

American Unions and Workers Confront Trump's Savage Attack

written by Dan La Botz | April 7, 2025



Tens of thousands marched in New York City on April 5 as part of the national "Hands Off" demonstration against President Donald Trump. Few unions turned out in New York City, but the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union of workers of the City University of New York did.

President Donald Trump has launched a vicious, multifaceted attack on American workers of all sorts and workers are beginning to respond, but both the working class and the unions are divided, making it difficult to organize and carry out a unified response.

Millions of people in all 50 states, joined 1,600 demonstrations in large cities and small towns to protest against President Donald Trump and his henchman billionaire Elon Musk on April 5, with a number of small solidarity demonstrations in European cities. The "Hands Off" demonstrations, the largest anti-Trump protests yet, demanded that Trump keep his hands off democracy, human rights, reproductive rights, Social Security, Medicaid, public schools, immigrants, and LGBT people. In New York City, where I joined the protest in the drizzle, some 50,000 people took part in a spirited march with many creative home-made signs and banners. I saw signs reading: "Hands off Our Planet," "Disappearing People for Speech = Fascism," and "Hands Off Our Bodies, Our Democracy, Our Freedom, Our Constitution." And scattered through the demonstration a few signs in support of

Ukraine, though fewer addressed the Palestinian genocide.

The demonstrations were called by a variety of organizations, including the Democratic Party groups like Indivisible, workers' groups such as the Federal Unionists Network, and environmental, religious, human rights, and civil rights groups. Yet in New York City, the largest unions such as the Service Employees International Union and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, with many Black members, failed to turn out their ranks. An exception was the union of workers of the City University of New York. Most unions failed to mobilize their members anywhere, though Federal workers, many recently fired, did join the protests.

The NYC protest was overwhelmingly white, with only a small number of Black participants in a city where Blacks make up 20%, Latinos 28%, and Asians 15% of the population. Some Latinos may have stayed home because of fear of being detained and deported, as Trump is now engaged in a massive deportation campaign. Some Black influencers on social media told their followers to stay home, that the march was not their affair. The low level of participation of Black people was an issue almost everywhere.

These protests were a significant step forward, but the big unions are still not really in the fight and there is no common leadership and no consensus on whether the Democrats or mass protests represent the future. The left has only a small presence and plays little role so far.



A protestor at April 5 "Hands Off" demonstration in New York City.

Trump's Attack on Labor

Donald Trump has launched an unprecedented attack on the American working class, threatening dozens of unions and millions of workers. The assault on workers takes many forms. Trump is threatening to deport 20 million undocumented immigrants, though most experts say there are only 11 million in the country. To carry out these deportations he has increased the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement police and also the Border Patrol officers.

Among others they have detained, these officers have been rounding up and deporting hundreds of alleged Venezuelan gang members, often identified on the basis of their tattoos. In doing so Trump has often denied immigrants due process and has violated U.S. law and court orders. Many undocumented immigrants now live in fear and often restrict their own movements to avoid the agents, Trump has also targeted foreign students who participated in rallies in solidarity with Palestine, having them arrested and planning to deport them, among them Columbia student Mahmoud Khalil whose case has become a cause célèbre. Yet according to recent polls, 48% of Americans approve of Trump's immigration policy while 44% disapprove, meaning that many native-born American workers are in favor of deporting the undocumented immigrants.

Trump has also gone after federal workers. His hatchet man Elon Musk is in the process of carrying out the firing of 13 percent of the country's 2.4 million civilian workers, that is, 312,000 people. Some of these cuts will have a crippling effect on the agencies involved, such as the 24% of all Health and Human Services employees. Some of these workers have been summarily fired without notice and show up to find their electronic badges don't work and their government email accounts have been shut down. Others receive emails late at night or early in the morning the day of their termination. Some workers accept buyouts, some combination of severance and pension. Millions of peoples' lives, the workers, their families, and the people they served are being disrupted and, in some cases, economically ruined in the process. Still, according to recent polls, 40% of Americans approve of Trump's handling of the federal government.

At the same time, Trump has by fiat abolished the collective bargaining rights of as many as one million federal workers in ten federal departments, effectively destroying their labor unions. The unions will no longer be able to collect from these workers millions of dollars in dues used to pay union staff and run union programs. The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), which represents 800,00 federal workers, is challenging Trump's outlawing of the unions in court. Just as when Ronald Reagan fired 11,000 striking Professional Air Traffic Controllers in 1981, so too Trump's attack on federal unions and workers will encourage private corporations to follow suit, seeing if they can get rid of their unionized workers.

In addition, Trump's tariffs on dozens of countries, affecting billions of dollars in commerce in many commodities, which he claims will bring back industries and jobs to the United States, have resulted in a trade war that has already had a negative impact on American workers. For example, the car company Stellantis is temporarily laying off 900 workers at five U.S. plants and pausing production at one assembly plant in Mexico and another in Canada. With the disruption of commerce and the breaking of global supply chains other companies will also be forced to shut plants and lay off workers.

Finally, Trump's trade war frightened investors leading to a serious decline in the stock market, which was reflected in the value of many 401-k retirement or pension plans. That is, millions of workers in the last week or two saw their personal pension accounts declining. While Trump may not have intended to attack these workers in this way, it is another blow to their well-being. And the tariffs and trade war mean that basic commodities such as food, clothing, and housing will now be more expensive, inflation that has already shown up in economic reports.



A protestor at the April 5 Hands Off protest in New York City

U.S. Labor Basics

What is the American working class today? The United States has a population of 340.1 million people, making it the third largest nation in the world in terms of population following India and China. Of those, about 144.5 million earn wages or salaries. Some 78.7 million are hourly wage earners, the core of the working class. Of these about 12 million are manufacturing workers and another six million have blue collar jobs. Unionization rates are low. In 2024, 9.9 percent of wage and salary workers were in labor unions. In the public sector, union membership represented 32.2 percent, while in the private sector only 5.9 percent of workers were unionized. (Public sector unionization was devastated this year, as we will discuss below.) About 8% of the U.S. workforce is made up of undocumented workers. Workers who are Black, Latino, or young tend to generally earn lower wages.

There were about 16 million workers in labor unions in the United States in January 2024. Some 15 million of these workers belong to 63 unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations. Teachers' unions are among the largest unions in the country: The National Education Association (NEA) has over 3 million members and the American Federation of Teachers has 1.7 million. The other two very large unions are the Service Employees International Union which has 1.9 million and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters which has 1.4 million. Several other unions have over 500,000 members.

There has been some increase in strikes over the last decade, peaking in 2023 and 2024. In 2024 some 271,500 workers were involved in major work stoppages. Yet recent strike levels don't begin to compare with the national strike waves in the periods of 1933-40, 1946-48, or 1969-71 when millions of workers struck, paralyzing various industries. The labor upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s ended in the 1980s as conservative Republicans and Democrats inaugurated then the neoliberal period of the 1980s and 90s undermined unions and thwarted strikes so that labor activism declined for over the next 40 years.

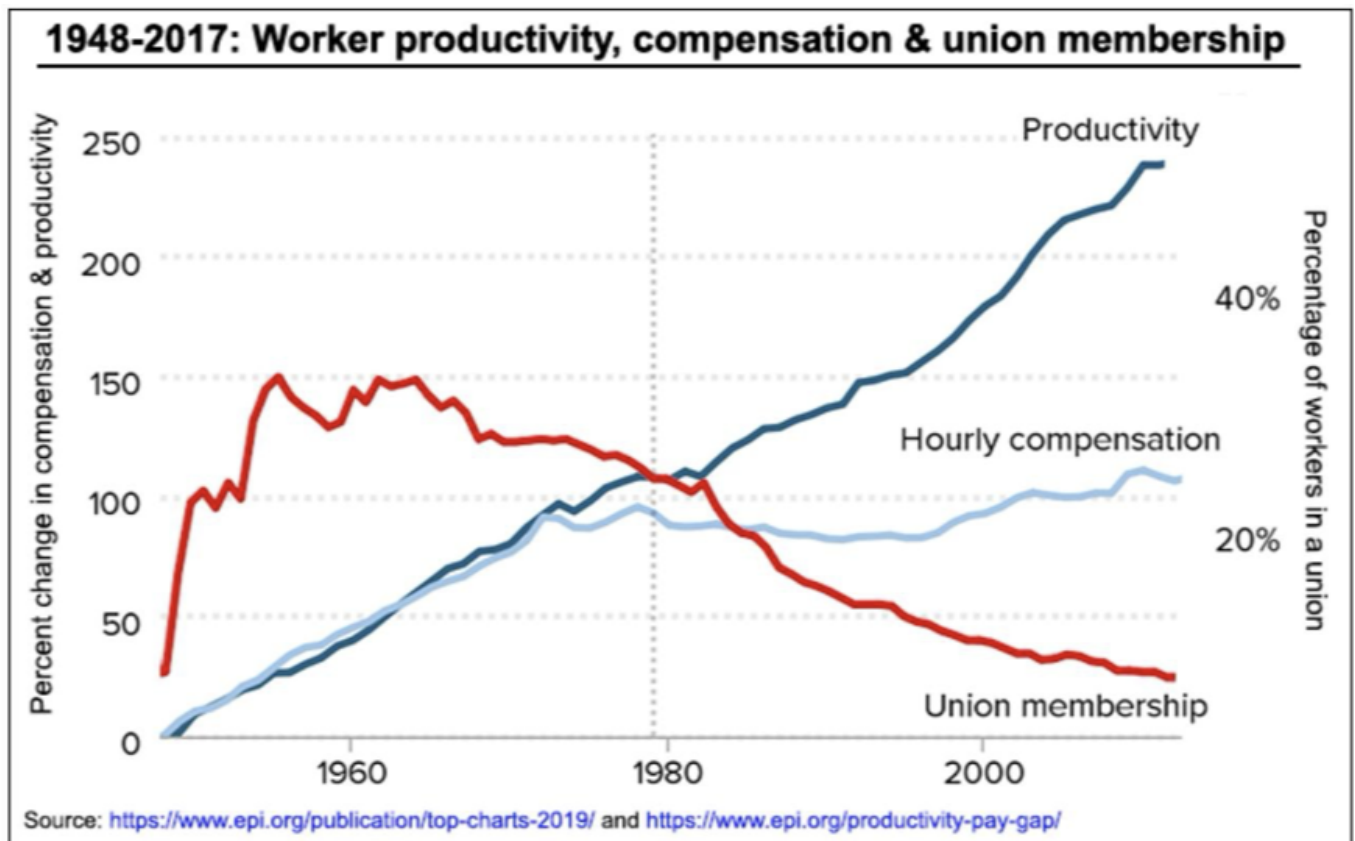
The Labor Bureaucracy



The shrinkage of unions and their declining militancy can be attributed in large measure to the labor officialdom, that is the elected and appointed staff of the labor unions. The success of labor unions in organizing in the 1930s—both the AFL craft unions and the CIO industrial unions—combine with government regulation of many industries made it possible for unions to hire permanent full-time staff and to pay them decent salaries. When the U.S. entered into World War II, the labor officials collaborated with the corporations and the government to increase production, the result was the continued expansion of the labor movement and its increasing stability and legitimacy—but also a profound conservatizing of the union officials.

Union officials became accustomed to negotiating with employers and working with government officials to increase the productivity in which workers often shared. Unions won not only wage increases but also acquired health benefits and pensions. But throughout the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, only about a third of all American workers had labor unions and enjoyed those benefits. In the unionized industries, officials tended to trade wages for working conditions, giving employers control of the shop floor. Meanwhile, the union officials congealed into a bureaucracy with high salaries, often ten or even twenty times those of workers in the industries they represented. They also had the perquisites of office including use of union cars, expense accounts, and personal pension plans, some so generous that they were called “golden parachutes.” Upon retirement, some union officials went to work for the companies they had negotiated with or as government arbitrators. Things were even worse in a few national unions—the East Coast International LongShore Association (ILA), the Hotel and Restaurant Workers (HERE), and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT)—Mafia dominated, violent, and corrupt unions where some officers received salaries of \$500,000. The labor bureaucracy thus became a caste with interests quite separate from those of the working class as a whole.

The bureaucratic caste of labor officials—the labor bureaucracy—developed its own ideology as an expression of its location as negotiator between rank-and-file workers and the employers. This was true whether one talked of the progressive unions like the United auto Workers (UAW) or the corrupt Teamsters union. Officials came to believe that because of their intimate knowledge of the workers, the employers, and government officials, they knew what was best for the working class. So the officials, not the workers, should make the decisions about whether or not to strike and what should go into the contract. These union officials, fearing to harm their own position, tended to seek labor peace rather than conflict and class struggle. Most union contracts contained clauses requiring union officials to prevent work stoppages or strikes during the life of the contract. At the same time, it is true that many local union officials were honest people who attempted to improve the lives of their members, but their national union officials often made that difficult.



So when in the 1980s the U.S. government promoted neoliberalism, a more ruthless capitalism, the corporations carried out a reorganization of labor, with widespread plant closing, and companies moved some plants to the non-union U.S. South or abroad, and the corporations introduced the new so-called “Japanese management” of the production process, but the labor bureaucracy had no interest in fighting the corporations, no practice in doing so, and little trust and support from the ranks. From the 1980s to the 2000s, union membership fell from 35% to 10% and strikes virtually disappeared from the U.S. labor scene.

Labor Politics in the U.S.

The United States has never had a large Socialist, Communist, or Labor Party. Since the early twentieth century, The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and its affiliates tended to support the Democratic Party. During the labor upheaval of the 1930s, largely led by the Socialists and particularly the Communists, some unions experimented with local labor parties, but both the AFL craft unions and the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) industrial unions supported the Democrats. In the 1940s the AFL, the CIO, and the Socialist and Communist Parties backed Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt who was elected to four four-year terms as president.

During the late 1940s and 1950s, Congress, over a presidential veto, passed the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 that limited labor unions power. At the same time, the media, the government, and employers carried out an anti-Communist crusade that drove many Communists out of their jobs and out of their unions. In 1955 the AFL and the CIO merged and the new AFL-CIO supported the Democratic Party from then on. The organizing and strikes of the 1930s and 40s brought about 34% of wage laborers into the union movement, but left two-thirds of workers with no union and little political influence. All of this led to the creation of what we call business unionism, that is unions that work to accommodate business and themselves behave like businesses, accumulating millions of dollars in property, bank accounts, and other assets.

The 1960s and 1970s saw important new union organizing among teachers and other public

employees as well as among farm workers in California. At the same time rank-and-file workers in many industries—telephone, auto, trucking, and the post office—rebelled against employers and often their unions too. Young radicals from the civil rights, student, and feminist movements became socialists of various sorts, mostly Maoists, and Trotskyists, got industrial jobs and became involved in the unions. They played a role in organizing the rank-and-file workers movements of that era.



The International Socialists (IS), Third Camp socialists who opposed both capitalism and the bureaucratic Communism of the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Korea and Cuba helped to organize Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and to found Labor Notes, a publication and labor organizing center. Those last two organizations survived the collapse of the left in the 1980s. Labor Notes continues to play a central role in orienting worker activists, educating and helping to organize them, though it does not represent a significant political tendency in the unions as a whole.

In June 1998, Tony Mazzocchi, vice-president of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (OCAW), other reform-minded officials, and some of those leftist labor activists came together to organize the Labor Party. Some 1,400 delegates from several large and important unions representing two million union members met in Cleveland to create the new party. But they could not agree on actually running candidates either at the founding convention or later, fearing that their party would take votes from the Democratic Party and lead to the election of a Republican. So the party atrophied and died.

The Labor Bureaucracy Today

The union officials today are quite heterogeneous. Most are business unionists who have tied their fortunes to union careers and the union structures and to the Democratic Party. Some are corrupt. And a very few are reformers. Two of the leading officials who have been playing a central role in labor activism and in politics provide a clear sense of the problems faced by workers and unions today.

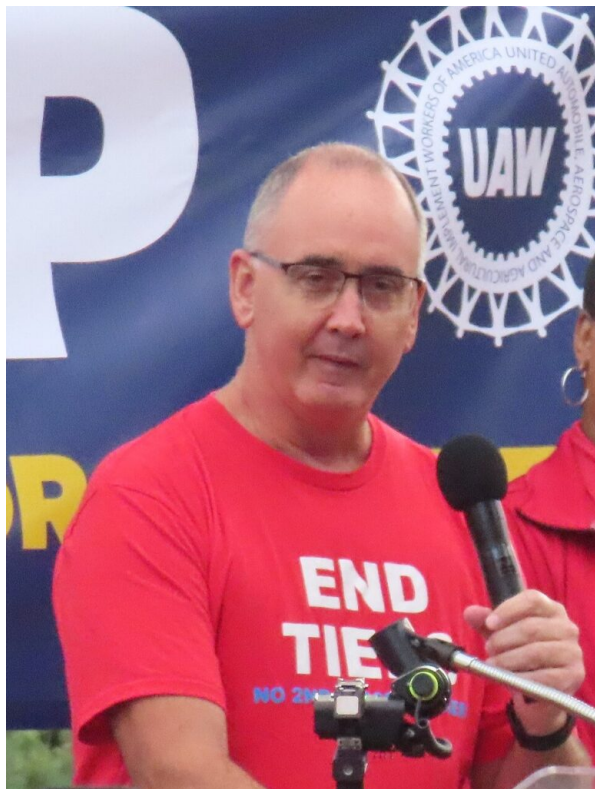


Teamster President Sean O'Brien

Sean O'Brien was elected president of the Teamsters in 2022 with the support of the long-time union reform organization Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). In 2022 and 23, O'Brien attracted the support of TDU, Democratic Socialists of America, and other leftists with the implication that he planned to strike UPS. In the end he negotiated a contract with both strengths and weaknesses, criticized by some union members and some on the left. Then in July of 2024 O'Brien broke ranks with the rest of organized labor and accepted an invitation from Donald Trump to speak at the Republican National Convention, for which he was roundly criticized by other union leaders and the left. Even though the Teamsters made no presidential endorsement, it was understood that O'Brien was backing Trump.

After the election, O'Brien recommended and Trump nominated Lori Chavez-DeRemer, a Republican congresswoman from Oregon with nothing special to recommend her. Upon being chosen she made the preposterous promise, "I'll work tirelessly to help President Trump put the American Worker First." While O'Brien claimed her appointment as a victory for the Teamsters and American workers, in fact the Secretary of Labor has little power and she has and she will do nothing for the American working class."

Another important official in the unions today, Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), led the union in a 45-day strike involving 50,000 workers against the Big Three U.S. auto companies—Ford, Stellantis, and General Motors—and in the contract negotiated in October 2023 won not only large wage increases and the elimination of tiers but also encroached on the corporations' control over their plants and the industry. The United States has not seen a union leader of a strike of industrial workers like this for decades. Fain seemed to embody a new unionism that could change the direction of the American labor movement.



Then in March of this year, Fain declared that the UAW supported Trump's tariffs on foreign cars. He said, this "signals a return to policies that prioritize the workers who build this country — rather than the greed of ruthless corporations." And that "ending the race to the bottom in the auto industry starts with fixing our broken trade deals, and the Trump administration has made history with today's actions."

Yet Fain retained his critical faculties. On March 28 Fain issued a statement saying, "Yesterday, President Trump signed an order that tramples on the union rights of more than a million federal workers, stripping them of their ability to negotiate over their working conditions. The 1 million members of the UAW stand with federal workers and their union, AFGE, against the attacks from the Trump administration."

As the cases of O'Brien and Fain make evident, there is not yet a clear understanding in the labor unions and much less in the working class as a whole that Trump represents a new and different threat of authoritarianism tending toward fascism that must be resisted at all costs and whose defeat will require a united workers movement with a clear alternative vision of labor and politics. Leftist labor activists have a long way to go in organizing rank-and-file workers and in raising the idea of workers' power and democratic socialism as the needed alternative. We will only arrive at that point after a long period of social and political battles with the capitalist class and the state.



A protestor at the April 5, "Hands Off" demonstration in New York.