

# Workers rebel against right-wing unions

**Jerry White****27 February 2013**

Four-and-a-half years after the financial collapse of 2008 there are many signs of growing militancy in the working class internationally.

In response to the crisis, the ruling class is imposing unprecedented austerity measures along with layoffs and wage cuts. The general consensus in parliaments, government chambers and corporate boardrooms is that the working class, the vast majority of the world's population, must pay for a crisis they did not create and for which they are not responsible.

The mass social struggles that emerged in 2011 are now entering a new stage. Strikes continue in Egypt against the US-backed regime and the International Monetary Fund; transit and ferry workers in Greece have gone on strike and Spanish workers have carried out mass protests against the European Union's austerity demands; auto workers in France have occupied factories threatened with closure; tens of millions of workers in India shut down much of the country in a two-day general strike last week.

In each of these struggles common problems arise. While there is no lack of the will to fight and the courage to prevail, every section of workers has been forced to confront the question of leadership and organization. To the extent that they remain under the control of the trade unions and the so-called "left" parties, the struggles are directed back into the political establishment and betrayed.

The objective logic of the class struggle, however, is driving the working class in a different direction. Workers are seeking to break free of the decades-long stranglehold of right-wing bureaucracies and the artificial suppression of social conflict.

Late last year, South Africa platinum miners revolted against the National Union of Mineworkers, which functions as a cheap labor contractor for the global mining companies. The response of the NUM was to collaborate with the African National Congress

government in the use of force to suppress the rebellion.

In Germany, auto workers at the GM-Opel plant in Bochum have begun to call for the withholding of union dues and a mass exodus from the IG Metall trade union, which has done nothing to fight the closure of the factory.

For the ruling class, the prospect of working class struggle outside of the framework of the official unions is deeply unsettling. Nowhere are the implications of this development more explosive than in the United States.

The US is the most unequal of all industrialized countries. Yet for three decades, as the wealth of the financial aristocracy has soared and the living conditions of masses of working people have deteriorated, every struggle of the working class has been isolated and defeated. In this, the official trade unions have played the central role.

Against this background, the formation of a rank-and-file committee by New York City school bus workers emerges as a highly significant development.

Workers formed the committee in the aftermath of the betrayal of the strike by 9,000 school bus drivers, matrons and mechanics by the Amalgamated Transit Union and the rest of the city's unions. Although there was widespread support for a struggle against the city's billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, the ATU, the AFL-CIO, the subway and bus unions, the teachers' union and the rest of the city unions isolated the strike. It was shut down without a membership meeting or vote, and with none of the workers' demands met.

From the beginning, the ATU made it clear it was willing to accept Bloomberg's plan to reduce the school bus workers to low-paid, casual workers, as long as the ATU maintained its franchise and was allowed to continue collecting dues money from workers' paychecks, no matter how small the checks. The ATU

leaders sought to use the workers as pawns, hoping to convince Bloomberg and big business that they could accomplish their cost-cutting more effectively with the union than without it.

The course of the New York bus workers strike paralleled that of countless struggles. Confronting a ruthless ruling class, workers are trapped in organizations that accept the entire corporate-dominated framework and work actively for the defeat of the workers they claim to represent. The impoverishment of the workers does not in any way detract from the income of the upper-middle class executives who run the unions.

The precondition for a serious and effective struggle is an organizational break with the official unions. The workers themselves are beginning to recognize this.

At the start of the New York meeting to set up the rank-and-file committee, a veteran school bus driver announced this was “not a union meeting,” but a meeting “by the members and for the members.” This statement reflected the growing awareness that the interests of the union and the interests of the members are fundamentally antagonistic.

The transformation of the unions into anti-working class organizations is not simply the result of corrupt officials, but rather the failure of their entire program, which is based on the subordination of the working class to the profit system and the global needs of American capitalism, carried out centrally through the political subordination of workers to the Democratic Party.

As the struggle of workers begins to erupt outside of the framework of the unions, the growth of militancy is accompanied by a growing receptivity to the perspective of socialism. In the course of the school bus strike, many workers came to recognize that the only publication that told the truth and articulated their interests was the *World Socialist Web Site*. Our warnings against the treachery of the union and our exposure of the role of the Democrats were completely vindicated in the living experience of the workers themselves.

Many political issues remain to be clarified. But the growing striving of American workers to break with the pro-capitalist trade unions and their openness to socialism is a historic change with the most far-reaching implications for the class struggle

internationally. Millions of workers are coming to an understanding that they confront not only a particular corporation or government official, but an entire socio-economic system.

The militancy, anger and determination of workers must be combined with and enriched by a thoroughly worked-out political program that articulates the real interests of working people in opposition to the policies of the ruling elites in the US and around the world. As the experience of the New York City school bus strike shows, only the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to arm the working class with such a program. We call on workers who see the need for such a struggle to join the SEP and help build it as the new, revolutionary leadership of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**