

ORGANIZING IN THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC NORMAL NO LONGER EXISTS



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FOREWARD

2020—*It was the **best** of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. . .*

It is certainly a year like no other and we all have been affected but it is also an opportunity for the union movement to grow, if we each work to make it happen. I have tried to collect experiences and strategies that we can use but it is challenging to write a pamphlet when events change so rapidly.

I appreciate the intelligence that Robin Johnson, a rep for AFGE, and Rosemary Trump, a longtime organizer for SEIU, have offered with their comments for improving this book. I also thank the others who have helped and who didn't want to be mentioned.

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One advantage of creating an electronic "booklet," is the possibility of constantly revising it and updating it, as new events happen. This edition is from September 19, 2020.

As always, it's dedicated to Joan, Willie and Alex.

Victims? Don't be melodramatic. Look down there. Tell me. Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stopped, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money, or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare? Free of income tax, old man. Free of income tax - the only way you can save money nowadays.”

--Harry Lime in *The Third Man*

When organizers get together, the one question we always ask is:” Why do they put up with all of this shit?”

That is, why do non-union workers put up with low wages, lousy or non-existent benefits, bad treatment and no job security and not organize.

The answer is usually “Well, they figure they’re getting by and don’t want to risk it.”

So now they are *not* getting by, millions of them all around the world. The most poorly paid are often the most “essential,” ordered to put their lives on the line in a pandemic, so they are finally organizing, with a rippling series of work stoppages and protests in dozens of countries. While the COVID-19 is a public health issue, it is also a workplace issue—pay cuts, layoffs, loss of health insurance, health and safety, job security—and the potential source of an enormous union organizing campaign but we have to make it happen.

In one way, this sudden collapse of the economy can be helpful for union organizing because it dramatically shows a large group of workers how vulnerable we are.

The “have-a-littles”--those of us between the “haves” and the “have-nots,” often called “the middle class”--are a part of the working class into which most union members fit. We have (or had) regular jobs, with regular hours of work, with benefits like health insurance, some vacation and retirement money. We owned our own homes with our own washing machines and thought we knew what the rest of our lives would be. Since we have private resources, we have not worried about the decline in public services—public housing, public transportation (about one-third of the residents of Baltimore City do not have access to a car), public banking (some payday loans charge up to 400% interest), public education, food stamps, public access to the internet (40% of Baltimore residents do not have broadband internet access, the third worst rate in the country) —you name it and we figured it was not our problem. Now we abruptly learned how vulnerable we are, so the pattern of “just getting by” is gone.

Unemployment compensation? A handout for those bums who don't wanna work, not a good worker like me. Only now, lots of us are in the same long lines--no jobs, no money, no health insurance. Many states are experiencing a crisis in the UC area, with tens of thousands of unemployed workers back in, and backed out, of the system. In Hawaii, the state has even recruited volunteers to help evaluate claims.

More people who figure that "getting by" is no longer happening are organizing without any relationship to existing unions. Workers are in the streets in their communities, although in many cases, they have been diverted to look for exclusively political solutions—for stimulus checks, for relief from rent, for the end of the Trump administration, for some sort of health insurance coverage, for better unemployment benefits.

At the height of this crisis, George Floyd was murdered by Minneapolis police officers, creating a movement of a different dimension, one which drew in many people whose work lives may not have been drastically cut by the pandemic. The subsequent murders of Breonna Taylor and Rayshard Brooks and the shooting of Jacob Blake, Jr. expanded the movement.

If we want to organize stronger unions, we will have to capture this energy, showing how issues of race and power spread across our workplaces—even when we are working from home—and our communities. In a striking moment, some of the world's highest-paid workers, professional baseball and basketball players, called work stoppages to protest the violence, combining a workplace action with a social issue.

Combined with the appearance of white militia groups and the presidential election, it is a year like no other.

Even though the jobs report in August showed a slight improvement, as the unemployment rate fell to 10.2%, it remains above the Great Recession high of 10% that was reached in October 2009. By the end of May, the US Labor Department reported that 2.4 million jobs had vanished, bringing the total to 38.6 million since mid-March. A major concern is that some of these jobs—maybe many of these jobs—will never come back, drastically changing the future for every America worker. American Airlines, for example, announced on August 20, that it will lay off up to 25,000 flight attendants, pilots and other front-line workers, in addition to 1,500 management and administrative workers already laid off. MGM Resorts announced that approximately 18,000 workers, protected so far by stimulus payments, will be laid off at the end of August. There are bankruptcies in areas like retail and hospitality, affecting both the large chains and small businesses.

The restaurant and fast-food industry, the second largest private employer in the country “collapsed overnight. At least 5.5 million jobs evaporated by the end of April and the number of people employed in food service is still 2.5 million fewer than February. Technomic, a consulting firm for the food-service industry, estimates that 20 percent to 25 percent of independently owned restaurants will never reopen.”¹

The figures are bleak but the numbers are so enormous and so global that most of us have a hard time getting the scope of the whole problem. We do know how it affects each of us individually—have I lost my job, my insurance, a friend to COVID-19? Seeing ourselves as a miniscule—but very important—piece of a global economy is so important because many of us have lived in a kind of separate, self-contained world. Now the problems we have to confront—loss of a job, loss of health insurance, erratic unemployment payments—used to be someone else’s problem. If we are a union member, we worried about our contract, and how it affected us individually, and not about other unionized workers, and even more, non-union workers.

Many workers who opposed national health insurance as a government takeover, for example, are now losing benefits. The Kaiser Family Foundation has estimated that 27 million Americans could lose their employer-sponsored insurance and become uninsured due to the pandemic. When these workers voted, if they voted, they voted in what they thought was self-interest, with no concern for other workers. In our unions, we felt secure and even isolated. Yes, there were a lot of problems, but it didn’t affect us. I got mine and that’s all I need to worry about and, besides, we have a President who promised to roll life backward and to make everything great again.

And then they came for us—relentless but so gradual that we almost didn’t notice, until we had a union contract with major concessions or suffered through a plant shutdown. These were isolated experiences, but the pandemic, and the murders of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, the attempted murder of Jacob Blake, Jr. threw us into the pit and we have to rethink all of our union strategies.

In the current health crisis, all of the disgusting inequalities are exposed and

**Never argue with
an idiot.**

**They will drag
you down to their
level and beat
you with
experience.**

¹ Priva Krishna. “How to Save Restaurants. *New York Times*. September 13, 2020.

intensified, both for workers whose jobs continue and workers whose jobs have been shut down. We still have low wages, erratic work schedules, poor or non-existent health insurance coverage, frightening health and safety conditions, and victimization of workers by bosses who use every excuse to not make improvements. The most essential are the often lowest paid, and are heroes facing layoffs. These bad conditions have been growing for years, however, as union membership steadily declined since the end of World War II, but now the privileged union minority is being pulled down and we need to respond.

The pandemic has intensified racial and ethnic economic inequalities, an area that the huge Black Lives Matter demonstrations have not really emphasized. “U.S. median household income was \$63,179 in 2018, the most recent year for which there is data. . . . Median income for white households was \$70,642; for Hispanic households, it was \$ 51,450; and for Black households, it was \$41,361.”² The issue of race discrimination is rooted in the workplace, as there is an almost 30% wage disparity between black workers and white workers,³ so the problem is not just with police treatment. Women earn only about 80% of what men earn.

In the food service industry, for example, “the most deeply affected were restaurant workers, who were either laid off so that they could file for unemployment or were asked to keep working and risk their health. These are people who often do not have health insurance, earn less than a living wage and disproportionately include undocumented workers, immigrants and Black and brown people—the most marginalized people in the country.”⁴

By shifting the focus on the problem of racial disparities from the workplace to the community, the solution becomes political action, not union organizing. While most of the protest movements are political—Storm the Capital, Defund the Police—and the demands are general (high unemployment, federal financial relief) we need to focus on our workplaces and our bosses directly because that’s where most of us are, or were, and all of our economic income inequality is based there.

So much energy now is being spent, or wasted, on re-electing, or defeating President Trump, as if all of our problems will be solved by whomever is in the White House. The importance of our workplaces has been totally forgotten—except by the workers themselves, who are running the hundreds of work stoppages.

² Jill Schlesinger. “The gigantic economic hole.” *Baltimore Sun*. June 28, 2020.

³ Elise Gould. “Stark black–white divide in wages is widening further.” Economic Policy Institute. February 27, 2019.

⁴ Michael Powell. “A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury.” *New York Times*. August 14, 2020.

⁴ Priva Krishna. “How to Save Restaurants.” *New York Times*. September 13, 2020.

An instructive event came on August 29, with the huge march on Washington, on the same date as the famous march in 1963 because many people lamented that they, or their children, are marching and protesting today over the same issues that were important in 1963. Doing what we have done for 57 years has not worked, so new strategies, focused on the workplace, are vital.

While the important topic of racism has become widely discussed, with an emphasis on including African-American history in all school and community activities, what about workers history? What about painting a street with “Black Workers Lives Matter,” or even “Workers Lives Matter,” to broaden the campaign and to emphasize that the division of the country into social and economic classes is fundamental that needs to be changed?

One illustration of this important debate, a presentation by Adolph Reed to a New York chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) was cancelled because Reed “acquired the conviction, controversial today, that the left is too focused on race and not enough on class. Lasting victories were achieved, he believed, when working-class and poor people of all races fought shoulder to shoulder for their rights.” Reed’s supporters “readily accept the brute reality of America’s racial history and of racism’s toll. They argue, however, that the problems now bedeviling America — such as wealth inequality, police brutality and mass incarceration — affect Black and brown Americans, but also large numbers of working-class and poor white Americans. The most powerful progressive movements, they say, take root in the fight for universal programs. That was true of the laws that empowered labor organizing and established mass jobs programs during the New Deal, and it’s true of the current struggles for free public college tuition, a higher minimum wage, reworked police forces and single-payer health care.”⁵

Some of these criticisms can sound like Blame the Victim but at some point, we have to face the consequences for our decisions and attitudes. It’s no good to complain about the political system, for example, when about half the population does not vote. You may try to justify that by saying that people don’t like any of the candidates, but the real question is: what did you do to find good candidates, or even become candidates yourself?

Simply being negative is not a solution.

We always talk with our kids about accountability—you make certain decisions, you have to live with the consequences and now we have to face the same

⁵ Michael Powell. “A Black Marxist Scholar Wanted to Talk About Race. It Ignited a Fury.” *Ew York Times*. August 20, 2020.

realities. The whole history of unionism, for example, and the dismal political situation, are products of our indifference. We didn't care enough, just like our co-workers who are always too busy to come to a union meeting.

The economic crisis seems trivial compared to the reality that going to work can be a matter of life or death—an experience no one could have imagined just a few months ago. A report from The Imperial College of London COVID-19 Response Team offers a frightening analysis of the expansion of the pandemic in the United States as a result of the rapid resumption of social and economic activity demanded by the Trump administration and big business. The report predicted the death toll by the end of July “could reach 2–3 times what it is today, or nearly 300,000 lives lost.”⁶ By mid-August, more than 183,000 people have died in the US, increasing by several thousand every week, and the increased “hot spots” like college campuses and large group gatherings make the original prediction look realistic. In the same mid-August report, a recorded 776,000 people have died around the world.

Unlike financial crises which often hit just a few countries, the pandemic, and the economic catastrophes, are global—from migrant workers in Kuwait⁷ to skilled trades workers in Detroit. The current circumstances are extraordinary, and no one can predict where it will end—or when or even if--so workers around the world have to confront this brutal new reality.

And you can't simply run away.

And you can't hide.

And wishing we could turn back the clock somehow is not a solution.

And hoping some Savior will miraculously make it all better is not a solution. It is always helpful to remember the warning from the great union leader, Eugene V. Debs in 1905: “Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. I would not lead you out if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.”

Let's talk SOLUTIONS, not victims because if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the Problem.

⁶ <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/mrc-global-infectious-disease-analysis/covid-19/>

⁷ Vivian Yee. “Virus Forces Persian Gulf States to Reckon With Migrant Labor.” *New York Times*. May 9, 2020.



The Chinese character for “Crisis” is comprised of two components—the character for “Danger” and for “Opportunity.” In her book *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein correctly illustrated how catastrophic events have provided the opportunity for right-wing movements to expand while workers are distracted dealing with a crisis. In the most recent

financial crisis, the Great Recession of 2008, companies like General Motors and Verizon seized the moment as the opportunity to gut union contracts, cutting benefits and opening multi-tier wage structures. The Obama administration proposed a \$ 700 billion bank bailout and eased the minimal restrictions on the banks and investment companies which caused the recession in the first place.

Not a solution.

In the 10 years that followed, we saw “the largest spike in wealth inequality in postwar American history,” so “Income disparities are so pronounced that America’s top 10 percent now average more than nine times as much income as the bottom 90 percent, according to data analyzed by UC Berkeley economist Emmanuel Saez. Americans in the top 1 percent tower stunningly higher. They average over 39 times more income than the bottom 90 percent. But that gap pales in comparison to the divide between the nation’s top 0.1 percent and everyone else. Americans at this lofty level are taking in over 196 times the income of the bottom 90 percent. . . The official poverty rate understates the number of people in the world’s richest country

who have trouble making ends meet. An estimated 40 percent of the total U.S. population are either poor or low-income. . . Income concentration today is as extreme as it was during the ‘Roaring Twenties.’ . . . In 2018, the CEO-worker pay gap was nearly seven times larger than in 1980. According to the AFL-CIO, S&P 500 firm CEOs were paid 287 times as much as average U.S. workers in 2018. CEO pay averaged \$14.5 million, compared to average worker pay of \$39,888. In 1980, the average big company CEO earned just 42 times as much as the average U.S. worker.”⁸

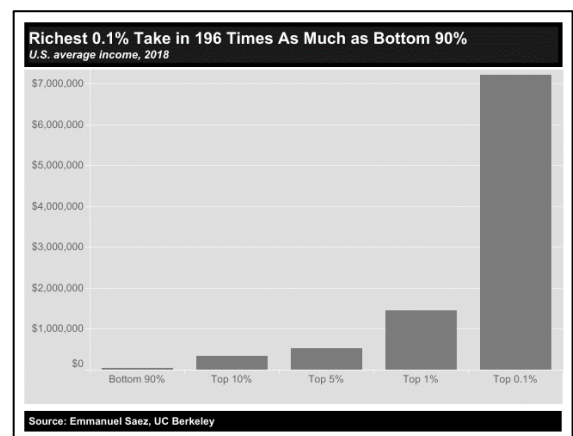
Now the global capitalists, with the support of the Trump administration, have tilted the whole system even further away from us. Major tax breaks, drastic NLRB decisions, the spreading of a culture of prejudice—all intensified by the pandemic epidemic and by the murder of George Floyd.

One cliché of the pandemic is that “we’re all in this together.”

Not so.

“The billionaires in the United States have increased their wealth by \$282 billion since the mid-March stock decline, according to a new report by the Institute for Policy Studies. While more than one fifth of the American population is now unemployed, and millions are deprived of basic needs and confront an uncertain future, the fortunes of the ultra-rich have not only recovered, they are improving substantially. Jeff Bezos’s fortune increased by \$25 billion between January 1 and April 15. Never in history has any individual made so much wealth so quickly. As the report noted, ‘this is larger than the Gross Domestic Product of Honduras, which was \$23.9 billion in 2018.’”

Eight billionaires, so-called “pandemic profiteers,” have increased their wealth, each, by over \$1 billion during this time: Jeff Bezos (Amazon), MacKenzie Bezos (Amazon), Eric Yuan (Zoom), Steve Ballmer (Microsoft), John Albert Sobrato (Silicon Valley real estate), Elon Musk, Joshua Harris (Apollo, financial asset management) and Rocco Comisso (Mediacom, cable and internet).”⁹



⁸ “Income Inequality in the United States.” Inequality.org

⁹⁹ Gabriel Black. “US billionaires increase wealth by \$280 billion since March, as millions are unable to get unemployment benefits.” *World Socialist Web Site*. April 27, 2020.

Let's create our own Shock Doctrine—let's look at this pandemic as a crisis that workers can use as an opportunity to organize and expand.

Don't cry

Don't panic

Don't have academic discussions

Don't trust our governments

Don't ask anyone else to solve your problems

ORGANIZE.

The pandemic has drastically changed everything in our lives, so our unions also must make major changes--to focus on new organizing, to seize the opportunity and begin to grow our movement again. Since many of the changes—the configuration of the workplaces and, most importantly, the new attitudes of the workers—will be “permanent,” the changes in our unions also need to be permanent. This pandemic is not simply a financial crunch in one country that will pass in time but a life-threatening catastrophe in every country, with no end in sight, opening the possibility of global organizing. The risk is NOT doing anything, because our bosses are relentlessly organizing against us.

As we talk about union organizing, it is essential to recognize that this crisis could force the permanent reconfiguration of every workplace—with more machines replacing live workers and with teleworking becoming the “new norm”—creating life-changing situations and decisions for workers in every country, and a historic challenge for union organizing. As an example, Alden Global Capital, which controls Tribune Publishing announced the permanent closure of numerous newsrooms so all of the reporters will be working from their cars instead of sharing a work space.

Moral imperatives are not solutions, as in “There must be Universal Health Care,” or “We deserve protection from epidemics.” “The government ought to do something!!”

Yeah, right, but how do WE make it happen?

I had a nice conversation with some retired union friends, and we talked about how we felt, and about people who are making statements about the pandemic but nowhere is this question: what am I going to do to change it? How am I going to organize my coworkers to change it? All of the philosophical, or even historical, discussions don't confront us with the question of our responsibility, our obligation, to make the change happen. We can complain about our bosses and about the government but what have we done/are we going to do to change it?

One way we don't make it happen is by depending on Someone Else, especially if that person is Donald Trump. In a classic example, AFL President Richard Trumka issued a public statement expressing outrage at Trump's use of the Defense Production Act to keep meat-processing plants open, even though UFCW officers know of at least "20 meatpacking workers who have died from COVID-19," and then proclaimed: "We need workplace safety standards based on safety and sound science, and we need the president to use his authority to make and distribute personal protective equipment to essential workers."¹⁰

Another dead end is appealing to the so-called "better instincts" of our bosses. As an example of the unfortunate attitudes of some high union officers, an article in *USA Today* featured Chris Shelton of CWA, Randi Weingarten of AFT, Mary Kay Henry of SEIU, and James R. Hoffa Jr. of the Teamsters who argued for "ethical" capitalism: in favor of companies with close, positive relationships with their workers, versus those that shirk their social responsibilities. They suggest that "the public should positively recognize that employers like AT&T, Kroger, Verizon, General Motors, and Major League Baseball have made moves to protect workers and remember those that have not."¹¹ The choice to these union officers, is clear: "vulture" capitalism or "ethical" capitalism."

Good luck with that game, especially since GM is one of the most aggressive employers in forcing workers to return to work in unsafe conditions. Almost two months later, in mid-June, AT & T announced plans to close 250 AT&T Mobility and Cricket Wireless stores, in response to "customers' shopping practices,"—shopping on-line—intensified by the pandemic. "If we are in a war to keep our economy going during this crisis, why is AT&T dismissing the troops?" said CWA President Chris Shelton. "AT&T could help lead the country toward recovery by partnering with its workforce to build next generation networks. Instead the company is adding to the pain of the recession already underway."¹² And ATT closed the stores anyhow.

¹⁰ Richard Trumka. "If Trump Wants Meat Plants Open, He Should Protect Their Workers." *New York Times*. May 7, 2020.

¹¹ "4 union leaders: Coronavirus is a stress test for capitalism, and we see encouraging signs." *USA Today*. April 13, 2020.

¹² CWA Newsletter. June 16, 2020

The most dangerous movement directs workers' anger at other workers, as if workers of color, or different backgrounds, were responsible for white workers, especially men, losing their union jobs. As part of post-industrial crisis, the blame game has become both distorted and violent, as if the businesspeople who make the decisions have no responsibility. We do need to drain the swamp but idolizing the Confederacy, and shattering any kind of class unity, is not the way to do it.



It's true that workers organize unions, not that unions organize workers. The enormous surge of workplace actions over the past few months demonstrates the truth of this statement. Not since the early 1930's,

when hundreds of sit-down strikes were carried out in workplaces from the GM plant in Flint to a local Woolworth 5 and 10, in a range of languages, has there been so much fury. Workers are organizing in many different directions: demanding better health and safety conditions, demanding higher hazard pay, demanding an extension of health insurance, and proclaiming that Black Lives Matter. These workers are not depending on the President to "use his authority," they are not hoping that the boss will miraculously become benevolent--we are establishing our own authority.

This movement is fabulous, a sudden sense of collective power, like the surge of teachers strikes in 2018-19—the 'Red For Ed' movement when a half-million teachers were involved in major work stoppages, often over the objections of their

union officers. The *Payday Report*, an on-line union newsletter, created a map to illustrate more than 1,000 wildcat strikes since the beginning of March,¹³ strikes rippling through all levels of the economy, from enormous auto assembly and meatpacking plants to the gig economy, like Uber.

The most exciting element of this surge is that, thanks to social media, there is a new global sense of “fellow worker”—a worker in Indiana can talk with a worker in India. Most union officers in the US think of organizing one group of workers, in a “bargaining unit,” in one location but the ownership of companies has gone global—they have no country and no loyalty, so our movement also has to become truly international. A global pandemic has provoked both a global movement and the demands that go far beyond “normal” union proposals-- a suspension of rent payments, protection against eviction, a forgiveness for student loans—in short, a whole structural change.

The organizing spread on social media across the country, and across the world, with organizations like Amazonians United group starting an international workers petition under the self-help slogan “We Keep Us Safe.” There were wonderful May Day demonstrations at companies like Amazon, Whole Foods, Instacart, and a group called the Gig Workers Collective. These workers didn’t worry about “bargaining units,” or “legal jurisdiction” or “independent contractor”—they see themselves as part of the global economy and as participants in a global workers movement.

Unfortunately, these workers are not attached to any existing unions so a big question is what will come next. At the beginning of the US labor movement in the 1880s, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the proportion of strikes not initiated by a union was about 39%, with a higher figure for the 1870’s.¹⁴ The same thing is happening today.

When a union officer talks about organizing, it ignores the astonishing new reality that hundreds of thousands of workers are already organizing—spontaneously, without a union structure. The real question is—what next?

In the 1930’s, the enormous energies of the sit-down strikes, like the work stoppages of today, were started by specific workplace issues—assembly line speedup, long hours of work, lousy treatment by supervisors. But all of these campaigns had a crucial demand: UNION RECOGNITION, so that workers could continue to exert power in their factories and communities after the strikes were

¹³ <https://paydayreport.com/covid-19-strike-wave-interactive-map/>

¹⁴ Melvin Dubofsky. *Industrialism and the American Workers, 1865-1920*. p. 40

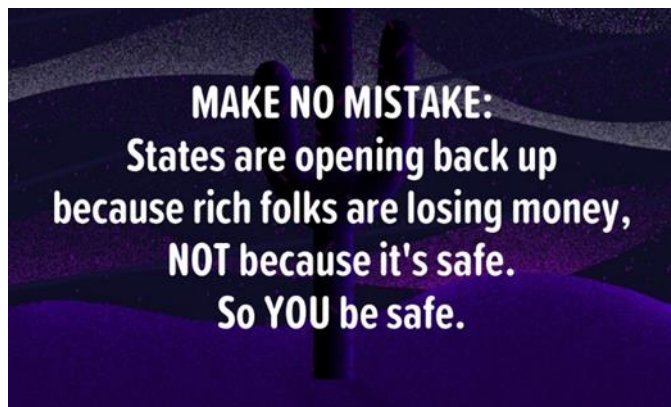
over. The biggest, baddest, most anti-union bosses, like General Motors and US Steel signed contracts, and even have unions today.

So far, it does not look like the wave of spontaneous strikes has moved in this direction to demand union recognition. Will this upsurge be like OCCUPY? An exciting event with no long-term changes, a movement that flashed and then died, with no real organizations surviving. Can workers bring permanent changes for themselves? The danger is what we can call MO's—Momentary Unions—when workers organize in incredibly brave and sophisticated ways but don't demand union recognition and don't plan on building long-lasting organizations.

Let's look at some of the inspiring examples—and I am including a long list (hope it's not too long for you) to show the enormous size of the movement:

- In Belgium, 10 supermarkets in the Carrefour chain were closed after workers walked out over low pay and inadequate protection against the coronavirus. Workers at a Carrefour in southern France previously walked out in late March.
- Royal Mail workers at a sorting facility in Kent in the United Kingdom walked out to protest the lack of hand sanitizer and other safety measures. The Communication Workers Union called off a strike earlier in March despite Royal Mail's intransigent opposition to implementing more safety precautions.
- Postal workers in the United States started an online petition to demand hazard pay. The petition, which had garnered nearly 500,000 signatures, denounced the postal workers union, stating: "The union is no help to employees during this time at all. They should be fighting for this hazard pay or threatening another shutdown. We have to get louder, post office!!"
- In the Bahamas, emergency medical workers staged a sickout to protest the lack of safety measures. In response, the country's health minister promised a payment of up to \$5,000 for frontline health care workers.
- In Massachusetts, over 10,000 construction workers, members of the North Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters, planned to strike over worksite safety concerns. The governor had left the decision to local governments on whether to allow construction to continue, while issuing toothless guidelines for safety practices.
- Nearly 1,000 meatpacking workers at JBS, a major pork and beef processor, stopped work in Colorado in mid-April. Much of the heavily immigrant workforce at the plant, who speaks 27 different languages, refused to report to work after as many as 10 workers tested positive for COVID-19. The job action was not organized by the UFCW, the local union president said.

- Amazon workers at a delivery facility in Chicago demonstrated for two days after two of their coworkers tested positive. This followed strikes by Amazon workers in Detroit and New York earlier in the same week.
- Over forty workers at the Perdue Perry Cook Plant, located in Kathleen, GA, walked off the job at the end of March and protested outside the factory demanding sanitary working conditions, hazard pay and time off after multiple workers reported being exposed to COVID-19 at the factory. According to *Bloomberg* the factory has 600 workers who process chicken and pork products. Across the United States, workers at Tyson Food, Sanderson Farms and Perdue Farms have reported an increase in forced overtime and production levels with the demand for meat soaring as bulk purchases skyrocket due to concerns in the population of possible shortages due to the pandemic and increased demand as restaurants are shuttered and millions of children remain home from closed schools in an effort to slow the spread of the virus.
- Dozens of workers walked out at a Hershey's food packing plant in Palmyra, Pennsylvania operated by logistics giant XPO. "We demand an explanation of why they did not close the factory since there was an infected person, and they kept it quiet," a worker at the plant told the local press.
- Over two dozen poultry workers at a Pilgrim's Pride plant in Timberville, Virginia walked out to protest the lack of information after a person at the plant tested positive for COVID-19. "They worked us all day. They didn't tell us, and we didn't know how long that they have known," a worker told local news.
- In Louisville, Kentucky, baristas at the coffee shop chain Heine Brothers carried out a sickout demanding better protective measures and hazard pay. Hannah Jones, a shift lead, told local media, "This entire COVID-19 outbreak [the company has been saying], 'Wait and see, wait and see, wait and see. We hear you, we hear you. We're nervous too.'" She added, "They aren't coming into contact with 200 people a day."
- In Pittsburgh, on March 25, a group of several hundred, mostly African-American sanitation workers in Pittsburgh, members of Teamsters Local 249, went out on an "illegal" wildcat strike to protest unsafe working conditions during the



COVID-19 pandemic. The strike comes as momentum for strikes goes with #GeneralStrike becoming the top trending topic on twitter in the United States.

- Even popstar Britney Spears called for a General Strike in late March. Spears seemingly called for the redistribution of wealth and a general strike on Monday, "regramming" a post written by Instagram user Mimi Zhu. "During this time of isolation, we need connection now more than ever," the text shared by Spears said, going on to describe how "we will learn to kiss and hold each other through the waves of the web. We will feed each other, redistribute wealth, strike. We will understand our own importance from the places we must stay." (Payday Report)
- Since April, workers for food delivery apps controlled by large transnational companies have engaged in a series of strikes and job actions in a number of countries including Brazil, Spain, Ecuador and Argentina. Their demands are the same: better delivery rates, safer working conditions and for the multimillion-dollar companies to supply essential protective equipment that has been paid for by the workers themselves.
- An extraordinary strike started on May 26 at a McDonald's—yes, that McDonald's, the company that no union has been able to organize--in North Oakland, CA, after twelve workers there tested positive for COVID-19, as well as eight of their family members, including a 10-month-old baby. As one of the longest recorded strikes ever by McDonald's workers, strikers are demanding a two-week paid quarantine period, company-paid medical costs, a deep cleaning of the store, and proper personal protective equipment, as well as Essential Worker pay and one free meal per shift.¹⁵



Christian Smalls became briefly a media star in the spring after he was fired by Amazon at the "fulfillment" center in Staten Island. He was let go almost immediately after he led a group of colleagues from the building during lunch hour in protest of what they saw as the company's inadequate response to the crisis. They

¹⁵ Kaela Sanborn-Hum. "Striking McDonald's Workers Block Entrance, Shut Store." Labor Notes. June 15, 2020.

were calling simply for the building to be temporarily closed and more stringently sanitized and for workers to be paid during the hiatus as several had become sick.

Amazon has stated that Smalls was fired because he violated the company's 14-day quarantine policy by returning to work after coming into contact with a co-worker who tested positive for COVID-19.

Not content merely to fire Mr. Smalls, executives planned to exploit him as part of a public-relations strategy meant to deflect attention away from safety issues. Internal notes from a meeting of executive leaders at Amazon obtained by Vice News reveal the company's general counsel David Zaplosky trying to smear the organizing campaign by calling Mr. Smalls 'not smart or articulate and thus a useful tool in its ongoing plan to besmirch unionization efforts.'¹⁶ In minutes of a meeting, Zaplosky stated: "We should spend the first part of our response strongly laying out the case for why the organizer's conduct was immoral, unacceptable, and arguably illegal, in detail, and only then follow with our usual talking points about worker safety. Make him the most interesting part of the story, and if possible make him the face of the entire union/organizing movement."

As this strike movement accelerates, it adapts to new circumstances. After days of protests over the murder of George Floyd in May, people still had to go back to work. At Condado Tacos in Columbus, OH, at least four employees were fired by a district manager allegedly for refusing to fill a large food order for the Ohio State police and walked out during a shift, even though "Condado management has largely been supportive of staff who wanted to participate in the recent demonstrations against police brutality in black communities, and had even offered bail and mental health resources."

One worker, Jake Widdowson stated "Immediately, I just didn't feel comfortable making that order . . . I've been joining in the protests the last couple of days and seeing the extreme brutality on protesters and making that food was not something I felt comfortable with doing." Other store staff and management also expressed discomfort with making the order and management agreed that people who didn't feel comfortable could leave and that they could count on still having their jobs. However, at the point, a district manager on site that day got involved. "He said, 'Tell anyone who's refusing to work, they're fired.' . . . 'Black lives matter and I think we need to keep saying that and saying that, and white silence is violence,' Widdowson says. 'Condado is a Mexican food company owned entirely by white people who claimed to be supportive of their community, but they take

¹⁶ Ginia Bellefante. "We Didn't Sign Up for This": Amazon Workers on the Front Lines." *New York Times*. April 3, 2020.

money from police and aren't willing to give that back to protestors who need actual support right now.”¹⁷

One strategic consideration is that a dramatic strike is sometimes not the most effective response. While workers challenging their individual bosses need to develop solidarity with other workers, to create momentum and a solidarity network, certain workers, especially health care, food service, sanitation workers and public transportation workers, are considered by everyone—not just the employers or the government—to be “essential,” so that a strike or sit-in by them could be confronted with hostility from other workers, the exact opposite of “solidarity.”

When so many teachers went on strike in 2018-19, they developed plans to build support in their communities, demanding smaller class size and more social services in schools, for example, in addition to the usual salary increases. But missing school was not fatal, so essential workers need to create a huge movement of solidarity to, in effect, replace a work stoppage as the only leverage. The workers movement in one industry or one community has to draw in workers from other industries and communities to build leverage. In the fall, 2021, however, support for keeping the schools closed has dropped, as parents are forced to work from home or worry about the social support network that public schools provide.

With more families housebound, delivery services are crucial. Instacart currently has over 200,000 shoppers on its platform and serves 5,500 cities in the U.S. and Canada so a strike in March, organized by the Gig Workers Collective, representing of gig economy workers at companies like Instacart, Uber and Lyft, was met with some opposition by people totally dependent on these deliveries for food and medicine.

Yeah, it's complicated.

In all the reports of non-union workplaces having these flashes of organizing activity, there are few occurrences where a union organizer appears, both to offer support and to try to get the workers into an existing union with the demand for union recognition. The extraordinary skills of these workers to build a movement, however brief, offer huge possibilities for permanent organizations but union officers and organizers must step up and demonstrate the importance of a permanent organization. Otherwise, these great organizers from the wildcat stoppages will get fired or will drift to another job with lots of great stories but no union.

¹⁷ Brenna Houck. “Ohio Taco Chain Employees Walked Out When Asked to Fill Mass Order for Law Enforcement.” *Eater*. June 3, 2020.

An instructive illustration of this confusion was the use of the photo from the 1968 sanitation workers strike in Memphis as an example of the Black Lives Matter movement. Of course, the strike was an important part of the civil rights movement but the goal was UNION RECOGNITION, the one demand missing from all of the workplace activities, and Black Lives Matter protests, today.



In these discussions, the challenge of organizing Amazon looms large, especially since the company is planning to hire 170,000 new workers so it is helpful to look at the movement created by Amazonians United. In a long explanation in June about strategies, the group proclaimed the importance of building solidarity actions, of creating organizing committees and of building solidarity with other shops. “Amazonians United is for building deep organizations where coworkers democratically assess their own issues, determine a strategy together, and, most importantly, build the power in our workplaces necessary to win these changes.”¹⁸

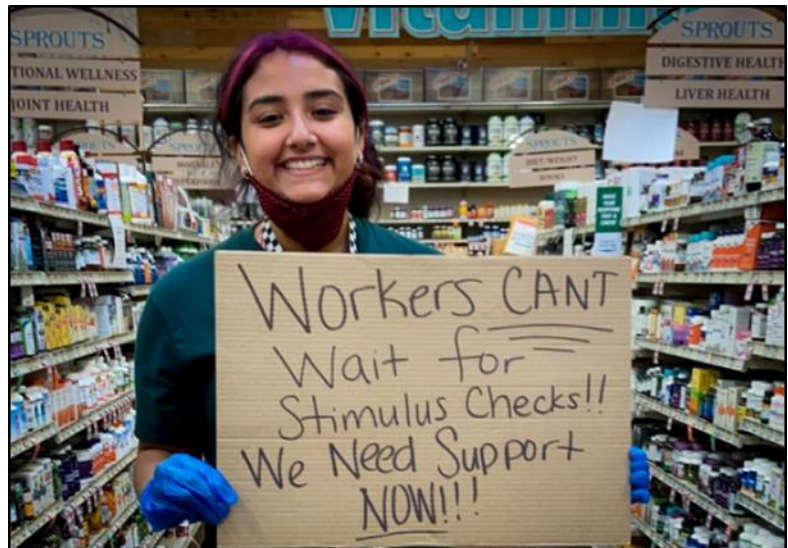
No mention of a demand for Union Recognition, no proposal to either join an existing union or to create a new one. Without this demand, the danger is that this, too, will pass.

The one extraordinary campaign where essential workers organized to demand union recognition was at Mission Hospital in Ashville, NC, where 1,800 nurses organized by a decisive 965-411 margin with National Nurses United (NNU) on September 16, 2020, after a campaign of a year. Owned by the largest health care company in the US, HCA-Healthcare, the nurses overcame a ferocious and expensive—your health care dollars at work, right?—anti-union campaign to win a victory which is the largest at a nonunion hospital in the South since 1975, and is the first private sector hospital union win ever in North Carolina. At this point, it

¹⁸ Amazonians United. “At Amazon, Here’s How We’re Organizing Ourselves for the Long Haul.” *Labor Notes*. June 2020.

is not clear how the demands of the hospital administration during the pandemic affected the development of such strong union support but this campaign is a great example of how a union, focused on new organizing, can create our own Shock Doctrine.

In one case, a union used some political connections to develop new organizing leads. A worker at Sprouts Farmers Market in McAllen, TX “had heard of an online form that activists from the Democratic



Socialists of America(DSA)and the United Electrical Workers union (UE) were using to help workers organize to make their workplaces safer as the Covid-19 pandemic spread. The two groups—which had previously worked together on the Bernie Sanders campaign—were calling their joint effort the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC). The experience many EWOC organizers gained from the Sanders movement had a direct impact on their work. Officials from the DSA and UE said the group took ideas from the Sanders campaign—such as building a largely volunteer operation to complex organizing—and applied them to workplaces rather than an election. Many former Sanders staff members also volunteered to help workers organize. It's one example of a possible path forward for the grassroots movement that powered the Sanders campaign—a way to channel its insurgent energy into new battles for social justice.”¹⁹

In another area, which may seem marginal, Nonprofit Professional Employees Union (NPEU), has expanded its organizing campaigns. “The NPEU has been around since 1998, when EPI unionized, but two years ago it began aggressively attracting new nonprofits. Now—seemingly all of a sudden—it represents 27 different workplaces, including influential D.C. institutions like the Center for American Progress, Open Markets Institute and J Street. Though affiliated with the national union IFPTE, the NPEU is run as a volunteer operation (with a single quarter-time paid organizer), with an executive board made up of members and an organizing strategy driven by word of mouth in the tight-knit D.C. nonprofit world.

¹⁹ Steven Greenhouse. “Bernie’s Army Redeploys to support COVID-19’s Frontline Workers.” *In These Times*. May 4, 2020.

The numbers tell the story of how dramatic and recent the surge in organizing has been: According to Blado, the NPEU has 250 dues-paying members, another 400 bargaining contracts now, and more than a thousand organizing at shops that are not public yet.”²⁰

The bosses are certainly aware of the dangers—for them—of increased union organizing. A major anti-union law firm warned: “. . . even if an employer follows all reopening instructions, they are still **not** safe from union organizing. Employees now, more than ever before, are susceptible to the ‘promises’ and ‘guarantees’ often advanced by unions when organizing a workforce. The only difference today is that union rhetoric will have an enhanced ‘safety,’ ‘protection’ and ‘urgency’ message attached to it, along with the typical — but seldom guaranteed — assurances that unions put forth. Wages, benefits and job security usually carry the most weight for employees when considering a union and these concerns have only been exacerbated during these times. Some employers have already experienced an increased interest in union membership from their employees as a byproduct of this virus.”²¹

One problem is that existing unions simply do not emphasize new organizing. In the Servicing Model [Appendix 1], union officers and staff get elected—and may get re-elected—for their “service” to the members who pay dues to the union’s treasury. New organizing seems to be irrelevant and is very both very expensive and very difficult, requiring a whole different set of skills that active members, moving up through the ranks of an existing union, do not usually have. Often members are hired as “organizers” as a political favor, with no training or guidance and no accountability for the officers who appointed them.

The numbers of this failure to organize are so clear—from 37% of the workers in a union in the 1950’s, to about 6.2% in the private sector today. Membership of 33.6% in the public sector brings the overall figure up to only 10.3%, and we are now seeing a renewed attack on public sector unionism, with police unions as an excuse. In 1970, 18.1 million workers were in a union but by 2019, there were only 14.9 million, a loss of almost 20%. The list of ugly numbers unfortunately goes on and on and is reflected in the poor quality of many union contracts. Fully-paid health insurance, defined benefit pension plans, strong job security, same job/same pay—all part of labor history, not labor today. From doing great to just getting by—that’s

²⁰ Hamilton Nolan. “The coronavirus pandemic has spurred a quiet frenzy of union organizing.” *In These Times*. May 25, 2020.

²¹ Carlos A. Torrejon. “Responding to the Uptick in Union Organizing During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” Fox, Rothschild, LLP. June 19, 2020.

the position of many union members today. We have become non-union workers while still paying union dues.

The times are so chaotic that you will even hear union members demanding to get what non-union workers receive. As an example, here is a CWA worker's Facebook post:

Dear #Governor #Larry #Hogan, I am one of many Essential workers. Having to wear a mask to protect myself & others for my 12 hour shifts is important, but aggravating! Stimulus packages are paying non-essential residents to stay at home. Meanwhile, CORRECTIONAL OFFICERS, MILL WORKERS, AUTOMOTIVE TECHNICIANS, DOCTORS, RNs, LPNs, CNAs, LAB TECHS, PHELBOTOMIST, DSAs, MAs, PHARMACY WORKERS, THERAPY STAFF, SOCIAL WORKERS, UTILITY WORKERS, MTA, DOC, NCPD, USPS, DHS, PARKS DEPT., SUPERMARKET EMPLOYEES, HEALTH CENTER WORKERS, CAREGIVERS, HRA WORKERS, DIETARY WORKERS, JANITORS, SECURITY OFFICERS, TRUCK DRIVERS, DPS's, FAST FOOD WORKERS, & many more, all put their lives at risk & the lives of their families as well. If it wasn't for ALL OF US & if we all PAUSED with the rest of the world, who would you turn to? Where is our hazard pay & bonuses? Better yet, we should have our own stimulus packages set aside & it should be MANDATORY with no questions asked. We as "ESSENTIAL WORKERS" should be taken care of also. "We" take care of everyone ALWAYS. Not just during trying times. #imessential.. Where is our 600.00 weekly extra pay!!!²²

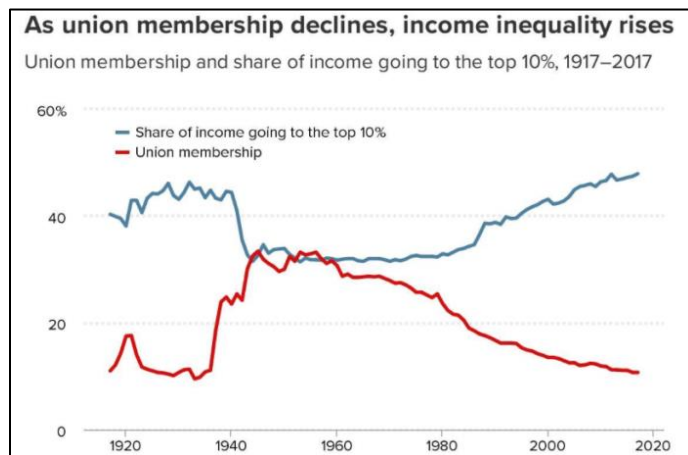
This pandemic will be the latest in a series of so-called crises that are blamed for the decline of the union movement, as if we are only victims—it was the 2008 recession, it was Trump, now it's the virus—but we are 10% of the workforce, basically where we were in 1910. That's 110 years with no substantial increase in numbers and that's not Trump or COVID-19.

If you want an unusual benchmark, the first union newspaper, the Mechanics Gazette, was published in Philadelphia on August 24, 1827, the outgrowth of a strike by Carpenters demanding a shorter, 10-hour day. The strike was lost but labor journalism blossomed and within five years, there were 68 labor newspapers across the country, many of them dailies.²³

So, tell us how many labor dailies there are in the US today? Or weeklies? Or monthlies?

²² Tina Mischou. June 12, 2020.

²³ David Prosten. This Week in Labor History.



There once were no open shop (or Right-to-Work) states and now there are 27, with more attempts coming. Only in Virginia, thanks to an aggressive Central Labor Council in Annandale, has there been a serious move to repeal the open shop law, even if the Democratic governor has not agreed to sign it. And don't forget legal attacks, like the *Janus* decision in

2019 or the infamous Act 10 in Wisconsin in 2011 which almost obliterated public sector unionism in the state where it started. And Mark Janus is back, by the way, now demanding that all of his back Fair Share payments be paid back to him.

This is not the pandemic, this is not Trump, this is a structural failure of unionism to get out and organize against the strategic and deliberate attacks on us. This failure is structural because the union officers, who are “The Union,” and who make decisions and who control union resources, have rejected any real organizing projects. If you disagree, simply ask each union how many new members they organized in the past year—either as new units or, as importantly, by signing up free-riders in organized workplaces. Union officers keep repeating that almost 60% of Americans “view unions favorably,” but do not answer the question of why they are still non-union, except to make excuses about strong anti-union campaigns and bad laws.

Ideally every member of every union—from the international officers to the part-time members—should be focused with the goal of 100% of workers organized-globally. For selfish reasons, members should demand that other locations of their employer, or other employers in their industry, must be organized, expanding the union's “market share,” and building leverage for negotiations. In reality, money spent on new organizing comes back to the pockets of the members as non-union competition is brought under union contracts.

We also need to focus on geographic organizing—making sure that every worker in our hometown is covered by a union contract. Whatever happened to the phrase “this is a union town?” The Central Labor Councils could co-ordinate a questionnaire for every union member: do you have a relative or friend who works in a non-union job? If so, can you get contact information, and will you come with the organizer to talk with them about starting an organizing campaign?

Often union officers will complain that new organizing is too expensive, but unions, as a group, spent more than \$110 million to support Hillary Clinton's campaign in 2016. You could hire a lot of organizers with that kind of resources, so it's mentality, not money that is blocking unions from organizing new members.

As Robin Johnson, a rep for AFGE, added: "Personally I think we have the organizers, we need to use them more effectively in response to real-world situations where the Union can improve workers' lives and communities. I mean sure, hire more, but not just for the numbers. An AFGE organizer once said in a class I was in, that getting the person to join is not the point of organizing. Getting them to join and then engaging them in some support of the union, no matter how small – That adds to our power, and THAT is what is important."

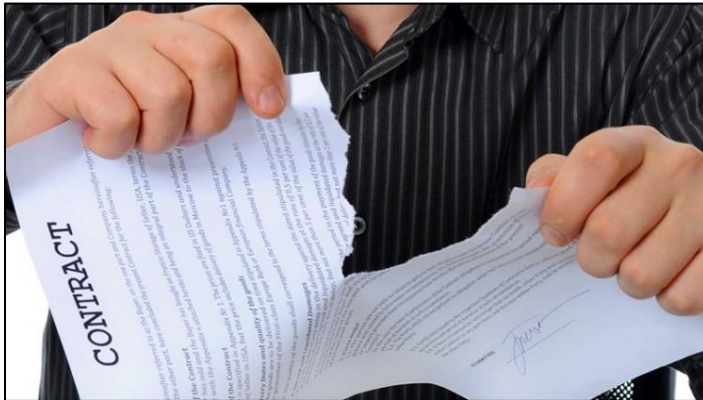
One important aspect of the teachers' strikes in 2018-19 is that many workers who were either anti-union, or simply non-union, found themselves caught up in the movement. In Arizona, for example, there were 90,000 teachers and only 20,000 (22%) of them were members of the Arizona Education Association. More than 57,000 (63%) filled out the strike ballot in April, 2018, and more than 70% actively participated in the walkout.

Build it and they will come.

These hazards are not limited to union members in an open shop—the non-members, the free riders are confronting the same challenges and now is the time to get them to see what a union can do if everyone sticks together, and to encourage them to join up. You have to convince all of your other members to help out, to make the organizing campaign part of their "normal" work conversations so that this crisis becomes an opportunity to build your union.

The whole "what next" question should also be in the minds of every person who demonstrates in support of the civil rights movement. As the movement spread, old civil rights organizers looked back more than 50 years and wondered why it is necessary to take to the streets again to deal with the same problems of systematic racism.

We now expected to submit in Act II of the Shock Doctrine. Shredding our union contracts is a major step, and the attempts have already started, involving unions that represent the lowest-paid union members to the workers in the Major League Baseball Players Association, with an average salary of more than \$ 4.36 million a year.



In Nevada, for example, public union contracts covering more than 18,000 hospital workers, police officers and other government employees have been cancelled, with Nevada's coronavirus outbreak as the excuse. Across the Las Vegas Valley, local governments since mid-

March have suspended more than 25 such contracts, using a rarely invoked portion of Nevada law that allows local government officials to suspend the contracts during an emergency. Other states have similar laws, but none have taken such extreme action. . . . prior to the pandemic, North Las Vegas in 2012 was the last local government to take such action. Facing a budget deficit estimated at nearly \$31 million, the city declared a financial emergency at the time, which it used to invoke the rarely used law allowing suspensions.

"The city's unions sued, arguing that the law did not cover financial emergencies. A Clark County District Court judge reversed the suspensions in January 2014. . . . Teamsters Local 14 official Fred Horvath, whose union represents more than 500 North Las Vegas employees, said he believes the coronavirus outbreak likely falls within the state's definition of an emergency. . . . Horvath said he expects the contract suspensions to end as soon as the coronavirus outbreak subsides. However, he said the pandemic could have a lasting impact on organized labor in the state.

"That's because the Nevada legislature in 2015 passed a law allowing local governments to reopen their union contracts if their general fund revenue fell 5 percent or more from the preceding year, and the coronavirus outbreak has already battered Nevada's tourism-driven economy."²⁴

Baltimore mayor Bernard C. "Jack" Young convened a meeting of union officers on April 10, and gave an ultimatum: "Leaders were told the city could freeze

²⁴ Michael Scott Davidson." Coronavirus emergency allows for rare union contract suspensions." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. April 10, 2020.

members' salaries, meaning they would forego raises unions won in collective bargaining, according to a city memo distributed to union presidents or would have city employees take up to six furlough days, with a 1.5% to 2.3% impact on their salaries.

"Lastly, the city offered a scenario in which there would be no pay freeze and no furloughs. But it would mean nearly 175 layoffs of full-time employees, the memo states, most of whom are deemed 'nonessential.' FOP President Mike Mancuso, in a 2-page letter to all members, stating that the suggested cuts are asking too much from a police department grappling with continued high rates of violence even during the pandemic. The police union also warned of the risks facing officers and their families as they work in dangerous conditions.

"I am furious and disgusted with the mayor and his administration for asking our members to shoulder the burden of this crisis both physically and now financially,' Mancuso wrote in the two-page letter to the department's 2,500 members.

"He said 350 department employees have been quarantined in connection with the outbreak, with 63 awaiting test results and 19 that have tested positive for COVID-19. Mancuso also noted that the city recently agreed to pay officers an additional \$200 per paycheck as hazard pay, which he said city leaders are now trying to 'recoup,' a move he called 'deceitful and insulting.'"²⁵

CSEA TO STATE: YOU NEED OUR SERVICES DURING CRISIS; CONTRACTUAL WAGE INCREASES FOR STATE WORKERS SHOULD BE PAID 4/8/2020--ALBANY – On the heels of an announcement from New York State that it will delay payment of negotiated wage increases for unionized state workers for 90 days, CSEA, the state's largest public workers' union, is lashing out over the state's failure to deliver on their contractual commitments. The 2 percent across-the-board increase was due to be paid in mid-April. "It's inexcusable to require our workers to literally face death to ensure the state keeps running and then turn around and deny those very workers their much-deserved raise in this time of crisis," said CSEA President Mary E. Sullivan. "People are failing to recognize the value of our state workers during this crisis and what they are going through to keep providing public services throughout the state. We literally have workers sleeping in their workplaces to make sure essential services are delivered around the clock. They're at the front lines keeping this epidemic from spreading further, caring for our most vulnerable and ill residents, helping people in our communities suffering

²⁵ Jessica Anderson and Talia Richmond. "Baltimore unions told there could be pay cuts, furloughs and layoffs because of coronavirus budget shortfall." *Baltimore Sun*. April 11, 2020.

from job losses, and keeping our state from wholesale economic and social collapse. We cannot value them enough right now.”

In Washington, DC, Mayor Muriel Bowser, endorsed by The Metro Washington Council AFL-CIO when she first ran in 2014, showed her appreciation by proclaiming in mid-June “she doesn't intend to pay employees the 3.5% pay increase that we negotiated and that is due in October 2020. She also released her four-year financial plan which proposes to freeze our pay through FY 2024.”²⁶

A staff rep for the ATU posted this public message on May 27: Some great advice out of our morning Zoom meeting from our IVP's. All Local members, prepare for a fight with management if you have a CBA opening up this year or next. All signs point to them trying to take as much of what we have struggled for away and they plan to use COVID-19 as an excuse. This is not for Local leaders. This is for Local MEMBERS. Put your differences (if you have any) aside, LOCK ARMS with each other and prepare for a fight. Our strength is, and always has been our willingness to pick each other up and band together. We MUST do that now. We must be ready. If we do nothing, we get nothing. Get ready!

In the federal sector, agencies like the Veterans Administration, as one AFGE rep remarked, “are doing anything they want, overriding contracts etc. under the guise of ‘emergency’ or because they have faith that under Trump and his Executive Orders, Labor will not be upheld.”

The ruling class is able, with its control of the media, to twist every situation to its anti-union goals. With so many areas in turmoil after the murder of George Floyd, blame is being thrown at a fundamental part of every union contract: the “just cause” article, the protection against easy dismissal.

When we run an organizing campaign, we stress to non-union workers that being organized is more than money—it’s rights in the workplace, a restriction on the bosses unlimited power and authority to do to us whatever they want. The “just cause” in our contracts cancels out “employee at will,” and provides protection against unfair discipline and discharge. Now police union contracts, which provide strong protections against discipline, are being attacked as protecting “bad apples,” as a method to claim that unions protect slackers and should be eliminated. The whole discussion about police unions is a topic for another time, but the attacks on “just cause” provisions in a union contract, on the ability of a union to protect the job security of the members, cut at a fundamental difference between a union and a

²⁶ Union City. June 18, 2020.

non-union workplace. The “bad apples” are not the problem for our bosses, the union contract is.



Baltimore Sun. June 15, 2020

“[Steven] Rushin, the assistant law professor at Loyola, has found in his research that ‘police departments’ internal disciplinary procedures, often established through the collective bargaining process, can serve as barriers to officer accountability.” Defending his members, “Minneapolis police union leader Lt. Bob Kroll issued a statement highlighting Floyd’s criminal history, calling protesters a ‘terrorist movement’ and criticizing Mayor Jacob Frey for firing Chauvin and three other officers who stood by at the scene of Floyd’s killing.”²⁷

Even more severe, the Minneapolis police chief announced that he was withdrawing from contract negotiations with the city police union, the Minneapolis Police Federation. If one employer can simply withdraw from negotiations because he doesn’t like a union position, others will follow.

²⁷ Travis Waldron. “Former Minneapolis Mayor: Democrats ‘Shouldn’t be Afraid’ of Police Unions.” *Huffington Post*. June 2, 2020

Asked about the participation of police unions in the AFL-CIO, Tefere Gebre, Executive Vice-President, said: “That’s something that we have to deal with. On the one hand, as a labor leader, I would never say any worker does not deserve a union, including police. And you’re talking to someone who has had a cop put a gun in my mouth. That said, bargaining agreements should not be shields for killers. About 13 of our international unions, one way or another, represent law enforcement officers. We are engaging with those unions in a very, very deep conversation about how we bring change to them, how we become a catalyst for that change to happen.”²⁸

While the ruling class uses the “bad apples” excuse to protect police power, the severe attack on the UAW because of the corruption of top international officers shows the dishonest approach. Instead of punishing a few “bad apples,” the federal government has discussed putting the UAW under a federal trusteeship—that is, officials of the Trump administration would take control of one of the country’s largest unions.

²⁸ Steven Mikulan. “Labor Day Reality Check: Tefere Gebre on the State of the Unions.” *Capital & Main*. September 7, 2020.

Let's look now at how the pandemic has accelerated social and workplace problems. At the end of May, 43 states in April registered jobless rates higher than at any point since the government started tracking such data more than 40 years ago. Barely 51 percent of the US population was employed, the lowest mark since records began, the Labor Department reported on May 10. An estimated 40 million workers



have filed for unemployment since March. In the first week of June, almost 1.5 million workers filed new unemployment compensation (UC) claims. The U.S. economy, which just two months ago boasted abundant jobs and soaring stock values in February, has become a hot mess.

“The American economy plunged deeper into crisis last month, losing 20.5 million jobs as the unemployment rate jumped to 14.7 percent, the worst devastation since the Great Depression. . . the share of the adult population with a job, at 51.3 percent, was the lowest on record. Nearly 11 million people reported working part time because they couldn't find full-time work, up from about four million before the pandemic. . . The scale of the job losses last month alone far exceed the 8.7 million lost in the last recession, when unemployment peaked at 10 percent in October 2009. . . . particularly in industries like retail and hospitality, layoffs that were initially temporary might not remain so as bankruptcies mount and business owners confront shifts in consumer behavior.”²⁹

“More than 23 million workers are without a job. In February, just 5.8 million lacked work. White workers saw their unemployment rate jump to a record 14.2%, more than four times higher than February. Asian Americans saw a record 14.5% unemployment rate—nearly six times greater than it was two months ago. The unemployment rate for black Americans soared to 16.7% in April, nearly triple the rate in February and the highest since early 2010, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data released Friday. Hispanic workers' jobless rate hit a record 18.9%, up from 4.4% two months earlier.

“As many as 43 million Americans could lose their health insurance in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a new report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Urban Institute. Prior to the pandemic, 160 million

²⁹ Nelson D. Schwartz and Ben Casselman. “U.S. Unemployment is worst Since Depression.” New York Times. May 9, 2020.

Americans, or roughly half the population, received their medical insurance through their job. The tidal wave of layoffs triggered by quarantine measures now threatens that coverage for millions. . . . Of those who lose employer-based insurance, an estimated 7 million Americans will remain uninsured, and will lack access to healthcare during the worst pandemic in a century, RWJF predicted. Another 30 million people lacked insurance even before the pandemic, according to the Urban Institute.”³⁰

In most states, the system for collecting unemployment collapsed with some workers confronting an unexpected crisis and dangerous delays. “According to an analysis by One Fair Wage, a nonprofit organization that advocates for restaurant workers, only 56% of those who have applied for unemployment insurance are receiving benefits, meaning about 44% have been denied or are still waiting.”³¹

In Maryland, “about one in five working Marylanders filed for unemployment benefits (UC) since the outbreak. Of those, tens of thousands of Maryland residents report getting stuck in the unemployment system.” At an on-line Town Hall meeting, one worker reported that he spent “10 hours a day repeatedly getting kicked off the state’s site,” losing sleep and seeing “his blood pressure spike.”³²

In Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis campaigned on cutting taxes, the state’s weekly benefit of \$275, one of the lowest in the country, has not increased in almost 20 years, and “only about 5 percent of applicants for aid in the past month have actually received payments from the state. Of the 650,000 people who applied for unemployment benefits since March 15, about 33,600 have received payments, the Department of Economic Opportunity said Thursday.”³³

As an indication of the desperate conditions, it was estimated that “37% of unemployed Americans ran out of food in the past month and 46% worried about running out. Two out of 10 working adults said that in the past 30 days they ran out of food before they could earn enough to buy more. One-quarter worried that would happen.”³⁴

More importantly, the threatened loss of UC benefits is being used by companies to force workers to return to potentially unsafe and unhealthy jobs. “As

³⁰ Jessica Glenza. “Up to 43m Americans could lose health insurance amid pandemic, report says.” *The Guardian*. May 10, 2020.

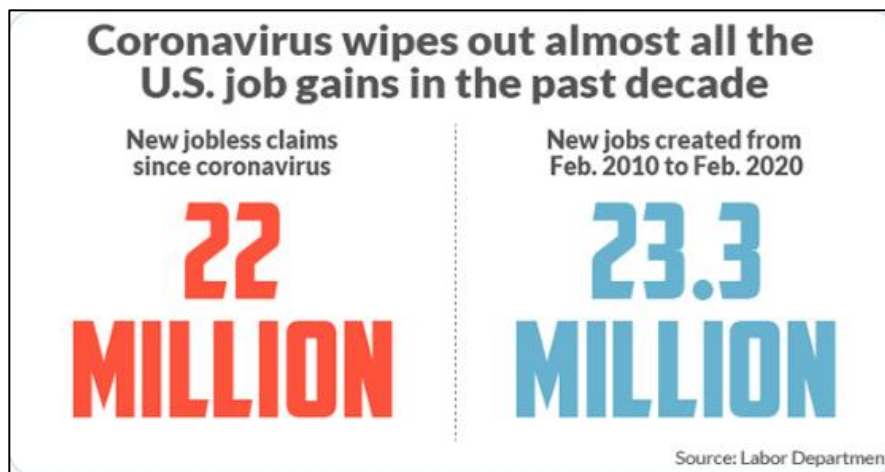
³¹ Abigail Hess. “Study finds 44% of U.S. unemployment applicants have been denied or are still waiting.” *Make It*. May 15, 2020.

³² Luke Broadwater and Pamela Wood. “Hogan praises turn to doubts.” *Baltimore Sun*. May 17, 2020.

³³ Gary Fineout. “Florida pays on only 5 percent of jobless claims as DeSantis rejects calls for generosity.” *Politico*. April 16, 2020.

³⁴ Tammy Webber and Hanah Fingerhut. “Fear of hunger ramps up amid pandemic economy.” *Baltimore Sun*. May 17, 2020.

people across the United States are told to return to work, employees who balk at the health risks say they are being confronted with painful reprisals: Some are losing their jobs if they try to stay home, and thousands more are being reported to the state to have their unemployment benefits cut off. . . . Some states with a history of weaker labor protections are encouraging employers to report workers who do not return to their jobs, citing state laws that disqualify people from receiving unemployment checks if they refuse a reasonable offer of work. Oklahoma set up a ‘Return To Work’ email address for businesses to report employees who turn down jobs. Ohio offered a similar way for employers to report coronavirus-related work refusals.”³⁵



The pandemic only intensified the poor conditions for many workers which have been gradually building for years. “Financial Health Pulse shows that only 29 percent of Americans were financially healthy in

2019. Just over 70 percent of Americans were not financially healthy and may be unprepared for changes in their income, financial shocks or an economic downturn. These figures were roughly the same as 2018, but likely to change as the coronavirus outbreak takes its toll on the economy. Compared to 2018, more Americans in 2019 did not have a one-week buffer of savings and were less confident that their insurance would provide sufficient coverage to help them weather an emergency.”³⁶

“That’s certainly been the case for Don, a father of 10-year-old twins who has just now encountered the unemployment program for the first time in his life. ‘I didn’t know that it was like this, and I didn’t know how terrible the system was to apply,’ he said. ‘It’s sick the way that they set it up, and they just made the system to fail, which is what’s so disheartening to us.’ ‘This is a kind of crisis that’s forced people to realize what the system is all about,’ [Andrew] Stettner said. . . . Unemployment insurance is supposed to act as a stabilizer in an economic downturn,

³⁵ Jack Healy. “Workers Fearful of the Coronavirus Are Getting Fired and Losing Their Benefits.” New York Times. June 5, 2020.

³⁶ Paid post by Financial Health Network in *The New York Times*. May, 2020

but ungenerous benefits mean that's not the case. 'In some of these states, the benefits are so hollowed out that it couldn't be countercyclical,' said Rebecca Dixon, executive director of the National Employment Law Program, meaning benefits are unable to help boost the economy when it's needed most."³⁷

The U.S. economy could take almost a decade to fully recover from the pandemic and related shutdowns, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said in mid-June. It projected the unemployment rate would be about 9.5% by the end of 2021, and about six million fewer people would be in the labor force.³⁸

³⁷ Emily Stewart." The American unemployment system is broken by design." *Vox.Com*. May 13, 2020

³⁸Andrew Maykuth. "Coronavirus has kicked off a 'massive' economic shift and no one knows where it's going." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. June 14, 2020

In the working class, there are two groups: Warriors and Victims, one which refuses to accept the lousy conditions (and become members of the organizing committee in a workplace) and the others who simply accept and bemoan. It is clear that the group of Warriors should not include the angry white Confederate soldiers who are parading around to demand that all businesses be reopened, because a Warrior looks out for friends and co-workers. Commercial media has turned up the focus on the Victims over the past few years, featuring people who are suffering enormously in a post-industrial economy but who, without exception, have no clue about what they can, or should, do about it. They deserve pity and charity, but no one urges them to collectively turn their lives around.

So what do we do? In this crisis, workers who for generations have patiently waited for Someone Else to make things right, now have the challenge and the opportunity to take action by ourselves, for ourselves. We have no one to save us but ourselves—it will not help to panic ourselves, to blame someone else, to expect a Savior to appear to make everything right. That’s what got us Hitler, that’s what’s got us Trump.

If we get distracted into thinking that the 2020 presidential election will solve our problems, we will continue our downhill slide. Yes, elections are important but ORGANIZE!

Let’s look at organizing strategies for four different groups of workers:

1. Union workers who are still working, even under protest
2. Union workers who are displaced
3. Non-union workers who are still working
4. Non-union workers who are laid off

1. Obviously, there is—or should be—a huge difference between workers who have a union and those who don’t. The key word for organizing is “unilateral”—that means the bosses can do anything they want. In non-union workplaces, bosses set all conditions unilaterally—wage cuts, furloughs, eliminating health insurance, ignoring “social distancing” and even taking advantage of the workers’ desperation by reopening when it is not safe to do so. Never has the need for a union been more urgent because unionized workers can bargain over conditions, while non-union workers are stuck with accepting almost anything the boss wants to do.

With all of the issues, we need to focus on organizing—both in our own union workplaces, and among the huge majority of American workers who don’t have a union yet. Use the benefits we have negotiated as examples for non-union workers what can be gained by organizing.

Be Warriors, not Victims.

It's like wartime, and we have to emphasize that the challenges and the confusion don't blind our bosses to their self-interest: making more money and screwing their workers. Only now, these challenges can be life-threatening, as we are exposed to more dangerous health hazards than normal, just so business-as-usual can continue. It has also become obvious that many of the declines in workers organizations—the dependence of the hospitality industry on tipping and no benefits, with no union representation, for example—suddenly become catastrophic for millions of workers suddenly dumped out.

In wartime, bosses charge exorbitant cost-plus contracts with the government, often without regard for quality—yeah, Boeing, we're talking about you--while at the same time, playing the patriotic songs to keep us from also defending our self-interests. Same thing today as bosses want to avoid the legal or social (never mind moral) responsibilities that protect workers. Landlords want to keep collecting rent, credit card companies want to keep their 30% interest charges on late payments. Watch out for payday lenders or pawn shops who will, as usual, try to take advantage of an economic downturn. Big Pharma will use federal subsidies—our tax money—to create a vaccine and will charge outrageous amounts for us to get it.

Union workers in some industries have bargained over conditions. A clear value of having a union was illustrated by one of the most desperate groups of workers (average salary \$3,894,220), the major league baseball players. When owners wanted to cut salaries, on the assumption that games could be played with no one in the stands, they were forced to negotiate with the union. In fact, the owners even had to negotiate with the union over using the designated hitter in both leagues. If it works for these premium workers, it can work for you.

Kroger, with UFCW contracts, paid all of its grocery workers, including supply chain, manufacturing, pharmacy and call center associates, a "hero bonus" for working on the frontlines of the crisis, a \$2 premium above their standard base rate of pay for hours worked from March 29 through April 18. The grocery chain gave its employees the bonuses weekly to ensure its workers have immediate access to the extra money.

As a contrast, at Tyson Foods, for example, the company offered \$60 million in bonuses to 116,000 employees and truckers amid the COVID-19 pandemic.



Eligible employees are to receive a \$500 bonus, but only payable during the first week of July—if they stay at work.

Internally, the union has to demand, and enforce, health and safety conditions, even if it means essentially taking over a workplace and reorganizing the work processes so people are not so close, or so contaminated, that they will spread the disease. Assembly lines at GM, for example, kept running for several weeks without any official union opposition, and the production of autos was only for the companies' profits—no “essential” work here. We cannot trust the boss to protect us and unions must negotiate strict protections—every worker should be tested every day, at company expense and on company time, work processes should be redesigned to allow “social distancing,” health and safety equipment must be provided and refreshed.

In fact, unionized employers are willing to jeopardize the health of workers, as if the workplace were non-union. In Baltimore, Department of Public Works (DPW) workers were allowed to stay off the job on “permission leave” (not working, but being paid), but on June 12, the city revoked the policy unilaterally after some trash pickup and recycling were either delayed or cancelled. As some residents proclaimed that “the workers are on strike,” DPW officials said the delays are “completely unacceptable and pose an additional threat to public health. These workers are considered essential and must report to work. The DPW said it is taking the immediate actions:

- All permission leave for Solid Waste workers is revoked and workers must return to work immediately. Failure to report will result in job abandonment.
- Anticipating that some employees may not return to work, an aggressive recruitment campaign is underway to hire laborers and Commercial Drivers Licenses (CDL) drivers to fill positions.³⁹

Some officers are very aggressive about using this crisis as an opportunity. UNITE-HERE Local 25 Local 25 represents more than 7,000 DC-area hotel workers. “We are fully operational even though our office is closed,” John Boardman, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of UNITE HERE Local 25, said. “We are in the process of contacting all of our members directly, by phone. We have a very robust text communications backbone in place. Almost 90% of our members are capable of receiving text messages from us. We have our website up. We’re in the process this week of launching an email newsletter. So we’re keeping people posted. We are all isolated now, so anything that we can do to do what we as humans need,

³⁹ City of Baltimore. June 12, 2020

which is create a sense of community, all of those little things will be important. So, call a friend, call a member, Keep in touch. Email, text message somebody. We're trying to do that as much as we can with our membership, so that they know what's going on."

As one AFGE rep proclaimed: *"Oh hell no we are not waiting for Mgt to do the right thing. Between you & I, I just talked to an agent who refused to take a fit test for the N-95 because they were testing everyone with the same hood. He was threatened with removal so he submitted. He and another co-worker got sick. Doctor didn't test him due to lack of tests available, but quarantined him. Co-worker not so lucky & has the pneumonia going on, not doing well. I would love to just take a couple minutes to list what we do have available for our members. I do understand this is an opportunity to organize & I teach that to my Local leaders, & recently have been trying to convince Local presidents that sometimes you need to not handle all the cases individually because you will do more good for more folks addressing the big picture. Get on TV. Get on FB Live. Whatever!!! UNION OUT LOUD!! That, and before you even take the time to file, GET THE INFO OUT TO MEMBERS. Empower them to be "complicit" in their own defense!! And don't hesitate to email."*

A perfect example of the difference between a union shop and a non-union one developed in mid-June when a lot of employers wanted to reopen. In order to get the workers to show up, they threatened to cut off their unemployment or to fire them. More outrageous, these workers were also being required—not asked, but ordered—to sign liability waivers so if they get sick, the boss has no responsibility. While hard numbers are often difficult to get, at one point an estimated 3,000 people died every day from the COVID-19. Tens of thousands of workers are called "essential," and forced to work even though it could threaten their lives. The devastating conditions look like they could last for—what, weeks, months, even years?

So "Your money or your life" is not just a threat by a robber, it's the business plan of our employers and an opportunity to start a union organizing campaign.

Travis Boothe, a pharmacy technician and Food and Commercial Workers Local 400 steward at a Kroger store in West Virginia: "In the pharmacy, where I work, our staff has been overwhelmed this whole week. We can't keep up with the demand... We are exposed to floods of people at the cash registers. I think we are going to be hit hard by the virus. Before now, it was hard to get people involved in the union and talking about collective action. Now everyone is scared and everyone wants hazard pay, protective gear, they want to change safety protocols. We are

starting to develop collective demands around health and safety. My union is handling the situation the best they can, but there is no precedent for what retail workers are facing right now. . . We have to organize that anger, fear, and frustration into collective action."⁴⁰

"I'm essential to the pocketbooks of rich contractors and essential for spreading the virus, but that's about it," said Kirk Gibbs, 57, an electrician at a new parking garage in Syracuse, N.Y. "It's not essential for us to be here right now."

As one example, Fiat Chrysler closed its North American factories Wednesday afternoon [March 18] after spontaneous job actions broke out, beginning with workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant and spreading to Jefferson North Assembly in Detroit, Dundee Engine Plant south of Ann Arbor and the Toledo North complex in Ohio. The stoppages were carried out independently and, in many cases, workers defied threats by the UAW officers and management, who tried to vainly restart production.⁴¹

Defending a member who raises issues of health and safety is essential. "A petition was started nation-wide to support Travis Watkins was unjustly fired at the GM-Components Holdings LLC plant in Grand Rapids Michigan on March 18 for informing his fellow workers on a private Facebook page that management was escorting workers out of the plant because they were suspected of being infected with COVID-19. Caravan management accused Travis of 'conduct designed to harm or sabotage the image or reputation of the company [and] employees...Through your messaging you incited panic, made false statements surrounding 'suspected COVID-19' cases, and slandered both GM and Caravan . . . The company refused him his rights to union representation and refused to disclose information pertinent to his discharge. . . . the company cited a rule violation related to assault, fighting and coercion in dismissing him. The plant where Watkins worked is one of four Components Holdings plants. 'I was absolutely dumbfounded. I didn't assault anybody. I didn't threaten anybody. I certainly didn't coerce anybody,' Watkins said, *noting that he didn't interfere with anyone either*. 'I reported out the facts and the truth. There's no better defense against slander than the truth. What I put out was a factual statement about exactly what happened.'"⁴²

It is also essential, in this era of multiple tiers in our union contracts, to protect ALL of our members. "The number of positive COVID-19 cases has reached six at

⁴⁰ Chris Brooks. "The Danger We're Facing: A Grocery Workers Speaks Out." *Labor Notes*. March 23, 2020

⁴¹ *Detroit Free Press*. March 18, 2020.

⁴² Eric D. Lawrence. "Contract worker at GM subsidiary says he was fired for raising coronavirus concerns." *Detroit Free-Press*. April 22, 2020.

the General Motors CCA (Customer Care and Aftersales) parts warehouse in the Flint, Michigan suburb of Burton... A CCA worker told the WSWS that temporary workers make up a substantial part of those who have returned to the plant. ‘This is not voluntary. It’s forced labor,’ the worker said. ‘The company and the union are dangling the loss of health insurance over the heads of the temps forcing them to choose between losing medical insurance, income, or life.’ In addition, unless temps ‘voluntarily’ return to work, they lose their accumulated consecutive days necessary for being converted to full-time.”⁴³



The massive global protests over police brutality, provoked by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, have added another element of anger and social conflict, intensifying a discussion about race rather than directly about our workplaces.

As an example of how these movements merge, sanitation workers in Philadelphia, “who are predominantly black and brown,” rallied to prove that Black Lives Matter at work, as well as in communities.

“While the rally is not explicitly focused on police violence or Black Lives Matter, its timing makes it hard to ignore the parallels. The rally calls attention to the fact that workers’ rights — especially black workers’ rights — are part of nationwide protests that seek to protect the lives of black Americans.” Management responded, of

⁴³ Sheila Brehm. “This is Forced Labor”: Six GM workers stricken with COVID-18 at parts warehouse.” World Socialist Web site. April 11, 2020.

course, as management usually does by threatening the workers. “Streets Commissioner Carlton Williams sent a letter to workers on Monday addressing the rally, saying that “unauthorized absences ... will result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination.”⁴⁴

While depending on a government agency to protect us is futile, we can use the law to try to protect ourselves. If you are concerned about possible discipline for an “illegal” work stoppage, simply post this code on your union bulletin board or text it to all of your members: **1977.12(b)(2)**.

That’s the section of the OSHA provision that states:

*Your right to refuse to do a task is protected if **all** of the following conditions are met:*

- *Where possible, you have asked the employer to eliminate the danger, and the employer failed to do so; and*
- *You refused to work in "good faith." This means that you must genuinely believe that an imminent danger exists; and*
- *A reasonable person would agree that there is a real danger of death or serious injury; and*
- *There isn't enough time, due to the urgency of the hazard, to get it corrected through regular enforcement channels, such as requesting an OSHA inspection.*

2. An estimated half of the workforce, about 179 million people was, at one time, ordered by governors and mayors to stay home, though the numbers are shifting every day. Just because your union members are not at work, and maybe not paying dues, doesn’t mean that they are not still a union members so developing programs for workers who are laid off can have the same organizing value as a campaign in the workplace. Many of your members now have plenty of free time, so providing on-line classes in union topics is suddenly possible.

For unions in certain industries, the pandemic has been a disaster. An estimated 90% of the members of UNITE-HERE have been laid off, with no solid estimate of how many of their employers will not reopen. “Right now, nobody is working,” said Geoconda Argüello-Kline, a Culinary Workers Union leader in Las Vegas, whose union represents 60,000 gaming workers.

⁴⁴ Juliana Feliciano Reyes. “‘Black lives matter at work’: Philly sanitation workers rallying for safer conditions on the job.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. June 9, 2020.

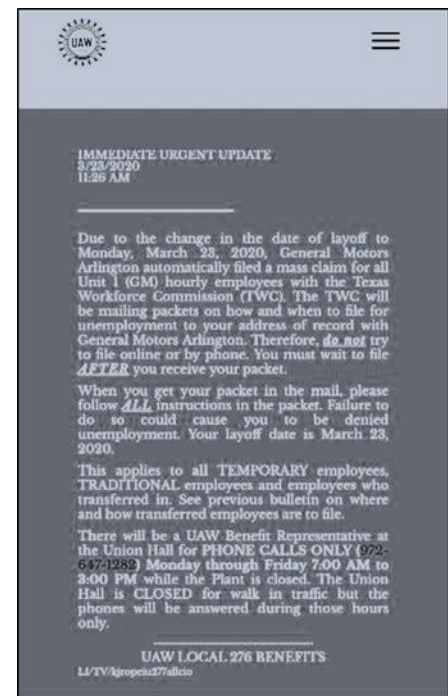
If your workplace shuts down, even temporarily, your union should demand that all workers be paid in full and that all benefits, especially health insurance, be continued. Simply dumping you out with encouragement to file for state unemployment is cruel and unusual punishment. Dropping your health insurance coverage could be accessory to murder. No worker should be forced back into an unsafe or unhealthy situation because of economic pressures.

One good example of the union activity is from the UAW Local 276 in Arlington, TX, where the local filed a mass claim for state unemployment, provided help at the union hall, and a clear explanation of how to properly file.

This excellent program provokes another important organizing decision for you to make if you are, like UAW Local 276, in an open shop state. Should you give this information to non-members, with the hope that it will prove to them the value of the union and get them to join, or should you block them as an example of how members get significant benefits for their dues dollars?

In any case, these are crucial issues for you and a reflection of a major deficiency of The Servicing Model of Unionism, where there is a significant gap between the officers and staff, and the members. In this pandemic, your local officers or Business Agents are probably working from home, safe and secure, and are not going to lose their jobs or their health insurance, so you have to assert your power and organize your co-workers. It requires a lot of discussion, but you know they will want to be part of this because each of them is calculating the worst case scenario—what happens if I lose my job, or if I get sick? A virtual union meeting, or discussion groups on these topics, are great organizing methods.

In a compelling way, the whole pandemic crisis has forced each of us to become savvy about distance learning, or meeting, technology. If you can Zoom with a physically distant relative, you can call a union meeting and can expect a whole new group of your co-workers to participate. In many locals, various work sites are spread so far apart—and sometimes even across the country in national locals—that a “meeting” of members seemed to be impossible. No more. Use this crisis as the opportunity to bring all of you together—on one screen, if not in one room.



Whether our members are working or on temporary layoff, and the union protects our benefits, now is the time to sign up non-members in any open shop. If the value of a union has ever been more important, this crisis shows it, but we have to be ready to expand our membership. Once again, the long-term reluctance of many unions to run consistent programs to sign up non-members makes it more difficult but this crisis will push us in new—and hopefully better—directions. A systematic approach to approach the non-members should bring good results.

Beyond that, a union should set up programs for the laid-off members, using various forms of social media—Facebook videos, the local web page, Zoom meetings, texts—to keep everyone in contact. Certainly, basic practical information, like filing for unemployment or continuation of benefits, should be a part of this visibility, but how about the social aspects? There is so much discussion about the isolation that people feel when they are home all of the time, and the union could set up social groups, like Happy Hours or birthday parties or discussions, to keep the members together, and to help build the sense of community that so many unions have lost over several generations. At one time, workers lived near their work, and would see their co-workers in the community—at the grocery store, in church, in a neighborhood park. Now workers are dispersed and the only “community” is the one the boss sets up, so we have to build new ones. With social media, we can do it even if we are quarantined.

Some officers—gasp!—are even talking about creating union training videos, figuring that if the members are stuck at home, it’s an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of their union.

And labor history! How about a history of your union, so that the members who thought that all of the benefits that are now threatened came from a benevolent boss can understand that organizing—just as we are discussing today—got us what we needed. A good example of a local union history is at http://www.ibew459.org/index.cfm?zone=/unionactive/view_page.cfm&page=New20Members.bible

And if you really want to see the whole sense of self-help that created our union movement, check out George Pullis and the brave shoemakers of Philadelphia Cordwainers, who were charged as criminals for organizing. Their inspirational labor history is in the transcript of their trial.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ https://books.google.com/books?id=ES4pAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA59-IA2&lpg=PA59-IA2&dq=pullis+%26+commons&source=bl&ots=3nA5RotiJ7&sig=o--wRm734MV-PjmnwB-nkY-IJ_E&hl=en&ei=t6kiS4PXNM-Wtge4ifHlBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result#v=onepage&q&f=false

We also need to share our successes and strategies. One of the challenges of not having a union movement in the US is that Best Union Practices are isolated. One person, or one local, develops a good strategy to deal with a crisis but no one else knows about it. There is no network where we can all learn. This program is a small step in that direction.

The commercial media does not cover our activities, so social media, and independent newspapers like *In These Times*, the PayDay Report, and *Labor Notes* are more important but how many of our members—or even staff and officers-- have access? As news come in from around the country of rank-and-file activities, it's obvious that workers have been pushed to the breaking point, torn between the urgency of having an income—and health insurance coverage—and the fear of getting sick or of contaminating their families. Another fear is getting fired for demanding safe and healthy working conditions. All of this shows a desperation and a difficulty in dealing with a new and, hopefully, unique situation.

3. What about new organizing to immediately begin to help non-union workers who are working? Hundreds of thousands of workers are organizing every day but they are not joining unions, even if they are acting like union members--holding work stoppages or protests over the conditions. We need to use even minimal union gains as a way to start new organizing campaigns, to try to build on the energies of the work stoppages because no matter how bad you have it, non-union workers have it much worse. In a couple of situations, like the Amazon warehouse on Staten Island, a union is around but, in many cases—partly because of the social distancing—no organizers are seen as workplaces erupt to help the workers create permanent organizations. Once again, the long-term failure of union officers to focus on new organizing will haunt us when new opportunities and leads appear.



While it can be very difficult to concentrate on a new organizing campaign because we are so focused on protecting our families, and securing our incomes, now is the time when a union is most important—and the difference between non-union are HUGE.

The total control that employers have over non-union workforces has been thrown into harsh visibility, as workers are being told to risk their lives by returning to work or lose everything. “As people across the United States are told to return to work, employees who balk at the health risks say they are being confronted with painful reprisals: Some are losing their jobs if they try to stay home, and thousands more are being reported to the state to have their unemployment benefits cut off. . . . Some states with a history of weaker labor protections are encouraging employers to report workers who do not return to their jobs, citing state laws that disqualify people from receiving unemployment checks if they refuse a reasonable offer of work. . . . In interviews across the country, workers said they were anxious to keep their jobs at a time when the economic devastation of the coronavirus has left more than 40 million in the country out of work. With the job market bleak and many family members unemployed, many people said they felt powerless to refuse an order to return to work or question the safety practices at their jobs.”⁴⁶

Obviously, the key word is “powerless,” a synonym for “non-union. The most basic organizing leaflet emphasizes that, with a union, the boss cannot simply take money away unilaterally, so moments like these provide huge organizing openings—if there are union officers willing to take them. Most importantly, on-union workers have ZERO representation on health and safety issues at businesses that are still open.

In another example of the boss giveth, the boss taketh away, Whole Foods workers were notified at the beginning of June that the extra \$2/hour they got as “hero pay” was being cancelled. Even after these pay cuts, workers got T-shirts from Whole Foods T-that say “Hero” on the front and call them “Hard Core” on the back.

“The Fair Labor Standards Act — the federal law that governs minimum wage, overtime pay, and record keeping — does not address hazard pay, except that it must be taken into account when calculating a federal employee’s overtime pay. Hazard pay could be included in a company’s collective bargaining agreement with unionized workers.

“There is no right to hazard pay,” said Janice Bellace, a legal studies and business ethics professor at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.”⁴⁷

Amazon is also eliminating the temporary \$2/hour “hazard pay” that was implemented in mid-March, to encourage workers to return to dangerous

⁴⁶ Jack Healy. “Workers Fearful of the Coronavirus Are Getting Fired and Losing Their Benefits.” *The New York Times*. June 5, 2020.

⁴⁷ Christian Hetrick and Katie Park. “Whole Foods and other retailers have ended hazard pay for workers even as coronavirus remains a threat.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. June 4, 2020.

warehouses—uh, excuse me, “fulfillment centers”—cancelling the policy of allowing unlimited time off for sick workers, so they will either have to return to their jobs, with the risk of contaminating their co-workers, or losing their jobs completely. Since they will be legally considered either a “quit,” or a “discharge,” they will also be denied UC.

This wouldn’t have happened if you had a union.

If you had an organizing campaign started, you already have contacts, so go to them and stress the danger, and the opportunity, that the pandemic presents. You can provide examples of how the union is forcing changes and compare them to the failures of non-union bosses to think about their workers. Hopefully the organizing campaign has set up an effective communications network—through e-mail, Twitter or text--so you can send out flashes and bulletins that will encourage these workers to protect themselves and help them begin to really appreciate the importance of having a union. The value of organizing will be more than just money, it will be changing the lousy health and safety conditions that non-union workers simply accept.

At least one significant campaign has appeared. According to an announcement from CWA, on May 7, 2020, “a committee of dozens of nurses, CNAs, and other bedside care workers at Denver Health announced this week that they are forming a new union for the hospital's employees, citing concerns ranging from workplace protections to executive pay. Denver Health Workers United, an affiliate of CWA, will organize members from all job categories in the hospital and advocate for workers' rights, institutional change, and meaningful public investment to improve patient health outcomes. . . . Nurses and other critical members of the more than 7,000 staff were asked to take leave without pay and cut hours, while a handful of executives raked in bonuses. Meanwhile, some staff report not receiving appropriate protective equipment; in some alarming cases, staff have been allotted just one mask for an entire week.”

One extraordinary union victory, which took at the end of July after a 17- year organizing campaign, involved the successful unionization of 45,000 childcare providers in California—the largest single union election America has seen in years. “The campaign is a tangible achievement that brings together union power, political might, and social justice battles for racial and gender equality. . . . Child Care Providers United Child (CCPU), the umbrella group now representing workers across the state, is a joint project of several powerful SEIU and AFSCME locals in California. Those unions divided up the state by counties, and workers will be

members of either SEIU or AFSCME depending on where they live, as well as being members of CCPU.

“The stage for this week’s vote was set last fall, when California governor Gavin Newsom signed into law legislation that granted bargaining rights to childcare providers, who had previously been legally ineligible for unionization. Getting the law changed took 16 years, during which time it made it to the governor’s desk twice, but was vetoed—once by Arnold Schwarzenegger, and again by Jerry Brown. In the months since Newsom signed the bill, the unions used the networks they had already created over the past two decades to administer the election. The vote, announced yesterday [July 28, 2020], was 97% in favor of the new union.”⁴⁸

As another example, 32BJ Area Director Jaime Contreras stated: “One of the things a lot of workers have said, especially at the airport where we have active organizing campaigns, is that this is one of the reasons why all workers in the United States need a union to speak for them in a time of crisis like this,” said Contreras. “We have about 125,000 contracted workers at airports, who don’t necessarily work directly for the airlines. If it wasn’t for the union, these workers would have been left out of the deal that made it to Congress. And our organizing campaigns continue.” (Union City. March 27, 2020)

If you had an organizing target, but no campaign, you can’t really go into that workplace with leaflets about how workers can protect themselves, but your members all have friends and relatives in non-union workplaces, so ask them for contacts. In many industries, like health care and hospitality, workers move from job to job, or have gone to school together, so union members have friends and contacts in non-union workplaces in the same industry. We should reach out to them, just as we are personally reaching out to friends and neighbors about the pandemic, to emphasize the value of a union.

Direct action and organizing can bring immediate results. As one possibility in the hospitality industry, in Baltimore an enormous list was posted online, called the Virtual Tip Jar, with listing of names of hospitality workers, where they worked, and whether they are covered by health insurance (and most are not, no surprise). Everyone listed a contact number so this would be, as one old-time organizer suggested, a great start for a city-wide organizing campaign. He suggested sending money to one person from each workplace, with the condition that the worker then circulate around among the co-workers, a petition demanding “We the undersigned

⁴⁸ Hamilton Nolan. “Child Care Workers Are Now a Mighty Force With a Huge New Union. It Only Took 17 Years.” *In These Times*. July 30, 2020.

promise to vote against any candidate who does not immediately support a Green New Deal, \$2,000/month to laid off workers and health care for all.”

The enormous list of names is also a fabulous First Contact—often the most difficult moment in an organizing campaign—for an organizing program. Yeah, we won’t be able to home visit them right away but sending out pro-union material, emphasizing the difference between how union workers are treated and how non-union workers are mistreated is a place to start.

Another challenge is developing new organizing strategies to recognize a dramatically changed workplace. For most organizers in the private sector, an organizing campaign involves getting cards signed and going to the NLRB for an election. But what if the workers you are trying to organize are not legally considered “workers?” As the gig economy has expanded, more workers are legally classified as “contractors,” and have no “rights” under agencies like the NLRB.

A case involving sexual harassment of home service workers, employed through a home services booking site called Handy, illustrates both the difficulties and the possibilities for union organizing. Several of these workers—out of an estimated 20,000 who have completed more than 1.2 million jobs for Handy just in in California--were confronted with sexual harassment but are “legally” not protected by any law because they are considered “independent contractors,” just like Lyft or Uber drivers, and an expanding reserve of workers in the transformed economy.

In California, a new state law, Assembly Bill 5 which took effect in January, 2020, “ordered employers to treat many gig workers as employees and provide them with the Associated benefits. Most gig companies in the state have refused to comply with the law.” Handy, a subsidiary of ANGI Homeservices, is one of them, and has an extensive record of not paying its “contractors,” or resolving problems. Some workers simply quit the platform,⁴⁹ but what about the excitement (and justice) of an organizing campaign involving 20,000 workers in just one state? Yes, it’s complicated because there’s not a common workplace but all these workers share conditions and grievances, the basis for every organizing campaign, .

One of the concerns is that there are “organizing” campaigns which do not have union recognition and a permanent structure as a goal. While social media has become an enormous asset for union organizing, a social media campaign is not a substitute for a union, even though some groups may try to substitute one for the other. One newspaper proclaimed “The Protests Show That Twitter is Real Life” but

⁴⁹ Kellen Browning and Kate Conger. “Home Service Workers Push for Harassment Safeguards.” *New York Times*, September 12, 2020.

every organizer knows the importance of personal contact and organizing to develop a permanent organization, not just a demonstration.

One organization on-line is “Coworker.org, a site that allows workers to start and run campaigns in their workplace—not union campaigns, but issue-based campaigns, which have won workers at a wide range of companies everything from wage increases to the right to wear beards. Founded in 2013, the site claims to have hosted campaigns for a million workers, including more than 300,000 in the past month who have participated in a slew of workplace campaigns related to the coronavirus crisis, many of them seeking hazard pay and safer working conditions. . . . ‘Historically, the labor movement has thrived when we were able to meet people in the spaces they were convening—in the early part of the last century those spaces were the backrooms of bars, churches and synagogues, parks and, eventually, we built union halls where people could gather for both meetings and celebrations,’ [Michelle] Miller says. ‘Online spaces should be considered no different. They are places people gather to talk about what matters to them and a savvy, thoughtful labor movement is part of those conversations.’”⁵⁰

And, not surprisingly in such chaotic times, there are entrepreneurs who want to capture the energy but not demand recognition or organize a real union. “Another new entrant into the field is GetFrank.com, which just launched in an early beta phase. The site, a for-profit company that aims to eventually support itself via subscription revenue, has a model similar to Coworker: Workers subscribe, organize and create campaigns privately, and then ‘Frank helps to privately send your campaigns to management and works to ensure you are heard.’ The company is being built by a team of tech industry veterans, based in Chicago. . . . The more products that launch in the online organizing space, the more we will be treated to a natural experiment of what works and what doesn’t. Coworker, the nonprofit, must raise its funding from the world of foundations; Unit, the benefit corporation, will operate essentially as a labor side labor consultant, seeking capital but also legally obligated to fulfill its pro-labor mission; and there’s Frank, the regular for-profit firm, which is hoping that there is a high, untapped demand for these services which the market has yet to fill.”⁵¹

The bosses, of course, are not sleeping and are openly running their anti-union propaganda, no matter the level of worker organization.

⁵⁰ Hamilton Nolan. “The Long-Neglected Online Labor Organizing Space Is Getting More Crowded.” *In These Times*. May 7, 2020

⁵¹ Ibid.

“Amazon is looking to hire two intelligence analysts to track ‘labor organizing threats’ within the company. The company recently posted two job listings for analysts that can keep an eye on sensitive and confidential topics ‘including labor organizing threats against the company.’ Amazon is looking to hire an ‘Intelligence Analyst’ and a ‘Sr Intelligence Analyst’ for its Global Security Operations’ (GSO) Global Intelligence Program (GIP), the team that's responsible for physical and corporate security operations such as insider threats and industrial espionage. The job ads list several kinds of threats, such as ‘protests, geopolitical crises, conflicts impacting operations,’ but focuses on ‘organized labor’ in particular, mentioning it three times in one of the listings.

“After this story was published, Amazon deleted the job listings and company spokesperson Maria Boschetti said in an email that ‘the job post was not an accurate description of the role— it was made in error and has since been corrected.’ The spokesperson did not respond to follow-up questions about the alleged mistake. The job listing, according to Amazon's own job portal, had been up since January 6, 2020.”⁵²

“In March, Trader Joe’s sent a memo to store managers encouraging them to relay a message to employees: Joining a union might be a bad idea. ‘It’s not like buying toothpaste you don’t end up liking,’ said the email, which listed a series of anti-union talking points, including a warning about the size of dues. ‘It’s like buying a house ... you’re in for the long term.’ At the end of March, store managers gave anti-union lectures during regularly scheduled ‘huddles’ with staff, using talking points from the email. In one case, a regional manager visited stores to argue that the hazard pay petition was an opportunistic attempt to seduce workers into joining a union.

“At a store in Philadelphia, the manager told a group of about 30 employees that ‘a union is a business and they’re trying to take your money,’ according to two employees who attended the meeting. A store manager at a Trader Joe’s in Maryland said that joining a union was like getting married and that ‘once you’re in, it’s very hard to get out,’ according to an employee who heard the comment.

“A company spokeswoman, Kenya Friend-Daniel, said in a statement that Trader Joe’s has ‘the right to express our opinion to crew members about the pros and cons of possible unionization.’ Trader Joe’s is hardly the only retailer to actively

⁵² Lorenzo Franceschi.” Amazon Is Hiring an Intelligence Analyst to Track ‘Labor Organizing Threats’” Vice. September 1, 2020.

oppose unionization. While workers at the grocery chain Kroger are unionized, Walmart has moved aggressively to squelch organizing efforts over the years.

“‘Because a union has chosen to inject itself into the lives of our crew members during this time of crisis,’ Ms. Friend-Daniel said, ‘we have no alternative but to remind and share with our crew members the facts.’”

“The incident helped re-energize discussions about unionization that had simmered since 2016, when an employee in Manhattan complained to federal authorities that he was fired after managers judged his smile to be insufficiently “genuine.”⁵³

In an unpleasant revival of an ugly practice, striking workers have been replaced by convict labor. “Livingston Parish work-release inmates are being used to pick up garbage in New Orleans East while the workers are on strike. Some sanitation workers in New Orleans went on strike this week to protest pay and work conditions in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The workers on strike are employed by Metro Service Group and the number of them protesting has grown. Metro Service Group primarily services New Orleans East. Local residents, union workers, hospitality workers and health care professionals —all impacted by the coronavirus — have voiced support and concern for the sanitation workers.⁵⁴

In a move that hopefully will be duplicated, these workers then announced the formation of The City Waste Union, with the plan to organize. “The workers hope that the new City Waste Union will help to change what they say is



an abusive system of subcontractors that exploits waste workers in New Orleans. ‘We have been dealing with this for years, and if we got this union organized, people in the future would have a better situation,’ says [strike leader Jonathan] Edwards. . . . The union effort has inspired mass community support. A GoFundMe effort launched by the workers has raised over \$76,000 in strike

⁵³ David Yaffe-Bellany. “Labor Fight Collides With the Pandemic at Trader Joe’s.” *New York Times*. April 2, 2020.

⁵⁴ WDSU-TV News. May 8, 2020.

funds for the 14 striking workers and the City Waste Union.”⁵⁵ When this union demands recognition, even for a small group, it changes the nature of the protests, just as the Memphis sanitation workers did in 1968 when they demanded that the city negotiate with them. Most importantly, these New Orleans workers have a sense of this history and carry the *I Am A Man* signs that were famous in the Memphis strike.

Just as workers have been out in the streets to protest the dangerous conditions, there are more frightening signs of some ugly social movements on the other side. The demonstrations by right-wing, armed groups in Michigan, for example, supporting the reopening of “essential” businesses, like barber shops or nail salons, look like the old newsreels from Germany in the early 1930’s, when inflation forced workers to take piles of money in wheelbarrows to buy basic foods—and we know how that ended. The Facebook page of a displaced steelworker denounced Baltimore County Executive John Olszewski, Jr., as “Baltimore Communist Executive Johnny Zero....,” for restricting the opening of small businesses. The most reactionary group wrap themselves in the US Constitution and are a clear menace in this troubled time.

The frightening incident where a 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse murdered two protestors in Kenosha, WI, with an illegal AR-15 rifle, demonstrated how serious the right-wing zealots are as they claiming to be defending “order”—a anti-union and discriminatory “order.” The brazen activities of armed white militias show that the struggle may be moving to a totally different stage. It’s one thing to argue about unionism with a co-worker, but it’s very different when the co-worker has a deadly weapon and is prepared to use it.

The challenge for new organizing is that so many of the jobs are “different”—that is, people work individually, or at home, or as “contractors, like Uber drivers. More importantly, the workers—and they are workers, no matter what the law says—in these industries are already organizing. They are ahead of us and we need to catch up but union recognition must be the principal demand.

At General Motors, for example, salaried workers in the United States have been told to plan on continuing to work from home until at least June 30, 2021. Google LLC and Facebook Inc. both plan to keep employees working from home through next July. Amazon.com has told its workers it will be at least January before

⁵⁵ Mike Elk. “Replaced by Prison Labor, NOLA Garbage Workers Form Union to Fightback.” *Payday Report*. May 29, 2020.

they return and Ford Motors has told its 30,000 U.S. salaried employees who are working remotely that they won't be expected to return until at least January.

If your organizing strategy is simply to find a common location, pass out leaflets at the gate and go to the Labor Board with a petition, you will miss enormous possibilities. Organizers will have to adjust to the new “workplaces,” as we always have, with new ways of communications and new issues. Workers adapted our organizations to the change to assembly lines, for example, and now the 21st century is bringing more challenges that we have to overcome or our numbers will continue to drop.

“Right now, there is no more gaping hole for organized labor than the tech industry. Unions have almost no power there. And that’s where all the economic power lies. This is not a small problem for unions — it is an existential one. Apple is not union. Microsoft is not union. Not Amazon, nor Alphabet, nor Facebook. Those five companies alone are worth \$7.3 trillion. Not only is all of that power completely untouched by the influence of unions, but almost all smaller tech companies are non-union as well. It is not hard to see that if our goal is to allow organized labor to exert meaningful influence over the entire economy, then it is a fairly major problem that organized labor is absent from the industry that exerts the most influence over the entire economy. The tech industry is the biggest failure of the union movement in the 21st century.”⁵⁶

One intriguing union move, that seems almost impossible to believe, according to Bloomberg News (March 26, 2020) the federal legislation demands that mid-size businesses seeking loans under new coronavirus stimulus legislation moving in Congress would have to agree not to oppose unions looking to organize their workers. Companies with between 500 and 10,000 employees applying for a direct loan from the Treasury Department would be required to “make a good-faith certification that the recipient will remain neutral in any union organizing effort for the term of the loan.”

Unions can develop political campaigns to protect non-union workers, such as one in Philadelphia. “The bill, introduced by Councilmember Helen Gym and supported by more than two dozen labor groups, would make it illegal for employers to retaliate against workers who refuse to work in conditions that expose them to the risk of the coronavirus and who speak out about their experiences. It’s a measure that would give some teeth to the city and the state’s public health orders regarding how

⁵⁶ Hamilton Nolan. “The Failure to Unionize the Tech Industry Will Eat the Labor Movement Alive.” *In These Times*. August 26, 2020.

businesses should protect their workers during the pandemic. As such, it's likely to draw critique from the business community.”⁵⁷

In Baltimore, UNITE-HERE Local 7 is “pushing city council to pass a bill to guarantee recall rights by seniority for workers who have been laid off from hotels, event centers, and commercial buildings.”

But these gestures do not bring union recognition, so the non-union workers will just have to desperately hope that the next ugly thing that happens, Someone Else—the unions, supportive politicians—will step up to protect the workers who won't organize to protect themselves.

4. Finally, how can unions even help non-union workers who have been displaced?

One important way is political action, getting legal protections for ALL workers, beyond a union contract, and our members will benefit if every worker sees an improvement. So what are some issues that affect both our members and non-union members off the job?

One fundamental question that union officers ask is: why should we? We have enough problems protecting our own members, so why should we worry about a bunch of people we don't even know and who don't contribute to our union?

This is a question that union officers have been wrestling with since the 1930's when many of them opposed federal legislation like the minimum wage laws or Social Security, and the benefits that workers had under a union contract would be spread—with no dues collected—to every worker. In some cities, like Philadelphia, the unions pushed for a paid sick leave across the city—it was a benefit for all workers, of course, but immediately came to all of the unionized workers who were unable to negotiate paid sick days in their individual contracts.

This raises the issue of political action, and demands new and imaginative proposals, some of which should be directed to increasing the number of union members, as well as providing social benefits. As society seems on the edge of an enormous reorganization, we have to organize to make sure it benefits us, and increases union membership, and not just the wealthy bosses, bankers and investors.

Pushing for another federal stimulus check, or for a massive public employment project, like the Civilian Conservation Corps, will help every worker, including our own members. The creation of a national health insurance system will be an enormous benefit to all of our members who are laid off and may lose their

⁵⁷ Juliana Feliciano Reyes. “Workers aren't calling out unsafe coronavirus conditions for fear of losing their job. A Philly bill could help.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. June 11, 2020.

health insurance and will help both our members who are laid off and those who are working because a single-payer plan will dramatically reduce health insurance costs.

You help all, you help one. Isn't that the definition of the word "Solidarity?"

Obviously today, the failure of the union movement to become a political force has never been more obvious. There has not been a piece of specifically pro-union legislation passed in decades—that is, new laws like card check or the elimination of the Taft-Hartley Act.

The officers of most unions are so closely tied to the top officers of the Democratic Party that they won't even consider a mild challenger like Bernie Sanders, and certainly will not consider supporting a third party or creating a labor party. One significant part of The Servicing Model of Unionism is the separation of officers and staff from the members, and the political divide is clear. Our members have left the Democratic Party in significant numbers, with about 47% of union voters in 2016 voting for Donald Trump.

As AFL-CIO Executive Vice-President Tefere Gebre explained, "We elected Democrat after Democrat after Democrat, and things never changed for workers. Sooner or later they're just going to say, 'I'm going to try something new.' In 2016, Donald Trump was that something new."⁵⁸

"Unions are on the decline. Some of this is related to changes in the real economy, some changes in regulation of industry, some changes in labor law/practice, some is related to the change in the Democratic Party, some is related to failures of union strategy, some of it is related to failures of union leadership. All of these are worth exploring and understanding, but the upshot is you have institutions with shrinking bases and shrinking power. There have been valiant efforts to fight against the sources of this diminution, but the symptoms of the disease of union decline have in the main created vicious cycles that exacerbate the decline itself. There have been valiant efforts to fight against the sources of this diminution, but the symptoms of the disease of union decline have in the main created vicious cycles that exacerbate the decline itself. As unions weaken, they carve out increasingly sectional deals with employers and industries, with the rise of labor-management partnership and other capital-friendly "innovations". They go for lower-hanging organizing fruit, scooping up low-wage workers without delivering gains for those workers, especially in the public sector where barriers to organizing are lower in traditional union states, and in the service industry. Politically, the unions become less politically independent, just as the need for political

⁵⁸ Steven Mikulan. "Labor Day Reality Check: Tefere Gebre on the State of the Unions." *Capital & Main*. September 7, 2020.

independence grows; they fight to preserve their status within the Party writ large rather than fighting for policies or political power in the direct interest of labor. We see more union mega-locals with fewer meetings, less member engagement or leader accountability.”⁵⁹

Unfortunately, there is no *status quo*—things have been changing rapidly in the global economy, and the changes forced by the pandemic will be even more dramatically disruptive. One of the great appeals of Donald Trump in 2016 was the promise to someone return the world to its conditions of the late 1950’s, when manufacturing was strong, companies were stable—ah, America was Great then, right? The slippage has never been more obvious when you look at the two presidential candidates in 2020 from the major parties.

⁵⁹ Jonah Furman. “No Left without the Labor Left.” Organizing Upgrade. August 24, 2020.

Obviously, as pressure increases on the federal government to provide financial assistance, with price tags in the many trillions of borrowed money, the big questions are: who gets it? Who pays for it?

While most of our members got a \$1,200 stimulus” check, analysis shows that the very wealthy continue to receive the major share of the package. One newspaper proclaimed it to be “Crumbs for the Hungry but Windfalls for the Rich” stating “While President Trump and his allies in Congress seek to tighten access to food stamps, they are showing compassion



for one group: zillionaires. Their economic rescue package quietly allocated \$135 billion — yes, that’s “billion” with a “b” — for the likes of wealthy real estate developers. . . . About 82 percent of the Zillionaire Giveaway goes to those earning more than \$1 million a year, according to Congress’s Joint Committee on Taxation. Of those beneficiaries earning more than \$1 million annually, the average benefit is \$1.6 million.”⁶⁰

In contrast, a group in Philadelphia called #NoServicesNoCity: Campaign for a Just Philly Budget, is demanding that the Mayor and City Council “implement measures that will collect money from bigger businesses, major nonprofits, and wealthy individuals. Slashing city services, they say, will hurt Philadelphia’s poorest and most vulnerable during a time when people are already struggling with massive job losses and a public health crisis.” Among the proposals are reinstituting the personal property tax, which taxes the value of stocks and bonds held by individuals and companies and ending the property tax abatement for bigger businesses.⁶¹

How could we demand a different approach? More than 2 million Americans work in the hotel industry, and 15 million Americans work at restaurants, for example, so the money should be paid directly to them and not just to help hoteliers or restauranteurs through industry-specific bailouts who may not let the money

⁶⁰ Nicholas Kristof. “Crumbs for the Hungry but Windfalls for the Rich.” *New York Times*. May 24, 2020.

⁶¹ Juliana Feliciano Reyes. “City workers facing layoffs say Philadelphia should tax the rich. Is that possible?” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. May 27, 2020.

trickle-down. The hotel industry alone has requested a \$150 billion bailout, which would help President Donald Trump endure the cancelled bookings at his resorts. U.S. cruise lines want U.S. aid even though they're headquartered outside the U.S. to avoid U.S. taxes. In a way, it is a rerun of the 2008 financial crisis, when the Obama administration authorized \$700 billion for the financial industry, expanding social inequality, while providing nothing for us.

When a union uses its political power at a local level to help non-union workers, it can demonstrate the importance of having the union. In Philadelphia, for example, the city administration "had expanded its five-year-old paid sick leave law to include workers affected by the health crisis. One noteworthy addition: Employers had to allow their workers to use their accrued paid sick time before laying them off. In other words, the city was ordering employers to pay their workers for the sick time they had earned. But at least one group of workers — the 400 hourly workers formerly employed by CookNSolo, the restaurant group behind brands like Federal Donuts, Zahav, and Goldie — isn't getting the payout. The experience of the CookNSolo workers reveals a shortcoming of the city's labor protections: It could take weeks or months for the city to investigate and issue a determination before workers get paid, and right now most workers don't have the luxury of waiting.

"STARR Restaurant Group, another one of the city's nationally known restaurant companies, is also not letting its 6,000 workers use their paid sick time during the pandemic, [radio station] WHYY reported last week. And it's possible that many more low-wage workers are in the same position as these industry staffers, as the chaos of the early days of the pandemic has exacerbated the confusion that already surrounds the city's labor laws."

While the owners of these restaurants whined about preserving "the viability of the business," they are clearly taking care of themselves, not their workers, and are simply breaking the law. In fact, two benevolent bosses, the co-owners of CookNSolo, with more than 400 displaced workers, refused to pay legally entitled obligated sick leave but have donated \$40,000 to a fund to "help out" displaced workers. Uh, so the owners can't adhere to a law that been in place since 2015, but have \$40,000 in spare change?

Workers organized a petition--hey, keep that social distance--signed by nearly 1,000, calling for CookNSolo to pay the sick leave workers had earned. They pointed to an emergency city law on March 23 that required employers to do so.

As an example of how organizing forces changes, several days later the company announced, "We're paying all of your accrued sick leave," the email said. Yes, they whine about confusion in the law because the company is claiming that

all of their workers have been terminated, not “laid off,” and the law doesn’t specifically mention “termination,” but they are still going to pay.⁶²

Another situation so clearly emphasizes the importance of a union as well as the failure to create organizing campaigns. Some well-known hotels in California, as well as several hotels in Baltimore, Phoenix and Boston, told longtime employees in early July that they had lost their jobs permanently. In some hotels, the workers were told that they could reapply for their jobs but if they were “hired,” they would be considered “new employees.” Obviously, these unilateral moves are very different from having the protection of a union contract, which guarantees recall by seniority.

As a political response, Los Angeles, Long Beach, and several other California cities as well as Los Angeles county, enacted legislation requiring hotels (and sometimes other industries) to rehire by order of seniority any workers they laid off because of the pandemic. Similar legislation moved forward in Oakland and Pasadena and has been introduced in the Baltimore and Phoenix city councils, although the Phoenix legislation was pulled from the council’s agenda in the face of intense hotel industry opposition. Supporters say such a recall bill will be introduced in the Massachusetts state legislature later this month.

The highest-stakes battle took place in California when, in March, 2020, the state assembly approved a bill that would extend the recall requirement to hotels throughout the nation’s most populous state. The legislation passed by a 44-17 vote, with an astonishing 18 members abstaining. but in 6 months, the bill has not passed through the Democratic-dominated state senate. The legislation would also cover tens of thousands of building service workers, such as janitors, as well as airport workers, such as baggage handlers.⁶³

UNITE-HERE Local 11, the union representing more than 32,000 hospitality workers throughout Southern California and Arizona, led the effort to get this legislation passed but there was strong resistance from the bosses, according to Assembly member Ash Kalma. “We’ve seen enormous pushback from big business interests from day one. They always object to expansion of rights and benefits to

⁶² Juliana Feliciano Reyes. “Workers say two high-profile restaurant groups are not paying sick leave as required by Philly law.” *Philadelphia Inquirer*. March 24, 2020.

⁶³ Steven Greenhouse. “Workers fight back as US hotels try to lay off staff and hire on the cheap.” *The Guardian*. July 9, 2020.

workers. There's a reason why our country lags behind so much of the world in paid sick leave and other types of foundational benefits that create a better society.”⁶⁴

On June 23, 2020, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a Back to Work Emergency Ordinance guaranteeing reemployment to certain employees who were laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Ordinance creates a temporary right to reemployment when covered employers seek to hire workers for the same positions previously held by employees who were recently laid off for COVID-19 reasons. Moreover, if covered employers seek to fill a job position that is “substantially similar” to a previously held position, they must first offer the position to a laid-off employee before offering the position to others. A “substantially similar position” is defined very broadly and includes any position for which a laid-off employee would be qualified.⁶⁵

These situation so clearly illustrates the difference between a union contract and an at-will status. Yes, this legislation—if it is really enforced—could protect these workers at the time, but what about the next crisis? It is an opportunity for organizing campaigns to start in every hotel, so workers are not dependent on erratic political support.

This legislation, in a couple of states, reflects the desperate, and temporary, responses to the ugly treatment at work that the pandemic has brought. There are a variety of other temporary political measures that have been introduced.

Since Medicare Part B does not cover Home Delivery of prescriptions, some senators—and not just Bernie Sanders—are now calling for a Medicaid For All, so that all medical expenses are covered. Pennsylvania senator Bob Casey insisted: “In this crisis, nobody should go broke or suffer financially because of the cost of treating COVID-19,” Casey said, calling to expand Medicaid to cover “every penny” for people who lack health insurance or have insufficient insurance, even though at its national convention, the Democratic Party explicitly rejected national health insurance..

Other senators are calling for protections against evictions and foreclosures, and even for forgiveness on student loans.

As another negative example, the coal industry wants permission to stop making payments to miners with black lung disease, both union and non-union.

Or how about making sure that workers can collect workers compensation for CORVID-19, rather than being challenged by lawyers who claim they contracted it

⁶⁴ Jody Meacham. “Worker ‘right of recall’ protections slowly moving through California legislature.” Silicon Valley Business Journal. August 13, 2020.

⁶⁵ Hunton Labor and employment Perspectives. July 7, 2020.

at home? At least one union, AFGE, has defined “presumption of workplace illness” and is lobbying Congress to advocate its inclusion in a stimulus bill.

In one of the stimulus bills, there was a clause so companies would also be required to use loan proceeds to retain at least 90 percent of their workforce at full compensation and benefits until Sept. 30, 2020.

Finally, there is also the looming threat of widespread bankruptcy filings, so the pandemic will be used as an excuse to end pension or benefit funds and to not pay workers for all of our wages and benefits. Both union and non-union workers have been remarkably, and regrettably, ignorant in the developing bankruptcy laws, which put us at the very end of the line of creditors. And then, when we finally start

to learn, it is usually too late because our boss has already used to law to protect his resources while dumping ours. And this threat of bankruptcy is not just for large corporations—small businesses, often desperate in the best of times, are also considering this escape route.

While these legal measures to protect non-union workers are helpful, and certainly important, a union’s activities must be focused on new organizing: how do we transform this “cause” into a campaign? We have to organize—both internally, in workplaces that have a union, and, more importantly, in new organizing—using this crisis as an opportunity to bring more workers into our movement.

In every case where unions help non-union workers politically to protect or even to increase a benefit, we should always include the tag line “This would not have happened to you if you had a union.”

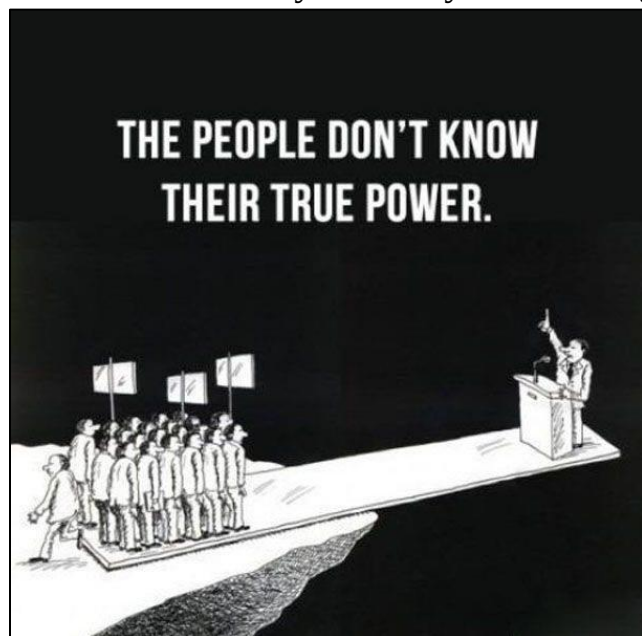
“It’s also the case that we need something that functions as a union — building worker power at the workplace — if we are to win anything else that matters to us. It’s not just a representation without redistribution argument, though that’s real enough. It’s also the idea that we cannot have a workplace that remains the



authoritarian, dehumanizing space that it is today if we want regular people to be empowered to run their own lives.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Jonah Furman. “No Left without the Labor Left.” *Organizing Upgrade*. August 24, 2020.

We need to stress self-help—workers can only depend upon ourselves, organized, to make things better. When religious people deal with problems, they often read the Bible for inspiration. When workers have tough times, they need to look at labor history. Not only are the struggles of workers inspiring—their bravery



and their organizing skills—but we can learn some lessons to use today.

Look at the history of unionism as the best example. In the late 1920's, the worst Depression—as severe as the one today so far—hit and what did workers do? They organized, at work with sit-down strikes, with general strikes in cities like San Francisco, national strikes like the Textile Strike of 1934, in national movements like the Bonus Marchers and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, that demanded structural change. Workers organized in

their in communities by establishing worker co-ops, and politically, with socialist and Communist parties.

In the 1930's, as workers stormed the places of power with sit-down strikes and radical political parties, direct action was the method for winning union recognition. In 1937 alone, it is estimated that more than 500,000 American workers participated in sit-down strikes, all across the country. In major industries like auto and steel—as powerful as Amazon is today—workers got union recognition and union contracts.

A critical shift happened within the next several years. Responding to this enormous pressure and frightened of more extreme—revolutionary—demands by their workers, the ruling class temporarily conceded and began to channel the union surge into a more conservative direction. The National Labor Relations Act was passed, recognizing collective bargaining rights and gradually shifting the union movement into the control of this federal agency.

One bad habit of The Servicing Model of Unionism is its reliance on these external agencies to protect workers, rather than creating grassroots organizing. Got a health or safety problem—call OSHA. Company pushing us around on health conditions—file a Board charge. The problem is that these “remedies” are no longer available to us, if they ever really protected us.

The reality today is that the three members of the NLRB are openly anti-union and the General Counsel, Peter Robb, made his name by supervising the discharges of the PATCO strikers in 1981. With the contentious election looming, they issued a series of directives to squash any legal support for unions dealing with pandemic challenges.

“The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has released a series of decisions regarding COVID-19. These decisions are the first guidance that the board has given since the pandemic started in March.

“In a series of five memos to their regional directors the NLRB instructed them to dismiss various cases regarding COVID-19 related charges against employers. The board concluded that an employer is not obligated to engage in midterm bargaining regarding union proposals for paid sick leave and hazard pay because of the ongoing pandemic. They also said that an employer does not have to bargain about a temporary closure.



“While this decision is not unexpected by the NLRB, it does give employers much more freedom into unilaterally creating work standards during COVID-19. This gives employers significantly more latitude for forcing workers into possibly dangerous workplace situations as COVID-19 continues to rage across the United States.

“In regards to workers speaking up about a dangerous situation on the job, the board has decided that an individual speaking out about a company's COVID safety procedure is not protected speech. This means that they can be fired by their employer. This guidance came after a case was filed by a nurse who was fired after refusing to work at a nursing home that was requiring workers to share isolation gowns.”⁶⁷

For union officers and organizers today, after four generations have passed, it is all they have ever known but the workers today—angry, frightened, courageous—are reviving the 1930’s. “For years we failed to understand how passing time was changing our unions. Old timers who had organized them and fought battles for their survival retired and died. A new generation of compulsory union members inherited good jobs without feeling any obligation to support the unions. Eroding individual

⁶⁷ Brian Young. UCOMMBlog. August 21, 2020.

union commitment weakened the movement. Employers developed sophisticated union-busting techniques to convince people that unions should be thrown out and kept out of workplaces.”⁶⁸

Another shift away from worker’ power which is crucial in this pandemic was encouraged by that great liberal president, Richard Nixon, who supported The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 1970. So many calls now are for the government to enforce health and safety standards, or union officers demand that the employers take responsibility for sanitizing workplaces. As the growing death and infection rates demonstrate, this has not worked. And it has not worked for a long time-- the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data reveals that workplace deaths jumped 7% from 2015 to 2016, and stayed roughly the same through 2017, leading to the deaths of 5,147 workers across all industries in 2017.

As another indication of the urgency for us to organize to protect ourselves, a report charted that “The Occupational Safety and Health Administration had only 862 inspectors at the start of the year, the smallest number since 1975, according to a report by the pro-labor, nonprofit National Employment Law Project. The total was down from 952 in 2016 and a historic high of 1,469 in 1980.” The report emphasized the virtual elimination of any government inspections or enforcement of health and safety conditions. “On April 10, OSHA announced that it would ease enforcement of existing record-keeping rules so that most employers won’t have to document whether employees with Covid-19 got the virus on the job. On April 13, the agency announced that it would generally try to deal with coronavirus-related complaints informally, by asking employers to investigate themselves, rather than sending in OSHA inspectors.”⁶⁹

The numbers of workers who die because of working is frightening in “normal” times, even if we celebrate Workers Memorial Day every year. One area where the epidemic is most serious is on public transportation. On the New York City subway system, more than 130 transit workers have died, 2,500 tested positive and more than 6,000 more



⁶⁸ Ottilie Markholt. *Maritime Solidarity: Pacific Coast Unionism, 1929-1938*. p. xv

⁶⁹ John Eidelson. “OSHA Inspectors Are Key to Re-Opening. Their Ranks Are at a 45-Year Low.” Bloomberg April 28, 2020.

have fallen sick or self-quarantined. The death rate is so alarming that the union is creating a mural to honor the dead.

In other transit systems, the agencies were slow to implement safety practices—eliminating the collection of fares, requiring riders enter through the rear door, setting up shields for the drivers—and the deaths increased. In late March, Jason Hargrove, a Detroit driver, posted an emotional Facebook video about a passenger coughing on his bus without covering her mouth. Eleven days later, Hargrove was dead from coronavirus. CNN and Good Morning America played clips from his video, and *Time Magazine* hailed Hargrove as a frontline hero.⁷⁰ But he's a dead and we don't need this kind of heroism.

This shift over the past 80 years to dependence on the government not only takes power away from us, but it trusts Someone Else to resolve our problems. At the worst, workers develop a Savior Mentality, where they hope that some individual—Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, Adolf Hitler, even a local union officer—will wave a magic wand and all our troubles will be over. The anger over the decline in industrial American drove almost half of union households to desperately vote for a new self-proclaimed Savior, Donald Trump, in 2016, getting him the best margin for a Republican since 1984, the election that gave Reagan his second term.

Has the swamp been drained?

At the same time, destroying his image as our Savior, Trump once again eliminated the possibility of any government protections for workers in the food processing industry. On April 28—ironically the anniversary of the OSHA Act and celebrated as Workers Memorial Day--Trump not only issued an order, citing the Defense Production Act, to force meat processing plants to stay open and also said he would issue an executive order to shield meat plants from legal liability if they are sued by employees who contract coronavirus while on the job. While Trump only mentioned Tyson Foods specifically, he suggested his order would protect other businesses from liability as well.

There was a great example of self-help on the New York City subway system. “As the virus spread, many workers became so concerned that they took measures into their own hands: They cordoned off seats with duct tape to distance drivers from riders and used their own masks and homemade disinfectant at work, only to be reprimanded by supervisors. . . . Still, around 1,500 transit workers have tested positive for the coronavirus, and 5,604 others have self-quarantined because they are

⁷⁰ “Revealed-nearly 100 US transit workers have died of COVID-19 amid lack of basic protections.” *Guardian*. April 20, 2020.

showing symptoms of the infection. Absenteeism is up fourfold since the pandemic began, officials say. . . . On Jan. 28, the president of Transport Workers Union Local 100, Tony Utano, met with several M.T.A. leaders, including the chief security officer, Patrick T. Warren, at the agency's headquarters in Lower Manhattan to discuss the coronavirus outbreak, which had already forced a lockdown in Wuhan, China. A doctor called in to discuss how the authority should respond to an outbreak: disinfectant for employees to keep their hands and shared work spaces clean, and masks, but only for those who fell sick — guidance that mirrored parts of the pandemic plan that the M.T.A. adopted in 2012. . . . By the group's next meeting, on March 5, the virus had been declared a global pandemic and had reached New York. Workers had already started requesting protective gear, like masks and gloves, but their appeals were denied because, at the time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had not recommended that healthy people wear face masks. When some workers wore their own masks, they were told to remove them because they violated uniform policy, according to management responses to two formal complaints reviewed by The New York Times. At the March 5 meeting, Mr. Utano and other labor leaders pressed the M.T.A. to alleviate the panic spreading among employees by providing masks to all workers and suspending the use of an attendance system that required them to touch a shared screen.

“We are supposed to have systems in place for this. We are supposed to have equipment for us to go out and serve the public even in a crisis,” said Ronald Spring, a bus operator. “But we didn’t see any of that happening like it should have. . . . On the subway, some workers carried homemade bleach and water solutions in spray bottles to clean their booths on the train, which new workers rotate into each time a train completes a run.

“At that point, I said if any changes are going to be made, we are going to have to be the ones to facilitate it, whatever the repercussions,” said Michael Enriquez, a bus operator.”⁷¹

Unfortunately, too few workers, even those covered by a union contract, are aware of this potential power. Obviously, resolving an OSHA complaint over an individual discharge can take years, and is uncertain, so a collective work stoppage is a faster way to enforce a safe and healthy workplace.

An illustration of the failure of a union is at Smithfield Packaged Meats Corp. in Sioux Falls, S.D., responsible for 5 percent of the country’s pork processing, where nearly 1,300 workers contracted the COVID-19 virus and four died. On

⁷¹ Christina Goldbaum. “41 Transit Workers Dead: Crisis Takes Staggering Toll on Subways.” *New York Times*. April 8, 2020

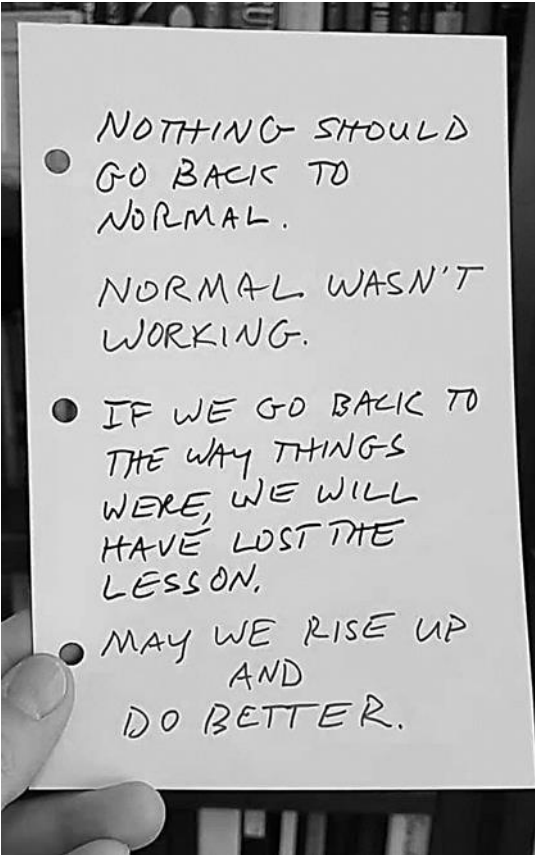
September 10, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued its first Covid-19-related citation at a meatpacking plant on Thursday by proposing a \$13,494 penalty, about \$3,500 for each worker who died--life is cheap, right?

More importantly, these were union workers, represented by the UFCW, whose President, Marc Perrone proclaimed "If we truly care about protecting workers and our nation's food supply during this pandemic, the federal government must take action, beginning with an enforceable national safety standard, increased access to PPE and COVID-19 testing, and rigorous proactive inspections,"

It's easy to blame the company or to blame OSHA—deserving the attacks, of course—but there is no mention of the responsibility of the union to step up and enforce safe and healthy conditions.

As part of an internal movement, we have to take control and see ourselves as The Union. In the Servicing Model of Unionism, members expect officers or staff to speak to the boss, but in many unions, these officers and staff are not in our workplaces. They operate out of union offices, which they will scrupulously cleanse, or they will even work from home. In the best case, union reps have many workplaces to worry about and simply can't keep up, especially while worrying about their own health and families.

Organizing a work stoppage, of course, comes from the bottom-up, and means you have to go around and talk to your co-workers, not wait for some Business Agent or local officer to come by the workplace. If you are in the public sector, where work stoppages are "illegal," figure out other leverage to pressure the agency. IT'S YOUR HEALTH! Your co-workers will share your sense of urgency—we are all parents, we all have spouses or partners or elderly parents of our own, we can't afford to get sick—or to die.



Mary Ann Alt (CWA) --When this virus is over, these companies are going to see how few people they needed to keep their businesses running. They are not going to staff with their previous numbers. Teleworking is going to continue, which will save on real estate. Workers are going to have more and different issues to deal with. Labor must organize to get in front of this.

The pandemic has brought so many economic and social changes, with no end in sight at this point. It is difficult to predict what our world will look like when we recover but one thing is clear--unions must come out of this conflict stronger than we went in, or else we risk being totally eliminated in the United States.

While there are some signs that the economy is coming back to "normal," it is

obvious that our workplaces will be permanently very different, so every union member has to focus on organizing and think big, think bold and think different. More importantly, in mid-June, about 80% of our population believe "the country is spiraling out of control," in contrast to polls in April that indicated "61% of registered voters said they were largely hopeful about the nation." As an incentive to union organizing and to a civil rights movement, a large majority does not believe that the presidential election will solve the problems.⁷²

"The unique character of this economic collapse, triggered by an ongoing public health crisis, may lead to an enduring decline in the demand for labor. While the pandemic rages, companies are developing new ways to operate with fewer people, replacing the lost workers with machines that are impervious to illness."⁷³

"New hires are taking place — Amazon, Walmart, and food delivery services are desperately seeking workers. But businesses are hiring only three new workers for every 10 layoffs, according to the authors of a recent report published by the University

⁷² Lisa Lerer and Dave Umhoefer. "Left, Right or Center, Voters See a Bleak Future." *New York Times*. June 13, 2020

⁷³ David Lynch. "Soaring joblessness could shake U.S. economy, politics for years." *Washington Post*. May 9, 2020.

of Chicago, which estimates that 42% of coronavirus-induced layoffs will be permanent.

“Yet there are increasing signs that unemployment is becoming permanent. With every week that the pandemic rages, distressed businesses are looking at their balance sheets, and either laying off employees or closing entirely. Americans continue to avoid crowded entertainment, shopping and dining venues, and small-business revenue has slumped. Rent, utility and insurance payments loom, and revenue prospects remain uncertain. About 4 million U.S. businesses are expected to close this year, according to Oxford Information Technology, which maintains a database of about 32 million businesses, nonprofits, government entities and farms. During that same period, only 1.3 million new businesses will be formed.”⁷⁴

“Even in the optimistic scenario where the pandemic recedes quickly, there’s no second wave, and we get things under control, the evidence suggests there will be a considerable reallocation across industries, within industries and within metropolitan areas,” said one of the report’s authors, Steven J. Davis, a professor of international business and economics at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

One danger is that so many industries have been forced to either make significant changes or have gone out of business. In industries like retail, tourism and hospitality, the chains filing for bankruptcy, or announcing the closing of many locations, are numerous. Often the pandemic was only a tipping point because private vulture capital firms that bought the chains, like Sears, Roebuck or Toys R Us, owed huge amounts of money—often to themselves—and are using the pandemic as an excuse. In other ways, people’s habits have changed, and may be changed forever, as they shift to delivery and on-line shopping.

As a sign of this shift, it’s estimated that 19.5 million jobs have been lost in the US over the past several months, but Amazon announced that it plans to hire 175,000 more workers, making it by far the biggest private employer in the world. More distressing, the brazen anti-unionism of Amazon management is giving us a HUGE challenge because if we can’t organize the biggest and wildy anti-union boss—as the GM sit-down strikers did in 1937—unionism in the US will be in even deeper trouble.

As a comparison, in France, as early as March 17, the day France’s national lockdown took effect, Amazon warehouse workers held protests and strikes against a lack of hand sanitizer and risks of overcrowding. More than 200 of the company’s

⁷⁴ Andrew van Dam. “As permanent economic damage piles up, the Covid Crisis is looking more like the Great Recession.” *Washington Post*. August 25, 2020.

roughly 10,000 warehouse employees gave formal notice that they were refusing to work in unsafe conditions. Amid the outcry, national labor inspectors ordered Amazon to address safety hazards found at several of the company's warehouses. In early April, in response to a separate union complaint, a judge in a Parisian suburb found Amazon still hadn't done enough to protect workplace safety and ordered the company to limit warehouse activity to certain essential items — food, and hygiene and medical products — until it developed improved health and safety measures with labor unions. Noncompliance would come with a stiff penalty: a 1 million euro (about \$1.08 million) fine per day and per violation.



“It was only through worker-led protest and a tough-handed response from courts that the tech behemoth began adjusting its behavior to better meet worker needs. As warehouse employees saw firsthand, Amazon often made improvements after it was pressured to do so.”⁷⁵

So with proper organizing and political support, workers at Amazon can force the company to negotiate. And if we can get Amazon, we can organize everyone.

An even more significant challenge is the permanent loss of millions of jobs—to workplaces closings and to technology. Wal-Mart, for example, is experimenting in a store in Fayetteville, AR, with totally automated checkout lines, removing all cashiers. In characteristic Shock Doctrine language, the company claimed that the coronavirus “forced” it to try to limit human interaction, but obviously the company is trying to cut costs by eliminating even low-wage workers in their stores.

“In 2012, venture capitalist and entrepreneur Marc Andreessen predicted that jobs will be divided between “people who tell computers what to do, and people who are told by computers what to do.” Already, smartphones and other internet-connected devices assign work in a wide variety of environments, from Amazon warehouses to city streets. Workers that take assignments from computers may see

⁷⁵ Cole Stangler. “How French Workers Took on Amazon in the Middle of a Pandemic and Won.” *New York Times*. April 29, 2020

their jobs completely automated as artificial intelligence and robots become more capable over time.”⁷⁶

These changes cannot be dealt with a single employer at a time but need a program that will cover all workers in all industries, a political challenge that is almost unimaginable with the major party presidential candidates in 2020. Jobs can be shifted to a 20-hour work week with no reduction in weekly pay, creating opportunities and reviving the movement for a shorter work day/week that started 150 years ago with the push for the 8-hour day. At the very least, the establishment of the 40-hour week was legislated more than 80 years ago, so it’s past time for improvements. How about setting eligibility for Social Security or Medicare at age 55?

In a similar development, it is marked that in May, “the number of people employed by federal, state and local governments dropped by 585,000. The overall job losses among public workers have reached 1.5 million since March. . .”⁷⁷ How many of these jobs will be permanently lost, as public jurisdictions face enormous tax revenue losses? How will be public services most of us take for granted be done? And most importantly, as part of the Shock Doctrine, how many union jobs, in the sector where we still represent more than 30% of the workers, will be gone?

One positive aspect of the movement after the murder of George Floyd has been the demand to Defund the Police, and many people are looking for the first time at how their city or county spends its tax money, and some are even considering how these municipalities raise tax money—which developers get tax forgiveness.

Benefits like medical insurance and retirement can be socialized so that having a fulltime job is not a requirement. “Public” facilities, like housing and transit, that have virtually disappeared from many cities can be revived with strong organizing and a radically different political approach.

Organizing will also be very different, and very difficult, especially as the “normal” workplaces we know disappear, replaced by teleworking or by on-line shopping for food and commodities.

There are some pleasant fantasies. One is called “sectoral bargaining,” in which, as if by a miracle, the US Congress—uh, headed by Mitch McConnell and Nancy Pelosi—would enact legislation establishing “sectors,” in which all workers would be covered by a union contract. “Trying to organize ten or twenty million new workers company-by-company under the system we have now. It’s unlikely, and it

⁷⁶ Jack Karsten. “Emerging technology can replace workers—or train them for new work.” Brookings. August 29, 2019.

⁷⁷ Geoff Mulvihill. “Government Job losses escalating.” Associated Press. June 8, 2020.

would take decades even if we could pull it off. I would much rather hand millions of new workers over to labor organizers and say, ‘They’ve been unionized by legal fiat—now go in and organize them into real union members’ than to say, ‘Here are 50 million tenuously employed workers at cutthroat mega-corporations with no safety net and also all of labor law is arrayed against you being able to get a certified union. Good luck.’”⁷⁸

Yeah, good luck.

TECH

Robots could take over 20 million jobs by 2030, study claims

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“This requires an independent socialist design for human survival that includes—but goes beyond—a Second New Deal. Since the days of Occupy, progressives have successfully placed the struggle against income and wealth inequality on page one—a great achievement. But now socialists must take the next step and, with the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries as immediate targets, advocate social ownership and the democratization of economic power. We must also make an honest evaluation of our political and moral weaknesses. The leftward evolution of a new generation and the return of the word ‘socialism’ to political discourse cheers us all, but there’s a disturbing element of national solipsism in the progressive movement that is symmetrical with the new nationalism. We talk only about the American working class and America’s radical history (perhaps forgetting that Eugene V. Debs was an internationalist to the core).”⁷⁹

Some people may be frightened by the word “socialism,” but the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2020 has almost made it respectable. Regardless of your personal feelings, it is clear that we are getting a whole new world, whether we are ready or not, whether we like it or not. Getting there without organizing ourselves, as workers, and not just by race or gender or social preference, will not happen.

So, let’s get started and get organized.

⁷⁸ Hamilton Nolan. “The Case for Sectoral Bargaining is Now Stronger Than Ever.” In *These Times*. May 24, 2020.

⁷⁹ Mike Davis: The Coronavirus Crisis Is a Monster Fueled by Capitalism. In *These Times*. March 20, 2020

APPENDIX 1

TWO MODELS OF UNIONISM

When unions were first organized, the workers' success depended on total membership involvement since the early organizations had no resources except the passions of the members and their communities. As unions became more established, this **Organizing Model of Unionism** gradually was replaced by **The Servicing Model of Unionism**, which became the dominant structure for unions. In the mid-1990's, as some union officers recognized the desperate situation for unionism, **The Organizing Model** was revived, at least as a discussion topic.

This chart shows the differences between the two models.

ORGANIZING MODEL

Proactive

Independent of management

Actively involves members in all decisions

Creates many activities in workplace

Constantly negotiating for improvements

Develops the skills and abilities of the lawyers

Open communications channels

Active membership

Decentralized union structure

Bottom-up decisions

Regularly supports other unions

SERVICING MODEL

Reactive

Dependent upon management

Union officers "solve problems" for members in response to complaints or requests

Total reliance on grievance and arbitration

Waits for regularly scheduled contract dates

Total reliance on union staff, "experts" and members

Union info is considered privileged and kept secret to a small group

Passive membership

Centralized union structure

Top-down decisions

Basically isolated from other activity

APPENDIX 2

Defending Your Members in the Pandemic

Your money or your life!

We expect to hear this command from a robber, but we are more likely now to hear it from our boss, who wants to get production up and running, without regard for the health and safety of the workers. That's why a union steward is so important, with decisions that can be literally a matter of life and death.

There is enormous pressure from many sides for workers to return to their jobs, even if the conditions are dangerous. Obviously, our incomes have been cut, and we might lose our health insurance. Employers are threatening to cut us off of unemployment if we refuse to return to work, even if we think it's unsafe.

While conditions are dangerous, our members, and thousands of non-union co-workers, are suddenly realizing the importance of being organized—every minute of every day, not just every couple of years when a new contract is negotiated.

Most importantly, the steward is in the workplace, while your boss or your union staff may be working at a safe distance. Waiting for an inspection from OSHA could take many months, while you and your members are possibly exposed to the dangerous COVID-19.

- A steward should be immediately assertive, demanding that the work processes be reorganized to make them safe and healthy, and convince your members not to return to work until it is safe. Proper distancing on an assembly line, for example, is essential. Too many facilities, like non-union packing houses, rushed to reopen and workers got sick.
- Don't let yourselves be bullied or threatened to work under unsafe conditions. Too many reports from assembly line factories, whether auto or meatpacking, have demonstrated that the bosses will ignore "social distancing" in order to ramp up production. Under no circumstances let your employer tempt you back to work with the vague promise that "We will do everything we can to make it safe."
- Being a steward means always learning new things. In this case, while the science of testing is still developing, check regularly with the Health & Safety department of your union to see what is really effective.
- You may have to demand that your workplace, or parts of it, be shut down for cleaning and disinfecting. You won't be popular with your boss, but you are protecting the lives of your members

- The steward also must demand that every worker be tested every day for any sign of the coronavirus, and this testing should be finished before every shift and you should be present while all of the tests are given to make sure that the results are accurate and no careless readings are allowed. Make sure you know what tests are being done and who is doing the testing. Ideally, an independent health care professional will do the test, not some supervisor whose only goal is to get everyone back as soon as possible, damn the risks.
- It is also important to do all of this testing on company time—it's a workplace protection and must be done at the employer's expense, not on your own time as you wait in a long line at the workplace entrance.
- If you are provided with health and safety equipment, at company expense, of course, make sure the devices are effective and are cleaned—don't let them force you to reuse old masks or cracked gloves
- The danger of the pandemic is also an opportunity to build your union. Set up a communications network with your members—text, Twitter, Facebook videos—to send out a stream of information about conditions so everyone will know what's going on
- It is also essential to keep organizing in mind—if you are in an open shop state, protecting all workers will show the non-members the value of a union. You may want to call shop meetings—in person or electronically-- to bring everyone up to date on testing procedures, on income protection, on hazard pay—whatever is the hot topic. Each time, you have to decide if you want to allow the non-members—who have been brainwashed to think that the Big Union only wants their dues money—to participate so they can see the enormous value of being organized.
- Finally, take care of yourself. You may be so determined to help out your members that you forget to protect yourself, so don't be careless.

As we face this dramatic health hazard, which can kill a person in a matter of days, it is worth remembering one failure of unions in the past, as workers were exposed to dangerous substances, like asbestos or coal dust or certain chemicals, which killed us slowly. Unions simply trusted their bosses to provide a safe work environment and died gradually—and often painfully—over many years. This is not a history we want to see repeated.

--Bill Barry

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