

The global significance of the resurgence of class struggle in the United States

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The following speech was delivered to the ICFI's May Day 2018 International Online Rally by Jerry White, labor editor of the World Socialist Web Site.

As we commemorate the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx, the reemergence of class conflict throughout the world, and in particular in the United States, confirms that the class struggle is the driving force of historical development.

“The history of all hitherto existing society,” Marx and Engels wrote in the *Communist Manifesto* in 1847, “is the history of class struggles.” The distinct feature of capitalism, they wrote, was that it simplified those class antagonisms. “Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”

Ten years after the global financial crash in the summer of 2008, the class struggle is resurging around the world. Since the beginning of the year, there have been upheavals in Tunisia, Iran and Greece, a wave of industrial strikes in Germany, working-class opposition against Macron, the “President of the Rich,” in France, and class battles in India, Sri Lanka and South Korea. In the United States, statewide strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona have been part of a worldwide revolt by educators, spanning Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa.

Over the last decade, the resistance of workers to capitalist exploitation was suppressed by the pro-capitalist unions and social democratic, Stalinist and pseudo-left parties. Between 2008 and 2017, there were only 129 work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers in the US, the lowest 10-year-period since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began recording strikes in 1947. By contrast, between 1968 and 1977 there were 3,238 major strikes, or 25 times more than in the last decade.

The suppression of the class struggle by the unions allowed the ruling class to carry out a historic redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top. Under Obama, the financial speculators who crashed the economy were bailed out and the stock markets re-inflated through a regime of virtually free credit, which depended on preventing any rise in “inflation,” the code-word for increasing wages.

The ruling class's decades-long program of social counter-revolution escalated, with the gutting of health care and

pensions, resulting in a decline in life expectancy for older workers, while the younger generation was condemned to low-wage, temporary jobs, and crushing college debts.

Nowhere has the class struggle been denied more than in the land of “unlimited opportunity.” But the division of American society into two “hostile camps” is clear for all to see. Just three billionaires in the US—Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffett—have the same amount of wealth as the bottom 160 million people. The top one percent of American households owns more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined.

After Trump's tax cut, corporations are sitting on a cash hoard of more than \$2 trillion, and companies like Apple are spending record amounts on dividends and stock buybacks to further enrich investors and top executives.

The contending factions of the American political establishment are engaged in savage infighting over geopolitical and military policy, with the corporate media and the Democrats, who speak for the military-intelligence agencies, hurling accusations of sexual misconduct and Russian collusion at Trump, in order to shift him even further to the right, including into a direct military confrontation with nuclear armed Russia. In an effort to direct internal social tensions outward, the media and the Democrats are blaming the Russians for sowing divisions in America, as if, without Putin and the Russians, America would be a thoroughly contented society.

The American working class, however, is consumed with entirely different concerns—over plummeting wages, austerity, social inequality, mass deportations, and the danger of war and dictatorship. During the last two months, state-wide strikes by teachers have spread across West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, while strikes and protests have erupted, and are continuing to spread, in Colorado, New Jersey, Florida, the Carolinas, and the US territory of Puerto Rico. As one teacher in Oklahoma, protesting in front of the state capitol for increased school funding for her students, told the WSWS, “I didn't see Putin or any Russians inside there.”

It is significant that teachers have been in the forefront of the resurgence of the class struggle. They deeply identify with the egalitarian principles of public education, which are incompatible with the staggering levels of inequality, and are

intimately aware of the impact of bipartisan funding cuts and the growth of poverty and other social ills, like the opioid epidemic, on their young students.

Various fake “left” apologists for the unions have attempted to claim that the teachers’ strikes have given a new breath of fresh air to the unions. But the strikes were not initiated by the unions, which opposed them and did everything to shut them down when they erupted. Instead, the struggles were initiated by rank-and-file teachers, who used social media to rebel against the unions and their collusion with the austerity measures imposed by both Democrats and Republicans alike. This prompted the *New York Times* to issue a worried comment about teachers using social media to “organize and act outside the usual parameters of traditional unionism.”

No position of the International Committee of the Fourth International has been more bitterly attacked by the pseudo-left than our exposure of the right-wing role and anti-working-class character of the trade unions. Yet our analysis of the transformation of the unions into direct agencies of the corporations and the capitalist state is the most powerful confirmation of the Marxist method.

The ICFI was alone in uncovering the historical significance of the global integration of capitalist production in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Globalization, we explained, had fatally undermined the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country” in the USSR, as well as the nationalist programs that had formed the foundation of all the unions and labor parties.

The next period of working class radicalization, we insisted, would take the form of a rebellion against these nationalist and pro-capitalist organizations. Workers would be more and more compelled to coordinate their struggles against the global corporations on the basis of an international and socialist perspective, which the ICFI alone embodied.

When addressing the representatives of the ruling elite, union officials openly boast their chief function is to prevent strikes and enforce the dictates of the employers and the state.

This was spelled out earlier this year in the opening argument by union lawyers before the Supreme Court case, *Janus v. AFSCME*. The sanctioning of the unions by the state and the guarantee of their financial security, the union attorney argued, was the tradeoff “for no strikes.” If the court ruled against unions collecting agency fees from public employees who are not union members, the lawyer warned, “you can raise an untold specter of labor unrest throughout the country.”

The teachers’ revolt is a sign of what is to come. In every section of the working class, there is a mood of rebellion. The call by the ICFI for workers to form rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the corporatist unions, has won powerful support. In the US, an incipient rebellion is brewing against the UAW, whose corrupt relations with the auto bosses and role as a cheap labor contractor was highlighted in the tragic, and still unexplained death six months ago of Jacoby Hennings, a 21-year-old, temporary part-time

worker at a Detroit area Ford plant.

“But every class struggle is a political struggle,” Marx and Engels declared in the *Communist Manifesto*. That is, every struggle of the working class for its social rights, whether for decent wages, for public education, or against war and state repression, poses the necessity of the working class taking political power in its own hands and reorganizing economic and political life to meet society’s needs.

Spontaneous struggles, no matter how militant, cannot resolve the crisis of revolutionary leadership, or automatically clarify the political tasks of the working class. A party, based on the most advanced revolutionary theory, and gathering within its ranks the most politically advanced sections of workers and youth, must bring socialist consciousness into the struggles of the working class.

“Our politics is not of a conjunctural but principled character,” Leon Trotsky said in 1940. “Tactics are subordinated to strategy, and for us the primary concern of every political campaign is that it guide workers from the particular question to the general, that it teach them the nature of modern society and the character of its fundamental forces.”

Anti-Marxists around the world have long claimed that the American working class is too backward for socialism to set roots in America. The “agency” for social change, they insist today, are privileged sections of minorities and women, who, far from seeking the overthrow of capitalism, only want to join the ranks of the oppressors.

In contrast, the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, has always insisted that the American working class, driven into struggle by the historic breakdown of American and world capitalism, would turn to Marxism to understand its social position and historic tasks, and make a monumental contribution to the world socialist revolution.

The development of the class struggle in the United States is transforming world politics. The awakening of the great sleeping giant of the American proletariat will inspire struggles all over the world, undermining the most reactionary force on the planet, American imperialism. And workers in the US will join their class brothers and sisters internationally in the greatest emancipatory struggle the world has ever known, following the clarion call of the Communist Manifesto, “Workers of the world, unite! The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains! They have a world to win!”



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