

Hot labor summer: Growing strike movement colliding with pro-corporate union bureaucracies

Marcus Day
23 July 2023

A powerful strike movement has begun to emerge in the US and internationally in recent weeks, involving tens of thousands of workers across different industries. Explosive anger over low wages, intolerable working conditions and obscene levels of inequality is prompting nervous comments in the corporate media of a global “hot labor summer.”

Again and again, however, workers are colliding with the reactionary trade union bureaucracies and, behind them, the capitalist state.

On Sunday, the Teamsters union announced that it was calling off a strike by 22,000 Yellow freight truckers which had been set to begin Monday morning, defying widespread sentiment among workers for a walkout. The primary purpose of the deal is to prevent a strike at Yellow from encouraging workers to walk out at UPS, where the contract for 340,000 Teamsters members expires July 31, a week from Monday. The Teamsters apparatus, headed by President Sean O’Brien, is currently trying to reach some sort of deal to block a strike.

The agreement at Yellow resolves none of the issues that have driven workers to demand strike action, including calls for brutal cost-cutting from the company’s Wall Street lenders.

The ruling class is extremely nervous over the developing struggles already underway in the US and Canada, which have the potential of developing into an uncontrollable movement of the working class:

- Over 11,000 screenwriters have been on strike for nearly two months, joined in mid-July by over 65,000 actors, effectively shutting down US film and television production in the first joint writers-actors strike since 1960.

- In British Columbia, 7,400 dockworkers walked out for the second time in a month last Tuesday. The

International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) shut down the strike within a few hours, however, after the walkout was declared “illegal” by the government of Liberal Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and then it called off a subsequent strike scheduled to begin Saturday. The ILWU is now seeking to ram through its tentative agreement with the port operators in a vote on Tuesday, despite widespread opposition among workers.

- Thousands of hotel workers in Southern California began a third series of strikes at eight locations across the Los Angeles area last Thursday. Hotel workers are seeking major wage increases to meet soaring housing and food costs but have seen their strikes deliberately isolated and segregated by UNITE HERE Local 11.

- Approximately 1,400 Wabtec workers in Pennsylvania—who produce locomotives—and 1,400 National Steel Car workers in Hamilton, Ontario—who manufacture rail cars—have each been on strike for more than a month.

Beyond North America, strikes have continued to spread across Europe, including, in recent weeks, 10,000 airport ground workers in Italy, thousands of senior doctors in the UK, and EasyJet airline workers in Portugal, among others.

The strikes are only a pale reflection of opposition building up, and more workers are looking to go on the offensive. Along with the possibility of a strike beginning in August by hundreds of thousands of UPS workers, in September, contracts expire for 170,000 autoworkers at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis in both the US and Canada.

The White House is particularly concerned that the development of the class struggle will upend US imperialism’s war plans, including both the escalation of the war against Russia and preparations for an even larger

war against China. It is relying on the union apparatus to try to somehow control the situation.

While United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain's administration has postured as carrying out a "reform" of the UAW, it has continued to sell out workers' struggles in its first months in office, including the 40-day-long Clarios battery workers strike. Well aware of the anger among workers over being continuously lied to by the union bureaucracy, the UAW has launched a Big Three "contract update" page and videos with much fanfare, while not telling workers in any detail what they are supposedly demanding of the companies or discussing with them.

Behind the bombastic "militant" rhetoric and hot air by Fain and O'Brien are significant amounts of both subterfuge and fear. The UAW and Teamsters leaderships, like their counterparts in other unions, are closely coordinating with the Democratic Party, desperately seeking to head off strikes and prevent workers from launching struggles that could escape their control.

Last week, US President Joe Biden requested a private face-to-face discussion with Fain, in advance of closed-door meetings between the UAW head and virtually the entire Democratic Party leadership—the same politicians who banned a rail strike and imposed a contract against rail workers' will last year.

Driving the explosive emergence of the class struggle are conditions of life that have become more and more impossible for the working class. In the so-called richest countries in the world, hunger and homelessness plague not only the unemployed and semi-employed, but also increasingly those with full-time jobs at major corporations. In a recent survey by job site Monster.com, over 80 percent said their pay was not keeping up with the rising cost of living.

Enormous social discontent is building up over a wide range of grievances, from the stratospheric profits and wealth amassed by the corporations and super-rich, to the abominable working conditions that have become ever-present. The increasingly apparent impact of the climate crisis is itself a factor in the "hot" labor summer, including a deadly heat wave that has gripped much of the Northern Hemisphere, as well as wildfire smoke that has repeatedly choked broad swaths of Canada and the US.

And the horrific toll of the COVID-19 pandemic, with early signs of a new wave emerging in the US, is continuing to give rise to a profound sense of injustice and the need for retribution among workers. "National

trauma fuels breaking point," the *Detroit Free Press* wrote Sunday, stating, "Workers are worn out and they want to feel valued for what they did during the pandemic."

It is against this rising tide of struggle that the ruling class is directing all its efforts. US and European central banks are set to continue raising interest rates this week, determined to drive up unemployment and weaken workers' leverage. "With the jobs market remaining firm, officials are taking no chances," said James Knightley, chief international economist at ING Financial Markets LLC, in a *Bloomberg* report on Sunday.

The ruling class and its servants are terrified of the tremendous social power of the working class. It is this social power that must be organized internationally and unleashed.

The outcome of the struggles in the auto industry, at UPS and other corporations depends upon workers seizing the initiative. No confidence can be placed in any of the union officials or anything they say. Fain, O'Brien and their counterparts are conspiring behind closed doors with the bosses and their representatives in Washington. They have already carried out massive betrayals, and they will do so again if given the chance.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is building a worldwide network of worker-controlled committees across every industry. These committees—at GM, Stellantis, Ford, UPS and elsewhere—are linking up workers. They are providing a means for workers to share information and prepare and coordinate a united counter-offensive. We urge workers to sign up to join the IWA-RFC and establish a rank-and-file committee at your workplace today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact