

Workers struggles mount in run-up to US election

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A series of strikes and other workers struggles have erupted in the United States in the run-up to the US presidential elections. The diverse array of public- and private-sector workers involved in these struggles reveals the broad scope of social opposition in the US over deteriorating living standards, attacks on health care and pensions and historic levels of social inequality in the seventh year of Obama's economic "recovery."

On Monday, nearly 5,000 nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area of Minnesota overwhelmingly rejected an ultimatum by hospital operator Allina Health and voted to continue their one-month strike. Allina wants to strip nurses of their traditional health care coverage and force them into inferior and more costly corporate-run plans.

The resounding "no" vote was a rebuke to the Minnesota Nurses Association and National Nurses United, which brought back the same company demands nurses had rejected three times. The nurses are taking a courageous stand against Allina, which cut them off of medical insurance last weekend and has spent \$40 million to import 1,000 strikebreakers into the Twin Cities.

Throughout the country, nurses and other caregivers are bearing the cost of Obama's misnamed Affordable Care Act, which has not only shifted health care costs from employers to workers, but has also piled more patients onto the already understaffed hospital workforce. Meanwhile, ACA has boosted the profits of the monopolies that dominate the health care industry, which took in \$1.6 trillion in revenue last year.

"Everyone is fed up with the way things are going in this country," one veteran nurse from United Hospital in St. Paul said. "With all this wealth, these companies are operating global enterprises, and they are using this to pit workers in different countries against each other."

Other sections of workers have also entered significant battles in recent days:

* On Tuesday, 750 food service workers walked out at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts to demand improved wages and full-time positions and to resist higher

out-of-pocket health care costs. The walkout by dining hall workers, the first strike at the Ivy League university in 30 years, has won the support of students from the university's medical, dental and law schools, as well as the Harvard Undergraduate Council.

* On September 30, hundreds of musicians at the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra walked out on strike to oppose demands for a virtual pay freeze and cuts in pensions. The Philadelphia musicians at the world-famous orchestra have still not recovered the concessions they lost during the April 2011 bankruptcy. Musicians are also currently on strike at the Forth Worth Orchestra in Texas.

* Thousands of faculty members from 14 state universities are expected to rally at the state capital in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania today after working a year-and-a-half without a new contract. The faculty union has set an October 19 strike deadline for 5,000 professors, researchers and teaching assistants who are opposing salary cuts, higher health care deductibles and co-pays, and demands that they function as "teaching machines" with workload increases of as much as 20 percent.

* On September 22, Cleveland teachers voted 1,830 to 1,730 to reject a deal reached by the Cleveland Teachers Union and the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools that included an insulting two percent wage increase and the continuation of test-based evaluations to determine pay or fire teachers. In a desperate effort to prevent a strike, the American Federation of Teachers has organized a "walk-in" today and is promoting a regressive tax hike on residents in one of America's poorest big cities.

* The Chicago Teachers Union has set an October 11 strike deadline after a 95.6 percent vote to authorize a walkout by 30,000 teachers and staff. Teachers have been working without a new contract for 15 months. They have already defeated an effort by the CTU and Democratic Party Mayor Rahm Emanuel to increase health care costs and impose a seven percent cut in real wages to cover pensions.

* More than 750 workers at a 3M chemical plant in

Cottage Grove, Minnesota have authorized strike action as the one-month extension of their three-year contract expires Saturday. The Minnesota-based conglomerate, which produces industrial and consumer adhesives, automotive components and other products, wants to cut weekend pay and implement more “flexible” work rules and benefits.

The growth of the class struggle in the US is part of an international process. In every country, the transnational corporations and governments are seeking to make the working class pay for the global economic crisis and ever-increasing military budgets as governments prepare for war.

Ten thousand Canadian autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) face an October 10 midnight strike deadline as opposition grows to the pattern contract signed by Unifor—the auto union—with General Motors Canada. That contract strips new-hires of defined benefit pensions, retains the hated two-tier wage system, and continues the erosion of living standards for current and retired workers. The auto bosses and Unifor are using the threat of plant closings and mass layoffs in an effort to beat back the resistance of workers determined to recoup past concessions now that the auto companies are making record profits.

Recent days have also seen the outbreak of mass protests and clashes with police by students in South Africa demanding free tuition and relief from crushing student loans, and by workers in Poland protesting right-wing laws banning abortions.

The American news media deliberately ignores the signs of growing class conflict while endlessly writing about the supposed unbridgeable divide between “black America” and “white America.” But the growing resistance of workers—all races, genders and nationalities—reveals that the basic division in society is the irrepressible conflict between the two main social classes—the working class and the capitalists.

Like the rebellion of US autoworkers in 2015 and the wildcat strikes by Detroit teachers, these struggles are increasingly coming into direct conflict with the official trade unions, which function as tools of corporate management and are allied with Clinton, Obama and the Democratic Party.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, the popular support for Bernie Sanders—a self-described socialist—in the Democratic Party primaries was an expression of growing anti-capitalist sentiment. Sanders is no socialist, and his bogus “political revolution” has morphed into a campaign for Clinton, a warmonger and tool of the “billionaire class.” While shilling for Clinton in Minneapolis Tuesday, Sanders did not say a word about the struggle of the Minnesota nurses.

Despite Sanders’ best efforts, the political radicalization of

workers and youth in the US will not be contained within the capitalist two-party system. The strivings by workers to attain the most elemental social rights—for secure and good-paying jobs, pensions, health care, education and a future for the next generation that is free from poverty and war—is bringing masses of working people into a struggle against the corporate and financial elite that controls the entire economic and political system.

Both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are committed to escalating the war on the working class at home. They both support US military violence around the world to secure markets, raw materials and profits for US-based transnational corporations and prevent any economic challenges from foreign competitors.

This is underscored by an article in the most recent edition of *Foreign Affairs* by Mac Thornberry, the Republican Chairman of the House Armed Service Committee, and military strategist Andrew F. Krepinevich. The two call for a vast expansion of military expenditures to prepare for war against Russia and China and praise the bipartisan support for cuts to bedrock social programs like Medicare and Social Security. The country’s financial woes “have little to do with military expenditures,” the two authors claim, saying the “main culprits are the government’s rapidly increasing debt and the expanding cost of entitlement programs.” Thus, “it is on the domestic front where the tough choices will have to be made in order to defend the nation’s security and economic well-being.”

Masses of people are sick of endless wars that have squandered countless lives and an estimated \$15 trillion since 2001. Increasingly, workers will come to see that the struggle to defend their living standards is inseparably bound up with a fight against war and the capitalist profit system that produces it.



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