COMMENTARY:
AN ATTACK AGAINST ORGANIZED LABOR

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Over the last few years, organized labor has taken a one-two punch. First, by a precipitous loss of members, and then by the break-up of the AFL-CIO. Now, at a time when skilled white-collar workers are turning to unions in droves for job protection, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) may have thrown the knock-out punch to organized labor.

In its “Kentucky River” decision involving nurses, the NLRB ruled that “workers are supervisors if they — on a regular basis, even if it’s infrequent — assign an employee to a particular unit or location, to work at a certain time, or to do a significant task.” Additionally, those accountable for the work they assign are also defined as supervisors. For example, nurses overseeing a shift are supervisors if they tell another nurse to care for a specific patient. The standard used in the past defined a supervisor as one who has the authority to hire, fire, or transfer an employee. Under this new ruling, virtually every skilled and professional employee may be defined as a supervisor, which could mean that all skilled and professional workers are ineligible for union protections.

The implications of the decision, which applies to all private-sector workers, are best summarized by dissenting voices on the NLRB. Dissenters claim that the “decision threatens to create a new class of workers under federal labor law; workers who have neither the genuine prerogatives of management, nor the statutory rights of ordinary employees.” Put more bluntly, by another commentator, “(e)mployers now have a road map for excluding workers from a union.” NLRB dissenters assert that about 20 million professionals could now be deemed supervisors under the ruling.

Just look at the categories of jobs that fit under this new definition. The list is endless, but includes nurses, physicians, laboratory workers, teachers, and engineers, just to name a few, as well as many in the skilled blue-collar trades, such as the building trades industry. Think, for example, of an apprentice working for a master carpenter, something that happens all the time in the building trades industry. The master may now fit the definition as a supervisor exempt from union protections.
President Bush is quick to attack the “left” for waging class warfare, but his Orwellian rhetoric doesn’t match reality. It is the president and his profit-hungry corporate cronies who are waging class warfare, and the most recent NLRB decision is part of this ongoing campaign. Indeed, it follows other recent decisions and presidential actions stripping many groups of their union protections, including graduate employees — whom the NLRB defined as students — Defense Department employees, and even disabled workers.

While union busters stand on the sidelines cheering, President Bush’s class war is breaking the back of America’s middle class and turning the United States into a country of haves and have-nots. As fewer workers are unionized, corporate profits reach record highs while wages plummet. In fact, in 2006, Commerce Department data show that the share of national income for wages and salaries was the lowest level on record. Yet, the share of national income going to corporate profits was at its highest mark since 1950. More, with the demise of organized labor — membership is now down to 7 percent of the workforce in the private sector — fewer people have health insurance and pensions. Once seen as a right, health care and pensions are now viewed as a privilege.

The key institution for countless millions in their quest to realize the American dream — organized labor — created the American middle class as we know it. Now, in the Orwellian world of 21st century America, labor is the target of a vicious class war that’s hidden and obfuscated by rhetoric denouncing class warfare. If they continue, it won’t be long before these attacks on labor make the U.S. look like a Third World colonial nation characterized by extreme poverty for the many and extraordinary wealth for the few.

Sadly, that’s the vision underlying Bush’s class attacks on organized labor.

**Sources**


“NLRB Decision on Supervisors is an Unreasonable Stretch.” American Federation of Teachers Press Release 3 Oct. 2006

“NLRB Nurse Supervisor Decision Will Harm Patient Care.” American Federation of Teachers Press Release 3 Oct. 2006