

# ...Cost of 9/11 attacks on workers is incalculable

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Pat Friend, who was president of Association of Flight Attendants at the time, says the airline industry never truly recovered. Airline employment today is still below what it was prior to the attacks. The biggest airlines entered bankruptcy, their employee pensions terminated and taken over by the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. With the industry in freefall, airline unions agreed to wage givebacks, but wages never returned to the earlier levels, even after air travel stabilized.

Thousands of aircraft manufacturing workers also lost their jobs in the aftermath of 9/11, as airplane orders collapsed. Within a year of the attacks, Boeing had laid off up to 30,000 workers.

Meanwhile, at the site of the collapsed towers, working people — particularly building trades workers from New York and the vicinity — mobilized a massive search and rescue and cleanup effort. They and thousands of other workers in the area inhaled toxic dust from the pulverized towers, dust which contained over 2,500 contaminants, including asbestos, lead, and mercury. The exposure led to thousands of illnesses.

War, too, came swiftly on the heels of the attack. On Oct. 7, 2001, the United States and several allied governments invaded Afghanistan. None of the 9/11 attackers were Afghan; 15 were Saudi, two from United Arab Emirates and one each from Lebanon and Egypt. But the attackers were trained and funded by the al-Qaeda terrorist organization led by Osama Bin Laden, which used Afghanistan as a base of operations. And the Taliban government balked at handing Osama bin Laden over to U.S. authorities. The invasion toppled the Taliban government; a military occupation continues to this day.

On Oct. 26, 2001, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act: It authorized the indefinite detention of non-citizens; expanded telephone and Internet surveillance; expanded government authority to conduct searches, including “sneak and peek” searches in which subjects aren’t told their property has been searched; and enabled the government to brand groups as terrorist organizations and deport their non-citizen members. It also granted the FBI broad access to individuals’ medical, financial and educational records, even lists of what library books they checked out; and for the first time allowed the CIA to gather information from other agencies about American citizens and residents.

At the time, the AFL-CIO warned that domestic spying could eventually sweep in unions and citizens organiza-

tions and threaten independent political and social activism: “We cannot accept excessive secrecy and unaccountable power that deny Americans the ability to question the authority and evaluate the conduct of their government,” the labor federation’s Executive Council said in a resolution.

On Nov. 19, 2001, Congress passed a law federalizing airport security, creating the Transportation Security Administration. But airport screeners would have to wait until President George W. Bush left office before they could win the right to unionize. Year after year, Bush threatened to veto any homeland security legislation that included union rights for the screeners. And in November 2002, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act, combin-

ing 22 federal agencies into one super-agency with expanded funding and a mission focused on terrorism. One of the agencies, the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA), was sufficiently distracted by its new focus that it was unprepared when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005.

No Iraqi nationals had taken part in the 9/11 attacks, and Al Qaeda had no presence in Iraq. But in late 2002, the Bush Administration began to build a case for war in Iraq, alleging that Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was seeking to develop weapons of mass destruction and could attack the United States. Congress voted to authorize the use of U.S. Armed Forces against Iraq. Hundreds of local and international unions took part in the global anti-war protests; other unions remained neutral.

The invasion began in March 2003.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan caused a boom for some union workers making supplies for the military, like Western Star trucks, Danner Boots, and Gerber Knives in the Portland area.

But they also took a toll on working families with members overseas. At its 2005 convention, the AFL-CIO passed a resolution voicing support for the troops but also declaring that the American people were misinformed before the war began, and calling for a com-

mitment to bring them home rapidly. The AFL-CIO reaffirmed that resolution at its 2009 convention.

About 47,000 U.S. troops continue to occupy Iraq today, and 100,000 are now in Afghanistan.

Close to 10 years in, U.S. casualties are over 6,000 killed and 41,000 wounded. Direct government expenditures for the wars top \$1.3 trillion thus far — money that might otherwise have paid for things like health care, education, or infrastructure.

“There is no way to fund what we must do as a nation without bringing our troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan,” the AFL-CIO Executive Council said in an Aug. 3, 2011 statement. “The militarization of our foreign policy has proven to be a costly mistake. It is time to invest at home.”

For working people, the full cost of the 9/11 attacks is incalculable. The events of September 11, 2001, continue to have an impact, in economics, politics, and war.

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