

Strikebreaking judges, defiant teachers: the real face of class relations in the US

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14 December 2001

The just-concluded strike by 1,000 teachers in Middletown, New Jersey says much about the real state of class relations in the United States.

The teachers in this suburb of 60,000 people about 50 miles south of New York City walked out on November 29 to fight against a demand that they absorb huge increases in their payments for health insurance, increases that would have virtually cancelled out any pay raises.

The local school board, well known for its hard line in past bargaining, was even more ruthless this time around. It immediately obtained a back-to-work order from State Superior Court Judge Clarkson Fisher. By December 6, 228 teachers and other school staff had been thrown into jail for defying the order. It was the first mass jailing of teachers in New Jersey since 1978, and the biggest such jailing of teachers anywhere in the US in the past 30 years.

Despite their determination, shown by the willingness to go to jail to fight for their rights, the teachers were forced back to work on December 10 without a contract. The union officials, no doubt prodded by the top leaders of the parent union, the 2.6 million-member National Education Association, caved in on December 7, agreeing to a mediation proposal that had been rejected just three days earlier.

The issues raised in this strike are far from resolved. As the current slump leads to growing job losses and even greater social inequality, the end of the Middletown strike is sure to be only the beginning of a round of intensified social struggle.

The mass media in the New York area made much of the contrast between the apparent unity displayed in Middletown after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, and the bitter divisions that erupted with the teachers strike less than three months later.

Many commute from Middletown to work in New York, and the death toll of 34 of its residents in the World Trade Center was one of the largest of any of the New York suburbs.

There was, understandably, an outpouring of sympathy and support for the Middletown families directly affected by September 11, but this was cynically exploited, as it has been everywhere else, to proclaim a kind of social harmony that does not exist. This is a time for national sacrifice, the media and big business politicians intoned. “Differences” must be put aside in the name of the war against terrorism.

What this has meant in practice is the demand that workers accept a stepped-up war against their own living standards and democratic rights at home. The teachers, working without a contract, were told that all talk of strike was unpatriotic. “Patriotism” has not, however, led to any moratorium on the class war being waged by big business and both of its political parties against the working class. Corporate America has laid off hundreds of thousands of workers in the past three months. At the same time the Bush administration and Congress have enacted a series of massive payoffs to the wealthy, including a huge multibillion-dollar “rescue” package for US airlines, while the laid-off airline workers got absolutely nothing. When airline workers threatened to strike to defend their living standards, President Bush warned he would ban the walkouts.

After a nearly a decade of record corporate profits and huge CEO pay packages, working people—who only kept up with inflation by laboring longer hours, taking on extra jobs and increasing family debt—are once again being told to tighten their belts and sacrifice to “save” their companies. A recent survey by the William M. Mercer consulting firm, for example,

reported that 40 percent of large employers, those with 500 or more employees, say they will require workers to pay a higher portion of health care costs in 2002. At the same time the much vaunted government surpluses—which were used to finance tax breaks chiefly for the wealthy—have turned to deficits. Everywhere social programs, from public schools, to health care, to benefits for the poor, are being slashed.

In the face of these attacks, the Democratic politicians and the corrupt and privileged trade union bureaucracy have lined up unanimously behind the current war and joined the propaganda campaign to disarm the working class. AFL-CIO leader John Sweeney has insisted the September 11 attacks mean labor and business must overcome their differences. The unions have done nothing to fight the massive destruction of jobs. Nor have they uttered a peep about the Bush administration's attacks on democratic rights, including the new anti-terrorism laws, which civil liberties advocates have warned are so broad they could conceivably be used against militant workers during a strike.

Despite the nonstop propaganda and all the best efforts of the union officials, however, workers are by no means prepared to sacrifice while the ruling elite continues to rake in millions. The mantra that “everything has changed” since September 11 is wearing thin, and the crude attempts to use this tragedy to intensify the onslaught on the working class are becoming clearer.

The growing anger and determination of millions of workers was demonstrated in microcosm in Middletown, but not only there. Thousands of New York firefighters protested angrily over shabby treatment of the families of firefighters who died on September 11. And Pratt & Whitney workers—makers of jet engines for the US military—waged a 10-day strike in Connecticut.

What began to surface in the Middletown strike was the social explosion that must inevitably be produced by the unprecedented and growing gulf between the super-rich and the most privileged layers of the upper middle class on the one hand and the great majority of working people on the other. Teachers proudly defied the court injunction and told the strikebreaking judges they were willing to go to jail if that's what it took to stand up for their rights.

Local authorities sought to whip up hostility toward the teachers in Middletown—a wealthier suburb where 32 percent of the town's households have annual incomes of more than \$100,000—and had some success appealing to anti-working class sentiments. But there was also sympathy and support for the teachers, in the area where many white-collar and professional working people are facing downsizing and concession demands at major employers in the area such as Lucent Technologies, AT& T and Verizon. But this potential support did not find organized expression. A majority of workers, lacking any political orientation, remains on the sidelines. With the unions doing everything in their power to prevent any mobilization of working class solidarity—and thoroughly tied to the Democratic Party—few working people yet see any way to fight back.

Whatever the present confusion, the class struggle is an objective process. It is vital, however, that workers coming into struggle begin to grasp the connection between the war crimes being carried out by the US government in Afghanistan and the government-backed corporate assault on the working class. The more workers come to see the connection between the war at home and the war abroad, the more effectively will they be able to take up the independent political struggle to defend their basic rights and living standards.



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