

Powerful strike movement emerges in the United States

Eric London
20 May 2022

A series of powerful strikes and social protests have broken out across the United States against intolerable social conditions and breathtaking levels of social inequality.

Spurred by the spiraling cost of living, the struggles are breaking down the false barriers erected by the ruling class to divide and weaken workers. They involve workers of every race and ethnicity in every region of the country, in both urban and rural settings. They include workers across many different industries and at many different rates of pay.

- In Racine, Wisconsin, and Burlington, Iowa, 1,200 manufacturing workers at the agricultural and construction equipment company CNH have been on strike for three weeks, with workers telling the WSWs they are demanding at least a 50 percent increase to wages to overcome surging inflation and years of stagnating pay.

- In Richmond, California, 500 oil workers at a Chevron refinery have been on strike since March 21. Richmond is located in the San Francisco Bay Area, one of the most expensive regions of the country, and workers reported to the WSWs that they are barely able to afford to fill their cars with gas, which *they* refine, in order to drive to work.

Roughly 5,000 nurses at Stanford Hospital in California went on strike earlier in May demanding significant wage increases and adequate staffing levels. Strikes have taken place in recent weeks at hospitals across California, including at Sutter Health hospitals in the northern part of the state and Cedars-Sinai in Los Angeles.

- Nearly 3,500 aluminum workers at Arconic in Iowa, Indiana, New York and Tennessee voted *unanimously* for strike action last week. Like their brothers and sisters elsewhere, Arconic workers are furious over being dubbed “essential” only for the company to make massive profits while attempting to impose paltry wage increases that amount to pay cuts with inflation.

- Also last week, 1,300 autoworkers at Detroit Diesel in Redford, Michigan overwhelmingly rejected a contract that would have raised wages by only 8 percent at the end of six years, a period in which inflation will have risen 45 percent if it stays near the current rate.

Contracts for 15,000 nurses in the Twin Cities and Twin Ports in Minnesota are expiring next month, and nurses plan to rally at hospitals across the metro area on June 1 to demand major

pay increases, adequate staffing and safe working conditions. In addition, 400 mental health nurses in Iowa and Minnesota are scheduled to carry out a one-day strike on May 24.

- An estimated 10,000 nurses protested in Washington D.C. earlier this month over wages, staffing, and the for-profit health system. Hundreds of nurses protested the next day outside the Tennessee courthouse where framed-up nurse RaDonda Vaught was sentenced to probation for a medical mistake that was ultimately the product of understaffing and other hospital system failures.

The intensifying class struggle in the US forms a critical part of an emerging global movement of the working class. In every country, workers are being driven into struggle by the red-hot pokers of economic hardship, exacerbated by the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, and the ongoing pandemic.

The cockpit of world imperialist reaction is no exception. In the US, the price of gas increased 18.3 percent in just one month, from February to March, driven by the war in Ukraine, as well as war-profiteering by the oil and gas corporations. Grocery prices increased 10 percent from the prior year, the largest increase since 1981, while the price of electricity increased 32 percent annually.

Average rent increased 11 percent over the same time period. Rent for America’s 22 million mobile home residents is expected to increase a staggering 70 percent in the coming months because mobile home parks are being purchased by Wall Street investors, which are then squeezing residents for profit.

In the land of credit card debt, interest rate hikes are driving borrowing rates up to levels not seen in decades. The *Wall Street Journal* reported Friday that delinquencies on subprime car and home loans “hit an all time high in February.”

According to the *Journal*, the increase in loan delinquencies is a product of the fact that the government has allowed social programs enacted at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic to expire, meaning that millions are now unable to stay above water. The two capitalist parties found \$40 billion virtually overnight to arm fascist battalions in Ukraine but claim there is not enough money to prevent unprecedented social hardship at home.

Demand for food pantries has never been so high, with one

Florida food pantry operator telling a Tampa Bay television channel, “We are seeing different types of families coming through our lines, we are seeing first-time families, middle-class families, some families on social security.”

The “all guns and no butter” policy of the Biden administration is having devastating consequences. Although two-thirds of US food banks are experiencing rapidly increasing demand, they are also witnessing “a 45 percent drop in food provided by the federal government,” CNN reported earlier this month. One leader of the non-profit Feeding America told the news outlet, “We are in danger of running out of food. We are doing everything we can to avert a major hunger crisis.”

Millions of workers in “the world’s wealthiest country” are forced to sell their blood in order to survive. On Thursday, the *Washington Post* featured a 41-year-old teacher with a \$50,000 salary who sells plasma twice per week to get by. “I never thought I would be in a position where I would have to sell my plasma to feed my children,” said Christina Seal of Slidell, Louisiana. “I’ve applied for every government program that I can think of. I don’t qualify for food stamps, I don’t qualify for any programs.” The *Post* explained that plasma donations “have quadrupled since 2006.”

To the world’s financial elite, the relentless pursuit of profit justifies even more social suffering.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell promised future rate hikes to reduce wage pressure and said, “There could be some pain involved.” Michael Tran, managing director for global energy strategy at RBC Capital Markets, said that as the war in Ukraine drags on, “It is going to be an expensive summer.” IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva told G-7 central bank governors Thursday, “I think what we need to start getting more comfortable with is, this may not be the last shock.”

The claim that workers must “get more comfortable” with economic desperation comes after two years in which workers have had to “live with” a coronavirus pandemic that has killed over 1 million people in the US.

As they have throughout the pandemic, the corporations and the government are relying on the trade unions to isolate these struggles, subdue workers’ demands and keep production going.

At Arconic, the USW has defied the workers’ unanimous strike vote and is instead seeking to push through a deal with below-inflation raises, sparking outrage among workers. Similarly, at Detroit Diesel, the United Auto Workers (UAW) ignored the workers’ 98 percent strike vote and is forcing them to revote on virtually the same contract they already rejected. At CNH, the strike was sparked in part by anger over the fact that the last contract was negotiated by former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who was imprisoned for accepting corporate bribes.

The president of the United Steel Workers (USW), Tom

Conway, pledged to Joe Biden that his union would help keep wage raises lower than inflation. The nurses unions have done nothing to address staffing issues anywhere. The teachers unions have forced teachers back to school during every wave of the pandemic. So critical have the trade unions been to implementing the policies of the government that the Biden administration is actively promoting the establishment of unions at companies such as Amazon in the name of maintaining labor discipline and managing supply lines.

But workers have passed through important experiences in the last year, including the strikes by 3,000 Virginia Volvo workers and 10,000 John Deere workers, as well as the contract struggle by 3,000 Dana auto parts workers. In each case, workers were able to establish rank-and-file committees and began to assert their strength against both the companies and the corporatist trade unions.

Workers confront not individual bosses or corporations but powerful global financial institutions backed by the world’s governments, police and armies.

But workers can unlock their immense potential power by recognizing their strength flows from their class *unity*, their *independence* from the trade unions and capitalist parties, and the *international* character of their struggles.

Workers in every corner of the globe are beginning to draw significant political conclusions about their experiences. As one Iowa CNH worker told the WSWS recently:

Now more people’s eyes are open. When you look at Volvo and John Deere, and everything those workers went through, and how stuff was pushed on them by the UAW, a lot of people saw that. And now it’s really coming out because it’s important to people. What we’re all working for is real change, not just for us, but for everybody. This strike is about more than just our job, this is about capitalism. And what this war really means, the high prices, it’s crazy, it all goes together. All over the world they want to keep us in capitalism and keep us going down.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact