

Labor Day 2023 and the eruption of class struggle

Marcus Day
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Labor Day is being celebrated in the United States today under conditions of an explosive growth of the class struggle throughout the world.

This holiday was established in 1894 in an attempt to separate American workers from their class brothers and sisters internationally. According to an act signed into law by President Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, it was to be marked on the first Monday of September, about as far on the calendar as possible from May 1, International Workers Day, inaugurated by the International Socialist Congress in Paris in 1889 to commemorate the Haymarket Massacre in Chicago of 1886.

The promotion of a national “Labor Day” was an attempt to perpetuate the claim that the United States was somehow exempt or disconnected from the development of the class struggle internationally. This conception of “American exceptionalism” was rooted in the belief that the social divisions on the surface of every society—and their relationship to the socialist movement—were of limited or no relevance to the United States, the “land of unlimited opportunity.”

The distinctive feature of Labor Day 2023, however, is that it coincides with the development of class conflict throughout the United States, which is increasingly heading towards an open confrontation between the working class on the one side and the pro-corporate union bureaucracies and the Biden administration on the other.

Broad sections of the working class are involved in the movement that is developing: auto parts and other industrial workers, nurses, teachers, municipal workers, graduate student workers, hotel workers, actors and writers and others. Significant sections of the American population who previously considered themselves “middle class” have become proletarianized, confronting the same questions of exploitation, declining wages and precarious employment as workers everywhere.

Tens of thousands of screenwriters and actors have been on strike for months, resisting the efforts of the entertainment conglomerates to starve them into submission. A further 88,000 healthcare workers at Kaiser Permanente are currently balloting on strike action across the US, seeking to overturn dangerous levels of understaffing and overwork. In the past year, teachers and educators have also launched powerful strikes, including 50,000 academic workers at the University of California system at the end of 2022, a strike by 65,000 school workers and teachers in Los Angeles in March 2023, and more.

There have been more than 250 strikes in the US so far in 2023, according to Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations, already outpacing the number it tracked in 2021 and 2022. Significantly, the number of workers reported to have been on strike—323,000—has reached the highest level in nearly 20 years, with the exception of 2018-19, when a wave of wildcat strikes by teachers spread throughout West Virginia, North Carolina, Arizona and other states.

But the struggles which have taken place this year are only a pale reflection of the deep social anger that is building up among workers. If one were to add the many sections of workers who voted to authorize

strikes but were sold out, the number of striking workers would be several times higher. In particular, nearly 340,000 UPS workers would presently be among the ranks of those on strike were it not for the efforts of the Teamsters bureaucracy to prevent a walkout and secure passage of a sellout contract on the basis of lies.

All eyes are now turning to the autoworkers. Contracts covering 170,000 US and Canadian autoworkers expire in less than two weeks. Autoworkers are determined to put an end to the wage and benefit tier system, stop the abuse of temporary workers and reverse many other concessions. But the auto companies, the UAW bureaucracy and the Biden administration are preparing to carry out a jobs massacre of historic proportions, which threatens the destruction of half or more of the jobs in the auto industry as it transitions to electric vehicle (EV) production.

Fearing that the anger and opposition of autoworkers may escape the union bureaucracy’s control, UAW President Shawn Fain has adopted militant-sounding rhetoric, seeking to head off a full-scale revolt. But Fain and the UAW bureaucracy have neither the strategy nor the intention to achieve any of the things they say they are fighting for.

In reality, the UAW apparatus is deepening its corporatist policies, i.e., the integration of the union bureaucracy, management and the capitalist state to suppress the class struggle and defend corporate profits. Its primary objective in the contract talks has been to secure the support of the Biden administration and the companies for its own privileged, institutional interests.

The development of the class struggle raises critical questions of organization and strategy for every section of the working class.

1. The rank-and-file rebellion against the union bureaucracies must be deepened and organized through the expansion of the network of rank-and-file committees.

The prevention, isolation and suppression of strikes and the imposition of pro-corporate contracts has been the essential function of the trade union apparatus for nearly 45 years. More than four decades have passed since 1979, when the first concessions contract was negotiated in the auto industry by then-UAW President Douglas Fraser, who was elevated to Chrysler’s board of directors and oversaw tens of thousands of job cuts and wage reductions totaling nearly \$40,000 a year in today’s dollars.

What followed has been an unending pattern of betrayals: the smashing of the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike with the assistance of the AFL-CIO trade union federation, the defeats of the 1983-86 Phelps Dodge strike, the 1985-86 Hormel strike, the 1991-92 and 1994-95 Caterpillar strikes, and countless others. As they led one struggle after another to defeat, the labor bureaucracies integrated themselves further and further into the state, abandoning any positive relationship to the class struggle.

In an earlier historical period, contract negotiations had been generally seen as the occasion to improve the conditions that workers faced. But for the last 40 years, the union bureaucracies have been exclusively concerned with eliminating past gains and extracting massive concessions from workers.

This process has continued up to the present, with economic data showing that wage increases for unionized workers continue to lag far behind non-unionized workers. Overall compensation for unionized workers rose 3.6 percent year over year as of June, while compensation for non-unionized workers rose 4.5 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Employment Cost Index.

Among autoworkers, an explosive rank-and-file rebellion has emerged in recent years, as workers have sought to resist the efforts of the union bureaucracies to impose further concessions. They have voted to reject one UAW-backed contract after another since 2021, at Volvo Trucks, John Deere, and auto parts makers Dana, Detroit Diesel and Ventra. This rebellion has continued under Fain, with Clarios battery and Lear auto parts workers overwhelmingly rejecting multiple UAW sellout deals this year.

Last year, Will Lehman, a socialist worker at Mack Trucks, ran for UAW president on a platform calling for the abolition of the union bureaucracy and the transfer of all power and decision-making to workers on the shop floor. Despite the efforts of the bureaucracy to suppress turnout in the elections, Lehman won nearly 5,000 votes for his program. He ran as a supporter and proponent of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), an international network of militant workers' organizations.

This network of committees, which already has developed local affiliates in the auto industry at GM Flint, Stellantis Warren Truck, Dana Toledo and other factories, must be broadened to every plant. In every struggle, workers confront in the trade union apparatus an instrument for isolation and defeat. The necessity for developing organizations that workers control, fighting for the transfer of power from the apparatus to the rank and file, is the precondition for a united fight against the ruling class and its state.

2. To fight the transnational companies, workers must adopt an international strategy.

Workers confront powerful corporate behemoths with vast resources stretching across continents. At the same time, globalization has vastly expanded the ranks of the working class internationally, welding workers together in a powerful and complex network of production. Moreover, the worldwide expansion of broadband internet, mobile devices, social media, automatic translation and other technologies now allows masses of workers to communicate with each other and coordinate their struggles in different countries to an unprecedented degree.

The past year has seen the emergence of militant workers' struggles internationally, from large-scale strikes and protests in France against pension cuts to rolling transportation strikes throughout Europe and mass anti-government demonstrations in Sri Lanka. In addition to US and Canadian autoworkers seeing their contracts expire almost simultaneously, contracts for 150,000 autoworkers and metal workers in Turkey also expire in September, and workers at Volkswagen are fighting a restructuring plan that threatens 30,000 jobs.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees is at the forefront of the fight to break out of the isolation imposed by the bureaucracies and create a global network of workers that will develop the class struggle on the basis of an international strategy. Workers are

increasingly coming to recognize that they are part of a massive global social force: the international working class. Workers in the US must reject every attempt by the ruling class and its representatives to pit them against their class brothers and sisters internationally, and instead appeal for the broadest possible support and collaboration from workers in Canada and Mexico, in Europe and globally.

3. A political movement of the working class against capitalism and for socialism must be built.

All the major issues workers confront stem from the crisis of the global capitalist system. The COVID-19 pandemic, inflation and the cost-of-living crisis, high interest rates and ongoing economic convulsions all reveal a socio-political-economic system wracked with instability.

The ruling class is engaged in a war on two fronts. Abroad, US imperialism is funneling billions of dollars a week to escalate its war against Russia in Ukraine, seeking to dismember Russia and plunder its vast natural resources. The war against Russia is taking place at the same time as Washington prepares for war against China, with both conflicts threatening to spiral into a nuclear conflagration.

Within the US, the capitalists are prosecuting a war against the working class. The Federal Reserve, like other major Western central banks, has rapidly increased interest rates, seeking to drive up unemployment and weaken the ability of workers to fight for higher wages. The Biden administration, meanwhile, has relied on the union bureaucracies to block or isolate strikes and impose contracts with below-inflation wage increases.

The fundamental contradictions of capitalism identified by Leon Trotsky in the first decades of the 20th century remain the main barriers to the rational, progressive solution to any of the life-and-death issues confronting humanity: the contradiction between the objective development of world economy and the division of the world into rival nation-states, and the conflict between social production and private ownership of the means of production.

In the present autoworkers' struggle, the corporations are insisting that their profit interests are incompatible with the demands of workers for higher wages, a decent standard of living and a secure retirement. If that is the case, then the corporate oligarchy has forfeited its right to privately own the auto industry and determine how it is organized.

In other words, the necessity for a socialist strategy arises out of the objective logic of the class struggle itself.

To make sure that workers' interests take precedence, not private profit, a mass political movement of the working class is required. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting to build a socialist leadership in the working class to take political power and ensure that the needs of the vast majority of the world's population, not the expansion of the wealth and privileges of the parasitic billionaire oligarchs, determine how society's resources are organized.



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