

The political and social lessons of the Hunts Point strike in New York City

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Last week's six-day strike by 1,400 produce workers at the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx, the first major strike in the US in 2021, was a significant strategic experience for workers in the United States and around the world.

In spite of countless claims to the contrary by *Jacobin*, *The Nation*, and other pseudo left and liberal news outlets and political tendencies, the strike, though powerful, was not a victory. It was shut down by the Teamsters union before it could achieve its central, albeit modest demand of a \$1 per hour wage increase each year during a three-year contract. Instead, newer workers will receive an average annual pay increase of 62 cents. Senior workers will get only 40 cents per year. This will leave workers struggling paycheck-to-paycheck in one of the world's most expensive cities.

Moreover, while the full details of the agreement are being held under lock and key by the Teamsters, workers report that even these paltry wage increases are being financed through cuts to healthcare coverage and higher out-of-pocket expenses.

The sellout was pushed through in the most flagrantly undemocratic fashion imaginable. Workers were forced to vote without having any time to study a full contract and were not allowed to keep the one-page "summary" sheet passed out by the union at the ratification meeting. No contract vote carried out under such conditions can be considered legitimate.

This failure of the strikers to win their demands was not due to a lack of determination on their part or public support. Indeed, the strike won immense sympathy throughout New York and around the world because workers saw in the strike the beginning of a broader counteroffensive against the criminal policies of the ruling class during the pandemic. That the Teamsters felt compelled to call a strike at all, after forcing through last-minute deals during the last two rounds of contract negotiations, demonstrates the degree of social anger and opposition which has built up in the working class.

Indeed, signs of resistance to the policies of the ruling class are growing all over the world, from the general strike and farmers' protests in India, to mass demonstrations against police violence in France, to the wave of strikes in the UK, to the growing rebellion of teachers in the United States, especially in Chicago and Alabama. In St. Paul, Minnesota, Marathon refinery workers are on strike, and wildcats have once again broken out in maquiladora sweatshop factories in the Mexican border city of Matamoros.

But the Hunts Point strike collided against two principal obstacles: the trade unions and the Democratic Party. The chief

lesson of the strike is that this growing social opposition must find new, independent and overtly political, that is, anti-capitalist and socialist, forms.

The COVID-19 catastrophe and the enrichment of the pandemic profiteers

The strike was in essence a political struggle because it exposed the degree to which the interests of workers and the interests of the capitalists are completely irreconcilable. Twelve miles to the south of the Hunts Point market lies Wall Street, where US and world billionaires have acquired over \$1 trillion during the pandemic, while millions around the world have been allowed to die, including 26,650 New Yorkers and at least six Hunts Point workers. Even a dollar per hour extra for workers making poverty wages, in the wealthiest and most unequal city in the world, was deemed too costly and unacceptable.

The Hunts Point strike was the first major strike in the US since the attempted coup by Donald Trump on January 6 and took place during the same week as the inauguration of Joe Biden as president. But while millions voted for Biden to repudiate the criminal and fascistic policies of Trump, the new Democratic administration's policy on the pandemic is fundamentally the same. Both New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio oppose further lockdowns as "too expensive," and have been hard at work prematurely reopening New York schools for in-person instruction. As for Biden, he also supports reopening schools and falsely claims that mass death is unavoidable.

A slew of Democratic Party politicians, led by Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, ran down to the picket line to posture as supporters. However, the real attitude of the Democrats was demonstrated early on in the strike when de Blasio sent riot cops against the picket line, and in the personal intervention of Cuomo to shut down the strike (the Teamsters thanked his "collaboration" when they announced the deal late Friday night). Meanwhile, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot is threatening teachers with legal retaliation for refusing to return to in-person instruction.

The purpose of the Democratic Party's intervention on the picket line, in line with their apportioned role within the capitalist two

party system, was to smother and confuse social opposition within the working class in order to continue the pumping out of corporate profits from workers, no matter how many of them die.

As for pseudo-left organizations such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), they covered up the sellout with a mixture of lies and dishonest populist-sounding phrases. Their false declaration of “victory” recalls their role in the teachers strikes in 2018, when they declared one sellout engineered by the unions after another of militant and courageous strikes as massive “victories.”

The strike equally exposed the unbridgeable class divide between the trade unions, which have become fully integrated with the companies, and the workers which they have long since ceased to represent. The unions have responded to the pandemic by working closely with management to keep workers on the job. The United Auto Workers engineered a reopening of the auto industry with the companies in the summer and is actively covering up the spread of new infections in the plants. The American Federation of Teachers, whose President Randi Weingarten recently hailed New York City's school district as a model of “safe reopening,” are playing essentially the same role. Similar measures are being taken by unions throughout the world.

It is noteworthy that the Teamsters did not even raise the question of workplace safety as an issue in the strike, in spite of the fact that 400 Hunts point workers have been infected and six have died. Indeed, they have worked with companies around the country to keep workers on the job with minimal safety protections, including at UPS where the union has worked with management to conceal the number of COVID-19 outbreaks.

As for those who claim that the unions, in spite of their betrayals, can be reformed, the official “reform” caucus, Teamsters for a Democratic Union, fully endorsed the betrayal carried out by local officials affiliated with the Hoffa faction of the bureaucracy.

What the Socialist Equality Party fought for

Throughout the strike, the Socialist Equality Party warned that the Teamsters, with the political support of the Democratic Party, were preparing to carry out a sellout. We campaigned vigorously, in spite of attempts at intimidation by the union bureaucracy, to encourage workers to take their struggle out of the hands of the Teamsters bureaucracy and into their own hands by forming a rank-and-file strike committee. Such a move, we explained, would form the organizational basis for workers to conduct their struggle in a genuinely democratic fashion, to widen the field for their independent initiative, and to appeal for the broadest possible unity and support from all sections of the working class.

The Hunts Point strikers, the SEP explained, should reach out to nurses, transit workers, teachers and the millions of other workers in the city and beyond to prepare a general strike to shut down schools and non-essential production, demand the payment of full income to workers and small businesses, and safe conditions and living wages to essential workers.

The rush to shut down the strike by the unions, the Democrats and their DSA apologists flowed from their fear that these demands were gaining growing support among strikers. They feared that the strike, if freed from the control of the corrupt unions, would become a catalyst for a far broader movement of the working class. In a city seething with social anger over mass deaths and grotesque levels of social inequality, such a struggle would quickly erupt into a battle against the Democratic Party and the corporate and financial oligarchy it defends.

Throughout the past year, the SEP has helped workers to take significant initial steps towards establishing a national network of rank-and-file committees, in opposition to the policies of “herd immunity” and the threat of dictatorship and fascism. We have assisted workers to set up well over a dozen committees at auto plants, school districts and Amazon warehouses throughout the country. We urge Hunts Point workers and their supporters to join the growing network, which provides the means for workers to conduct a struggle without and against the sabotage of the unions and independent of both capitalist parties.

Most fundamentally, the strike points to the need for a new political orientation. No faction of the ruling elite defends, even if in a limited way, the most pressing interests of workers. The growing danger of fascism demonstrates the incompatibility of democratic forms with the massive levels of inequality which pervade the United States and the world.

The way forward for workers is to take up the fight for socialism and the reorganization of the US and world economy to meet the needs of the working class and society as a whole, not the profits of the rich. The giant banks and corporations should be transformed into public utilities, under the collective ownership and democratic control of the working class, the private fortunes of the billionaires and multimillionaires expropriated and used to guarantee the lives and livelihoods of the working class.

The fight for socialism means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party. To discuss becoming a member, contact the SEP today to apply.



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