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USA

11 September: one year later, US workers still feel the fallout

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By 12 September 2001, commentators were already telling Americans that "nothing will ever be the same again". In the year since then, workers have found that some things have changed a lot, and others not at all - but that they now have a new rationale, the war on terrorism. Increasingly, national security is invoked to cover the anti-labour agenda of the Bush Administration and the employers.

Plans for the restructuring of labour-management relations in both the public and private sectors - plans that often existed long before September 11 - have become part and parcel of the new order. Whether through mass layoffs and other economic dislocations, or through the more direct effects of governmental policy, working people are discovering that forces are in motion that may change much in our daily lives and in the workplace.

One year later, **Labor Notes** looks at the cumulative effects of 11 September and the government's response.

Immediate fallout

Fallout from 11 September was immediate for many workers. The quick drop into recession for an economy already wracked by structural weakness unleashed a wave of mass layoffs. In the 18 weeks after 11 September, 125,637 workers from 430 workplaces, mostly in the airline and hotel/tourism industries, were laid off as a direct result of the attacks.

Protests against US policies attacking workers' rights under the figleaf of the 'war against terrorism'...

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The resulting budget shortfalls also led to wage freezes for public employees in many communities. In Miami, for example, teachers and classified employees recently held a large-scale sick-out in response to this trend.

A drive to exact concessions from unions had existed long before the World Trade Centre fell, but some companies - airlines in particular - took advantage of the crisis to demand more givebacks. According to Joshua Freeze, a member of the Association of Flight Attendants, "Months before 11 September, airlines began asking employee groups for concessions. It is important to note that the reason they had to ask at all is that the airline industry is at least 80 percent unionized, probably the most heavily organized industry in the U.S."

Homeland security

Besides suffering this indirect blowback from the events of 11 September, thousands of workers have been directly affected by governmental policies stemming from the war on terrorism. From firings of non-citizens, to stripping 170,000 federal employees of union protection, to enlistment of workers in a national snoop system, the impact is readily apparent.

Efforts to create the new Department of Homeland Security have meant more to workers than a brand new layer of bureaucracy. Buried inside the original 35-page bill to create the DHS super-agency is a 68-word sentence under

Section 730 that allows the President to strip at will all collective bargaining rights and Title 5 civil service protections from the roughly 170,000 new DHS employees.

The sentence calls for a new management system that is "flexible", "contemporary", and "grounded in the public employment principles of merit and fitness".

Bobby Harnage, president of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), called the language "a code word for a mind set that would undermine civil service's pay, health insurance, and retirement systems, merit-based hiring, firing appeal rights, whistle-blower protection rights, and rights to organize and bargain collectively."

The new bill follows on a January 7, 2002 Presidential executive order that deprived close to a thousand employees in the Justice Department of their collective bargaining rights.

At times the anti-labour aims of these efforts have been explicitly spelled out. Michael Franc, a vice president of the influential right-wing Heritage Foundation think tank, stated in the Houston Chronicle June 20 that "this new agency and the war on terrorism is the conservative agenda between now and the elections".

Franc added that "asserting managerial rights over unions, ensuring no race or gender hiring targets are allowed, and preventing attempts to apply prevailing wage laws - will be a large part of the debate". Franc has strong ties to Rep. Richard Armey of Texas, who presided over the House select committee charged with moving the bill through Congress.

AFGE currently represents about 50,000 of the affected workers in a number of the agencies that will be combined into the DHS, from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Coast Guard, Immigration and Naturalization Service (including the Border Patrol), and Federal Protective Service. Jackie Simon of AFGE says that the union is mobilizing its members in a pressure campaign to drop the anti-worker section from the final version of the bill.

Senate Democrats moved to throw out the anti-union provisions, but the bill's final status is undetermined while Congress adjourns for the summer. However, President Bush has vowed to veto the bill if section 730 is dropped in later deliberations.

Firing legal immigrants

The Aviation and Transportation Security Act prohibits workers who aren't citizens from holding airport screening jobs. Possibly upwards of 6,000 currently employed non-citizens (about 25% of the national screener workforce), will be fired when the legislation comes into full effect on 19 November.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/09_US_police.jpg]

... and 'the defence of democracy', encounter limited tolerance from the state

The vast majority of non-citizen screeners are permanent legal residents, many with years of experience. Besides the injustice to the workers to be axed, activists are concerned that the requirement of citizenship will "start bleeding into other jobs" at airports and elsewhere.

Airport screeners on the West Coast will be hit most dramatically. In several major airports in California close to 80%

of screeners are immigrants, mostly Filipinos. The Service Employees union, which represents many of the screeners, filed a joint lawsuit with the American Civil Liberties Union in January on behalf of the affected screeners. A grassroots campaign that involved Filipino and peace and justice activists has organized around the issue in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Operation TIPS

Policy changes that impact the lives of workers directly are not limited to the economic realm. The Department of Justice revealed a plan, Operations TIPS (Terrorism Information and Prevention System), to draw millions of American workers into a vast network of surveillance.

According to the newly formed Citizen Corps (a federal government-run volunteer group), TIPS would be "a national reporting system that allows these workers, whose routines make them well-positioned to recognize unusual events, to report suspicious activity".

Talks began mid-July between the Justice Department and managers of large firms whose workers have frequent interactions with the public, such as letter carriers, utility employees, delivery drivers, ship captains, truck drivers, and train conductors. The ultimate aim of TIPS is to bring one million workers into the system as a pool of potential informants.

Much resistance to the plan has already come from civil libertarians and sections of the labour movement. A resolution passed by the California Federation of Labor July 24 strongly condemned the plan, comparing TIPS to efforts in Nazi Germany to turn the nation's workforce into a network of informants and spies. The National Association of Letter Carriers announced on July 17 that it would not cooperate with the plan. Representatives of the Utility Workers of America stated shortly afterward that they were "not in favour of having our members act as informants".

Some rank-and-file workers have been even stronger in their criticisms. Butch Traylor, a UPS driver and member of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, commented on TIPS in a New York Times op-ed: "I worry about whose definition of 'suspicious' is going to be used.... It bothers me that those charged with defending our freedom would so cavalierly foster such an atmosphere of fear and suspicion.

"It bothers me to think that my postman might be paying more attention to where my mail is coming from than to where it's supposed to go.... A program that asks people like us to do surveillance... threatens the trust we've built in the communities we serve every day."

Not all sections of the labour movement disapprove of TIPS; Traylor's president James Hoffa has embraced the plan. According to Teamsters spokesman Rob Black, "Mr. Hoffa said that Teamster members can be the eyes and ears of the war on terrorism."

Mounting opposition to TIPS has already forced some scale-back from the original plans. The Justice Department announced August 9 that it would no longer seek to include postal and utility workers in the operation.

Chilling strikes

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The Bush Administration, claiming national security concerns, has intervened directly in contract negotiations for a pillar of the labour movement - the western dockers. As early as mid-May, when negotiators for the Longshore union (ILWU) and the employers sat down for talks, the Administration had already begun to craft a response that will mostly likely rely on a Taft-Hartley injunction.

A similar use of the "national emergency" provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act has not been used. Jimmy Carter tried it out on the 1978 coal miners' strikes. Ironically, in 1978, one of the strongest responses to the injunction came from the ILWU, who promised a one-day West Coast-wide strike if the military was used to run the mines.

*This article is taken from the September issue of the US publication **Labor Notes**.*