

Teachers unions intensify efforts to suppress growing class struggle in the US

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On Sunday night, the National Education Association (NEA) shut down the strike by 4,000 teachers and support staff in Jersey City, the second-largest school district in the state of New Jersey. The NEA ordered educators to return to their classrooms without providing any details on the tentative deal, let alone allowing workers to vote on it. Presuming that an agreement actually exists, it will do nothing to address teachers' demands to end soaring health care costs.

The one-day strike is the latest in a growing wave of protests and calls for strikes that have spread from West Virginia to Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, Tennessee, Colorado and other states, plus the US territory of Puerto Rico, where teachers struck against school privatization yesterday.

The struggle of Jersey City teachers exposes the role of the Democratic Party, which supports the assault on teachers and public education no less than the Republicans. At issue is a bill, known as Chapter 78, which forces public employees to pay up to 35 percent of their medical insurance premiums and eliminates fully funded pensions for future teachers. It was passed with the backing of the Democratic-controlled state legislature in 2011.

Within hours of the beginning of the strike, a Hudson County judge granted the city's Democratic Party-controlled school board an injunction to order teachers back to work on the grotesque grounds that teachers—not the corporate-controlled politicians—were doing “irreparable harm” to Jersey City school children.

The Jersey City Education Association (JCEA) is acting in the same manner as the unions in West Virginia, which opposed any struggle of teachers and worked to end it and impose a sell-out deal as soon as they could. Under conditions of a growing desire for a unified fight across the country, the NEA, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the other state-affiliated organizations see as their central task the suppression of class struggle. They will do exactly the same thing wherever a struggle emerges, and not only among teachers.

Any worker who wants to understand the nature of these organizations should make a careful study of the article, “If the Supreme Court rules against unions, conservatives won't like what happens next,” published in the *Washington Post* on March 1. Written by Shaun Richman, a former organizing director of the AFT, it spells out in extraordinarily blunt terms the value of the unions for the American ruling class.

The motivation for Richman's comment is the ongoing US

Supreme Court case of *Janus vs. AFSCME*, which will rule on the constitutionality of “agency fees”—the requirement that workers in public-sector unions in some states pay the equivalent of dues to unions even if they are not members.

“What the Janus backers (and most commentators) miss is that agency fees are not just compensation for the financial costs of representation,” Richman says, “but for the political costs of representing all the members in the bargaining unit and maintaining labor peace. As AFSCME's lawyer pointed out in his oral arguments, the agency fee is routinely traded for a no-strike clause in most union contracts. Should those clauses disappear, employers will have chaos and discord on their hands.”

That is, the steady income stream for these organizations—in the form of a portion of workers' income automatically deducted from their paychecks—is *quid pro quo* for the “political cost” of “maintaining labor peace” by preventing strikes.

Richman continues: “American labor laws, and *the employers who benefit from them*, prefer that if there's going to be a union, only one should serve as the exclusive representative of all eligible employees in a workplace. That scheme imposes on unions a legal obligation to fairly represent all members of the bargaining unit, and *a political imperative to defend the terms of any deal* as ‘the best we could get’ (*even if it includes concessions on benefits and work rules*). It rewards the unions with a guaranteed right to exist and a reliable base of fee-paying membership. But it rewards employers with the *far more valuable guarantee* of the right to direct the uninterrupted work of the enterprise while union leadership has to *tamp down rank-and-file gripes and discord* for the length of the contract.” (emphasis added).

That is, it is not a matter of these organizations representing the workers against the employers, but of them representing the employers against the workers—by tamping down “rank-and-file gripes [!] and discord.” The unions are rewarded with an income stream, the companies are rewarded (far more!) with uninterrupted work, and the workers are “rewarded”...with concessions on benefits and work rules.

Exclusive representation, mandatory agency fees, no-strike clauses and “management's rights,” Richman declares, “are the foundation of our peculiar labor relations system,” which, he says, is different from virtually every other country.

Richman's reference to the “peculiar” system of labor relations in America perhaps unconsciously harkens back to an earlier “peculiar institution” in America, chattel slavery. In any case,

Richman is describing an arrangement that emerged in the postwar period in which the unions, both private- and public-sector, agreed to forego any challenge to the rights of management in the workplace. This was bound up with a ruthless purge from the unions of socialist and left-wing militants that formed the backbone of the movement for industrial unionism in the 1930s.

In a 1956 address to arbitrators, Arthur Goldberg, the general counsel for the United Steelworkers of America (later Secretary of Labor under Kennedy, and Supreme Court justice), enumerated on management's "inherent rights," which were "not modified or diminished" by collective bargaining. "The union cannot direct its members to their work stations or work assignments... The union does not notify people who are discharged to stay put. The union does not tell employees to report for work after a layoff... Very often union men are disturbed by decisions they consider entirely wrong. Nevertheless, a company's right to make its own judgments is clear."

During the postwar period, under conditions of economic growth and the undisputed sway of US corporations over the world economy, workers were able to win certain gains despite the domination of the unions by right-wing bureaucrats.

This changed as American capitalism began its historical economic decline and the ruling class shifted from a policy of relative class compromise to class war and social counterrevolution. When Reagan fired 13,000 air traffic controllers and jailed their leaders, the AFL-CIO did nothing, initiating a decades-long wave of unending betrayals that continues to this day. Incapable of any progressive response to capitalist globalization, the unions blocked any resistance by workers and colluded with corporations to shut down plants and wipe out millions of jobs.

During this period the unions went through a fundamental transformation. Though they still called themselves "unions," they abandoned any of the tasks traditionally associated with unions, including calling strikes, addressing workplace grievances and opposing speedup and management abuse. Far from expanding the share of national income that goes to the working class, the unions colluded with the corporations and the government to reduce that share, in order to increase the share that goes to the top five percent of the population.

If the American union leaders were to "defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the raising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, not a trade union," Leon Trotsky noted in 1937.

This is exactly what these organizations have become. It is necessary to avoid the tyranny of language. While workers have a desire to unite and organize joint opposition, they confront in the "unions," not workers organizations, but corporatist instruments of management and the state, controlled by privileged, upper-middle-class executives. (AFT President Randi Weingarten has an annual salary of half a million dollars, while Richman was paid \$200,000 for his "service" at the AFT).

The greatest fear of these organizations is that opposition will develop outside of their control. If the Janus ruling undermines the

monopoly of the unions, Richman warns of "new unions that are more left-wing and militant (or at least crankier)" and "will not be satisfied with the current work rules and compensation and will have little incentive to settle."

All those pseudo-left organizations that defend the unions do so because they want to maintain the organizational stranglehold that they have over the working class. They denounce the Socialist Equality Party as "sectarian" for supposedly refusing to "work within the unions." In fact, the SEP carries out its political work wherever workers are, including in the corporatist syndicates, but it does so to fight for the independent organization and revolutionary initiative of the working class, not to uphold the authority of anti-working-class organizations.

For the working class, what is posed is not the formation of new unions that accept and defend capitalist property relations, let alone simply replacing the existing leadership. While there may be something "peculiar" about the openness within which unions in the US embraced the domination of management, the same process of degeneration and transformation has occurred within the nationalist, pro-capitalist labor organizations around the world.

Rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, based on the needs and rights of the workers, must be built to unify all sections of the working class in a common struggle. In opposition to the UAW, AFT, NEA and other corporatist organizations, these organizations must reject the subordination of the interests of the working class to the capitalist system and the state, and the relentless demands for austerity to enrich the financial oligarchy and finance new wars. Instead of acceding to management dictatorship in the factories and workplaces, these committees must assert the right to organize collective action to oppose all forms of corporate abuse and exploitation.

Above all, these committees must reject the lies peddled by Democrats and Republicans, who say there is no money for public education, decent wages, health care and pensions for public employees, while they squander trillions on corporate tax cuts and endless wars.

While fighting for such rank-and-file committees, the Socialist Equality Party insists that the class struggle must be fused with a new, socialist perspective and that the fight for the right to public education, living wages and fully paid health care and pension benefits, will not be possible outside of the independent political mobilization of the working class and a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the capitalist exploiters.



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