

The resurgence of class struggle: More strikes in the US so far in 2018 than all of last year

By Jerry White
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There have already been more major work stoppages this year in the US than in all of 2017, as teachers and other sections of workers have begun to break through the grip of the unions and express their opposition.

There were only seven work stoppages of 1,000 or more workers in 2017, the second lowest number since 1947, and the fewest since 2009, when there were only five such strikes. Already this year, there have been at least 10 major work stoppages, and many more are brewing.

“Waves of workers are hitting picket lines in 2018,” CBS News headlined a May 8 story. “From teachers walking out of classrooms in several states to hospital workers manning picket lines in California, a surge in strikes is happening in 2018... The first three months of 2018 have seen revived activity on the labor front, and the second quarter is suiting up to be active as well, as workers strike over issues including pay, benefits—and in the case of some educators—distress over lack of funds for equipment and supplies.”

The strikes so far this year have included:

- * The nine-day strike of 33,000 West Virginia teachers and school employees in late February and March.

- * A one-day strike on March 19 by teachers on the US territory of Puerto Rico

- * A 12-day strike by 2,700 University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign graduate workers and teaching assistants in February and March.

- * A three-week-long strike by 1,400 Frontier telecommunications workers in Virginia and West Virginia.

- * A one-day strike by 4,000 teachers in Jersey City, New Jersey on March 17

- * The nine-day walkout of 30,000 Oklahoma teachers in April

- * A week-long strike by 3,000 teaching and research assistants at Columbia University in April and May.

- * The April 26-May 3 strike by 60,000 Arizona teachers

- * A three-day strike by 53,000 University of California food service, groundskeepers, janitorial staff and nurses at university campuses and medical centers.

- * The ongoing strike of 1,800 Spectrum technicians in New York City

- * Around 900 teachers are currently on strike in Pueblo,

Colorado, in a state where thousands conducted sickouts last month to demand higher wages and restored school funding. Earlier this year, school bus drivers walked out in Seattle and Pasadena, California, and 350 faculty members struck at the Loyola University in Chicago. New strikes have just begun by 600 aerospace workers at United Launch Alliance worksites in Alabama, California and Florida, and electrical linemen in New Hampshire.

The struggles so far are an initial expression of what is to come. In the next few weeks, teacher protests are planned in North and South Carolina; grad students are threatening to strike at the University of Washington; and 50,000 casino and hospitality workers are voting on strike action. Educators in Dallas could strike in September when school reopens.

There is widespread rank-and-file opposition to a deal being prepared by the Teamsters for 280,000 United Parcel Service (UPS) workers when their current agreement ends on July 31. According to news reports, the Teamsters and UPS are discussing a two-tier wage system that would allow the company to hire lower-paid workers to deliver packages on weekends, including Sundays, to compete with US Post Office deliveries for Amazon.

The Atlanta-based company, which blazed the trail for low-paid, part-time warehouse workers, accepted by the Teamsters in the 1970s, now wants to create a “hybrid driver” position that would start at \$15 an hour so that the company does not have to pay overtime to higher paid workers for working weekends.

A labor agreement covering 200,000 US Postal Service workers also expires September 20, and opposition is growing among hundreds of thousands of non-union Amazon workers who are paid low wages and subjected to sweatshop conditions.

There is also an incipient rebellion brewing among workers against the United Auto Workers (UAW) more than a year before the contract expires for 140,000 workers at General Motors, Ford and Fiat Chrysler. Earlier this month, workers at the Flat Rock Assembly outside Detroit walked off the job when management attempted to resume production after a worker’s legs were crushed in an industrial accident.

The UAW is currently embroiled in a corruption scandal after it was exposed that union executives accepted millions in

bribes for signing company-friendly contracts, which halved the wages of new hires, lengthened the workday and expanded the use of temporary part-time workers who pay union dues and have no rights.

The 10-year period between 2007 to 2016 saw the lowest number of major work stoppages since the US Bureau of Labor Statistics began collecting data in 1947, with an average of only 14 per year. This compares to an average of 145 per year in 1977-1986, 332 in 1967-1976 and 344 in 1947-1956.

The suppression of class struggle by the unions gave a freehand to the American ruling elite to restructure class relations in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash. With the assistance of the unions, corporate profitability was restored through a relentless drive to cut wages and shift the cost of health care and pensions onto the backs workers, and the stock market bubble was re-inflated by providing virtually free credit to financial speculators. The “quantitative easing” program of the Obama administration depended on containing “inflation,” the code word for rising wages.

The historic redistribution of wealth from the bottom to the top that occurred under Obama has continued under Trump, who has slashed corporate taxes and sought to lift every regulation on big business, from health and safety to environmental laws. The administration is currently planning to overturn prohibitions on employing young workers under the age of 18 in hazardous occupations.

US corporations are sitting on a cash hoard estimated to be over \$2 trillion and are squandering record amounts on dividends and stock buybacks for their richest investors and corporate executives. At the same time, despite supposed “full employment” in the US—with the official jobless rate at the lowest level since 1969—wages only rose about 2.6 percent year-over-year, according to last week’s jobs report, barely above the official rate of inflation of 2.1 percent.

The unions have sought to block any strikes, and, where unable, to isolate them, wear down strikers and then shut down the walkouts before they have a chance to spread. In West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and their state affiliates accepted deals with state governments that ignored teachers’ demands and funded meager pay increases by cutting other essential services and supporting regressive taxes that will hit workers the hardest.

Allied with the Democratic Party, the pro-capitalist unions and the affluent executives that run them fear that that these individual sectional struggles could coalesce into a broader movement of the working class. However, the discredited and corrupt unions are finding it increasingly difficult to suppress opposition to their decades-long collusion with the state and the employers.

The strikes that have erupted, particularly among the teachers, have been largely initiated by rank-and-file workers, using social media, in opposition to the strikebreaking unions.

This has struck fear in the entire corporate and political establishment. Responding to this challenge from below, the Democrats are trying to do everything they can to prop up the discredited unions and reassert their domination over workers.

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and a group of Democrats, including Senators Elizabeth Warren, Kirsten Gillibrand and Sherrod Brown, introduced the Workplace Democracy Act Wednesday, to shore up the financial and institutional interests of the anti-working class unions by making it easier for unions to sign up new workers with card checks and banning “right to work” laws that allow workers to opt of joining and paying dues as a condition of employment.

“You could make the argument that right now the trade union movement, as weak as it is, is the last line of defense against a corporate agenda that not only wants tax breaks for billionaires but wants to privatize Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid,” Sanders said.

In fact, the unions are the “last line of defense” of the Democratic Party and the capitalist system that it defends. Far from opposing the relentless attacks by the corporations and both big business parties on workers’ living standards and essential services like public education, the unions have been partners in these attacks.

The growing wave of strikes is only the initial stage of a powerful upsurge of the class struggle that is coming in the United States and internationally. Workers require new forms of organization, rank-and-file factory and workplace committees, independent of the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions, to wage these coming battles. All these separate struggles must be combined in a general strike to fight for the social rights of the working class, including the right to a good paying and secure job, fully funded health care and pensions, and a vast expansion of funding for public education and other essential programs.

The resurgence of class struggle must be connected to a political movement of the working class, in the US and internationally, against the capitalist system and its state. All efforts to implement desperately needed social reforms require the expropriation of the fortunes of the capitalist oligarchy and a frontal assault on the dictatorship of the banks and giant corporations. This requires a struggle by the working class to take political power in its own hands and replace capitalism with socialism.

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