

The growing strike movement in the United States and the case for rank-and-file committees

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Nearly two years into the coronavirus pandemic, a strike movement is gaining momentum in the United States, with profound implications for the class struggle all over the world.

Thousands of workers are already on strike. These include Kellogg's cereal workers, who launched a strike in four states on Tuesday; thousands of nurses and health care workers in western New York, Massachusetts and the West Coast; hundreds of distillery workers in Kentucky; and over 1,000 Warrior Met coal miners in northern Alabama. A strike of 2,000 carpenters in Seattle was recently shut down by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters.

Tens of thousands of other workers have already approved strike action or are scheduled to vote on strike action soon. These include 60,000 television and movie production workers, 24,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses in Northern California and 11,000 John Deere workers in the Midwest. Among 3,500 auto parts workers at Dana, Inc., demands for strike action are widespread, but they are being kept on the job against their will by the pro-corporate United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers.

The potential is building for the largest strike movement in the United States in generations. This exposes as lies the claims made by demoralized pseudo-left groups that American workers are hopelessly reactionary and backward. Workers in the US are pushing to take their place in a worldwide strike movement that has already involved millions of workers in South Asia and tens of thousands in Europe and in Latin America. In South Africa, 155,000 metalworkers launched an indefinite strike earlier this week.

Workers are fighting against intolerable levels of overwork to which they have been subjected during the pandemic, as well as meager wage increases that do not

keep up with rising inflation, which is currently at 5 percent. In factories, hospitals and schools throughout the country, working conditions increasingly resemble those of the early 19th century, with seven-day workweeks and 12- or even 16-hour days the norm.

The capitalist ruling class is enforcing such conditions on workers in a desperate attempt to offset the economic consequences of its own criminal response to the pandemic, which has been to subordinate all public health measures to profit. This has not only made the pandemic immeasurably worse, with millions of lives needlessly lost to a disease that could be eradicated within a few weeks; it is producing worsening dislocation and shortages throughout the world economy.

Global shortages of needed raw materials and components are becoming endemic, and shipping costs have skyrocketed to their highest levels in decades as hundreds of container ships sit idle outside of overloaded ports for weeks. But worst of all by far, from the standpoint of the ruling class, millions of workers are reluctant to accept jobs that expose them to infection and death, forcing an increase in wages to address labor shortages.

The ruling class is doubling down, forcing workers to labor beyond the limits of human endurance and demanding that governments in countries such as New Zealand and China abandon their "zero Covid" strategies of eliminating the pandemic within their borders. Throughout the world, the capitalist class is using the pandemic to restructure class relations and create a "new normal" of relentless exploitation.

Workers must develop the organizational forms through which they can unite the various struggles breaking out across the United States and the world and carry them forward on the basis of an international strategy.

This means, above all, the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched this May by the International Committee of the Fourth International. While workers have clearly demonstrated an enormous desire to fight back, the extent to which they can build a powerful movement capable of challenging the policies of the ruling class depends upon their ability to break free from the straitjacket of the unions, which are working might and main to suppress strikes and enforce the very conditions that workers are fighting against.

The Biden administration and the Democratic Party are pursuing a definite strategy of corporatism, based on strengthening the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions and integrating them even more closely with management and the state. This is the content of Biden's promotion of the unionization drive at Amazon and his pledge to be the most "pro-union" president in American history.

The American Federation of Teachers has spearheaded the reopening of schools over the overwhelming objections of teachers, with AFT President Randi Weingarten reportedly working 15 hours a day towards this end. The United Auto Workers is keeping workers at Dana Inc. and John Deere on the job past the expiration of their contracts, where workers continue to get injured or become infected when they should not be working at all.

The UAW also negotiated an obscure clause in its national contract with Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler) under which the company is making autoworkers at its Sterling Heights Assembly Plant work for 90 consecutive days. The BCTGM (Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers' International Union), the union at Kellogg's, shut down a strike by Nabisco workers last month, who are back on the job working 16-hour days.

In other words, these "unions" are systematically blocking strikes from occurring or isolating them when they do. They are enforcing substandard contracts with wage increases below the rate of inflation, while conspiring with management to keep workers on the job during a deadly pandemic. "If you want to make \$22 an hour, you need to find another job," one UAW official at a Michigan Dana plant recently told a worker.

The official unions are nothing more than a labor police force in the employ of management. They are enforcing the ruling class's herd immunity policies on workers because they have at stake billions of dollars in stock market investments and billions more in direct transfers of corporate cash through corporatist labor-management

schemes.

In 1988, in analyzing the globalization of capitalist production, the ICFI predicted that the global integration of world production would fundamentally undermine the outmoded nationalist and pro-capitalist orientation of the official unions, while creating the conditions for the development of working-class struggles that are international not only in content but also in form.

More than three decades later, the working class is far more internationally connected and more numerous than it has ever been before. The supply chain crisis has itself demonstrated the extremely high degree of international integration of the world economy, such that plant shutdowns due to outbreaks even in one country can ripple throughout the global economy. While workers have been told for decades by the unions that they are powerless to fight back against the companies, they are discovering that they in fact control countless strategic choke points in the global supply and production chain.

This potential must be acted on consciously by workers and given organized expression. This requires the building up of the network of rank-and-file committees, under the banner of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to link up their struggles with those of workers throughout the world.

Mobilizing the strength of the working class, the most powerful social force in the world, will provide the basis not only to fight for policies needed to eradicate the pandemic but to replace the anarchy and inequality of the capitalist system with a socialist planned world economy based on human needs, not private profit.



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