

For a united struggle of US steel, auto and telecommunications workers!

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On Tuesday, the United Steelworkers (USW) in the US ordered 30,000 workers at ArcelorMittal and US Steel to continue working without a contract, even as the giant companies press for draconian concessions and contracting firms have begun hiring replacement workers in the event of a lockout or strike.

The “continue to work” agreement leaves workers vulnerable to victimizations, while ensuring that all initiative lies in the hands of the companies. It also further isolates the 2,200 steel workers, already locked out by Pittsburgh-based Allegheny Technology Inc, which is demanding steep increases in health care expenses and the elimination of pensions for new hires.

The collaboration of the union with the companies in an effort to create the best conditions for a renewed assault on workers is not unique to the USW. Throughout the United States, the unions have compelled hundreds of thousands of workers to work beyond the expiration of their labor agreements, including 300,000 workers at the US Postal Service, 60,000 Verizon and AT&T telecommunication workers, 38,000 Illinois state employees and tens of thousands of teachers in Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit and other cities.

The actions of the USW are also a warning to the 140,000 auto workers whose contracts with General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler expire on September 14. The United Auto Workers is currently conspiring behind the scenes with corporate executives and the Obama administration to institute new wage and benefit cuts. The UAW has made absolutely clear it has no intention of calling a strike, despite a nearly 98 percent strike authorization by workers.

All sections of the working class face a common class enemy that is pursuing a definite strategy. The economic and financial crisis that erupted in 2008 was followed by a massive infusion of trillions of dollars into the financial system and an escalation of the assault on jobs, wages and

benefits. The former was initiated by the multi-billion dollar bailout of the banks under Bush, which was vastly expanded under Obama. The latter was announced by the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, overseen by the Obama administration.

The result has been an unparalleled transfer of wealth from the working class to the financial and corporate elite. Now, with the government-inflated stock market boom and world economy unraveling again, the corporations and the banks will only intensify their demands that every penny be extracted from the hides of the working class.

The objective conditions exist for a united struggle of both private-sector and public-sector workers to fight back. This year alone, contracts expire that cover some five million workers. At the beginning of the year, various business, political and media figures warned of an impending “wages push” by workers after the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression.

Yet to date, the strivings of workers to mount such a struggle have been subverted and suppressed, and the corporations have been able to impose new attacks on workers’ living standards and working conditions. On Wednesday, the Labor Department reported that productivity rose at its fastest rate since 2013 in the second quarter, while labor costs declined again.

It is unprecedented that in the midst of a supposed economic recovery, with profits, stock prices and CEO pay hitting new record highs, workers’ wages continue to decline. There is no longer even a pretense that wage and benefit cuts, speedup, forced overtime, etc. are temporary measures to help out companies facing large losses. These are permanent facts of life under the profit system—the “new normal”—and the precursors to even more brutal attacks.

The obstacle to mobilizing the working class is not an unwillingness to fight among workers, as the pseudo-left apologists for the trade union bureaucracy claim. It is the

trade unions themselves. Far from uniting workers to increase labor's share of the national income, the unions do every thing they can to divide and weaken workers and reduce that share.

The year began with the Obama administration intervening to block a strike by 20,000 West Coast dockworkers. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) then signed a federal mediated deal that was hailed by the ship and terminal owners for introducing greater "cost containment" and "efficiency."

Indeed, the AFL-CIO and other unions have enforced a virtual ban on strikes. In a country with 144 million workers, there have been just five walkouts involving 1,000 or more workers this year. This follows 2014's total of 11 such stoppages, the second lowest since records began in 1947.

When the unions have called strikes, it has only been with the aim of dissipating anger among workers, dividing them against each other and enforcing defeat. This is what the USW did during the oil refinery strike that began in February. The union ordered four-fifths of its members in the oil refinery industry to remain on the job. The USW, whose president Leo Gerard sits on Obama's corporate competitiveness board, responded to growing demands from workers for an all-out fight by strangling the strike and signing a contract that met all of Big Oil's demands.

In so far as the trade union executives have engaged in "collective bargaining" it is only to preserve the income of the executives that run them and create a new modus vivendi with the companies. The UAW has offered to expand the union-controlled retiree VEBA health trust to active hourly and salaried workers as part of Obama's efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate employer-paid health benefits. This is particularly important because they fear the loss of dues income from thousands of disgusted and disaffected workers once laws that make union membership voluntary take hold in Michigan, Indiana and other states.

Other unions are following a similar model. Indeed, the VEBA was pioneered by the USW, and the Communication Workers of America (CWA) is offering itself in a similar capacity as part of "negotiations" with Verizon and AT&T. Such moves demonstrate that the unions have long ceased to be workers' organizations and have become businesses that prey on the workers they claim to represent.

Among workers there is mass discontent, rising anger and the initial stages of a political radicalization. One indication of this is the powerful response the *World*

Socialist Web Site has already received from US autoworkers, with hundreds subscribing to the WSWS Autoworker Newsletter, posting WSWS articles on social media and sending in comments expressing their hatred of the UAW bureaucracy and the desire to fight for the unification of the working class.

The decades-long suppression of the class struggle has only ensured that when it erupts it will do so explosively. Eighty years ago, the eruption of the class struggle took the form of a rebellion against the AFL unions. Today, it will be aimed at the UAW, the USW and the other anti-labor organizations, which function unabashedly as the tools of big business and the government.

The task facing the working class is not in trying to revive these long dead institutions, but to build new organizations to unite the working class in an industrial and political struggle against the ruling class and the capitalist system.

Such a movement must reject the nationalism of the trade unions, which has long been used to swindle workers by claiming the enemy is not the corporate owners and bankers at home but workers in other countries. US workers can only fight the global corporations by uniting with their class brothers and sisters in Mexico, Canada, China and other countries in a common fight for jobs and decent living standards, and against the threat of war.

In the US, the task is to unite every section of workers—the young and the old, the employed and unemployed, immigrant and native born, and workers of all races. It must champion a program of social rights—for a living income, health care, education, a good retirement, and for leisure time and access to culture—regardless of whether the capitalists and the big business politicians say they can afford it.

In order to fight for these, workers must organize as an independent political force in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans and the capitalist system they defend. The big corporations and financial institutions that suck up wealth from every corner of the globe must be put under the common ownership of the working class as part of the socialist reorganization of the US and world economy.



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