

USA: Raise the Stakes ? Unify the Strikes!

Christian Gebhardt Wed, 01/04/2020 - 09:56

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The corona epidemic has the United States in its grip. Daily we hear about a rising number of infected individuals and sadly the number of deaths is also steadily rising. After ignoring the problem, underestimating the problem and calling it a hoax, even Trump has had to acknowledge what the US is heading towards. The lack of respirators, testing, and personal protective equipment (PPE) for our healthcare workers shows us the immediate needs for fighting this crisis, but the bigger question is who can solve this crisis and whose interests need to be kept in focus?

It comes as no surprise that Trump, as well as all the others in the political class, came running to help out the economy first. A \$2 trillion (!!) emergency package was put together quickly to help those most in need - in their eyes: the companies and billionaires. After all, if we don't have companies to work for, what other purpose could there be in our lives? While it is true that there were some measures for the people in the package, the workers' interests were, unsurprisingly, not the main focus of the bailout. Given this lack of attention to the needs of the front-line ?essential? workers, all around the country, as well as around the world, they are starting to show a recognition of their own interests in an impressive manner. Those interests were morphed together in a trending hashtag #notdyingforwallstreet. And, in real life, those interests were shown by an increasing willingness to walk off the job in strikes, either sanctioned by their unions or in unsanctioned ?wildcat? actions.

Workers in various sectors of the economy are starting to spontaneously walk-off their jobs. After several small wildcat-strikes, now bigger mobilizations are coming together. This past Monday, March 30, the workers of Instacart called for a nationwide strike demanding not only provision of protective equipment to do their jobs, but also raising economic demands: higher pay, a change in ?tip policy?, as well as the need for a ?hazard bonus?. Another very impressive action took place on the same day in an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island. The workers there are demanding a total shut-down of the warehouse until it is sanitized and disinfected after workers reportedly tested positive for Covid-19. The response from Amazon? Instead of dealing with the demands of the workers who do not want to endanger their own health or that of their colleagues and families, and potentially their customers, Amazon fired Chris Smalls; the organizer of the strike.

Besides activities to demand safe working environments and safety regulations that actually keep the workers safe, workers at General Electric took their demands up to a much higher level altogether. They walked off their work to demand that GE make ventilators; the ventilators that hospitals all around the US and the world need to save lives.

These are just a few examples of the spontaneous and empowering activities the working class is taking for itself. Instead of continuing to work quietly, obeying the bosses, both on the shop floor and in the halls of the legislatures, workers have decided to use their most precious weapon and strike in service of themselves and society at large. Directly confronting their bosses' obsession with profit above everything

and everybody else, workers are downing tools to put pressure on their bosses and the government to deal with their needs and not just with the needs of big businesses and banks.

What way forward?

Building on those highly motivating actions, what could the US working class do to support, defend and enlarge these spontaneous reactions from US workers? As we have written in several articles regarding the powerful teachers' strikes, now is the time to organize our activities not only on a local level, but nationally. As workers in Italy showed us, in a time of massive turmoil and state repression, the working class is able to organize even general strikes to fight for their demands. Such national mobilizations do more than protect us from aggressions from our bosses and the authorities, they also help us to build solidarity and support within our class and also within society at large, Especially at a time when the bourgeoisie and its authorities are playing the "patriotic", and the "we are all in this together?", cards, strike actions like this can put pressure on the ruling elite to actually take actions that benefit the rest of us and not just the wealthy and powerful.

As revolutionary socialists, we also call on the existing organizations of the working class and those that claim to work in their interest to support this struggle. The trade unions as well as the organisations like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and Labor Notes should be at the forefront of building up such a movement, organizing debates on a local, regional and national level to work out an action-program to solve the Covid-19 crisis. This action-program should then be used as a guideline for the struggles in every region of the country and also beyond. As the Covid-19 crisis shows us daily, this is a crisis that can only be resolved by an international strategy.

It is the leaders of the trade unions, the DSA and Labor Notes who are best placed to give a lead in building such action. We call on all the activists of those organisations to demand their leaders act, and act fast. If they do not want to lead our organizations in an effective way for everybody, they should be replaced with representatives that will. All of our steps should be guided by the principle: "With them when possible, without them when necessary!"

Such a movement based on regional action-committees and solidarity-committees organizing strike action, could be a firm foundation on which to build an even bigger and equally important structure. The US is facing an economic crisis; 3 million registered unemployed in just one week and the sharpest nose-dive on stock markets for decades show the scale and the speed with which it is coming. The working class needs a functioning structure to lead the coming battles: a worker's party in which we, as revolutionary socialists, will fight and argue for a revolutionary way out of this crisis.

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