

Plans to expand US Navy highlight vulnerable conditions of shipyard workers

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In late January, President Trump issued a Memorandum to vastly expand the US armed forces. Among other demands, the memo calls for a rebuilding of the military, a review of US nuclear readiness, and a ballistic missile defense review. The document begins, “To pursue peace through strength, it shall be the policy of the United States to rebuild the U.S. Armed Forces.” A major pillar of these plans will be the expansion of the US Naval fleet.

In a speech given in October in Pennsylvania, Trump lamented the “badly depleted military” and claimed that the “Navy is the smallest it’s been since World War I. My plan will build the 350-ship Navy we need. This will be the largest effort at rebuilding our military since Ronald Reagan, and it will require a truly national effort.”

On January 27, the same day the Memorandum on “Rebuilding the U.S. Armed Forces” was released, the White House issued another press briefing detailing a “Manufacturing Jobs Initiative” that is to be carried out in concert with the rebuilding of the US war machine. The initiative involves industrial bosses as well as AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and Deputy Chief of Staff Thea Lee.

Taken together, these announcements represent two cornerstones of the policies of the American ruling class: a vast expansion of US militarism abroad and further attacks on the working class within the United States.

The plans to “rebuild” the Navy will be carried out on the backs of American workers. There is no side of the war machine that does not take a violent toll on the working class, from those who prepare the machines to those who use them, and most directly, on those they are used against. These war plans will not be creating safe, high-paying jobs for the working class, but rather

will exacerbate the already deadly conditions of the poorly regulated shipbuilding industry.

Shipyard accidents and injuries

The workers who build and repair Navy ships operate under conditions with some of the weakest oversight of any federally contracted industry. In the decade spanning from 2005 through 2015, a total of 76 workers in the private shipbuilding and repair industry were killed on the job. According to the most recent federal labor figures, shipyard workers face an injury and illness rate that is approximately 80 percent higher than construction jobs.

Examples of these conditions have been exposed repeatedly over the last 15 years. In 2009, VT Halter Marine Inc.’s shipyard in Escatawpa, Mississippi, was forced to settle with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), agreeing to pay a reduced fine of \$860,500, after admitting to willful violation of 12 safety rules that killed two men. A recent report in *Politico* describes the incident: “[T]he company had dispatched the men into a confined space with flammable vapors without testing the air. It didn’t give them explosion-proof lights. As the men worked, toxic fumes reached more than 600 times the legal limit, according to OSHA.”

Of two men who died in the explosion, one was an immigrant from Puerto Rico, only 25 years old. The other was a recently released felon, 52 years old. Just a month before the explosion, another worker was killed at a VT Halter shipyard in Pascagoula, Mississippi, after falling 40 feet, working unharnessed and without

handrails. He was 23 years old and left behind 4-year-old twins.

During the several-months-long investigation, and just months before the settlement was reached, the US Navy awarded the company another contract, worth \$87 million, to build a 350-foot ship to improve submarine warfare.

The US government has given out over \$100 billion in public money to the Navy and Coast Guard's seven major private shipbuilders since October 2008. These contracts continue to funnel money into shipbuilding industries despite numerous citations for serious safety lapses that have endangered, injured and, in some cases, killed workers. The two arms of the political establishment operate in this field as if a part of separate bodies—one “shakes a fist” at these industries by imposing minimal fines, while the other routinely rewards them with massive contracts. Thus is the logic of the imperialist machine.

Although many commercial shipyards have moved overseas as a result of globalization and less expensive manufacturing in China, Korea, and Japan, the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 requires that government vessels be constructed within the borders of the US. Critics of this policy include longtime war hawk John McCain, who favors shifting the construction of oil and gasoline tankers to other countries that will further cut costs of shipbuilding. Trump, on the other hand, has promised that the plans to expand the Navy will mean the hiring of American craftsmen, pipe fitters and welders.

In 2011, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote a lengthy policy article headlined “America’s Pacific Century,” calling for “a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise—in the Asia-Pacific region” over the next decade.

In December 2016, Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus announced that the department had completed a yearlong Force Structure Assessment, to evaluate long-term defense security requirements and upon review, “recommends a 355-ship fleet including 12 carriers, 104 large surface combatants, 52 small surface combatants, 38 amphibious ships, and 66 submarines” as part of the Navy’s 30-year shipbuilding plan.

Mabus went on to state, “To continue to protect America and defend our strategic interests around the

world, all the while continuing the counter terrorism fight and appropriately competing with a growing China and resurgent Russia, our Navy must continue to grow.” Numerous policy analysts, think tanks, and politicians in the Democratic and Republican parties have recognized the declining economic power of the United States in relation to China and have, over the past few years, pursued diplomatic measures and more-aggressive military action in the region seeking to contain China.

Long-term plans to expand the Navy, which have already been under way, are in line with Trump’s call to bring jobs back to the US. His slogan “Make America Great Again” in reality means an intensification of the attacks on the social position of shipyard and other workers in order to further enrich American corporations and make them more competitive on the global market. Trump’s plans represent a further shift to the right in a process that began under Obama with the restructuring of the auto industry and the halving of workers’ wages with the dedicated complicity of the unions.



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