



# USA: Despite the Pandemic ? The Working Class Awakens

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Something is happening with the US working class despite the resurgence of the pandemic with the Omicron wave. They are awakening to militancy. And while it's true that this newly found strength of purpose has, arguably, been building since the great Wisconsin uprising of 2011 and the Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter protests in succeeding years, it has taken a decade to reach the organized working class on a widespread basis.

Although unions have been taking workplace actions at a rapidly increased pace over the past year, they are following on the heels of the mass exodus of workers who are quitting their bad jobs in droves. Dubbed the "Great Resignation" by pundits, 4.3 million workers quit their jobs in August, a record for this type of individualized action. With the lack of union density in the US today, this type of individualized "strike" by workers is ultimately a result of four decades of stagnant or falling real wages and disappearing benefits. Now it is spurred by rising prices for most of the things that workers actually need to survive like rent, mortgage payments, food and utility prices.

For many there has been no other way to show their dissatisfaction than to quit their lousy jobs and attempt to find something else that's at least marginally better. Most seem to be gravitating towards some type of self-employment, figuring they're better off struggling as their own boss rather than struggling to boost somebody else's bottom line.

Meanwhile, the curse of "business unionism", has been espoused by the union leadership(s) at least since the days of Ronald Reagan. He broke the back of union resistance when he smashed the PATCO strike early in his administration and then proceeded to turn "union" into a dirty word. After being beaten down for decades, it should surprise no one that it's taken so long for the rank-and-file to realize what capitalism actually means for workers.

"Striketober and Strikesgiving Leading to Strikemas?"

Decades of contracts have been foisted on union members by predatory capitalists in cahoots with a labor bureaucracy swearing that the only way for workers to keep their jobs is to give back hard-won gains on wages and, especially, benefits. Using the threat and actuality of closing workplaces and moving them to places with even worse conditions and cheaper labor costs, workers have been scared into giving up much more than they've gained during decades of previous negotiations. It's always the workers who have been told that they are the ones who must sacrifice for the good of the company. CEOs, Boards of Directors, hedge fund bandits, and Wall Street profiteers feel free to loot and pillage any gains in production that have come from the concessions made while workers suffer.

In every contract and especially in the ones that have been negotiated since the Great Recession of 2008/09, workers have been promised that these concessions would only be temporary and would only last until the company gets back to profitability when their sacrifices will be repaid in full. But the greed of a system that only looks to the next quarterly profit statement, along with the general instability of capitalism itself, doesn't allow for this payback. You can only fool people with misdirection and illusion for so long before they see the promises for the outright lies that they are. Post pandemic, we seem to have come to this point of discredited illusions for a large portion of the working class.

Even the staid and conservative AFL-CIO has, at least temporarily, bought into the militancy being shown by a whole range of workers. Dubbing this uptick in action "Striketober" and then "Strikesgiving", over 100,000 unionized

workers have authorized strikes, with most of them actually going out. A sampling of actions taken include:

From Portland, OR, to Buffalo, NY, thousands of nurses are on strike against the "for profit" health care industry that has asked them to work through physical and mental danger and burnout to care for Americans ill from Covid 19. Two-tier contracts are also a factor in this strike.

In Brookwood, AL, a thousand members of the United Mine Workers have been on strike since April over further concessions demanded by the company. These are the workers who had already made concessions to "save" the company from bankruptcy in 2016. While Warrior Met Coal has returned to profitability, only the CEOs and upper management have benefited with raises. And they're still demanding more concessions from the workers.

John Deere's plants have been shut down as thousands of United Auto Workers members have walked off the job in protest of a corporation that has earned over \$6 billion in profits so far this year and yet is still asking its workers for concessions, including "two tier" contract provisions that disadvantage new hires. Although now settled, this strike saw at least one company offer rejected by the membership.

Kellogg's workers went on strike after working thousands of hours of enforced overtime through the pandemic to provide food for Americans stuck at home during the last 18 months of isolation. The cereal giant also attempted to force a "two-tier" contract on workers that will result in a massive disparity of income between new hires and veteran workers. Yet another strike that has been settled with a dubious result.

And this doesn't count strikes that had been previously settled like the Pacific Northwest Carpenters Union (NWCU) and Nabisco and Frito Lay snack foods. It also doesn't count the strike authorizations that have resulted in the bosses folding like the strike authorization by IATSE (The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) for workers in the film and television industry.

These are just a representative sampling of job actions taking place now. According to the Cornell University Labor Action Tracker, there have been 103 strikes in October and November and 332 from January 1, 2021. Many have been settled, but many have not. It's clear that, for the foreseeable future, the bosses will now have to take into account the needs of their workers rather than just taking them for granted.

With the leadership when we can, without the leadership if we must

Following on the heels of the teachers' strikes during 2018, which were organized on social media by the membership who ignored their leadership when it tried to keep them from striking, most of these strikes have been member driven rather than top down calls. As an example, most of the tentative deals reached initially between union negotiators and the owners have been rejected by the membership on a ratification vote. Although the numbers are difficult to calculate, strikes don't usually occur without this rejection of at least one negotiated deal. We know that Deere workers, the northwest carpenters, the mineworkers, Kellogg's, and several others have rejected their leaders' attempts to defuse their strike actions by rejecting the deals they negotiated, and then also rejected settlement offers, after they had taken up the picket line. This seems to indicate a widespread phenomenon of the membership outpacing their leadership in militancy and demands for action.

In addition to wages and benefits conceded in the recent past, one main point that's been in contention during many negotiations is the bosses' demand for a "two tier" contract for new hires as compared to veteran workers. This has been a major issue in many of the current strikes, including the UAW strike against John Deere, the Kellogg's' strike, and the strike of nurses against Kaiser Permanente, a managed care consortium.

Two tier plans violate a core principle of unionism: "equal pay for equal work?". Although allowed for years for some benefits like vacation time, forcing new hires to make less money and accrue less or no pension and/or health care benefits is a betrayal of the very idea of a democratic union. It's also an indirect attack on the idea of unionism itself. After all, why should a new hire join a union that won't fight for their equality in the workplace?

Of course, for the company, it all boils down to profit. The less they can pay their workers in wages and benefits, the more profit they make. It's a simple proposition for the bosses. They can make all sorts of noise about caring for their workers, but the pandemic "hero" in 2020, quickly became the "union thug" in 2021. In fact, despite the noise from the likes of the Democratic Party, class struggle is a zero-sum game. If nothing else changes, if workers win, bosses lose and vice-versa. The owners understand this very well, which is why, if they are forced to pay better wages, they try to claw back their profit by raising productivity or reducing benefits. All too often the union bureaucrats support such a "compromise" but workers should see it for what it is.

At the present time, it seems that even the union bureaucracy has decided to get out of the way of the recent upsurge in militancy, but no one should expect this to last. The bureaucracy of the unions has one purpose under the capitalist system and that is to direct righteous rank-and-file anger into a contract, a contract that's as beneficial to the company as current conditions allow. As evidence of this, keep in mind that even the contracts that have been accepted, either have not, or have just barely, kept up with the current inflation rate, which rose to 7 percent in the last month of 2021.

There has also been no permanent removal of the two-tier plans that the bosses have demanded. In some cases, these undemocratic demands by the corporations have been temporarily suspended, but none have actually been ousted from future potential contracts. The only way to avoid this inevitable betrayal is to watch the bureaucracy like a hawk, peruse any contract offered carefully, and set up independent workers' committees to oversee the strike, the contract negotiations, and the ratification vote. If the company cries "we are facing bankruptcy?" then demand to see the books. If they're truly in a dire financial strait, it should be no problem to prove it.

## Democratize the Unions

In combination with this increased militancy is an ongoing drive to "democratize" the current unions with rank-and-file caucuses that more closely express the concerns of the actual workers. This is not necessarily a new development, although in some unions it may be. In many cases there are long running campaigns including Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) who recently won control of the Teamsters and Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) within the UAW. The Caucus of Rank-and-file Educators (CORE) was an instrumental driver of the teachers' strikes in 2018.

Such initiatives should be supported as they provide a valuable check on the entrenched overpaid full-time officials that run most of today's large unions, but they can't be the only thing. Even "democratized" union caucuses run the risk of being taken over by opportunists and co-opted by the power structure. Which is why anybody that rises to power in a democratic body like a union needs to be carefully watched and be held accountable by the membership.

There's also the matter of the focus of the caucus. Is it put together in order to replace the current leadership structure merely because of a bankruptcy of ideas, strategies and tactics and/or corruption? Or is it there to provide an entirely alternative view of the purpose of the union? Replacing one class collaborationist leadership with an initially more "democratic" version of the same strategy will sooner or later result in the same concessionary contracts that the old leadership supported. Only democratic caucuses that understand the reality of actual class struggle will be fit for fighting the demands of capitalism in its late stages.

Of all the caucuses that have been attempting this rank-and-file strategy to democratize the unions, perhaps the one that has come closest to success in the recent wave of strike action is the Peter J. McGuire caucus in the Carpenters Union. This caucus not only organized the strike against the wishes of the leadership of the union, but also fought the leadership when they attempted to control the strategy and tactics of the strike, the "when, where, and which job site?" to strike and picket. They organized the resistance to the immense pressure of the leadership to accept still more concessionary contract offers and influenced the membership to turn down as many as four offers before the strike was finally settled. In short, the McGuire caucus understood that just "democratizing" the union wasn't enough. Organized workers in each union have to be assertive in controlling all aspects of job actions and fight the fight on all fronts, including inside the union and against the leadership if needed.

They've also led the drive to fight against the separation of unions from one another and from the class in general. In other words, they've welcomed allies to the struggle including Seattle city council and Socialist Alternative (SALT) member Kshama Sawant and fought against the 'red baiting' of the union leadership who attempted to silence her voice.

## Allies

Over the last decade, at the local level, unions have seen the need to reach out to unorganized workers, oppressed communities, and sympathetic outside groups like the DSA, in order to gain allies and supporters for when they do have to strike. It appears that time is now. This outreach has also included a loosening of the, many times unstated, restrictions about working with 'communists and socialists' in matters of class struggle and union politics.

Although this outreach has been continuing for a while, it's still more in the realm of 'public relations' rather than action. With a few exceptions, support for reining in killer cops doesn't go so far as taking strike action until they're stopped but is limited to joining demonstrations and issuing statements of support for murdered victims. All better than nothing of course, but as the teachers' strikes in 2018 showed, even in the most hostile of political climates, strikes are what can actually win demands.

However, with the legal restrictions on strikes and union activity and, yes, the union leaderships' fear of them, it falls to the allies, in concert with the union membership, to push for further steps when necessary to make strikes successful. It's all well and good to support union leaders when they are leading a strike against the bosses, but a good ally must also call out mistakes, and misleadership, when strikes are in progress. The DSA should be in a good position to advance union demands with secondary pickets and demonstrations that go further than the unions are able or willing to go. But for this, the DSA, like the unions, must get away from their complete focus on electoral politics and local 'mutual aid'. In times of heightened class struggle, epitomized by a strike, voting for Democrats won't be enough. And of course, in the case of a concessionary contract pushed by the leadership, but rejected by the membership, we must always side with the membership.

In other words, a good ally must always be prepared to tell the truth as they see it, regardless of the pressure to 'settle' at any cost. Those pressures are real, especially where trade union consciousness limits the struggle to the 'best deal' available, rather than posing the question of who really holds the power in the workplace, the workers or the owners. Ironically, or maybe not so ironically, the quickest way to get the 'best deal' is always to show workers' power in the workplace. The more power shown by the workers, the quicker the owners settle.

## More militancy in 2022

As exciting as the rise in militancy in 2021 was, the potential for more in 2022 is even greater. According to a report in Bloomberg Law and reprinted by Labor Notes, between November 2021 and the end of 2022 there will be approximately 200 contracts covering 1.3 million workers coming due for negotiation and potential action. And these are only contracts covering large unions at major corporations, not counting the many contracts at smaller firms and newly organized workplaces that will be negotiating brand new contracts. With the labor shortages of this past year not expected to get much better in the new year, we should expect the militant attitude of Striketober to Strikemas to continue and hopefully become even more prevalent with more workers.

The big contracts up for negotiation cover the gamut of industries from the longshoremen in the ILWU, to grocery store workers affiliated with the UFCW, to oil refinery workers with the Steelworkers union. In addition there are teachers, hospital workers, higher education workers and telecom workers across the country. The Teamsters are expected to be active in negotiations covering the contract for car hauling from drop off sites to car lots, potentially exacerbating the recent shortages in automobile sales.

The UFCW contract negotiations are especially interesting in that the union is attempting to co-ordinate actions across several states against two major grocery chains in the western part of the US. It would be hoped that they will also co-

ordinate with the UFCW locals at the Stop and Shop stores in the east, whose contract expires in February, in order to make this a more widespread action approaching a sector-wide strike.

The ILWU, representing the west coast longshoremen, is always a union to pay attention to because of its strategic position and the potential effect of action on world trade, and its history of militancy. The contract expires on July 1. A relatively small number of dock workers can effectively shut down a huge part of world capitalism, especially if they can co-ordinate with local allies and truckers, as they have in the past, to prevent goods from being off-loaded and transported away from the docks.

Some of the big keys that could turn 2022 into a watershed year for workers' rights and workers' power are involved in these two struggles. The co-ordination of the grocery workers needs to be a blueprint for every union and every strike, but it needs to be expanded further to encompass the entirety of the organized sector of the class. Whenever possible, strikes should be called together with other strikes, especially in related industries. Teamsters striking with dockworkers brings logistics to a screeching halt. Teachers striking with cafeteria workers and their students in sympathy could be coupled with actions in the higher education sector. Hospital workers should strike with nurses. The courage it takes to strike can be contagious and affect many other workers, even the ones who aren't yet organized.

Forty plus years of bad deals, betrayals, and retreats for the working class seem to be coming to an end in the wake of a worldwide pandemic that has shown us exactly how much we matter to the bosses. A year after calling us 'essential?', they're attempting to drag us back into concessionary contracts designed solely to cheat us of even a small portion of what we deserve for our labor. The time has come to show exactly how much our labor matters by withholding it from the owners of this rotten system.

It goes without saying that in conditions of a labor revival all socialists must do all they can to organize solidarity actions both locally and nationally with the strikes already underway or in preparation. Such solidarity can spread the struggle to workplaces not yet involved. A mass strike wave will strengthen all who participate in it. Likewise, political parties like the DSA, and its youth organization, can help achieve a historic revival of US Labor, both political and trade union. Such a revival is long overdue and is the right response to Biden and the Democrats' failure to get their pro-worker promises through Congress, not least because of the sabotage of fellow Democrats.

The Labor Notes Conference, due in Chicago from June 17 to 19, will be a great opportunity to rally the forces of the present strike wave and debate the issues of union democracy, anticapitalism and the political representation of Labor with its own party. 2022 is the year to think big.

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