

The dawn of a working class upsurge

written by Stephen Millies
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Actor Wanda Sykes, right, with Writers Guild of America members and supporters on a picket line outside NBCUniversal headquarters at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in New York, on May 23, 2023.

Presentation given at the Socialist Unity Party national plenum on Dec. 16, 2023.

Eighty-six-year-old Verna Mae Jackson was crushed to death on Dec. 6 while working at the FedEx world hub in the Memphis International airport.

Six months before, 16-year-old Michael Schuls was killed in a Florence, Wisconsin, sawmill near the border with Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

What were an 86-year-old Black woman and a 16-year-old teenager doing in these dangerous jobs? Both of these tragedies were preventable.

Seventy years in age and 800 miles separated these two murdered workers. Maybe FedEx will be fined for unsafe conditions.

Florence Hardwoods was fined \$190,000. It was found that the sawmill employed nine children, some as young as 14.

Yet, under Wisconsin law, it's perfectly legal for teenagers to work in sawmills. Child labor is making a big comeback.

At the same time, the share of folks older than 60 in the workforce has doubled since 2000. By exploiting both the young and old, capitalism is extending the time that it extracts profits from us.

Karl Marx called this stealing "absolute surplus value."

These two murders on the job are another sign of how much the working class has been pushed back in the last 50 years.

Look at the federal minimum wage. Because of the tremendous struggles of the 1960s, it was raised to \$1.60 in February 1968.

To equal the purchasing power of that you would need at least \$14.04 today. But the federal minimum wage has been frozen at \$7.25.

That's nearly a 50% drop in real terms, although many states, because of struggle, have raised their own minimum wage. These include California, Maryland, and New York.

In 1975, Wall Street demanded and got 50,000 New York City municipal workers fired. In the late 1970s, tens of thousands of Chrysler workers were laid off, most of whom were Black.

Reagan crushed the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 while AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland did nothing.

He was busy helping to overthrow socialist Poland. Kirkland also served on Reagan's Social Security Commission, which raised the retirement age.

Targeting Black workers

Big capital was determined to lessen its dependence on Black labor in basic industry. The Black-majority cities of Detroit and Flint, Michigan, and Gary, Indiana, were wrecked as hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost in auto and steel.

Fifty years ago, General Motors was the biggest employer of Black workers who were members of the UAW. Today, it's non-union, poverty-wage Walmart.

Look at Baltimore. When I moved here in 1978, 20,000 or so workers were employed at Bethlehem Steel's Sparrows Point mill, the largest in the world. Thousands more worked in shipyards, the Koppers factory, and at the GM plant.

All these unionized strongholds of our class were wiped out. Close to seven million manufacturing jobs, most of which were unionized, were destroyed coast-to-coast.

Seven million homes were foreclosed, and millions more evicted.

The biggest defeat was the overthrow of the Soviet Union. That was more dangerous than Hitler coming to power by crushing the German working class.

Yet the capitalist class can't make a penny in profits without us. Thousands of Amazon workers now are employed at Sparrows Point.

Organizing drives at Amazon will make Jeff Bezos pay union wages and benefits. He might even have to trade in his \$500 million yacht.

After decades of being beaten up, the U.S. multinational working class is fighting back! Capitalists are taking note.

A recent Wall Street headline read, "For Labor Unions, 2023 Was the Year of the Strike — and Big Victories." The Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations has counted 354 strikes this year.

Back in 1933, one of the first working-class victories was winning unions in Hollywood. Movie making is big business.

Eighty years later, both the Writers Guild and the Screen Actors Guild went on strike for months in 2023, bringing the Hollywood moguls to their knees. Workers used their courage and intelligence to beat back artificial intelligence.

The Teamsters eliminated the hated two-tier pay scheme for drivers at UPS without going on strike. Wages for part-time workers were raised to \$21 per hour.

That wasn't enough for many part-timers, who justifiably wanted \$25 in these inflationary times. I don't think that Teamsters president Sean McBride settled for

less because of pressure from the White House.

I think he was trying to show Amazon workers that by joining the Teamsters they can get more money, too, without a lengthy strike. We'll see how that works out.

Solidarity with Palestine!

The Starbucks workers seem to be unbeatable. They continue to struggle in hundreds of stores across the country. They've got billionaire Howard Schultz on the run!

Nurses and other health care workers conducted 27 strikes across the United States. Picket lines were set up in New York and throughout California. There were also strikes in Hawaii, Illinois, Michigan, Oregon, St. Louis, and the state of Washington.

Workers at Rutgers and Temple universities went on strike as well as against colleges in Illinois.

The biggest star was the UAW strikes against the Big Three automakers that lasted more than six weeks. The union struck all three at once for the first time, although only striking a few selected chokepoints.

The hated pay tiers that were imposed in 2008 were smashed. The lowest-paid workers got the biggest wage increases. That's what our late Comrade Vince Copeland advocated for decades.

Nonunion outfits like Toyota were so scared that they increased their wages, too. That won't keep out the UAW. More than a thousand workers at Volkswagen have signed union cards.

Just as notable is UAW president Sean Fain's demand for a ceasefire in Gaza. So had

Mark Dimondstein, president of the American Postal Workers Union, who did so earlier.

Long gone are the days of George Meany supporting every filthy imperialist war. “Solidarity Forever” means solidarity with Palestine!

No railroad workers have any illusions about “Amtrak Joe,” who has now become “Genocide Joe” Biden. Despite being forbidden to strike by Congress, most railroaders were able to claw sick days out of the rail tycoons.

We are at the very beginning of a working-class upsurge. The actions that have been taken at Amazon warehouses are like those of the autoworkers in 1933 and 34.

The United Farmworkers Union is springing back to organize some of the poorest workers.

Who would have thought that small groups of Starbucks employees would stage work stoppages at hundreds of coffee shops? That takes enthusiasm and discipline.

We look forward to union drives at Walmart. The Teamsters will come to Memphis, where FedEx has 30,000 employees, and Verna Mae Jackson was killed.

The labor movement will come to some of the smallest towns just like the Black Lives Matter! movement did.

We’re mad as hell and we won’t take it anymore!

