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The global strike wave and the crisis of revolutionary leadership

Across the world, a surge of working-class opposition to inequality and capitalist exploitation is developing in the form of strikes and protests.

The growth of the class struggle comes after three years of a global pandemic that has needlessly claimed the lives of tens of millions of people, and seven months into a war in Ukraine that has fueled starvation, poverty and inflation for billions more. It is this objective movement that has the power to take control out of the hands of the imperialist madmen driving the world toward the nuclear abyss and to inaugurate a new era of socialist equality.



Retirees demanding increase monthly pay try to enter to the parliament building during a protest in downtown Beirut, Lebanon, Monday, September 26, 2022. [AP Photo/Bilal Hussein]

The international working class has tremendous potential power, but to unlock this power it must break free from the stranglehold of the reactionary apparatuses of the trade unions and obtain consciousness of its role as the revolutionary social force.

The trade unions, controlled by massive bureaucracies that are entirely integrated into the structures of the state and finance capital, serve as instruments of imperialism, and are working in every country with the corporations and capitalist parties to suppress this growing movement and to isolate the most militant struggles. The task that directly confronts the working class is to smash the bureaucratic dictatorship and transfer power to the rank and file.

Everywhere the working class is fighting back against inflation and the spiraling cost of living, greatly exacerbated by the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

In Argentina, 5,600 tire workers at Bridgestone and Pirelli have affected the entire country's auto production after launching a powerful strike against the corporations and the pro-corporate unions. In Haiti, strikes and mass demonstrations are continuing for the seventh week as the country's infrastructure essentially collapses and workers die of thirst, starvation, violence, coronavirus and now cholera.

The class struggle is developing across Africa, population 1.5 billion. In South Africa, a general strike appears to be developing as tens of thousands of workers plan to shut down the country's railroads and ports on Thursday after the state-owned Transnet company offered wage increases of just 1.5 percent. In July, South Africa's former president Thabo Mbeki predicted an "Arab Spring-type uprising" in the country.

In Tunisia—where protestors sparked the Arab Spring uprising 11 years ago—the head of the UGTT union warned that it will be unable to prevent mass strikes in the weeks ahead against IMF austerity measures. Air traffic controllers are currently on strike in 18 African countries, including Cameroon, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte D'Ivoire.

Strikes are taking place across the Middle East and Asia, including Iran, where workers' protests are coinciding with widespread demonstrations over the brutal police murder of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini for wearing a hijab "improperly." In neighboring Iraq, large protests took place across the country over the weekend in response to growing inequality and poverty worsened by decades of US war and occupation.

In Lebanon, a national teachers strike is taking place as demonstrators stormed into four banks demanding their deposits. A Beirut woman became a national hero after she broke into a bank with a fake pistol to demand that she be allowed to withdraw her own money to pay for her 23-year-old sister's cancer treatment. In Sri Lanka, strikes and protests by agricultural and industrial workers continue to envelop the island.

Powerful strike movements are also developing in the centers of world imperialism. As governments pour billions and billions of dollars into fueling the NATO war against Russia, masses of people in cities like London, Berlin and Paris confront intolerable conditions, exacerbated by the rising cost of living.

In France, ongoing strikes by energy workers have shut 60 percent of the country's oil refining capacity. A quarter of a million workers struck last week against the cost of living.

In the UK, strikes by 170,000 railroad workers, postal workers, dockworkers in Liverpool and Felixstowe, and other sections of the working class have broken out in defiance of efforts by the British ruling class to use the death of Queen Elizabeth II to effect "national unity."

In Germany, warning strikes are developing as the contracts for seven million workers expire simultaneously and protests grow over the cost of living. A strike wave of teachers is sweeping Europe, including in Germany, Greece, Norway, Kosovo, Hungary and Serbia. Rail workers are also on strike in Belgium. In Canada, 55,000 education support staff are preparing to strike against the Ford government's austerity regime.

The development of the class struggle in the cockpit of world imperialist reaction, the United States, is particularly significant. After decades in which the AFL-CIO has artificially suppressed the class struggle, workers are confronting these massive union

bureaucracies and striving for a path to carry their struggles forward.

Over 125,000 railroad workers are eager to strike and have begun to hold independent protests against the railroad unions, which are conspiring with the rail carriers to block a strike that would effectively shut down the US economy.

Strikes are developing across the northeast among drivers and warehouse workers employed by Sysco, with the Teamsters warning that “this could spread.” Grocery store workers employed by Kroger in Columbus, Ohio recently rejected a pro-corporate deal reached by the United Food and Commercial Workers for the third time and are currently being forced to vote on the same contract a fourth time.

On the West Coast, 25,000 dockworkers have been working without a contract since June, while the contracts for 50,000 California university employees and 50,000 Southern California grocery workers are expiring. Amazon workers at JFK8 in Staten Island, New York walked out spontaneously yesterday after management attempted to send them back into a facility that was partially on fire.

According to Cornell University, there were 180 strikes involving 80,000 workers in the first half of 2022, triple the number of workers who struck in the first half of 2021. Johnnie Kallas, director of Cornell’s labor action tracker, told *The Guardian*, “Strikes appear to be increasing as we head into the fall.”

As winter approaches in the Northern Hemisphere, analysts are predicting a further explosion of the class struggle.

Verisk Maplecroft warned in September that “the world is facing an unprecedented rise in civil unrest as governments of all stripes grapple with the impacts of inflation on the price of staple foods and energy.”

The World Economic Forum reported last week that workers’ real wages are declining and that “social unrest is on the rise.” The report warns that in many countries, “further spending is constrained or impossible, with some governments running out of fiscal space, reducing their ability to manage the cost of living crisis.”

In other words, while the capitalist governments spent trillions to bail out the banks and corporations after the 2008 financial crash and again in 2020 at the onset of the pandemic, it is “impossible” to even heat the homes of workers in the world’s “richest” countries during the winter.

This movement has the power to stop the imperialist war, to implement policies necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19 once and for all, and redistribute the world’s wealth to meet the human needs of the international working class. But the spontaneous development of the class struggle is not enough to break the decades-long suppression of the workers’ movement by the trade union bureaucracies. This requires political leadership.

In the founding document of the Fourth International, Leon Trotsky wrote, “The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.” This is as true today as it was in 1938, on the eve of the Second World War.

The working class is larger and more technologically advanced than ever before. But the task of workers engaged in each struggle is to broaden their fight, to tap into the immense social power of the international working class by unifying with other sections in struggle, to win allies among the mass of workers who are not organized in trade unions, and to reach across national boundaries in common struggle against transnational corporations. This means directing the struggles consciously as struggles not against this employer or that politician, but against the capitalist system as a whole.

This is the purpose of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), founded by the International Committee of the Fourth International in May 2021, which aims to coordinate and draw together all the disparate struggles of the international working class into one unified world movement. Above all, what is needed is the building of a socialist leadership to direct the emerging struggles in the direction of a challenge to the capitalist system and imperialist war.

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