

“We need to build an international alliance of rank-and-file committees to take the power out of the hands of the companies and unions”

Autoworkers, educators and Amazon workers in US speak on International May Day rally

Our reporters
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Workers who attended the International May Day Online Rally held by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) on May 1 told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they were most struck by how speakers from many different countries described the common conditions confronting workers around the world and advanced a common international strategy for workers to fight the pandemic, social inequality, and the danger of war and fascism.

Several workers spoke about the opening report by David North, the chairman of the international editorial board of the WSWs and national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, who reviewed how capitalist governments around the world had refused to take the necessary measures to save lives during the pandemic because this would undermine the private accumulation of wealth by the world’s billionaires. Drawing the comparison to revolutionary struggles that finally brought World War I to an end, North said that the pandemic could only be brought under control if “new means and instruments of social struggle” were formed to unleash “the creative power of the working class” in the US and around the world.

North explained the ICFI’s call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which he said was aimed at encouraging “workers in all countries to break out of the prison-like shackles in which they are confined by the existing state-controlled and antidemocratic unions, staffed by right-wing pro-capitalist executives.” In assisting workers to build the IWA-RFC, North said, the ICFI and the *World Socialist Web Site* would outline “a clear international strategy, to explain the connection between local struggles and the unfolding global struggle of the working class against capitalism and imperialism.”

A striking worker from the ATI Vandergrift plant in Pennsylvania said, “I’d never really tied together COVID and the struggles that are going on, like a lot of the speakers did.” He was particularly struck by the numerous exposures of the treacherous role of the trade unions in countries across the globe: “People from all over the world, all over the place, a lot of the problems they’re having are the same problems we’re having in this country. Workers are the people who end up paying the price in the end.”

Commenting on North’s remarks, an autoworker in Kokomo, Indiana said, “The report talked about the need for containing the spread of the pandemic. The ruling class is saying everyone needs to be prepared for reopening and that ‘the cure must not be worse than the disease.’

“People are facing evictions, no healthcare, no internet. The fear of the ruling class is the uncontrolled eruption of the class struggle. Their plan is

using the unions for continued suppression of the working class so they can’t advance their own social interests. In order for the working class to keep going forward,” she said, workers “have to overcome all these obstacles from the ruling class by standing together and defeating all the suppression efforts.”

The worker explained how the shortage of microchips had led to the closure of many auto plants and layoffs of five weeks or more. Saying that the shortage “could last up to two years,” the worker commented, “They need to figure out how make their own parts in the US, so we don’t have to be relying on other places when there are problems.”

Discussing this issue with her, members of the Socialist Equality Party pointed out that there is no national solution to any of the problems facing the working class. The Biden administration and the unions are promoting economic nationalism and the reactionary idea of reeling the global economy back into the confines of the national economy, they explained, to pit American workers against their class brothers and sisters around the world, prepare for trade war and ultimately military confrontation with China and other economic competitors.

Taking this criticism to heart, the worker responded: “It is a global issue; it doesn’t matter where they’re made, but everyone needs to have the chips. If we have all the chips here, other people can’t have them. It’s a global problem; it needs to be resolved everywhere, not just here. I guess I didn’t look at it that way. I didn’t think about all the global processes, with all the countries involved. All the workers are involved, and it takes a lot of workers to produce these chips. If you have one nation dominating, that’s like a form of slavery. If all the workers are involved, then that gives more people power.

“This [chip shortage] could cause a war where one country wants to dominate over another,” she added. “History could repeat itself. It’s really about internationalism vs. nationalism. Workers need to intervene before a war happens. They’re going to keep exploiting the workers, so we have to find a way to overrule all the CEOs and the people who have money, so the workers are in control. There are more of us than them, they need us more than we need them because without us nothing can be made, and it’s past time for the workers to have power over them.”

Commenting on the rally, a founding member of the Alabama Educators Rank-and-File Committee said: “I learned a lot, especially things going on in other countries and stories about how the political leaders, like the UK’s Boris Johnson and Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro, are treating the people. It’s crazy to me. There are so-called humanitarian efforts around the world, but they don’t care about the working class or everyday workers.

It's like it's my job to keep you all rich but you won't protect us and give us what we need. All schools need to go virtual to save lives.

"I liked seeing different countries, different reports on what's going on. India has me in tears. I have family friends in India, and they let me know it's so crazy over there. And UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson says, 'let the bodies pile up.' We have #MeToo and all these other movements, but someone says that and it's not hitting the airways and the media doesn't have a problem with that.

"They won't even raise the minimum wage, and they are just getting rich. Governments are not giving health benefits, and there is no protection when workers get sick. It's eye-opening. You hear about this stuff but to see the scope and magnitude of it, and hearing what's going on in different countries was very powerful. I enjoyed seeing it in different languages, we could be coming together globally to find way to beat the pandemic."

The Alabama teacher said the reason why elemental measures to save lives have not been taken is "money." The "heads of country or powers-that-be felt that if they listened to science and shut everything down, the rich would lose money. It went from being about health to money. When we listened to scientists and shut countries down, they lost money. So, they stopped listening to science. That's when the CDC turned into a political tool.

"We could be so much further along. There would have been vaccines and cures if we put money together to get it. Capitalism isn't allowing researchers to do what they need or want to do but are funding projects that make them money."

She also spoke about the common problem workers around the world face with unions that oppose their interests. "That's another thing we have in common. What our union (Alabama Education Association) says to us is, 'We have people on both sides, because you all are both our customers. We have to cater to everybody.' The powers-that-be put unions in place for us to give them our money. It is the corporations that fund the unions. This is how they maintain political control over what the union does. The unions are not for us.

"All these protests by educators against school openings, none have been backed by unions. An individual person protesting is a small amount, and they're OK with that, but if it's the whole group they won't support it. They don't ask us what our desires are, they're not in the trenches with us. The unions just want to get us to agree to deals that are not for us, but for the corporations.

She concluded: "This pandemic has revealed the underbelly of society. Contrary to popular belief, the underbelly is not the criminal and murderer on our streets, it is the CEOs and the people who run these corporations. These people have done more damage and more killing than any criminal in our criminal justice system. And they're making money doing it. The victims and workers who are paying to being oppressed; we're paying them to kill us."

The WSWS also spoke with two members of the Baltimore Amazon Rank-and File Committee. One worker said that the May Day event's speakers "mirrored each other" and that he could "totally agree" and relate with the remarks describing conditions of working people across the world. Regarding the call for the formation of rank-and-file committees independently controlled by workers, he said, "If you're a part of the working class, you don't have much control over your destiny. The most important thing workers have is their voice. Without that, you will be subject to whatever capitalists throw on you."

Another leading member of the rank-and-file committee added that workers "as a class have a lot of power which we don't tap into." The "only way we can do that is by expanding our collective voice," he said. "We stand on common ground, from city to city, to state to state and country to country as a working class against capitalist society and we must band together."

Speaking about the trade unions that are currently seeking to tie workers to capitalist interests, the Amazon worker said, "They're playing a chess game with working people." He referenced the situation with the United Auto Workers former president Dennis Williams, stating that these organizations were "corrupt. .. they are all about themselves and their money, not workers."

John, a teacher in Maryland, added that he was especially moved by Alex Lantier, who spoke at the May Day rally from France. "The French speaker mentioned the 1871 Paris Commune, in which police were used to kill workers," he said. The teacher likened the far-right US-backed government of Colombian President Ivan Duque to the reactionary government of Adolphe Thiers, who drowned the Paris Commune in blood in 1871. "Almost 200 years later, the capitalist class still is acting the same."

John agreed with statements raised by Tomas Castanheira from Brazil. "One speaker said that the trade unions are politically responsible, that is absolutely right," he said. "Our unions abandoned us," he said, speaking about his own experience as a teacher.

"They said that we could reopen safely with a vaccine for teachers, but they had us working for almost a month in person before they let us get vaccinated," he said. "In my school, I teach in a windowless classroom with a bunch of students who are not vaccinated. We just had a case in our school this week, it was a student." The teacher said that "unsafe working environments face workers everywhere, whether it is auto, or in supermarkets, or teachers."

A founding member of the Rank-and-File Safety Committee at the Faurecia Gladstone auto parts plant in Columbus, Indiana said: "These companies are hoarding all the money they can, and they don't care who they run over to get it. Their employees are just a number to them. They don't care whether they hurt their employees or not. Faurecia was a lot different when I first started than it is now.

Many years ago, the veteran worker said, "The union used to fight for you. If you wrote a grievance up, the company dealt with it and they took care of it to your satisfaction. They will not now. All they say now is, 'We have the right to manage any way we see fit.'" And the union says they do. They don't even try. They are all part of management.

"This is happening worldwide, and they think they have carte blanche. We need to stand up to them, and that is what I've been telling everybody at work now. It is not going to stop unless we stand up to them. And when we do there won't be anything the corporations can do about it.

"They are trying to make us feel that workers in other countries are the enemy, but they are not. It is the governments which are fighting each other, and they are trying to get the working class on their side. They know they cannot do anything by themselves. I think it is criminal myself. The government is in with the companies, and the union is too. The working class has to get together."

Referring to Biden's promotion of the failed union drive at the Bessemer, Alabama Amazon warehouse, he said, "For the president to go and rally for a union just shows that the government, the unions and the companies are all in bed with each other.

"I'm a member of the rank-and-file committee and I am proud. We all need to build these committees. All the working class needs to get together and work against the capitalists. There is no other way to put it. The government is capitalist. The companies are capitalist. Now the unions are opportunist. They are being bribed to do what the companies want.

"I have talked to members of the rank-and-file committees in the schools, I have talked to autoworkers around the world. I tell them we need to do this. Otherwise, they are just going to kill us and throw us to the curb. And that's what they are doing."

Concluding, the worker said, "We need to build an international alliance of rank-and-file committees to take the power out of the hands of the

companies and unions. It is going to come down to replacing the capitalist governments with workers' governments. That is something that I am going to be proud to see if I live long enough. That's the socialist perspective which is the backbone of the rank-and-file committees."



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