

The political significance of the US oil workers' strike

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More than 5,000 refinery workers in the United States are striking against the largest oil conglomerates in the world in a fight for improved living standards and working conditions. Although the United Steelworkers (USW) leadership has deliberately limited the struggle—calling out less than one-fifth of the 30,000 oil workers it organizes—the strike is a harbinger of a renewal of open class struggle in the United States with far-reaching implications in the US and internationally.

The strike and other signs of working class opposition, including the brewing struggle of West Coast dockworkers, are manifestations of the pent-up anger of workers who have suffered through the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression, even as corporate profits and stock markets soar in the sixth year of a supposed economic recovery.

In recent months, major think tanks and corporate-controlled publications have warned about the danger of a “wages push” by American workers in 2015. Late last year, President Obama held a meeting with the Business Roundtable—which includes top executives from Big Oil—where he complained there was a “disquiet in the general public” over the fact that “wages and incomes still haven’t gone up significantly.”

While Obama has since spouted meaningless rhetoric about “inclusive prosperity” and “middle class economics,” his policy has been to transform American workers into a highly exploited cheap labor force. The relentless lowering of wages that began with Obama’s restructuring of the auto industry, has led to the record corporate profits.

Even though the drop in oil prices has affected their earnings, the big five oil companies—BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil and Shell—made \$89.7 billion in profits last year. While spending tens of billions on stock buybacks and dividends for their super-rich investors, they are drawing a line in the sand against any

raises for workers.

The White House has urged the oil companies and the USW “to resolve their differences using the time-tested process of collective bargaining.” This only means that Obama is looking to the “time-tested” USW bureaucracy—whose president, Leo Gerard, sits on Obama’s corporate competitiveness board—to strangle the strike before it can become a catalyst for a wider movement over wages.

The fact that the oil strike has broken out at all is significant. For more than 30 years, the class struggle in the US has been suppressed by the trade unions, which have functioned as direct adjuncts of the corporations and the state in the systematic destruction of workers’ living standards. Every aspect of life—above all, the explosive growth of social inequality—has been impacted by the virtual absence of organized working-class resistance.

Nothing the working class has ever gained—the right to organize, the eight-hour day, decent wages, pensions, public education and other social rights—has been achieved through the beneficence of the ruling class and the government. It has been wrenched from them by means of mass struggles. So fierce were the class battles that characterized much of American history from the 1870s to the 1980s that they were generally referred to as “labor wars.”

The breakthrough eighty years ago with the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was the result of a series of semi-insurrectional struggles led by socialist and leftwing militants in Toledo, Minneapolis and San Francisco. They were followed by the sit-down strikes in Flint, Michigan, which implicitly challenged the private property of the capitalist owners. Then, in 1937, Chicago cops brutally attacked striking steelworkers, leaving 10 unarmed workers dead in the Memorial Day Massacre.

The newly formed CIO remained subordinate to the

Democratic Party, and this political alliance had far-reaching implications for the labor movement. The alliance with the Democrats, a capitalist party, meant the abandonment of any fight for a fundamental change in social relations, and the new unions quickly made their peace with American capitalism. This was cemented by the post-war anti-communist purge of the socialist pioneers who had built the industrial unions, which was part of the alliance of the CIO with American imperialism. The merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955 marked the final repudiation of any radical social struggle.

The crisis of the labor movement was exacerbated by the decline in the global economic position of the United States in the 1960s and 1970s and the end of the period of the postwar boom, when American imperialism held unquestionable sway over the world economy. When the American ruling class abandoned its policy of class compromise and adopted an aggressive policy of class war—symbolized by Reagan’s 1981 firing of 13,000 striking PATCO air traffic controllers—the trade unions not only capitulated, they aided and abetted these attacks.

In the name of boosting the “competitiveness” and profitability of US corporations, the AFL-CIO deliberately isolated and betrayed strike after strike—PATCO, Phelps Dodge, AT Massey, Hormel, Eastern Airlines, Pittston and countless others. The cumulative impact was the transformation of the unions into organizations that in no way represented the working class. The betrayals provided a lucrative path for union bureaucrats, who had no association with any form of class struggle, directly into the structure of corporate management and the capitalist state. As a result, strikes, which were a common feature of American life for a century, virtually disappeared.

The United Steelworkers is a case in point. Far from opposing the dismantling of the steel industry, the USW colluded with Wall Street and corporate asset strippers to wipe out the jobs and pensions of hundreds of thousands of workers, while preserving the interests of the union executives.

The dissolution of the American labor movement was part of an international process. The global integration of capitalist production undermined the nationally based unions in every country. In order to attract investment, the unions have been transformed into mechanisms to suppress the class struggle and lower workers’ living standards.

The degeneration of the unions has been accompanied by a parallel development in the ranks of the middle-class

“left” organizations. They have written off the working class and obsessively focused their attention on race, gender and everything but class. Many of these pseudo-left forces have found lucrative careers within the union apparatus as they seek to keep workers tied to these discredited organizations.

Now the “sleeping giant”—the American working class—is stirring once again. This will bring to the fore the basic, but unmentionable, contradiction of American political and social life: the class struggle.

The reawakening of the working class, strategically located in the center of world imperialism, is a powerful threat to the American ruling elite, which will no longer be the unchallenged master in its own house.

The movement of the American working class is being driven by a profound economic logic. The myth of the land of unlimited opportunity has long been dissipated. Several generations of workers have known nothing but the relentless decay of their living standards. The long suppression of the class struggle by the trade unions has not done away with social tensions, but only ensured that, once released, they will take on an ever more revolutionary character.

The reemergence of social struggle raises complex and difficult political questions. It is necessary to reconnect with the immense traditions of class conflict in the United States, while absorbing and learning the lessons of history.

The development of a Marxist orientation in the working class will require a relentless exposure of the role of the trade unions and a determined campaign to break their stranglehold over the working class. It requires the fight to develop an understanding among workers of the fundamental *political* questions at stake—that to secure their interests, workers must embark on a path aimed at taking political power and reorganizing society internationally on the basis of socialist principles. It is to this basic task that the Socialist Equality Party is dedicated.



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