

A fresh lesson: The end of the Detroit newspaper strike and the crisis of the labor movement

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The following statement originally appeared in the February 24, 1997 issue of the International Workers Bulletin, at that time the printed newspaper of the Socialist Equality Party and forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site. We are also appending an accompanying article entitled "What the International Workers Bulletin said about the Detroit newspaper strike."

The collapse of the Detroit newspaper strike is another humiliating defeat for the labor movement. No amount of double-talk from union officials can conceal this fact. Every striker and every worker who followed the 19-month struggle knows it has ended in a debacle.

It is the nature of the union bureaucracy to conceal the truth and prevent workers from drawing any lessons from this better experience. As the Detroit unions were announcing their unconditional back-to-work offer, the AFL-CIO's Executive Council was assembling for its winter meeting in Los Angeles. It declared the capitulation "a bold new strategy."

Meanwhile, the AFL-CIO was giving President Clinton private assurances of its support for his strike-breaking intervention against the American Airlines pilots. Just three days after the White House ordered the pilots back to work, the Executive Council met with Vice President Gore. AFL-CIO President Sweeney held a joint press conference with Gore, providing him with a platform to declare, in a breath-taking bit of demagoguery, "The right to organize and the right to strike are fundamental rights!"

The bureaucracy can count on its friends and accomplices in the various organizations of middle class ex-radicals—the Communist Party, the Socialist Workers Party, Workers World, Socialist Action, Spartacist League, etc.—to lie to the workers about what has happened, just as they lied throughout the strike to cover up the treachery of the union leadership.

Needless to say, the officials of the Teamsters, the Newspaper Guild and the other striking locals never missed a paycheck. But the defeat of the strike has tragic consequences for the workers. The *Detroit News* and *Free Press* have no intention of rehiring the vast majority of the 1,200-1,500 workers who remained on strike. Some 300 workers who were fired have been abandoned by the unions, as have scores of strikers who were arrested on the picket line and face fines and possible prison terms.

The workers have suffered financial losses they can never recoup. Homes have been foreclosed, cars repossessed, marriages destroyed and families torn apart. But what can and must be salvaged from the wreckage of the strike is an understanding of its lessons, not only for those immediately involved, but for the working class as a whole. This requires

an objective, clear-eyed assessment of what has happened and why.

The collapse of the Detroit newspaper strike is only the latest in a long series of defeated labor struggles, going back more than 20 years, for which the AFL-CIO is directly responsible. A partial list of these defeats provides an indication of the historical character of the AFL-CIO's betrayal of the working class: the *Washington Post* in 1975; the *Oakland (Michigan) Press* in 1977-78; PATCO in 1981; Continental Airlines, Phelps Dodge and Greyhound in 1983-84; AT Massey Coal, United Airlines, Pan American Airlines, the *Chicago Tribune*, Hormel and Wheeling-Pittsburgh in 1985-86; TWA, Colt Firearms, USX Steel, IMP and Patrick Cudahy in 1986-87; John Morrell and International Paper in 1987-99; Pittston Coal and Eastern Airlines in 1989; Greyhound in 1990; the *New York Daily News* in 1990-91; Caterpillar, Bridgestone-Firestone and Staley in 1995.

To put a halt to this chain of betrayals and defeats the working class requires two things: a clear understanding of the role of the AFL-CIO and the social interests it defends, and a new perspective for struggle.

The AFL-CIO represents the interests not of the working class, but of the labor bureaucracy. In the course of decades of collaboration with the corporations and the government, this organization and its affiliated unions have shed any connections they once had to the militant traditions of the American working class. Over the past two decades in particular they have allied themselves directly with big business and its drive to intensify the exploitation of labor. This is what lies behind the AFL-CIO's sabotage of every struggle of workers against layoffs, wage-cutting, union-busting and the destruction of social programs.

The bureaucracy itself is a privileged, upper-middle class social layer. Because it is tied to the capitalist system, it seeks to conceal from the working class the real nature of this system and the position of workers within it.

But experiences like the newspaper strike show the reality of social relations in capitalist America. Corporate giants like Gannett and Knight-Ridder, the media chains that own the *News* and *Free Press*, carry out a ruthless assault on the living standards of their work force, and any attempt by the workers to resist is met with the full force of the capitalist state. The police and the courts are mobilized behind the strike-breaking efforts of the employers. Company thugs are given the run of the streets, while attempts of workers to defend their jobs are denounced in the media as "striker violence." Finally the politicians, Democratic and Republican alike, take their stand, either openly or tacitly, with the corporate bosses.

Such eruptions of class violence are not mere aberrations. They are not,

as liberals and union bureaucrats would have one believe, exceptions to a humane and democratic social order, attributable solely to the subjective greed of rogue employers. They are open expressions of the underlying reality that dominates capitalist society: the irreconcilable conflict between capital and labor.

Who, after all, controls the economic and political levers of American society? Working people, or billionaire investors, bankers and corporate CEOs? To ask the question is to answer it.

American workers confront a social and political system which turns them into second and third-class citizens. The economic chasm between the rich and the masses grows ever wider, and rising social inequality is accompanied by increasing legal inequality, to the point that workers are denied the right to defend themselves against the attacks of the employers.

This is the nature of the social order which the AFL-CIO defends. The trade union bureaucracy seeks to subordinate the working class to a system which holds workers in conditions of exploitation and oppression. Herein lies the source of the cynicism and duplicity of the union leadership.

Corporate management is acutely conscious of its interests. It bases its actions on the imperatives of a global market dominated by financial institutions operating on a world scale. A company like Gannett proceeds from the needs of its major shareholders. It responds every day to the demand of big investors that it provide a sufficient return on their capital. If it fails to do so, its stock will be dumped and newspapers will be closed down.

These are the objective realities of capitalism. The ruling class proceeds not from moral considerations, but from the ruthless defense of its economic interests. With the working class, however, the opposite is the case. It has a leadership which uses lies and illusions to conceal the basic interests of working people.

Bitter experience like the Detroit newspaper strike are teaching more and more workers that the defense of their living standards cannot proceed through the AFL-CIO. There are growing signs of militant resistance to the attacks of big business and the government, and opposition to their agents in the trade union bureaucracy.

But the working class cannot take a step forward unless it recognizes its real position within the profit system and the need to abolish that system. It must proceed from the understanding that it is involved in a class war. It must therefore break the grip of the trade union bureaucracy and reject its entire political outlook. Otherwise, it is doomed to ever more tragic defeats.

Because the struggle between the classes involves irreconcilably opposed interests, it is a political struggle. The issue is, which class is to control the economic levers of society? Who is to make the decisions that affect the lives of millions? The transnational corporations, the banks, the holders of immense sums of capital, or the vast majority of the people, whose labor produces the wealth of society? What are the priorities to be? Corporate profits, or the need of the working people for decent jobs, housing, education and health care?

The great issue facing the working class boils down to the need to build a political party committed to placing the working class in power, and, through the establishment of a democratic workers government, taking those measures necessary to reorganize economic life in the interests of the masses.

Such a government would advance the struggle for social equality and oppose all forms of class privilege. It would systematically expand the sphere of public ownership of the basic means of production—the utilities, the banks, the insurance and health conglomerates, major manufacturing corporations, oil monopolies, telecommunications, media and transportation giants—so as to make the satisfaction of social needs, rather than the accumulation of personal wealth, the driving principle of economic development.

The working class must build a socialist party, and that party is the SEP. Only through the construction of the Socialist Equality Party can the American working class be united as a conscious political force, and the unity of American workers with their class brothers and sisters internationally be forged.

At the same time workers need genuine unions, under the democratic control of the rank and file, together with other forms of organization in the workplace and the community to carry out the day-to-day struggle in defense of their economic interests. But such organizations can only be effective if they are guided by this socialist political perspective.

We call on every worker, young person and student who is looking for a way to fight the attacks of big business and its political parties, and an alternative to the bankrupt policies of the trade union bureaucracy, to consider carefully the revolutionary program of the Socialist Equality Party. Fight for the perspective of socialist internationalism by joining and building the SEP.

What the *International Workers Bulletin* said about the Detroit newspaper strike

July 15—"Detroit workers face a political struggle"

No one should underestimate the dimensions and difficulties of the struggle ahead. Newspaper workers are in for a long and bitter battle. Moreover, if the Detroit workers are not to suffer the same fate as workers in the above-mentioned strikes [the *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Daily News*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*] the lessons of those struggles must be learned.

In each case workers stood behind police barriers for months while scabs were herded in, production was resumed and workers saw decades of gains go down the drain. There was no unified mobilization of the working class as a whole to stop the destruction of jobs and conditions. The same pattern is already unfolding at the *Detroit News* and *Free Press* ...

Newspaper workers must not allow the conduct and strategy of their struggle to remain in the hands of the union bureaucrats who have time and again proven their unwillingness and inability to conduct a serious struggle...

What does this alliance [between the trade unions and the Democratic Party] mean in practical terms for newspaper strikers? Any serious action taken to mobilize workers in support of the *Free Press* and *News* workers must inevitably lead to confrontation with the Archer administration. But for the union leaders the alliance with Archer and the Democrats is the holy of holies, which at all costs must be preserved. Consequently, the union leadership will oppose any serious solidarity action within the working class to back the strike...

There is only one road to victory for the newspaper workers: the active support and participation of masses of workers, acting independently of the trade union bureaucracies. The newspaper strike must become a mass movement of workers against the offensive of big business.

July 31, 1995—"The Detroit newspaper strike: what the record shows"

The July 17 rally at the *Detroit News* building was a textbook example of how the union leadership uses demagogic phrases to cover up its refusal to mount a serious struggle. Hundreds of such rallies have been held over the past 15 years. They have become a ritual part of every sellout from PATCO in 1981 to the current debacles at Caterpillar and Staley. Here talk is not only cheap, it's endless.

The most outrageous falsehood, peddled by one official after another, was the claim that the newspaper strikes at the *New York Daily News*, the *Pittsburgh Press* and the *San Francisco Chronicle / Examiner* were victories for the workers ...

The purpose of this piece of deception is obvious. If *News* and *Free Press* workers can be made to believe that the tactics of the union leadership were successful in these previous struggles, they can be lulled

into following the line of the union leadership in Detroit.

September 25, 1995—"The middle class 'left' and the Detroit newspaper strike"

Notwithstanding the effusions of the middle class groups, the Detroit newspaper strike has underscored certain truths that the working class must assimilate if it is to counter the ongoing offensive of big business, backed by the government, against its jobs and living standards.

The first and most basic fact is the inadequacy of the outlook and methods of narrow trade unionism, all the more so in an increasingly global economy dominated by huge multinational corporations. Even if the workers at the *News* and *Free Press* were blessed with genuinely militant unions and an honest leadership committed to the defense of their interests—which they certainly are not—they would come up against the inherent limitations of a perspective that goes no further than the picket line.

The strike weapon itself is only one tactic in the arsenal of working class struggle. It can be effective today only if it is employed as part of a far broader strategy which proceeds from an understanding of the objective nature of the profit system and the irreconcilable opposition of class interests at the heart of this system...

Aware of the growing frustration and increasingly militant mood of the workers the bureaucracy is prepared to call limited actions and even sanction occasional punch-ups with the police.... They serve two purposes—to give the union leaders a left cover and to dissipate the anger of the workers, in the end sowing greater discouragement and passivity.

This is the reason for the AFL-CIO sponsorship of the September 2 mass picket. Groups such as the SWP, Workers World and Spartacist play a crucial supporting role for the bureaucracy by throwing dust in the eyes of the workers and obscuring the central political issues they face.

January 15, 1996—"Union strike paper back killer cops"

The six-month strike by Detroit newspaper workers has been undermined because the organizations that are supposedly leading the struggle are controlled by a reactionary bureaucracy deeply hostile to the working class.

To prove this all one has to do is pick up a copy of the December 31 edition of the *Detroit Sunday Journal*, the weekly paper published by the Detroit Council of Newspaper Unions with the financial support of the national AFL-CIO. There, emblazoned on the front page ... is an article promoting the campaign by extreme right-wing forces to free two Detroit cops convicted for the November 1992 murder of unemployed black steel worker Malice Green...

As a privileged and corrupt petty-bourgeois social layer with personal and business ties to the political and law enforcement establishment, the trade union bureaucracy is rife with anticommunist and racist elements. In its political outlook and social physiognomy, the bureaucracy has much in common with the likes of Budzyn and Nevers and is irresistibly drawn to such depraved elements.

July 15, 1996—"Political lessons of AFL-CIO betrayal must be drawn"

What are the union leaders preparing now? They are openly broaching the question of an unconditional offer to return to work. The heads of the six striking unions recently put this question to a vote. The membership handily voted it down, but the very fact that the union bureaucracy has introduced the proposal signifies that it is laying the groundwork for an outright surrender...

The ... union leadership expresses outrage over how *unfair* and *ruthless* the newspaper bosses have been. Union officials are apparently shocked that Gannett and Knight-Ridder mobilized a private army of goons and strike-breakers, and had local police at their disposal to beat up, arrest and terrorize strikers. Any thinking worker will ask: *what did they expect?*

What can be said of a general staff that leads its forces into battle, suffers a resounding defeat and then complains that they other side *fought*

to win? There are two possibilities. Either they are incompetent to the point of criminality, or they are working directly in the service of the enemy. In either case, they deserve the boot...

Workers must face the fact that the AFL-CIO is a failed organization that will not respond to workers' demands. Workers need unions, but they must be genuine organizations of the working class, under the democratic control of the workers and committed to defending their interests without compromise. Such unions can only be established as the industrial arms of a mass political party of the working class, and this party can only be built in a ruthless struggle against the trade union bureaucracy. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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