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2016 will be a year of escalating class struggle

By Jerry White

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Class conflict will become an ever-more dominant feature of life in 2016 as the ruling classes in the US and around the world demand that workers pay for the global economic crisis and the cost of endless and expanding war.

Last year was marked by significant initial expressions of growing opposition among workers internationally. Among the most critical battles was the fight of autoworkers in the US, the center of world capitalism.

During the latter months of the year, the corporations and the United Auto Workers union were only able to overcome mass opposition to pro-company contracts at Fiat Chrysler (FCA), General Motors and Ford through a campaign of lies, intimidation and reports of vote-rigging. Even so, workers at FCA voted down a national contract backed by the UAW for the first time in 32 years.

The anger of auto workers reflected not only hostility to the new four-year labor agreements—which maintain the hated two-tier wage and benefit system and contain labor cost increases to below the rate of inflation—but deep discontent in the working class as a whole over growing social inequality, stagnating wages and unending attacks on health care and pension benefits.

The fight of US autoworkers was part of a broader renewal of the class struggle on an international scale. Last year saw the eruption of major strikes and protests in the advanced capitalist countries in Europe, Australia and Canada as well as the so-called emerging markets of China, Brazil, India and Turkey.

In the face of a major economic downturn, strikes and protests rose steadily in China's garment, electronics, mining and construction industries, reaching a high of 301 incidents in November 2015, according to Hong Kong-based *China Labour Bulletin*. The majority of workers' actions were over demands for back pay and benefit and pension obligations at companies that were closed or swallowed up in mergers.

Mass layoffs also provoked strikes by autoworkers in Brazil, and other walkouts hit the banking and state-owned petroleum industry, as the country faced a second consecutive year of economic contraction for the first time since the 1930s. General strikes erupted in Greece, India, Argentina, Uruguay and Burkina Faso last year.

In Germany, the year ended with strikes at warehouses operated by the US-owned online retailer Amazon, following walkouts in November by Lufthansa airline workers and a year of public-sector strikes by train drivers, postal workers and kindergarten and nursery school teachers. The strikes, which coincided with rising industrial action in France and the UK, were described as a threat to the long-standing "German model" of labor-management relations.

Euro zone economists polled by the *Financial Times* last week set out the agenda for the New Year with a call for a renewed push for so-called "structural reforms" of the labor market. This means scrapping remaining regulations governing wages and working conditions and reducing workers to the status of a cheap labor force.

In every country, workers are coming into conflict with the national-corporatist trade unions, which have worked to contain any manifestation of class struggle and prevent it from developing into a conflict with the capitalist system. In Greece and other countries, mass hostility to austerity and the dictates of the banks has thrust workers into a collision with pseudo-left parties such as Syriza.

Increasingly, the class struggle will break free from the constraints imposed by the reactionary unions and their political allies. This tendency found initial expression in the US auto workers struggle, where thousands of workers turned to the *World Socialist Web Site* and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* to arm them with the truth and a strategy to fight the gang-up of the companies, the corporate-controlled media, the UAW and the Obama administration.

The development of the class struggle in the United States has international implications. The American ruling class, which is spearheading a global redivision of the world, has long had a free hand to attack the working class at home due to the collaboration of the trade unions. However, it will become increasingly apparent that the financial aristocracy on Wall Street does not have its "own house" in order.

The militancy of autoworkers and other sections of American workers—including the oil refinery workers who waged a months-long strike in the face of the sabotage of the United Steelworkers (USW)—is fueled by powerful economic and social impulses, which will only escalate in the New Year. This includes the ongoing impact of the 2008 financial meltdown and a supposed “economic recovery” that has benefited only the super-rich.

Nominal wages (not adjusted for inflation) of private-sector workers rose only between 2.0 and 2.5 percent in 2015 and every other year since the official recovery began in 2009. Real wages remained flat. While US workers have suffered through the longest period of wage stagnation since the Great Depression, nearly all of the income gains since 2009 have gone to the top one percent of the population.

Last year began with warnings by think tanks, the media and various business and political figures about the danger of a “wages push” by millions of US workers with contracts expiring in 2015-16. In addition to autoworkers, this includes workers in the telecom, steel, airlines, grocery and health care industries, as well as US Postal workers, teachers, state employees and other public-sector workers.

Working with the Obama administration, the AFL-CIO and other unions deliberately blocked any struggle, organizing only 11 strikes involving 1,000 or more workers last year. The 2015 strike figure was tied with 2014 for the second-lowest number on record since 1947.

Fearing an autoworkers-style rebellion by 30,000 workers at US Steel and ArcelorMittal, the new year begins with the USW deliberately isolating the nearly five-month lockout of Allegheny Technology workers in Pennsylvania and several other states. The USW has announced that it has reached an agreement with US Steel but has not released any details and is working behind the scenes to push through a contract as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, Verizon telecom workers, Chicago teachers and more than half a million US Post Office workers continue on the job without contracts or with extended agreements.

While completely ignored by the mainstream media, the growing mood of opposition has found many expressions. Last month, 12,000 Southwest Airlines flight attendants voted by 87 percent to reject a contract brought back by the Transport Workers Union. Their old contract expired three years ago. American Airlines flight attendants voted down a contract twice before their union accepted mandatory arbitration, while the contract for United flight attendants expires on February 28.

Eight thousand pilots at Southwest voted their contract down by a two-to-one margin in November, while talks are resuming at Delta after 65 percent of pilots voted to reject a new three-year agreement. UPS pilots have authorized a strike, while pilots and mechanics at United are currently voting on deals.

Workers at all the major freight railroads have contracts expiring this year, as do Volvo truck workers and 75,000 State of New York employees.

These struggles cannot be taken forward within the framework of the pro-company labor syndicates that comprise the AFL-CIO and the official unions. Workers need new organizations of self-representation and struggle, including rank-and-file factory committees.

Above all, workers confront critical political issues as they enter a new period of struggle. As vital as determination and willingness to fight are, workers must have a thoroughly worked out political strategy to oppose the policies of war and austerity being pursued by the ruling classes and their political representatives in every country. In the US, this means the development of a political movement of the working class against the Obama administration, both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend.

The struggles of American workers must be consciously linked to the struggles of workers all over the world in a common fight for international socialism.