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USA

# US Labor Against the War

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**On January 11 a meeting of more than 100 officers of U.S. unions and activists from a number of labour antiwar committees met in Chicago to establish US Labor Against the War (USLAW). The meeting reflected the growth of U.S. antiwar sentiment over the last six months. During this period approximately forty Central Labor Councils (geographic bodies that unite all AFL-CIO unions), six national unions and dozens of local unions have adopted various antiwar resolutions.**

Right after 9/11 New York City Labor Against War (NYCLAW) formed around a petition calling for just and effective responses, which meant no war, justice not vengeance, defence of civil liberties/opposition to racism and aid for the needy not the greedy. It has been signed by over 1,400 trade unionists.

Similar committees sprang up in Albany, NY, the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area, Detroit, Portland, Seattle and Washington, DC. They took up a variety of tasks, including training sessions in how trade unionists could raise these issues with co-workers and organizing labour contingents - even if small - at anti-war demonstrations.

These committees also made the point that the dramatic increase in the military budget was at the expense of social needs. Additionally, swift passage of the U.S. Patriot Act set back labour's demand that the federal law making it illegal for an undocumented worker to hold a job be repealed.

After 9/11 Congress passed legislation requiring those who screen passenger luggage at the airport to be citizens. Over 800 screeners at the San Francisco airport - many of whom had worked five-ten years there, and who had won a union contract with higher wages and benefits only two years ago - faced being fired because they were not citizens. Along with immigrant rights organizations and SEIU Local 790, the Bay Area committee protested this unnecessary restriction, pointing out that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was unwilling even to 'fast track' the screeners' applications.

Bush's drive toward war against Iraq has seen greater questioning or outright opposition to the war on the part of trade unionists. That is because of the unilateral position the administration first took, its arrogant articulation of a pre-emptive strategy, and the fact that Iraq has no connection to al Qaeda.

Perhaps even more importantly, over the past year reality has hit - this permanent war has huge domestic implications. The economy is still tanking, and even if it revives, little hiring will follow. The dramatic expansion of the military budget is draining resources from U.S. social needs. The recently passed Homeland Security Act - requiring the massive reorganization of 22 federal agencies and affecting 170,000 union members - has given Director Tom Ridge the authority to suspend current civil service regulations including union rights. Yet the Office of Personnel Management could not cite one single example showing that unions had ever compromised national security. This act parallels business demands for greater 'labour flexibility' at the workplace.

Finally, President Bush's willingness to invoke the Taft-Hartley Act and send the International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) back to work indicated his determination to intervene in labour disputes. Currently the ILWU is voting on whether to accept the employer group's offer, but had they not come to a tentative resolution the Bush administration was discussing other legislation that could have been used to bludgeon the union into settling. This is clearly a warning to other unions: militant action in defence of workers' rights will be treated by the administration as harmful to the economy and the battle against terrorism.

## US Labor Against the War

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Over the late summer and early fall a number of labour bodies passed resolutions opposing the war in Iraq. The UE and AFSCME are the first national unions to oppose the war, but 100,000 California teachers union and Teamsters Local 705 - the second largest Teamster local in the country - also passed strong statements. A number of Central Labor Councils have also endorsed specific antiwar demonstrations or voiced their opposition to a war in Iraq. More important than the text of the resolutions - or even their actual passage - is how they reflect discussions in offices, factory floors and union halls.

The combination of some small steps of labour opposition against the war with Bush's targeting of Iraq led to AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's October 7th letter to members of Congress. The letter asserts that debate over war is needed and that evidence and considerations must be presented before war. True, it basically instructs U.S. policymakers in how they should go about getting consensus, but the letter's importance is that it provides a lot more political space within the union movement to raise questions and debate the Bush scenario.

This questioning at the top is a factor in giving radical labour activists some time and space to illustrate how war is used to attack the U.S. working class. Passage of the Homeland Security Act and the U.S. Patriot Act have set a political framework that reinforces racial profiling and a variety of anti-immigrant practices, including a dramatic rise in workplace INS raids.

This moment is also an opportunity to confront U.S. foreign policy. We can point to the double standards that exist:

– According to Bush it's bad for Iraq to have weapons of mass destruction, but fine for Israel.

– Although Bush doesn't talk about it, essentially it was okay for the United States to have given Iraq biological weapons when Saddam Hussein was the friend of past administrations, but now the Bush administration has the right to police the country. Of course the media fails to note that many of Hussein's crimes took place when he was Washington's favourite.

And it's also a chance to talk about how U.S. policy in the Middle East is driven by oil.

In the auto plant where I work, many workers have served in the Military - not just Vietnam era workers who were subject to the draft - but many younger workers who enlisted in order to get some skills. Some are still in the reserves. So when there is talk of war, it is very close to the bone. My co-workers often raise the idea that we must do everything to keep our soldiers from being in a war. Even veterans of past wars have spoken up to say they distrust the pro-war propaganda they hear.

In Detroit our Labor Committee for Peace and Justice is working with the Detroit Coalition of Labor Union Women to pull together a forum in February: 'Why Labor Should Oppose the Coming War.' Our perspective also includes organizing a workshop directed toward labour activists whenever teach-ins are organized by some of the larger local antiwar coalitions.

As the Detroit Labor Committee for Peace and Justice leaflet against the coming war in Iraq points out, if we don't trust Bush's domestic policies because we see how destructive they are for our needs, why should we trust his foreign policy?