

Telecom, airlines, retail, manufacturing workers entering battles

Growing signs of a resurgence of class conflict in the US

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24 May 2016

In recent weeks, an increasing number of workers in the United States have been engaged in strikes, lockouts, contract rejections and other struggles. Social inequality is at historic highs, and workers are suffering the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression, producing a radicalization that is in its initial stages.

According to President Obama, life has never been so good in America, and an Internet search for the word “strike” brings up far more coverage in the news media of murderous “air strikes” by the US military than of workers’ struggles. Despite the best efforts of the trade unions to suppress the class struggle, however, workers in the telecom, manufacturing, airline and supermarket industries, as well as public sector workers, are entering significant battles.

Developments in the US are part of an international tendency. Recent months have seen mass protests and now an oil refinery strike in France; a three-day general strike by Greek workers against austerity; a week-long strike by Nigerian workers against rising fuel and electricity prices; a strike by Mexican teachers to defend public education; a one-day strike by train conductors in the United Kingdom; and the first strike by Kuwaiti oil workers in two decades.

In the US, the strike by 1,700 telecom workers at AT&T West in San Diego, California has undermined the efforts of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and other unions to isolate the six-week strike by 40,000 workers at Verizon. The CWA was forced to call the strike—which involves only 10 percent of the 16,000 AT&T West workers who have had no contract since April 9—because of growing rank-and-file opposition to giant telecom company. AT&T made

\$13.2 billion profit in 2015 and spent billions on acquisitions and dividend payments to its richest investors and top executives.

The CWA and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) are currently involved in secret negotiations under the auspices of Obama’s labor secretary and a federal mediator to shut down the strike at Verizon as soon as possible on management’s terms. Despite being put on starvation strike pay rations by the CWA and IBEW, Verizon workers remain determined to beat back the attack on their living standards.

In the working class as a whole, there is widespread support for a unified struggle. “We stand with our brothers and sisters on the East Coast,” an AT&T worker in San Diego told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “What happens to them can happen to us—corporate America is taking away our rights and we have to take them back.”

A worker at the GM Hamtramck Assembly in Detroit told the WSW on Monday, “I truly feel all workers should support the Verizon and AT&T workers. There is nothing on the news. They don’t want anyone to know. They look at it like a cancer that should be stopped from spreading.”

An estimated 8,788 collective bargaining agreements, covering 2.2 million workers, are due to expire or be modified in 2016. The chief obstacles to a fight against the companies are the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions, which are allied with the Obama administration and the Democrats. The unions function as an arm of corporate management and the state. They support the policy of lowering wages and cutting health care and pension costs to make US corporations more “globally

competitive.”

The unions have long abandoned the principle of “no contract, no work,” keeping workers on the job for months or even years without a contract. On Friday night, the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) announced that it would continue negotiations with the US Post Office past the contract expiration date for 204,000 city letter carriers. Another 370,000 USPS workers were forced to accept arbitration by the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and other unions.

The United Auto Workers barely survived a rebellion by autoworkers and required a campaign of lies, threats and vote fraud to get sellout contracts past the resistance of the rank-and-file last fall. This year has already seen sick out protests by Detroit teachers organized in defiance of the union, opposition to a union-backed concessions deal by Chicago teachers and a wave of student walkouts in Detroit, Chicago and Boston.

Earlier this month, hundreds of Honeywell workers rejected a “last, best and final” offer containing massive health care concessions by a nine-to-one margin at factories in South Bend, Indiana and Green Island, New York. The UAW forced workers to continue to labor past the May 3 contract extension, allowing the world’s largest aircraft parts manufacturer to lock out workers and bring in a notorious strikebreaking firm, Strom Engineering.

Four hundred workers have been on strike for two weeks at Triumph Composite Systems in Spokane, Washington, another parts supplier for Boeing, after overwhelmingly rejecting a company ultimatum. The International Association of Machinists, which rammed through an eight-year contract extension on 25,000 Boeing workers in 2014 by less than a 400-vote margin, is now isolating the Spokane workers.

Five thousand retail workers at Macy’s four New York stores, including in mid-town Manhattan, voted last Thursday to strike when their contract expires on June 15. The workers are fighting attacks on their health care, pay and the right to opt out of working on holidays. Thousands of workers at Kroger’s, the largest traditional grocery store in the US, have also voted to strike 41 stores in Virginia, Tennessee and West Virginia unless the company offers better pay and health benefits for retirees. The United Food and

Commercial Workers (UFCW) has forced them to continue working after the contract expired May 8.

Two thousands pilots for five cargo companies contracted by DHL Express have voted to strike the German-based package delivery company because their wages are below those of workers at competing firms, UPS and FedEx. Meanwhile, thousands of UPS pilots and aircraft mechanics could strike after nearly three years of federal mediation.

Hundreds of thousands of other workers at United Airlines, Costco, Safeway and Albertson’s supermarkets face contract expirations. Across the border in Canada, some 23,500 hourly workers at Ford, General Motors and FCA Canada have a mid-September contract expiration.

In the US elections, the radicalization of workers and young people is expressed in the widespread support for Bernie Sanders, who has centered his campaign on social inequality and opposition to the “billionaire class.” Sanders role, however, has been to try to channel growing anti-capitalist sentiment back behind the Democratic Party, which, under the Obama administration, has overseen a historic transfer of wealth from the working class to the corporate and financial elite.

The Socialist Equality Party is running in the US presidential election to fight to unify every section of workers in an industrial and political counter-offensive. We call for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the pro-capitalist and nationalist trade unions, in order to fight for common actions to defend the Verizon and AT&T workers and organize a joint offensive against the attack on jobs, benefits and working conditions.

Above all workers need a new revolutionary leadership, the Socialist Equality Party, to transform these struggles into a conscious political fight against the capitalist system, which is the root cause of social inequality, war and the drive towards dictatorship.



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