Trump and the Labor Movement

written by Dan La Botz | February 19, 2018

We working people live in darkening times. When the Trump presidency ends in four years—if it does—we may no longer have an organized labor movement. As one of my colleagues, Ed Ott of the Murphy Institute, the City University of New York's labor school, said to me, "We are at the beginning of the end of the U.S. labor movement based on a partnership with capital." We are at the twilight of an era. Labor unions and collective bargaining stand to be swept away, and with them the institutions that have sheltered us in the workplace and provided us with a modicum of job security, living wages, health insurance, and pension benefits.

President Donald Trump and the Republican Congress, as well as Republicans in state legislatures and in the courts, are planning an assault meant to annihilate the American labor movement. This attack on the unions, however, is only part of a broader attack on working people in general. The Trump administration is not only threatening unions, but is also destroying the social safety net, restricting voting rights, and criminalizing large parts of the immigrant population. At the same time, Trump's racist rhetoric encourages and exacerbates racial and religious tensions in society, encouraging right-wing violence, while his misogynist language degrades women and makes them, too, more vulnerable to discrimination and mistreatment.

The U.S. labor union officialdom has proven incapable over the last four decades of resisting a relentless assault, both economic and political, on the unions, nor has it provided leadership to the working class a whole. Nothing better illustrates organized labor's pathetic state than its inability to embrace, and to mobilize in support of, what are clearly movements of workers and oppressed people such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. As the day darkens, only a handful of unions have stood up to confront the bosses, the Republicans, and Trump. And fewer have challenged the leadership of the neoliberal Democratic Party or had the courage to attempt to create some new political alternative.

The sun is setting on the unions. The labor movement as we have known it is being exterminated, while a new workers movement has yet to emerge. We will have to develop new forms of struggle, and we will only know what they are as we are forced to create them. We will have to make the sun rise again, and it won't be done through prayer, at least not through prayer alone. We will have to organize and fight, learning from the social movements and setting our own independent political direction.

Where Do We Stand at Present?

To build a new future, we must understand our recent past and the present. Let's begin with the objective situation of the unions today. American labor union membership is at its lowest point since

the 1920s, and a number of bills before Congress and state legislatures, as well as cases in the courts, suggest that in the next few years labor unions will face the possibility of virtual extinction. In 2016 the United States had 14.6 million union members, representing only 10.7 percent of all U.S. workers, while in 1983 there were 17.7 million unionized workers, or 20.1 percent of the labor force. Back in the mid-1950s, 35 percent of workers belonged to labor unions. Among public-sector workers, today 34.4 percent are unionized, compared to only 6.4 percent in the private sector.[1] Most workers have never been involved in a strike, never attended a union meeting, and in the recent Teamster election for top officers, only 19 percent of members voted in a mail-ballot election. To many workers, unions have ceased to seem relevant.

Despite some highly publicized organizing efforts, for example among autoworkers in the South, labor has been unable to turn the tide. The United Auto Workers campaigns at Volkswagen and Nissan lost; the staff organizers failed to build a real union on the shop floor, and so workers never became confident that they could win without risking their jobs.[2] In addition to the regular labor unions, there are dozens of workers centers in the United States that bring together immigrant workers, most of them Latinos and many of them undocumented, into organizations to help protect their labor rights and to improve their working conditions.[3] While these organizations have thousands of members and do very important work, they do not have anything like the weight and strength of the labor unions.

Not only are there fewer organized workers than at any time in almost a hundred years, but unions also conduct many fewer strikes. In 2016, there were only 15 major work stoppages involving a total 99,000 workers. Over the past four decades major work stoppages declined by approximately 90 percent. The period from 2007 to 2016 was the decade with fewest strikes, averaging approximately 14 major work stoppages per year. The lowest annual number of major strikes was five in 2009.[4] While a few major strikes have inspired the labor movement and provided models of organization, strategy, and struggle, such as the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012 and the Communications Workers strike of 2016, there has been no major strike wave in the United States since 1970-1971.

In the last decade, U.S. labor unions have adopted some new organizing strategies among groups of low-wage workers. The most salient of these campaigns has been the "Fight for $15," backed by unions such as the Service Employees International Union and the United Food and Commercial Workers. The protest demonstrations, local symbolic actions, and occasional small-scale strikes combined with lobbying and legislation have won workers an estimated $62 billion in raises over the last decade, according to a report by the National Employment Law Project.[5] This is all well and good, though wages remain too low. And, most important, the campaign has failed to organize the hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers in the fast-food, hospitality, and retail sectors.

Legal, Legislative, and Administrative Attacks

Workers' right to organize labor unions is now under attack in the courts, in Congress, and in state legislatures.[6] The anti-union National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation asked the Supreme Court to hear *Janus v. AFSCME*, which could take away unions' ability to collect "agency fees," sometimes called "fare share fees." The conservatives argue that the union forces workers to financially support political causes with which they may disagree, and so violates their free-speech rights. At present, workers may decline to join the union in their public sector workplace, but must still pay an agency fee to the union. It is the members' dues and the non-members' fees that provide the union with the resources to buy or rent a union hall, to hire staff, and to carry out its activities. If the Supreme Court upholds the *Janus* case, many public employee unions may find themselves facing not only a loss of non-members' fees, but also possibly an exit of union members.[7]

Labor union rights in both the public and private sectors are also under attack in Congress. Conservatives in Congress have introduced a national "right-to-work" bill that would "prohibit, on a national scale, any union contract requirement that employees pay union dues as a condition of employment."[8] As *The National Law Review* writes,

The National Right-to-Work Act would likely be devastating to organized labor, drastically diminishing union revenues and unionization rates, particularly in states that already have low union membership and less historical support for unions. Studies show there is a direct correlation between the passage of right-to-work laws and diminished union membership. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the 27 states with union membership below the national average in 2016, almost all are right-to-work states, dropping as low as 1.6 percent in South Carolina.[9]

A federal right-to-work law could virtually eliminate unions in many sectors of the economy.

Meanwhile, state legislatures continue to pass new right-to-work laws. For many years, right-to-work laws existed only in the states of the Deep South and a couple of the Great Plains states. But in 2012, Michigan and Indiana passed right-to-work bills, followed by Wisconsin in 2015 and West Virginia in 2016. Then in January 2017, Kentucky adopted right-to-work, and in February 2017, Missouri became the 28th state to pass right-to-work.[10] Where right-to-work laws are passed, unions lose members and their dues base, face staff reductions, and have less economic power and political clout.

Even without court decisions or new legislation, Trump has moved to reduce the power of unions by nominating two longtime union opponents to the National Labor Relations Board, which oversees union representation and collective bargaining in the private sector. Trump's two appointees, William Emanuel and Marvin Kaplan, now confirmed by the Senate, will give Republicans a majority on the five-member board and tremendous power to block union organization and representation.[11] Peter Robb, who will become NLRB General Counsel, is known for his anti-union positions and will have the power to influence thousands of labor cases.[12] The board has the power to decide who in the workplace gets to vote for a union, how unions and management conduct themselves during an election, and how and when union elections will take place.

While the worst was to be expected, unions were shocked to learn on December 14 that the NLRB, on a party-line 3-2 vote, had overturned the Obama-era joint-employer decision of 2015, which made it easier for contractors and workers at franchised businesses, such as hotels and restaurants, to form unions and collectively bargain with such chains. The very next day, in a case involving Raytheon Network Centric Systems and on the same 3-2 vote, the board overturned a 2016 ruling on changes employers can implement in union workplaces. The board, in this case, restored a 50-year-old precedent allowing businesses to change policies without a union's permission if they have taken similar actions before.

Trump appointees at the U.S. Department of Labor, which oversees occupational health and safety, wage-and-hour standards, unemployment insurance benefits, and reemployment services, will also be working against the interests of workers. The appointees can be expected to weaken worker protections on the job, to reduce eligibility for overtime pay, and to impose forced arbitration on unions while forbidding class action lawsuits.[13]

All of these laws and court cases, rule changes, and appointments mean that labor unions' size and economic resources will decline and, consequently, so will labor's political power. Fewer union members means fewer people working in the Democratic Party's phone banks, fewer door knockers, and fewer people to get out the vote on election day. Workers will find it more difficult to defend themselves at work and to advance their interests in society and politics. All of this means that

rebuilding the workers movement, or, better put, building a new labor movement, becomes the urgent task.

Trump's Promises, and the Reality

Donald Trump ran for president on a nativist, nationalist economic platform, promising to "Make America Great Again" by both encouraging job production and defending those jobs against both foreign capital and foreign workers. Trump promised to rebuild the national infrastructure and to pressure companies to keep industrial jobs in the United States or return them. He pledged to protect those jobs from Mexicans and other "illegal immigrants" as well as to protect the United States from economic competition from China. Trump vowed that while doing those things he would save Social Security and Medicare. Finally, Trump swore to end America's foreign wars and the U.S. policy of regime change in foreign countries, concentrating on putting "America First." Trump went so far as to claim that he would make the Republican Party "a workers party."[14] It was this nationalist economic platform that in a few key states won Trump just enough white working-class voters to carry the Electoral College vote and win the election.

Trump promised to drain the swamp of Wall Street and Washington insiders. Yet, when he became president, Trump appointed cabinet members who were Wall Street bankers, and several, like Rex Tillerson and Wilbur Ross, were billionaires. The cabinet's total worth was estimated at $14 billion. Trump's pro-business agenda is seen not only in his political appointments, but also in his policies, particularly the budget and the tax plan. Taken together, they not only represent an enormous reallocation of wealth to the already wealthy, but they also will result in reductions in the labor force of various federal departments.

Trump's initial budget proposal for the fiscal year, which would total over $4 trillion, called for large increases for Defense (up 10 percent), for Homeland Security (up 7 percent), and for Veterans Affairs (up 6 percent), while at the same time proposing reductions for the Environmental Protection Agency (down 31 percent), for states' development programs (down 29 percent), and for Agriculture and Labor (each down 21 percent), as well as for Justice (down 20 percent—through cuts to crime victims, for example, though the FBI will see an increase), Health and Human Services (down 16 percent), and Education (down 14 percent).[15] The proposed budget also eliminates a list of nineteen small programs whose total cost is only $500 million but which includes many that are particularly disliked by conservatives, among them the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the Legal Services Corporation, AmeriCorps, and the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities.[16] As the *Washington Post* observed,

If you're a poor person in America, President Trump's budget proposal is not for you. Trump has unveiled a budget that would slash or abolish programs that have provided low-income Americans with help on virtually all fronts, including affordable housing, banking, weatherizing homes, job training, paying home heating oil bills, and obtaining legal counsel in civil matters.[17]

Trump's budget will cut regulator agencies and social programs and lead to layoffs for federal workers. And Trump's tax plan, which passed Congress at the end of 2017, will cut taxes for the very wealthy, reducing federal revenue and leading to deeper cuts in the budget.

Trump's Strategy Toward Labor

Trump has a shrewd strategy toward labor. He has put forward a program to win over some highly skilled, largely white workers while simultaneously attacking the unions that represent many more black, Latino, and women workers. It is a strategy intended to solidify his base while dividing and weakening the labor movement. Trump's initial meeting with labor representatives on his first day in

office was a coup. Meeting with building trades leaders, he told the union officials of his plans for vast infrastructure projects: highways, bridges, and, of course, the border wall.

The union leaders praised Trump. Sean McGarvey, president of North America's Building Trades Unions, sounded like Trump himself as he called it "an incredible meeting," the best he "had ever had in Washington." "We have a common bond with the president," said Garvey. "We come from the same industry. He understands the value of driving development, moving people to the middle class." Teamsters President James P. Hoffa, whose union endorsed Hillary Clinton, has also lauded Trump. Many Teamsters work in the building trades, driving dump trucks, cement trucks, and delivering the steel beams to work sites. The Teamsters have praised Trump for what they call his "commonsense goal" of infrastructure projects.

Hoffa also praised Trump for withdrawing the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal. He said, "With this decision, the president has taken the first step toward fixing thirty years of bad trade policies that have cost working Americans millions of good-paying jobs." Hoffa told Fox News, "We've been talking about changing NAFTA forever, and no one would ever do it. It can be done, and I applaud the president for being so bold as to say we'll just rip it up and negotiate a new one. That's unheard of. But it really is what needs to be done." The Teamsters also want Trump to alter the NAFTA clause that permits Mexican truck drivers to cross the border into the United States.

Interestingly, though Hoffa and the Teamsters have praised Trump, they remain active in the Democratic Party, where they have endorsed Keith Ellison of Minnesota, candidate of the "Bernie Sanders wing" of the Democratic Party, for chairperson of the Democratic National Committee. The Teamsters' contradictory stances on these issues are shared by many other unions.

While Trump promised the building trades leaders what they wanted to hear, he may be scamming them. The Republican Party Platform of 2016 calls for the repeal of the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931, which requires public works projects to pay the prevailing local wages (usually union scale), a law that has been key to maintaining construction workers' incomes. When McGarvey asked Trump about Davis-Bacon, the president refused to commit himself. Should Davis-Bacon be overturned, the impact on building trades workers would be disastrous. Only a few days after Trump's meeting, Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona introduced a bill to suspend Davis-Bacon on federal highway projects.

Trump also claimed to be a friend of the coal industry and of coal miners. Once elected he made good on promises to eliminate any restrictions on coal production. Speaking on October 9 in eastern Kentucky, in coal country, Scott Pruitt, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, announced to the cheers of coal company executives that "the war on coal is over" and that his agency was doing away with Obama's Clean Power Plan, which had been adopted to protect both the environment and human health.[18] But Trump and Pruitt may not be able to deliver on the promises of more coal jobs: Many companies have already switched to wind, solar, or natural gas. Still, fuel-burning plants—whether coal or gas—continue to contribute to climate change, to harm children, and to worsen health problems such as asthma. And the coal production they support is dangerous to the planet and all of its inhabitants, not only producing global warning, but also causing more extreme weather. Pruitt's announcement came just after hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Nate struck Texas, Louisiana, Florida, and Puerto Rico in an unprecedented storm season that some scientists believe was caused by climate change. But, though not many coal jobs may be created, in the very short run Trump's promise to bring back jobs in coal is a problem for AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka in his own home base, the United Mine Workers.

Trumka, who supported Hillary Clinton and opposed Trump as bigoted, racist, sexist, and anti-union,

changed his tune immediately after Trump's election. In a statement emailed to reporters, Trumka said the AFL-CIO accepted the outcome of the election and offered Trump "our congratulations." Trump's strategy of wooing the building trades seems to have effectively neutralized the AFL-CIO, the largest and most important labor body in the country. Trumka seems hesitant to challenge Trump directly for fear of losing the support of the trades and some other affiliated unions and their members, a good many of whom voted for Trump.

Trumka told the media that the election was a referendum "on trade, on restoring manufacturing, on reviving our communities." He added, "We will work to make many of those promises a reality. If he is willing to work with us, consistent with our values, we are ready to work with him." Not surprisingly, Trumka visited the president a few days after the election and said he had a "productive conversation." The failure of the head of the country's largest and broadest labor organization to speak out against Trump from the beginning was extremely disappointing to many in the labor movement, though he would come to resist some of Trump's appointments.

Trumka, for instance, worked against Trump's nomination of Andrew Puzder, the former fast-food CEO, to be Secretary of Labor, saying, "He has spoken out against increasing the minimum wage. … He opposes President Obama's updated overtime rule. He is dismissive of workplace discrimination issues. [Puzder] appears comfortable reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women, and I could go on."

Trump cleverly appointed Trumka to his Business Council, otherwise populated by multimillionaire and billionaire corporate CEOs. The AFL-CIO leader accepted the job and stayed in the position for months. Trumka only stepped down from the council after a number of corporate leaders had resigned following Trump's failure to condemn the march by alt-right, Klan, and Nazi groups in Charlottesville. Trumka wrote in an op-ed in the *New York Times,*

Unfortunately, with each passing day, it has become clear that President Trump has no intention of following through on his commitments to working people. More worrisome, his actions and rhetoric threaten to leave America worse off and more divided. It is for these reasons that I resigned yesterday from the president's manufacturing council, which the president disbanded today after a string of resignations.[19]

Trumka, now "woke," as we say, did not, however, outline in that piece a plan to fight Trump. Trumka's vacillations raise the question of whether the AFL-CIO as it is currently constituted is still viable.

While embracing the mostly white and male workers of the building trades, Trump has simultaneously attacked public employees. He issued an executive order freezing hiring for the executive branch, which has 1.2 million employees. The freeze does not affect the military, which Trump has announced he will be strengthening. A hiring freeze, if it lasts any time, reduces the workforce through attrition, leading to demoralization because of inadequate staff, and then to more people quitting because of higher workloads. Government agencies become less productive, creating an excuse to contract out or privatize.

Federal workers unions were quick to criticize the freeze, framing their objections in terms of service to society. While the freeze will be bad for those who use the federal agencies' services, it will also reduce a major source of permanent, full-time—though often low-paid—employment, with holidays and health benefits, for many workers, especially for blacks and females.

Trump's choice of Federal Judge Neil M. Gorsuch put another arch-conservative on the Supreme Court. Gorsuch's addition will create a conservative majority that will take up *Janus v. AFSCME* and

very likely end public employee unions' ability to collect agency fees from non-union members whom they are obligated to represent. As we have already mentioned, the result is likely to be the financial starvation of many public employee unions, forcing them to reduce staff and making them less effective.

While the Trump administration will be bad for all public employees, teachers will face even greater challenges. Donald Trump's choice for secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, another billionaire, has been a leader in corporate education reform. As the *New York Times* wrote of her activities:

Like the Kochs, the DeVoses are generous supporters of think tanks that evangelize for unrestrained capitalism, like Michigan's Acton Institute, and that rail against unions and back privatizing public services, like the Mackinac Center.

They have also funded national groups dedicated to cutting back the role of government, including the National Center for Policy Analysis (which has pushed for Social Security privatization and against environmental regulation) and the Institute for Justice (which challenges regulations in court and defends school vouchers). Both organizations have also received money from the reactionary, anti-union Koch family. So teachers can expect an attack on public education combined with an attack on their labor union rights.

President J. David Cox Sr. of the American Federation of Government Employees, challenging Trump in his own nationalist terms, criticized the president's budget arguing, "These budget cuts will make a difficult job even harder for the women and men who protect our skies, patrol our waters, and help us prepare for and respond to emergencies." He was referring to double-digit cuts to the Transportation Security Administration, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and Coast Guard. "President Trump promised to 'make American safe again,' but the drastic budget cuts he's proposing will do just the opposite," Cox said. "You don't improve security by slashing budgets for programs that prevent terrorists from hijacking airplanes, keep illegal narcotics off our streets, and counter violent extremists in our neighborhoods." Such nationalist rhetoric and fear-mongering from union leaders, especially those who represent many workers of color, undercuts the potential for a common stand by unions against Trump's white nationalism.

Trumka vacillated while the building trades and Teamsters embraced Trump's project, but many national and local unions have gone into opposition mode, though to varying degrees. Teachers have been in the forefront of the resistance. The American Federation of Teachers mobilized 250 locals and members in more than 200 cities the day before the inauguration as part of the Reclaim Our Schools National Day of Action against Trump's agenda. The National Education Association, the largest union in the nation with 2.7 million members, called on its members to walk out of schools on inauguration day to protest Trump. Both the AFT and the NEA endorsed Hillary Clinton.

Members of Local 10 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union in Oakland, California, a union with a long radical history and a membership that is half black, stopped working on Inauguration Day. The wildcat strike stopped the loading and unloading of cargo ships in one of the busiest West Coast ports. Though largely symbolic, it was an important statement.

Surprisingly, Service Employees International Union President Mary Kay Henry, who was not invited to Trump's love fest with some union leaders, has said that she doesn't believe that Donald Trump represents an existential threat to her union, the country's second largest with 1.5 million members. She said her union was "battening down the hatches" and would continue to build the Fight for $15 movement.

Even where an international union has come out for Trump, one can find locals that have taken a

different position. For example, Teamsters Joint Council 16, which represents 90,000 laborers in New York City, came out strongly against Trump's immigration policies.

Outside of unions, there have been significant protests by workers in the service sector and tech industry as well as by consumers. The New York Taxi Workers Alliance, a workers center with a large number of Muslim immigrant members, went on strike at Kennedy International Airport. At the same time, tech workers at Google in California and at Comcast in Philadelphia demonstrated against Trump's immigration policy. The unorganized and "unofficial" sections of the workers movement, then, at times have been more active opposing Trump than unions.

A New Labor Movement

There will be two principal sources of ideas for building the new labor movement: One will be workers' own experiences, their tactics and strategies developed through trial and error in the struggle with the bosses and the state. The other will be the socialist left, which can provide a revolutionary theory, that is, a vision of a democratic socialist society, as well as more inclusive strategies for bringing together workplace, community, and social movement struggles into a broader battle for political power. This synergy between workers organizations, social movements, and socialist ideas has been the source of radical change in society for over 150 years, and it remains the font of our potential power.

The left's program for labor for many years has been the building of a rank and file movement to transform business unions into democratic and militant organizations. Many leftists entered the unions in the 1970s with a variety of strategies, everything from working with "progressive" union officials to trying to create a revolutionary alternative to existing leadership. The rank and file strategy aimed at organizing workers to challenge the existing union leadership and transform the union into a class-struggle organization. One group, the International Socialists, had a goal of uniting rank and file groups in different unions, as well as in the social movements, into a small, mass revolutionary socialist party. This strategy—though subsequently disconnected from building a revolutionary organization—was carried by the IS when it merged with other socialist groups to form Solidarity. Not only Solidarity, but also the International Socialist Organization and more recently the Democratic Socialists of America have also sometimes adopted this strategy.

The IS, which developed this strategy in the 1970s, argued that the labor union bureaucracy, even in progressive unions, tended to control workers rather than take up their interests and fight for them. The IS argued that the labor bureaucracy, especially its higher levels, constituted a social caste with its own material interests—salaries, expenses, pensions, and union assets. And perhaps even more important, the union bureaucracy also had its own ideology, namely that because of its privileged relationships to government officials, the bosses, and the workers, it knew best what was in the workers' interest, better than did the workers themselves. The rank and file strategy existed precisely to overcome the union bureaucracy and to make it possible for workers to come together to fight the employer. That meant taking up shop-floor grievances, organizing contract campaigns, and running for local and national office, always with the goal of a more democratic and militant union. Building up such a labor movement was at the center of a conception of building a socialist labor party. As Kim Moody, who most articulately explained the theory, writes, "The notion of a bridge between rudimentary class consciousness or trade-union militancy and socialist consciousness is the cornerstone of transitional politics and the rank and file strategy."[20]

The idea of the rank and file strategy had its origins in the Communist Party's Trade Union Education League of the early 1920s and in the best practices of the Trotskyists in the Teamsters union in the 1930s. It was also inspired by the many rank and file rebellions in U.S. labor unions beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing until 1981, when a combination of economic recessions

and political repression broke the movements. In that period, miners, autoworkers, truck drivers, postal workers, farm workers, and others rebelled against their union leaderships, their employers, and sometimes the government.[21] Leftists played a role in many of these movements. The International Socialists' work in the Teamsters union, where it helped to bring together younger radicals and longtime dissidents to found Teamsters for a Democratic Union in 1976, represented the most successful of the rank and file rebellions of that era.[22] With TDU's support, in 1991 Ron Carey was elected president of the Teamsters union, and under his leadership the union conducted a national strike against United Parcel Service in 1997 that was an inspiration for the union movement.[23] The rank and file strategy remains valid and necessary if not sufficient to build a new workers movement. *Labor Notes*, which publishes a monthly newspaper, distributes books such as the *Troublemaker's Handbook*, holds Troublemaker's Schools around the country, and hosts a biannual conference attended by as many as 2,000 activists, remains an active center for rank-and-file activism.

Today union activists have adopted the rank and file strategy in unions representing public transit workers, teachers, and hospital workers. While public employee unions present unique challenges because their members often so directly serve the public—consider nurses and school teachers—the principle of organizing rank and file workers to challenge the union bureaucracy so that the workers can fight the boss remains the same. With public employee unions coming under concerted attack in the courts and legislatures, workers will need rank and file movements to pressure their reluctant leaders to mobilize the members to defend themselves. And socialists must position themselves to help provide leadership to those movements.

Most workers, however—some 90 percent of them—are not in unions, so we need new strategies for union organizing. Some workplaces, for example in the logistics industry, that is warehousing and shipping, still have the character of traditional industrial workplaces. That is, there are large numbers of semi-skilled workers organized around facilities and machines—in this case shelving, order pickers, forklifts, docks, and trucks—and gathered together in large numbers in one plant or a constellation of facilities. For example, Amazon, a corporation worth $386 billion, has 350,000 workers. The Fall River facility outside of Boston employs 1,000 warehouse workers. While up to now, efforts to unionize Amazon have failed,[24] workers like these can be organized in the same way industrial workers have always been organized, by building a core of clandestine organizers in the workplaces and tying them together across the country with a labor union. Large retailers like Wal-Mart, which has 2.1 million employees, many of them warehouse workers, could be organized in the same manner.

In most American cities today, however, the biggest employers are usually one or more major universities and a hospital or hospital complex. While in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the great industrial manufacturing plants stood at the center of the economy, today it is health and education workers who come together in enormous workplaces with significant economic, social, and political power. Take the small city of Cincinnati, for example. The University of Cincinnati has 15,000 employees, more than half of them located on its main campus. In the medical center nearby, Children's Hospital has 15,000 employees, while the nearby University of Cincinnati Hospital employs 12,000.

Similar complexes exist in cities across the nation. Many university and hospital employees are unionized, both professional groups like professors and nurses and non-professional staff. There is still basic unionization to be done at some universities and hospitals, and there are rank and file union movements to be organized at others. Some of these unions have become quite political. Organizations such as the California Nurses Association, which created National Nurses United, played a central role in building support for the Bernie Sanders presidential effort and other

progressive campaigns.

An important sector that remains largely unorganized is high tech. According to the U.S. government, there were 17 million high tech workers in 2014, responsible for 23 percent of the country's output. High tech companies employ tens of thousands: Google has 75,000, Facebook has 17,000, and Yahoo has 8,500. There have been some tentative efforts among these workers, but so far no serious organizing campaign resulting in the formation of a labor union and the winning of a union contract.[25]

A great deal of attention has been dedicated to discussions of the difficulty of organizing the "precariat," that is, contingent workers without regular full-time jobs.[26] Over the last several decades, the workplace became "fissured," as one authority puts it.[27] Many employers in a variety of industries contracted out all but the essential productive and moneymaking elements of their businesses to other companies, often non-union. These companies in turn often hired seasonal, temporary, or part-time workers. Other employers in the hospitality and restaurant industries also hired contingent workers. Even where workers hold some sort of supposedly full-time or permanent status, they perceive their positions as being insecure.[28] Today millions of young people, many of them with college debts amounting to tens of thousands of dollars, cannot find jobs in the fields for which they prepared themselves and have only the most precarious employment. Organizing these workers, many of whom work two or three jobs, will require new strategies and tactics, but the organizing must be done one way or another. The organization of the unorganized must be high on the agenda of a new labor movement and of socialists.

Building a New Workers Movement

What's going to happen to the unions? Right now the public employee unions that stand to be dismantled by the regulatory, legislative, and court actions discussed here—above all the *Janus* case—are engaging in what some have called maintenance of membership or recommitment campaigns. Union leaders are carrying out education work about the union among the members and are asking members to sign pledges to continue paying their dues. While this is well and good, it hardly seems likely to reinvigorate the unions, much less to transform them into fighting organizations.

As the attack proceeds and the unions are dismantled, some unions and some workers will find themselves involved in minority unions, that is, unions that only represent some of those eligible in the workplace and perhaps not a majority. While workers have the legal right to organize such minority unions, they may not have the right to bargain contracts. The strength of the minority unions lies in their ability to organize workers on the shop floor or in the office to resist, and such resistance usually takes the form of traditional work-to-rule, slowdowns, and perhaps sabotage of one form or another and may involve wildcat or illegal strikes. Workers' ability to use such economic action, and particularly the strike, stands at the center of rebuilding the workers movement.

Minority unionism resembles what was historically called "the militant minority," that is, that key group of workers that is central to the mobilization of larger groups and even masses of workers. The term first referred to small groups of workers who organized important strikes in factories and shipyards in Britain during World War I, but workers in Germany, France, and Italy were doing the same thing in the late 1910s and 1920s. The militant minority was often made up of skilled workers, whose knowledge and experience not only provided them some protection, but also gave them economic leverage in the workplace. At the center of the militant minority there was almost inevitably a handful of socialists with a radical vision of social change, a strategic idea about challenging the bosses and the government, and a commitment to the struggle over the long term. While the term originated in World War I, militant minorities could also be found at the center of the

strikes in the 1930s that led to the formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CIO. And similar groups led the strike movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s in France, Italy, and the United States. The building of militant minority organizations in the workforce will be essential to rebuilding the labor movement, and it will be the job of socialists to build them.

A new American workers movement will have to be rebuilt both in the workplace and in the communities, as well as in alliance with the progressive social movements. While the labor movement has its greatest presence and strength in the workplace, workers also engage in struggles in their communities for housing, for better education, and for health care. They engage in struggles against racist and violent police and for a fair share of public resources. We need to find ways to create better connections between the workplace and the neighborhood. We also need to take the labor movement to the streets. A healthy labor movement would naturally rally to Occupy Wall Street and put itself unhesitatingly on the side of Black Lives Matter and would join the movement against climate change and for a system change as well.

Our next workers movement, whatever form it takes, must not be built upon a partnership with capitalism, but upon the principle that we fight to abolish it. The notion of a struggle for a society based on democracy, equality, and solidarity can, should, and will inspire a new movement just as much as the fight against greed, white supremacy, militarism, and environmental destruction. Our goal of creating a new workers movement becomes more possible if we can project a vision of a struggle from below for a democratic socialist society, a vision that for now will attract only a minority of workers but can help to inspire them to become a militant minority that galvanizes the working class majority.

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Footnotes

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