

ISO complicit in drive to strangle New York Con Ed workers' struggle

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Locked-out workers at energy giant Con Edison in New York are now in the fourth week of their struggle. In seeking to carry forward their fight against the dictates of corporate management, workers face basic questions of organizational and political strategy.

Who is on the side of the workers and who is against them? What role do the unions and the different political tendencies involved play? How can the fight of Con Ed workers be connected with the struggles of other sections of the working class—in the United States and internationally—in a joint offensive? These questions and many more must be answered.

Arrayed against the Con Ed workers is first of all the company itself. The utility giant, which supplies power to nearly 10 million people in New York City and Westchester County, is a highly profitable concern, owned in large part by various investment banks.

The 8,500 workers at Con Ed are well aware the company lockout is part of a widening attack by the banks and corporations—as well as the local and national governments that serve their needs—against the working class. Everything that workers won in previous generations is being eliminated. The Obama administration has spearheaded this attack, in particular through its insistence that new auto workers accept poverty level wages as part of the restructuring of the auto industry in 2009.

In carrying out its attack on workers, however, the corporations also rely on the trade unions and their supporters—including groups like the International Socialist Organization—to prevent the unification of the struggles of the working class and to keep workers tied to the two-party system.

Many workers have spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* in recent weeks about the need to unite with transit workers and Verizon workers in a common struggle. Others have expressed their determination to draw a line in the sand and halt the corporate offensive. Sentiment is high for turning the lockout into a genuine strike until a decent contract has been won.

But the expansion of the struggle, and particularly the development of an independent political struggle by workers, is precisely what the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA) Local 1-2 and the New York City Central Labor Council are now seeking to prevent.

As with recent struggles at Verizon, Cooper Tire in Ohio, Caterpillar in Joliet, Illinois, and New York City's transit workers, the union executives are trying to isolate the Con Ed workers and,

after they have exhausted workers on the picket lines by months of delay, impose the concessions that the employers have asked for.

In a clear sign of its intentions, Local 1-2 has appealed to the state's utility oversight agency, the Public Service Commission (PSC), a notoriously pro-corporate agency, to end the lockout, and to send workers back without a contract.

The unions rely on a network of supposedly "left" or even "socialist" organizations to provide them with political cover as they work to isolate and defeat the struggle. The fundamental aim of these groups, repeated in struggle after struggle, is to maintain the organizational control of the trade union apparatus and keep the working class tied to the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, is a political arm of the corporate and financial elite.

A July 17 commentary on the Con Ed struggle in *Socialist Worker*, the publication of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), provides an instructive example of the manner in which this is done.

The article outlines the ISO's hopes that the Con Ed lockout can be transformed into a new "Wisconsin," referring to the mass protests that erupted in February 2011 against the budget cuts and anti-worker measures of Republican Governor Scott Walker. "The movement in Madison can be a precedent for a similar struggle in New York City, where supporters from every union and every neighborhood come together and take action—for example, by occupying Con Ed headquarters."

However, what was the role of the unions in the Wisconsin struggle? They worked deliberately to channel the mass opposition of workers—which initially erupted largely outside of their control—into a recall campaign aimed at electing a pro-corporate Democratic Party governor.

As in the Con Ed lockout, there was an intense desire among workers in Wisconsin for a broadening of the struggle. The call for a general strike against the Walker government—a demand advanced by the Socialist Equality Party—won widespread support. The unions and their pseudo-left supporters intervened to head off this militancy, which threatened the political domination of the Democratic Party.

The *Socialist Worker* piece goes on to state, "Labor lost that battle in Wisconsin—most of all because of the conservatism of union officials and Democratic Party leaders ..."

Two things are worth noting here. In the first place, the phrasing, "conservatism of union officials and Democratic Party leaders"

implies that union officials and Democratic Party leaders might not have been conservative, if only they had listened to the ISO. A different course of action may be possible in the future, according to the ISO, and it is certainly worth trusting the union bureaucrats and giving the Democrats a second chance.

Secondly, the ISO passes over its own role in suffocating the Wisconsin struggle. For weeks in February and March of 2011, the pages of *Socialist Worker* were filled with material that boosted the credibility of these so-called labor organizations. *Socialist Worker* even praised the Democratic Party state legislators who prevented the legislature from achieving a quorum so that it could vote on Walker's legislation.

The ISO next proposes using the remnants of the Occupy Wall Street movement—which is itself oriented to the Democratic Party—to assist the Con Ed struggle. “Activists,” the article observes, “are hoping to push the UWUA and the Central labor Council to organize a more aggressive public relations campaign against Con Ed. Other ideas for activism included making a call for customers to cancel auto pay or to pay an incorrect amount on the balance of the bill – with the aim of putting more pressure on the work that managers and scabs are doing.”

The “public relations campaign” proposed by the ISO is nothing but the “program” of the trade union bureaucracy. In opposition to the fight of mobilize the entire working class against the joint attack being carried out by the corporate and financial elite, the unions favor toothless gestures such as pressure campaigns directed at customers. These will supposedly persuade the corporations and friendly politicians in the state legislature, or perhaps the Obama administration itself.

In its efforts to bolster the Democratic Party, the ISO falls back on a standard method: the promotion of identity politics. It seeks constantly to insist that the fundamental social division is not class, but race or gender. Thus the article states, “Cutting pensions is an attack on all workers, but they will disproportionately affect Black workers, who, because of racist hiring practices, often have less seniority on the job than their white counterparts. Women also have less seniority because if they take maternity leave or time off to stay at home with children, these years are deducted from their overall service time. The fight against the pension changes should include a discussion about challenging these instances of racism and sexism as well.”

Why does the ISO seek to highlight and reinforce race and gender divisions just as many Con Ed workers are seeking greater class unity? Once again, the aim is to divert workers from the necessity for a common struggle on the basis of their class interests. The identity politics championed by the ISO can be easily accommodated to the politics of the Democratic Party.

In the end, the most significant political element of the ISO article is that it excludes any mention of the leading role that the Obama administration has played in destroying jobs and smashing wages, pensions and healthcare for millions.

The ISO and the unions are gearing up for Obama's reelection campaign in November. They want to see a Democratic Party victory because the Democrats afford the unions and the upper middle class layers represented by the ISO with a greater amount of political “space”—that is, the Democrats give them a greater role

in enforcing the attack on the working class.

The ISO's intervention into the Con Ed struggle is directed toward achieving one goal: to help the union bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and their masters in the banks and corporations prevent the growth of independent working-class politics—genuinely socialist politics, in other words.

The fight of Con Ed workers to defend their basic rights to healthcare, a secure retirement, and a decent wage requires an entirely different strategy.

It is not possible for the workers to defeat the onslaught of the corporate and financial elite on their own. An immediate campaign must be launched to unite the Con Ed lockout with the struggles of other utility workers, telecommunication workers, transit workers, teachers, manufacturing workers and every section of the working class—in the United States and internationally. Only in unity do workers have strength.

This cannot be carried out so long as workers are tied to the union apparatus, which is determined to prevent such a struggle. Independent rank-and-file committees must be established to take the fight out of the hands of the unions and hammer out a common program of action.

Above all, what is posed is a political struggle. The determination of the ISO and the unions to maintain the political domination of the Democratic Party is bound up with their absolute support for the capitalist system. However, the interests of the Con Ed workers—and the interests of the entire working class—are not compatible with a society in which every aspect of economic life, including utilities, is controlled by private corporations determined to extract profit from the backs of working people.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the energy companies must taken out of the hands of the corporate executives and banks, and placed under the democratic control of the working class, run on the basis of social need, not private profit. This is possible only through the fight for the socialist reorganization of economic life.

To carry forward this struggle, the working class needs its own political party—in opposition to the twin parties of big business. We urge Con Ed workers to discuss the program of the SEP in the 2012 elections and to take the step joining and building the Socialist Equality Party.



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