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Internationalist Notes

Broadsheet of the Internationalist Workers' Group

THE WORKING CLASS NEEDS A MILITANT LABOR DAY



September 2nd 2024 marks the 130th anniversary of the first official Labor Day in the US and Canada. Labor Day has a long and complex history for the North American working class. Today, Labor Day appears to most workers as little more than an extra day off, if that. At most, it is a moment for the unions to organize BBQs and parades to cover for their management of worsening conditions for the wider working class. On this Labor Day, we must recognize the need for the working class to take on independent class action in response to massive economic attacks by capital and increased imperialist rivalry.

Labor Day in Canada has its origins in non-political, community parades where craft workers had their own processions. With the development of the labor movement and increasing class conflict, however, the workers of a given town or community began organizing their own parades—typically taking the form of a strike parade. In Hamilton, Ontario, in May 1872, striking workers marched through the industrial district with union banners. In the next decade, these labor parades became commonplace from small mining towns to large cities. An official, national Labor Day would not be declared in Canada until decades later in 1894. After years of unionists petitioning parliament, in addition to their more notable demands like shortening the working day, the House of Commons finally conceded and declared that the first Monday of September would be a national labor day. It was a small and easy concession to make for the government. Thus, Labor Day quickly became a staple in cities like Toronto for workers and unionists, but the battle for a shortened working day would drag on.

In the US during the 1880's, in the midst of an economic depression, unions as well as anarchist and socialist organizations grew exponentially. Unions such as the Knights of Columbus, the Central Labor Union, and the American Federation of Labor would choose separate dates to hold public parades and demonstrations and to show solidarity amongst unions. The year that Labor Day was enacted as a federal holiday was marked by pitched class struggle. Most significantly, the Pullman Strike in Chicago from May 11th to June 20th 1894 saw 4,000 rail-car workers initiate a wildcat strike and boycott trains carrying Pullman cars. The state responded brutally with federal injunctions, sending in the military and company strikebreakers, and arrests. President Grover Cleveland hoped to stifle the growing class conflict with an

olive branch; only eight days after the state successfully repressed the Pullman workers, Labor Day became a federal holiday.

The first Monday of September was chosen to obstruct the memory of May Day, on which workers' organizations had organized strikes for an 8-hour work day each year starting on May 1, 1886. In Chicago, the movement's leading figures were composed mainly of anarchists, such as Albert Parsons and August Spies, both of whom were executed in the aftermath of the "Haymarket affair" when a likely saboteur threw a bomb in Haymarket Square at advancing police. The demonstrations at the square were called in response to waves of police brutality and the use of strikebreakers against striking workers at the McCormick Reaper Plant the night before, leaving two strikers dead. After this tragedy, the first of May would be formally adopted by the Second International at its first congress in 1889 and would be celebrated widely in Europe.

The capitalists in the United States have been grappling with the fact that recent growth has done nothing to stem the underlying economic crisis. The economy is growing too fast, unemployment is too low, and the Federal Reserve is doing its best to slow down the economy ostensibly to reel in inflation. What the US government and its economists are really trying to achieve is another round of assaults on the working class. The only way to get a "soft landing" of the economy after Covid and the inflationary period is to increase unemployment and further hit wages. One large investor, seeing that unemployment has ticked up to 3.9%, stated that this was "just what the Fed wanted." Politicians are praising the return to American manufacturing, never stating that the renewed growth of factories is based on an all-time low in working conditions and labor regulations. To ensure this plan prospers, the Republican and Democratic parties have worked hand in hand on immigration policy. Democrats provide "welcoming" rhetoric while Republicans push hard enforcement and strict conditions; this is all ultimately aimed at creating a precarious work force and driving down wages across the board while dividing the class with racist rhetoric.

Faced with this capitalist onslaught, the working class has fought to defend itself and maintain its basic living conditions. In the US, the number of striking workers increased from 120,000 in

2022 to 500,000 in 2023. However, there have not been great victories coming out of these struggles. Why? Strikes are sabotaged by the unions themselves (alongside the boss and the state) because of the dictates of capitalism. The unions have long been integrated into the state: to enforce worker discipline when the need arises, to enforce worse concessions, to prevent strikes, and to channel labor into stagnant industries for national competition. A union victory is a workers' defeat.

Unions' role to play within capitalism was clear in the aborted US rail strike, stifled by Congress using 100+ year old legislation to force a settlement under the guise of "national security". The main rail unions then pushed the workers to accept the settlement, even though it did not meet the workers' main demands. Last fall, the UAW directed workers to rotate their strikes, fragmenting workers' efforts so as to not dampen company profits and not force the union executives to dip into their war chest. In Montreal, government liquor store workers at the SAQ have been on strike since April. Despite a massive vote for a 15-day strike mandate, the union has thus far only used two, leaving the workers in limbo. Under the pressure of a hard tier system, many SAQ workers are only granted part-time hours with little job security. This is a common problem facing the wide working class, but the unions only offer the "least bad" negotiated settlement.

Instead, workers must seize the strike as their own and organize amongst themselves to determine the nature of their strikes. No force is going to do it for us: no parliamentary party, no "good" employer, and no union. In the summer of 2023, the Common Front mobilized 600,000 Quebec workers to strike. But despite playing up the national mythos of militant Quebec labor, the union front was not a front for workers. Even the most militant unions can't defend workers' basic economic conditions due to their partnership with the state and the needs for armament. Workers will need to organize on their own, in place of, and necessarily against union domination.

Faced with a profitability crisis, capitalists and their states aim to push their losses onto their rivals; this takes place through the drive towards generalized imperialist war. The meat grinder in Eastern Ukraine, the murderous siege of Gaza, the brinkmanship between Israel and Iran, and military defense treaties heating up Chinese and US tensions have been the consequences of this crisis. Entire generations of young workers from Ukraine, Russia, and Gaza are decimated, with hundreds of thousands massacred in both wars. Strikes and anti-draft demonstrations outlawed and repressed in Ukraine and Israel confirms that democracy really is the camouflage for the dictatorship of capital. Ukraine and Gaza's nightmare landscapes of muddy trenches flooded by the smell of death, starved bodies under mountains of urban rubble, and a sharpening of the whip of capitalist exploitation at home are glimpses into the future that global capitalism is preparing for the working class everywhere.

In the Pacific, the US and China have been building economic and military infrastructure, forming and maintaining alliances, and restructuring their pro-

ductive and financial institutions, anticipating a total war to determine absolute supremacy. In the Middle East, the US is increasingly off-centered by its support for Israel's war in Gaza. China gained ground by holding talks between the main parties in Palestine for a coalition government. Israel assassinated Hamas's political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran—an act of imperialist arrogance and a step towards regional war that will decimate the working class.

Unions have never been revolutionary instruments of the working class, but began as bodies of working class economic struggle outside of the capitalist state. Yet given their inherent logic of being negotiating bodies for the sale of labor-power, over time they became integrated into the legal framework of the capitalist state. In Canada this was most pronounced during the First World War when the TLC was invited into parliamentary commission bodies to oversee the organization of national labor. In the USA, Roosevelt finalized this process with the legalization of unions and by making them partners of the New Deal. The integration of unions helped to preemptively prevent strikes, whereas repressing the unions had increased the possibility of independent class activity out of the hands of the bosses and state. The legal recognition of unions helped connect them to the state by a thousand threads. Unions enforce worsening deals when negotiating under the guise of being realistic. This is since unions must maintain a respected position of an arbitrator between labor and capital, for capital. Most factions among the state and the bosses only began to repel unions again when the rate of profit began to decline with the return of the crisis of profitability.

Despite the role unions play in capitalism, we do not call for ripping up your union card tomorrow. We call upon the workers themselves to be the basis of the struggle. In Montreal, the daycare workers in Little Burgundy started doing exactly this. They organized an email chain and began determining the course of their strike beyond the union. This small example serves as a modern lesson for struggles today, but pales in comparison to the strike committees that dominated whole towns in the general strike of 1972.

But the economic struggle is not enough to challenge capitalist rule on the stage of history. For that, the working class will need to wage a political struggle against the very roots of capital. To do so, the working class must form its own political party. Not a party in a capitalist parliamentary sense, but a party of workers organized around a coherent political outlook and fighting on the front ranks of struggles, always connecting them to the struggle as a whole and pointing the way forward.



TWO PARTIES, ONE ROTTEN SYSTEM

Another election season has arrived in the US' sick and crisis-ridden political system. With the exit of Biden and the ascension of Kamala Harris, the Democratic Party has gotten a break in what was shaping up to be a defeat. Nevertheless, both ruling parties represent nothing less than full on political reaction. At the root of the political chaos is the crisis of capitalism and the undeniable decline in the American empire. The rivalry between factions of the capitalists in power is of no concern to workers, who desperately need to take up our own self-organized class struggle against economic crisis and imperialist war preparations.

The propaganda surrounding the elections would have you believe that each election is a choice between good and evil incarnate. When the election is settled, one finds the same foreign and domestic policies in force. This is a process in US political history that goes back to the fossilization of the duopoly as it came to be established during the nineteenth century. During the present century this has been more bitterly contested and decided with the narrowest margins of victory. The exception to this was Obama's first election to the presidency with its hollow slogans of "hope" and "change".

2024's election throws the crisis within US capitalism into sharp relief. With the replacement of Biden and the appointment of Harris on top of the assassination attempt on Trump, the struggle for the Oval Office has heated up. The usual homeless sweeps and mass arrests for the Republican and Democratic Conventions, that is Trump and Harris' coronations by a bunch of drunk capitalists, set the tone for what the two tickets promise the working class. Trump picks JD Vance for the same reason that Harris picks Walz. Vance supports "worker-management committees", aka roping a few workers from off the shop-floor into meetings with the bosses to more smoothly implement work speed-ups and the fragmentation of real worker self-organization. Walz gave workers in Minnesota a few crumbs in the form of free school lunches, but this only disguises the eradication of our class' purchasing power through inflation and the wider capitalist crisis. Really both parties are ideologically conditioning the working class to accept a cataclysmic war with US imperialism's main competitor, China. Vance calls for dialing back US weapons to Ukraine only to save artillery for a war with China, while Harris calls for US imperialism to maintain "the most lethal fighting force in the world". The two capitalist parties get giddy thinking about a vicious war which will put workers in the US against workers in China, massacring each other in the service of our respective ruling classes.

For this election some Democratic Party functionaries have openly declared political warfare to keep any electoral third parties off the ballot by making sure the signatures on any petition for ballot access get tossed out as invalid. This is normal behavior for both ruling parties but this election leaves even less room for protest votes. But even these protest parties pose no real political solution for workers. The Libertarians are the GOP for the politically in-



ept, the Greens tail-end the latest trends in the US capitalist left scene, the 'uncommitted' movement is toothless and represents total enthralment to the Democratic Party which will never cease funding the imperialist massacres of proletarians in Gaza, the PSL promises a program of reformed state-capitalism in the Stalinist variety... the list of petty-bourgeois rackets goes on, who see workers at best as de-classed voters to get them into political office, or as meal-tickets to continue playing in their 'activist' careers.

The US has suffered a series of defeats and setbacks that came to characterize the entire Biden administration, with Biden in his dementia personifying an American empire in crisis. Although the administration began with the defeat of US forces in Afghanistan, it did not hesitate to start up other profitable imperialist debacles. The most expensive state military machine in history is powerless to stop Houthi fighters from choking off the Red Sea at the Bab el-Mandeb straights. It is currently the largest campaign the US Navy has undertaken since the last World War. While another US-armed and trained army in Ukraine is being slowly ground into the dust. The US has lost its edge with an astronomically expensive defense sector that has trouble producing anything that works in any needed quantity.

There is little in the way of any attempt by American capitalists to rebuild enough industry to sustain industrial scale warfare. For decades the only enemies the US military faced have been guerrilla fighters. Without industry and a working class involved in direct production, it is impossible to wage a major conflict between imperialist powers. America as a post-industrial society now finds itself in

the situation of not having the workforce to work in factories that don't exist, full of machinery they no longer know how to build and an army that can't fill enough uniforms to carry out the bloody work of imperialism.

US imperialism entered its latest expansion phase with the collapse of the USSR. The 9/11 attacks marked a decisively aggressive turn that opened the subsequent decades of ongoing wars. This is reflected domestically in the decadent bourgeois rot of the US political process. First, there is the ritual of the political primary election period culminating in the coronation rituals of the ruling parties' political conventions. Second comes the final election, hotly contested in the dominant media, a battle of bourgeois titans. Finally there is the demeaning ritual of voting that drags workers into the rivalries and crimes of the ruling class.

Marx once entertained the idea that peaceful change via the ballot box might work in certain countries, like Britain, but even this he acknowledged would be met with a "slave holders rebellion". In Lenin's time the Bolsheviks were able to take advantage of their seats in the Tsar's Duma to put forward propaganda against the government. At that point the only purpose for any sort of parliamentarism was for propaganda towards the working class. This too was conditioned on the weakness of the Russian bourgeoisie and their corrupt anemic regime. Today, no such possibilities exist. The ruling Democrats need their "Democratic Socialists of America" to isolate and police the left on behalf of their masters. Every unpopular policy the Democrats carry out can then be blamed on "socialists".

One primary basis for continuing the voting ritual is political blackmail (vote or you will lose your right to have an abortion), a cynical bourgeois ploy to blackmail working women into voting. Being political timeservers, there is nothing more they need from the atomized citizen once they are elected. In real terms the Democrat Party's politicians have never defended anything other than capital. But the locus of decision-making power isn't in the hands

of elected officials, rather in those of unelected bureaucrats. One example is Victoria Nuland of the US State Department, who over the years served under six presidents and guided the foreign affairs of US imperialism. Nobody gets to vote against imperialism and war.

Every election is a crisis and becomes a referendum on the very idea of freedom itself. The bourgeoisie proclaims that "we're losing our democracy" and tells us that we must vote. Those who refuse to vote are then told that they have no right to complain since they didn't bother to vote. There is an alternate route, not simply abandoning a politically empty reactionary activity (voting in capitalist elections) but taking up the class struggle and not using the election as a substitute for collective action.

America's decline and descent into open crisis has become painfully obvious. The US is a deindustrialized post-modern ruin. The very processes by which American capitalists maintain their power are the very processes that are destroying it. The political fight between the two factions has convinced many in the US that they must vote or perish in the deluge. Yet neither Harris nor Trump will fundamentally alter the course that US and global capitalism are on. Instead of voting and thereby legitimizing their class rule, our class needs to self-organize and combat the economic attacks and generalized war preparations that will occur under either candidate if elected. We should take a page out of the heroic struggle waged by oil workers in Iran in recent years who have called for the formation of workers' councils, or workers in China who mobilized against factory dormitories in 2022, and keep control of our own struggles for our own class demands. We should get political, and signal that our exit from pre-WW3 capitalist crisis lies in the construction of our own international communist party to guide our self-organized struggle, and not in the electoral circus which chains our consciousness within the ballot box prison.

Who We Are

"The IWG stands for a global society where production is for need and not profit (and is therefore sustainable), where the state, national frontiers and money have been abolished, where collective power is exercised through class-wide organizations like workers' councils. This has to mean the active, daily participation of the majority aiming for the interests of all. Only then can the world be rid of the capitalist offspring of poverty, hunger, oppression and war: we call it communism but this vision has nothing in common with Stalinist state capitalism and the old USSR.

In order to get there we are working to create a world working class political organization - a 'party' for want of a better word - not a government in waiting but a guide in the struggle for a new world. We by no means claim to be that party but we do aim to be one of the elements which will need to come together in its formation. As the working class, the majority of the world's population, is more and more faced with the consequences of a crumbling capitalist system, it will have to unite and overthrow the capitalist system and its bloody imperialist appetites."

The Internationalist Workers' Group is the US affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency.

For more information about our organization and answers to frequently answered questions: <https://www.leftcom.org/en/about-us>

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