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LABOR 101

SOCIALISM AND THE LABOR MOVEMENT

PM Press PAMPHLET SERIES No. 0000

Labor 101

Socialism and the Labor Movement

Fred Glass



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Socialist contingent, May Day march, San Francisco, 2021.
Photo by Fred Glass.

Who Should Read This Pamphlet

Unions have been essential institutions for worker empowerment for more than a century and a half and remain so today. More than 14 million workers currently belong to unions in the United States. While that is obviously a lot of people, in a workforce of 150 million, union density (10 percent) is at a ninety-five-year low, and most people don't know what a union is and does—at least, not through direct experience. This is unfortunate, since institutions empowering workers in capitalist America are not to be found on every street corner. If you are a democratic socialist or progressive—or really anyone, union or non-union, who wants more power and security within and outside your workplace—then the information in this pamphlet is for you.



University of California workers on strike, Berkeley, October 2018. Photo by Fred Glass.

Introduction: Why Do Workers Need Unions?

Unions are organizations meant to generate and exercise working class power. They are created by and for workers to provide a space to gather, determine common interests, and act on them collectively. Working people have come up with other ways to do these things, like political parties, employee associations, worker co-ops, and worker centers, but in the United States none have proven as durable or effective as unions.

One of the most important tools unions offer workers is collective bargaining. Through collective bargaining, unions can fight for and win significant gains that individuals acting alone would find impossible to achieve. Individual workers possess nothing like the power



Oakland Education Association on strike, Oakland, February 2019. Photo by Fred Glass.

concentrated in the hands of their employer. It is only when workers confront their boss as an organized group, united in purpose, that the playing field can be somewhat leveled. Union contracts, the result of collective bargaining, have the force of law.

But unions are about much more than collective bargaining. The strongest unions are those in which the members themselves mobilize and organize legislatively and politically as well. This is necessary because what can be won at the bargaining table can be and often is lost in the legislature or at the ballot box. And while collective bargaining gets results for members, gains for the entire working class—like minimum wage and overtime laws, health and safety regulations, progressive tax policies, or unemployment insurance (or programs yet to be achieved, like universal health care)—require union-backed legislation.

To accomplish any of these things, a union above all has to be able to *organize*—to gain recognition from the employer as the bargaining agent for its members and in various other ways to make sure workers' interests are advanced inside and outside the workplace. When unions function in this manner, it is because of the bonds of solidarity they have enabled workers to build among themselves, together with workers in other unions and with broader layers of society. If there is one word that best sums up the purpose of unions, that's it: solidarity.

If there is one word that best sums up the purpose of unions, that's it: solidarity.

Not all unions act in these ways, and not all union leaders even try or intend to. Unions are necessary but usually incomplete vehicles for class struggle. It often takes socialist participation to push a union to become the type of organization that can effectively represent the interests of its members, let alone the broader interests of the working class.

What's So Essential About the Working Class?

For socialists, the working class is essential to our goal: moving beyond the enormous inequalities of capitalism, with its wealth wastefully concentrated in the hands of a tiny elite, to a society democratically controlled by its vast majority, in which, as Marx and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*, "In the place of the old bourgeois society with its classes and its class antagonisms, there will be an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

The significance of the working class lies in its transformative potential. Due to its numeric superiority and location within the economy, it is the only class that can successfully lead the struggle for socialism. But that leadership requires the achievement of a number of difficult preconditions, including a high degree of class consciousness among workers, alongside organizational structures that can transform consciousness into action and bend power. If this were easy, we would be living in a socialist world by now!

No social class exists in a vacuum. The existence of one class implies the existence of others with which it has fundamental relationships. Many bookshelves have been filled on this topic, so what follows is just a sketch or beginning for study and understanding.

The most important concept about social class is that it is *a shared relationship among a group of people to the means of production, distribution, and exchange*: i.e., do they own a piece of the power centers of society, and if so, do they own enough that it matters in terms of power? Here are snapshots of the major classes of capitalist society from this perspective.

Working class

The working class is made up of people who have nothing to sell in the marketplace but their labor power. To belong to the working class, it mostly doesn't matter whether you are skilled or unskilled,

are educated or uneducated, have tools or need to borrow or rent them. If you are a carpenter, a teacher, a software engineer, an actor, an artist, or a nurse, it can be said you own your own means of production: the knowledge, skills, and some or all of the tools of your trade. Regardless, if you need to sell your labor power to survive, you are a worker and part of the working class.

The working class is exploited by capital: Workers create more value than they are paid. Goods-producing workers create surplus value, which becomes profit. The terms of employment and workplace conditions are established by the owners of capital and communicated via management. As labor historian David Montgomery once noted, under capitalism, the greater the role a person plays in making a decision, the less likely that individual is to be affected by the decision—although a union in a workplace means that workers have something to say about that.

Estimates vary as to the precise size of the working class (usually somewhere between 60 and 80 percent), but in any case, it is undeniably the vast majority of the populace.

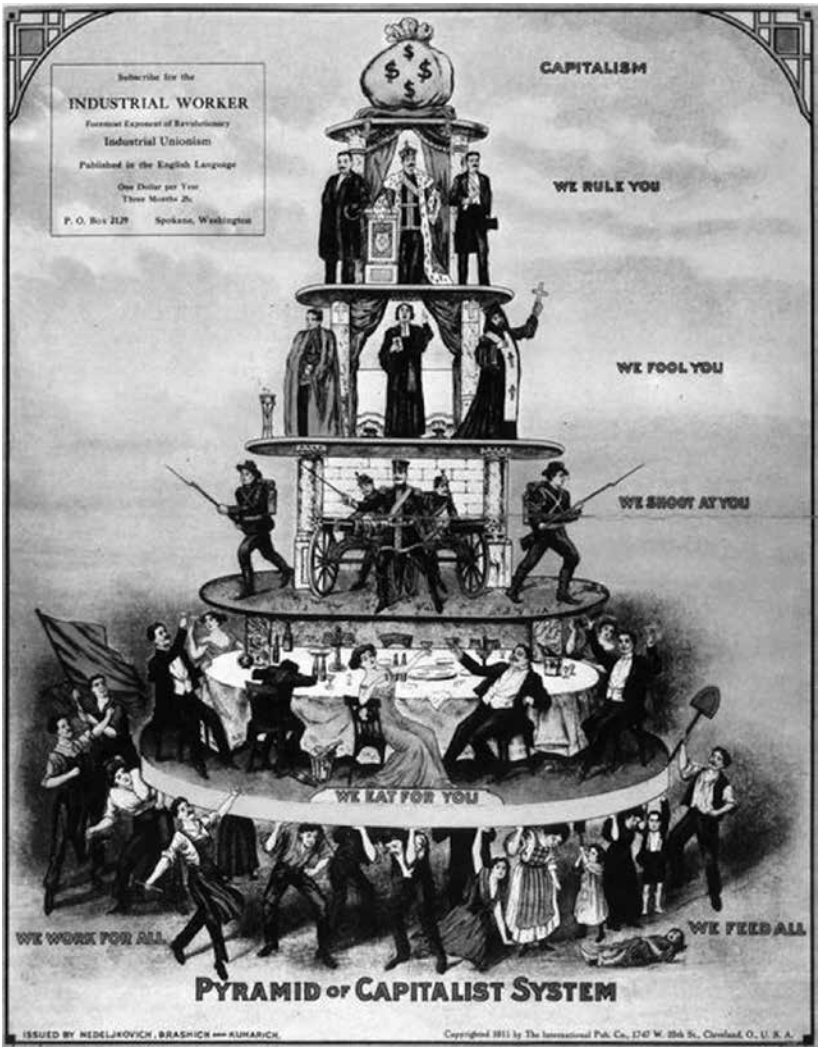
Middle class

There are more like two middle classes, not a single middle class, and a prevalent but mistaken notion of another supposed type of middle class. The first two are:

- The *"classical" middle class*, consisting of small business owners or shopkeepers, going back through the Middle Ages and beyond, and also known as the *petit bourgeoisie*. They may employ a few workers and own a small amount of the means of production, exchange, or distribution.
- The type of middle class that arose with the division of labor in industrial society, called the *professional/managerial/technical class*, with a significant enough education or skill set that they exercise more control over their work life than most workers,

and might exercise that control over others as well (hire and fire).

The middle classes, while not as large as the working class, include millions of people whose livelihoods are not assured and who



IWW poster, *Industrial Worker*, 1911. Artist unknown.

float between relatively privileged economic positions and the need to take wage employment to make ends meet. The precarity of large sectors of the middle classes means that many of these individuals are and will be sympathetic to working-class organizing, especially if carried out on behalf of universal needs like education, affordable housing, efficient transportation, health care, and the like.

The trickiest concept—pay close attention—is about the place of the unionized working class, which for several generations in the mid–twentieth century was large and prosperous enough to support the mistaken but widely shared notion that home ownership equals "middle class." Socialists understand that a unionized home-owning worker is still a worker and still part of the working class. But we live in a society with certain prevalent assumptions and have to be prepared to discuss things in those terms. Union leaders and politicians, for instance, often refer to union members as "middle class" due to their stronger earning power. We wish they wouldn't do that. Luckily, within the context of a union, we can talk about our common interests together as part of the working class and reinforce that identity through collective action.

Capitalist class

The capitalist class—or ruling class, or bourgeoisie—owns the most important means of production, exchange, and distribution. The Occupy movement designated this part of the population the "1 percent," and that is a pretty good approximation, although for real power and control over the economy and society, it is more like one-tenth of 1 percent that exercises the "rule" in "ruling class." In terms of income, the top 1 percent *begins* around $500,000 per year and pulls in more than 20 percent of total social income each year. In terms of wealth, the 1 percent owns somewhere between one-third and 40 percent of all wealth in the United States. And the gap between them and everyone else has been growing for decades.

But the key indicator of membership in the capitalist class is not the amount of money someone makes per se; it is their shared

location in relationship to the means of production, exchange, and distribution that provides them with their income, wealth, and power and causes them to act together in shared class interest. In terms of its power over the working class, this is expressed especially in capital's ability to create or eliminate jobs and determine the direction of economic development.

Unions, when they are working properly, can and do change the balance of power between classes.

If left alone, the capitalist class is the most powerful force shaping society. The only class with a greater *potential* power is the working class. The location of the working class within capitalist relations of production allows it—if organized, unified, and determined—to bring the gears of the economy to a halt. Thus unions, when they are working properly, can and do change the balance of power between classes. This occurs when unions operate not simply on behalf of their own members but consciously on behalf of the working class as a whole.

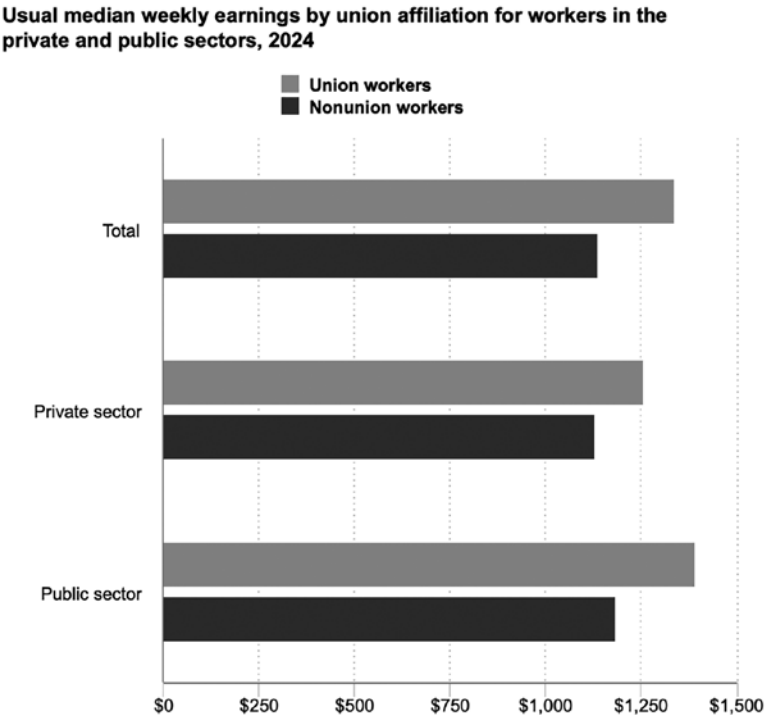
Unions: What They Are and What They Do

The difference between a union and a non-union workplace is considerable. In a workplace protected by a strong union contract, managers cannot simply impose their arbitrary will on the workforce. Changes in workplace rules need to be negotiated, and the rules as embodied in the contract are enforceable by law.

In a non-union workplace, most workers are "at will" employees, meaning they can be fired at any time, for any reason, or for no reason at all. In a union workplace, most workers can only be fired or disciplined for cause. The bottom line is that in a union workplace workers have a measure of power, dignity, and respect—and the possibility of more. It is out of the successful experience of day-to-day collective struggle in their workplace and in their union that workers can gain the confidence to expand their power.

The difference between a society with strong unions and a society with a weak labor movement is also significant. In Sweden, with a union density of 68 percent and a labor-based social democratic party, Swedes enjoy free public education (kindergarten through university), universal childcare, and health care for all.

In the US unions have been and remain imperfect institutions. Women and people of color have not always been welcome within them, and organized labor's bureaucracy often impedes, rather than promotes, member activism. Even when starting out with the best of intentions, leaders and staff can be ground down by the burden of everyday efforts to enforce the contract, shrinking the political horizons of what seems possible. Undemocratic practices can stifle member activism and growth. Union leaders more interested in individual advancement than in collective power are all too common in a society dominated by competitive values. In the worst cases, leaders and staff can succumb to the temptations of outright corruption. There are many reasons why unions often do not do what they are supposed to do.



The Union Difference, 2024.
Source: US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Nonetheless, they are one of the key mechanisms by which the working class exercises its collective might to check capital's rapacious exploitation. Unions—especially rank-and-file-oriented, militant ones—empower workers to speak out against unfair treatment and stand up for their rights. They provide a school for the working class in which workers can teach themselves how to acquire and exercise power over their own lives and the world around them and come to view themselves as members of a class. The union difference is readily apparent in a few statistics:

- Union workers make on average 12.8 percent more per week than non-union counterparts in their industry.

- The union advantage is even greater for women and workers of color: Women union members get paid 21 percent more per week than non-union women; Latino/a union members earn 16 percent more than non-union Latino/a workers; Black union workers earn nearly 13 percent more than non-union Black workers.
- 95 percent of union workers have access to employer-sponsored health insurance plans, versus just 71 percent of non-union workers. In addition, unionized employers contribute more toward employee health insurance than non-unionized employers do.
- Substantially more union workers have access to retirement benefits than non-union workers do, and union members are far more likely to be covered by the more advantageous defined benefit pension plans.[1]

In addition, union members have more control over their time spent on and off the job: greater input into their schedules and hours, stronger protection against abuses like wage theft and sexual harassment, and health and safety standards far above non-union workplaces. Where unions are strong, wages are higher for all workers. In states where unions are weak, all workers suffer. In states with anti-union "Right to Work" (for less) laws, full-time workers take home on average 7.5 percent less per year.[2]

In industries and regions with stronger unions, we find more capacity and willingness to address broader social concerns like racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, as well as health and safety and environmental issues. This is because higher standards in

1 Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, Heidi Shierholz, and Hilary Wething, "Unions Aren't Just Good for Workers—They also Benefit Communities and Democracy," Economic Policy Institute, August 20, 2025, https://www.epi.org/publication/unions-arent-just-good-for-workers-they-also-benefit-communities-and-democracy.

2 Nicole Fortin, Thomas Lemieux, and Neil Lloyd, "Impacts of Right-to-Work Laws on Unionization and Wages," Working Paper No. 30098 (National Bureau of Economic Research, August 1, 2022), https://www.nber.org/digest/202208/impacts-right-work-laws-unionization-and-wages.

some areas make problem areas stand out more, highlighting their need to be fixed.

Unions can make these kinds of differences because they are stable, dues-supported organizations with the stated mission of enabling various forms of worker power. Here's how they operate.

Governance, Finances, and Structure

Governance

Unions generally have local, regional, and national governance. The local is typically the most important point of contact between workers and their union. That contact may be rank-and-file stewards, elected leaders, or staff. The constitution and bylaws of a union determine the mechanisms of how members can create union policy and hold their elected leaders and staff accountable. But as in democracy at large, within a union the rules only go so far to ensure a responsible leadership without active involvement by the members.

Member involvement is not an easy thing to make happen. Besides how busy workers are earning their bread, not to mention what else might be going on in their lives, most have little practice in democratic processes and decision-making outside of general elections every two or four years. It can be intimidating to come to your first union meeting and hear the debates and try to puzzle through the intricacies of Robert's Rules of Order.

Yet unions are one of the few institutions in which it is possible for workers to deliberate and cast votes on matters of significance to their lives. Where else does one learn how to do this? In this way unions can and do function as schools for worker self-determination and participatory democracy.

Finances

Members' dues are the primary source of union revenue. Amounts vary by union but average roughly 1 percent of wages. Collective bar-

gaining and worker representation in disputes with management—including salaries for officials, organizers, lawyers, health and safety experts, etc.—account for the lion's share of union expenditures, but many unions spend significant amounts of their treasuries on political action and legislative advocacy.

State and national union structures are paid for by small slices of each member's union dues, called "per capitas," and usually focus their work on support for local organizing and training, as well as undertaking coordination of state and national political and legislative work.

Structure

The basic building block of union structure is the local. Here is where access to most union activities takes place. But coordinating bodies exist for most unions at the state or regional and national levels as well. A local union, like the Chicago Teachers Union, AFT Local 1, is affiliated with its state body (Illinois Federation of Teachers) and with the national organization (American Federation of Teachers). The local union elects delegates to attend and participate within the deliberations of these higher bodies of the union.

A local union is also usually connected with other unions outside its industry in a city's central labor federation or council, like the Chicago Federation of Labor, which in turn is affiliated with the Illinois Labor Federation, the state affiliate of the national AFL-CIO.

These coordinating bodies bring together union locals from many sectors of the economy to discuss and act on their members' common interests. If a union is going on strike, it seeks strike sanction from the central labor council so that members of other unions do not cross its picket lines. Before a general election, the labor council interviews and endorses candidates after listening closely to the recommendations of the unions closest to the elected office (e.g., education unions advising about school or college board elections, or electrical worker unions advising about public utility board choices). The council then

organizes contributions—money, precinct walkers, phone bankers—to those campaigns. And this local process is replicated at the state and national levels.

Major Unions

Although there are more than fifty national unions, the bulk of union membership is concentrated within a relative handful. The largest unions in the United States today, making up about two-thirds of the total membership, include:

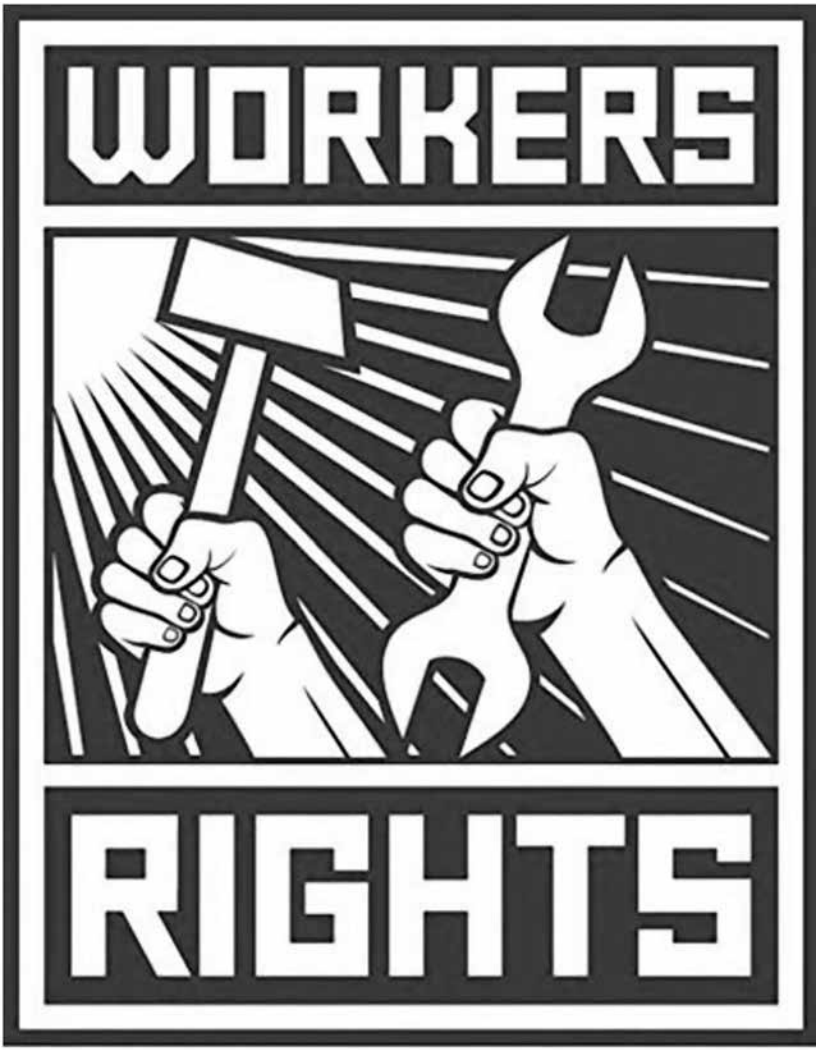
- **National Education Association (NEA)**, representing public school teachers and other educators (around 3 million members).
- **Service Employees International Union (SEIU)**, representing health care, maintenance, and other workers in both the private and public sectors (around 2 million members).
- **American Federation of Teachers (AFT)**, also a union of teachers and other school employees (1.5 million members).
- These three unions claim around 1 million members each: the **International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT)**, which represents a broad range of workers, from truck drivers to printers, in both the public and private sectors; the **American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)**, representing white- and blue-collar government employees; and the **United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)**, representing workers in grocery stores and food-processing industries.

Why Unions Matter to Socialists

Unions are the only institutions capable of halting production—the source of the bosses' wealth—and can create social disruption on a large scale. Through unions, workers can develop class consciousness. Even the most cautious unions are predicated on the concept

that employers and workers have distinct interests. Union actions on the job, whether they take the form of grievance disputes or strikes, immerse workers directly in the dynamics of class struggle.

Unions are among the few American institutions that can bridge racial, gender, and ethnic lines, enabling solidarity to counter the divisiveness that increasingly fractures our society. Unions promote the



value of mutuality and cooperation, principles that undermine the bedrock capitalist tenets of avarice, competition, and self-interest.

Although unions are outspent by corporations each election cycle by a factor of anywhere from 3:1 to 16:1, they are the only force that comes close to balancing the impact of corporate and ruling-class political spending.

To become genuinely democratic and radical, unions need socialist members. And to challenge capitalist hegemony, socialists need unions. So it's simple: To socialists, unions really matter.

The central questions for socialists and other progressives about unions are these: What makes a union not just effective on behalf of its members, but capable of lifting up workers to the next stage of the class struggle? If your union is not effective, how do you recognize that, and what can you do about it?

Ineffective Unions

An ineffective union may not be visible as such on the surface, but once you get a closer look at the day-to-day workings of the organization, the warning signs are not hard to spot: few or no meetings, irregular or no communications with members about the work of leaders and staff, no place in which to provide input on leaders' decisions, no training or member education to enable rank-and-file activism, little or no workplace representation structure like elected stewards and steward councils, failure to enforce the contract, and a weak collective bargaining agreement.

Effective Unions

An effective union "brings home the bacon" in the form of a strong contract with vigilant enforcement of its provisions. In addition, it inverts the above description of ineffective unions: adequate number of meetings; regular communications, including two-way communications; a robust member education program; and so on. But it also looks beyond its own edges to cultivate and maintain relationships

with other unions and other types of organizations in the broader community. It is not possible to practice solidarity without these relationships, and it is hard if not unreasonable to call on the community for help when needed if your union hasn't been there for them.

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Schools for Class Struggle

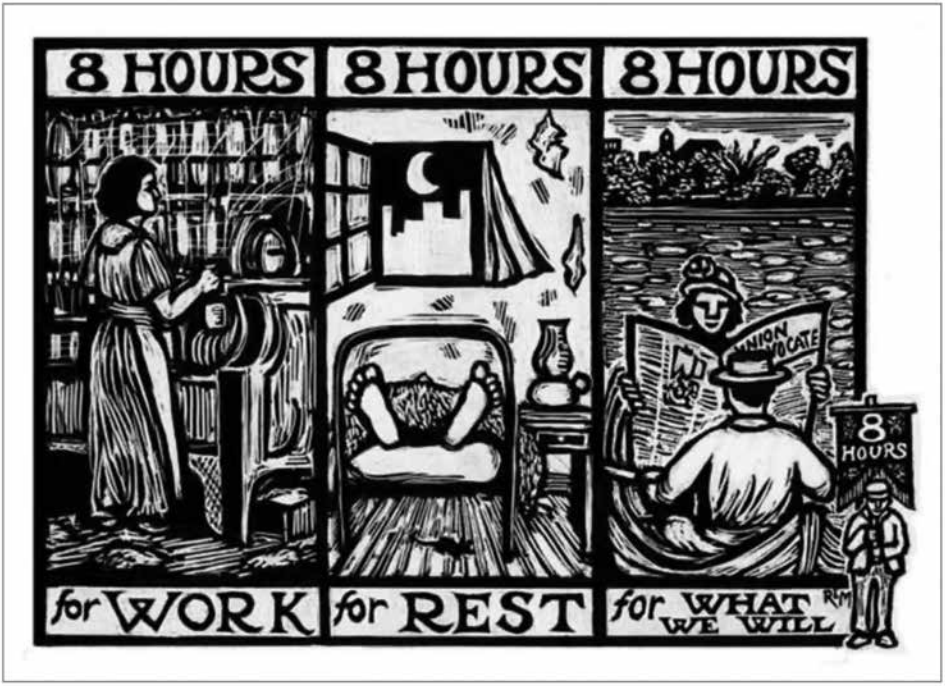
A union offers the opportunity to build working-class power, whether helping a weak union become stronger or participating in a strong union's advocacy for members and the working class. While unions are not in and of themselves socialist institutions, they contain the potential to become incubators of fundamental social change by providing the space to bring together workers in collective action. They give individual socialists a place to test their ideas in practice, learn what works and what doesn't, and gain the confidence that comes with winning. Unions alone are not sufficient for socialist transformation of society, but they are indispensable—through the experience of solidarity—in making that change happen.

A Short History of American Labor

The United States has not been a receptive environment for socialist ideas for the bulk of its history—at least, not compared with the rest of the world. Elsewhere, labor parties or social democratic parties based in the labor movement have provided political allies for workers alongside the workplace advocacy of unions. Here, unions have had to soldier along on their own, often on the receiving end of anti-communist propaganda for the mildest of reform proposals. Yet it is no coincidence that the moments of American history most transformative for unions and the working class have been those in which socialists were centrally involved.

Unions have been around since soon after the American Revolution. As the numbers of wage earners in the early republic grew, workers found they needed to form organizations to defend their common interests and advance their economic and political agendas. By the early nineteenth century, working people were creating economic organizations (unions) and political organizations (workingmen's parties) to advocate for shorter workdays, better pay, and such social changes as free public education for all. Such organizing occurred despite court decisions ruling that unions constituted illegal conspiracies.

In 1877 workers engaged in direct action on a national basis for the first time. The great railroad strikes of that year demonstrated clearly to workers that the ability of "the monied interests"—corporations—to influence the course of events and to sway elected officials and the courts had to be matched by well-organized workers. In St. Louis, led by the socialist Workingmen's Party of the United States, the railroad strike expanded to become a citywide general strike in which workers peacefully ran the city for a week before it was crushed by force. Responding to the growing power of national corporations, local unions began to reach out to one another, forming national organizations as well.



The struggle for the eight-hour day in the nineteenth century raised the slogan "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will." Poster by Ricardo Levins Morales, 1997.

Combined in the 1880s into the American Federation of Labor (AFL), these worker organizations, mostly representing white skilled craftsmen, sought "a fair day's work for a fair day's pay." Their principal means to achieve their goals was collective bargaining, but political action played a major role too. In the view of AFL leader Samuel Gompers, rather than align itself with one or another political party, labor should weigh candidates and parties on the basis of their actions in relation to workers' interests and should "reward its friends and punish its enemies."

The Knights of Labor, rivaling the AFL in the final decades of the nineteenth century, espoused a different philosophy. Its local assemblies could represent either a single occupation or combine many in a "mixed assembly," a nascent form of what would become known

as "industrial unionism." More inclusive than the AFL, it admitted unskilled workers, women, and (unevenly) workers of color. It also looked toward a future without capitalism, which it called a "cooperative commonwealth." For a few years its membership outstripped the AFL's, but by the mid-1890s, after suffering political attacks and the missteps of its leadership, it dwindled into irrelevance.

In this period rose the call for an eight-hour day, so that workers and their families might have some time to spend together and celebrate life with leisure. Its advocates had a slogan: "Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will." At a time when ten- and twelve-hour workdays were common, along with six- and even seven-day workweeks, the push for an eight-hour day was considered radical by employers and their anti-worker allies.

The fight for an eight-hour day crested in 1886, when on May Day a third of a million workers answered the call for a general strike to achieve the goal. However, in Chicago a bomb thrown into the ranks of police breaking up a demonstration led to severe anti-union repression and the nation's first employer-orchestrated Red Scare. The eight-hour cause was set back for decades.

The rise of the Socialist Party at the turn of the century signaled a major step forward for working-class organization and consciousness. With a membership of more than one hundred thousand at its peak, including many union members on the ground and hundreds of elected officials in local and state governments, the party exerted a strong pull to the left on political discourse and regularly polled a third of the vote in AFL conventions.

The Socialist Party, together with the Western Federation of Miners and a smaller left-wing group, the Socialist Labor Party, launched the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. The IWW, whose members are known as "Wobblies," sharply contrasted its inclusive structure with the AFL's exclusive (and often racist) unionism. Proposing "one big union" for all workers, the IWW differed fundamentally from the craft-oriented AFL in its insistence on industrial organizing, meaning

everyone in the same workplace in the same union. Its membership—men and women, workers of color alongside whites, immigrants as well as native-born, skilled and unskilled—was drawn principally from industries and populations ignored or denigrated by the AFL. It looked toward the day when a new worker-run society would be born through a massive general strike.

The IWW differed fundamentally from the craft-oriented AFL in its insistence on industrial organizing, meaning everyone in the same workplace in the same union.

The Socialist Party left the IWW a few years after its formation due to the Wobblies' aversion to political action, although many individual workers continued to belong to both. The IWW led several important mass strikes before World War I, and the Socialist Party brought basic infrastructure to working-class neighborhoods in cities that it ran, such as Milwaukee. The two organizations continued to attract tens of thousands of workers until an anti-immigrant, anti-socialist Red Scare in the guise of patriotism during and after World War I decimated both groups.

Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, and during this domestic offensive against the left, the Socialist Party split, and out of the division arose the next dominant force on the left, the Communist Party. In a time of general weakness for the American left and labor, communists (and socialists) nonetheless continued to work within established AFL unions and also experimented with new structures like the Trade Union Educational League and unemployed councils, planting the seeds of new workers' movements that took root in the early years of the Great Depression.

It wasn't until 1935 that a federal law—the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA)—passed Congress, finally giving workers in most industries in the private sector the legal right to form unions



International Longshore and Warehouse Union contingent, Labor Day march, San Francisco, 1948. Source: San Francisco State University Labor Archives and Research Center.

and engage in concerted activities on their own behalf. Collective bargaining between workers and employers became the law of the land and remains so today. However, that right is under increasing pressure from capital and its representatives in elected office.

Although identified in the public mind with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, passage of the NLRA and the rest of the New Deal during the Great Depression did not occur due to the benevolence of the president or the Democratic Party. Rather, it was the direct result of events such as citywide general strikes in San Francisco, Toledo, and Minneapolis in 1934, along with factory occupations, sit-down strikes, and industry-wide organizing in basic industry in the mid- and late 1930s, all of which featured substantial leadership from

leftists of varying stripes and established workers' power as a social force to be reckoned with. Among other impacts, these events forced a restructuring of the AFL.

In 1935 a number of AFL union leaders formed the Committee for Industrial Organization, or CIO. They believed everyone in a large industrial workplace should join the same union instead of having different crafts in different unions. As a result, the new industrial unions became a de facto civil rights movement, because like the IWW before them they organized everyone together—whites and people of color, men and women, native-born and immigrants.

In 1937 the old-guard AFL leaders expelled the CIO unions, and for the next two decades the rival federations vied for workers' allegiances. For a decade the CIO (renamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations) leadership maintained a working relationship between liberals and radicals. Hundreds of socialists and communists were hired as organizers by the CIO, part of the reason for its success, militancy, and generally progressive politics, alongside a willingness of tens of thousands of rank-and-file union members to stand up and insist on unionization, usually in the face of intimidation and sometimes extreme violence.

Gaining millions of new members, the labor movement became the backbone of the coalition that elected Franklin D. Roosevelt president to an unprecedented four terms. Conscious of the enormous upsurge in unionization and worker activism, Roosevelt signed several laws in addition to the NLRA benefiting workers, including the Social Security Act, the Unemployment Insurance Act, the GI Bill (subsidizing housing and higher education), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA).

The FLSA set a minimum wage, declared the standard workday to be eight hours, and set the standard workweek at forty hours. It regulated child labor and mandated payment of time and a half (overtime) for work past the forty-hour week. More than any other law, the FLSA is what's behind the bumper sticker that reads, "The labor movement: the folks that brought you the weekend."

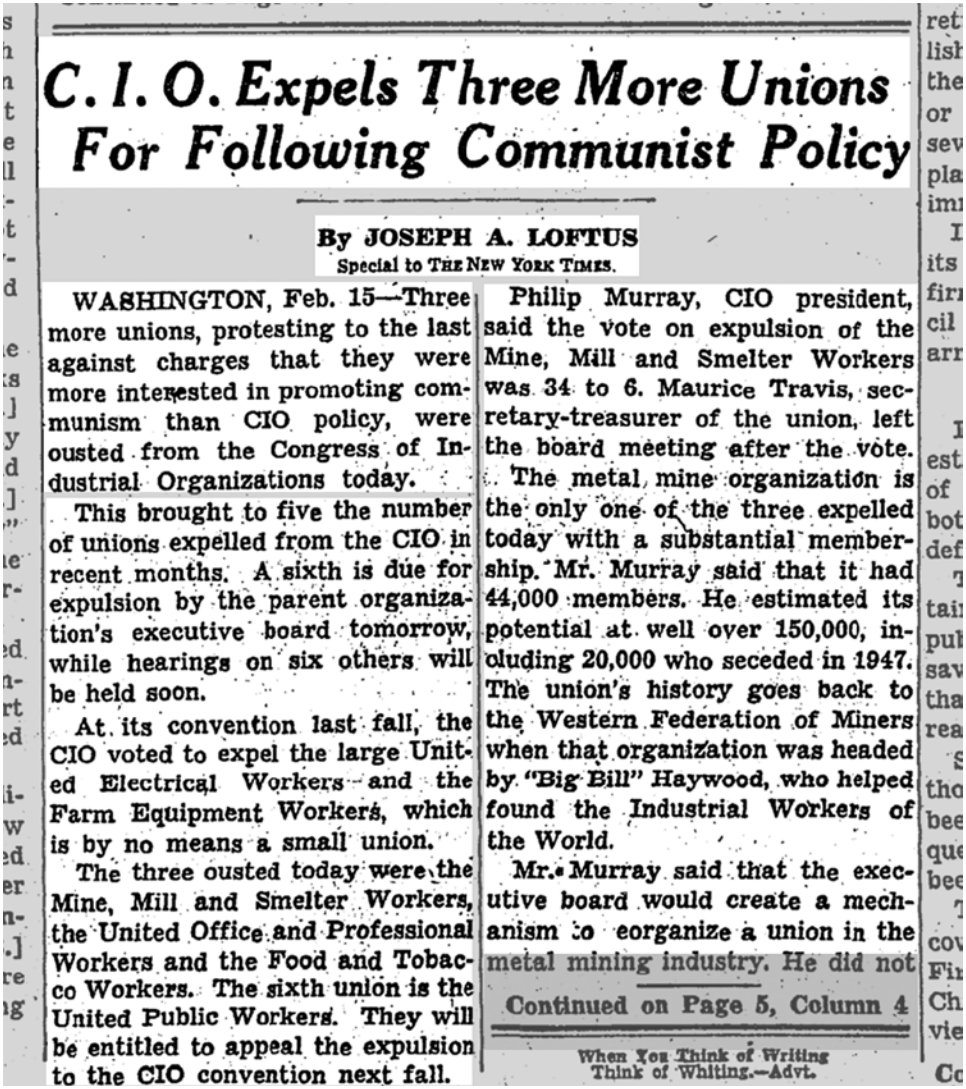
The engine driving these transformative laws was mass direct action. But this equation changed during World War II, during which both the AFL and the CIO agreed to a "no strike" pledge to keep assembly lines moving for the war effort. The Communist Party, previously a leader in militant shop floor action, lost credibility among many union activists for reversing its stance and subordinating class struggle to production.

Postwar collective bargaining institutionalized some of the policies introduced during the war, which had the effect of channeling workplace conflict resolution away from rank-and-file direct action and into more staff-driven bureaucratic and legalistic mechanisms like detailed grievance procedures. Instead of taking matters into their own hands when problems arose, workers were expected to "let the union take care of it."

The conservatizing impact of these changes was reinforced by the onset of the Cold War. In 1946 the largest strike wave in US history, including 4.5 million workers on the picket lines and a half dozen citywide general strikes—a response to an employers' offensive seeking to roll back the gains of the previous period of worker militancy—ended with wage increases and a grudging recognition by the capitalist class that unions were here to stay. But in the process, the unions let go of the potential to leverage their militancy and transform some fundamental rules of the game between labor and capital. In perhaps the best-known instance, the United Auto Workers, after initially demanding that the companies not pass on the cost of wage increases to working-class consumers in the sticker prices of cars, backed off, ceding such decisions to "management rights."

Shortly afterward, when Republicans captured full control of Congress, the Taft-Hartley Act reversed key sections of the NLRA, banning closed shops, mass picketing, and secondary boycotts, putting in place "Right to Work" laws, and exacerbating a growing split between left and right in organized labor with a provision requiring union representatives seeking the assistance of the National Labor

Relations Board (necessary for certifying union elections and adjudicating disputes) to sign anti-communist affidavits.



C. I. O. Expels Three More Unions For Following Communist Policy

By JOSEPH A. LOFTUS
Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 15—Three more unions, protesting to the last against charges that they were more interested in promoting communism than CIO policy, were ousted from the Congress of Industrial Organizations today.

This brought to five the number of unions expelled from the CIO in recent months. A sixth is due for expulsion by the parent organization's executive board tomorrow, while hearings on six others will be held soon.

At its convention last fall, the CIO voted to expel the large United Electrical Workers and the Farm Equipment Workers, which is by no means a small union.

The three ousted today were the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, the United Office and Professional Workers and the Food and Tobacco Workers. The sixth union is the United Public Workers. They will be entitled to appeal the expulsion to the CIO convention next fall.

Philip Murray, CIO president, said the vote on expulsion of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers was 34 to 6. Maurice Travis, secretary-treasurer of the union, left the board meeting after the vote.

The metal mine organization is the only one of the three expelled today with a substantial membership. Mr. Murray said that it had 44,000 members. He estimated its potential at well over 150,000, including 20,000 who seceded in 1947. The union's history goes back to the Western Federation of Miners when that organization was headed by "Big Bill" Haywood, who helped found the Industrial Workers of the World.

Mr. Murray said that the executive board would create a mechanism to eorganize a union in the metal mining industry. He did not

Continued on Page 5, Column 4

When You Think of Writing
Think of Whiting.—Advt.

The American labor movement cuts off its own left arm in a time of Cold War divisions. *New York Times*, May 1950. Source: San Francisco State University Labor Archives and Research Center.

In 1949–50 the CIO threw out a dozen of its left-led unions, totaling over one-fifth of its membership. CIO and AFL alike, with intensive Red-baiting, raided these unions for years until the only ones still standing were the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and the United Electrical Workers. The UE, once one of the largest unions in the CIO with five hundred thousand members, was left with less than fifty thousand. The Taft-Hartley Act, and the Cold War climate it reinforced, remade the labor movement in a much more conservative mold.

Nonetheless, by the 1950s, large swaths of the working class were experiencing unprecedented prosperity, clawing back a larger portion of the surplus value they produced. Through collective bargaining, health and retirement benefits became a standard part of employee compensation. Thanks to the GI Bill, workers went to college in re-



Social workers on strike, Los Angeles, June 1966. Photo by SEIU 535.

cord numbers, and more working-class families than ever before could afford to own a home. The strength of organized labor enabled most working people to rise from the economic uncertainties that had plagued them, generation after generation, since the Industrial Revolution.

Yet all was not well. Left out of this picture of a rising working class were most people of color. Access to homeownership, the main source of wealth generation for the working class, was largely denied Black and Brown families through restrictive housing covenants, redlining, and the rules of federally guaranteed home loans drawn up during the New Deal to appease Southern lawmakers in exchange for their votes.

Unions were divided over how strong a stand to take for civil rights. As the US was preparing for World War II, A. Philip Randolph and C.L. Dellums, leaders of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a march on Washington against job discrimination in rapidly expanding defense industries. In response Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, the Fair Employment Practices Act, banning racist hiring and promotion practices for the duration. But the FEPA expired at the end of the war.

Unions were divided over how strong a stand to take for civil rights.

The CIO, in coalition with civil rights and other community organizations, lobbied for passage of a new federal FEP law. When it failed to pass Congress, the coalition worked to pass state FEP laws. While labor support was uneven, the unions that did participate provided most of the funding and staffing for these efforts; FEP laws passed in many states in the 1940s and '50s.

As civil rights struggles gained momentum, attitudes and policies within labor ranged from a refusal to reform exclusionary policies, especially in the building trades and unions in the South, to solid

support, as when the American Federation of Teachers expelled its segregated locals in the South in 1957 and the UAW paid for the buses that brought tens of thousands of marchers to Washington, DC, for the iconic March for Jobs and Freedom in 1963.

By the time the AFL and CIO merged in 1955, one-third of the working class was enrolled in unions. The NLRA, however, had left some workers outside its protections. The rights of public employees—workers employed by the federal, state, county, and city governments—along with farm workers, domestic workers, and a few other categories, were not addressed. These workers were forced to seek collective bargaining rights piecemeal, mostly through state legislation. The biggest successes for union organizing in the 1960s and '70s occurred in the public sector, where millions of workers, taking their cue from the militant civil rights movement of that era, mounted a broad offensive in the streets and in state legislatures to win collective bargaining rights that the NLRA had denied them thirty years before.

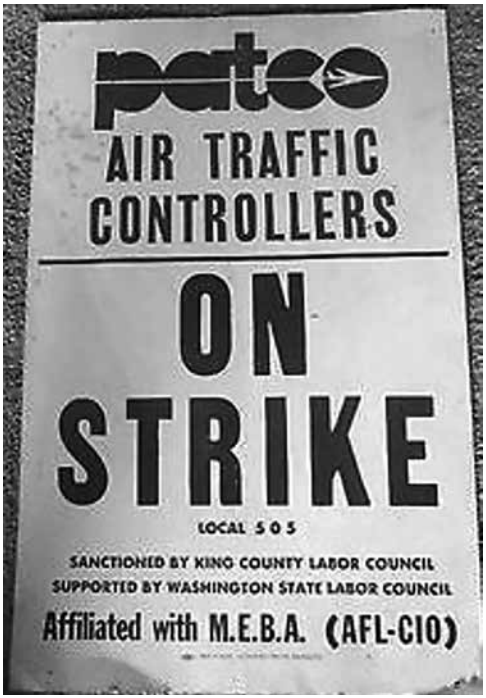
Although the Communist and Socialist Parties had by this time lost much of their former size and influence, their remnants along with elements of the New Left played important roles in public sector unionism and in carrying anti-war and anti-discrimination politics into the industrial unions in auto and steel.

To meet the needs of all workers—outside as well as within unions—in this prosperous time, organized labor worked with allies in Congress to pass the Medicare and Medicaid programs and Head Start. Union support for the Equal Pay Act, Civil Rights Act, and Voting Rights Act was likewise key to their enactment. Within the cramped Cold War limits of its anti-communist worldview, organized labor wielded a powerful voice for workers in the United States' two-party political system, culminating in 1970 with the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, establishing a federal agency to regulate and oversee enforcement of workplace health and safety standards.

Labor's Decline

But by the 1980s, unions were on the defensive and in decline. Most union leaders had either forgotten the militant lessons of the 1930s or never learned them. When the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike in 1981, President Ronald Reagan seized the opportunity to send a clear signal to capital and labor that the informal decades-long "partnership" between the classes had come to an end. He fired and permanently replaced ten thousand strikers.

In an existential moment for American labor, AFL-CIO leaders briefly debated whether to call a general strike of the airline industry—but unused to and uncomfortable with class struggle, they instead retreated from battle. Reagan proceeded to slash taxes on the rich, gut government regulatory agencies and social programs, and utilize dog-whistle racist rhetoric to divide the working class and divert attention from capital's actions. What we now call "neoliberalism"—a historical stage of capitalist development and a philosophy advocating that the market should decide everything, with weak unions, low taxes on the rich and corporations, and a minimal welfare state with privatized public services—came to dominate the political stage and economic policies.



Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) picket sign, August 1981.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, corporations sent millions of unionized industrial jobs overseas in a globalizing economy to take advantage of cheap labor, and automated millions more out of existence. Most new jobs produced in the US were non-union, and the shrinking labor movement failed to organize much of the growing sectors of the economy, like tech, services, and retail. Democratic and Republican administrations alike pursued policies that increased economic inequality—although the losses were typically more severe under Republican rule.

Union values and labor standards, for more than forty years, have been under constant attack. Today, despite the clear advantages offered by unions to working people, organized labor represents but 10 percent of the workforce. Still, public opinion surveys indicate a majority of workers would join a union in their workplace. Why don't they? Because they fear getting fired during organizing campaigns. The NLRA's protections have been rendered far less effective by adverse legislation and court decisions, budget cuts, and reductions in personnel. In the private sector, just under 6 percent of workers are in unions. This is the lowest percentage of unionized workers since before the Great Depression.

Despite scattered valiant efforts by workers and their local unions in steel, auto, garment, trucking, and other industries over the decades to resist corporate assaults, the general response of national labor leadership to the relentless attrition of their membership has been indecision, paralysis, and ill-considered attempts to try to hold on to as much of their shrinking domains as possible through concessions and mostly fruitless appeals to the Democratic Party.

Alongside the falling unionization rate of the working class is the consequence: growing economic inequality. In the three decades following World War II, with unionization at its strongest, the top 1 percent's share of annual income hovered around 10 percent. The salaries of CEOs of large corporations averaged twelve times the amount of their employees. Today the 1 percent's share of annual

national income is approaching 25 percent, and CEOs make hundreds of times what their workers make. Taxes on the wealthy and corporations have been slashed to a fraction of the rates they used to pay to fund government-provided social programs needed by everyone.

Unions were once the anchor of the political coalitions advocating for and protecting policies that lifted up the working class and restrained capital from its most predatory practices. It will take rebuilding the labor movement on the basis of a class struggle program before that social equation can be rebalanced.



Justice for Janitors demonstration, Century City, Los Angeles, 1990. Photo by SEIU.

Renewed Hope

Encouraging signs of more militant union thinking and action have emerged in the past few years. The strike weapon, which had fallen into disuse in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, has been making a comeback. And socialists have been playing an important role in several of these struggles.

Education unions led the way, with a "red state revolt" of mass strikes in 2018 involving hundreds of thousands of teachers and education support personnel in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona pushing back against years of draconian austerity measures in their schools. The following year local education strikes erupted in cities across the nation, from Oakland and Los Angeles to Chicago and cities in North Carolina. Most were successful, with increases in pay and improved teaching and learning conditions resulting from the job actions bolstered by widespread community support for the picket lines.

The private sector showed a significant uptick in walkouts as well. In 2018 hotel workers in UNITE HERE hit the bricks in eight cities, shuttering two dozen Marriott hotels for two months and winning substantial wage increases alongside pathbreaking housekeeper protections against sexual harassment. The following year fifty thousand autoworkers closed GM plants for more than five weeks, gaining salary increases and corporate investment guarantees in continuing production.

Thirty thousand members of the United Food and Commercial Workers struck Stop & Shop markets in New England in spring 2019. After eleven days the agreement preserved health insurance and pensions against proposed cuts and raised wages. The company lost $220 million during the walkout, demonstrating the economic clout that workers can wield when they are organized.

In all, the surge in 2018–19 represented the largest number of workdays lost to strikes in thirty-five years, with close to half a million

workers taking part each year. With this background as inspiration, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and heightened public appreciation for frontline workers, hundreds of smaller and often spontaneous strikes took place in 2020 and 2021 demanding safety measures and hazard pay in factories, stores, hospitals, warehouses, and other businesses. Teachers across the country were able to fend off unsafe school reopenings with their strike threat made credible by the recent walkouts. The pandemic, however, restricted the number of strikes to far fewer workers than in 2018–19.

The numbers bumped up again as the nation emerged from the pandemic. In 2022 a quarter million workers walked out in several industries, and the number of strikers doubled again in 2023, making it the biggest strike year since 2000. Corporations previously considered impregnable, like Starbucks and Amazon, discovered organizing drives in their workforces. United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain, following his union's decisive "Stand Up" strike victory over the "Big Three" car manufacturing companies late in the year, issued a call for all unions to line up their contracts for expiration on May 1, 2028, potentially setting up a display of mass worker power unseen in three-quarters of a century.

Typically, public opinion shifts in favor of unions as they are more active and successful on behalf of large numbers of workers. This is proving true again, as opinion research shows the most favorable view toward unions among the general public in decades. A growing public awareness of the depth of economic inequality and insecurity has been accompanied by a renewed understanding of the importance of unions in combating these social ills, and in some places this has resulted in a turn by union leaders from narrower concerns toward a broader working-class orientation, such as participation in and support for the Movement for Black Lives.

One area in which unions have consistently taken a stand for the entire working class is advocacy for minimum wage increases. Low-wage workers have been hit the hardest by the increase in economic

inequality and catastrophic events like the pandemic. In recent electoral cycles, dozens of cities and counties across the country have passed "living wage" laws, thanks to vigorous efforts of unions and community allies.



Public sector unions led a successful state ballot campaign in 2012 to increase income taxes on the richest Californians.
Photo by Francisco Rodriguez.

Unions have organized similar campaigns in the private sector, such as the Fight for $15 in the fast-food industry. Attempts to unionize big-box stores and their supply chains have not yet achieved breakthrough success, but a number of unions have devoted substantial resources to these growing and critical sectors of the workforce and continue to do so.

Following progressive tax victories in California in 2012 and 2016, union-led campaigns for taxing the rich and corporations at fairer rates to fund education and social services have increased in numbers and success after decades of unions timidly avoiding the issue. The 2020 election saw such taxes pass in Multnomah County, Oregon, to

fund universal preschool and in Arizona to boost education funding, among others.

Finally, the rapid growth of Democratic Socialists of America and its active support for various labor-based electoral, legislative, and workplace solidarity campaigns has produced over the last several years something unseen for over half a century: open labor-socialist alliances and cooperation, educating the union rank and file and leaders alike about the shared interests of labor and socialists. The Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, a joint project of DSA and the United Electrical Workers, is but one of many initiatives, mostly undertaken at the local level, of this new labor-socialist co-operation.

While we have a long way to go before the American labor movement fulfills its potential as a progressive class-conscious force seriously contesting the power of capital, the last few years provide some concrete lessons and hope. None of these victories would have been possible without unions acting like unions, even if that meant rank and filers taking over and doing it themselves, as the red state teachers did, and new militant leaders replacing corrupt old-guard bureaucrats, as occurred within the UAW. It bears reiteration that a growing cohort of young socialists played significant roles in many of the recent efforts.

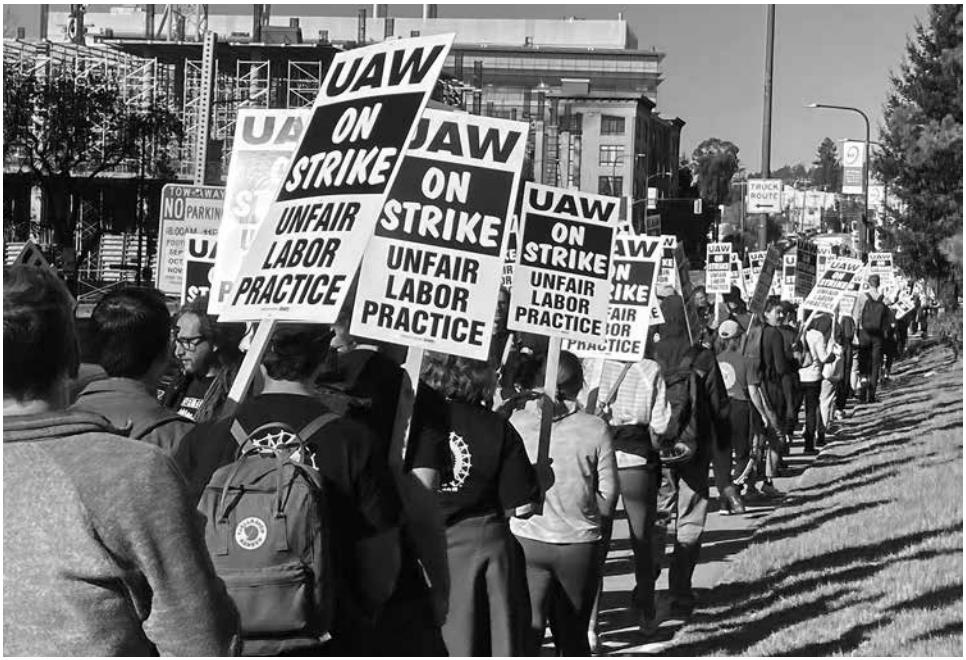
A growing cohort of young socialists played significant roles in many of the recent efforts.

The working class will need the lessons of the past few years and much more to deal effectively with the unprecedented onslaught it is currently (late 2025) facing from the Trump-MAGA fascist regime. Hundreds of thousands of federal workers have been purged, and hundreds of thousands more who remain employed have lost their right to collective bargaining. The NLRB is in the hands of viciously

anti-union lawyers doing the bidding of right-wing billionaires. Pending court cases may completely undo the remnants of the National Labor Relations Act. Federal budget cuts will most likely shrink public employment in cities, counties, and states, and their unionized workforces along with it. Tariffs may wreak similar havoc in the private sector.

What You Can Do

Whether you are a union member or not, the most important thing you can do to help build a more vital labor movement is to get together with your coworkers to discuss, and act collectively to solve, the problems you face together in your workplace and within the surrounding society. As workers, your power and protection arise from your numbers coupled with your ability to stop your boss from making profits (or providing services, if your boss is the government). At the end of the day, you can have all the legal or community or political support and fancy media campaigns in the world, but if you and your coworkers are not willing and able to act publicly with your demands and to stop work if necessary, little can be accomplished for yourselves, the labor movement, or the working class.



Academic workers represented by UAW strike and win in late 2022. Photo by Fred Glass.

If you work in a non-union workplace and conditions are ripe, you can organize it. You can also take a job in a non-union workplace with the intention of organizing; this is known as "salting" or "rooting." For instance, Amazon, the nation's second-largest employer, is almost completely non-union, offering plenty of opportunities to organize. In some cities DSA members and other young radical workers are getting new jobs together so they can support each other in such work.

If you are already a union member, most unions provide ways to become involved, such as participating in general membership meetings, where you help to make decisions on the union's direction, or joining a committee concentrating on an area of the union's work, like recruitment, legislative action, solidarity with other unions, protecting the most vulnerable members of your community, and so on. After doing this work and building legitimacy among your sisters and brothers, you can run for office (or better, run with a slate of like-minded members), where you will have more influence over union policy.

There are multiple entry points in most unions for individuals to take on responsibilities, including site rep or steward, bargaining team member, COPE committee (political action), labor council delegate, and many more possibilities. Most unions do not have an excess of activists. Often all you need to do is volunteer and the position is yours.

Some unions help their members get training in how to do these things effectively; some don't. The best unions are those that support rank-and-file involvement, and the best leaders know that. If you find yourself in one that doesn't, an option is to create a rank-and-file caucus to steer things in a more democratic and active direction.

Finally, everyone, union member or not, can support the activities of unions involved in contract disputes, legislative and political campaigns, strikes, and organizing efforts. Unions are the linchpin for organizing against the capitalist class's war on workers in America.

Building up union power will benefit everyone but billionaires. Let's do it.

Resources

- Check out the *Working In These Times* newsletter (http://www.inthesetimes.com/working) as well as *Labor Notes* (http://www.labornotes.org). Sign up for the *Labor Notes* weekly eblast. The Labor Notes project also offers local Troublemakers Schools and has a biannual convention you might consider attending.
- Look up your local Jobs with Justice chapter (http://www.jwj.org); its chapters are often the organizing space for the most progressive union activists in an area.
- If you are a member of DSA, get involved with your chapter's labor working group. Support union activities as a chapter: strikes when they occur, but also campaigns like boycotts or organizing and lobbying campaigns. If there's labor activity in your area, go to the union's website and social media for info.
- Talk with friends, family, and coworkers about unions. Perhaps they have union and workplace experiences (positive or negative) you can learn from. Or maybe they need encouragement to understand why unions are fundamental to a democratic and just society.

Glossary

agency shop—a private sector unionized workplace requiring non-union members to pay "fair-share" or agency fees to the collective bargaining agent. Due to a recent Supreme Court decision, a public sector workplace cannot be an agency shop.

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)—the merged national organization of the two main groups of unions, formed in 1955.

capital—the money, machinery, and raw materials that enable a capitalist to hire workers and offer goods or services for sale in the market. In Marxist terms, it includes the labor side of the equation, known as "variable capital," while the other elements are "fixed capital." The term also refers in shorthand to the ruling class.

central labor council—a city or county federation of local unions affiliated to various national or international unions; the local version of the AFL-CIO.

collective bargaining and **collective bargaining agreement**—when representatives of the union and company discuss wages, hours, working conditions, etc., and then write what they agree on into a contract or collective bargaining agreement, which has the force of law.

closed shop—a workplace in which union membership is required prior to employment; made illegal by the Taft-Hartley Act.

craft union—a union organized along the lines of specific skilled crafts, like electricians.

Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA)—a major piece of New Deal legislation (1938) creating national laws and oversight regarding a floor for wages, hours, and conditions at work.

general strike—a strike of all workers in a town, city, region, or country. A major power confrontation between the working class and the ruling class (and often the government) that, if successful,

results in a major shift in power relations with possible revolutionary implications.

grievance—under union contracts, a worker can bring a contract violation to the attention of a union representative (usually called a steward) or committee, which then seeks to correct it with the management.

industrial union—a union that includes all workers in a particular industry or workplace regardless of their specific occupation or skill.

Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)—a radical industrial union organized in 1905 that sought to enroll all workers in militant struggles to improve their wages and conditions at the workplace as part of a strategy to end capitalism and place the economy under workers' control.

Knights of Labor—a large and inclusive organization of working people founded in 1869, first as a secret group but later public, which included various trade union, social, cultural, educational, and reform activities toward the goal of a "cooperative commonwealth"; influential in the 1880s.

labor—a term used in multiple ways in general usage, here appearing in two senses. It refers to what workers need to do to earn a living; workers in the capitalist system bring to market their labor power to exchange for a price, or wages, which they receive from their employer. "Labor" also means the union movement, or organized labor.

Landrum-Griffith Act—the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959, modifying the NLRA to regulate union elections and finances; a mixed bag of restrictions on union activities and protections for union members in conflict with leaders.

National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and **Board (NLRB)**—New Deal legislation (1935) establishing the right of workers to engage in "concerted activities" and form unions. It created a National Labor Relations Board to oversee supervised elections and collec-

tive bargaining with employers. Modified by the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) and the Landrum-Griffith Act (1959) as well as restrictive court decisions.

Occupational Health and Safety Act (OSHA) and **Administration**—authorized the secretary of labor (1970) to establish and enforce health and safety standards in workplaces. Employer resistance and insufficient funding have hampered its implementation.

open shop—a workplace that, in contrast to both a union shop and a closed shop, employs workers regardless of union membership; a device to prevent unions from effectively representing workers at that workplace. Non-members do not have to pay dues or fees.

rank and file—the membership or social base of a union, exclusive of its leaders, and the activation of which is key to a successful union.

Right to Work—a term used by opponents of unions to establish open shop laws, meaning no one has to pay union dues. The term has nothing to do with guaranteeing anyone the right to a job.

strike—a temporary withdrawal of labor by all the workers together, in order to pressure the employer to improve their conditions; usually run by the union (but not always) and involves workers picketing at the entrances of their workplace and disrupting everyday routines. Effective strikes build strong connections with community and are the workers' ultimate weapon.

Taft-Hartley Act—adopted in 1947 to limit the power of and eliminate radicalism in unions, repealing numerous provisions of the NLRA and establishing the legality of various anti-union tactics for employers.

union local—the basic unit of unionism, bringing workers together, usually from one workplace (but not always) to discuss and act on the basis of their common concerns.

union shop—a private sector workplace in which workers must join the union as a condition of employment following a probation period.

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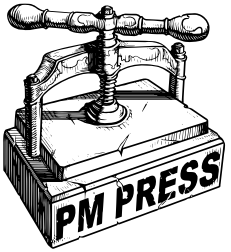
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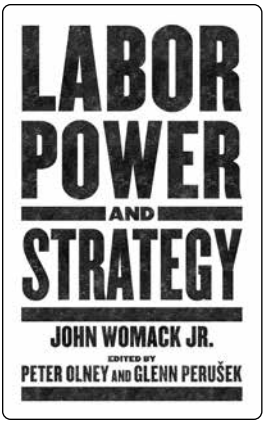
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Labor Power and Strategy

John Womack Jr.
Edited by Peter Olney and Glenn Perušek
ISBN: 978-1-62963-974-1
$16.95 • 5 x 8 • 208 pages

What would it take to topple Amazon? To change how health care works in America? To break up the media monopolies that have taken hold of our information and imaginations? How is it possible to organize those without hope working on the margins? In *Labor Power and Strategy*, legendary strategist, historian, and labor organizer John Womack speaks directly to a new generation, providing rational, radical, experience-based perspectives that help target and run smart, strategic, effective campaigns in the working class.

In this sleek, practical, pocket inspiration, Womack lays out a timely plan for identifying chokepoints and taking advantage of supply chain issues in order to seize and build labor power and solidarity. In interviews by Peter Olney of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, Womack's lively, illuminating thoughts are built upon by ten labor organizers and educators, whose responses create a rich dialogue and open a space for joyful, achievable change. With inspiring stories of triumph, this back-pocket primer is an instant classic.

Contributors include: Gene Bruskin, Carey Dall, Dan DiMaggio, Katy Fox-Hodess, Bill Fletcher Jr., Jane McAlevey, Jack Metzgar, Joel Ochoa, Melissa Shetler, and Rand Wilson.

> *"Put this unique collection of strategic insights into the hands of the new generation of militants excited about revitalizing the US labor movement and 'working-class power' might once again become something other than an abstract slogan in this country. Couldn't be more timely."*
>
> —Max Elbaum, editor at *Convergence Magazine* and author of *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che*