

Class struggle in US intensifies on eve of election

Jerry White
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In the run-up to Tuesday's national election, a significant number of strikes have broken out among a wide variety of workers in many parts of the United States. The biggest action is a walkout by nearly 5,000 transit workers in Philadelphia. The strike, now in its fifth day, has shut down the nation's sixth largest public transit system and brought the city of 1.5 million people to a virtual halt.

The main issue in the strike is the demand of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) for an eleven-fold increase in the workers' out-of-pocket health costs.

Other workers currently on strike include Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra musicians, who are in the fifth week of a struggle against wage and pension cuts; 700 chemical workers at Momentive Performance Materials in New York State and Ohio, who are fighting health and pension cuts; and 300 video game voice actors in Los Angeles, who are demanding improved compensation and working conditions.

In addition, some 400 workers in Indiana and New York State are in the seventh month of a lockout imposed after they rejected demands for health care concessions from the aircraft component manufacturer Honeywell International.

Another series of recent strikes were terminated by the trade unions, which are seeking to prevent walkouts wherever possible and quickly end those that break out in the interests of promoting their campaign for the election of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

Over the past several weeks, the unions have shut down strikes by state university faculty members in Pennsylvania, Minnesota nurses, Libbey Glass workers in Ohio, Jim Beam whiskey workers in Kentucky, and cafeteria workers at Harvard University in

Massachusetts. These walkouts followed the strike by 40,000 Verizon telecom workers earlier in the year.

Thousands of other workers, including 95,000 California state employees, United Parcel Service aircraft mechanics, General Electric appliance workers in Kentucky, and bus drivers in Ohio and Illinois, could soon be on strike.

The increase in working class struggles in the US coincides with a growth of the class struggle internationally, including last month's strikes by tens of thousands of autoworkers, rail workers and hospital workers in South Korea, and a record number of strikes in China.

The artificial suppression of the class struggle by the unions, which during the Obama presidency held strikes to the lowest level since the end of the Second World War, has allowed the corporations to restructure their operations and slash their labor costs in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. This has entailed the shifting of health and pension costs onto the backs of workers and the transformation of millions of workers into casual laborers.

A common thread in virtually all of these struggles is opposition to corporate demands for higher out-of-pocket health care costs. The offloading of the cost of health coverage from the companies to the workers has escalated alongside the implementation of Obamacare, the central domestic "achievement" of the outgoing administration.

According to a survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation, premiums in the US rose by 3.4 percent and deductibles by 12 percent last year, more than eating up the average 3 percent increase in wages, which followed nearly a decade of falling or stagnant real wages. Another study shows that over the past five years, the share of employees enrolled in high-

deductible insurance plans has more than doubled, reaching 29 percent, or 50 million workers.

Between 2002 and 2015 annual earnings for the bottom 90 percent of Americans rose by only 4.5 percent, while earnings for the top 1 percent grew by 22.7 percent, according to the Economic Policy Institute. Under the Obama administration, more than 90 percent of income gains since the so-called “recovery” began have gone to the top one percent.

Meanwhile, the percent of Americans below 125 percent of the official poverty rate has been higher every year under Obama than during the Bush presidency.

These are the conditions for millions of workers on the eve of an election that pits a billionaire real estate mogul, Donald Trump, against a multi-millionaire long-time politician, Hillary Clinton. Neither of these right-wing defenders of the capitalist system offers any policies to address the social needs of working people.

The elections have been conducted at the most degrading level in order to exclude the real issues confronting the broad mass of working people: economic insecurity and poverty and the growth of militarism and war.

The real sentiments of working people can find no expression within the framework of the existing political system. The ruling elite was shocked and frightened when millions of workers and young people voted for Bernie Sanders to register their opposition to the capitalist system and the tyranny of Wall Street. The 13 million votes for what was presented—falsely and cynically—as a “democratic socialist” campaign reflected a profound shift in consciousness to the left, developing alongside a revival of working class struggle.

Sanders’ endorsement and vote-hustling for Clinton, the favored candidate of the financial-corporate elite, thoroughly exposed his reactionary role as an instrument of the ruling elite for channeling social opposition back into the dead end of the Democratic Party. He has played a central part in giving Trump an open road to exploit the social grievances of those who have been economically devastated and seek to channel discontent in a reactionary nationalist direction.

Clinton, taking advantage of Sanders’ capitulation and the backing of the complacent and reactionary liberal and pseudo-left milieu, has redoubled her efforts

to promote race and gender politics, and attribute the support for Trump to the supposed racism of the “white working class.”

The greatest exposure of such lies is the class struggle itself. The initial stirrings of a new period of class struggle, involving workers of all races and nationalities, underscores the basic fact, as Marx put it, that society is split “into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other,” the capitalists and the working class.

The political radicalization that found initial expression in the mass support for Sanders has not gone away. It will intensify under a new administration that will escalate US military violence abroad and the attacks on the working class at home.

During the course of the Socialist Equality Party’s election campaign, thousands of workers and young people have expressed a growing interest in socialism. Our party and our candidates alone—Jerry White for president and Niles Niemuth for vice president—have fought to provide a perspective and program for the class battles that are coming, and to build a new political leadership that will unite every struggle—against war, social inequality, the danger of dictatorship—into a political struggle for workers’ power and socialism.



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