The global implications of the auto struggle in the United States

Socialist Equality Party (US)
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In less than 48 hours, at 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time on Thursday, contracts covering 150,000 US workers at General Motors, Ford and Stellantis will expire. Contracts covering an additional 18,000 autoworkers in Canada expire four days later, on September 18.

As the deadline approaches, the United Auto Workers bureaucracy is engaged in an effort to call off a battle or severely limit its impact. According to a report in the *Detroit Free Press* published Tuesday evening, UAW President Shawn Fain is preparing to announce "strategic strikes"—that is, strikes isolated to only a handful of plants—if an agreement is not announced. In recent days, the UAW has backtracked on core demands of workers.

The situation is being carefully monitored by the Biden administration, which is in daily communication with the UAW apparatus. What is being discussed behind closed doors is not the content of the contracts, which were written up long ago, but how workers can be forced to accept a betrayal.

Among workers, however, there is growing anger and determination to fight. Workers voted 97 percent to authorize a strike with the aim of winning massive wage increases, the abolition of tiers, cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) and fully-funded pensions, the immediate hiring-in of all temporary workers and an end to layoffs and plant closures.

The developing class confrontation has immense national and global implications.

The emerging rebellion among autoworkers comes in the aftermath of 40 years of attacks on the rights and living conditions of the working class. In the 1980s, with the help of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, the American ruling class crushed powerful struggles at PATCO, Hormel, Greyhound, Phelps Dodge, and many others, and ushered in several decades of the artificial suppression of the class struggle, with devastating consequences for the living standards of the working class.

But the decades-long period in which the ruling class could suppress the class struggle in the US with the aid of the trade union bureaucracies has come to an end. For the last several years, there has been a steady escalation of class struggle in the US. And the principal form it has taken is the ever-more bitter conflict with the bureaucratic apparatus, which is dedicated to subordinating the working class to the interests of the corporations and the state.

The working class confronts in this struggle not just a few greedy corporations. The entire policy of the ruling elite—the bailout of the rich, the extreme growth of social inequality and endless war—requires a relentless assault on the jobs and living standards of workers.

The class struggle always tended to be bitterly violent in the United States. This is not only the product of the internal dynamic of class relations in the US. As the US emerged as the predominant imperialist power, all the pressures and contradictions of global capitalism were concentrated within the United States itself.

Through much of the 20th century, the class struggle unfolded against the backdrop of the rising power and dominance of American imperialism. As a result, the strength of American capitalism's global position granted the ruling class the ability to make certain concessions to the working class, though such concessions were always motivated by the fear of social revolution, a fear that had become reality in the Russian Revolution of 1917.

More than half a century has passed, however, since the Johnson administration confronted the reality that the stated aspirations of the "Great Society" could not be combined with the Vietnam War, setting into motion a policy of social counter-revolution. The ruling class reacted to the deterioration of American capitalism's economic position with a ferocious assault on the working class. This was aided and abetted by the anti-socialist trade union apparatus, which transformed itself into an

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arm of corporate management.

Today's struggles of the working class take place under entirely different conditions. The ruling class celebrated the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989-91 as heralding a new birth of capitalist stability, but the world did not turn out as the ruling class predicted.

More than 30 years later, the American ruling class confronts an intersection of economic, social and political crises of an unprecedented character. The United States is not the world's largest creditor, it is the world's largest debtor, fighting to maintain the increasingly precarious position of the dollar as the world's reserve currency. The effort of American imperialism to assert its dominant global position through endless war has produced one debacle after the next and is now escalating into a third world war.

The social situation in what was once called the "world's richest country" is a disaster, characterized by growing poverty and record levels of inequality. The relentless decline in living standards has erased from the American language such phrases as "the land of unlimited opportunity." Over the past three-and-a-half years, well over one million people have died from the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, due to the refusal of the ruling class to take basic public health measures because of their impact on Wall Street share values.

As for the political system, it is increasingly discredited as a tool in the hands of the rich. Unable to respond to the crisis with any reform agenda, the ruling elites careen toward fascism and dictatorship.

The working class is driven to find a way out of the madness and dysfunction of American society. In its program adopted in 2010, the Socialist Equality Party wrote, "In the final analysis, the vast wealth and power of American capitalism was the most significant objective cause of the subordination of the working class to the corporate-controlled two-party system. As long as the United States was an ascending economic power, perceived by its citizens as 'the land of unlimited opportunity,' in which a sufficient share of the national wealth was available to finance rising living standards, American workers were not convinced of the necessity of socialist revolution.

"The change in objective conditions, however, will lead American workers to change their minds. The reality of capitalism will provide workers with many reasons to fight for a fundamental and revolutionary change in the economic organization of society."

This is now happening. The brutal suppression of the class struggle is breaking down. The development of rank-and-file committees, working class organizations not controlled by the bureaucracy, is gathering strength throughout the United States.

The development of the class struggle, however, will not just take the form of a strike movement. There is a growing sense that what is necessary is a fundamental reorganization of society.

This found expression last year in the widespread support for autoworker Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president. Lehman, who ran as an open socialist and supporter of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), won almost 5,000 votes, despite massive voter disenfranchisement of the rank and file by the union apparatus, which refused to tell many workers that an election was even taking place.

Again, events within the United States will have international implications. A reciprocal relationship is at work. Just as the full impact of the global crisis of American imperialism imparts to the class struggle internally an extraordinarily explosive character, so the growth of class conflict in the United States will have a radicalizing impact on the entire world.

The emergence of a rank-and-file movement among American autoworkers is part of the development of a powerful movement of the working class on a global scale. On every continent, mass protests in recent years have involved tens of millions of people, representatives of a globally integrated working class that has grown by billions in the last 30 years.

Within this objective situation, the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class, based on the entire historical experience of the class struggle and the socialist movement, is the basic political task.

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