

Working class resistance mounts to back-to-work campaign

15 September 2020

As the death toll of the coronavirus in the United States nears 200,000 and the economic and social catastrophe facing millions of workers intensifies, there are growing signs of working class resistance.

On Monday, nearly 4,000 clerical, maintenance and other service workers walked out at University of Illinois campuses and medical centers in Chicago, Peoria and Champaign-Urbana. After more than a year of negotiations for a new contract, UI workers unanimously voted to authorize the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to call a strike to demand adequate staffing to ensure safety of staff, patients, and students, proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and lower workloads. The workers are also demanding an increase in the minimum base wage for food, building and other service workers who earn less than \$15 an hour.

The service workers joined 800 nurses at the University of Illinois Hospital (UIH) in Chicago who walked out on Saturday. Nurses at the hospital, one of the largest urban medical centers in the country, are fighting chronic staffing shortages, which have made their work even more life threatening during the pandemic. At least two nurses have died from COVID-19 at the hospital, located in Cook County, Illinois, where more than 5,100 people have succumbed to the deadly disease.

The walkouts in Illinois occur as nearly 2,000 graduate student instructors begin their second week on strike at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The grad student workers are demanding remote-only teaching at the campus where 45,000 students resumed classes late last month.

Last week, members of the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) rejected an offer from the university that rejected their demands and over the weekend the strikers voted to extend their strike. They have won the support of construction workers, faculty members and dining room workers, along with residential advisors who joined the strike after the university recklessly exposed them to infected students in the dormitories.

In both cases, workers are confronting the opposition of the Democratic Party. In Illinois, billionaire Governor J.B.

Pritzker, who heads the university's governing board, is backing the strikebreaking efforts at the UI hospital in Chicago. In Michigan, the Democrat-controlled Board of Regents is seeking an injunction to break the strike.

Opposition to the deadly reopening of the colleges is growing across the country as the number of infections on campuses has surpassed 50,000, according to a tally by *Axios*. Students and faculty at Iowa State University and the University of Iowa are organizing a joint strike starting this Wednesday, while opposition among students and workers is growing at San Diego State University (SDSU), University of California San Diego, University of Wisconsin, Cornell and other universities.

The reopening of the public schools has already led to the deaths of at least six teachers over the last month in Missouri, South Carolina, Iowa, Mississippi and Oklahoma, including a 28-year-old special education teacher, Demetria "Demi" Bannister in Columbia, South Carolina.

In New York City, teachers at Public School 139 in Brooklyn refused to enter the building Monday morning, and educators walked out at Murry Bergtraum High School in Manhattan, one week before schools are set to reopen for in-person classes in the largest school district in America. Expressing their anger over the school reopening deal by United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio, the PS 139 teachers denounced the lack of ventilation and janitors to clean their 100-year-old building, the distribution of inaccurate thermometers, and demanded remote-only learning for the district's 1.1 million students.

Opposition is also spreading among industrial workers. On Friday night, workers at Lear Corporation's automotive seating plant in Hammond, Indiana stopped production and refused to work for several hours after learning about potential COVID-19 cases in the facility. The work stoppage, which compelled Ford Motor Company to idle its nearby Chicago Assembly Plant, was carried out in defiance of the United Auto Workers (UAW) whose officials defended management.

Autoworkers have set up rank-and-file safety committees,

independent of the unions at Fiat Chrysler and Ford plants in Detroit, Toledo and Chicago, as well as the Faurecia parts plant in Indiana. Teachers have also formed similar committees in New York City, Detroit, Florida and Texas.

The meatpacking industry, which largely wrote the order Trump used to invoke the Defense Production Act and force protesting workers to return to infected plants in late April, continues to be a vector for the spread of COVID-19 and worker opposition.

After six months during which time, at least 18,000 workers were infected and at least 203 died, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued its first two citations last week against the industry. The agency fined the \$52 billion multinational JBS a total of \$15,615 for violations at its Greeley, Colorado plant and Smithfield Foods \$13,494 for violations at its Sioux Falls, North Dakota plant. This amounts to \$2,425 for each of the 12 workers who lost their lives at the two plants, where another 1,500 were infected.

In California and Oregon, immigrant agricultural workers who conducted several strikes demanding safe working conditions are now being forced to continue working amidst the pandemic and the poisonous, choking air from the wildfires on the West Coast.

As last week's revelations by *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward showed, President Trump knew about the unprecedented dangers of the coronavirus as early as January 2020 and deliberately lied to the American public to prevent "panic." The Democrats and the news media, who were also informed, were co-conspirators in this effort aimed at preventing a selloff on the stock market and a rebellion by workers to save their lives.

It was only the actions by the working class, including a wave of wildcat strikes and protests by Fiat Chrysler workers in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Windsor, Ontario, which forced the closure of industries and schools last March, and partial shutdowns ordered by state governments. This was a part of a wave of struggles by workers all over the world.

Once the CARES Act was passed with the near unanimous support of both bourgeois parties, handing over more than \$3 trillion to Wall Street and other major corporations, both parties immediately began the campaign to herd workers back into the factories and other workplaces to produce the profits needed to pay for the mountain of corporate and government debt. The Democrats and Republicans let the \$600 a week federal unemployment benefit expire at the end of July to add pressure on workers to return to work.

The unions have served as partners in this back-to-work campaign. After workers walked out at all the Detroit automakers in March, the UAW worked with management

to orchestrate the restart of production in mid-May. The teachers unions, which concealed the outbreak of infections in New York City in March, are now collaborating to reopen schools around the country.

A massive catastrophe has been produced. At the same time, it is generating a powerful groundswell of working class opposition. Frightened by this incipient movement, Trump is inciting fascist violence against protesters. Biden and the Democrats, no less terrorized by the growth of anticapitalist sentiment, are above all concerned with preventing opposition from threatening the basic policy of the ruling class of making the working class bear the burden of the unprecedented crisis of American capitalism.

As the Socialist Equality Party (US) Political Committee wrote in its statement, "The Civil War Election" last week, "The struggles of different sections of the working class must be organized and united through the formation of independent factory, workplace and neighborhood safety committees. The fight of teachers against the back-to-school campaign must be connected with the fight of students against the reopening of the universities, the fight of workers against the horrific conditions in the plants, the fight of the unemployed against social devastation, and the fight of the youth against police violence.

"At issue in every struggle is the question of political power: What class rules and in whose interests? The only solution to the crisis is one that is directed against the capitalist system. A massive diversion of social resources away from the bailout of the rich and the financing of militarism and war is required. The wealth of the oligarchs must be seized, and the gigantic corporations and banks turned into public utilities to create the conditions for a globally coordinated program to save lives."

The major task ahead is building the Socialist Equality Party as the revolutionary leadership of this struggle. We urge workers and youth to contact us and join the fight.

Jerry White

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>