



Extract of Le Journal des Alternatives

<http://journal.alternatives.ca/spip.php?article2019>

AFL-CIO Convention calls for troop withdrawal from Iraq

- EN - Our organisation - Our Publications - Analysis and Articles -

Publication date: Monday 1 August 2005

Description:

CHICAGO, IL (7/26/05) - On the second day of its convention in Chicago, the AFL-CIO took an historic step, calling for the rapid withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, and an end to the country's occupation

Copyright © Le Journal des Alternatives - All rights reserved

CHICAGO, IL (7/26/05) - On the second day of its convention in Chicago, the AFL-CIO took an historic step, calling for the rapid withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, and an end to the country's occupation.

Public attention has focused largely on the split in US labor, and the decision by two of the federation's largest unions to leave. Yet the impact of this call will reverberate for years, with as profound effect on the future of US workers and their unions.

Brooks Sunkett, vice-president of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), started a train of passionate speeches on the convention floor, saying that the government had lied to him when it sent him to war in Vietnam three decades ago. "We have to stop it from lying to a new generation now," he implored. Henry Nicholas, a hospital union leader in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, told delegates that his son, who has served four tours of duty in Iraq, is now threatened with yet another.

Speaker after speaker rose to condemn the war and occupation, and to demand the return of the troops. No one dared defend a policy that has caused revulsion throughout US unions.

Watching from the visitors' gallery was a handful of Iraqi union leaders. One of them had traveled to the US two months ago, with five other union activists, to plead the case of Iraqi workers. For 16 days they traveled to more than 50 cities, often speaking before hundreds of angry workers, demanding an end to the occupation. The Iraqis urged their US union counterparts to take action.

The resolution at the convention was the answer to this call. It was the culmination as well of an upsurge that has swept through US unions since before the war started two years ago. From the point when it became clear that the Bush administration intended to invade Iraq, union activists began organizing a national network to oppose it, US Labor Against the War. What started as a collection of small groups, in a handful of unions, has today to become a coalition of unions representing over a million members.

The network organized the tour of the Iraqi unionists, to provide them a chance to speak directly to US workers. "We believed strongly that if unions in our country could hear their Iraqi brothers and sisters asking for the withdrawal of US troops, they would respond in a spirit of solidarity and human sympathy," said Gene Bruskin, one of USLAW's national coordinators. "We were right."

Resolutions calling for troop withdrawal poured in from unions, labor councils, and state labor federations across the country. But as the convention began, AFL-CIO national staff tried to substitute another resolution that called for ending the occupation "as soon as possible." This was the same position as that put forward by the Bush administration.

Delegates at the convention, who belong to the USLAW network then called for using instead the phrase "rapid withdrawal" of the troops. At a strategy-planning session attended by over 150 delegates, US and Iraqi unionists joined together to plan a fight on the convention floor to win that language. Before it could take place, however, CWA Vice-president Larry Cohen went to the AFL-CIO executive council, the federation's ruling body, and asked them to accept the change. Knowing that a fight was in store, and suddenly unsure of their ability to win it, the council agreed.

The resolution was put on the floor of the convention Tuesday afternoon, two days before the scheduled debate on Iraq. When the proposal for rapid withdrawal was introduced by Fred Mason, head of the AFL-CIO in Maryland, it was obvious what he meant by the words.

His call to "get out now" became a chorus thundering from speaker after speaker. The new language was adopted with the votes of an overwhelming majority.

The resolution marks a watershed moment in modern US labor history. It is the product of grassroots action at the bottom of the US labor movement, not a directive from top leaders. The call for bringing the troops home echoes the sentiments of thousands of ordinary workers and rank-and-file union members, whose children and family have been called on to fight the war. A growing number, who now form a majority in US unions, believe the best way to protect them is to bring them home.

The resolution represents a deeper understanding that is making its way into thousands of discussions in workplaces and union halls. The war in Iraq never had much credibility as an effort to find weapons of mass destruction, since none were ever found. The administration's claim that it is fighting to bring democracy to Iraqi people inspired a similar disbelief.

After five years of administration attacks on US workers and unions, none but the most diehard of its supporters have much faith left in its pro-democracy pronouncements.

Over the last year, however, the Iraqis themselves have provided a new understanding of the occupation's anti-democratic impact. American military authorities, they told US union members, have banned labor organization in oil fields, factories and other Iraqi public enterprises. Meanwhile, Bush political operatives have begun to engineer the sell off of those enterprises to foreign corporations, with a potential loss of thousands of jobs and the income needed to rebuild the country.

"This is not liberation. It is occupation," said Ghasib Hassan, a leader of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, one of the unions that sent its members to speak in the US. "At the beginning of the 21st century, we thought we'd seen the end of colonies, but now we're entering a new era of colonization."

In the many meetings and discussions that finally led to the resolution, union members understood the purpose of the occupation in a new way - as the imposition, at gunpoint, of Bush administration free market policies on Iraq. After the resolution's passage, the Iraqis called on delegates to act on that understanding, and asked the AFL-CIO to bring its members out to coming national demonstrations against the war.

Rapid withdrawal means more than just bringing US soldiers home. Calling for it puts American workers on the side of Iraqis, as they resist the transformation of their country for the benefit of a wealthy global elite. Brooks Sunkett, Vietnam vet turned union leader, spoke powerfully for this renewed unwillingness to wage wars based on lies and greed. His call for rapid withdrawal breathes new life into the Vietnam syndrome - so feared by US administrations intent on military intervention to defend their free market policies around the world.