

The US Labor Movement Today

With the steady drumbeat of attacks on the living standards of US workers, attacks which have continued now for some 30 years, one would think that there would be a massive move to fight back. Yet even before the present recession, the number of strikes had reached all time lows, membership participation in the unions was very low and the unionization rate for private sector workers had declined to below 10%.

Labor's "Giant Step"

The US labor movement reached its high water mark during the late 1930s as tens of millions of workers surged into the unions, many through organizing work-place occupations. Mass pickets directly confronted the police and other union busting forces. The underlying reasons for this situation included the economic crisis itself, which vastly undermined confidence in capitalism, as well as the fact that several anti-capitalist forces had major bases within the working class. These included the Communist and the Socialist Parties. These and other forces not only mobilized radical action of workers, they also forced a wing of the traditional, pro-capitalist leadership to take action.

During World War II, mass strikes were postponed, although workers engaged in a huge number of unofficial wildcat strikes. Then, in 1946, a huge strike wave hit as workers sought to recoup some of their lost real wages. However, the traditional, pro-capitalist leadership was on the road to recovering their control. Already discredited by many of the actions of Stalin and his henchmen, the Communist Party of the USA was further undermined by its strike-breaking role during the war. The Socialist Party also collapsed into social democracy. The Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party, unable to come to grips with the new world situation, also was unable to develop.

Post War Period

During the next three decades, however, the US capitalist class was on the defensive in many ways. It was struggling against the Soviet Union to influence the newly independent former colonial world. Within the US, there was the revolt of black people. Along with this was the Vietnam War, which radicalized a huge layer of US youth. Within the mainstream of the US working class, some of the traditions of the 1930s still had not been erased.

As a result, the employers in general did not try to break strikes. This coupled with the domination of US capitalism in a booming world economy meant that granting increases in the standard of living was both necessary and not too painful to US capitalism. Under these conditions, the pro-capitalist union leadership was able to consolidate their control over the unions. In the process, they further weakened the class consciousness and the militant traditions of US workers.

Employers Move Onto Offensive

Starting in the late 1970s, the economic boom started to come unwound. The US capitalist class started on a conscious and systematic drive to break the power of the

unions, starting in the construction industry. At the same time, the process of sending jobs to low-wage countries, mainly Mexico got underway.

In the 1980s, US workers fought a series of protracted and extremely bitter strikes. There were the copper strikes in the US Southwest, two strikes of Greyhound bus drivers, the air traffic controllers' strike, the Hormel meat packers strike, and others. Despite the militancy and self-sacrifice of the workers, all these strikes were defeated. The main reason was that the militant tactics of the 1930s were not used systematically. Wherever workers started to move in this direction, the upper echelons of the leadership put a stop to it. And there was no alternative, anti-capitalist leadership with a base amongst the workers to further organize such attempts. The result was that the attempts were stillborn.

These defeated strikes actually further contributed to a lowering of the mood and consciousness of US workers. Many accepted the position of the leadership that strikes cannot be won nowadays, instead of concluding that strikes could only be won by returning to the methods of the 1930s.

Alongside of this was the weakening of the industrial working class in the US. In almost all countries, it is this sector of the class that most strongly carries the traditions of the struggle. Yet as in other advanced capitalist countries, this sector had been vastly weakened by the shipping of industrial production to low-wage countries such as Mexico, Brazil, South Korea and more recently China. (This is balanced out by the enormous strengthening of the industrial working class in those countries and others.)

Anti-Communism & Collapse of Stalinism

During the Cold War, anti-communism was a major tool in keeping radicalism sidelined within the US labor movement. The labor leadership used this to further cement their ties with the US State Department, and the CIA. Internally, they red-baited labor militants and radicals. Ironically, the collapse of Stalinism further strengthened the union officialdom and their pro-capitalism. Following this collapse, the "free" market was the mantra chanted in almost all corners of capitalist society; it was the icon to which all must bow down in worship. The labor officialdom was no exception. Some even openly modeled their rule over their unions on the corporate model. They used this to even further isolate the radicals within the unions.

The ongoing campaign by the union officialdom against anybody who in any way sought to return to the more militant traditions of the US working class had an effect amongst many workers, including union members. Coupled with the general capitalist propaganda that only individual effort should be considered, consciousness of the traditional approach of collective struggle was weakened. Those who sought to maintain this approach were often victimized by both the employers and the union leaders.

It has been the world domination of US capitalism that has been the foundation for the weakening of class consciousness in the United States. As explained in previous articles, that domination is now ending. Thus, the complacency of tens of millions of US workers will be shattered. This will not be an easy process. Given the weakness of the left in the

United States, many US workers will be attracted by right-wing populism. This will include anti-immigrant propaganda, (Christian) religious fantasies (such as the “end times”, etc.) and even outright racism. However, the concrete reality, the facts of life so to speak, always have a way of stamping their imprint on consciousness sooner or later. Already, the loss of their homes by tens of millions of US workers has sparked anger at finance capital here.

It is impossible to predict what form this class anger will take, what outlet it will find. Normally, one would predict that it would flow through the unions, weakened as they are. However, this natural channel is so constricted by the union officialdom, that when millions of US workers finally decide that they have no alternative but to organize themselves and fight along class lines, then this movement may well be forced to flow through other, less restricted channels. New organizations will be built and other, presently marginal ones will play a role previously never considered possible. Ultimately, a wing of the official unions themselves will also be forced into the fray.

In 1886, Frederick Engels commented on the upsurge in the class struggle in the United States. He wrote: “*The first great step of importance for every country newly entering into the movement is always the constitution of the workers as an independent political party, no matter how, so long as it is a distinct workers’ party.*” Here it is well over a century later, and that first great step has yet to be taken. When it is taken in the United States, it will transform world politics.