

The Minnesota workers strike and the class divide in America

Shannon Jones
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The official expressions of dismay and outrage at the strike by 28,000 Minnesota state workers demonstrate the real content of the calls for “unity” and “sacrifice” by the big business press and politicians in the wake of the events of September 11.

The walkout is the second largest strike by public employees in the United States since 1989. Members of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Minnesota Association of Professional Employees (MAPE) are resisting drastic increases in health insurance premiums and co-pays, which, combined with the state’s paltry wage offer, would further erode their standard of living.

The strike has come under concerted attack by the state. Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura mobilized 1,000 National Guard troops and incited workers to cross picket lines. Already one striker, Steven Kuehl, has been injured, run down by a car driven by a strikebreaker.

Ventura suggested that workers were “unpatriotic” for striking in the midst of the Bush administration’s preparations for a military assault against Afghanistan. Typical were his comments on an October 5 radio talk show when the governor declared, “We’re going to war, in my opinion. Everybody has to bite the bullet a little bit.”

The walkout has drawn the ire of the national media, with articles disparaging the strikers appearing in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. A piece in the October 5 *Times*, titled “Some workers are finding it a difficult time to strike,” insinuated that Minnesota public workers endangered “national unity” by taking to the picket line to defend their jobs and working conditions. “It has suddenly become difficult, or even risky, for unions to use their most potent weapon,” intoned the article’s author, Steven Greenhouse.

The virtual unanimity with which the establishment has come out to attack the right to strike reveals some basic truths about the United States. In reality it is a country sharply divided between a privileged segment of society and millions of workers and middle class people scraping ever harder to make a living.

For the wealthy elite, calls for the “defense of America” signify little more than defense of the corporate status quo, that is, the unlimited right of US big business to accumulate massive profits through its exploitation of the labor and raw materials of the entire globe. The corporate chiefs and their errand boys in the White House and Congress have seized on the confusion produced by the recent tragic events as an opportunity to launch an across-the-board attack on the jobs, living standards and democratic rights of the working class.

The airline industry is a glaring example. In the wake of the terrorist attacks, the airlines curtailed service, slashed hundreds of thousands of jobs and denied laid-off workers their contractually guaranteed severance benefits. Then the airlines marched hat in hand to Congress to demand a multibillion-dollar handout from the government.

Yet Minnesota state workers are denounced for insisting on a modest raise. In fact, the average AFSCME member working for the state of Minnesota earns just \$31,000 per year, one 400th the pay of Rakesh Gangwal, CEO and president US Airways Group and one 1,000th the \$34,821,583 in total compensation raked in last year by Leo F. Mullin, Delta Air Lines CEO.

In itself, this disparity demonstrates the phony character of the patriotic fervor now being whipped up in the United States. As in the Vietnam War and other conflicts, workers are expected to tighten their belts and

sacrifice the blood of their sons and daughters while the wealthy coin profits out of their suffering.

The edgy response by Governor Ventura and the media to the walkout in Minnesota demonstrates that the big business establishment is well aware that, despite its talk of unity, America is a society rife with tensions. In fact, just days before the Minnesota strike, rioting broke out in poor neighborhoods of Cincinnati over the acquittal of a cop accused of murdering a black youth.

The Minnesota public workers strike also exposes the false populism of the so-called independent Ventura. The former professional wrestler and Navy veteran rode into the governorship by capitalizing on popular discontent with the Democrats and Republicans. Since taking office he has adopted policies virtually indistinguishable from his Democratic and Republican predecessors, uncritically supporting US militarism while denouncing welfare recipients and promoting “fiscal responsibility.” Faced with a state budget surplus in previous years Ventura decided to give out tax rebates, rather than increase spending on state services. As a result, state workers have seen a steady decline in their real wages. In the current contract negotiations the Ventura administration is proposing a health plan that would force individual state workers to pay as much as \$3,800 in out-of-pocket expenditures.

This experience again demonstrates the futility of the policies of the AFL-CIO of supporting the lesser evil among capitalist politicians. All the big business politicians, whether they call themselves Democrats, Republicans or independents, in the final analysis defend the interests of the corporate elite. What is required is the construction of an independent party of the working class based on defending the human needs of workers and their families, not the profit interests of the rich.



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