

The class struggle in the US in 2017

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The year 2017 promises to be one of increasing class struggle in the United States and around the world. In every country, the ruling elites and their political servants want to make the working class pay for the global economic crisis and the costs of war.

In the US, the working class will confront a government unlike any other in American history, which will continue and intensify a decades-long social counterrevolution overseen by the Democrats and Republicans. The incoming Trump administration is manned by billionaires, generals and arch reactionaries. It is a government of, by and for the oligarchy, committed to destroying every remaining gain won by workers over the past century.

Trump wants to “Make America Great Again” by eliminating any restrictions on corporate profit, from minimum wage laws and occupational safety, health and environmental protections, to bedrock social programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. Workers will fight against these attacks, and any illusions sections of workers may have had in Trump are already being rapidly dispelled.

While hardly reported by the mass media, 2017 opens with a series of strike threats and labor contract expirations in the US. These include:

- 145,000 workers at the largest US railroads who have been working without a new contract for a year. The workers are opposing sweeping health care cuts, cuts to vacation time and unsafe working hours. They could face a strikebreaking intervention by Trump.

- More than 30,000 transit workers in New York City who are holding a mass meeting this weekend and have a January 15 contract expiration date with no agreement in sight. Another 460 bus drivers and mechanics for the regional transportation system in Dayton, Ohio have voted to strike on January 9 over health care and work conditions. In addition, 10,000 Chicago Transit Authority workers face a contract fight this year.

- 4,000 General Electric Appliance workers in Louisville, Kentucky, who rejected a wage-cutting deal recommended by the local and national leadership of the International Union of Electrical-Communications Workers of America in November. The same month, 1,200 airline mechanics at UPS’s super-hub in Louisville overwhelmingly voted to strike against health care cuts.

- 38,000 Illinois state workers who are in a contract impasse with Republican Governor Bruce Rauner’s demands for sharp hikes in health care costs and changes to overtime rules.

- 700 workers at Momenive Performance Materials in Waterford, New York, north of Albany, and Willoughby, Ohio (near Cleveland) who have been on strike for three months. It was recently revealed that a key advisor to president-elect Donald Trump, Blackstone Group founder and CEO Stephen Schwarzman, owns a stake in Momenive.

The assault on health care, pensions and wages was at the center of Obama’s economic policies. This will only be intensified under Trump. Some 120,000 retired coal miners and their dependents face the cut off of health and retirement benefits, some as early as April, because of the near-bankruptcy of the United Mine Workers funds.

Thousands of General Motors workers are facing the elimination of their jobs over the next few months, as the giant automaker, working with the UAW, seeks to slash jobs as car sales slow. Trump has appointed GM CEO Mary Barra to his corporate competitiveness board.

With great fanfare on Tuesday, Ford and the UAW announced that the company was canceling plans to build a new \$1.6 billion plant in Mexico and would invest instead in expanding a plant in suburban Detroit. Ford CEO Mark Fields said the decision was made because, “One of the factors we’re looking at is a more positive US manufacturing business environment under President-

elect Trump and some of the pro-growth policies he said he's going to pursue. And so this is a vote of confidence.”

Indeed, the Ford executives and wealthy investors will certainly reap the benefits of tax cuts, deregulation and other anti-working-class policies the Trump administration will pursue, while the UAW bureaucrats are more than willing to offer their services.

The growth of class conflict poses basic political questions for every section of the working class.

First, the struggles of workers must not be subordinated to the pro-capitalist trade unions, which in the United States and around the world function as instruments of corporate management and the state, not as workers organizations.

The past two years have already seen a significant increase in the efforts of workers to resist decades of declining real wages. In every case, they came into conflict with or were smothered by the pro-corporate, anti-working-class trade unions, which worked closely with the Obama administration.

In late 2015, autoworkers rebelled against sellout contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers, which were only rammed through with a combination of lies, threats and fraud. Last year began with a series of wildcat sickouts by teachers in Detroit. The action of teachers was in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, which shut them down and facilitated the passage of laws that deepened the attack on public education.

These actions were followed by the strike by 39,000 telecom workers at Verizon, a strike by 5,000 Minnesota hospital workers and a walkout by Philadelphia transit workers. All were isolated by the unions, which pushed through contracts that attacked jobs and living standards.

Workers must build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, and based on the methods of the class struggle. Every division used to weaken the working class must be overcome and a common struggle waged to defend the social rights of all workers.

Second, a real struggle to defend jobs and living standards must reject the economic nationalism that has long been promoted by the unions to subordinate workers to the profit interests of their “own” corporate bosses.

The growth of the class struggle must and will take on an increasingly international form. Over the past year, major strikes and demonstrations broke out throughout Europe, including in France against reactionary labor “reforms,” and in Portugal and Greece in opposition to

austerity measures dictated by the banks. India saw one of the largest one-day strikes in human history against the right-wing agenda of Narendra Modi, while in China the number of strikes and protests in the first half of 2016 was up 20 percent from the year before.

Strikes by teachers, oil workers and other sections of workers in defiance of state violence also took place in Mexico, Venezuela and Brazil. In Canada, the year ended with 9,300 teachers in Nova Scotia, Canada walking out over wage freezes and to demand increased educational funding.

Finally, the defense of the basic rights of workers is fundamentally a political struggle. In the incoming Trump administration, the reality of the state as an instrument of class rule is exposed in naked form. Yet anyone under the illusion that a Clinton administration would pursue a pro-worker policy need only look at the record of the past eight years and the response of the Democratic Party to the election of Trump. Rather than criticizing Trump for his right-wing agenda, the Democrats have denounced him for not being aggressive enough against Russia while pledging to work with him on imposing his policy of economic nationalism.

The political radicalization of American workers and youth in 2015 was expressed in support during the Democratic Party primaries for Bernie Sanders, who presented himself as a socialist and opponent of social inequality. Sanders carried out his assigned task of channeling this opposition behind the candidate of the status quo, Hillary Clinton. However, millions of people backed Sanders not because of his political treachery, but because they are seeking some way of opposing an economic system dominated by the corporate and financial aristocracy.

The essential question confronting workers in 2017 is the development of a socialist leadership for the momentous battles ahead. The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to unite every section of the working class and every struggle, for jobs, decent living standards, against police violence, war and the attack on democratic rights, into a single political movement to fight for socialism. We encourage all those who agree with the fight for socialism to join and build the SEP.



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