

# **AFTER WISCONSIN, WHICH ROAD FORWARD: CLASS INDEPENDENCE OR CLASS COLLABORATION?**

## **PREPARE FOR A GENERAL STRIKE, OR CARRY WATER FOR THE DEMOCRATS THROUGH 2012?**

Our unions' leaderships are not prepared to fight and win in the current economic crisis. They lack an analysis of the nature of the crisis and are therefore incapable of mapping a road forward. They have buried themselves so far inside the corporate Democratic Party that they can't see they are feeding the hand that bites us! They believe their own mythology that corporate capitalism can be run in a "moral" manner, and that rational pressure exerted in the traditional manner can resolve the crisis in the interest of the working class. Not only are they mistaken at every step in the road, but their strategy and tactics are leading the working class to defeat and preventing the **independent political action** needed for the working class to defend and advance our own historic interests. After serving as a tool of class peace for so many decades, these leaders do not know how to respond to the objective fact that **the bosses have declared class war on us, and this is a fight to the death!**

### **WHAT THE LABOR TOPS DON'T WANT WORKERS TO KNOW**

Labor leaders bemoan the decline of the "middle class," but the real crime is that they went along with academic sociology and the TV culture which for decades has told workers they are not a "working class," defined by their social/economic relationship to the means of production, but rather a "middle class" defined by income level and the culture of consumerism. In the face of the economic decline of the American empire and the realignment of economic power toward a rising China, the "middle class" expectations of the American labor movement are no longer affordable in a "profit first" driven economy. Our expectations have burst the limits of capitalism! This objective fact leaves the labor tops with nothing to offer workers today!

The international economic crisis has not been resolved. Billions were thrown at banks and none of it trickled down to jobs. Rather the big banks, speculators and corporate elite used it for personal bonuses, to continue speculative trading and to "rationalize" their companies, increasing capital expenditure and cutting employees to assure returns for stockholders. As American workers' wage packages (wages, COLAS, pensions and healthcare) are slashed in an "employer's market" here at home, across the world in China workers' wages are rising under the pressure of a working class which holds, on average, 435 strikes a day. Businesses, *The Economist* tells us, are seeking to set a price point in their purchase of labor power (the commodity that workers sell) on the international market, before they can bring jobs back to the USA. But even the most optimistic economists predict that lowering American wages would not bring back enough industrial manufacturing, or even service jobs, to put the 12-20% unemployed back to work, much less to preserve the much vaunted "middle class" lifestyle. The result is a marginalized youth, black and Latino population with no prospects for inclusion in the productive economy, and a prison industrial complex housing two million prisoners who are disproportionately people of color, and overwhelmingly come from the poorest layers of the working class.

As the crisis heads into what is termed a "double dip" recession, imperialism has its tentacles spread thin. Three wars, responsible for countless tens of thousands of civilian deaths, are being run by the Democrats, while covert actions and drone strikes cross more borders than Wikileaks can keep up with. The workers of North Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and China are attacking their governments and taking massive strike and protest actions. With the collapse in the bailouts of Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and the potential downgrading of the USA's bond rating by Moodys, it is clear the big bosses of the world economy see no way out except imposing massive austerity measures, which they expect the trade union leaders, the Social Democrats, the Labor Parties, and, in the USA, the Democratic Party to administer. And the class traitors at the head of our unions are following right along – witness SEIU Local 1000's endorsement of Governor Brown's regressive tax plans in California.

The bosses' current strategy translates into attacks on all workers. The halving of UAW auto workers' pay has set a new lower wage standard for American industrial and manufacturing work. The increase in class sizes and tuition for students, the cuts in public services, the gutting of public health and other essential governmental services and the scapegoating of the public worker have become standard measures across the nation. The attack on the last and largest bastion of the American labor movement, the public employee sector, is an all-out class war launched by big capitalists with the intention of imposing a historic defeat on the American working class.

In order for market forces (remember the free hand of the market) to drive American workers' compensation down to the price point where capital can rationally invest here again, the market demands gutting of defined benefit pension plans, driving down public sector wages, cutting the social wage (government benefits), and shifting the burden of the crisis further onto the backs of the poor, workers, and the oppressed. The market requires the destruction of the unions and any organizations that organize the working class, the poor, and the oppressed. Today's union leaderships are not prepared for this onslaught. In fact, these class collaborators act in diametric opposition to the interests of the working class; they are doing everything they can to stop us from organizing independently of the bosses' political parties, from launching solidarity actions, and from striking at all – let alone building for the widespread, indefinite general strikes that will ultimately be needed to confront the bosses' attacks.

### **A FAILED STRATEGY FOR LABOR**

In the period of the expansion of the US Empire during and after WWII, the labor tops made peace with the American ruling class. Under the threat of rising working class rank and file militancy in the 1930s (the rise of the CIO; general strikes in Minneapolis and San Francisco), Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act – much lauded as a victory for workers, as it guarantees the right to organize, but the actual purpose of which was to corral the working class into reliance on a state structure rather than our own self activity. The NLRA was followed quickly by anti-labor laws such as the Taft-Hartley Act, which constrains labor by making it illegal to offer solidarity to other workers in the form of strike action. Today we see the result: the MUNI rank and file rejected a sell out contract, only to have the "impartial" arbitrator impose it over their objection. If workers in the Bay Area can be stripped of the right to collective bargaining without a fight, it exposes the role of the sell-out labor leaders, which is to constrain the working class during the imposition of austerity. We need to shut down the entire Bay Area transportation grid to defend our MUNI drivers, but solidarity strikes are against the Taft-Hartley law and the craven leadership uses that law to keep the rank and file in line.

As long as the preeminent position of US imperialism brought home super-profits after WWII, infrastructure, education, technology and

industry (particularly the military-industrial complex) created a high demand for labor. Rising wages increasingly came with labor peace, enabling the labor bureaucracy to transform itself into a self-perpetuating dues collection agency that acted in its own interests, abandoning class conflict for the “rational” road of arbitration, lawsuits, legislation, and buying politicians.

This worked well for about 25 years, but the laws of capitalist economics precluded the fantasies of the labor bureaucracy from enduring. As the economy changed and wages started to stagnate in the early 1970s, the illusion began to evaporate. There never was a “middle class”; we had been workers all along, and we could pay for the new consumerist culture of a “middle class American dream” only by sending the women of the household to work, by taking second jobs, and by incurring debt in the form of student loans, credit cards, and second mortgages against our houses. Now all these stopgaps are running out, and the explosion of the speculative stock market and inflated housing bubble economy is gutting the standard of living of the American working class. Wages have been flat or declining for decades; we work more hours than before; we have less vacation; we are less secure, and all the money has floated to the top 0.01% while we are scrounging to hold on to a declining paycheck. The labor bureaucracy was not prepared for this! They still cling to their failed strategy of class collaboration with the Democrats, reliance on the courts, and lobbying legislators to “tax the rich.”

This strategy is not just a mistake. Rather, the union tops are doing their job, as defined for them by the bosses’ legal system. They will do everything possible to keep workers from taking strike action, and from mounting solidarity actions with workers with workers in other unions, counties, districts, states or nations. The labor bosses see the upsurge in rank-and-file militancy as a threat, which they can only contain by corraling it into electoral politics. Thus, the popular sentiment for a general strike in Wisconsin was diffused into a recall campaign, which prevents immediate militant action, and steers workers into placing faith and hope in the Democrats rather than in our own self-organized mass actions. Thus, the AFL-CIO forbids any mention of opposition to foreign wars as they prepare to rally the troops for the 2012 electoral cycle.

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR A GENERAL STRIKE

The current crop of union leaders is not going to prepare for a general strike. Instead, they spend most of our dues dollars selling concessionary contracts to the members, while giving the rest to lobbyists and lawyers, leaving our strike funds dry and our membership unorganized, frustrated, and demoralized. For the working class to avoid the historic defeat the Koch brothers have planned for us, we must first take back control of our unions! New militant rank and file leaders not afraid to confront Taft-Hartley through strike action must rise in the ranks to replace the functionaries and careerists who sap our dues while shedding crocodile tears about

their inability to mobilize the membership and bring home the bacon.

Effective strike action and general strikes cannot be organized unless we first either take over our unions, or else build new unions and other workers’ organizations with a new leadership. Our current union misleaders’ attitude is that they are only responsible to act in the interest of the dues-paying membership – not the future members, not the unorganized workers, not the unemployed, and certainly not the workers of the world, oppressed, exploited and brutalized as we are by Wall Street and the military industrial war machine. But our class can only survive and win if we take up the old Knights of Labor slogan: An Injury to One Is an Injury to All! Solidarity is our only power, and the ability to strike in the historic interest of the class is our strongest weapon. When the leaders of today’s unions spurn these tools of the international working class, they act as the agents of the ruling class in our organizations, and must be driven out and replaced. That means we need rank-and-file class struggle caucuses to promote a new militant leadership, to fight for working class independence, and to build a fighting workers/labor party that unites the entire working class and all our allies nationally and internationally to strike as one against the rule of the exploiters and build a movement for workers’ power and workers’ ownership of the means of production.

The drive to build for a general strike must be pursued in conjunction with the democratization of the unions and/or the formation of new workers’ organizations. As the current leaders continue to mislead the masses, workers’ frustration will rise, and the opportunity to form class struggle rank-and-file caucuses that can challenge for power will grow. To win, these caucuses must advance strategy, tactics, and demands that unite the entire working class, and forge independence, and must prepare for and take united strike actions.

Demands such as no concessions, no take aways, and pay me my COLA are of immediate concern. Demands such as jobs for all and 30 hours work for 40 hours pay can unite labor with the unemployed and those on furloughs and reduced hours. Demands for universal health care, not handouts to the insurance companies, will unite the organized with the underinsured. Demands to nationalize the banks and major industries under workers’ control to provide immediate access to capital for job creation offer solution to the crisis of market control. Demands to end imperialist interventions abroad can unite our organizations with the workers across the planet who struggle against the same corporate criminals who are crushing us!

**These demands cannot be won by the current leaders, but can be when we take back and rebuild rank and file workers democracy. The fight to defend the working class from the bosses’ class war requires that labor must clean its own house! Drive out the functionaries, imperialists, corporatists, and class collaborators! Then we can remake our unions into a militant organizing force in the fight for the historic interest of the working class!**

“[T]he sections of the Fourth International should always strive not only to renew the top leadership of the trade unions, boldly and resolutely in critical moments advancing new militant leaders in place of routine functionaries and careerists, but also to create in all possible instances independent militant organizations corresponding more closely to the tasks of mass struggle against bourgeois society; and, if necessary, not flinching even in the face of a direct break with the conservative apparatus of the trade unions. If it be criminal to turn one’s back on mass organizations for the sake of fostering sectarian factions, it is no less so passively to tolerate subordination of the revolutionary mass movement to the control of openly reactionary or disguised conservative (‘progressive’) bureaucratic cliques. Trade unions are not ends in themselves; they are but means along the road to proletarian revolution.” Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Program* (1938)

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