

# Intolerable conditions fuel class struggle in the United States

Tom Hall  
20 July 2022

Around the world, a global wave of strikes and social protests by the working class is underway, from nationwide strikes by rail workers and dockworkers in Europe to mass protests in Sri Lanka, Albania and other countries against spiraling inflation. Whatever the immediate cause of each particular struggle, all of them are centered on the demand that society's resources be allocated away from the profit interests of the rich and towards the maintenance of human need.

But nowhere is the contrast between a high level of technological and industrial technique, which makes possible the eradication of want, and the reality of social misery as stark as in the United States. The ruling class in the most powerful capitalist country in the world has cut the wages and living standards of workers for decades. In the course of little more than two years since the start of the pandemic, it has succeeded in reducing the country to the level of complete dysfunction. It is now foisting the cost of this crisis of its own making onto the backs of the working class.

The scenes of grinding poverty and industrial slaughter in *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel about the Chicago meatpacking industry at the turn of the 20th century, read like a straightforward account of daily life in 21st century America. The book, the publication of which launched a scandal in the early 1900s, has lost its ability to shock.

Deadly industrial accidents are a daily occurrence. Last week, dockworker and Nicaraguan immigrant Uriel "Popeye" Matamoros was crushed to death at the Port of Newark when equipment he was operating fell on top of him. According to co-workers, management kept them on the job, making them work around the site of the accident without even having fully cleaned it up. "It smelled awful," one worker told the WSWS.

The same day, a worker died at an Amazon warehouse in Carteret, New Jersey during the company's Prime Day promotion, which places tremendous strain on workers to keep pace with orders. Earlier in the year, Steven Dierkes died at a Caterpillar foundry in Illinois when he fell into a crucible filled with molten metal.

Increasingly frequent and intense heat waves, the product of man-made global warming, also take their toll. Two weeks ago, UPS driver Esteban Chavez died of heat stroke while driving his route in nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius)

weather. UPS delivery trucks are not air conditioned. Workers at auto parts maker Ventra's facility in Ewart, Michigan are passing out on the line and being hospitalized due to extreme heat. This is taking place while an historic heat wave pummels Europe, killing thousands.

As terrible as this is, it pales in comparison to the human toll of coronavirus, which has killed more than 1 million people in the US. Factories, other large workplaces and schools have long been known to be primary centers of COVID outbreaks, yet the federal and local governments have deliberately kept them open for virtually the entire pandemic in the name of the "economy."

Moreover, despite self-serving media claims, the pandemic is continuing to rage. At the Ewart plant, workers report that an outbreak is underway. However, the true toll of COVID on workers is not known because of the systematic coverup of outbreaks in the plants. Often, workers only find out about cases through their co-workers and word of mouth.

As major corporations desperately improvise to maintain supply chains and production, American workers are subjected to arbitrary and punishing scheduling regimes, with the eight-hour day and 40-hour workweek a distant memory. Autoworkers oscillate, often without warning, between 70- and 80-hour workweeks and extended layoffs. On the West Coast docks, thousands of "casuals"—in reality, day laborers—line up at hiring halls each morning for the distant chance of getting work for the day.

Conditions are even worse in the railroad industry, where *100-hour weeks* are not uncommon. Workers are on call 24/7, leaving them with no time for their families or even to schedule a doctor's appointment. One worker told the WSWS that she has so little downtime she has to take sleeping pills to maximize her rest, and then another set of pills to wake herself up in the morning.

On top of everything else, workers are being squeezed by runaway inflation, which last month exceeded 9 percent for the first time in decades. A rise in nominal wages, which has sent chills down the spine of Wall Street, is in reality nowhere close to enough to keep pace. Inflation-adjusted wages have fallen over the past year by 4 to 5 percent.

Meanwhile, the corporate oligarchy that owns the country is making money on a scale never before seen. Through the

bipartisan infusion of trillions of dollars in cash, Washington has seen to it that Wall Street has been “made whole” during the pandemic, while millions face destitution.

Even the railroad industry, which is on the verge of total collapse, has been raking in tens of billions of dollars. This critical segment of the country’s infrastructure is used as little more than a piggy bank for Wall Street hedge funds and billionaires such as Warren Buffett and Bill Gates. In 2019, according to research group Comparisun, it was the most profitable industry in the country, with a whopping 50.93 percent profit margin, more than five times the national average.

It is little wonder, then, that the American working class is seething with discontent. There is a growing sentiment that things can no longer go on as they have been going, that things need to fundamentally change. This finds its most overt expression in the growing militancy of workers and support for strike action. Earlier this month, railroaders voted by 99.5 percent to authorize a national strike.

In an earlier period, before most Americans alive today were even born and when the country was still a rising industrial power, the ruling elite was capable of parting with concessions to workers in a bid to diffuse such discontent. No longer. The Biden administration’s entire domestic policy, in one way or another, is aimed at suppressing the class struggle and worsening social conditions even further.

The Federal Reserve, with Biden’s support, is hiking interest rates to avert a “wage-price spiral”—that is, wage rises keeping pace with inflation. Modeling themselves on similar monetary policies from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which began the era of deindustrialization, they are prepared to trigger a recession by hiking interest rates to ramp up mass unemployment as a weapon against a restive working class.

The Biden White House is also intervening directly to block strike action and prevent the emergence of a mass movement of the working class. Last Friday, while he was on his way to meet with the autocratic ruler of Saudi Arabia, Biden signed an executive order appointing a Presidential Emergency Board (PEB) in the railroad industry, blocking a strike that workers had nearly unanimously voted to approve. This follows his close and unprecedented involvement in contract talks on the West Coast docks, as well as a similar intervention earlier this year in the US refineries. Biden worked with the United Steelworkers to avert a national refinery strike and impose a contract that the union president boasted was “non-inflationary.”

Biden is pursuing a policy known for decades as corporatism, the drawing together of the state, the corporations and the unions against the working class. The unions, controlled by a bureaucracy tied by a thousand threads to management, have enthusiastically embraced this policy. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union has kept dockworkers on the job without a contract, or even a formal extension, for nearly

three weeks. It issued an extraordinary joint statement with port operators last month that it had no intention of striking. The railroad unions, meanwhile, had been openly calling on Biden for months to appoint a PEB, effectively demanding government intervention to illegalize a strike of their own members.

But as Leon Trotsky said, the laws of history are more powerful than the bureaucratic apparatus. The attempt to bureaucratically smother the class struggle will not only fail, it will also discredit everyone involved and encourage the development of a rebellion by the rank-and-file against the entire corporatist conspiracy, including the companies, the unions and the government, and both pro-capitalist parties.

There are many signs that such a movement is beginning to develop. The overwhelming rejection by workers of sellout contracts is increasingly becoming a regular feature of public life. In one recent development, Kroger grocery workers flooded the local union’s Facebook page with oppositional comments following the “passage” of a substandard contract, prompting the UFCW to delete its page entirely.

The critical question, however, is the organization and direction of this movement. The proliferation of rank-and-file committees over the past two years, formed in opposition to the treachery of the union bureaucracy, points the way forward.

A critical initiative has also been taken in the election campaign for president of the United Auto Workers by Will Lehman, a worker at Mack Trucks. Lehman’s campaign, based on the abolition, not the reform, of the labor bureaucracy and the establishment of rank-and-file control, is the most conscious expression of the brewing collision between the workers and the pro-corporate trade union officialdom.

Workers are being confronted with the question of society’s basic organization and structure. Who should control society’s wealth, the capitalist ruling class or the workers?

The past two years have shown that not a single social problem is solvable within the framework of the profit motive. In fact, all modern social problems have their origin in the profit motive. But the fight against capitalist exploitation requires the fight by the working class for the socialist reconstruction of society and the abolition of private ownership of social resources.



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