

Autumn strike wave pits workers against the corporatist trade unions

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The working class in the United States is coming into a headlong conflict with the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy, which is doing everything it can to block the development of the largest strike wave in decades.

Tomorrow, the United Auto Workers union is forcing 10,100 striking John Deere workers to vote on a six-year agreement that is the same or even worse than the proposal workers rejected on November 2. Deere has announced that the contract is its “last, best and final” offer, and the UAW is functioning as its enforcer.

Confronting the militant resistance of workers, who voted down the first UAW-backed contract by 90 percent in mid-October, the UAW is pulling every dirty trick out of its bag. This includes trying to divide the 3,100 workers at Deere’s Waterloo, Iowa plants—the center of opposition—by having 12 separate voting sessions, one hour apart, where workers are segregated according to their last names.

Announcing the re-vote last week, the UAW claimed it would “support the outcome as determined by our members” just as it has “throughout the bargaining process.” In fact, the UAW—whose leading officials have been exposed as bribe-taking liars who steal workers’ dues money—is dedicated to one thing: imposing the dictates of the companies in direct opposition to the will of its members.

The effort to sabotage the month-long Deere strike follows the shutdown of the strike of 2,900 Volvo Trucks workers in Virginia, who voted down three UAW-backed contracts before the UAW claimed a “re-vote” on the third contract passed by 17 votes. The UAW then kept 3,500 Dana auto parts workers on the job for a month and a half after they voted down a UAW contract by 90 percent, before ramming through a pro-company contract through lies and economic blackmail.

It is not just the UAW. Since October 1, there have been at least 40 strikes, involving 28,000 workers across

multiple sectors of the economy. The response of every union to this revolt has been to systematically block new strikes with last minute deals imposed by any means necessary.

On Monday, the International Alliance of Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts (IATSE) announced that its two agreements covering 60,000 movie and TV production workers had been ratified by a razor thin margin of 50.3 percent to 49.7 percent. Workers rejected the basic agreement at the big Hollywood studios by 50.4 to 49.6 percent, but IATSE claimed it passed based on its undemocratic Electoral College-type voting system.

Last Friday, the Alliance of Health Care Unions announced an agreement to prevent a strike set to begin yesterday by 32,000 health care workers at Kaiser Permanente hospitals on the West Coast. The new deal, which has yet to be voted on, includes raises that are well below inflation and abandons demands for safe staffing levels.

In late October, the Transport Workers Union announced a last-minute deal to prevent a strike by 5,000 Philadelphia transit workers, and the United Food and Commercial Workers shut down a six-week strike by 450 Heaven Hill distillery workers in Bardstown, Kentucky. A new five-year deal was pushed through at Heaven Hill even though a majority voted against it, with the UFCW claiming that two-thirds of the members had to vote “no” to defeat the contract and continue the strike.

Perhaps worst of all are the teachers’ unions, led by multi-millionaires, whose major function over the past year has been to drive teachers back to work in unsafe schools. This is helping to fuel another deadly surge of the coronavirus pandemic that has killed more than one million people in the US and continues to claim the lives of more than 1,000 people every day.

The resurgence of the class struggle has clearly exposed

the real character of the “unions,” which are better described as labor syndicates—corporatist instruments of management and the state dedicated to the suppression of working class opposition.

There is not a trace of democratic rights in these organizations. In every case, the operation is the same. Strike authorization votes are ignored. Contracts rejected by overwhelming majorities are presented again and again for a re-vote. Often, as in the case of Deere, workers do not even have the right to see the full contract before a vote, instead being presented with lying “highlights.” When the unions decide they cannot prevent a strike, workers are isolated on the picket lines and strung out on poverty-level strike pay.

Leon Trotsky, the founder of the Fourth International, explained in 1937 that should the unions “defend the income of the bourgeoisie from attacks on the part of the workers; should they conduct a struggle against strikes, against the rising of wages, against help to the unemployed; then we would have an organization of scabs, not a trade union.”

This is precisely the role of the unions today, though one could add, based on the experience of the past two years: “should they facilitate the implementation of a policy that guarantees the death of countless of their own members by forcing them to work amidst a pandemic...” Labor fronts set up by the Nazi regime in Germany would not function differently from the AFL-CIO.

Apologists for the union bureaucracy charge the Socialist Equality Party with “sectarianism” because we insist workers should not bow before the authority of the corporatist trade unions, and instead should build new organizations of struggle committed to the defense of the working class. The promotion of the unions by the Democratic Socialists of America, *Jacobin* magazine, *Labor Notes* and many other groups is not an accident. They defend the unions precisely because they serve as a labor police force over the working class.

These organizations, which speak for privileged sections of the upper-middle class, are aligned with significant sections of the ruling class, led by the Biden administration, who see in the trade unions the last line of defense against a growing wave of working class anger and opposition. Short of the establishment of a military-police dictatorship, they have very little left. Though, one must add, the existing unions would function with little trouble under conditions of a police state.

The revolt by the working class against the pro-capitalist and nationalist unions is now an undeniable

reality. Nor is it limited to the United States. In the United Kingdom, the unions are seeking to block a strike by 1.4 million National Health Service workers; in Germany, IG Metall is colluding in the restructuring and job-cutting in the auto industry; and in Sri Lanka, the unions are seeking to contain the nationwide struggles of educators, health care and other public sector workers to demand raises and protection against the pandemic.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has long anticipated this reality. Three decades ago, the ICFI concluded that the unions could no longer be called “workers’ organizations.” This past May, in response to the role of the unions in enforcing the homicidal response of the ruling class to the pandemic, the ICFI initiated the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The call for the formation of rank-and-file committees is winning a powerful response. Rank-and-file committees have been established among educators, logistics workers, and auto and auto parts workers, including Volvo Trucks, Dana and Deere workers. They have created a means for workers to communicate across workplaces, industries and countries, to warn each other about and counter the sabotage of the union bureaucracies.

The development of these committees must be extended to every sector and workplace, in the US and internationally, and connected to the building of a political leadership in the working class to bring into its struggles a socialist program directed at the entire capitalist system.



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