The COVID-19 pandemic and the global resurgence of class struggle

Keith Jones
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As the last month of 2020 begins, working class resistance is erupting throughout the world in opposition to the mercenary response of the ruling class to the COVID-19 pandemic, its concerted drive to intensify capitalist exploitation, and its evisceration of democratic rights.

Just in the past eleven days, tens of millions have joined strikes or mass protests:

• On November 26, workers across India staged a one-day general strike to protest the Hindu supremacist BJP government's socially incendiary economic policies. The strikers also demanded emergency aid for the hundreds of millions of impoverished workers and toilers who have been left to fend for themselves amidst an unprecedented health and socioeconomic catastrophe.

A ten-week COVID-19 lockdown last spring was accompanied by no serious mobilization of society's resources to halt the spread of the virus, while the tens of millions of workers rendered jobless overnight were denied social support. This was followed by a premature return to work that has resulted in mass infections and deaths.

In the name of "reviving" the economy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has doubled down on the "pro-investor" policies that have made India one of the most socially unequal countries in the world. The BJP government has accelerated its privatization drive; rewritten India's labor laws to promote precarious contract-labor employment, gut restrictions on mass layoffs, and illegalize most worker job action; and pushed through a "reform" of India's agriculture sector that puts small farmers at the mercy of agribusiness.

Drawing support from workers across India, the one-day protest strike dealt a blow to the relentless campaign of Modi and his BJP to promote reaction and split the working class by inciting anti-Muslim communalism.

• Also on November 26, hundreds of thousands of Greek workers shut down much of the country's public sector. The strikers, who included teachers, health care workers, doctors and transit workers, were protesting a law that will abolish the eight-hour day and significantly curtail the right to strike and demonstrate. To halt the spread of COVID-19, the strikers also demanded the mass hiring of health care staff and the confiscation of private clinics.

• Last Saturday, November 28, hundreds of thousands joined protests across France to oppose the Macron government's law to criminalize filming the country's police, who routinely employ violence to suppress worker and left-wing protests and to terrorize poor, predominantly immigrant, neighbourhoods. Staggered by the size of the protests, the government now claims that it will rethink the measure. The mass anger is driven by the impunity the police enjoy. Not a single officer has been charged for assaulting Yellow Vest protesters, including for attacks that left protesters maimed.

• In Spain, thousands of doctors and nurses protested in Madrid on November 29 against cuts to health care in the midst of a devastating "second wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rejecting attempts to stoke nationalism, they chanted, "Fewer flags and more nurses." In neighbouring Portugal, child educators and primary and secondary school teachers have announced a national strike for Friday, December 11. Teachers are angry over the refusal of the government to protect them from infection in schools and years of austerity.

• In Chile, 60,000 public health workers, who have been on the front line of the fight against the pandemic, launched an indefinite strike Monday, November 30 to oppose threatened health care cuts and demand payment of long-promised bonuses and better working conditions. Decades of underfunding have left Chile's public health system so dilapidated that at the height of the pandemic, last May and June, workers had to sew their own masks.

The strike is part of a broader working class mobilization against the country's hated ultra-right billionaire president, Sebastián Piñera, for unleashing police state violence against all forms of social protest.

• In the US, numerous strikes and demonstrations have been mounted by nurses and other workers at hospitals and nursing homes in recent days and weeks to fight for higher pay, increased staffing and personal protective equipment. In the Chicago area, for example, 700 poorly paid caregivers and support staff have been striking for the past two weeks at 11 for-profit nursing homes. It is only the sabotage of the unions that has prevented the unification of these manifold struggles into a broader movement prioritising the fight against the pandemic and the protection of workers' lives over the profits of the health care industry.

• Autoworkers are resisting the transnational auto giants' drive to increase profits by slashing jobs, intensifying the pace of work, and forcing workers to maintain production at full throttle as the pandemic rages. Workers at GM and Kia plants in South Korea have mounted a series of four-hour strikes in recent weeks to demand higher wages and job security. Earlier this week, the GM workers rejected a union-endorsed agreement that would have maintained a years-long wage freeze and abandoned their other key demands.

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In India, 3,000 workers who walked off the job at Toyota's Bidadi, Karnataka assembly plant on November 9 and were then locked out are continuing to defy a government back-to-work order. The workers are resisting the company's demand that they increase monthly output and are fighting the victimization of 40 workers.

In the US, autoworkers have formed a growing network of rank-and-file safety committees at major auto assembly and auto part plants to defeat the conspiracy between the automakers and the United Auto Workers to compel them to work under unsafe conditions amid the pandemic.

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The years 2018 and 2019 witnessed a global resurgence of class struggle after decades in which it had been suppressed by the corporatist trade unions, social democrats, other establishment "left" parties and their pseudo-left accomplices. From France, Spain, Algeria, Iran and Sudan to South Africa, Mexico, Chile and Colombia, mass strikes and protest movements erupted, frequently in open rebellion against the unions and "left" parties. In the US, there was a wave of teacher strikes that pitted the rank and file against the union apparatuses, and in the fall of 2019 the first national strike of autoworkers in decades.

A key factor in precipitating last spring's government-ordered COVID-19 lockdowns was ruling class fear that wildcat worker job action, as in North America's auto industry, to demand action to halt the spread of the virus would spark mass social unrest.

The Memorial Day police murder of George Floyd provoked mass protests across the US that united working people of all ethnicities and redounded around the world.

Now, 10 months after the ruling classes' criminally negligent response to the pandemic began to produce mass death in countries around the world, social struggles are erupting anew. But they do so under radically changed conditions.

The pandemic has vastly accelerated the global crisis of world capitalism. The wealth of the ruling elite has soared to unprecedented heights since March due to the endless supply of cash funneled into the markets by the central banks and other organs of the capitalist state. Workers' incomes, meanwhile, have plunged due to job losses and the meager, and in many parts of the world nonexistent, relief programs governments promulgated in tandem with the initial COVID-19 lockdown measures. The resulting social misery is deliberate. It serves as a bludgeon to compel workers to return to work under unsafe conditions.

The pandemic has also fatally undermined the political and moral authority of the ruling elites and their governments. This is above all true in the United States, whose capitalist class is the wealthiest and most powerful of all. But the European bourgeoisie has no less brazenly prioritized profits over human lives. European governments, whatever their political complexion, whether avowedly right-wing like that headed by Boris Johnson in Britain or comprised, as in Spain, of social democrats and "left-populists" (Podemos), have pursued homicidal back-to-work and back-to-school policies.

It is the ruling class fear of the incipient political radicalization of the working class that is causing it to turn ever more openly to authoritarian forms of rule and to rehabilitate the ultra-right. A major motivating factor in many of the struggles of the past 11 days was the imposition of new measures to criminalize workers' struggles and expand the repressive powers of the state.

The breakdown of democracy is epitomized by developments in the US, where Trump is seeking to nullify the outcome of the presidential election and build up a fascist movement. But this is a universal process. In Spain, recently retired army officers have been secretly urging the King to carry out a coup by illegally dismissing the elected government, a right-wing regime in phony left colours that is implementing austerity and pursuing herd immunity.

The critical question is the infusion of the growing global upsurge of the working class with a socialist and internationalist program.

Workers around the world face—as exemplified by the struggles enumerated above—common conditions and problems. Arrayed against them is a global financial oligarchy and its transnational corporations, which use the global labor market to systematically drive down wages and working conditions. They are determined to make working people pay for the crisis of world capitalism, beginning with the drive to keep them churning out profits amid the pandemic.

If workers are to prevail, they must transform their objective unity in the process of world production into a conscious strategy and coordinate their struggle in a global counteroffensive against the relentless assault on jobs, wages and public services and for workers' power.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International explained in a June statement "For International working class action against the COVID-19 pandemic!" this begins today with the fight to take control of the response to the pandemic out of the hands of the capitalist class.

"The massive sums accumulated by the wealthy must be seized and redirected to fund emergency measures to stop the pandemic and provide full income to those impacted. The gigantic banks and corporations must be placed under the democratic control of the working class, run on the basis of a rational and scientific plan. The enormous resources squandered on war and destruction must be diverted to finance health care, education and other social needs."

To assert its independent interests both during and after the health emergency, workers must build new organizations of struggle entirely independent of and in opposition to the pro-capitalist trade unions, which for decades have worked hand in glove with corporate management and the state and today are herding workers into unsafe factories, schools and other workplaces.

The formation of rank-and-file safety committees by autoworkers and teachers in the US, transport workers and teachers in Britain and Germany, and teachers in Australia represents an important step forward in this regard.

But if the vast social power and revolutionary potential of the working class is to be unleashed, it must above all be armed with an international revolutionary party that incorporates in its program and strategy the lessons of the revolutionary struggles of the working class and its Marxist vanguard. This is the program upon which the International Committee of the Fourth International and its national sections, the Socialist Equality Parties, fight. All those who agree and wish to take up this life-and-death battle should make the decision to contact us today, to join and build the world party of socialist revolution.

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