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Strike action in the US hits a 32-year high

The number of workers participating in strike action in the US during 2018 reached the highest level in 32 years, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) report issued Friday morning in Washington. The figures document the rise in the class struggle in the course of the year, spearheaded by public school teachers who rebelled against their unions and carried out statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

The BLS report identified 20 major labor disputes, defined as strikes or lockouts involving at least 1,000 workers. It was the largest number of such actions since 2007, when there were 21 strikes or lockouts of that size.

More than 485,000 workers staged walkouts during the year, with the vast majority of these being teachers and other school workers, including 86,000 in Arizona, 45,000 in Oklahoma, 35,000 in West Virginia and 26,000 in Kentucky, all in protracted battles with their state governments, as well as 123,000 in North Carolina and 63,000 in Colorado, who were limited to one-day strikes.



Teachers on strike in West Virginia

The total number of workers involved was the largest since 1986, when 533,000 workers engaged in major strikes or lockouts. The 2.8 million work days lost to strikes or lockouts in 2018 were the most since 2004.

Of the 20 major walkouts, eight were by teachers, including the six statewide actions and local strikes in Jersey City, New Jersey and Tacoma, Washington. Five strikes were by health care workers in Rhode Island, Vermont and California; two by telecommunications workers; two by hotel workers and two by construction workers. One was the lockout of workers at National Grid, a New England-based gas utility. Not a single major strike took place in manufacturing.

The figures released by the BLS raise a number of important historical and political issues. While far higher than the average of the past 20 years, the 2.8 million work days lost in 2018 is a lower figure than for any year from 1947 through 1999. This figure rose as high as 60 million in 1959, the year of a 116-day industry-wide steel strike, and never fell below 10 million until 1982, the year after the Reagan administration smashed the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike.

In the rest of that decade, work days lost to strike action exceeded 10 million only in 1983, 1986 and 1989, remaining well below that figure throughout the 1990s, as the unions systematically smothered or betrayed struggles by workers. There were 20 million work days lost in 2000, a number inflated by a six-month strike by 135,000 commercial television actors, most of whom worked only infrequently, but the figure plunged to 1.1 million in 2001 and 659,000 in 2002, before declining to the all-time low of 124,000 in 2009, the year after the Wall Street crash.

The most important revelation in the strike statistics—and one on which the media reports sparked by the BLS announcement are entirely silent—is the contradiction between the rising curve of worker militancy and the continued efforts by the unions to strangle the class struggle.

Of the six conflicts in 2018 with the largest impact in terms of work days lost, only one, against the Marriott hotel chain, was called by the unions. Four were statewide teachers' strikes initiated by the rank-and-file on their own, using social media—in West Virginia (525,000 work days lost), Arizona (486,000), Oklahoma (405,000) and Kentucky (182,000). A fifth was the lockout imposed on utility workers at National Grid by the employer (156,000 work days lost).

Of the 2.8 million work days lost in labor disputes in 2018, nearly two-thirds were not the result of strikes called by the unions. They emerged organically out of the workplace and the conflict between the workers and employers. If it had been up to the unions, these struggles would never have taken place.

The upsurge of the working class in 2018 did not represent a revival of the unions, but a rebellion of the working class against them. These organizations have become a straitjacket, not only in politics—with the decades-long subordination of the working class to the Democratic Party—but in the assertion of even the most elementary class interests of workers for decent wages, working conditions and health and retirement benefits.

The initial struggles of the working class in 2019 have already confirmed this assessment. The teachers' unions betrayed the week-long strike by 33,000 Los Angeles teachers in the most blatant fashion possible, abandoning the most important demands before the strike even began and rushing through a ratification vote in a matter of hours, having broken up the teachers into hundreds of separate meetings to block any organized opposition.

At the same time, the teachers' unions are repeating the same policy as in 2018, when they kept the statewide strikes separated month-by-month so as to prevent the emergence of a nationwide strike by educators against budget cuts, low pay and increasing class sizes. While Los Angeles teachers were on the picket line last month, the unions delayed strikes in Oakland, Denver and the state of Virginia. These strikes too, should they break out, will be staggered in time and deliberately separated from one another.

Even more blatant is the deliberate silence of all the American trade unions, and particularly the United Auto Workers, on the heroic struggle by 70,000 auto parts workers in Matamoros, Mexico, across the border from Brownsville, Texas. These workers defied their unions to launch strike action, which has won substantial pay raises and bonuses at

most of the auto parts plants, while inspiring other workers in the Mexico-US border region to launch their own strikes demanding similar increases.

The UAW and the other American unions have ample reason—from the standpoint of the millionaire bureaucrats who head them—to censor any news of the Matamoros struggle. The workers there have rebelled against the unions, denouncing them as corporate stooges, elected strike committees of rank-and-file workers to lead their struggle, and defied local, state and national government threats of police repression.

It is the nightmare of every union official that American workers will see the Mexican workers' struggle as an example to be followed. This is particularly true of the UAW and its counterpart in Canada, Unifor, which have made anti-Mexican chauvinism a central feature of their politics, blaming plant shutdowns and layoffs, like the current shutdowns threatened in Detroit, Lordstown, Ohio and Oshawa, Ontario, on workers south of the Rio Grande.

It is in order to assert and demonstrate the fundamental unity of the struggles of the working class—in the US, Canada, Mexico and throughout the world—that the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees and the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* are holding a demonstration today at 2 pm outside General Motors headquarters in downtown Detroit to fight the GM plant closings and layoffs.

We urge auto workers and other workers in the Detroit area and throughout the Midwest to join this rally, take up its call to establish rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, and build a mass movement of the working class to defend jobs, wages and working conditions on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.