US midterm elections anticipate explosive growth of the class struggle

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Behind Tuesday's midterm elections, which produced the largest defeat of a sitting president's party in half a century, lies an immense growth of social anger over the cost of living, war, social inequality and the assault on democratic rights. That anger cannot and will not be contained within electoral forms. It will erupt in the form of the class struggle.

Three days after the vote, the process is already visible. At midnight Friday, the citywide contract between New York City and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37 expired. It covers about 90,000 municipal workers, including clerical staff, caseworkers, school aides, library workers and 911 operators. The deal it replaced, signed in 2023, provided raises of 3 percent a year and an $18 wage floor, $1 above the city minimum.

An $18 hourly wage comes to $37,440 a year for full-time work, before taxes. The median asking rent in New York City reached a record $4,199 a month in May, according to StreetEasy, or more than $50,000 a year. A city worker at the wage floor would have to hand over more than a full year's gross pay to rent the typical apartment on the market.

These conditions are universal. In exit polls for the election, 90 percent of voters named the cost of living as a major concern, and those who described themselves as struggling financially swung by 60 points against Trump and the Republicans. Nearly 70 percent said the economic system favors the wealthy.

Friday's jobs report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed average hourly earnings up 3.1 percent over the year, while consumer prices rose 3.7 percent in the 12 months through September, driven by gasoline prices pushed up by the war. That is, real wages are falling. In the New York metropolitan area, prices rose 4.5 percent, and the official figures understate the inflation working people face on gas and food.

Mass layoffs are also on the horizon. Companies have cited artificial intelligence for 121,401 announced job cuts in 2026, about one in five of the total. A survey by the consulting firm Mercer earlier this year found that 99 percent of corporate executives expect AI to drive headcount reductions within two years.

On Wednesday morning, the day after Iowa elected a Democratic senator and governor, Deere announced the closure of its 115-year-old Ottumwa Works and its plant in Clarion. In Detroit, Dakkota Integrated Systems is shutting its instrument panel plant and eliminating 397 jobs.

The coming months will bring these conflicts to a head across every section of the working class. In New York, DC 37 joins the 40,000 subway and bus workers of Transport Workers Union Local 100, who have worked without a contract since May, while the Metropolitan Transportation Authority offers 2 percent raises and demands a doubling of health costs. In Boston, more than 4,000 nurses at Brigham and Women's Hospital have called an open-ended strike for November 12.

Graduate workers at Harvard have been on strike since October 27, and strike deadlines loom this month at MIT and the California State University. Tens of thousands of steelworkers at US Steel and Cleveland-Cliffs have worked without a contract since September 1. In New Hampshire, 250 grocery warehouse workers are on strike, and UPS is eliminating up to 30,000 jobs.

The Democrats have responded to the overwhelming opposition to Trump with calls for "bipartisanship" and "common ground." This is motivated above all by the fear, shared by every section of the ruling class, of the growth of the class struggle. Tens of millions voted for higher wages, affordable healthcare, an end to war and an end to oligarchic rule. But the incoming Democratic House and Senate have been given their marching orders by Wall Street: Rescue the markets and fund war.

Whatever their posturing before the vote, the Democrats will be compelled to wage war on the working class. Who is to pay for a national debt approaching $40 trillion? How is the military budget to be raised to $1.5 trillion? The answer of both parties is the same, and a collision is inevitable.

This is already developing in the cities and states the Democrats run, including those governed by their

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Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) faction.

In California, Governor Gavin Newsom's refusal to meet the demands of state workers provoked the first strike in the history of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1000, by 100,000 workers, on October 21. In Chicago, overseen by Democrat Brandon Johnson, an ex-Chicago Teachers Union staffer backed by the DSA, the city faces an $882 million deficit and is proposing major layoffs of public school teachers.

In Seattle, Mayor Katie Wilson, a self-described democratic socialist though not a member of the DSA, has proposed nearly $50 million a year in cuts while increasing police funding by $68 million. Firefighters packed the City Council's budget hearing early last month to protest cuts that the fire chief said would take units out of service.

New York City itself is run by DSA member Zohran Mamdani, who has led the Democrats in forging a political alliance with Trump. Facing a projected budget gap of $7 billion to $9 billion next year, he has ordered two rounds of agency spending cuts and sued to block $10,000 bonuses for paraprofessionals under the Taylor Law, the state statute that bars public employees from striking.

In the developing collision, the trade union apparatus plays a decisive role in attempting to suppress the class struggle. Mamdani has also brought the union apparatus into his administration. Julie Su, who as Biden's acting labor secretary helped block national rail and port strikes, is his "Deputy Mayor for Economic Justice," and Jahmila Edwards, a top DC 37 official, runs his intergovernmental affairs office. If the Taylor Law is invoked against city workers, a member of the DSA will enforce it.

The United Auto Workers bureaucracy under Shawn Fain poured its resources into electing Democrats, in what Fain called its "biggest political program" in decades, while suppressing every struggle in the plants. At Bradford White, it isolated a 47-day strike and brought back the company's terms four times until they were ratified. It has done nothing to fight the closures at Dakkota and Deere.

Teamsters President Sean O'Brien campaigned for Republicans, including Florida Senator Ashley Moody. The United Steelworkers just announced a tentative agreement with Cleveland Cliffs, which includes raises barely above the rate of inflation after keeping thousands of steelworkers on the job under rolling 48-hour extensions. Whether it backs the Democrats or the Republicans, the apparatus ties workers to the corporations and the state and blocks any independent movement of the working class.

Workers need organizations of their own: rank-and-file committees in every workplace, democratically controlled by workers and independent of the bureaucracy and both parties. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) spearheads the fight to build such committees and to link them across workplaces, industries and borders.

The same process is unfolding internationally. In France, public sector workers struck nationally on Thursday. Spain faces a general strike on November 11, Ireland a public sector strike on November 12 and Italy a general strike on November 20, while the unions everywhere confine the struggle to one-day actions. Workers in every country confront the same crisis and the same demand that they pay for war through austerity.

The IWA-RFC advances demands based not on what the corporations and the city budgets claim is affordable but on what workers need: raises that make up for inflation and rise automatically with prices, guaranteed healthcare, no layoffs or closures and control over new technology by those whose labor it is being used to replace. In New York, that means committees in every city agency, prepared to defy the Taylor Law.

All of these struggles raise fundamental political questions. Equality and an end to the domination of society by the oligarchy cannot be won under capitalism. The DSA speaks for privileged sections of the upper middle class, which seek not to end the wealth of the oligarchy but a more favorable distribution of it within the top 10 percent of the population. Genuine socialism means the transfer of power to the working class, the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the oligarchy, and the placing of the banks and giant corporations under the democratic control of the working class.

The decisive question is leadership. The radicalization expressed in the vote will not develop spontaneously into a conscious movement for socialism. That requires bringing this perspective into every struggle: exposing the role of the Democrats, the DSA and the trade union apparatus, building rank-and-file committees, and winning the most advanced workers and young people to socialism. That is the task of the Socialist Equality Party.

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