

Growing class conflict in the US and the resurgence of socialism

Joseph Kishore—SEP national secretary and candidate for US president
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According to a report released Tuesday by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), working class struggles in the US are at their highest levels in decades.

There were 25 work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers in 2019. This is the largest number in nearly two decades. Ten of these strikes involved 20,000 or more workers, the largest number since at least 1993, when data on the size of walkouts began to be systematically tracked by the BLS.

The number of workers involved in strikes is increasing as well. There were 425,500 workers who took part in major work stoppages last year, down slightly from 2018 (485,000). The 2018 figure was a near 20-fold increase over the previous year. Combined, 2018 and 2019 saw the largest number of workers involved in a major work stoppage, over a two-year period, in 35 years.

Over the past two years, teachers have engaged in major strikes in West Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Oregon and other states, and in major cities like Los Angeles, Oakland and Chicago. The unrest among manufacturing workers was expressed in the 40-day strike by 46,000 workers at General Motors last year, the first national strike by autoworkers in decades. More than 30,000 Stop and Shop grocery workers in the US Northeast also walked out last year.

In many cases, these strikes have developed outside of the official trade unions, and in all cases have come into conflict with these nationalist and pro-capitalist organizations. The United Auto Workers succeeded in shutting down the GM strike, even as its executives were under criminal investigation and indictment for stealing workers' dues money and accepting bribes from the auto companies.

The intensification of the class struggle is the

essential factor underlying the shift to the left among workers. Numerous polls express the broad-based support for socialism, and hostility to capitalism and inequality, particularly among young people. In the 2020 elections, this political radicalization has found its initial and, as yet, politically limited expression, in support for the campaign of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who has won the popular vote in the first two contests in the Democratic primary campaign—Iowa and New Hampshire.

The impulse toward socialism is derived not only from social discontent and the outbreak of strikes, but from a complex interaction of the domestic and international crisis of American capitalism.

The principal objective factor that allowed the ruling class in the United States to suppress the growth of socialism was the strength of American capitalism. So long as the United States was an ascending economic power, with a sufficient share of the national income going to rising living standards, American workers were not convinced of the necessity for socialism.

The objective conditions for this American “exceptionalism,” however, have thoroughly eroded. Over the past 40 years, the American ruling class, responding to the decline in the dominant global position of American capitalism, has been working systematically to destroy everything that had been won by workers through bitter struggle. The “land of unlimited opportunity,” which always had a semi-mythical character, has given way to the land of low wages, debt and economic insecurity. The “American Dream” has turned into the “American nightmare.”

Particularly since the crash of 2008, the concentration of wealth has enormously intensified class and social divisions. The 400 richest individuals in the US now possess more wealth than the bottom 64 percent of the

population, and social inequality is greater than at any time since the years preceding the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Anticipating this development, in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, the Socialist Equality Party predicted: “The reality of capitalism will provide workers with many reasons to fight for a fundamental and revolutionary change in the economic organization of society.” This is now taking place.

The growth of social unrest and interest in socialism has frightened and shocked the ruling class and its political and media mouthpieces. The Trump administration has responded with frenzied anti-communism. Trump frantically denounces “socialism” and the “radical left.” His effort to build up a movement of the fascistic right is directed, above all, at the growth of social opposition in the working class to the policies of the financial oligarchy.

The Democratic Party and media are working relentlessly to undermine support for socialism. The hostility of dominant factions of the Democratic Party to the Sanders campaign expresses their determination to prevent an election that raises, even in a limited way, the mass hostility to social inequality and corporate dictatorship.

While posturing as a popular party, the entire program of the Democrats is based on the suppression of class consciousness. Through the mechanism of racial and gender politics, the Democrats and their affiliated organizations seek to divide the working class. With the growth of the class struggle, these efforts are intensifying.

Sanders, while the immediate beneficiary of the movement to the left among workers and youth, seeks to direct anger and opposition back into the Democratic Party itself, to prevent it from breaking out of the bounds of capitalist politics.

The development of the class struggle, and the radicalization of workers and youth, will inevitably come into conflict with Sanders and those, like the Democratic Socialists of America, that are promoting him. In terms of his program, Sanders seeks to combine proposals for minor social reforms, impossible under capitalism, with economic nationalism; a shameful silence on the persecution of Julian Assange and Chelsea Manning, and support for the imperialist foreign policy of the Democratic Party.

The growth of the class struggle, and the political radicalization of workers and youth, is in its initial stages. Millions of people, in the United States and internationally, are looking for a way to oppose inequality, exploitation, dictatorship and war. They will go through political experiences and must draw the necessary conclusions.

“We must patiently explain,” Lenin once wrote, under similar conditions. The workers must be imbued with a consciousness of the logic of the struggles they are waging. They must understand the role of different political tendencies, to distrust those who make empty and false promises. They must be encouraged to have confidence in their own strength and the possibility of independent action. They must be trained to analyze politics in class terms, and to reject all efforts to promote racial, gender and national divisions.

As the Socialist Equality Party candidates in the 2020 presidential elections, Norissa Santa Cruz and I will fight to build a socialist leadership in the working class. The SEP campaign will explain what socialism is and how it can be achieved. It will bring into the growing struggles of workers throughout the world the immense historical experiences of the working class, embodied in the history of the Fourth International.

The intersection of the objective movement of the working class and the intervention of the socialist movement will create the conditions for abolishing world capitalism and putting an end to inequality, exploitation and war.

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