

Strike wave in US continues to grow, sparking fear and repression from ruling class

Marcus Day
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Corporate executives in boardrooms across the US are responding to a growing strike wave—set to become the largest in decades—with increasing fear and hostility. The longstanding policy of relying on the trade union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle is failing to contain the outbreak of strikes, and increasingly the corporate and political establishment is resorting to strikebreaking, court injunctions and threats of state repression.

Anger among broad sections of workers has begun to boil over, after being suppressed for four decades by the AFL-CIO. Placated as “heroes” and “essential” by companies’ public relations departments, workers in health care, manufacturing, transportation, logistics and warehousing, and other industries have suffered the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic—working ever-longer hours at low wages and with inadequate protection against the virus. Meanwhile, workers have watched as corporate profits and the fortunes of the super-rich have skyrocketed since 2020, with the latest report by *Forbes* showing that the wealth of US billionaires swelled 70 percent, a whopping \$2.1 trillion.

With rents and prices in consumer goods surging, and companies struggling with an ongoing labor shortage, growing numbers of workers are walking out or pressing to strike to secure substantial increases in wages and benefits, both in the United States and internationally.

A strike tracker maintained by Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) has already recorded 180 strikes for the year, including 39 in October alone, involving approximately 24,000 workers.

Reflecting the growing concerns in ruling circles over the possibility of strike “contagion,” Kate Bronfenbrenner, director of labor education research and senior lecturer at the ILR, told Yahoo Finance: “What will happen is you’ll see more workers going on strike. Each time there’s a ripple effect with each one of those, if the John Deere strike isn’t settled, you’re going to see another big group go out. If companies don’t move, you’re going to see this spread from one group to another. Strikes are contagious.”

Wall Street investors and financial analysts are increasingly voicing similar worries. According to Canada’s *Financial Post*, a strategist for RBC (the Royal Bank of Canada) wrote in a

note recently that strikes were the top supply-chain concern among 23 S&P 500 companies that reported earnings in the first two weeks of October, double the number that mentioned port bottlenecks and logistics problems. “Labor inflation is definitely a watch item for us,” said JPMorgan Chief Financial Officer Jeremy Barnum on a recent call.

Roughly 2,000 workers employed at health care giant Kaiser Permanente’s Hawaii locations were the latest to authorize a strike by overwhelming margins, voting to approve a walkout by 93 percent this week. They join 35,000 Kaiser workers in California, Oregon and Washington who had earlier voted for strike action, and 700 Kaiser hospital engineers in the Bay Area who have already been on the strike for over a month. Thousands of other Kaiser workers, out of approximately 52,000 total whose contract expired September 30, are taking strike authorization votes in the coming weeks.

In a move that is being replicated in contract negotiations at companies throughout the US, Kaiser has demanded that raises be limited to just 1 percent and that a new tier of lower wages for new hires be established, despite taking in over \$2 billion in operating income in 2020. However, the trade unions have refused to set a strike date, keeping workers on the job for weeks without a contract.

Balloting for strike authorization is also continuing in other industries. Teachers in school districts from Pennsylvania and Ohio to California have approved strikes in the past week. Several hundred flight attendants for Piedmont Airlines, a regional carrier for American Airlines, as well as SEPTA transit workers in Philadelphia are voting this week over whether to walk out.

So far, the US ruling class has been largely relying upon its loyal assistants in the trade union bureaucracies—who for decades have enforced corporate attacks on wages and working conditions—in the hopes that they can contain and suppress the growing strike movement. The Biden administration has made the promotion of the trade unions central to its policies, viewing the unions as firewalls and enforcers of “labor peace.”

The biggest walkout threatened recently, that of 60,000 TV and film production workers in California, was called off at the last minute by the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) union over the weekend. The initial details

released by IATSE of its so-called “Hollywood ending” agreement showed that it would continue to sanction brutally long hours, provoking outpourings of anger from workers and denunciations of the deal as a sellout.

The old principle of “no contract, no work” has been increasingly transformed into “no contract, no strike” by the pro-corporate trade unions, as they work desperately to hold back workers as long as possible. At auto parts maker Dana Inc., the United Auto Workers and United Steelworkers unions have kept 3,500 workers on the job under day-to-day contract extensions for months, even after workers voted down a union-backed agreement by 90 percent. The UAW and USW are presently engaged in an effort to ram through largely identical deals at Dana, which again fail to meet workers’ demands for serious wage increases and an end to appalling sweatshop work schedules.

The UAW is hoping to secure a contract at Dana as quickly as possible, in fear of the growing support for the strike by 10,000 workers at John Deere, the multinational agricultural and construction equipment maker. Dana workers, who supply Deere with critical parts, have been demanding with increasing insistence to strike themselves.

While the corporations and their political representatives are working closely with the trade union executives to restrain workers wherever they feel they can, they are simultaneously worried about workers’ growing defiance of and contempt for the unions’ orders. A business columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* recently noted, “After decades of abject somnolence, American labor seems to be stirring, but the Deere strike may be the best example just now of how fed up unionized workers have become with their leadership. The UAW allowed the Big Three automakers to impose two-tiered wage rates in 2007, a supine concession that quickly spread to other UAW contracts, including Deere.”

Where the unions are proving unable to hold workers back from striking, as at Deere, the companies are quickly resorting to all the old methods of class war and state repression.

On Wednesday, Deere secured a temporary court injunction against striking workers in Davenport, Iowa, who had carried out mass picketing in recent days. The company has also requested an injunction against workers at its plant near Des Moines, the state capital. Scott County District Court Chief Judge Marlita Greve’s ruling in Davenport unabashedly solidarized itself with Deere, complaining that because of workers’ picketing, the company “has suffered and will continue to suffer substantial and irreparable injury.”

The injunction attempts to facilitate Deere’s use of strikebreakers by severely constraining workers’ ability to picket, limiting them to just four individuals at each gate, while also provocatively barring their use of firewood barrels and chairs.

Predictably, the UAW has responded by ordering workers to comply with the injunction without offering a hint of protest, let

alone seeking to mobilize opposition to it, indicating thereby its de facto support.

The UAW’s role in seeking to leave workers defenseless in the face of corporate strikebreaking and attacks has been mirrored to a greater or lesser degree in other ongoing struggles. At food manufacturer Kellogg’s, where 1,400 workers have been striking across several states, the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union (BCTGM) has defended the Building and Construction Trades Council unions’ plans to force their members to cross picket lines in Omaha, Nebraska.

At St. Vincent Hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Nurses Union has isolated the seven-month strike by 700 nurses, doing nothing to seriously oppose Tenet Healthcare’s use of permanent replacements, nor the company’s unilateral imposition of its contract demands. Strikebreakers have also been brought in to crush struggles by Heaven Hill distillery workers in Tennessee and Warrior Met Coal miners in Alabama. In the latter case, the United Mine Workers union has left miners open to the violence of the company’s scabs and armed thugs, with workers hit by strikebreakers’ cars and reportedly shot at.

Such resort to outright repression and all the most vicious corporate tactics of the early 20th century presents serious dangers to workers. However, it is not an indication of the capitalist ruling class being in a powerful position, but rather of its weakness and desperation, as it lashes out against a growing rebellion by workers that threatens to erupt on a scale not seen in generations.

To counter and overcome the attacks of the corporations and their trade union partners, workers must have organizations and a strategy of their own. Critical steps in this direction have already been initiated by autoworkers at Volvo Trucks and Dana Inc., among Deere workers, as well as Amazon workers, teachers and others, who have formed rank-and-file committees to coordinate their struggles and oppose the pro-company maneuvers of the unions and break the isolation of the ongoing strikes. These committees must be expanded at workplaces everywhere, both in the US and internationally, linking up workers in a global movement to secure the rights and interests of the working class. To get more information about building these committees, workers should contact the WSWs.



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