Opposition to union bureaucracy, class war monetary policies to fuel growth of US class struggle in 2023

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Strikes by workers in the United States grew significantly over the course of 2022 and class conflict will escalate in 2023 with an estimated 1.6 million workers facing contract expirations. The number of large strikes involving more than 1,000 workers increased from 16 in 2021 to 25 in 2022, with the total number of workers involved growing from 80,700 to 130,000, according to government figures.

Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, which also tracks smaller strikes, reported that there were 374 work stoppages in 2022, a 39 percent increase over 2021.

The largest strike last year was by 48,000 graduate students in the University of California system at the end of the year. Seven of the 25 largest work stoppages involved health care workers, underscoring the opposition to the disastrous impact to public health by the removal of all COVID-19 restrictions.

Even this number, however, is a significant understatement of the huge levels of social anger that exist, because hundreds of thousands more workers, especially in key industries, were prevented from striking by the pro-corporate union bureaucracies. In December, 120,000 railroaders had a contract imposed upon them by Congress, after the unions deliberately extended deadlines past the midterm elections to strengthen the Biden administration's hand.

The White House also colluded with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to prevent a strike by 20,000 dockworkers on the West Coast who still don't have a contract seven months after their contract expiration. Last February, the United Steelworkers worked with Biden to prevent a strike by 30,000 US refinery workers and impose a deal, which USW bureaucrats boasted "did not contribute to inflation." The unions have also kept more than 100,000 New York City and Los Angeles teachers, along with tens of thousands of pilots, flight attendants and other airline workers on the job well past their contract expirations.

At the end of 2022, 17,000 nurses at a dozen private hospitals in New York City voted nearly unanimously to strike, only for the New York State Nurses Association to announce a tentative agreement at the largest hospital on the eve of the December 31 strike deadline.

Two basic elements dominated the growth of the class struggle in 2022. The first was substantial and growing opposition to the spiraling cost of living and intolerable working conditions. The second was the growing conflict between the working class and the trade union apparatus, especially as the latter drew closer with the Biden administration to suppress strikes and help rein in wage growth through substandard contracts. As a result, between September 2021 and September 2022, wage growth was actually lower for unionized workers (3.6 percent) compared to nonunion workers (5.4 percent).

This rebellion took its most conscious form in the growth of rank-and-file committees opposed to both management and the union apparatus. Autoworker Will Lehman's campaign for president of the United Auto Workers, which called for the abolition of the UAW bureaucracy and its replacement with democratic organs of rank-and-file power, found a substantial hearing in spite of attempts by the UAW to suppress even knowledge of the election itself.

Last year, railroaders across the country also formed the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee, which played a leading role in organizing opposition to the union-government sellout. It held a series of informational pickets as well as online public meetings attended by well over 1,000 people in total. Overall, at least 106 statements by rank-and-file committees were posted last year on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The class struggle will continue to grow substantially over the course of 2023. This year, at least 1.6 million workers in the United States will have more than 150 labor agreements expire, according to figures compiled by Bloomberg Law.

These include:

- 5,000 workers at Caterpillar on March 1
- 200,000 urban postal workers in the National Association of Letter Carriers on May 20
- 35,000 New York City transit workers on May 31
- 5,000 members of the United Auto Workers and International Union of Electrical Workers-CWA workers at General Electric

Aerospace on June 18

•150,000 TV and theater workers in SAG-AFTRA on June 30

•More than 300,000 workers at UPS on July 31

•150,000 United Auto Workers members at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis (formerly Fiat-Chrysler) on September 14

•3,500 UAW members at Mack Trucks on October 1

A significant element in these struggles will be the fight against fraudulent “reform” factions within the bureaucracy that have or are likely to take control of many of the major unions. Sean O’Brien, a former apparatchik for his predecessor, James Hoffa Jr., was elected to the presidency of the Teamsters with key support from Teamsters for a Democratic Union. There is a real possibility that the UAW will be controlled by Shawn Fain, a career official backed by Unite All Workers for Democracy.

Whatever posturing for public consumption over “accountability” or a “fair share” for workers is made by these figures will be exposed by the collision between workers and American capitalism, which they defend. The United States is a powder keg wracked by massive social and political crisis, and the assigned role of the bureaucracy will be to prevent workers’ opposition from escaping their control.

This crisis will lend to the class struggle an explosive character. Economic analysts have said that a major recession is all but a certainty in 2023. This, however, is not just the outgrowth of impersonal economic forces but deliberate monetary policies. Beginning last year, the Federal Reserve has increased interest rates by the highest amounts in decades, with a stated goal being to curb wage growth and ramp up unemployment as a weapon against the working class.

In the first six months of last year, global real wage growth after inflation fell by 0.9 percent, the first such decline in the 21st century, according to the International Labour Organization. This decline was sharpest in North America, where real wages fell by 3.2 percent in the first six months, followed by the EU, where wages fell by 2.4 percent. The figures for the second half of last year will almost certainly be even higher, as the impact of higher interest rates began to be more acutely felt.

“Income inequality and poverty will rise if the purchasing power of the lowest paid is not maintained,” ILO Director-General Gilbert F. Houngbo said, and warned that this “could fuel further social unrest across the world.”

Even this decline, however, is not enough for the world’s governments and central banks, for whom modest wage growth far exceeded by inflation is considered an intolerable drain on profits. Bloomberg recently complained of a “disconnect” between workers “mistakenly assuming that their employers would deliver raises in line with inflation” with the “the current price environment” that supposedly made this “[not] realistic.” It pointed to a “gap between the raises that workers expect for next year—5.5%, according to [consulting firm Gartner Inc.]—and what companies have budgeted for, typically between 3.5% and 4.5%.”

One of the chief causes of this growth in nominal wages, according to a comment on the Fed’s monetary policy last month by *Fortune* magazine, was the shrinking size of the labor force, with 2 million “excess” retirements, driven by worsening conditions and fear of COVID-19, and 400,000 COVID-related deaths among working-age Americans.

Fortune added: “How the Fed will manage a robust labor market, with its effect on inflation, could prove perilous. Powell and other Fed officials have said they hope their rate hikes will slow consumer spending and job growth. Businesses would then remove many of their job openings, easing the demand for labor. With less competition for workers, wages could begin to grow more slowly.”

Already, tens of thousands of workers have been laid off in the tech sector in recent weeks, with Amazon announcing 18,000 job cuts. But this will not be restricted to white collar workers. General Motors CEO Mary Barra recently declared that the auto giant would be “very conservative” on costs over the next year.

She added, in relation to this year’s contract: “What do people want? They want job security and they want to be recognized … and appropriately compensated.” This, however, was unrealistic. “It will be interesting, given inflation and the [uncertain] economic backdrop,” she added. “You tell me what the economic situation will be next year. I don’t think anybody knows.”

The stage is being set for a massive growth in the class struggle in 2023, which will not be so easily contained through traditional methods.

There is a growing political conflict emerging between the working class, on the one hand, and the Biden administration and the entire political establishment, on the other. This includes its nominally “left” elements, such as the DSA members who voted to impose the rail contract. The class struggle will also powerfully intersect with the political crisis in the United States.

The class struggle between the workers and capital is between social interests that are totally antagonistic and mutually exclusive. Above all, what will emerge are both the prerequisites and the recognition of the necessity for the struggle of the working class developing into a conscious political movement against capitalism.