

Labor Day 2018: The growth of the class struggle and the case for rank-and-file committees

Jerry White
3 September 2018

Labor Day 2018 is being celebrated today in the United States and Canada. As is the case every year, the day will be marked in the US with a few demonstrations organized by the AFL-CIO, where union officials and Democratic Party politicians deliver empty and hypocritical speeches. This year, however, Labor Day takes place amidst a resurgence of class struggle that is bringing workers into ever more direct conflict with the corporatist and anti-working class trade unions.

With public schools reopening, teachers are renewing their fight for substantial wage improvements and increased funding for public education. In the state of Washington, where in 2013 Democratic Governor Jay Inslee oversaw the largest corporate tax cut in US history—\$8.7 billion for aircraft and defense giant Boeing—teachers have walked out in several districts. Despite efforts by the unions to shut down the struggles, there are increasing demands from rank-and-file educators for a statewide strike.

Last week, teachers in Los Angeles voted by 98 percent to authorize a strike in the nation's second-largest school district, with 640,000 students and over 33,000 teachers. In Detroit, teachers and parents are livid over high levels of lead and copper in drinking water, just two years after Detroit teachers waged a series of wildcat sickouts over decaying schools and underfunded classrooms. The school district has been forced to shut off water to all the city's schools.

In the states where teachers waged statewide walkouts earlier this year, none of the issues motivating the strikes have been resolved. In Arizona, the state Supreme Court just threw off the ballot a tax initiative, called Invest in Education, which would have raised income taxes by a meager 3 to 4 percentage points on individuals and households earning more than \$250,000. The unions, the Democrats and their affiliated organizations promoted the initiative as the solution to the funding crisis when they conspired to shut down the six-day strike by 60,000 Arizona

teachers last May. In the end, however, the ruling class would not countenance the slightest incursion on its moneymaking operations.

The strikes in the US coincide with the growth of the class struggle internationally. Over the weekend, workers at South Western Railway in the UK carried out a three-day strike against the elimination of safety guards' positions. This followed last month's strike by Ryan Air pilots in Ireland, Spain and other European countries.

The trade unions have worked systematically to prevent strikes and, if unable, to quickly isolate these struggles and sell them out.

- The teacher unions have rushed to settle a dispute in Seattle, the largest school district in the state of Washington, in an effort to prevent a statewide walkout. The teacher strikes in the spring were not initiated by the unions but emerged through a rebellion of rank-and-file educators against them.

- After the labor agreement covering 31,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal expired Saturday, the United Steelworkers union has forced workers to remain on the job despite the demand for historic rollbacks by the highly profitable companies.

- A month after the July 31 expiration of the contracts covering 230,000 workers at United Parcel Service, the Teamsters has defied the overwhelming strike mandate by workers and is trying to push through a contract introducing lower wages and part-time conditions for package delivery drivers, along with poverty-level wages for warehouse workers.

- The Communications Workers of America has kept 7,000 AT&T workers on the job months after the expiration of their contracts.

- After Fiat Chrysler workers voted overwhelmingly to strike the company's transmission operations in Kokomo, Indiana, the United Auto Workers has kept them on the job. The UAW has been exposed as a direct arm of corporate

management, accepting millions of dollars in exchange for its role in pushing through historic concessions on auto workers.

The actions of the trade unions are the expression of what they are. Over the past four decades, the unions, based on their defense of capitalism and the nation-state system, have been transformed into cheap labor contractors and police agencies over the working class. They exist not to organize opposition to the dictates of the ruling class, but to prevent this opposition.

During the *Janus v. AFSCME* case, attorneys for the public sector unions repeatedly told the Supreme Court justices that agency fees—the equivalent of union dues for public sector workers who opt out of union membership—was the “tradeoff for no strikes.” That is, the state-sponsored, automatic deduction of a portion of workers wages was the payment for ensuring that workers do not rebel against the conditions imposed on them.

More recently, a spokesman for the New York State United Teachers told the *Albany Times Union* that the Taylor Law, which bars strikes by public sector employees, “has worked effectively for more than 40 years” in “keeping the peace” and should not be overturned.

At its recent Fifth National Congress, the Socialist Equality Party (US) passed a resolution, “The Resurgence of Class Struggle and the Tasks of the Socialist Equality Party,” that explained the consequences of the extreme growth of social inequality and the social and political radicalization of the working class and youth:

The United States is a social powder keg. The eruption of social struggles on a scale never before seen in the United States is all but inevitable. There are many factors—the commonality of social interests among broad sections of the working class, the erosion of sectional differences, the racial and ethnic integration of the working class, the impact of Internet-based social media—that are working toward the coalescence of mass protests. Thus, it is to be expected that the outbreak of serious social protests—whatever the immediate issue or wherever the location—will rapidly expand and draw millions of workers into active participation in the struggle. Given the historical experience of the working class, the logical outcome of this coalescence of social struggles will be a general strike, which will raise the question of political power.

country and internationally are seeking a way to oppose inequality, intensified exploitation, social misery and all the consequences of capitalism. However intense their internal conflicts, the representatives of the ruling class, Democrat and Republican, are united in their terror at the implications of the resurgence of class struggle.

The coordination and organization of working-class opposition requires the formation of new organizations, rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. As the resolution states:

Therefore, preparation for mass working-class struggles requires the development of an interconnected network of popular workplace and neighborhood committees. The necessity for such committees arises out of the experiences of the workers themselves. The organizations that claim to represent them, the trade unions, are not only deeply hostile to the organization of working-class struggles, they have abandoned even the most limited forms of representation, including the resolving of grievances and the enforcement of contract provisions.

The development of such committees is a central task confronting every section of the working class. So long as the trade unions maintain their organizational stranglehold over the working class, the establishment of a genuinely united movement of the working class—in the United States and internationally—is impossible.

The formation of factory committees and the preparation of a general strike raise, as the SEP resolution states, the “question of political power.” The fight for the most elemental necessities—the right to decent wages, high quality public education, health care and housing, and a future for the next generation free from war, political repression and violence—requires the revolutionary mobilization of the working class to take political power in its own hands, break the stranglehold of the corporate and financial aristocracy and carry out the socialist reorganization of society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

This analysis has proven correct. Workers throughout the