats on Capitol Hill to voice support for Trump’s promise to renegotiate NAFTA and other trade deals.”<sup>5</sup>

The next month, Trump delivered his first speech to Congress, punctuating it with demagogic appeals to racism, including bragging about his campaign of mass deportations and his creation of a new office of the Department of Homeland Security to publicize the names of immigrants alleged to have committed crimes, as well delivering a long tribute to a marine who died on a mission in Afghanistan without showing any concern for the large number of civilians slaughtered in the incident. And Trumka’s response? He chose to appear on the *Fox Business News* channel (of all places!) to praise Trump’s speech as “one of his finest moments” and pledge to “partner” with him, including on re-writing immigration laws!<sup>6</sup>



AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka has sought to “partner” with Trump rather than mobilize struggles against his racist, anti-working class attacks. If such treachery by union leaders is allowed to go unchallenged, it will pave the way for terrible defeats for the labor movement and the entire working class.



Trump and the Republicans' moves to overturn the Affordable Care Act and slash Medicaid have triggered protests across the country. Defeating these attacks is a matter of life and death for countless working-class and poor people. Labor can take the lead in advancing the struggle by organizing a March on Washington.

### Trump's Bait

It's bad enough that union leaders chase after these promises even as Trump advances attacks on the working class and oppressed people. It typifies the bureaucrats' approach of isolated attempts at grabbing crumbs while ignoring the need for unity of all working-class and oppressed people. It plays directly into the capitalists' divide-and-conquer strategy. But a closer assessment of the promises themselves only makes it worse.

The financing of the proposed infrastructure program is to be done through "public-private partnerships," whereby firms bid on a project and then build and maintain it for a certain time period, recovering costs through tolls or assigned state payments. "One proposal that Trump has floated would provide \$137 billion in federal tax credits to companies that finance transportation projects, which he claims would unlock \$1 trillion in investment over 10 years."<sup>7</sup> This would guarantee corruption as well as huge profits for speculators and banks while sticking working-class people with high tolls or taxes. But then the whole plan overall has remained vague and Trump so far has been too busy initiating his attacks and dealing with his administration's scandals to follow through on his infrastructure promises. The only thing clear that he wants to see built are new oil pipelines.

Meanwhile congressional Republicans are talking down the original inadequate figure of \$1 trillion and putting off the actual drawing up of an infrastructure plan until early next year.

Union leaders are well aware of the appalling state of the infrastructure – roads crumbling, bridges deteriorating, electric power grids grossly overburdened. The AFL-CIO itself noted that "the American Society of Civil Engineers revealed the 2017 Infrastructure Report Card ... America got a D+. America's infrastructure deficit has skyrocketed by \$1 trillion over the past four years and now stands at \$4.59 trillion. And that's just to get things up in a state of good repair. This is the cost of inaction. We need a transformative, inclusive infrastructure program now."<sup>8</sup>

But the bureaucrats still won't appeal to the country's 14,000,000 union members to mobilize and demand the building projects and jobs we need. Rather, they leave it to the capitalists to decide what to build and how to make money on it, and gather like dogs around the capitalists' table hoping for crumbs to fall off.

Trade deals like NAFTA and the TPP are indeed used by capitalists to offshore more jobs and capital to low-wage countries that are typically ruled by brutally repressive dictatorships. They also contribute to the immiseration and super-exploitation of workers in Mexico and other "third-world" countries. But the notion of axing

trade agreements and adopting even greater protectionist measures in the hope that jobs will come back is a cruel illusion. It will not end the shift of production to low-wage countries that characterizes the global capitalism at this stage; and if the international economy were to be seriously disrupted by protectionism it would trigger an economic crisis that would see huge numbers of job losses. Besides, Trump is already wavering under pressure from dominant sections of the ruling capitalist class to moderate his “America first” trade outlook. What the union bureaucrats should be doing is seriously finding ways to build solidarity with workers in those low-wage countries, supporting their struggles to win higher wages, benefits, and democratic rights. But that’s not their way.

### **Pipeline Treachery**

A particularly revolting example of the bureaucrats’ narrow-minded approach is provided by the AFL-CIO’s support for the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) to transport crude oil under the Missouri River, thereby endangering drinking water on land stolen from the Standing Rock Sioux. The Sioux rallied other Native Americans and their supporters to block the pipeline for months, defending themselves against vicious and repeated cop attacks. Obama, after vacillating, put a temporary hold on the pipeline, while the state of South Dakota continued to send police in armored vehicles to beat and jail protesters. And once in office, Trump moved to remove restrictive measures and, aiming to crush the struggle, ensured that construction re-started in February.

Earlier, the AFL-CIO had sanctimoniously stated “that community involvement in decisions about constructing and locating pipelines is important and necessary, particularly in sensitive situations like those involving places of significance to Native Americans. However, once these processes have been completed, it is fundamentally unfair to hold union members’ livelihoods and their families’ financial security hostage to endless delay. The Dakota Access Pipeline is providing over 4,500 high-quality, family supporting jobs.”<sup>9</sup>

In fact, most assessments show fewer than 4,500 jobs would be created, almost all of them temporary; that amounts to crumbs set against the millions of unemployed who need jobs. But that’s not the main point. Why not fight for the planned building and installation of renewable energy sources, cleaning up the environment and providing ongoing jobs for Native Americans and other workers and oppressed people? Instead, the union bureaucrats throw in with the capitalist thieves and polluters and their government against the long-suffering protestors who were fighting heroically for clean drinking water for all of us! Some unions, including the Communication Workers of America, the Amalgamated Transit Union, National Nurses United, the American

Postal Workers Union and the United Electrical Workers, did voice support for the Standing Rock struggle. But this did not prevent the general leadership from backing the pipeline project.

### **Needed: a Working-Class Led Defense**

The anti-Trump protests have by and large until now demonstrated no awareness of the centrality of the working class for building a powerful defense against the right-wing assaults. A large part of this is due to the biased outlook of middle-class misleaders and the Democratic Party’s influence over many protesters. But there is little question that the past betrayals of union leaders and their current kowtowing to Trump contributes greatly to the problem. Even though some of the anti-Trump protests have been characterized as “strikes,” there is little evidence that what has been involved in most cases was collective action by workers to stop or curtail economic production by withholding their labor. The fact that the term can be bandied around so lightly is a sad comment on the lack of real strikes in the recent past.

Still, the growing popularity of strike talk, even just using the term, does reflect a wish for a more powerful form of resistance than electoralism. And it does start to make a more concrete discussion of mass working-class tactics like strikes, and even general strikes, possible. The League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) was known for many years for raising the idea of the general strike as a means to utilize the potential power of organized labor in a fighting unity against the decades-long capitalist offensive. It became a less effective idea as union power waned under misleadership and the capitalist weapons of outsourcing, automation and layoffs demoralized workers. While we don’t think calls for a general strike would have an immediate wide appeal at this point, the state of society does make education around the need for a general strike more meaningful.

### **For a Union-Led Mass March on Washington**

In the immediate future, we think the unions should throw their weight behind the anti-Trump protests and advance their own initiatives. A defense must be raised against all his attacks, but the urgent need to defeat Trump and the Republicans’ proposed legislation to overturn Obama’s Affordable Care Act and slash Medicaid stands out as a prime opportunity for the unions to take the lead in mobilizing millions.

We note that the Affordable Care Act is in a deepening state of crisis on its own as insurers continue to dramatically raise premiums – cost hikes that are perfectly legal, since the ACA was constructed to work through the “free market.”

As it was designed by Obama’s Democrats, the ACA



had to meet the approval and profit needs of the insurance industry rather than the needs of the masses. It is an important indication of how the Democrats serve the interests of the capitalists, not the working class; even if in so doing they make some concessions to popular needs. And we have to note the disgusting reaction of congressional Democrats when the Republicans' passed their hideous legislation in the House. Convinced that the pain of these attacks will drive voters to reward their party with support in the future, the Democrats taunted the Republicans by waving and singing "nah, nah, nah, hey, hey, hey, goodbye" – never mind how many people die for lack of a struggle to win healthcare for all!

The majority of the American public, including many Trump supporters, is decidedly against health-care cuts. This has been a major concern in the eruption of town hall protests in numerous cities in the country. And the assault on ACA has been temporarily weakened by the disarray of conservatives in Congress and the White House.

So this is a good and necessary time to take a more active stand. That's why supporters of the LRP in New York's Transport Workers Union Local 100 have joined with other transit workers to launch a campaign for the unions to call a March on Washington to protest the Republicans' assault on healthcare. Such a march could attract huge numbers, build momentum for even more powerful mass action, and win the unions much needed support as they face impending direct attacks themselves. It could be a massive step toward a struggle that can defend working-class and oppressed people from all of the attacks on their lives and rights.

The campaign has met with early success, with motions for the unions to call a March on Washington

receiving unanimous support in morning- and evening-shift meetings of Local 100s Train Operators and Track Worker Divisions. And transit workers have sought to take the campaign forward by issuing an Open Letter to their union's president, John Samuelson, calling on him to waste no time in taking the call to the rest of the union movement and beyond.

Members of other unions should join the effort. This cause also requires the backing of organizations representing Blacks and Latinos, immigrants and other oppressed people as well as the left. Members of organizations should, where possible, raise motions and issue open calls for unions to organize such a march. As well please get in touch with the campaign via e-mail at [campaign4amarchonwashington@gmail.com](mailto:campaign4amarchonwashington@gmail.com).

Why don't the union leaders sponsor such an action? They can't complain that this would be an illegal strike action that would endanger members' jobs and upset the "public." Indeed, such an action could put the unions in the forefront of a highly popular resistance. They can't say it couldn't be organized: they have plenty of resources and experience to pull it off. Their failure is only due to their refusal to organize a meaningful fightback that would interfere with their policy of currying favors with those in power. That policy of inaction can be fought by determined union members, by raising motions in unions meetings, circulating petitions, convincing workers in discussion and in other ways campaigning for the unions to act.

Such a protest should defend what is worth defending in the Affordable Care Act, in particular the subsidies that help the poorest working-class people most. But working-class and poor people clearly need an alternative. While the ACA contains some meaningful gains, we have noted

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how it allows for spiraling insurance rates and additional costs. An important demand would be for a “single-payer” plan, *Medicare for All*, as well as demands to improvements to Medicare coverage and service. This idea is gaining in popularity because of both the general crisis facing working people and the furor surrounding the attempts to repeal the ACA. Even some Democratic politicians are favorably talking about it. There should be mass pressure for them to actively support such a demand, along with the savaging of Democrats who collaborate with Trump and the Republicans at our expense.

## Revolutionary Solution

Healthcare is just one of many issues that the masses must mobilize around in order to defend against attacks and demand improvements. For example, the infrastructure crisis does indeed urgently need to be addressed. We need a massive investment in clean infrastructure rebuilding and expansion, an effort not beholden to the interests of capitalist profiteers. This in turn requires a program of mass public works, providing millions of jobs and leading to better hospitals, schools and housing, as well as roads and bridges.

We all can and should fight for such reforms under the capitalist system. The masses need relief, and it is natural they will seek it first under the system we live in. By mounting

mass struggle, including the resurrection of mass strikes, we can win some gains and the confidence to fight further. We must demand that the current leadership of the unions use the resources at their disposal to make mass workers’ action a leading edge in the fights ahead – pressuring the bureaucrats while we must and replacing them when we can.

Under capitalism, gains for our class can only be limited and temporary because the system’s crisis demands ever more intense exploitation to survive. If reforms benefit the working class will be a drain on the profit system, so the capitalists will look to defeat any mass struggle. (Indeed Trump’s presidency is a dress rehearsal for the kind of right-wing authoritarianism the capitalists will come to recognize they need.)

Ultimately, to put an end to the nightmare of life under capitalism the struggles of the workers and oppressed will have to culminate in the overthrow of the capitalists and their state. With the working class in power, the wealth of society could be directed to producing for the masses’ needs and not the profits of a few and a socialist world of freedom and abundance could be built. And for this, the most revolutionary-minded workers and youth must come together to build a revolutionary socialist party of the working class that that can lead the masses’ struggles, in unions and everywhere else, all the way to the overthrow of the capitalist system. *We encourage readers to contact us to discuss these ideas more.* ★

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<sup>1</sup> Max Greenwood, “Teachers union president condemns protests blocking DeVos from school,” [www.thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/318963-teachers-union-president-condemns-protests-blocking-devos-from](http://www.thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/318963-teachers-union-president-condemns-protests-blocking-devos-from).

<sup>2</sup> Tim Devaney, “Teamsters endorse Clinton,” [www.thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/293493-teamsters-endorse-clinton](http://www.thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/293493-teamsters-endorse-clinton).

<sup>3</sup> “TWU Local 100 rally 11/15/2016,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaUBJmPbSQs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaUBJmPbSQs).

<sup>4</sup> “Hoffa: Withdrawal from TPP the Right Choice for U.S. Trade Policy,” January 23, 2017, [www.teamster.org/news/2017/01/hoffa-withdrawal-tpp-right-choice-us-trade-policy](http://www.teamster.org/news/2017/01/hoffa-withdrawal-tpp-right-choice-us-trade-policy).

<sup>5</sup> “Clinton-backing AFL-CIO boss Trumka visits President-elect Trump on Friday,” *New York Daily News*, January 13, 2017, [www.nydailynews.com/news/national/clinton-backing-afl-cio-boss-trumka-talks-trade-trump-article-1.2945620](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/clinton-backing-afl-cio-boss-trumka-talks-trade-trump-article-1.2945620).

<sup>6</sup> “AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka Reacts to President Trump's Address,” March 1, 2017, [www.aflcio.org/Blog/Political-Action-Legislation/AFL-CIO-President-Richard-Trumka-React-to-President-Trump-s-Address](http://www.aflcio.org/Blog/Political-Action-Legislation/AFL-CIO-President-Richard-Trumka-React-to-President-Trump-s-Address).

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Zanona, “Trump’s infrastructure plan: What we know,” [www.thehill.com/policy/transportation/314095-trumps-infrastructure-plan-what-we-know](http://www.thehill.com/policy/transportation/314095-trumps-infrastructure-plan-what-we-know).

<sup>8</sup> *Labor Wire*, March 9.

<sup>9</sup> [www.aflcio.org/Press-Room/Press-Releases/Dakota-Access-Pipeline-Provides-High-Quality-Jobs](http://www.aflcio.org/Press-Room/Press-Releases/Dakota-Access-Pipeline-Provides-High-Quality-Jobs).