Class Struggle and Social Protest in the Coronavirus Pandemic

written by Dan La Botz | May 18, 2020



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The United States has during the shutdown of the last two months suffered 90,000 deaths while 36 million workers have filed for unemployment, nearly 25 percent of the workforce. President Donald Trump now wants to restart the economy because he fears losing the November election if this Second Great Depression continues. Businesses are also anxious to make profits, and many unemployed workers want to earn wages—but they fear putting themselves and their families in danger. The fight for safe workplaces will become the driving force of activism in the coming weeks.

Throughout the pandemic, federal and state governments and public and private employers failed to protect workers' health and their income. Essential workers who were forced to continue working without adequate safety and health protection either protested or walked off the job in hundred of mostly small, brief, and localized wildcat strikes. Some of these, like a small walkout at Amazon warehouse in New York, garnered publicity but failed to find a mass following. Others had a bigger impact.

Nurses and other hospital workers organized demonstrations to demand masks, gowns, and ventilators. Many nurses protested at their hospitals, but some from the National Nurses United went to the White House to demand that Trump invoke the Defense Production Act (DPA) to order the production of masks, ventilators and coronavirus test kits. While there, in a moving tribute, they read the names of their coworkers killed by the virus. Federal and state governments and hospital managers responded by making greater efforts to provide supplies for workers.

Nurses were not alone. In mid March teachers threatened a sickout to force the closure of the New York Public Schools when Mayor de Blasio and and their own union, the United Federation of Teachers failed to do so,. In late April about 50 workers walked off the job at the Smithfield meatpacking plant in Nebraska over health and safety issues. The governor promised to bring testing and contact tracing to the plant. In Washington where there is a long history of worker strikes, hundreds of fruit packers struck for safer working conditions and hazardous duty pay.

Some unions have provided leadership. The Amalgamated Transit Union has supported bus drivers who have struck over health in Detroit, Birmingham, Richmond, and Greensboro. The Carpenters

Union, which represents about 10,000 workers in Massachusetts, ordered its members to strike on April 5 over concerns about Covid-19 and did not end the strike until April 20.

Many unions issued statements calling for employers and government to protect their members and provided helpful information. And unions have also lobbied Congress. But in general they have not attempted to raise the level of class struggle as might be possible.

Some unions capitulated to reopening factories and resuming production, even though it is clear that it may put their members' health at risk. As early as May 5 the United Auto Workers conceded that the company had the contractual authority to resume production in May in the GM, Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler plants, without strong guarantees of health protections.

The largest left organization, the Democratic Socialist of America, already active among nurses and teachers unions, joined forces with the United Electrical Workers Union known as the UE, and together they have created the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee. EWOC is training hundreds of volunteer organizers to help workplace activists organize. DSA has also begun to organize a network of restaurant workers in several cities.

The pandemic and the shutdown have taken a toll, but they now provide an opportunity to rebuild the American labor movement from the bottom up. While the challenges will be great, working class resistance is growing and socialists with a rank-and-file strategy and class struggle perspective are involved in the fight.