

May Day 2022: The revolutionary role of the American working class

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This is the report delivered by Joseph Kishore to the 2022 International May Day Online Rally held on May 1. Kishore is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States. To view all speeches, visit wsws.org/mayday.

This May Day rally is being held as the war policy of the US and NATO against Russia has brought the world to the very brink of catastrophe.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union more than three decades ago, American imperialism has been in a state of continuous and expanding war, targeting one country after the next with invasion, occupation and destruction. The eyes of Washington are now fixed on Russia and China, the principal geostrategic barriers to its dominance. Regional war is developing into world war, and the danger for all of mankind is enormous.

Any assessment of the world situation, of the possibilities inherent in the trajectory of events, however, is incorrect, if it leaves out the most powerful social force within the United States itself, the working class. What has always distinguished the Trotskyist movement was not only its understanding of the central role of American imperialism, but of the enormous social and political power that is the American working class.

We say to workers throughout the world: There are two Americas. There is the America of Wall Street, the Pentagon, the CIA, the plutocracy, which lies, threatens and bullies. But there is also the America of the working class.

Nothing so clearly exposes the reality of class rule in America than the response to the pandemic. The ruling elite, with absolute indifference to human life, refused to adopt the necessary public health measures to stop the pandemic. After bailing out Wall Street, they sent Americans back to work.

More than 1 million died, and the rich got richer. The life expectancy of Americans fell by nearly two years, and the stock market soared. Portfolios and gravestones. Two Americas.

No major capitalist country is so unequal as the United States. In the course of its conflict with Russia, the American ruling class has begun to speak of the wealth of the Russian oligarchs. “We’re going to seize their yachts, their luxury homes, and other ill-begotten gains,” Biden declared on Thursday.

The ruling class is playing with fire. There is no wealth that is more “ill-begotten” than the wealth of the American oligarchy.

Over the past two years of mass death, the wealth of US billionaires grew by more than 70 percent, to over 5 trillion

dollars. Five trillion dollars. Fueled by the money-printing operation of the Federal Reserve, median pay for US CEOs at major companies rose to \$14.2 million last year.

Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, with a quarter of a trillion dollars to his name, received a \$23 billion “bonus” last week. He broke the law to force open Tesla plants during the pandemic. Now he is buying Twitter for \$43 billion.

Just over 100 years ago, in 1919, the American socialist leader, Eugene Debs gave a May Day speech, heavily influenced by the October Revolution of 1917.

“I am going to speak to you as a socialist, as a revolutionist, as a Bolshevik,” Debs proclaimed. “What is this thing that the whole world is talking about? What is it that the ruling class power is denouncing, upon which they are pouring a flood of malicious lies—what is it? It is the rise of the workers ... who for the first time in history are saying unitedly, ‘We have made what there is, we produce wealth; now we will take what we have produced, for it is ours.’”

Workers throughout the world will take up this call once again.

For nearly half a century, the American ruling class waged one-sided class warfare. The trade unions turned themselves into a labor police force, on the take from management, run by well-heeled executives who profit off the exploitation of those they claim to represent.

The working class in the United States, however, has already begun to fight back. Over the past two years, a series of strikes and struggles of workers has erupted in many industries: Volvo Trucks in Virginia; Kellogg’s; John Deere; Dana auto parts; King Soopers grocery stores—these battles were waged not just against management but against the dictates of the trade unions as well.

Autoworkers launched wildcat actions against the efforts to keep plants open as COVID spread. Educators walked out and protested the unsafe reopening of schools.

Among nurses and other health care workers, the impact of the pandemic has fueled a mood of militancy and opposition that extends far beyond the ongoing strike of 5,000 nurses at Stanford in California.

As with workers throughout the world, workers in the United States have been slammed by the surge in the costs of basic goods, including food and gas, accelerated by the economic impact of the US-NATO war drive against Russia. As a result of record inflation, workers are confronting a decline in real wages of between 10 and 15 percent in just one year.

According to a Harris poll conducted on April 20-21, 60 percent of American voters said that the economy is weak, and nearly half report that their own financial situation is getting worse. Only a third of respondents said that the country is “on the right track,” compared to nearly 60 percent who said it is “on the wrong track.” The top two fears for American voters are, according to the poll, inflation and the use of nuclear weapons.

There is in the American working class a deep hostility and anger toward the entire political establishment. It is this that explains the mind-numbing propaganda that comes from the official media, the inability of political officials to speak a single truthful word. As Trotsky once noted, the American ruling class is the most fearful in the world.

American capitalism is rotten to the core. Just over one year ago, the president of the United States, Donald Trump, launched a fascistic coup to overturn the Constitution and rule as dictator. The former president cannot deliver a speech without furious denunciations of the danger of socialism.

Earlier this year, Biden declared that he was not certain whether the institutions of American democracy would last another decade. In the campaign against Russia, the American president Biden joins hands with the conspirators in the coup and proclaims “national unity” on the basis of war.

But the United States is not united. It is deeply divided—not along the lines of race and gender, the false divisions that the Democratic Party does everything it can to foster—but along the lines of class.

The American working class has a long and proud tradition of class struggle. Today we celebrate May Day, the day of international working class solidarity. Indeed, the origins of May Day lie in the struggle of American workers for the 8-hour day, in the bloody suppression of workers in Chicago in the Haymarket massacre of May 1886 and the subsequent frame-up.

The history of the United States in the 20th century has been a history of militant class struggle. The ability of the American ruling class to thwart the development of a revolutionary movement in the United States was bound up, in the final analysis, with the strength of American capitalism. This objective factor, however, belongs to a distant past.

In the Socialist Equality Party’s program, adopted in 2010, we noted that “The change in objective conditions ... will lead American workers to change their minds. The reality of capitalism will provide workers with many reasons to fight for a fundamental and revolutionary change in the economic organization of society.”

This prognosis has become a reality. The question that confronts workers is: Upon what basis and with what strategy must their struggles be developed?

The development of the class struggle requires the formation of organizations comprised of and controlled by the workers themselves, independent of the corporatist trade unions.

The Socialist Equality Party has taken the initiative for the formation of rank-and-file committees, as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. These committees have played a leading role in many of the most important struggles of the past two years. They must be expanded and developed into every industry and every section of the

working class.

The expansion of the class struggle and the independent organization of workers must be connected to the building of a socialist leadership in the working class. This means a fight against all the institutions and representatives of the ruling class, from the fascistic nationalism of Trump to the reactionary racial and gender politics of the Democratic Party and the pro-imperialist pseudo-left.

It means forging the strongest bonds between workers in the US and workers throughout the world. American workers are connected, through the process of production and through revolutionary advances in communication, with their class brothers and sisters in every country like never before. There is no national solution to any of the great problems confronting mankind: the global pandemic, surging inflation that is impoverishing hundreds of millions, global warming, and now world war.

And it means the development of a movement consciously directed at capitalism. The ruling class has forfeited its right to rule and has demonstrated the bankruptcy of the profit system upon which it rests.

The basic problem confronting workers in the United States and in every country is the problem of revolutionary leadership. The objective conditions, enormously intensified by the pandemic, create the possibility for socialist revolution. But the transformation of this objective possibility into political reality requires the building of a socialist leadership in the working class. And it depends on the actions of individuals to make the decision to build this leadership.

This political leadership is the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement. There is no one else. The fundamental task that follows from this May Day rally is the building of the Fourth International, its national sections the Socialist Equality Party, and the development of a revolutionary socialist movement against capitalism.



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