

AFL-CIO 25th National Convention Chicago, Illinois

Debate on Resolution 53 on Iraq (Tuesday afternoon, July 26, 2005)

For the first time in its 50 year history, the AFL-CIO voted to break with the U.S. government over a foreign war.

The decision to adopt a resolution calling for rapid return of all U.S. troops from Iraq was the product of more than a year of patient steady organizing on the part of antiwar labor activists and union leaders across the country, led and coordinated by U.S. Labor Against the War.

Eighteen AFL-CIO affiliates (unions, labor councils and state federations) submitted resolutions calling for either an immediate or rapid end to the occupation and return of the troops. The General Executive Council, meeting on the eve of the convention, prepared its own resolution, drawing elements from the eighteen but failing to include a demand for immediate or rapid withdrawal. It was the GEC resolution that was reported to the convention floor for a vote by the Resolutions Committee, which met over the weekend prior to the opening of the convention in Monday, July 25th.

Throughout the weekend and all day Monday, USLAW supporters leafleted and lobbied delegates, inviting them to a reception Monday evening cosponsored by Pride at Work and USLAW for the Iraqi union leaders who attended the convention as guests of the AFL-CIO. More than 150 people turned out for the reception, reflecting the strength of antiwar sentiment and support for a strong anti-occupation resolution.

USLAW forces caucused and decided to propose an amendment calling for a rapid return of the troops. The transcription that follows makes clear that by "rapid" the delegates mean "immediate" or "speedy" withdrawal, not some drawn out "phased" down-sizing of the U.S. military presence. No one spoke against the amendment, which was adopted, nor against the amended resolution. The resolution passed by an overwhelming majority vote of the delegates.

*** Presentation of Resolution 53 by Leo Gerard, President of the Steelworkers union, on behalf of the AFL-CIO's Resolutions Committee:**

Resolution 53 deals with our country's military involvement in Iraq, surely a difficult and contentious issue. The resolution applauds the courage of our soldiers, insists that they be properly equipped with protective fighting gear and armored vehicles, and calls for expanded benefits for veterans and those returning from Iraq.

It calls for our troops to be brought home as quickly as possible.

And finally the resolution asserts that the bedrock of any democracy is a free, democratic labor movement, and calls on the Iraqi government to adopt new labor laws that conform to ILO standards.

This resolution was submitted by the Executive Council and subsumes Resolutions 35 to 39, and Resolution 56. Upon adoption of Resolution 53, there will be no further action taken on the subsumed resolutions.

The many resolutions submitted on Iraq clearly reflect the very strongly held views from around the country on the war in Iraq. There were 18 different resolutions originally submitted by State Labor Federations and Central Labor Councils, some of which were combined before the resolutions were finalized.

Resolution 53 reflects many months of consideration and discussion by the International Affairs Committee of the AFL-CIO and more recently this week by the Resolutions Committee.

Mr. Chairman, this Committee recommends that Resolution 53 be adopted. On behalf of the Committee, I so move.

*** Gerald McEntee, President of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and Chairperson of the Convention Resolutions Committee:**

You heard the report of the committee. Do I hear support? Yes, I hear support. The Chair understands that the delegate on microphone 3 is prepared to offer what the Federation believes is a friendly amendment to Resolution 53. And I would like to invite delegate Fred Mason to make such an amendment. Brother Mason ...

*** Fred Mason, President, Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO:**

Thank you very much. I'm Fred Mason, President of the Maryland State and District of Columbia AFL-CIO and also a proud member of the American Federation of Teachers.

I rise today to offer a friendly amendment. This amendment would change Paragraph 2, Line 9 and would simply change the words "as quickly as possible" to "rapidly." I would urge for a second to this friendly amendment. [spontaneous applause from the delegates]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

The Chair deems this a friendly amendment. Does he have support? I hear support. All those in favor of the friendly amendment signify by saying "aye" [loud response]. Those opposed say "no" [no opposition heard]. The "ayes" have it. Your amendment is friendly, brother.

Fred Mason:

Thank you very much. And if I may, President McEntee, I also would like to express my pride in the work and deliberations of the Executive Council in taking up this very important issue.

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Good. Most of the International Affairs Committee, as Leo [Gerard] said, worked very hard and very long. The delegate on mike 1 ...

*** Traven Leyshon, President, Washington-Orange-Lamoille Labor Council (Vermont):**

My name is Traven Leyshon. I am the President of the Washington-Orange-Lamoille Labor Council in Vermont. Our labor council is one of the 18 affiliates that submitted resolutions quite similar to the one that we're discussing at this point. Our central labor council and our Vermont State Federation call for supporting our troops by bringing them home now [applause] to their families and loved ones. We took this position only after careful consideration and building unity among the membership and officers of our local unions and community allies.

By adopting this resolution we will join with unions representing millions of members who have taken a stand for peace and against occupation. To mention only a few: AFSCME, CWA, APWU, American Federation of Musicians, many of our State Federations (California, Washington, Wisconsin, Vermont, etc.), as well as numerous central labor councils -- as well, of course, as SEIU and NEA. Indeed, I think, this is a majority of organized labor.

Many of our troops are union members, or they're from families of union members, who face extraordinary danger with courage and sacrifice. Bringing them home now is the best means of protecting and honoring them.

The Bush Administration is using the war and national security hysteria to create a climate to attack civil liberties, collective bargaining rights, and the right to organize. Just ask the Department of Defense employees, the Transportation Security Administration workers, or the West Coast longshoremen about the impact of the war on workers' rights.

The Vermont AFL-CIO was a proud sponsor, along with many of you, of a recent tour of Iraqi labor leaders who met with thousands of union members across this country. The Iraqis gave voice to the working people of Iraq -- until the tour, a voice largely unheard in the U.S. They issued a joint statement, which states in part:

"The principal obstacle to peace, stability, and the reconstruction of Iraq is the occupation. The occupation is the problem, not the solution. Iraqi sovereignty and independence must be restored. The occupation must end in all its forms, including military bases and economic domination. ... The occupation has been a catastrophe for both our peoples."

As Resolution 53 concludes:

"Iraq's workers and their institutions are already leaders in the struggle for democracy. Trade unionists are being targeted for their activism, and some have paid for their valor with their lives. ... In concert with the international trade union movement, the AFL-CIO will continue to provide our full solidarity to Iraq's workers as they lead the struggle for an end to the violence and a more just and democratic nation."

Indeed, as the voice of the organized U.S. working class, we have a responsibility to stand with Iraq's courageous labor movement, and to fight to bring our troops home now! I thank you. [applause]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Delegate mike 2 ...

*** Nancy Wohlforth, International Secretary Treasurer, Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) and National Co-Chair, Pride at Work:**

My name is Nancy Wohlforth, and I'm with the Office and Professional Employees International Union. I would just like to draw the attention of all the delegates to the unionists who are here from Iraq. Could you please stand up [addressing the Iraqi delegation in the guest section of the convention hall] so we can all see you [standing ovation].

I am very proud to know many of them as I have had the opportunity to be a Co-convenor of U.S. Labor Against the War, which sponsored the tour of six Iraqi trade unionists to the United States.

The purpose of the tour was to educate trade union rank-and-file members and trade union leaders to the real truth of what's going on in Iraq. All too often, all we hear are the lies and deceit of the Bush administration that put us in Iraq on a lot of false pretexts and keeps us in Iraq for absolutely no good reason except to enrich his cronies in Halliburton and other such companies. [applause]

We asked the Iraqi trade unionists to tell us honestly what they believe about this war and what they want American working people to do to help them in their struggle to build unions, justice and equity and fairness in the work place, and get their lives back together so that can have running water, electricity and gasoline. ? We asked them what they wanted.

And I'll tell you what they want: They want an end to the U.S. occupation [applause]. They want it now, and not yesterday [applause]. Because as long as we are there, they can never really achieve their self-determination and build a truly democratic state.

So we in U.S. Labor Against the War say to the Iraqi unionists: Thank you for telling us what you think; now it's our responsibility to get the word out to every single trade union in the country that we must tell George Bush that we are sick and tired of his lies, and we are sick and tired of the massive deficit that is built up supporting this war while schools are going down the drain, while our working people are being laid off, and while so many other vital needs are not being dealt with.

That is why we must now mobilize and bring people to a massive demonstration in Washington on September 24. Thank you very much. [applause]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you. Delegate mike 3 ...

*** Brooks Sunkett, Vice President, Communication Workers of America (CWA):**

Mr. Chairman, brothers and sisters. My name is Brooks Sunkett, and I'm from CWA.

I rise in support of this resolution for many reasons. Number one: I'm a Vietnam veteran. And this war seems very similar to that war. Lies were told to me then, and lies are being told to me now. [long applause]

We were told that there were weapons of mass destruction -- and, as we all know, there were no weapons of mass destruction.

Number two: This war is tearing our country apart.

Number three: The cost of the war is putting our public sector services at stake. I am also a public sector worker. And 250 million dollars a day is being spent on this war. All together, 200 billion dollars have been spent. That means sacrificing the public sector infrastructure of this country.

Number four: How many more men and women need to die, how many more families need to be torn apart, how many more of our sons and daughters need to be maimed because of this war?

It was a mistake to go to war, and it is a mistake to stay in. [loud and long applause]

Number five: The people of Iraq don't want us there. We lied to get there, and they would like for us to leave. All we are doing is exacerbating a very bad situation.

On behalf of working families, on behalf of our communities, on behalf of our sons and daughters, on behalf of families everywhere, I urge all of you to support this resolution. [applause]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you brother. Delegate mike 4 ...

*** David Newby, President, Wisconsin State AFL-CIO:**

Chairman McEntee, brothers and sisters: My name is David Newby and I'm President of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, one of the state federations that submitted resolutions to this convention.

Both of the resolutions we submitted were passed last September at our State AFL-CIO Convention. To be perfectly honest with you, I expected there to be a lot of debate over those resolutions. I've never in my experience in the labor movement not seen a situation where a resolution on an international affairs issue came before a convention that was not extremely contentious.

As a result, I was really quite surprised that these were not contentious resolutions. One called for an end to the occupation in Iraq, the other called for the restoration of the right of Iraqi workers to organize and form unions. There was almost no opposition. And in fact, my hunch is that there were fewer than 10 out of the many hundreds of delegates present who voted against these resolutions.

I think this was because, number one, our delegates were outraged that President Bush and members of his administration lied to us in order to start this war -- a war that was planned probably from the very first day that he became president. And they were outraged as well, I think, because as a result of that war -- which we got into because of lies to the American people and to Congress -- over 1,700 of our men and women in uniform have died, and tens of thousands of Iraqis civilians have died.

And those 1,700 men and women in uniform come almost completely from working families. They are our members, or the sons and daughters of our members.

I urge you very strongly to adopt this resolution. I think it is carefully crafted. And I think it sends a message both to the President and to the American people that we simply must end this war and end this outrage that has been visited upon us by President Bush. [loud applause]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you brother. Delegate mike 1 ...

*** Tom Lee, President, American Federation of Musicians:**

I'm Tom Lee, President of the American Federation of Musicians. I rise in support of Resolution 53. Last week at our 96th Convention our delegates supported a resolution similar to the one we have before us.

I don't think there's anybody in this room who wouldn't support the overthrow of a dictatorial regime. There's no one in this room who wouldn't support the right for people throughout our world to enjoy basic human rights -- and there is nobody in this room who wouldn't support the right to self-determination.

However, this administration has embarked on a new and dangerous path: a pre-emptive war without an imminent threat to the U.S. This is a policy that makes us less secure, increases the threat of terrorism, and has put Iraq on a path of civil war, rather than on the path of a democratic society.

There's a general agreement in the United States and throughout the world that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction that posed an imminent threat to this country or to Iraq's neighbors. In fact, the only weapons of mass destruction were the bombs and missiles that were falling out of our own planes on the poor people of Iraq, who are being killed and maimed.

The war and the military occupation of Iraq have cost the lives of over 1,700 troops, the wounding and disabling of thousands more, and the death, by some estimates, of over 150,000 Iraqi civilians, with casualties among soldiers of other nations and the devastation of much of that country.

Last week we heard an impassioned plea from one of our delegates who was in the Korean War. This gentleman stood up and said, "I wish, I truly wish somebody when I was in the Korean War had introduced a resolution like this and kept my ass out of those bunkers." [applause] He said, "I was scared, I was afraid, we were all afraid. I still suffer from nightmares because nobody had the courage to stand up and get me out of those bunkers."

We recognize the courage of U.S. military troops, many of whom are members or relatives of members of various unions, including all of the unions of the AFL-CIO and other organizations. But the war and occupation of Iraq have cost over 200 billion dollars, leading directly to cuts in social and human services, education, music and arts programs, and even benefits for the very veterans from this and other conflicts.

Our workers and their families face growing domestic challenges, unemployment, declining wages and benefits, de-unionization of the work force, reduced public services, cutbacks in health care and education services, cuts in veterans' benefits, threatened cuts in Social Security, escalating public debt -- as well as sharp declines in the funding for music and the arts.

We support Resolution 53. We want to bring our troops home. We should start a movement to bring our troops home now and reorder the priorities of this administration to bring health care and bring back the things that people need. Thank you. [loud applause]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you brother. Delegate mike 2 ...

*** Henry Nicholas, President, AFSCME 1199 (Pennsylvania)**

Mr. Chairman, my name is Henry Nicholas, and I'm a delegate from AFSCME. I stand before the delegates as one of those patriots. My son has been called back to Iraq four times already, and he's on the list to go back now. He talks of the lack of equipment for the servicemen.

But there is another side of that. Most of our sons and daughters serving in Iraq, when they come home, there is no help here. My son is a nervous wreck right now, but he's on the list to go back. He knows that when he comes back home, there will be no jobs here.

We need to say that the sons and daughters of the American families should come home now! [applause]

And I must say to all the members of this labor movement that I'm so proud. This is my proudest moment being a union member, because in all the 49 years that I've been coming to these conventions, this is the first time we've had the moral courage to stand up and say "Enough is enough!"

Thank you so very much. [loud applause]

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you brother. Delegate mike 3

*** Tim Paulson, Executive Director, San Francisco Labor Council:**

My name is Tim Paulson and I'm the Executive Director of the San Francisco Labor Council. Early on, the delegates to our Council realized that this was a distortion of the values of working men and women in our country. All this money that is being spent on bombs and occupation could have been used for health care, jobs, and infrastructure. It could have been used for the things that working men and women absolutely value. That's what we believe in.

Very early on, we passed a resolution that said that we must bring the troops home immediately! We believe, as Jesse Jackson said today, that we must "Bring the troops home!" "Bring the troops home!"

We believe that when you say "rapidly," that would be the same as "immediately" -- and that is why we are going to support this resolution.

I also want to thank our brothers and sisters of U.S. Labor Against the War for the hard work they have done across the country [loud applause] to make sure we are all aware of, and united around, this issue -- which is an issue of central concern to all working men and women. Thank you.

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you, brother. Delegate mike 4 ...

*** Tom Hobart, Vice President from New York, American Federation of Teachers:**

Mr. Chairman, I'm Tom Hobart, American Federation of Teachers, Vice President from New York. The AFT supports this well-crafted resolution that is before us. I know everybody in this room wants peace both in America and in Iraq. But there is not going to be peace in America or in Iraq today ... or tomorrow.

More Americans every day realize that President Bush misled us on why we went to war, and he also poorly executed that war. But we are there.

All of us, everyone in America I'm sure supports our men and women in uniform who are over there. But what we are going to have to do is make sure that they are removed safely, and that the people in Iraq are also safe.

Remember that the terrorists are not only killing American service people, they are also killing Iraqis. And we cannot leave there, and leave the terrorists in charge of that country, in which we went in and disrupted the order that was there, however bad it was, and then have a killing field like we saw in Cambodia.

I urge the delegates to pass this resolution that was carefully crafted in order to stand in a position that does what is right in a war that maybe was started for the very wrong reasons.

*** Chairperson McEntee:**

Thank you brother. Delegate mike 1 ...

Mr. Chairman. I'm with the American Federation of Teachers. I move to close the discussion.

Chairman McEntee:

The motion has been made to move the previous question and close the discussion. All those in favor of closing the debate signify by saying "aye." All those opposed say "no." The "ayes" have it.

Before you is amended Resolution 53. Debate has been closed. We'll vote on the amended resolution. All those in favor signify by saying aye" [overwhelming majority]. All those opposed say "no" [a few voices].

The "ayes" have it. So ordered. [loud applause]

[Convention discussion on Iraq Resolution 53 transcribed verbatim from audio tape by Donna Kesselman and Alan Benjamin]