

What the growing class struggle in the US reveals about the pseudo-left

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Both in the United States and in other countries, workers are engaging in an upsurge of strikes and militant struggles, seeking to reverse decades of worsening living standards and working conditions. As has often been the case, the development of the class struggle is shedding light on fundamental aspects of contemporary social and political life, putting to the test political programs and tendencies.

Shortly after midnight on Monday, nearly 600 Frito-Lay workers in Topeka, Kansas, walked out in the first strike at the facility since at least the early 1970s, when the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers union (BCTGM) initially established a presence at the plant. Last week, workers at the snack food giant overwhelmingly rejected a fourth contract proposal this year, defying the BCTGM's efforts to pass a deal that failed to meet workers' demands for substantial raises to make up for years in which pay has been virtually frozen.

The Frito-Lay strike is the latest in a recent series of rebellions against company-union concessionary agreements. At Volvo Trucks' New River Valley plant in Virginia, roughly 2,900 workers are entering the second month of their strike after overwhelmingly voting down two contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers. The contracts would have significantly raised health care costs and throttled wage increases. At Warrior Met Coal in Alabama, striking miners rejected a United Mine Workers-backed contract in April by a stunning 1,006 to 45 vote, burning copies of the pro-company agreement outside the union hall.

And beyond the US, nickel miners employed at transnational firm Vale Inco's northern Ontario operations are continuing their strike after overwhelmingly rejecting a United Steelworkers-backed contract which would have kept raises far below inflation.

In every struggle that is taking place, workers are fighting against appalling conditions of exploitation *previously agreed to* and enforced by the trade unions, which have spent the last 40 years integrating themselves more and more deeply into management and the capitalist state. As the recent wave of contract rejections shows, workers are now moving into increasingly open conflict with the present joint corporate-union efforts to maintain these conditions and deepen the attacks.

For any genuinely left-wing organization, let alone socialist or Marxist one, such a renewal in the fighting capacity of the working class—and its opposition to the agencies operating on behalf of the corporations—is to be not only welcomed, but aided and encouraged to the maximum degree, which has been the response

of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties.

But this is the opposite of the reaction of a host of parties and publications that present themselves as left-wing or socialist.

Most striking has been the response—or lack of response—to the strike at Volvo Trucks by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and its most prominent media outlet, *Jacobin* magazine. To date, *Jacobin* has not published a *single* article on the struggle at Volvo, which has been ongoing since April, nor has the DSA issued any official statements.

The silence by the DSA and *Jacobin* on the Volvo strike has been mirrored to one degree or another throughout the entirety of what falsely presents itself as the “left” in the United States, from Socialist Alternative, which has also published zero articles on the strike, to Left Voice and Labor Notes, which have published only cursory reports.

In the little coverage that has appeared in these publications, there is no mention of the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which has played a leading role in organizing opposition at the Virginia plant where workers are striking. The one notable exception to the media blackout on the VWRFC was an article that appeared in *Counterpunch* (“The Volvo Strike,” by Kenneth Surin), which did note that workers at the plant “have a deep distrust of their union, so much so that they formed the Volvo Workers Rank-and-File Committee to counter the UAW's attempt to isolate striking workers.”

It is worth contrasting the overall reticence on the struggle at Volvo by organizations such as the DSA with the wall-to-wall coverage and support they gave to the unionization drive at Amazon's facility in Bessemer, Alabama. The drive to bring in a union at Bessemer was a top-down, state-approved effort that received the official blessing of the Biden administration, the Democratic Party, and even sections of the Republican Party, along with substantial portions of the corporate media.

While *Jacobin* has published nothing on the Volvo strike, it produced close to 50 articles on the drive by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) to unionize Amazon. Socialist Alternative produced 15 articles, Left Voice 10, and Labor Notes eight.

Under conditions of a growing movement of the working class against the pro-corporate trade unions, the pseudo-left is moving to shore up the very same trade union apparatus, bitterly opposing

any independent initiative and organization of the working class. The DSA has stated that its “highest national priority” is to ensure passage of the Protect the Right to Organize Act, or PRO Act, a Democratic Party-sponsored bill aimed at bolstering support for the trade unions, in particular their ability to “organize” the growing sections of workers who are not unionized, such as gig workers at Uber, Lyft and Doordash.

The differing responses of the DSA and other pseudo-left groups to every state-backed effort to expand the unions—boundless enthusiasm—versus the rebellion against the UAW at Volvo—frosty silence—is itself an expression of the social basis and political orientation of such organizations, which do not represent the working class, but rather privileged sections of the upper-middle class.

The pseudo-left endlessly insists on the supremacy of the corporate police agencies falsely described as “unions” *because* of the role they play in disciplining workers and subordinating them to the Democratic Party, which these groups all either operate within or are oriented towards.

Not least among the reasons that the DSA has said nothing about the Volvo strike is the central role played by the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party, which have assisted workers in forming the VWRFC and found a wide hearing among those opposed to the corporatist UAW. While the DSA routinely denounces the WSW as “sectarian,” what they really fear is the growth of its influence among the working class and the possibility of a broad movement of workers towards socialism, which would threaten the considerable investment accounts of the upper-middle class layers which the DSA and *Jacobin* represent.

Their conception of a “labor movement” is one that is thoroughly integrated into the state and corporate management, with sections of the middle class functioning as arbiters. This means, under the present conditions, a “labor movement” that is dedicated above all to the suppression of the class struggle and the imposition of the demands of the ruling class.

An increasing number of members of the pseudo-left organizations have made their way into the union hierarchy and the wealth and privileges offered, with perhaps the most prominent recent example being Jesse Sharkey, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, formerly a long-time leading member of the defunct International Socialist Organization, and now the DSA.

The integration of the pseudo-left into the structure of the unions has coincided with the unions’ own transformation into auxiliaries of the corporations and the state, increasingly unable to conceal their subservience to corporate profits and contempt for workers’ interests.

Beginning in earnest with the defeat of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike nearly 40 years ago, which was deliberately isolated and broken by the AFL-CIO, the unions have worked to ensure a highly regimented and controlled labor force wherever they hold sway, with pay low enough to make US workers “competitive” on an international scale.

The trade unions have hemorrhaged members throughout this time, both through the destruction of large swaths of jobs in the auto, steel and other industries—which the unions suppressed resistance to—and through the increasing rejection of the unions by

workers who have witnessed or suffered through their endless betrayals.

The inability of the RWDSU to get more than 13 percent of workers at the Amazon Bessemer plant to vote to bring it in is not an expression of a rightward movement of workers. It is, rather, another expression of the same moods that led to massive repudiations of union-backed contracts at Volvo and Frito-Lay.

The union executives and officials have nonetheless grown rich in the process. Objectively speaking, they have made their way into a different social class than workers, drawing salaries in the low- to mid-hundreds of thousands, placing them in the top 5 or even 1 percent of income earners. They have shifted a growing share of their assets and wealth into the stock market, making them, like their confreres in the pseudo-left, increasingly hostile towards and terrified of any movement of workers that could overturn the low-wage regime on which US corporate profits and inflated share values are based.

The union apparatuses in the US, which for much of their history have been dominated by a ferocious anti-communism and support for capitalism, have shifted even further to the right politically, in line with the change in their material interests, constituting now a hothouse for the most reactionary nationalism, corporatism and even fascist politics.

While the growing rebellion by workers against the unions runs counter to every position held by the pseudo-left, it vindicates the political prognoses of the WSW and the ICFI.

At the time of the PATCO strike, the Workers League, predecessor of the SEP in the US, warned that the subservience of the AFL-CIO to capitalism and its main political parties would lead to one defeat after another, stressing that the “struggle against these betrayals cannot be based solely on militancy, but requires a political strategy for the struggle against the government.” Drawing a balance sheet of the defeats of the 1980s, culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, the ICFI determined that the unions and other national labor bureaucracies were no longer capable, even in a limited capacity, of defending the interests of the working class.

On May Day this year, the ICFI took forward this perspective, issuing a call for the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The call for the IWA-RFC explained that it would “work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale,” and would “be a means through which workers throughout the world can share information and organize a united struggle.”

The struggle of workers at Volvo and elsewhere provide further confirmation that this perspective and these organizations are the road on which the class struggle will develop.



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