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LABOR'S MISTAKEN ANTI-CHINA CAMPAIGN

ON MAY 24, 2000, THE AMERICAN LABOR MOVEMENT SUFFERED A SIGNIFICANT DEFEAT when the House of Representatives voted 237 to 197 to approve Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) for China. Mobilizing resources of the American labor movement from coast to coast, the labor movement had, in its anti-PNTR efforts, mounted its largest legislative campaign in years. But was this the best step to have taken on the heels of the powerful anti-World Trade Organization coalition that emerged in Seattle in November 1999? While the campaign was launched with the intent of promoting internationalism and avoiding China-bashing, it has in fact weakened the strong anticorporate and international solidarity focus coming out of the anti-WTO protests in Seattle. And more broadly, the campaign's ultimate impact has been to fuel cold war politics, encourage an unholy alliance with the right wing, and perpetuate racially offensive messages.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

RUNNING AS A FAULT LINE THROUGHOUT the U.S. labor movement's history has been hostility toward Asian workers. American unions were major proponents of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the first racially exclusive U.S. immigration policies targeting people from a single country. Subsequently, the racist immigration laws

were expanded to include other immigrants from Asia.

The American Federation of Labor, under its first president, Samuel Gompers, explicitly forbade Asian workers from joining the ranks of the American labor movement. This policy of exclusion and hostility continued well into the twentieth century. While hostility to China declined somewhat

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during World War II when China was an ally in the war against Japan, the postwar victory of Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communist Party marked the beginning of the cold war. During the cold war, U.S. attitudes toward China led to renewed racist portrayals of China and the Chinese as "inscrutable," untrustworthy people and ruthless killers. The "yellow hordes of coolies" of the nineteenth century were transformed into the "red hordes" of the twentieth century as Americans were taught to fear the hundreds of millions of "Red Chinese" who were considered a threat to U.S. security.

The U.S. labor movement has been at the forefront in supporting U.S. cold war policy. And while labor today has made an important change in its attitude toward immigrants, siding with undocumented workers and their right to organize, many cold war, anti-Chinese vestiges are still alive and well within U.S. society. China continues to be a major target of the conservative and religious right, whose adherents maintain this cold war ideology in their crusade against China.

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This historical context is vital information when labor advocates are deciding on tactics. Labor advocates should criticize actions by the Chinese government, but they must view such actions in the context of a legacy of racism and hostility against Chinese and Asian workers.

SINGLING OUT CHINA

THE MOST RECENT CAMPAIGN TO DENY China PNTR and WTO admission was a step backwards in the campaign against corporate-sponsored "globalization" and for fair trade, development, and global solidarity. The AFL-CIO advanced the slogan "No Blank Check for China," which was misleading: PNTR status, was after all, merely the same as that the United States gives other nations it trades with. The slogan also shifted the focus of the globalization debate away from corporations and the U.S. government's actions and onto China, which is hardly driving globalization. China is neither a major player in establishing international trade policies nor a beneficiary of corporate global domination. Instead, China, like other developing nations, has been exploited for its natural resources and cheap labor by other countries.

The campaign against China has shifted attention away from key structural problems of the global economy. Whether or not China is granted PNTR does not change the fundamental problems of corporate control of trade policies. Similarly, whether or not China is admitted to the WTO does not change the fundamental problems of the WTO's refusal to address issues of labor, human rights, and environmental standards.

Certainly, trade unionists and all other people of conscience must actively oppose human rights abuses, labor rights abuses, and environmental degradation in China, as well as support Chinese workers in their struggles to build democratic trade unions and to fight for social and economic justice. But the American labor movement must have a clear, consistent policy on global trade and development, and on human rights, that does not unfairly single out China.

Unfortunately, the violations of political, labor, and human rights do not distinguish

China from other countries that have PNTR with the United States or from some of the 135 current WTO member governments. The U.S. government itself has a deplorable track record of supporting repressive regimes in

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Indonesia, Iran, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, and other countries. In fact, a U.S. challenge to China's WTO entry because of political and human rights abuse amounts to hypocrisy. China should not be singled out for some of the very same human rights abuses that occur in the United States, such as widespread use of prison labor. For union leaders to spearhead the campaign against China implies that the biggest threat to U.S. workers is China—not corporate-driven globalization and the corporate-dominated institutions driving the race to the bottom such as the WTO, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

THE ANTI-CHINA CAMPAIGN'S FLAWS

IN ADDITION TO DIVERTING ATTENTION FROM key global issues, the anti-China campaign, has been marked by serious tactical problems. First, it has inevitably built on the cold war framework and on racially hostile sentiment against China. The April 12, 2000, demonstration against China held in

Washington, D.C., had the embarrassing consequence of providing a forum for Teamster President James Hoffa Jr. and right-wing demagogue Pat Buchanan to address union members from the same stage. At the AFL-CIO rally, union leaders denounced China as a "godless" society. Unionists wore T-shirts demonizing China and promoting an image of the Chinese as ruthless killers and torturers. Unfortunately, the anti-China campaign has been a step backwards for the new AFL-CIO leaders, who have done much otherwise to break with the cold war positioning of the

labor movement and to construct a new alliance with communities of faith, immigrants, and social movements, on international as well as domestic issues.

The campaign has also undermined labor's efforts in working with the Democrats to recapture the House and the Senate and to retain the presidency. Industrial unions have been the most vocal in denouncing the White House's campaign for China's PNTR status, and these same unions have historically been strongest in the midwestern states, which have emerged as the central battleground for the November presidential election. If this conflict is not brought under control, the resulting political fallout could be considerable.

Finally, while approval of China's PNTR status was clearly an important issue for the Clinton Administration and for business, a labor success in denying this status would have been a Pyrrhic victory at best. In that case, the debate over China would merely have continued annually with renewal of its Most Favored Nation (MFN) status. Preserving the status quo would not have

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advanced labor's agenda, would not have changed the WTO, and would not have strengthened international labor solidarity.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

THE IMPACT OF CHINA'S PNTR STATUS ON U.S. and Chinese workers is uncertain. Increased trade with China may cause downward pressure on wages in the United States, but trade with China was on the increase even without its PNTR status. Clearly, the U.S. corporate agenda of free trade, privatization, and deregulation is taking its toll on workers domestically and internationally. But to blame China for U.S. capital flight and for U.S. corporations' shifting of production to the Third World is neither fair nor accurate.

China's admission to the WTO may negatively affect Chinese workers; however, it is problematic for the U.S. labor movement to

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attempt to speak on behalf of Chinese workers. When advancing international policy, the American labor movement should do so in the spirit of internationalism. No clear consensus exists among human rights and labor activists in China with regard to PNTR or the WTO, and it is chauvinism for the

American labor movement to speak unilaterally on behalf of Chinese workers with whom they have had no dialogue. Furthermore, within the international labor arena, there clearly is no consensus supporting the U.S. labor movement's unilateral anti-China campaign.

China will no doubt oppose the inclusion of human rights and worker's rights in trade agreements. China, however, is not alone in this stance. Most Asian countries—indeed, most Third World governments—oppose such a linkage. China will not have a veto within the WTO and, like all of the other 135 member countries, will be expected to follow its rules. The WTO has unequivocally opposed inclusion of labor and human rights in its mandate, and it is hard to imagine that rejection of China's PNTR status would have forced a change in the WTO's stance.

With or without PNTR, trade with China has been increasing, and relations between China and the United States will grow. Labor needs to encourage critical engagement with China—including criticism of China's human rights practices—but not isolation. Since China is too important for the U.S. labor movement to communicate with simply via the U.S. media alone, labor leaders should take a bold step and seek to open up dialogue and cultivate relationships with workers and

trade unions in China. While American labor leaders should continue to meet with Chinese political dissidents, it would also be important to meet with other union leaders and workers in China.

China is home of the largest trade union confederation in the world. Although

Chinese trade unions are not independent from the government, they are strong worker organizations with 100 million members, and they reflect great diversity, depending on the industry, sector, geographic area, and individual leaders. The policies of the cold war have prevented the American labor movement from establishing fraternal relations with trade unions in China. To this day, the AFL-CIO does not recognize the Chinese trade union movement, and Chinese trade unionists cannot visit the United States as official representatives of their unions—even though President Richard Nixon went to China and opened U.S. relations with the People's Republic of China in 1972. It may well be time for AFL-CIO President John Sweeney to consider a similar initiative and reach out to Chinese workers.

The reality is that China has undergone tremendous change in the past few decades.

The Chinese economic system has rapidly transformed from a centralized, state-run one toward a mixed economy, with a growing market and increasing foreign investment. The results have been both positive and negative for Chinese workers. The economy has experienced significant growth and development, along with dislocation and growing economic inequality. Human rights, political repression, and environmental degradation are crucial issues. In this context of change, would not more worker-to-worker and union-to-union exchange be positive? Through more dialogue with Chinese workers and unions, the American labor movement could promote mutually beneficial labor solidarity, move beyond the cold war and unilateralism, and refocus attention on the domestic and global corporations and associated institutions that are, in fact, the main threat to workers throughout the world.