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Canadian rail workers, Las Vegas casino workers set to strike as class conflict widens across North America

More than 3,000 railway workers could strike Canadian Pacific at 10 p.m. tonight, while 50,000 food service and hospitality workers could walk out of the major casinos in Las Vegas, Nevada at 12:01 a.m. Friday. The potential walkouts, which follow a massive contract rejection by the CP rail workers and a near unanimous strike vote by the casino workers, are part of a series of working-class struggles spreading across North America and internationally.

There has been a marked increase in major work stoppages this year, which have taken the form of an ever more direct conflict between workers and the corporatist and nationalist unions. The suppression of the class struggle by the unions, which reduced strike activity in the US to post-World War II lows over the last decade, allowed the financial elite to re-inflate the stock markets following the 2008 crash, which depended on preventing any significant rise in “inflation,” a code word for pay rises.

Canadian Pacific is one of North America’s largest railways, with extensive US operations. It has spearheaded the railroads’ drive to cut jobs and increase workloads. Train operators and signal workers, members of the Teamsters and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), were poised to strike last month when the Liberal government in Canada intervened to force votes on CP’s “final” contract offers, temporarily suspending workers’ legal right to strike. Train conductors and engineers voted by more than 98 percent, and the signalmen by 97 percent, to reject the offer.

The Teamsters and IBEW have said they are committed to working with federal mediators to reach an agreement and will “remain at the bargaining table until the May 29 strike deadline and beyond.” For its part, CP management said it had “commenced its work stoppage contingency plan.” The rail company is relying on the federal government to criminalize the strike or use the threat of back-to-work legislation to impose contracts dictated by a government-appointed arbitrator, as it did during strikes in 2012 and 2015.



Casinos workers at mass meeting in Las Vegas last week [Credit: Culinary Workers Union]

In Las Vegas, thousands of members of the Culinary Workers Union voted during mass meetings last week by a 99–1 percent margin to authorize the first city-wide casino strike since the 67-day walkout in 1984. A strike by kitchen workers, servers, bellmen, porters and guest room attendants would hit 34 major casinos, including those owned by the largest casino operators, MGM and Caesars.

While the culinary union has not made its demands public and has indicated a willingness to postpone the strike deadline, workers are angered over stagnating wages and the lack of job security in the face of greater automation. They also want protections for hospitality workers against sexual harassment by guests.

“I want the companies to open up their eyes and think what’s going to happen if we go on a strike,” Don Leadbeter, a bellman at the MGM Grand, told NBC News. “That’s a lot of business that’s going to go down.” Bartenders are already using automated systems that could potentially eliminate their jobs, he said, and guests are now able to check in and out of resorts without interacting with front-desk personnel, putting their jobs at risk too.

The largest casinos saw their profits triple in 2017. The CEOs of Nevada's six largest casino operators collected more than \$110 million combined in total compensation last year, according to Equilar. The list is topped by Steve Wynn, the former chairman and CEO of Wynn Resorts Ltd., who pocketed \$34.5 million in cash and stock; Las Vegas Sands Corp. CEO Sheldon Adelson, who pulled in \$26 million; Caesars Entertainment Corp. CEO Mark Frissora, who got \$23.9 million; and MGM Resorts CEO Jim Murren, who got \$14.6 million.

In a related struggle, 2,300 casino workers at Caesars Windsor in Ontario, Canada have entered the 54th day of a strike that is continuing after workers rejected another sellout deal backed by the Unifor union more than a week ago.

The struggle of US teachers is also continuing. Hundreds of elementary school teachers in the San Diego suburb of National City, California, voted by 88 percent last week to strike. The contract covering 300 teachers at 10 elementary schools expires on June 30, with school officials offering a one-time, two percent bonus and demanding the lengthening of the school day by five percent. The National City Elementary Teachers Association, which is resuming mediated talks today, has signaled that it will not call a strike before the end of the school year, but that it might once schools resume in September if the district unilaterally imposes its demands.



National City teachers protested after strike vote

Since the beginning of the year, state-wide strikes have erupted in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky and North Carolina, along with limited strikes in Pueblo, Colorado, Jersey City, New Jersey, and the US territory of Puerto Rico.

This is part of an international revolt by educators. Elementary school teachers are set to walk out on Wednesday in the southern provinces of the Netherlands, as part of a wave of working class struggles that brought the number of strike actions in the small country to 32 in 2017, the highest number since 1989.

As the strikes of teachers this year have demonstrated, the central obstacles to the unification of the struggle of teachers are pro-corporate syndicates that go by the name of unions. In every case, the unions have worked to suppress opposition and shut down strikes.

The teacher strikes in the US have been initiated by rank-and-file educators in opposition to the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA). The AFT, NEA and their state affiliates, aided by various union-aligned groups posing as “grassroots” organizations, worked to reassert their control and end the walkouts based on deals with Democratic and Republican officials that did not meet teacher demands.

The demobilization of teachers by the unions has only emboldened President Trump and his education secretary, Betsy DeVos, to escalate the push for school vouchers, the diversion of public money to parochial and private schools, the expansion of merit pay and other attacks on teachers.

“It’s almost like the walkout never occurred,” an Oklahoma City teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “The momentum has been taken away. Instead we had elected officials like Democratic Rep. Jason Dunnington, along with the president of the AFT, tell us to vote for Democrats in November and join the AFT.”

The teacher expressed support for a nation-wide strike by teachers when schools reopen in September, adding that there would be a lot of discussion among educators during the summer about the role of the unions and the Democrats during the strikes in Oklahoma and other states.

In the coming months, contracts covering tens of thousands of teachers in big cities controlled by the Democratic Party are expiring.

This includes the labor agreement covering more than 33,000 educators in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation’s second largest, which expires on June 30. California, run by a Democratic governor, ranks 48 out of 50 in the nation for student-teacher ratio, and school authorities in Los Angeles are pushing for-profit charter schools through such schemes as “co-location” inside of public schools.



12,000 Los Angeles teachers rallied last Thursday [Source: United Teachers Los Angeles] At a rally Thursday that attracted 12,000 workers, teachers carried signs with slogans reading, “Schools are not for sale—No to privatization!” and “Why does the US spend 750 times more on war than we do on education?”

Next November, the contracts for 100,000 teachers and support staff expire in New York City, the largest school district in the US. Like California and Los Angeles, the state of New York and New York City are led by Democrats, which have collaborated with the unions in imposing corporate-backed “school reform” schemes.

Other sections of workers are also facing contract deadlines this summer, including 280,000 UPS workers on July 31 and 200,000 US Postal Service workers on September 20.

The explosive growth of social inequality and the relentless austerity measures imposed by capitalist governments around the world are fueling this resurgence of the class struggle.

The initial stage of these struggles has revealed the urgent need for workers to break free from the corporatist trade unions, through the building of new factory and workplace committees, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers. The industrial struggle of the working class must be combined with a political counter-offensive against both corporate-controlled parties and the capitalist system they defend.