

International Socialist Organization covers for union treachery in the teachers' strikes

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The growing wave of teachers' strikes in the United States demonstrates that the class struggle, which has been artificially suppressed for decades, is beginning to reemerge.

One of the most significant features of the upsurge of teachers is the fact that it has taken the form of a rebellion against the trade unions. The strikes have been organized by teachers on social media, independently of the unions, which have worked for decades to suppress the class struggle.

The conflict between the teachers and the unions flows organically from the character of the unions themselves, which have long been transformed into the police arm of management and have played a critical role in keeping strike levels at historic lows even as poverty and social inequality have risen to record highs.

It is precisely at this point that the pseudo-left—self-declared radical or even “socialist” organizations that speak for privileged middle-class layers—have intervened to try to bolster illusions in the unions. The organizations function as factions of the Democratic Party and the union apparatus.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO), one of the leading US pseudo-left groups, articulated the position of this broader social layer in a recent piece, “Organizing to spread the labor rebellion,” published on its *Socialist Worker* website. Writing on the eve of this weekend's national conference of Labor Notes, a group that functions as the “left” flank of the trade union bureaucracy, author Lee Sustar gives a lying account of the teachers' strikes, portraying the unions as leading and organizing opposition.

“It's the biggest labor rebellion in decades—and nearly 2,000 militants and activists are coming to Chicago to strategize on how to spread it further,” Sustar writes. “Workers have scored some important victories during that time, including the 1997 UPS strike, several strike wins at Verizon and its predecessor companies, and the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012... But these were exceptions, not the rule—and what used to be called Big Labor is now at a critical stage.”

Sustar argues that “the teachers' strikes are pointing to a different way to revive labor ... [with] militant action from below.”

Sustar's use of the term “labor” is intended to identify the struggle of the teachers with the trade unions. In fact, at every

step, the teachers unions have sought to stifle and sabotage any struggle.

In West Virginia, which Sustar falsely calls a “victory,” the teachers unions enforced a sellout deal, almost identical to the one which the teachers had rebelled against only one week before, which did not address the teachers' main demand for full funding of their healthcare program and tied paltry wage increases to significant cuts to social spending.

In Oklahoma, the teachers unions, after being forced to call a strike for April 2nd, attempted to limit it to one-day demonstrations “thanking” the state legislature for grossly inadequate funding increases brokered by the union, which were widely rejected by teachers. They are currently conspiring with Democratic politicians to find some way to shut down the strike, which will enter its second week on Monday.

Events in Arizona, Kentucky and other states have proceeded along identical lines. The treachery of the unions, which has been all the more confirmed over the past month, is what prompted rank-and-file teachers to organize for strike action outside of the unions in the first place.

Sustar's reference to the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike as a “victory” demonstrates which side of the barricades Sustar and the ISO stand on. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) ended the strike in 2012 with a sellout contract that handed the initiative to Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, Obama's former chief of staff, to close down dozens of schools and layoff thousands of teachers.

The CTU followed this up in 2016 with another sellout deal which included no wage increases for two years and imposed sharp increases in pension contributions for new hires. The ISO, moreover, is in the leadership of the CTU, through ISO member and vice president Jesse Sharkey, and played a direct role in enforcing this defeat.

It is also noteworthy that the ISO has written almost nothing on the ongoing corruption scandal in the United Auto Workers, whose top negotiators accepted \$1.5 million in bribes from Fiat Chrysler over the course of several years. The scandal has commanded widespread attention among autoworkers, who hate the union bureaucracy and rebelled against the union-backed sellout contract in 2015. To acknowledge widespread

corruption in the unions would undercut the ISO's narrative that the unions are "workers organizations."

Sustar's false depiction of the teachers' strikes is in the service of a more fundamental lie, that the unions, no matter how treacherous, can be recaptured and turned into a vehicle for working-class struggle. While "union democracy" has always been a "rarity," Sustar argues, "[W]ith 14.8 million members, unions constitute a unique mass force in U.S. society. They are working-class institutions, and their very existence is a challenge to the constant drive by capital to increase productivity and boost profits."

When they appeal to the employers, however, the unions candidly describe their role as the exact opposite; that is, of aiding and abetting profits by suppressing strikes. After the end of the West Virginia strike, American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten warned in a *Washington Post* op-ed that weakening the unions would "lead to more activism and political action." Because collective bargaining does not exist for teachers in West Virginia, "thousands of teachers mobilized and took on the governor and legislature for their failure to provide teachers with the economic dignity and voice they deserve—and that kind of activism will be multiplied and magnified across the country if collective bargaining is struck down."

Weingarten's reference to "collective bargaining," i.e., the ability of the unions to "bargain" away concessions, was in reference to the *Janus v. AFSCME* case pending before the Supreme Court, which threatens to deprive the unions of millions in revenue through "agency fees" collected from nonunion workers.

In arguments before the Supreme Court, the lawyer for the public employees union argued, "The key thing that has been bargained for in this contract for agency fees is a limitation on striking... Union security is the tradeoff for no strikes." He argued that if the court rules against the unions, "you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country."

A comment in the *Washington Post* by Shaun Richman, former organizing director of the AFT, was even more explicit. Unions, he wrote, have the "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)," adding that this arrangement "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."

Sustar ends his article with an appeal to the trade union bureaucracy to incorporate the pseudo-left more closely into its apparatus to ward off a growing rank-and-file rebellion.

"A strong socialist current—the Communist Party, Socialist Party and Trotskyist organizations—was indispensable to the epic labor victories of the 1930s and 1940s," Sustar writes.

"In recent years, the Labor Notes conference—which for many years banned socialist publications from circulating at the

event—has taken up a discussion of the role of socialists in the labor movement, in history and the present day... Now, in the wake of the Bernie Sanders campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, socialism has reentered mainstream political discussion in the U.S. for the first time in decades."

"[A]t a time of political crisis," Sustar concludes, "when employers and the right are driving down working class standards, it is essential for socialists in the labor movement to bring their political perspective into the unions. Our fights today have to be linked to the struggle for justice, equality and the liberation of the oppressed."

The influence of socialism among American workers in the 1930s and 40s reflected an understanding within the most militant and advanced workers, spurred on by the experience of the Russian Revolution, that the logic of their struggles went far beyond mere contract disputes and posed the necessity to overthrow the capitalist system. Sustar's suppression of the actual record of the unions and his praise for the "socialism" promoted by Labor Notes and Bernie Sanders demonstrates that he has something quite different in mind.

Sustar and the ISO are acutely aware that the trade unions, threatened with the loss of guaranteed revenue in the *Janus* case and increasingly discredited in the eyes of workers, confront a crisis that threatens their very existence. In order to continue to enforce the types of "epic victories" over the working class as in West Virginia and Chicago, Sustar is arguing, the trade unions must work hand in glove with the organizations such as the ISO who can provide them with a "left" cover even as they prepare to carry out betrayals.

The ISO's support for the trade unions flows organically from its hostility to the working class. As with the pseudo-left as a whole, they represent layers of the upper middle class, including sections of the trade union bureaucracy itself, which have grown wealthy over the past three decades through the intensified exploitation of the working class.

As teachers come into increasingly direct conflict with the official institutions of the capitalist state, including the Democratic Party and the trade unions, they must understand the treacherous role of "socialist" organizations like the ISO.



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