

Growth in class struggle in the US pits workers against the pro-capitalist trade unions

Tom Hall
2 April 2021

There are a number of expressions of a significant growth of the class struggle in the United States, which pose fundamental questions of perspective for the working class.

At Columbia University, 3,000 graduate students are fighting against “COVID-19 austerity” and are demanding decent pay, health and child care benefits. In Worcester, Massachusetts, more than 700 nurses have been on strike for more than four weeks against unsafe staffing ratios in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. These ongoing strikes were joined this week by important sections of industrial workers, including 1,300 workers at steelmaker ATI in the northeast US and 1,100 miners at coal company Warrior Met in Alabama.

These struggles are a component part of a growing movement of workers internationally, including a one-day general strike against a pay-rise cap in Belgium, a four-day strike by 2,000 Amazon workers in Germany, a strike by 2,000 coal miners in Bosnia and Herzegovina over unpaid wages, and a planned walkout of primary school teachers against school reopenings as the pandemic surges in France.

This is only an initial expression of an enormous growth of social antagonisms throughout the world as a result of the ruling class response to the pandemic. The subordination of public health to the profit interests of the rich has led to more than 2.8 million deaths globally, including more than 560,000 in the United States alone. At the same time, the pandemic was used to orchestrate a historically unprecedented bailout of the rich, which is being followed by a massive restructuring of class relations to force workers to pay for it.

Every struggle of the working class raises directly the reactionary role of the corporatist trade unions, including the AFL-CIO in the US, which serve to suppress the class struggle and, when they cannot avoid a strike, to isolate and defeat it. The “unions” intervene not on behalf of the workers that they falsely claim to represent, but on behalf of management against workers.

At Columbia University, the United Auto Workers, which covers graduate students, is working to keep the strike isolated from graduate students at NYU only a few miles to the south, who are in the same local. Last month, the president of the

UAW local revealed that they had planned to shut down the strike before a strike vote at NYU. The UAW is doing nothing to mobilize auto workers behind the graduate students and everything to prevent them from even knowing about the strike.

Meanwhile, the UAW is starving graduate students out on the picket line with a meager \$275 weekly strike pay, in spite of the fact that the UAW controls a strike fund of \$790 million.

The Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA), an organization with 23,000 members, is isolating the 700 Worcester nurses while not providing any strike pay. Instead, the MNA is forcing nurses to beg for charity: it is running a Venmo account to receive donations from the public to pay for nurses’ living expenses.

As for the ATI and Warrior Met workers, the United Steelworkers and the United Mine Workers are using the tactic of an “unfair labor practice” strike to avoid raising any concrete demands, and to allow the union to shut down the strike as soon as possible under the pretext that management is “bargaining in good faith.”

Over the past year, the executives that operate and control the AFL-CIO have played an absolutely essential role in enforcing the homicidal policy of the ruling elites. The teachers unions—the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—have been instrumental in forcing a reopening of schools against overwhelming opposition from both teachers and parents. Local teacher unions have forced through reopening agreements by forcing teachers to vote on a fait accompli, as in Chicago and Los Angeles, or by not allowing them to vote at all, as in Philadelphia and Detroit.

The United Food and Commercial Workers union and its subsidiary, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, have kept meatpacking workers on the job even as more than 50,000 in the United States have become infected and at least 286 have died. In the auto industry, the UAW is not only keeping workers on the job but forcing them to work 50, 60 and even 80 hours per week, while covering up all information on the extent of infections and deaths.

The word “union” conjures up images of an organization that defends workers against the deprivations of the companies, or

at least one whose fate is somehow bound up with its ability and willingness to defend workers' standard of living. This, however, bears no relationship whatever to the present unions. They function as labor syndicates, controlled by wealthy executives whose incomes move in inverse proportion to the fate of workers.

Within every major national organization in the AFL-CIO, there are literally dozens, and in some cases hundreds, of bureaucrats at both the national and local levels who earn more than \$100,000 per year, many times more than the workers in the unions. Top executives have incomes that place them in the top 5 or even top 1 percent of income earners in the US.

Stuart Appelbaum, the president of the relatively small RWDSU, which is campaigning for recognition at Amazon, made \$344,464 last year, and secretary treasurer Jack Wurm made \$324,022. In the RWDSU national office, there are 29 staffers who "earned" more than \$100,000 last year, and the union spent more than \$6 million on salaries for the national office alone.

Randi Weingarten of the AFT made \$564,236 in total compensation for the fiscal year ending June 2019, according to the AFT's IRS filings. The national office received more than \$253 million in receipts and spent more than \$238 million, including \$43.75 million on salaries and *zero dollars* on strike benefits last year. Fully 234 people in the AFT national office alone made more than \$100,000 during the union's last reporting period, and 28 made more than \$200,000.

The Teamsters union has more than 200 officials on its payroll making more than \$100,000 a year, and ten making more than \$200,000, including President James Hoffa (\$387,000).

As the unions' dues base has continuously shrunk as a result of their own betrayals, the executives have resorted to control of strike funds, pension funds and even ownership of corporate stock in order to finance and supplement their income. This directly ties the financial status of the organizations and the executives who control them to the profitability of corporate America and the performance of the stock market. They fear a movement of the working class not least because it would threaten their own financial interests.

The union bureaucracy has shared in the looting operation carried out by Wall Street during the pandemic. According to the UAW's latest federal financial filings, for example, its assets increased by \$31 million last year, and the union shelled out tens of thousands of dollars for trips to resorts and casinos for its top bureaucrats, hundreds of whom earn more than \$150,000 per year. In recent years, the UAW has been exposed as an organization run by corrupt gangsters who steal workers' dues money and accept bribes from the companies in exchange for ramming through concessions contracts.

The unions are emerging more and more as a critical instrument of bourgeois statecraft. The unprecedented intervention into the unionization campaign at Amazon by

Biden and the Democrats, and even right-wing Republican Marco Rubio, reflects the intense fear within ruling circles of the growth of the class struggle, and their calculations that this can be blunted by putting workers under the guardianship of the AFL-CIO and byzantine US labor law.

Under conditions of growing commercial and military conflict between the US and its rivals China and Russia, the unions are viewed as a means of tying the working class to the capitalist state and its war preparations.

This year is the fortieth anniversary of the betrayal by the AFL-CIO of the PATCO air traffic controllers, who were fired by President Ronald Reagan in a deliberate provocation. The attack on the PATCO workers was preceded by an agreement from the AFL-CIO that it would oppose any broader mobilization of the working class to defend them. This was followed by a series of struggles that were systematically isolated and defeated with the collaboration of the unions. This was a key turning point, not just in the US but around the world, in the complete integration of the unions into the structure of corporate management.

The expansion and unification of the struggles of the working class requires the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, completely independent of the pro-capitalist trade unions. Such committees are the form through which workers can advance their own demands, including emergency measures to stop the coronavirus pandemic, an end to the unsafe reopening of schools and workplaces, with full compensation for workers and small businesses.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party will do everything in our power to promote and assist in the establishment of independent workers' organizations, connecting the growth of the class struggle to a socialist political perspective and program. We urge workers interested in establishing such committees to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)