The political issues confronting American workers on Labor Day 2022

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Labor Day 2022 presents the working class with two choices. One is with the AFL-CIO and the Biden administration, which plan to make workers pay for imperialist war, facilitate the spread of the pandemic no matter the death toll, cause mass layoffs through the hiking of interest rates, and lower wages as the cost of living explodes.

The other path is the development of an independent movement of the working class. This is happening objectively, in the form of the rejection of sellout contracts, the development of an international strike wave, and a growing sense in every workplace that things cannot continue as they are.

But to succeed, this emerging movement needs political direction and strategic self-awareness.

The first path—the losing path—goes through the AFL-CIO and the Democratic Party. President Biden will be traveling to Pittsburgh today where he will celebrate his supposed "pro-worker" policies with the corrupt and widely hated union executives who lead the AFL-CIO, the United Steelworkers (USW), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and other unions.

In an advance statement released by the White House, Biden declared, "Unions have been the voice of American workers, guiding their path to power as a major force in our society. Unions fought for higher wages and family-supporting benefits, established vital health and safety standards, secured an eight-hour work day, eradicated child labor, guarded against discrimination and harassment, and bargained for every worker's fair share of economic prosperity. They give workers a say in critical decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods and play a transformative role in shaping the future of our democracy…"

Biden turns reality on its head. Far from being a "voice for American workers" the membership of the official trade unions has fallen to an all-time low, with only 10.3 percent of all workers and 6.1 percent of private sector workers in a union. Over the last 40 years, the continued existence of these organizations has largely depended on the financial and institutional support the unions have received from a section of employers and the capitalist state, which see them as a critical tool to police the working class.

The period of time when the unions "fought for higher wages" belongs to the distant past. Over the last year, as inflation rose to a four-decade high of 8.5-9.0 percent and energy costs by 41.6 percent, the average unionized worker saw a pay increase of only 4.4 percent. This is less than the 5.3 percent increase for non-union workers.

Biden's claims that the unions have "bargained for every worker's fair share of economic prosperity" are belied by the four-decade-long decline in real wages of US workers and the explosive increase in the wealth of the corporate and financial oligarchy. Since the pandemic began, the net worth of America's 727 billionaires rose by 70 percent, or $1.71 trillion. Meanwhile, the unions, led by bureaucrats with incomes in the top 5 percent of the population, have negotiated contracts at the oil refineries, with shipbuilding companies, in the tire industry, at hospitals and in the public sector. These wage increases, as USW President Tom Conway boasted, "did not add to inflationary pressures."

As for the unions enforcing "vital health and safety standards," again, the opposite is the case. Throughout the pandemic, AFL-CIO unions have played the central role in forcing workers into unsafe factories, schools and other work locations. This has contributed to the massive loss of more than 1 million Americans and a historic decline in life expectancy in the US. While the unions have concealed the numbers, tens of thousands of unionized transit, health care, retail, logistics, meatpacking and other workers have died, including an estimated 8,000 active and retired teachers alone. Millions more face long-term disability. And these horrific figures are on top of the 5,000 workers—or nearly 14 per day—who die annually from workplace accidents.

Biden's reference to the eight-hour day is an insult. The unions regularly sanction workdays of 10, 12 and even more hours per day, six or seven days a week. Railway workers, who do not have paid sick days, are basically on call 24/7. After such exhausting and dangerous hours, some workers

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will be grabbing much needed rest on Labor Day while enjoying a few rare hours with their families—if they don't have to work. The US is the only advanced economy in the world that does not federally mandate paid vacations or holidays, and about one in four US workers does not have any.

According to Biden, the unions "give workers a say in critical decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods and play a transformative role in shaping the future of our democracy." In fact, the democratic rights of workers are routinely trampled on by union bureaucrats who conceal information, ignore unanimous votes for strike action, and ram through pro-company contracts with threats and ballot-stuffing.

In recent weeks, the unions have worked with the Biden administration to impose a de facto ban on strikes by 28,000 West Cost dockworkers, 110,000 railroad workers and hundreds of thousands of teachers and nurses across the country.

Most importantly, the unions have been totally silent on Biden's speech last Thursday night warning about the danger of dictatorship posed by Trump, his fascistic supporters and the majority of the Republican Party. "Trump and the MAGA Republicans," Biden said, were promoting "an extremism that threatens the very foundation of our Republic." They "do not respect the Constitution" and do not "recognize the will of the people" or "accept the results of a free election."

Like Biden, all the unions can say about this existential threat is to vote for the Democrats in the mid-term elections. The fact is, the unions and the Democratic Party have spent the last four decades attacking the jobs, living standards and social rights of the working class, while promoting nationalism and militarism. This has given Trump and the Republicans the ability to exploit popular discontent for their own reactionary purposes.

On every issue facing the working class, the unions have lined up with the ruling class. On COVID, they've helped it spread. On the US proxy war against Russia and the escalation of trade war measures and military encirclement of China, the unions are in support. On inflation, the unions favor pay cuts. On fascism, they are silent. They subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party even as it escalates the war against the working class and threatens to drive the economy into a recession to beat back workers' demands for wage increases that keep up with surging prices.

Biden boasts that he is the "most pro-union president in US history." By this, he means that his administration is doing everything it can to prop up the discredited and hated labor bureaucracy in hopes that it can hold back the rising tide of social opposition and impose the labor discipline needed to wage war abroad and class war at home.

Biden's agenda is that of corporatism, that is, the ever closer integration of the unions with corporate management and the state.

The development of a movement of class struggle requires at every point the building of independent organizations, rank-and-file committees, that will unite all sections of the working class, in the US and internationally, against the corporatist trade union apparatus. This, in contrast to the path of defeat through the Democrats and the AFL-CIO, is the path to victory for the international working class.

The highest expression of this growing rebellion of the working class is the campaign of Will Lehman, a Pennsylvania Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers union. Lehman has received powerful support from autoworkers, teachers, railroad workers and other sections of the working class for his call for the abolition of the labor bureaucracies and the transfer of power to rank-and-file workers.

Lehman has called for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace and the coordination of struggles across national boundaries through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The independent organization of the working class must be connected to the building of a socialist leadership in the working class. There is not a single problem confronting workers—exploitation and inequality, the threat of fascism and dictatorship, imperialist war—that can be resolved within the framework of the capitalist system.

The way forward is the fight for socialism, connecting the growth of the class struggle in the US and throughout the world with the building of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International as the revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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