

REBECCA BURNS ON TENANT AND
LABOR UNIONS TEAMING UP P.6

SARAH LAZARE ON THE FIGHT
FOR GROCERY WORKERS P.16

SARAH JAFFE ON TRUMP
POSING AS SCOTT WALKER P.23

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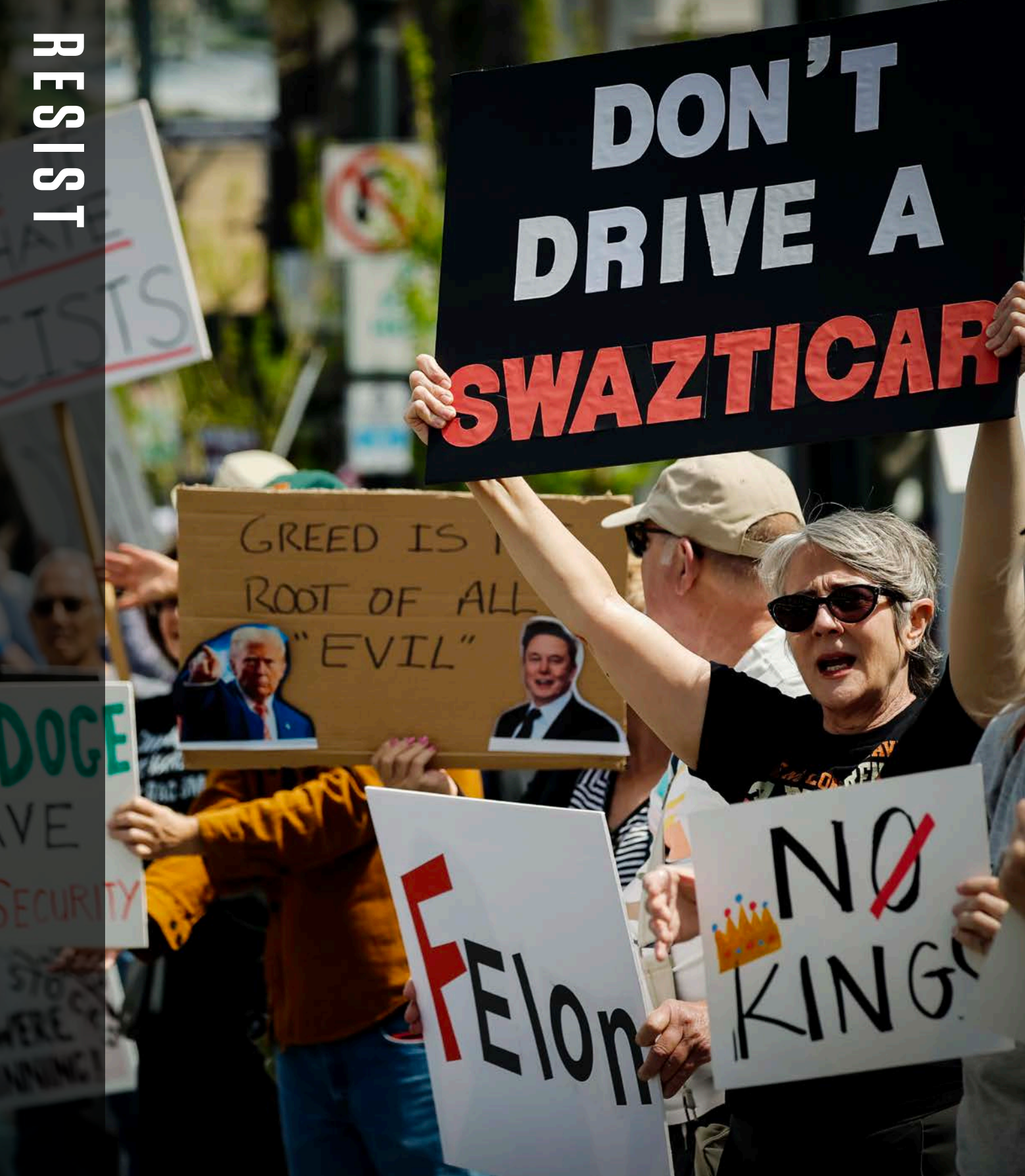
2025

LABOR ORGANIZERS — OF THE YEAR —

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PASADENA, CALIFORNIA—Crowds gather outside of a Tesla dealership on March 29 in protest of Tesla CEO Elon Musk and his work with the Department of Government Efficiency. The demonstration was part of a nationwide “Tesla Takedown” day of action, with thousands of protesters participating in more than 200 demonstrations in the United States and Europe. Musk has been granted unprecedented access to the White House and organized mass federal layoffs after spending more than a quarter of a billion dollars on the Trump campaign. (Photo by Mario Tama/ Getty Images)



Labor Organizers of the Year **30**

The three winners of our inaugural prize are doing radically transformative work

BY NELSON LICHTENSTEIN, LUIS FELIZ LEON, MAURIZIO GUERRERO, KIM KELLY AND FATIMA JALLOH



For Labor, the Riskiest Course Is To Stay the Course

Unions can gamble on lying low, or they can disrupt business as usual

BY STEPHEN LERNER

8



Putting Reentry Out of Business

What if labor championed abolition?

BY CALVIN JOHN SMILEY

14



Grocery Workers vs. Goliath

Unions stopped Kroger and Albertsons from merging, but the fight for grocery workers is just beginning

BY SARAH LAZARE

16

“ No political movement can be healthy unless it has its own press to inform it, educate it and orient it. ”
 —IN THESE TIMES FOUNDER JAMES WEINSTEIN

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DISPATCH

6 Home Is Where the Union Is
 BY REBECCA BURNS

VIEWPOINTS

8 For Labor, the Riskiest Course Is To Stay the Course
 BY STEPHEN LERNER

12 Rise and Unwind
 BY MILES KAMPF-LASSIN

14 Putting Reentry Out of Business
 BY CALVIN JOHN SMILEY

FEATURES

16 Grocery Workers vs. Goliath
 BY SARAH LAZARE

23 Donald Trump’s Disastrous Scott Walker Moment
 BY SARAH JAFFE
 VISUALS BY MARGARET VAIL PALMQUIST

CULTURE

54 Comics
 BY SAM WALLMAN, JEN SORESEN,
 MATTIE LUBCHANSKY
 AND TOM TOMORROW

56 In Those Times Arms and L’eggs: Workers Organize Around Job Ailments
 BY DAVID MOBERG

LABOR ORGANIZERS OF THE YEAR

30 Introduction
 BY NELSON LICHTENSTEIN

32 The Education of a Teamster Rebel: Antonio Rosario
 BY LUIS FELIZ LEON

38 Braving a Campaign of Terror: Anonymous
 BY MAURIZIO GUERRERO

44 Building Bridges and Erasing Jail Debt: Katherine Passley
 BY KIM KELLY

50 Honorable Mentions
 BY FATIMA JALLOH

DEPARTMENTS

4 Editorial
 BY ALEX HAN

7 In Case You Missed It

10 This Month in Late Capitalism

11 The Big Idea: May Day 2028
 BY J. PATRICK PATTERSON

29 For the Win

ON THE COVER

Illustration by Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes of the graphic arts collaboration Dignidad Rebelde

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In These Times' Inaugural Class of “Labor Organizers of the Year” Will Help Lead Us Into the Future

OUR ROOTS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT are deep.

For almost 50 years, unions and worker power have been at the core of the journalism *In These Times* is known for. Our labor writers, over those five decades, have been among the most crucial voices in the movement, from Barbara Ehrenreich and David Moberg to Sarah Jaffe, Kim Kelly, Hamilton Nolan and so many others.

Among our staff and in the office, we spend more time than most discussing what’s happening in labor and how to tell stories around it, from the excitement of strikes and organizing victories to the challenges of building worker power in a new Gilded Age.

We’ve brought you stories from the front lines, lifting up workers who are building power to transform their lives and those of their communities, and our reporting on worker safety issues—like heat and the new rise of black lung—has helped advance policies that can save lives. We covered the first organizing drive at Amazon way back in 2000, and we’ve reported the victories and setbacks Amazon workers have faced since.

What we’ve never done is shy away from reporting that challenges the powerful.

But even as the popularity of unions and the visibility of worker struggles rise, it’s clear our movements need to help uplift more of those who are leading these fights on the ground, to make them louder public voices and more visible public leaders.

In the attention economy, forces fighting for economic and social justice are, by nature, at a disadvantage. Labor unions and worker struggles are, by necessity, organizations and fights pushing for more democracy, not less. They are

collective actions aimed at collective freedom, but our economy and public square are designed to algorithmically atomize us into oblivion.

To lift up the people and campaigns helping to build a more just future, it’s critical to support and develop emerging leaders who can communicate their strategies, visions and experiences on a broad scale.

To that end, *In These Times* is proud to announce our inaugural “Labor Organizer of the Year” award to celebrate emerging leaders alongside their organizations, and to showcase the diversity and tenacity of the modern labor movement. With support from the Omidyar Network, each of the three Labor Organizer of the Year recipients will be awarded a one-time, no-strings-attached award of \$25,000, with an additional \$25,000 to be distributed to their respective organizations, campaigns or unions.

We received 273 nominations of 182 people, as many received multiple endorsements. The nominees ranged in age from 22 to 82, and they spanned many occupations and sectors of the economy. There were candidates from agriculture, hotels, firefighting, food service, nursing, railroads, sex work, coffee shops, clothing stores, dock work, the postal service, colleges and universities, secondary education, meatpacking, media, Silicon Valley, trucking, warehousing and outdoor recreation, along with the unemployed and the formerly incarcerated.

Our pool of nominees represented the breadth and depth of the American working class. They came out of traditional unions, workers co-ops, tenant unions and worker centers, and they hailed from—almost equally—every region of the United States. New organizing campaigns were well represented, with 20 nominees coming from the Starbucks effort and 11 from Amazon.



Each of the candidates is worthy of being honored, but this year's three winners stood out.

You'll notice that the names of only two of the winners are being announced. Since our nomination process opened in early January, the world has changed. As Maurizio Guerrero writes in "Braving a Campaign of Terror: Anonymous" (p. 38): "The terror campaign constitutes an attack not only on immigrants, but on the entire working class, impacting the labor rights and conditions of citizens and noncitizens alike."

These attacks have landed sharply on immigrant workers of every legal status—from those who are undocumented to legal permanent residents—including those who have risked much by standing up and leading their co-workers to collective action, whether for justice in Gaza or for basic dignity on the job. One of our winners is staying out of public view because their work—helping hundreds of immigrant workers stand together for fair treatment in a brutal industry—could make them a target.

So we arrive at this moment celebrating our Labor Organizers of the Year, but with the constant reminder of the risks at hand. We are entering a dangerous moment in history, when basic freedoms that many of us have taken for granted are being rolled back on a daily basis.

The working class never wins when those whose risks are most apparent—whether because of immigration status, gender, sexuality or race—are forced deeper into the shadows. When immigrant organizers are silenced, all of us lose. The victories won by workers across this

The working class never wins when those whose risks are most apparent—whether because of immigration status, gender, sexuality or race—are forced deeper into the shadows.

country have never been won through division, nor have they been won by any group of workers in isolation. From the first general strike of enslaved Africans leaving the plantations and demanding their freedom, to the still unfinished struggle for gender equality and through generations of fights for immigrant rights, organized workers have been at the center of every expansion of freedom and justice.

We believe this year's inaugural group of Labor Organizers of the Year will help lead us into the future, and we're excited for you to get to know them and the brilliant work they do.

—ALEX HAN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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COURTESY OF CONNECTICUT TENANTS UNION

Home Is Where the Union Is

HARTFORD, CONN.—Three years ago, Dave Richardson was spending half of his monthly income on an apartment with rats, roaches and a broken elevator. A stroke had made climbing the stairs difficult, forcing him to limit trips outside of his third-floor home. Other wheelchair-bound tenants had to be physically carried up and down.

The landlord was ignoring phone calls, Richardson says, but one day in 2022, a group of organizers came to his door with a pitch to build a tenants union.

It didn't take much to convince Richardson. Before his stroke, he had spent nearly two decades as a member and elected officer of the carpenters' union. The prospect of mobilizing neighbors to demand a

working elevator, for starters, made intuitive sense.

"Automatically, I signed up," Richardson recalls.

He began hosting meetings and pressuring the city on code violations. The organizing grew more urgent when, in 2024, an electrical fire displaced more than 50 households—including Richardson—which started a months-long campaign for adequate temporary housing from the city and renovations from their landlord, the New York-based, private equity GreyHill Group.

Today, Richardson is back in his renovated building, serving as vice president of the Hartford chapter of the Connecticut Tenants Union (CTTU), which has swelled to nearly 900 members statewide. Drawing from his labor leadership experience, Richardson helped set up an elected tenant council that now governs the organization.

Whether fighting an employer or fighting a landlord, there's a "common denominator," Richardson says: "They [both] want more for themselves."

That's an ethos CTTU has taken to heart as it looks to labor for lessons on building a durable, democratic organization that can organize at the scale of the housing crisis. CTTU now has a formal partnership with Service Employees International Union 1199 New England (SEIU 1199 NE), a labor union representing more than 26,000 healthcare providers in Connecticut. Since 2023, the two groups have adapted the labor union's battle-tested playbook for face-offs with some of the region's most notorious slumlords.

The parallels between tenant and labor organizing aren't exact, as tenants unions generally lack formal collective bargaining rights. But many of the same principles apply—like the importance of strong leaders, clear demands and a plan to force concessions. Above all, CTTU emphasizes the importance of "supermajority" unions, a term borrowed from labor, meaning the bulk of members—not just a handful of activists—are prepared to escalate collective actions.

That emphasis is critical, says Josh Poe, organizing director of the Louisville Tenants Union, which has adopted a structure similar to CTTU. Both groups belong to the Tenant Union Federation, a coalition that hopes to seed a national tenants movement with the ability to conduct coordinated campaigns and, ultimately, rent strikes—including in communities where labor has never gained a foothold.

The Louisville Tenants Union has organized in mobile home parks

Above: Members of the Connecticut Tenants Union, SEIU 1199 NE and allies rally in New Haven, Conn., in August 2023.

and subsidized housing and is currently working on building supermajority unions for a statewide campaign. “We’re able to organize people who have never actually been invited into building power before,” says Poe. “It’s very important to us, when we step into the community, that we’re able to say we are a union—we are not a nonprofit.”

CTTU has helped set new standards for what tenant unions can win. In 2024, the union won Connecticut’s first collectively bargained lease, guaranteeing maintenance standards and stabilizing rents in a building where Ocean Management, one of the largest landlords in New Haven, had attempted to hike them by as much as 30%. With that precedent, tenants in several other Ocean-owned buildings are now

pushing for similar agreements.

“The idea is that what’s a winnable fight changes every time we win,” CTTU President Hannah Srajer says.

More than two decades ago, SEIU 1199 NE was part of a multi-union effort in Stamford, Conn., that wove together housing and workplace organizing. Mobilizing to defeat a city-led gentrification scheme, unions joined community allies to stop the planned demolition of four public housing complexes, establish landmark affordable housing requirements in Stamford and win union contracts that raised wages for thousands.

SEIU 1199 NE President Rob Baril says it was a natural step to join forces with CTTU, given the increasing rate of evictions and homelessness among members: “It doesn’t make a

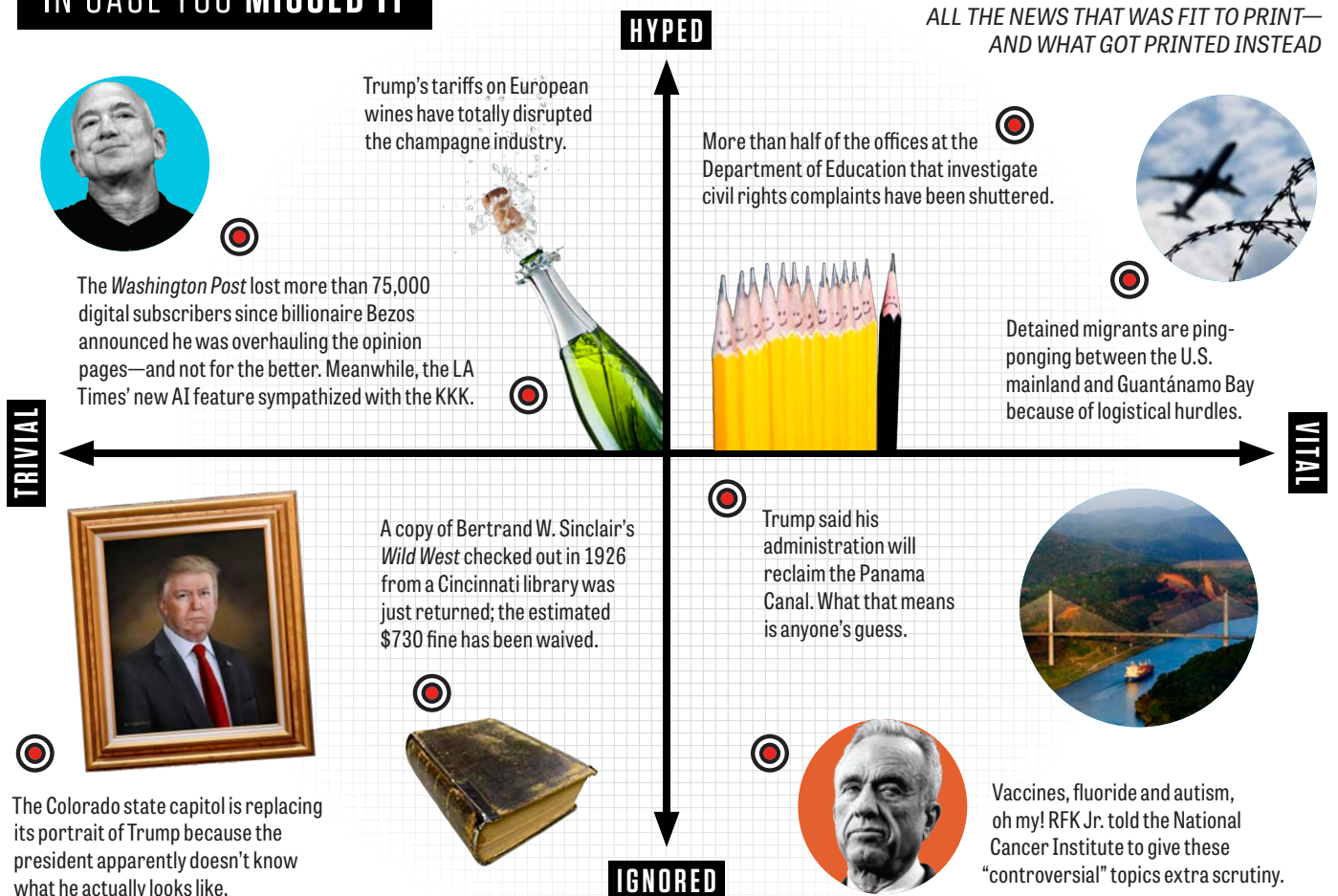
lot of sense for us just to focus on increasing worker wages if those wages are getting eaten up by housing.”

The labor union is currently providing technical and financial assistance to CTTU as CTTU builds out a dues base. Future collaboration could include dual union memberships, joint campaigns against employers who are also landlords, and even coordinated strikes. As Srajer says: “The vision is a union at home and a union at work.”

That vision is especially crucial as labor comes under relentless attack from the Trump administration, Baril adds. “If we don’t figure out ways to build alliances ... at a much more collaborative and effective level, we’re all going to have hell to pay.”

REBECCA BURNS is *In These Times*’ housing editor.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT



STEPHEN LERNER

For Labor, the Riskiest Course Is to Stay the Course

LABOR FACES A CONTRADICTORY, PARADOXICAL moment. On one hand looms an existential threat, on the other, a historic opening.

Unions face potential annihilation, as Trump shreds federal sector collective bargaining agreements, and Elon Musk and other employers challenge the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Board itself. What we are witnessing could be the final nail in the coffin of a post-war order that had ceased to protect workers and unions, as finance capital reorganized the world around its priorities and inequality bloomed.

At the same time, the country as a whole is more pro-union than at any time in a half-century.

Our goal can't be to just limit the damage, slow the hemorrhaging and hope the Democrats get elected in 2026 so we can return to the slow and steady decline that labor has long faced under both parties. After all, labor continued to lose density even under Biden, with an aggressively pro-union labor board.

As this order crumbles, workers and unions must play a leading role in ensuring that what comes next is more durable, just and democratic than what is now falling away around us.

The American union movement has returned from near destruction multiple times. Economic downturns and aggressive employers combined in 1837 and 1873 to wipe out the first two efforts to build a national union federation. The American Federation of



STEPHEN LERNER

is the architect of the Justice for Janitors campaign. Lerner is a labor and community organizer and helped found the Bargaining for Common Good network.



ILLUSTRATION BY LINCOLN AGENEW; PHOTOS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Labor (AFL) emerged in the 1880s out of the calamitous collapse of the Knights of Labor. And it took the near destruction of the AFL in the 1920s and 1930s to plant the seeds of labor's renewal in the form of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). We can draw hope from the knowledge that the union idea has proven astonishingly resilient despite all of the forces that have been arrayed against it.

Importantly, this history also suggests unions are averse to risk-taking, except when their survival depends on it. In the immediate future, few elected national labor leaders will likely be willing to risk their positions of power and influence on behalf of a resistance that has no guarantee of success. Some will be afraid to "poke the bear," hoping if they lie low they won't be a focus of attacks. Others will offer only careful opposition, filing lawsuits and the like, fearing huge fines and government legal action if they launch protest strikes or encourage mass civil disobedience.

Yet we appear to be rapidly approaching the tipping point at which continuing to choose caution is obviously suicidal. Almost everything that increases workers' power is already illegal or likely will soon become so. In the public sector, increasing numbers of states will not only cut budgets but also outlaw collective bargaining, as Utah has just done. In the private sector, not only will the National Labor Relations Board

be gutted, but corporations will also be emboldened by Trump's rhetoric (like his call to fire strikers) to even more aggressively resist, break or domesticate unions. As it becomes increasingly difficult for unions to hold on to what they have, history suggests they must move aggressively or, like the Knights of Labor, be weakened to a point they cannot even contemplate resistance.

As challenging as the current situation is, those who went before us faced much worse: chattel slavery; laws that categorized union activity as a criminal conspiracy; strikes deemed illegal; racial and gender discrimination upheld by the highest courts; employers who hired mercenary armies to fight unions; the violent repression of labor agitators; Gilded Age plutocrats as brazen as Elon Musk in purchasing political power. The list goes on. We only need to look as close to home as America's own segregated Jim Crow



THIS MONTH IN LATE CAPITALISM



🔥 CHILDREN COULD BE JUST THE THING

to fill vacancies left from the right-wing crackdown on immigrant workers. In Florida, Republicans advanced a bill so kids as young as 14, for example, could start working overnight shifts on school days. Child labor violations in the state have just about tripled in recent years anyway, which obviously means the children want to be working.

🔥 ONE FEDERAL EMPLOYEE DEEMED THE STATE

of their office building “fucking gross” and others are reporting clogged sinks, roach infestations, overflowing trash cans and a lack of toilet paper at their federal offices. Apparently, Trump’s order to “return to office” didn’t include custodial staffing. But don’t take it personally, federal workers; other reports allege the White House, too, has recently been flooded with shit.

🔥 NEARLY 40% OF THE CONTRACTS

“efficienced” (read: chainsawed) by Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency are expected to produce zero actual savings, according to a report from the Associated Press. But fear not! These so-called cost-cutting moves have also left grandmothers potentially unable to apply for Social Security and put our food and water safety at risk. So, potato, potato.

🔥 GIG DELIVERY SERVICE DOORDASH HAS

partnered with Klarna, a “buy now, pay later” company, allowing U.S. customers to put their midnight Taco Bell delivery on layaway. Which, sure, overpriced fast food may not be a healthy reason to go into debt, but remember that DoorDash is quickly expanding its grocery delivery options. In unrelated news, Americans’ household debt has reached an all-time high of more than \$18 trillion.



South to get a sense of how a racist, patriarchal, anti-union and authoritarian regime can be constructed within the confines of a nation that calls itself a democracy governed by the rule of law.

There are valuable lessons for us in how people organized during times of intense repression. To protest restrictions on free speech, the Industrial Workers of the World organized mass illegal soap-boxing actions that filled the jails. Industry-wide strikes in steel and other sectors, although they lost, laid the groundwork for the CIO to form industry-wide organizing committees in the 1930s. From there, a combination of strikes and plant occupations, supported by robust community organizing with tenants and others devastated by the Great Depression, led to millions of workers organizing.

In 1960, when segregationists were defying *Brown v. Board* and no political will existed to actually break down Jim Crow segregation and McCarthyite repression, the young activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) put their bodies on the line. Their sit-ins jump-started movement activism and led to the breakthroughs of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act.

SNCC’s research department also looked at which corporations were profiting off segregation and propping up politicians. Then, SNCC developed ways to make these companies pay financial and reputational costs. Such strategies and tactics are worth reviving; we need to follow SNCC’s example and power-map the corporations and elites who are profiting, nationally and locally, from technofascism. We then need to demonstrate, through a disruption of business as usual, that attacking workers, immigrants and people of color has direct economic consequences. The Tesla Takedown actions across the United States and protests in Europe demonstrate that even the world’s richest man can be impacted by mass action—Tesla’s stock price was down 53% in the first quarter of this year.

We need to ask: How do we cut off their capital? How do we mobilize unionized workers in their companies and organize nonunion workers in them? How do we disrupt and isolate them, working to cut off pension fund investments, and state and local subsidies?

To do so, we need a new infrastructure built for struggle—a network of people and organizations that are willing to take risks, including being jailed, in the effort to revive the labor movement and turn back the antidemocratic threat we now face. We do not need another schism among unions or a rival federation.

A first step is to select some initial places where local unions and community groups can collaborate on citywide strikes and mass actions, like they did in Minnesota in March 2024. Those local mobilizations then set the stage for national strikes in 2028. Even if national unions remain cautious, they and other organizations can and should fund litigation, organize for state and national elections, perfect a narrative that can educate and mobilize public opinion, and more.

But such work alone, while necessary, will be insufficient if participants in the network are unwilling to put their own bodies and organizations on the line, just as the members of SNCC did at crucial moments. And like the CIO, we need to occupy factories when we strike or develop our own innovative 21st-century ways of laying our bodies on the gears.

We need to maximize economic impact by focusing on choke-points in the economy.

the **BIG** idea

Imagine if we shut down Silicon Valley for a day by blocking exit ramps and intersections.

Imagine if, in response to ICE raids at airports targeting immigrant workers, key airport workers stayed home—because it isn't safe to work at an airport with ICE there—while others sat in and blockaded the airport, echoing the massive spontaneous demonstrations to oppose Trump's Muslim ban.

Imagine if students across the country demanded the resignation of university trustees who have compromising ties to the executors of the dramatic education funding cuts.

Imagine if public sector workers demanded the \$6 trillion of their pension capital be invested in housing and things that benefit workers.

Imagine if logistic workers went on strike at Amazon and their allies blocked the highways, making it impossible for goods to move.

You don't need to go back as far as the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 to see how tying up a transit system demonstrates worker power; those of us involved in the Justice for Janitors campaign blocked bridges into D.C. multiple times in the 1990s, effectively shutting down much of the city in a successful effort to win a citywide contract.

Because the full consequences of the current decimation of the federal government's most vital services will not be felt for months or even years, those who will be adversely impacted—the vast majority of the country—have not yet been drawn into the fight. We must reach them and begin to organize them around a program of active resistance. For those who are in a position to take risks, that will mean civil disobedience; for others, it will mean capacity-building and support.

It is time to make a choice: Gamble that we can somehow ride this out and try to rebuild from the ruins—or take courage, wisdom and resolve from our own history and not only nip authoritarianism in the bud, but together begin building the road to the promised land. ■

An extended version of this piece appears on [InTheseTimes.com](https://www.inthesetimes.com).

May Day 2028

noun

1. a plan to make union contracts expire May 1, 2028, all across the country—to precede a general strike, led by the United Auto Workers, for concessions from the ruling class

» Whoa, seriously?

UAW President Shawn Fain sure seems serious. As he wrote for *In These Times* in 2024: If we're to build "enough collective power to win universal healthcare and the right to retire with dignity, then we need to spend the next four years getting prepared."

Fain first announced the idea in fall 2023, after the UAW's historic Stand-Up Strike won substantial gains from the Big Three automakers. The UAW has previously aligned their contracts with the Big Three to expire together, but this time, the UAW is also asking unions from sectors across the country to join and, as Fain put it, "flex our collective muscles." The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), the American Postal Workers Union and other major unions have publicly supported the effort.

- » **Sounds difficult.** Yep! Especially in the United States, where union density sits at around 11%. Challenges abound; even if unions want

“The call for aligning contract expirations and planning for a general strike is powerful in and of itself.”

—SARA NELSON, PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION OF FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

to strike, many don't have adequate strike funds or capacity, and in the case of many public sector workers, it's illegal to strike (although they could still support legislative and issue campaigns). May Day 2028 isn't a pie-in-the-sky idea, but it will take "time, mass coordination and a whole lot of work by the labor movement," according to Fain.

» Does this fit in with elections?

The plan could include pressure not just on employers—but on the state itself. Coordinated issue campaigns and disruptive mass strikes across the country could give workers enough leverage to make bold demands, influence elections and fight Project 2025. And if unions band together, the working class could help move the needle on Medicare for All, debt forgiveness,

a shorter workweek and other key demands—turning up the heat during the 2028 presidential campaigns.

According to *The Nation*, the CTU and UAW are in talks to establish an institute to support collective organizing for May Day 2028 and the years to come. It's too early to know the exact shape the day might take, but an organized, militant and politicized labor movement could put the business class and its politicians on the ropes and secure major gains for working people.

—J. PATRICK PATTERSON



ILLUSTRATION BY KAZIMIR ISKANDER

MILES KAMPF-LASSIN

Rise and Unwind

We all work too much. Let's take up the fight for more freedom and less time on the job.

E LON MUSK LOVES TO BRAG ABOUT HIS tireless work ethic. The Tesla CEO and world's richest man claims he works 120 hours every week—an average of more than 17 hours per day, including Saturdays and Sundays. Now ensconced in the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), where Musk says his underlings keep the same grueling schedule, he has promised to bring Silicon Valley's "grind culture" to the federal government.

So far, that's meant slashing thousands of federal jobs, causing a speed-up for the remaining workers. Positions across the entire government are now on the chopping block, leaving workers nationwide unsure whether they'll be next. And, if enacted, a March executive order from President Donald Trump would eliminate collective bargaining rights for two-thirds of the federal workforce, stripping nearly 1 million workers of their hard-earned benefits.

DOGE's slash-and-burn tour through the government follows the same playbook Musk rolled out at X, where he implemented "extremely hardcore" 80-hour work weeks after firing 80% of the staff.

Filthy rich executives downsizing their workforces, evading regulations and demanding more labor is nothing new—it's the ethos of corporate capitalism. But now, it's being imported into the government in the name of so-called efficiency.

But indiscriminate layoffs do not actually increase efficiency.

After Musk took an axe to the workforce at X, the platform quickly became a glitchy cesspool of misinformation and bigotry. When translated to government, this approach has caused chaos, leading to attempts to rehire essential workers in nuclear safety and Ebola control who DOGE "accidentally" fired.

Reports also reveal the agency isn't delivering on its promised cost savings.

In reality, DOGE is just another ploy to bleed workers dry so elites can extract profit—this time, by removing state guardrails on economic power.

Democrats are starting to call out this clear display of greed and hubris, highlighting how Trump's cuts will impact ordinary people who happen to want their food safe, their Social Security checks on time, their national parks staffed and their flights landing safely.

Labor unions have filed a bevy of lawsuits over the mass layoffs, and protests are spreading. As Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) said at a February 19 rally for federal workers in Manhattan, "This is the culmination of what oligarchy is all about ... the fusion and the capture [by] the billionaire class of our democracy." This kind of pushback is welcome, but the central vision of Musk and his fellow aristocrats—life as an unending grind in service of greater productivity and profits—should also be challenged head-on.

Rather than accept the premise that the workforce should hustle harder, Democrats and unions can offer a clear counter: Workers deserve far more time off the job to enjoy their lives.

FREEDOM FROM WORK

The call for more leisure has animated the labor movement for generations, from the demand for an eight-hour day in the late 19th century to more recent campaigns to win paid time off, sick days and family leave. To reclaim the American promise of freedom and liberty for all, those opposed to the takeover of our lives by ultra-wealthy elites should outline an alternative vision—one of shorter



MILES KAMPF-LASSIN

is senior editor at *In These Times*. His writing has appeared in *The Nation*, *Jacobin*, *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*.



ILLUSTRATION BY MYKA LI

work days, longer vacations and mandated paid leave.

As Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt explains in *Free Time: The Forgotten American Dream*, the demand for less work was once central to the broadly shared concept of social progress. Only in the latter 20th century was this demand eclipsed by the “glorification of work,” in large part because of the expanding ranks of rich industrialists who sought to ramp up production to grow their fortunes.

Still, through the early 1970s, many prominent thinkers predicted the country was heading toward a more leisurely future—potentially even “the end of work.” The opposite ensued, with the American workweek growing longer as real wages fell. The collapse of union density coincided with corporate consolidation and income inequality. As a result, from 1979 to 2024, worker productivity increased 2.7 times as much as pay.

Americans keep crushing schedules compared with their European counterparts, amounting to hundreds more hours of work every year, which research shows is bad for both physical and mental health. While Musk may call working nonstop a “superpower,” it leads to fatigue, disrupted sleep, heart disease and catastrophic safety mistakes on the job.

Simply put, the “rise and grind” credo is a ruse to suck more value out of our labor.

A LEISURE AGENDA

How can we cure our national epidemic of overwork? The answer isn’t complicated: In 2019, the People’s Policy Project, a left-wing think tank, outlined a “leisure agenda” that included more holidays, mandated vacation, paid leave, and an expansion of unemployment and Social Security benefits.

New workers in the United States have an average of just 11 paid days off each year. European countries, by contrast, mandate between 20 and 30 vacation days annually, and up to two weeks of paid holidays.

In some white-collar U.S. workplaces, four-day workweeks have become more common. Trials show they’re popular among both employees and employers. The promise offered by this arrangement isn’t just one fewer day spent at work; it’s one more day to go for a stroll, see a movie, meet friends at the bar, take kids to the park, finish that art project, plant a garden or try the new pizza spot—in other words, to live.

But for most U.S. workers, that still sounds like a far-off fantasy. Those at the bottom of the economic ladder have it worst, with low-wage workers least likely to receive paid holidays, sick days or vacation. While some states mandate these benefits, federal action remains stalled. In 2024, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) introduced legislation that would enact a 32-hour workweek with no loss in pay. It’s an idea whose time has come—but one that is unlikely to pass Congress soon.

That’s why it’s heartening to see unions taking up this call. In 2023, the United Auto Workers (UAW) made the 32-hour week a high-profile demand during its successful “stand up” strike against the Big Three automakers. While the final contracts didn’t cut down the workweek, the union hasn’t abandoned the idea. As UAW President Shawn Fain told Sarah Jaffe for the April 2024 issue of *In These Times*: “I really felt it was imperative to get the dialogue going again, to try to fight for a shorter workweek and get the public thinking along those lines.”

The AFL-CIO, the nation’s largest federation of unions, adopted a similar resolution in 2022, promising to “aggressively take up the fight for a shorter workweek.” Continuing to advance bold demands to improve workers’ daily lives is part and parcel of fighting the attempted takeover of tech oligarchs who seek to root out the entire labor movement.

Time off is good for our bodies and our brains. But who needs to be told the upsides of taking vacation? Spending an afternoon listening to the soft tide roll in on a sun-soaked beach is all the proof anyone needs.

THE FRUITS OF OUR LABOR

We are living through a time of rapid technological advancement, coupled with an extreme concentration of wealth. Yet, automation and artificial intelligence aren’t being deployed to increase our leisure time. Instead of taking over menial tasks or high-risk work, the tech is used to produce internet slop, chatbots and cybernetically generated iterations of what we previously called art.

And while the billionaires in power hoard their riches, they tell the rest of us to work harder for less.

It’s time to rouse a different reality—one in which the machines stock the warehouses and we claw back control over our lives from our bosses, giving us time to explore the full scope of human creativity. Getting there will mean bringing the demand for less work back into public debate, with Democrats and the labor movement offering a direct rebuttal to DOGE sycophants.

Kathi Weeks, author of *The Problem With Work*, has said that “demands for more time off are generative not just of needed reforms that would help people live their lives, but of critical perspectives and political imagination.”

We can imagine new and inventive ways to spend our time, revel in the wonders of modern life, build the world we want to inhabit and experience collective joy.

But first, we need to clock out. ■





CALVIN JOHN SMILEY

Putting Reentry Out of Business

ABOUT A DECADE AGO, RICHARD TRUMKA, then president of the AFL-CIO, told a crowd gathered at Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles that “the theme of this event is mass employment, not mass incarceration.”

A year earlier, the AFL-CIO had committed to addressing mass incarceration as a labor issue. In his speech at the jobs and reentry organization, where he was introduced by labor leader María Elena Durazo, Trumka described why: “When some people are forced to work for close to nothing, all workers’ living standards are pushed down.”

Then, Trumka repeated the refrain “it’s a labor issue because,” followed by explanations about mass incarceration’s impact on families, communities, the economy and voting, among others, until finally: “because labor rights and social justice and civil rights are intertwined.”

A decade later, the terrain around mass incarceration and labor has shifted significantly, and it is critical that unions think beyond reform and seriously consider abolition—the elimination and eradication of carceral institutions that exacerbate violence and underprepare people for reentry.

Abolition posits that these hellscape known as jails and prisons must be replaced with institutions that provide basic needs, such as housing, healthcare and employment. Unions are indeed best positioned to recruit, train and provide skills as alternatives to incarceration. To get there, we need a radical social movement that can bring labor and reentry together for, as I call it, “abolition reentry.”

We know that strong labor organizing and unions are fundamental to protecting workers’ rights and democratic values. Yet incarcerated and formerly incarcerated workers have, historically, generally benefited least from this framework because of draconian “tough on crime” policies entrenched in the United States.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative, the average incarcerated worker makes between \$0.14 to \$0.63 per hour. Additionally, folks “doing reentry” are marginalized from the workforce upon release. Formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate of more than 27%, higher than during the Great Depression. Criminal records, compounded with other social factors (such as poverty and white supremacy), create mounting barriers to meaningful and stable employment after incarceration. Recidivism rates also continue to hover around 62%, highlighting the absence of a social safety net.

The modern prison rights movement began in New York with the Attica rebellion in September 1971. Inspired by the teachings of George Jackson, whose writings underscore how people in prison are intrinsically linked to surplus labor, the rebellion was a call for better prison conditions and an expansion of vocational

and academic training. “Real union activity,” Jackson wrote, “will eliminate the corporative ties between the regime-ruling class and labor.”

A year later, in 1973, incarcerated folks at Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Walpole organized the National Prisoners Reform Association, a vehicle for prisoners to engage in collective bargaining for better wages, healthcare and food.

More recently, the Free Alabama Movement, which began in 2013, published “Let The Crops Rot in the Fields,” calling for work stoppages in prisons as a strategy to end mass incarceration and prison slavery. This national movement was assisted by the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee, a prison-led section of the Industrial Workers of the World.

In the wake of the summer 2020 social movement commonly referred to as “Defund,” organizers and activists reaffirmed the fundamental links between police and prisons, calling for the reallocation of funds into other sectors of society. That summer, the 2-million strong Service Employees International Union passed a resolution in support to end the War on Black People, stating: “The Movement for Black Lives has been the driving force behind the protests that have spread to all 50 states and across the globe.” As longtime organizer Jasson Perez, formerly with Action Center on Race and the Economy and organizer against mass incarceration, tells me: “Defund is combating ‘crime wave’ propaganda. ... It’s about the sustainability of organizing, not the flash in the pan.”

Ultimately, the tools for grassroots labor organizing within jails and prisons are already here, including the Abolish Slavery National Network, No New Jails and G.A.N.G.S. Coalition.

An important next step is a national reentry union that combats under- and unemployment, fights for fair wages, combats perpetual punishment post-incarceration and provides networks for skills-building.

Ultimately, abolition reentry would put “reentry” out of business. ■



CALVIN JOHN SMILEY

is associate professor of sociology at Hunter College and author of *Purgatory Citizenship: Reentry, Race, & Abolition and Defund: Conversations Towards Abolition*.

GROCERY WORKERS

VS

GOLIATH

Kroger and Albertsons tried to merge; union organizing stopped them. But the fight for grocery workers is just beginning.

BY SARAH LAZARE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RACHELLE BAKER

In early February, when temperatures in Denver plunged to seven degrees below zero and snow dusted the sidewalks, Martin Bonilla, bundled in two jackets and a neck warmer, walked a picket line 1,000 miles from his home of Fillmore, Calif. Bonilla works in the produce department at Vons and had flown to Colorado in the early morning after finishing an 11-and-a-half-hour shift.

Over the next eight days, Bonilla picketed five of the 77 striking Kroger-owned King Soopers stores in Colorado, in support of 10,000 members of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 7, putting in 16-hour shifts each day before going back to his hotel, exhausted. On the lines, he wore new boots he had bought the night before his flight and shoved hand warmers into his gloves to protect from a cold that was so piercing he went hours without texting or calling his wife, not wanting to remove his hand from his glove.

The main thing that stuck out to Bonilla, who is 53, were workers far older than he is, pushing walkers. He has worked in grocery stores for 30 years and says, “It hurt me to see people like that. They’re probably gonna be working until they die.”

“I asked them, ‘How come you’re here? You look like you’re ready to retire,’” Bonilla says. They told him: “We can’t afford it.”

Bonilla traveled to Denver because he is on one side of an intensifying battle—of union locals within the UFCW against these grocery behemoths that set standards across the industry.

Bonilla believes his fate as a lifelong grocery worker will be defined by the outcome. He is probably right.

Bonilla’s California-based Local 770 was one of six UFCW locals that led a successful, multiyear fight to block an attempted merger between Kroger and Albertsons, concerned it would result in greater exploitation of grocery workers and customers. It would have been the biggest



**CLASS WAR
ON
AISLE 10!**

10

supermarket merger in American history, worth \$25 billion, and its failure likely played a role in the recent resignations of the CEOs of both companies.

Now, four out of six of the UFCW locals that helped take down the merger—Locals 7, 770, 324 and 3000—are facing their own contract expirations in 2025, a year that will see a total of 130,000 UFCW grocery workers with contract expirations—70,000 of them Kroger or Albertsons workers from those four locals. They are up against employers who, they say, are furious with them for disrupting their corporate plans. Local 7's strike has been called off for now—its contract extended 100 days—which means it is in negotiations even as some of these other locals could go on strike.

As these locals gear up, their muscle memory of working together to defeat the merger is coming in handy. Leaders and workers told me that, to gain ground against such big companies, they are showing unity across geographical distances and across companies, holding exchanges among members, sharing skills and suggestions, and showing up for each other's fights. When they come together, workers discover they face similar issues, particularly chronic under-staffing, which leads to long lines and an exhausting pace.

Workers at both companies are fighting together and trying to unite the unionized workforces of both grocery giants. Bonilla traveled all the way to Denver to walk picket lines even though he doesn't work for Kroger. His employer, Vons, is owned by Albertsons, the other behemoth. "That was not a pleasant time ... because of the weather, but I'll go again if they need me to," he says, "because we have to stay together. Workers, we need this."

WHEN DYLAN BOYKE DRIVES TO HIS 3:30 A.M. SHIFT IN

the bakery of an Albertsons in Westminster, Calif., the city is quiet and the streets are empty. Only a few other workers are in the building when he shows up, usually night stockers and janitors, but those hushed hours are his most hectic, a race to get everything ready before the store opens at 6 a.m.

It's his job to prepare "pretty much everything" for the day, he says, so the mid-shift can put it on the floor: the bagels, donuts, rolls, cookies and muffins for the display, the cinnamon rolls, pastries and turnovers for the sales floor.

The work is intense and nonstop, he explains, especially since his employer has been rolling back staffing levels, a complaint I heard from every grocery store worker interviewed for this article. "When I started in 2018, we had probably at least four people every day in the department working eight hours," Boyke says, "but now, we'll have three, or maybe have someone working multiple departments and they'll help for a few hours."

When Albertsons and Kroger announced plans for the merger in 2022, Boyke was part of an increasing wave of opposition. He was worried, he says, that staffing problems would get worse because "we would have less leverage" if

the merger went through. His local, 324, joined with Locals 7, 400, 770, 1564 and 3000 to form the Stop the Merger coalition. About 100 community and worker organizations joined the effort, including Teamsters Local 38.

"We were the face of the opposition" to the merger, says Kim Cordova, president of UFCW Local 7. Cordova started as a grocery bagger for Safeway in high school and stayed for eight years before becoming staff for Local 7. She returned to Safeway in 2009, where she ran for president of the local UFCW on a reform platform to make UFCW, as she put it, "a more member-centered union."

Under internal pressure, the international union eventually came out against the merger in May 2023. Cordova appears to take pride in the fact that the coalition moved swiftly to oppose the merger and did not hesitate to play a leadership role. When asked about the role the international union played, Cordova says: "We didn't wait for the cavalry to come save us. We were the cavalry."

Some officials took notice. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and attorneys general from eight states launched lawsuits to prevent the merger, as did Colorado and Washington. Workers testified in these cases, held webinars and press conferences, staged workplace actions and even talked with customers.

Monique Hightower was one of the workers who spoke at an FTC listening session on November 1, 2023, and she warned of the disastrous consequences of the 2015 merger of Albertsons and Safeway. During that merger, Albertsons sold redundant stores to Haggen, but Haggen expanded too quickly and went bankrupt, and eventually was sold to Albertsons. Hightower was working at the time for an Albertsons store that was sold to Haggen and then abruptly closed. "I was without a job for a whole year," she testified at the session. "It was a very uncertain and stressful time for me. I couldn't afford to pay my rent, so I had to move in with my mother. Not many workers had that option, and some ended up losing their housing and becoming homeless."

She did odd jobs to survive, before eventually landing work as a deli clerk at an Albertsons in South Los Angeles, Calif. "I don't want any worker to struggle as my coworkers and I did back then," she testified.

The Stop the Merger coalition warned that a monopoly formed by Kroger and Albertsons—the second- and fourth-biggest grocers in the country—would not only drive down working conditions but hike prices. The FTC echoed the argument; unions benefit from the fact they are "separate and competing companies," so if the companies combined (and stopped trying to poach workers from each other), UFCW and other unions would lose critical leverage.

One of the companies' main arguments was that a merger was necessary to compete with Amazon and Walmart. But during the FTC hearings, Roundy's Division President Michael Marx (working under the Kroger umbrella) confirmed that Mariano's (also owned by Kroger) maintained high prices on eggs even after Walmart and Meijer lowered them, and only reduced the prices when Albertsons'

“These companies are huge and operate at a huge scale,” Boyke says. “To fight against them, we have to do the same.”

Jewel Osco did so. In other words, it was Albertsons, and not Walmart or Meijer, that created competitive pressure to drive down prices in this instance.

Late in 2024, Judge Adrienne Nelson of the Oregon District Court blocked the merger, as did a Washington state court judge, simultaneously. The Stop the Merger coalition praised the “well-reasoned decisions” and said the development would be good for workers and shoppers who deserve “better choices and lower prices.”

Kroger and Albertsons, along with Costco and Walmart, account for two-thirds of all grocery sales in United States. This consolidation trend aligns with one that extends beyond grocery: One 2018 study found that, in the past 20 years, three out of four U.S. industries have seen an increase in corporate consolidation.

Boyke is a member of UFCW Local 324’s bargaining committee and part of Essential Workers for Democracy (EWD), a rank-and-file movement within UFCW fighting for “union democracy,” “strike readiness” and “coordinated bargaining.” EWD argues that all workers stand to benefit from more coordination and solidarity across locals, and they would like to see master agreements with the grocery giants, similar to the ones the United Auto Workers have with the Big Three automakers or the Teamsters with UPS.

“These companies are huge and operate at a huge scale,” Boyke says. “To fight against them, we have to do the same.”

AS A DELI CLERK FOR A KING SOOPERS STORE IN BOULDER, Colo., 28-year-old Conor Hall is used to working with his hands. So when he went out on strike in February, once the initial excitement wore off, he started to get antsy. Kroger sent in replacement workers (referred to in labor movement parlance as “scabs”) to some of the stores, though managers

ran the deli at Hall’s store while workers were on strike.

However difficult, the strike was transformative for Hall. “The coworkers you go out on strike with,” he says, “you come back with new relationships, with a deeper bond. You’re part of your community and bigger than yourselves.”

The strike was waged over charges of unfair labor practices—that Kroger unlawfully interrogated union members, monitored their conversations and sent them home for wearing union pins. (Most of those charges are still pending before the National Labor Relations Board.)

For Hall, staffing is the biggest issue: “People are pushing themselves to the brink, working through breaks, working through lunches, trying to meet those standards.” He’s also concerned about safety; he works in Boulder’s Table Mesa neighborhood, where a mass shooting in 2021 left 10 people dead. Hall wants the store to be notified if there is a dangerous emergency within three miles, and he wants improvements to heat and cold protections for people who work outdoors, among other demands. (The union says the company has yet to make sufficient movement on those provisions.)

During the extension of the contract that emerged from the strike, the company can’t lock out workers or implement a contract, and negotiations are ongoing. Cordova says there is also a possibility that another strike could occur simultaneously with other locals. Strikes often occur after a contract has expired, in part as a result of no-strike clauses in collective bargaining agreements.

“The company has put itself in the situation where all these locals’ contracts are expired, or will expire, at the same time,” Cordova says. “If we need to consolidate our power that way, we will.”

KATHY FINN, PRESIDENT OF LOCAL 770, STILL REMEMBERS the big grocery strike in Southern California in 2003, the longest and largest grocery strike in U.S. history. About 70,000 workers stayed out for 141 days, into 2004—a difficult battle that ended in disappointing two-tiered provisions that trapped many members in low pay. (Those two-tiered provisions were tossed out in a 2007 contract.)

“All of our members stayed out, and they fought their hearts out, and the companies lost billions of dollars, right?” Finn says. “It was probably the greatest supermarket strike, but the companies held out, and they would have held out forever, because while Southern California was on strike, they were earning money in Oregon and Washington and Colorado and all along the East Coast and wherever else they were—Texas and all over the country.”

Local 770 is already coordinating regionally, one of seven locals in Southern California doing joint bargaining with Kroger-owned and Albertsons-owned companies, as well as the upscale Gelson’s and Stater Brothers.

Finn says she talks “a lot” with Cordova, president of Local 7 in Colorado. “We talk about how things are going



in our negotiations, and then we talk about the strategies that we're using, in terms of building, engaging our members, and engaging customers," she says. Finn even went to Denver to attend bargaining. But Finn notes, "it's also challenging" because "we have different benefit structures, trust funds, so there are differences."

Yasmin Ashur, 55, is a cashier at an Albertsons in Port Orchard, Wash., and a member of UFCW Local 3000, which already bargains jointly with Teamsters Local 38, though their contracts are technically separate. Beyond the local, her union also coordinates with the four UFCW locals, and also sent people to walk the picket lines in Colorado.

"Last weekend, we had two guys from Local 7 come from Colorado and join us at an informational picket training in our office in Des Moines, Wash.," Ashur says. "They told us

how the picket went over there and some of the tricks Kroger used." Those tricks included King Soopers declining to allow strikers to plug space heaters into outdoor outlets, according to a spokesperson for Local 3000, and filing a temporary restraining order against strikers, which the union denounced as an attempt to silence workers' voices.

Ashur comes from a big local of more than 50,000 members. The president, Faye Guenther, is part of an effort to reform the international union to make it more directly democratic, more aggressive at new organizing, and more militant overall. Guenther is open about her plans to run for president of the UFCW international in 2028.

"As a whole union, we are learning from each other," Ashur says. "It's union power, getting together, feeding off of each other's information."

ILLUSTRATION BY RACHELLE BAKER



ON NOV. 25, 2024, LOCAL 7 MEMBERS FILED A LAWSUIT in a Denver district court. It charges that Kroger and Albertsons unlawfully colluded to undercut Local 7's 10-day strike against King Soopers in 2022.

The lawsuit, a proposed class action in its early stages, alleges that, during the strike, Kroger "asked Albertsons to enter into an illicit agreement not to hire or poach any King Soopers workers or to solicit any of its pharmacy customers."

The primary evidence is an email sent by Daniel Dosenbach, senior vice president at Albertsons, to his counterpart at Kroger, Jon McPherson. "We don't intend to hire any King Soopers [sic] employees and we have already advised the Safeway division of our position and the division agrees,"

according to the email (originally obtained by the FTC and Colorado attorney general, and made public during the course of the proceedings), which was sent January 9, just before the 2022 strike began.

"It's an agreement between employers not to compete, which is the core thing our antitrust laws protect against," says David Seligman, labor lawyer and executive director of Towards Justice, the nonprofit labor law firm that filed the suit. "Employers compete with each other for workers. That's really important for workers, because it puts upward pressure on wages and benefits and working conditions."

The collaboration between Kroger and Albertsons is ongoing. Kroger and Albertsons routinely sit at each other's bargaining tables and participate in private caucusing. Ian Adams, senior director for labor relations at Kroger-owned King Soopers, acknowledged this in a letter to Cordova on Sept. 19, 2024: "King Soopers and City Market as an initial matter plan to engage in legally permitted coordinated bargaining with Albertsons."

Matt Shechter, general counsel for Local 7, notes that companies merely sitting at each other's tables "is not per se unlawful, but it could be evidence of unlawful coordination between two companies to drive down wages in violation of antitrust law. You'd need to have more facts to establish that than them just sitting together."

But separate from legal questions, the coordination does shed light on the companies' own perceptions of shared self-interest. They are working together even after Albertsons sued Kroger on Dec. 11, 2024, over the collapse of the merger deal, charging breach of contract.

Meanwhile, Kroger is using a lawsuit to try to hit back at Local 7. On February 7, King Soopers filed a federal lawsuit accusing Local 7 of trying to force the company "to bargain collectively, not solely with Local 7, but with different labor unions representing non-King Soopers employees outside of Colorado."

Seligman says the allegations are "absurd," especially "because we have evidence Kroger engaged in illegal collusion with Albertsons during the 2022 Colorado strike, to break the strike and rig the market against workers."

A statement from the Local 7 press department says the union "vigorously denies" the allegations and "will zealously defend against any attempt to prevent the workers from securing a fair contract."

As Cordova tells me: "They're trying to set up the case that we're not bargaining in good faith, but that's not true. We are just bargaining hard."

Kroger and Albertsons did not respond to a request to comment on the allegations and criticisms in this piece.

THE STAKES ARE HIGH FOR GROCERY STORE WORKERS. A 2020 Government Accountability Office report found grocery is one of the top industries in which workers are enrolled

“I am seeing humanity dying, and seeing corporations not caring, and it is beyond me,” Ashur adds. “Unions—if they have solidarity for each other—it shows the companies that, as a working people, it’s our right to have the ability to survive.”

in programs like Medicaid and SNAP to meet basic needs. In a 2022 survey of 37,000 Kroger grocery workers in four states, researchers at the Economic Roundtable and Occidental College found 14% are homeless and 78% are food insecure.

Boyke is a shop steward, so he knows a lot of his co-workers have trouble paying their bills and several can’t afford to eat where they work. “It’s unfortunate, but I know a lot of people who don’t take breaks,” he says. “I’ve seen people working through lunches.”

Boyke is able to pay his bills only because he still lives with his mom. After six years, he makes \$18.45 an hour after starting at \$11.20. He does get decent benefits, he says, but “you need to work a certain amount of hours each month to keep your health insurance, so part-timers are left in a precarious position.” He consistently puts in 40 hours a week, but he’s not officially full-time, which means instability.

“I’m not locked in,” he says, “as they would call it.”

If workers aren’t getting good hours, their pay suffers, and so do working conditions. When Rachel Fournier rings up customers, she tries not to look at the line that stretches behind them. If she does, she’ll see “a never-ending sea of angry faces” in queues so long, sometimes she has to stand

on her toes to glimpse the end. Since the pandemic, she says, the Los Angeles Ralphs, owned by Kroger, where she has worked for 20 years, has continued to cut staff.

“I’m overwhelmed, working 100% of the time, trying to put on a good face, trying not to take it personal,” says Fournier, a member of Local 770. She says she has conditions that create pain in her feet and ankles from a lifetime of standing at the cash register.

“My feet get really stiff and hard to walk on at night. I have to use a cane at home,” she says. “The tendons that have been stretched out all day stiffen up.”

KROGER HAS BUILT ITS IMAGE ON KEEPING PRICES LOW. “Our focus remains on reaching a fair agreement that honors their hard work while ensuring we continue to provide fresh, affordable groceries for the families who rely on us,” the company said in a press release after the strike.

But the company’s own statements might contradict that image. During the FTC’s challenge to the merger, details emerged about price gouging. On Aug. 27, 2024, in Oregon District Court, the FTC questioned Andy Groff, Kroger’s senior director for pricing, about an internal email he sent March 5, 2024, in which he acknowledged that prices on staples like milk and eggs rose faster than inflation.

This year’s contract fights are raging amid mounting concerns about rising prices. According to the Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, food prices increased 23.6% from 2020 to 2024, far outpacing wage increases.

Grocery companies, of course, are not the sole party responsible. Egg prices, for example, have increased in part because of avian flu, as well as consolidation in food production. Prices rose during the pandemic in part because of supply chain issues. But workers and customers are concerned about profiteering. And trust has been broken.

At the cash register, customers frequently express shock at the prices, Ashur says. Senior shoppers sometimes tell her they are unable to afford food. Some grocery workers take their own families to food pantries. “We have an older gentleman who retired, who had to come out of retirement because he couldn’t afford to live,” she says. “He is now working as a courtesy clerk.”

“I am seeing humanity dying, and seeing corporations not caring, and it is beyond me,” Ashur adds. “Unions—if they have solidarity for each other—it shows the companies that, as a working people, it’s our right to have the ability to survive.” ■

SARAH LAZARE is the editor of *Workday Magazine* and a contributing editor for *In These Times*.

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BY SARAH JAFFE

DONALD TRUMP'S DISASTROUS SCOTT WALKER MOMENT

Trump and Elon Musk are making drastic cuts to the federal workforce. Unions are fighting back.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP WANTS A Scott Walker moment, a Ronald Reagan moment, perhaps even a Margaret Thatcher moment: a big, dramatic showdown with public employees in which he can appear all-powerful and mercilessly crush them.

Accompanied by Elon Musk, the president issued an executive order on March 27 to strip collective bargaining rights from more than 800,000 federal employees. The order uses a thin “national security” argument to justify busting the unions, but a fact sheet released with the announcement includes the line, “Certain Federal unions have declared war on President Trump’s agenda.” This, then, is retaliation.

“President Trump’s latest executive order is a disgraceful and retaliatory attack on the rights of hundreds of thousands of patriotic American civil servants—nearly one-third of whom are veterans—simply because they are members of a union that stands up to his harmful policies,” says Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees, who was quoted in a March 31 statement from the union.

Protesters hold signs in solidarity with the American Federation of Government Employees of District 14 at a rally in support of federal workers at the Office of Personnel Management in Washington, D.C., March 4. Since his inauguration, President Donald Trump has moved to unilaterally dismantle federal agencies and fired thousands of government workers.

ALEX WROBLEWSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



Some 67% of the federal workforce would lose the right to bargain under this order. According to Harold Meyerson at the *American Prospect*, “The number of workers covered under Trump’s order is so large that it would probably reduce the number of unionized American workers, both public and private-sector, by somewhere between 5 and 10 percent.”

Agencies covered by the order—supposedly all focused on national security—include the departments of Justice, State, Defense, Treasury, Veterans Affairs, Energy, Interior, Agriculture and Health and Human Services, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Science Foundation, the General Services Administration, and more. Layoffs have already begun in what Elise Gould, at the Economic Policy Institute, notes is “the steepest uptick since the laying off of census takers in 2020.”

She continues, “The decision of this administration to target the federal workforce is having its intended effect. Unfortunately, this is likely only the tip of the iceberg.”

Battles will proceed in the courts, but if history is any indication, they’ll also be waged in the workplace and in the streets, and their outcome will depend on how broad of a base the federal employee unions are able to organize.

Workers in the Federal Unionists Network (FUN) and across public sector unions have used the past couple of months of chaos to demonstrate their value to the U.S. public, conducting what I’ve called a massive public education project to show Americans what the federal government actually does. The image of Musk with a chainsaw has stuck precisely because it so perfectly captures the indiscriminate destruction that he’s wreaking.

To Joseph McCartin, historian and director of Georgetown University’s Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor, that’s actually a reason for optimism: “I think these people have no idea of what they’re triggering here, and there are bound to be unintended consequences.”

As Chris Dols, a dredging expert with the Army Corps of Engineers and president of Local 98 of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers—and one of the founders of the FUN—notes, “We’re the ones who make the government sausage.” (Dols provided his job title and union membership for identification purposes only and spoke in a personal capacity, not on behalf of his employer or union.)

Dols also points out that any claims of “efficiencies” on the part of Trump or Musk, or indeed most conservatives, have always been offered in bad faith: “They don’t actually want regulations to be implemented efficiently. They don’t want regulations implemented at all.” Government employees, he argues, would actually be well-placed to find real efficiencies in government, to make their departments work better and to provide better services to the country.

IT WAS WISCONSIN GOV. SCOTT WALKER WHO provided the most recent blueprint for what Trump is doing. Elected in the “Tea Party” wave of 2010, Walker pushed through a “budget repair” bill, Act 10, which stripped state workers of collective bargaining rights over the protests of tens of thousands of workers. Alex Hanna, coauthor of the forthcoming book *The AI Con*, was co-president of the Teaching Assistants Association (TAA) and a graduate student in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison at the time, and notes, “Wisconsin was the testing ground to see if they could get away with this and see if you can pass muster in the courts.” She points out that Trump even imitated Walker’s carve-out for police and firefighters, who retain their rights.

The TAA kicked off what became a week-long occupation of the Wisconsin Capitol in February and March of 2011.

Some 80,000 people came out to resist not just the attack on workers, but the way it had been done—by cutting off public debate and rushing through major policies. Union members from around the country poured into Wisconsin to fight, and there were similar protests and resistance in other states like Ohio and Indiana, which had put forward similar bills of their own. Fourteen Democratic members of the Wisconsin Senate left the state to deny the legislative quorum needed to pass the bill. The protests continued as Walker’s budget slashed the state government, cutting money from schools to lower taxes for



ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARGARET VAIL PALMQUIST

corporations. It was an example, as I wrote in my book *Necessary Trouble*, “of what the Chicago Teachers Union would later call ‘being broke on purpose,’ eliminating a source of revenue in order to justify cuts [Walker] already wanted to make.”

Regardless, Republicans pulled the collective bargaining attacks out of the budget bill and pushed it through as a standalone bill in the middle of the night. Walker signed it in a private session. He later survived a recall attempt, though two Republican state senators did lose their seats to recalls. In contrast, in Ohio—where state law allowed for putting a bill itself up for referendum—unions and their allies were able to overturn the ban on collective bargaining.

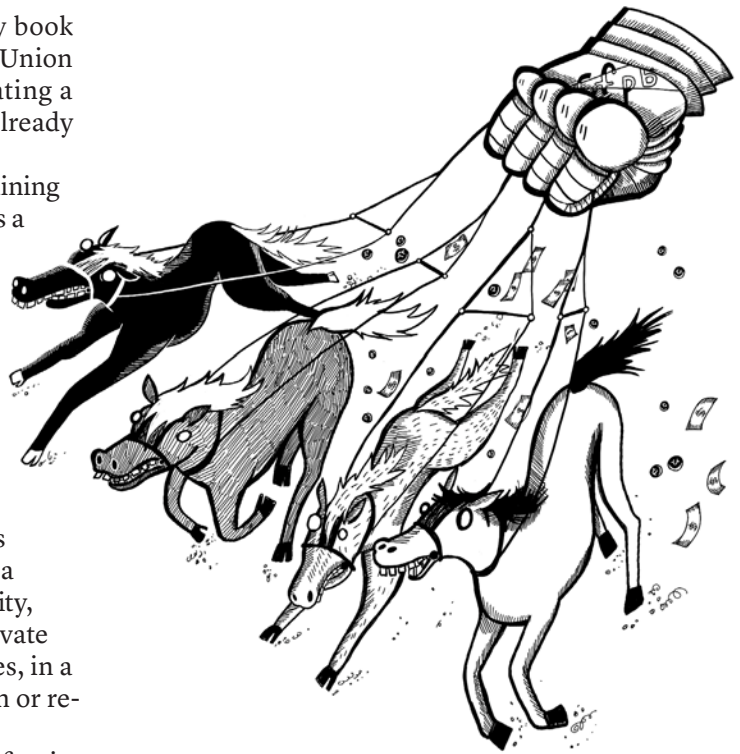
Walker, like Trump, argued that his attacks on bargaining were an attempt to save money, but it is hard to argue that collective bargaining itself has a price tag. (Public workers, despite higher union density, tend to make less money than they might in the private sector.) Rather, these moves are about power: Bosses, in a factory or the federal government, try to crush, ban or restrict unions to maximize their own control.

The most important lesson here from the brutal defeat in Wisconsin is that labor needs to be a movement that fights for the whole working class. The return of the strike, beginning with Chicago teachers in 2012 and rippling across the country, notably in Republican-held states where teachers didn’t have the right to strike or in some cases even bargain collectively, has been important, Dols notes: “I think it’s probably safe to say ... there’s probably at least one, maybe two orders of magnitude more workers who know how to really organize in a way that builds power.”

The echoes of the Act 10 fight are alive in Wisconsin, which is probably why Elon Musk spent some \$25 million to elect a Trumpist judge to the state Supreme Court. But Wisconsin, in part of the sea change begun in that uprising, rejected Musk’s choice and handed Democrat Susan Crawford a sweeping victory. Crawford represented teachers’ unions in their suit against Act 10.

SCOTT WALKER WAS INSPIRED BY RONALD Reagan, whose breaking of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in 1981 sent the message that it was open season on labor unions in the United States. McCartin, who wrote the book on PATCO—*Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers and the Strike that Changed America*—notes that PATCO provided the blueprint for subsequent attacks on workers, but that Trump’s attempt to strip collective bargaining from most of the federal workforce “is many orders of magnitude more serious.”

The PATCO workers, like other federal workers, received the right to collective bargaining for the first time in 1962 thanks to an executive order from President John F. Kennedy. They did not have the right to strike (they are, in



fact, forbidden to even advocate for the right to strike) and their bargaining was limited. Even so, they were part of a growing wave of public sector militancy that included a landmark (and illegal) postal workers strike in 1970.

By the time Reagan was sworn in as president—the first former union president to occupy the White House, having been head of the Screen Actors Guild—the air traffic controllers had built a powerful union through militant job actions—most of them work slowdowns and work-to-rule—and were confident that Reagan wouldn’t crack down.

But PATCO hadn’t built the advance solidarity with the rest of the labor movement it would need to win an illegal strike, McCartin says. The union—made up of mostly white, male veterans—had even endorsed Reagan and was “pretty blunt about wanting a pay increase at a time when it was hard to ask for that.” But Reagan’s true agenda (rather like Trump) showed up in the early days of his administration, with budget cuts and anti-union appointments to the National Labor Relations Board. He played hardball with the PATCO negotiations, and when the workers struck on Aug. 3, 1981, Reagan gave them 48 hours to come back or be fired. They thought they were calling a bluff, and Reagan fired 11,345 workers, decertified the union, and banned them from government employment for life.

Historian Erik Loomis, in his book *A History of America in Ten Strikes*, calls the PATCO strike “the greatest disaster in American labor history.”

The labor movement, McCartin says, was in a difficult position because Reagan was popular and most of the public saw the controllers as greedy. But Dols wonders if this moment could be “PATCO in reverse.”

2008 • THE WORLD SUFFERS THROUGH THE GREAT RECESSION WHILE CAPITAL BAILS ITSELF OUT

2010
DODD-FRANK
ACT PASSES

2011 • THE CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION BUREAU IS FORMED



CONSUMER

• CFPB WORKERS ARE CHARGED WITH TAKING ON BANKS, CREDITORS, INSURERS, LOAN SERVICERS — PREDATORY FINANCIAL ACTORS OF ALL KINDS

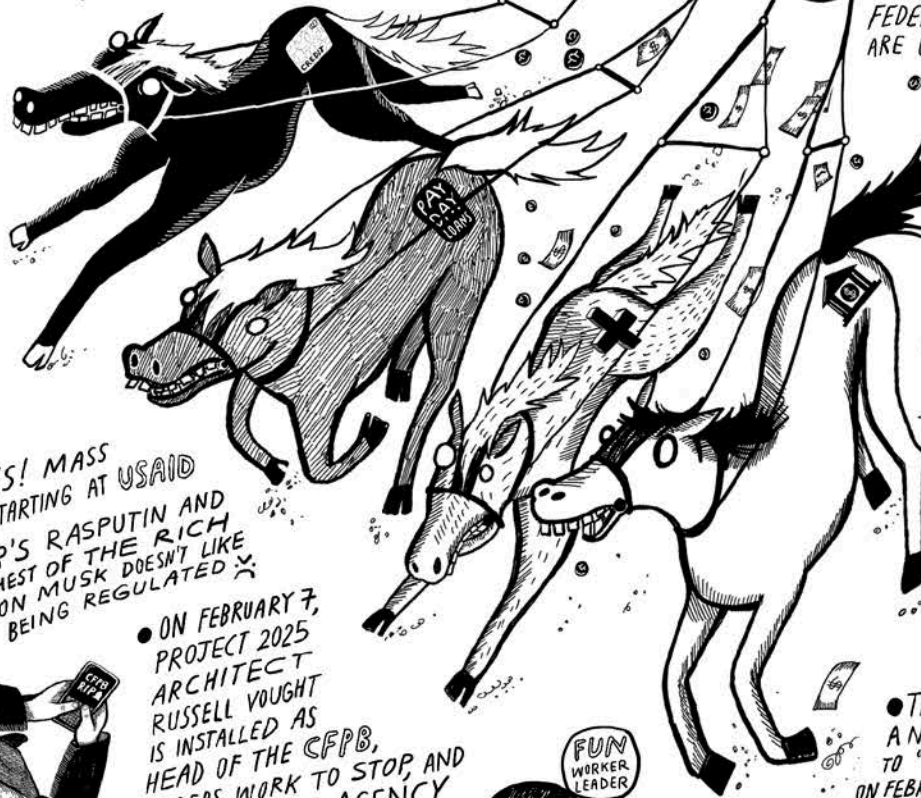
• THE CFPB RETURNS \$21 BILLION TO WORKING PEOPLE OVER ITS 14-YEAR TENURE IN (FROM) THE FINANCIAL SECTOR (INCREASINGLY EVERYWHERE)

- \$ 26%
- \$ 88%
- \$ 2x
- \$ 42%
- X.X

2025

• MANY OF THE RICHEST MEN IN THE WORLD ARE GUESTS AT TRUMP'S INAUGURATION

• MANY OF THEIR COMPANIES ARE IN THE CROSSHAIRS OF THE CFPB



• A LOT OF FEDERAL WORKPLACES ARE UNION BUT ARE "OPEN SHOPS" MEANING EMPLOYEES CANNOT BE COMPELLED TO JOIN — THEY ARE ALSO PROHIBITED FROM STRIKING

• SINCE DOGE BEGAN THE MASS LAYOFFS, MORE THAN 14,000 FEDERAL WORKERS HAVE JOINED A UNION

• DOGE ATTACKS! MASS LAYOFFS BEGIN, STARTING AT USAID

• TRUMP'S RASPUTIN AND RICHEST OF THE RICH ELON MUSK DOESN'T LIKE BEING REGULATED

• ON FEBRUARY 7, PROJECT 2025 ARCHITECT RUSSELL VOUGHT IS INSTALLED AS HEAD OF THE CFPB, ORDERS WORK TO STOP, AND SHUTTERS THE AGENCY

• FEDERAL WORKERS SOUND THE ALARM: NOT JUST ABOUT FED JOBS BUT ABOUT OUR RIGHTS AS WORKERS; OUR PUBLIC GOODS, SERVICES, AND INSTITUTIONS; THE FABRIC OF OUR SOCIETY

FUN WORKER LEADER
CHRIS DOLS

• THE FUN HOLDS A NATIONAL DAY OF ACTION TO "SAVE OUR SERVICES" ON FEBRUARY 19 — THOUSANDS MOBILIZE TO RALLIES, MARCHES, AND PRESS CONFERENCES IN DOZENS OF CITIES



"THEY THINK THEY CAN MANAGE THE CRISIS. OUR JOB IS TO MAKE IT UNMANAGEABLE."

• THE FUN GROWS; DOGE CONTINUES DISMANTLING THE GOVERNMENT

what is the FUN?

THE FEDERAL UNIONISTS NETWORK IS AN INFORMAL ASSOCIATION OF FEDERAL WORKERS AND ALLIES ORGANIZING ACROSS THE FEDERAL SECTOR TO STRENGTHEN THEIR UNIONS

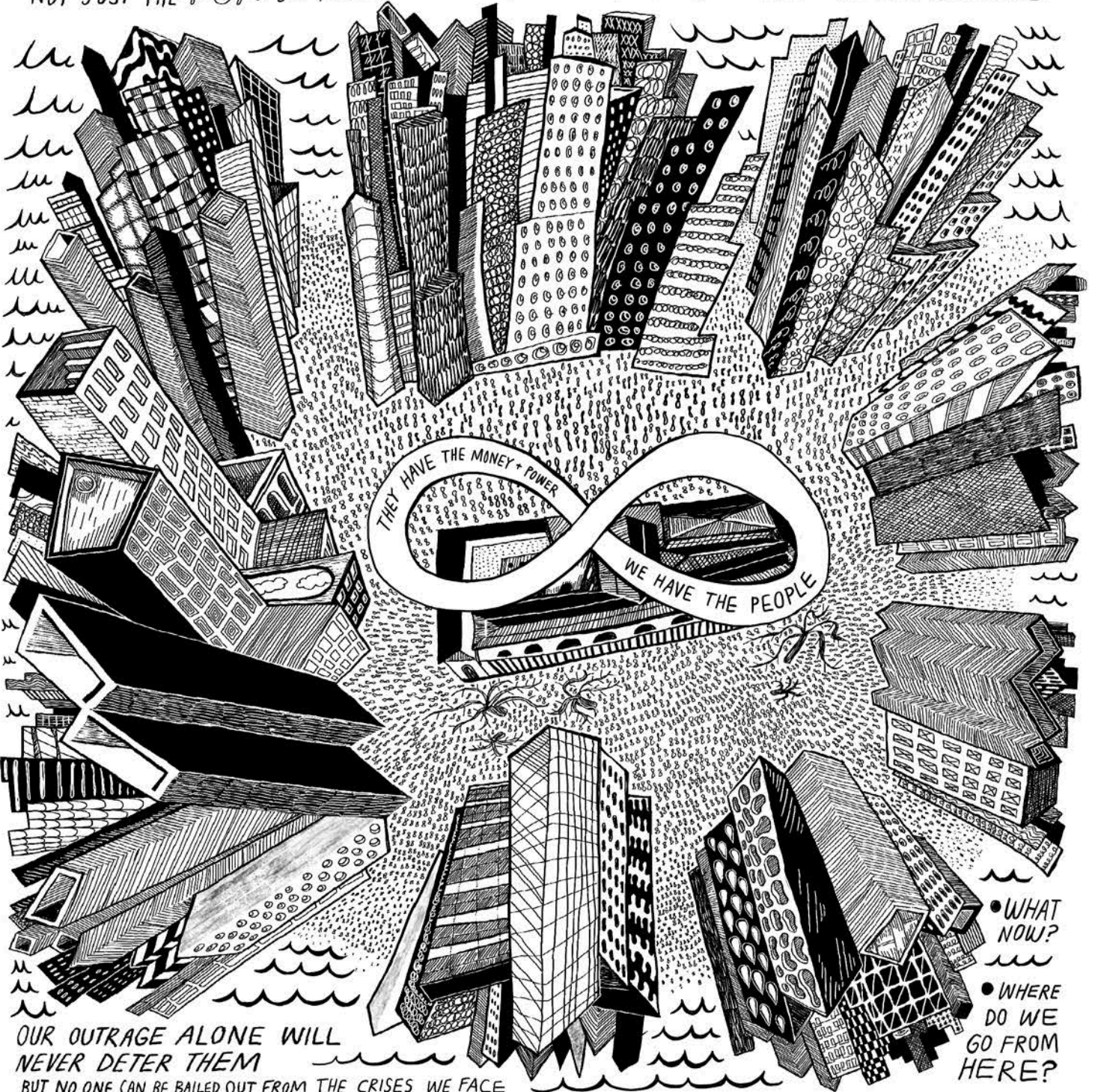


● WITH CONSUMER PROTECTIONS AXED, TRUMP AND DOGE SET THEIR SIGHTS ON LABOR — WHERE OUR REAL POWER LIES

● ON MARCH 27, TRUMP SIGNS AN EXECUTIVE ORDER TO ELIMINATE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS FOR MANY FEDERAL WORKERS IN THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ATTACK ON THE RIGHTS OF ORGANIZED LABOR IN DECADES

● THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES, THE NATIONAL TREASURY EMPLOYEES UNION, AND THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES ANNOUNCE THEIR INTENTION TO SUE THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

● ON APRIL 5, MILLIONS TAKE TO THE STREETS IN "HANDS OFF!" DEMONSTRATIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY NOT JUST THE FUN BUT PEOPLE FROM UNIONS, COMMUNITY GROUPS, AND ORGANIZATIONS OF ALL KINDS



OUR OUTRAGE ALONE WILL NEVER DETER THEM
BUT NO ONE CAN BE BAILED OUT FROM THE CRISES WE FACE

● WHAT NOW?
● WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

That strike was a moment of overconfidence on the part of labor, he says, that mirrors the overconfidence emanating from Trump and Musk. “It wouldn’t have been overreach if [PATCO] had the solidarity to win and the power to actually not only shut down the airlines, but also either spread it or otherwise make the political cost high enough that the Reagan administration made a different political calculation,” he adds.

The same goes for the federal workers now: If they can build the solidarity to win, they can turn this into a moment of overreach for the Trump administration that turns the tide for workers.

TRUMP MIGHT ALSO BE TAKING INSPIRATION from a forebear across the ocean—former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, in Britain, and her crushing of the miners’ union. Coal mining was nationalized in Britain, meaning that miners were, in fact, bargaining with the government over their conditions. The nationalized industry created what historian Ewan Gibbs—author of *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland* (who was building on socialist historian E.P. Thompson’s writings)—describes as a “moral economy.” Part of the moral economy was that workers got some control over their jobs and the industry, which Thatcher was determined to end.

The miners struck in 1984 following the closures of a string of mines. They did get broad community support, but it was ultimately not enough to overcome the Thatcher administration’s determination to break the union and close the mines. Recently declassified papers show Thatcher planning to privatize the industry. “It was a calculated political decision,” Chris Kitchen, head of what remains of the National Union of Mineworkers, told me for my book, *From the Ashes*. “They wanted to fragment people.”

The defeat of the miners underscores the challenges of striking to beat a boss who wants to fire you. Joshua Clover, in *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*, calls it the “affirmation trap,” in which workers are put in the position of mobilizing to keep their jobs. If Thatcher wants to shut the mines, if Elon Musk wants to take a chainsaw to the federal government, and you go on strike, you might just hand them the tools to fire you; if you beg to keep the workplace open, you’re also supporting your boss’s goals.

Workers have to be at least as strategic and thoughtful as they are militant in this moment; the lesson from PATCO is that militancy alone is insufficient.

But PATCO also offers some ideas for actions that could be effective. “I think if there is collective action, I don’t think these federal workers will make it easy to replace them,” McCartin says. “I would anticipate we’d more see sick-outs, slowdowns, other kinds of resistance, short of a traditional walkout.”

According to Dols, “Our maximum goal right now is to make this a sufficient political crisis that they lose complete control of it. And we help the public draw all the



right conclusions from this, which is that it turns out federal workers not only are workers, but they’re extremely important workers who make sure that we all stay safe, healthy, that our rights are intact.”

THE CHALLENGE BEFORE FEDERAL WORKERS—and us—is massive, but so is the anger that Trump and Musk have provoked. “I’ve been very impressed with what the [FUN] has done in a very short time,” McCartin says. “Federal workers have never been more activated than they are now. And nor has there ever been a moment where the public was maybe more open to being educated about what its government does, what its public sector workers do, and if the workers themselves and their allies and the rest of the labor movement approach this in a smart and strategic way, I think they can organize, agitate and engage in some collective actions that will actually build support.”

The FUN called a day of action on April 5, and their mass organizing calls have pulled together tens of thousands of people, but Dols notes, “There’s union work that is accrued by addition, there’s union work that accrues by multiplication, and then there’s fractal organizing,” or organizing that

Above: Federal employees rally in support of their jobs outside of the Kluczynski Federal Building on March 19, 2025 in Chicago, Ill. The rally was organized by the National Treasury Employees Union to voice concerns about the mass firing of federal workers by the controversial Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which is led by Elon Musk.

SCOTT OLSON/BETTY IMAGES



moves by leaps and bounds to bring in new people. Bargaining for the common good is a strategy, begun in the wake of the Wisconsin uprising, that has the potential to connect people outside of the federal workforce to the workers who are under threat. Organizing explicitly on behalf of the broader public is a way for the federal workers to overcome the shortcomings of PATCO and to challenge the entire dog-eat-dog worldview at the root of Trumpism.

Because the federal sector is, in fact, many sectors—with workers who have counterparts in the private sector—there is potential for action that brings together public employees with private ones: air traffic controllers with flight attendants, say, like what happened in 2019 when Sara Nelson of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA called for flight attendants to join the air traffic controllers who'd called out sick to end the government shutdown.

“Right now, everybody needs to become an organizer,” Dols says. “The FUN is about to be starting up massive trainings on how to be an organizer. And we’re hoping, in turn, to inspire the unions who just have more resources than us and more legitimacy and larger numbers.”

It is impossible to predict exactly how things will shake out, but Dols concludes: “I don’t want to have any regrets that we didn’t do every damn thing we could to win.” ■

SARAH JAFFE is a writer and reporter living in New Orleans and on the road. She is the author of *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*; *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt*. Her latest book is *From the Ashes: Grief and Revolution in a World on Fire*. You can follow her @sarahljaaffe on X.

FOR THE WIN

RODRIGO DUTERTE, FORMER PRESIDENT of the Philippines, is facing charges of crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court. The charges stem from his brutal “war on drugs,” which led to thousands of deaths. The hearing marks a key moment in global efforts to hold powerful leaders accountable for human rights violations.

DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST NEW YORK MAYORAL candidate Zohran Mamdani has raised \$8 million in donations, topping the fundraising limit and signaling growing support to challenge the city’s political establishment. Now a top contender, Mamdani is focusing his platform on housing, economic justice, free public transportation and expanding childcare services.



RESISTMAP WAS LAUNCHED TO TRACK U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement activities in real time. The goal is a live national map, with updates via text, based on reports from witnesses—essentially, a nationwide registry to combat ICE raids and kidnappings.

NO OTHER LAND, A FILM ABOUT PALESTINIAN resistance to Israeli occupation, won this year’s Oscar for Best Documentary. Importantly, the recognition comes as one of the film’s co-directors, Hamdan Ballal, was beaten by Israeli settlers and detained by the Israeli military, and despite the film struggling to secure a streaming platform or wide U.S. distribution.



AFTER 46 DAYS ON STRIKE, OREGON NURSES have returned to work because their newly ratified contract promises significant improvements in staffing and pay. The nurses, who had been advocating for safer working conditions and fair compensation, are celebrating the victory as a step toward better healthcare standards in the state.





LABOR ORGANIZERS - OF THE YEAR -

BY NELSON LICHTENSTEIN

IF DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES IS TO BE preserved and extended, then we need to honor those whose efforts are indispensable to building the one institution that truly stands as a bulwark against economic powerlessness and political defeat: the labor union. Labor organizers are essential to the growth of the union movement, but even more importantly, they demonstrate something at the heart of working-class life—how ideas and determination can

be transformed into collective power, essential for the advancement of democracy itself, in the workplace and society at large.

Employers and elites have been wont to call the organizer an “outside agitator,” and there is much truth to that accusation because the labor organizer stands outside (and in opposition to) the enclosed hierarchies and insular work culture designed by the boss and helpmates in human resources departments that keep workers passively quiescent. Fred Ross, the legendary community organizer who worked closely with Saul Alinsky and César Chávez in the 1950s and 1960s, understood the necessity for such agitation. “A good organizer,” Ross once wrote, “is a social arsonist who goes around setting people on fire.”

There is no single handbook to guide the work, but all organizers do two things that are radically transformative. First, they raise and transform consciousness. They listen, they learn, they seek to understand the fears and hopes of the workers. At the same time, they explain that the boss is not, in fact, all powerful, that the workplace future can be made different from the past, and that, collectively, workers have a power that can offer them not only dignity and well-being, but a world transformed.

Today, this consciousness has to be created in the face of intense employer opposition, often backstopped by a hostile political class and a National Labor Relations Board that is hardly of much help. Most workers have their own set of grievances and aspirations, a few loudly voiced, the majority held in secret abeyance. It is the task of the union organizer—whether someone who emerges organically out of the enterprise or someone “parachuted in” by a well-established union—to figure out the commonalities that unite the workers, raise their expectations and provide a realistic path toward the realization of those aspirations.

But if all organizers did was make people aware of their oppression, or even rouse them to collective protest, that wouldn’t be enough. In recent years, we’ve seen some remarkable progressive upheavals, like A Day Without Immigrants in 2006, Occupy in 2011, the Women’s March in 2017, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Pundits and politicians take notice,

and such manifestations can each create a new generation of activists. Trade unionists can only envy the energy unleashed in these upheavals. But consciousness is episodic; it rises and falls and gets distorted. While we cheer these episodes of social movement activism, unionists also understand that consciousness and organization are dialectically imbricated—each sustains the other, and, in tandem, they create a powerful counterweight to the elites that rule the workplace and the political economy.

That perspective is something unique to the unions, which may be why people in power are almost always hostile to organized labor. Working people need their own structures, their own leaders, their own institutions that can channel, every day, the aspirations and anger of those they represent. The class struggle is a long haul, punctuated with more setbacks than victories, which is why successful organizers not only transform consciousness but create a collectively governed organization that can withstand the ideological and economic assault the boss is sure to throw their way.

With the inaugural Labor Organizer of the Year Award, *In These Times* honors three such organizers. Antonio Rosario, a Teamster of 30 years, has become the union’s lead organizer in its herculean effort to organize Amazon. He represents the adaptation of a long and proud labor tradition to a new moment.

The recipient of the second award remains undisclosed, being one of the many immigrant worker-leaders who are braving the risk of expulsion from their homes and communities to stand up to exploitative employers. Immigrants have been a driving force in the U.S. labor movement since its inception, and they operate with considerable risk, no more so than now.

Katherine Passley organizes workers with criminal records, a group often considered “unorganizable.” The work they’ve done in power-mapping and successfully pushing for local legislative change is especially impressive in the hostile terrain of South Florida, reflective of a new surge in Southern labor organizing.

The 2025 Labor Organizer of the Year Award also gives honorable mention to the vibrant campaigns at Starbucks and in higher education, movements that have not only brought tens of thousands of new workers into unions, but have seen countless new labor leaders rising from their ranks. ■

SELECTION COMMITTEE:

Sheri Davis, Jennifer Epps, Nelson Lichtenstein,
Victor Narro, Jane Slaughter

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY OSCAR DUARTE



BY LUIS FELIZ LEON

THE EDUCATION OF A TEAMSTER REBEL: ANTONIO ROSARIO

IN SEPTEMBER 2024, TEAMSTERS ORGANIZER Antonio Rosario gathered 80 workers at Highland Park in Brooklyn, N.Y., to celebrate a union campaign going public after nine months underground.

To mark the occasion, Rosario roasted a pig, christened “Little Bezos” after Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. The ritual drew from two traditions important to Rosario. The first is the practice of Rosario’s union local—the 8,000-strong Teamsters Local 804—of using inflatable pigs (rather than the typical rat) to protest bad employers.

The second is familial: the Puerto Rican pig roast. Rosario’s mom seasoned the pig the night before, and on this day, he and the workers would meet each other’s families. The celebration felt almost like a “coming out” party, Rosario says, with drivers and warehouse workers who’d organized at different ends of the company “starting to meet each other, seeing how many people were actually involved.”

When Rosario turned the pig on its spit—“us Puerto Ricans, we like our skin very crispy,” he says—he carved “Jeff” into its skin. “A lot of people talk about eating the rich. That day, we literally felt like we got to eat the rich.”

The roast celebrated the drivers’ effort to gain union recognition at three of Amazon’s subcontractors, known as “delivery service partners” (DSPs in company parlance), at Amazon’s DBK4 delivery station in Maspeth, Queens. The drivers argue that Amazon—which controls the DSPs and splashes its logo across their vans and uniforms—is their real employer and it should use its billions in profits for better working conditions.

The message to managers, explains driver Jeffrey Arias, was: “We deserve better pay. We deserve better working conditions. We deserve better vans, better routes, less packages and guaranteed hours.”

The message to Bezos: “Stop being a greedy pig!”

Within weeks, Rosario successfully pushed the Teamsters to do a union organizing blitz at the remaining five DSPs at the same Queens delivery station. Organizers signed up workers around the clock outside the warehouse in view of Amazon’s security camera and supervisors. The time for timidity and underground organizing had come to an end.

The showdown was on.

ORGANIZING AMAZON IS DO-OR-DIE FOR THE TEAMSTERS.

Rosario is one of the key leaders in that effort.

As the Teamsters’ lead Amazon organizer for the Northeast, Rosario is responsible for the New York metro region, a strategic chokepoint that holds a large number of Amazon customers jonesing for speedy delivery. Snarl that supply chain with delays, and Amazon takes a massive loss, the only way to truly get the behemoth’s attention.

Pulling this off would require shutting down the whole expanse to prevent Amazon from simply reshuffling delivery routes—and no single union can do that alone.

But Rosario has taken the first steps with a beachhead of unions and affiliates in New York City, covering between 7,000 and 10,000 workers. At DBK4, all eight DSPs demanded union recognition by the end of September 2024. At the JFK8 warehouse on Staten Island, Rosario was pivotal in convincing the scrappy independent union to join forces with the Teamsters in June 2024.

Rosario brings an education in trade unionism from 27 years driving for UPS, where he participated in the rank-and-file movement Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) and the historic 1997 strike, then the largest private-sector strike in more than a decade.

“My knees are a little creaking from getting in and out of UPS trucks,” Rosario says. “When I first started, the step was really high, and it was through fighting, and workers getting knee surgeries and having problems, that we were able to get UPS to get trucks with lower steps where you actually felt like you were stepping onto a vehicle off the sidewalk, which is a beautiful thing.”

Another beautiful thing workers won: power steering. “If you notice, back in the ’80s and ’90s, most UPS drivers had pretty big arms,” Rosario says, “and that was from turning that damn steering wheel.”

Rosario wants other workers to have the same kind of gains that UPS Teamsters have won, but his fervor for trade unionism runs deeper than that. He often says the labor movement saved his life.

Rosario’s father died when he was 17, and he began hanging out in the streets just as the crack epidemic ravaged working-class neighborhoods. He had run-ins with the law and had watched friends die, as he tells it, and union life showed him another way, the Teamsters’ horse-and-wheel logo as the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. He wants the Teamsters to provide the same alternative for young Amazon workers coming off the streets now.

Sometimes Rosario's passion gets the better of him. Before hitting the road in 2019 to chase down organizing leads among Amazon workers, Rosario and other Teamsters organizers were trained not to sell the union. "We have two ears and one mouth": Talk less, listen more, he says.

But that wasn't always how things played out.

He recalls going up to an Amazon worker at a Long Island deli in 2019 and asking how the company treated him. When the worker said Amazon was treating him well, Rosario gave a quizzical look and launched into a pitch about the UPS Teamsters' benefits and wages. The worker was unmoved; Rosario doubled down; ultimately, they ended up in "a screaming match."

Not his most shining moment, he acknowledges. But his tough-love approach hearkened back to how the Teamsters educated him when he was new on the job in 1994. When he complained about paying a \$50 union initiation fee, he was schooled on the spot about the power that comes with workers funding their own organization.

Three years later, in 1997, when strike talk was growing, Rosario was taking care of his mom, who had a mortgage. He floated an idea to his coworkers: "'Would it be a problem if I kept working if you guys strike?' And they were looking at me like I was fucking crazy. 'What, are you gonna be a scab? ... Don't ever do it. It's the lowest form of life.'"

Another told him, "You think you're the only one who's worried? You're talking about your mom. I got kids, bro."

It was a blunt, necessary lesson, he says now: "This is how you fucking learn how to be a union person."

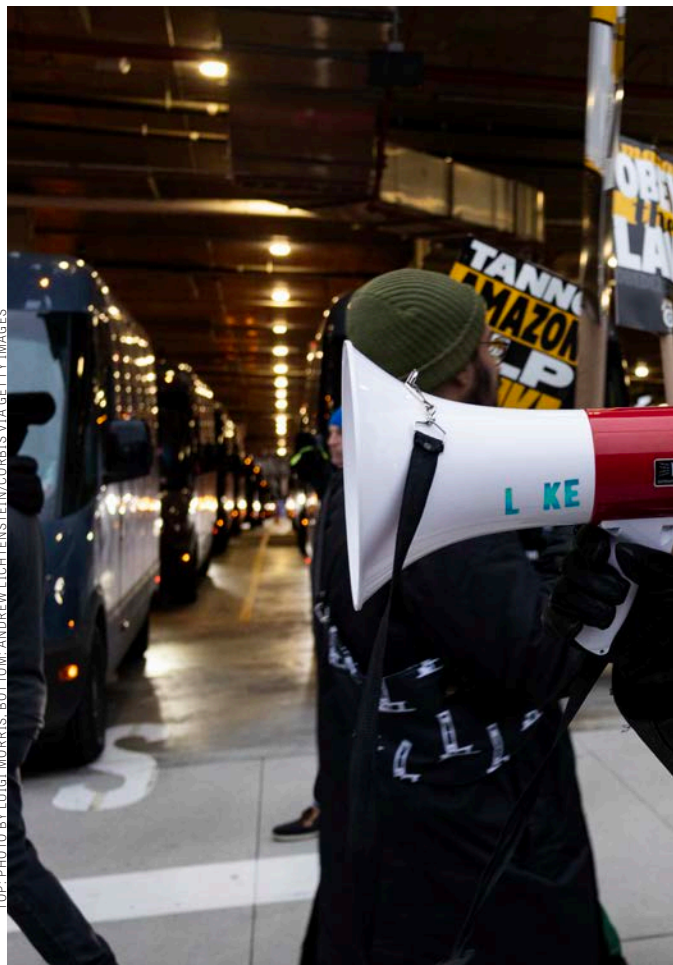
When 185,000 UPS Teamsters went on strike that year, Rosario joined the picket lines and soon learned how powerful strikes can be. Not only did UPS lose \$780 million, but managers who were suddenly tasked with delivering packages themselves (and failed miserably) were taught a lesson.

More than anything, Rosario learned about the unique "camaraderie on the picket line" as people risked everything to keep big corporations from turning stable jobs into throwaway gigs. Against that dehumanizing race to the bottom, Rosario saw genuine human bonds forged, the kind "you don't see happen often."

But the hard lessons Rosario learned then are harder to come by now. With union density at historic lows and contract terms longer than the customary three years, fewer workers than ever get to experience what it means to strike, much less what it means to be part of a militant, fighting working class.

The value of a union is so self-evident to Rosario—after all, it saved his life—that, when he talked with the Amazon worker at the deli, he had trouble grasping their perspective. "You can't just come in off a union job and expect people are going to want or need all the things that you have," he says in retrospect. "They have different needs."

Not only did Rosario have to start from scratch to raise consciousness; he also had to come to grips with how Amazon's workload



TOP: PHOTO BY LUIGI MORRIS. BOTTOM: ANDREW LICHTENSTEIN/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Above: A Labor Organizer of the Year, Antonio Rosario talks strategy with workers on the Maspeth, Queens picket line in freezing weather last December as Amazon workers struck the logistics giant nationwide. *Right:* At the picket line in Queens, Rosario keeps the energy up as workers march around the entrance to Amazon's DBK4 delivery station in Maspeth.



shapes workers' priorities. Many workers told him they valued the flexibility of Amazon's "voluntary time off," which lets them clock out early with a pay hit. That concept was anathema to a UPS Teamster used to guaranteed paid time off. Such on-demand employment is a live wire as high-tech companies like Amazon seek to gigify employment relations.

Rosario was shocked, too, when he learned Amazon workers gave up breaks to meet quotas: "We can't have a workforce that doesn't take breaks!" But he learned break time often came at 1 p.m., shortly after workers clocked in; their days stretched to 11 p.m., and they didn't want to risk staying later.

Even if the people he's organizing with aren't much different from the young knucklehead who joined the Teamsters at 20, Rosario has come to understand they are living a different moment. He's reconciled himself to the fact future union contracts will probably keep voluntary time off, and he's considering how longer, more flexible break windows might work as a demand.



THE 1997 UPS STRIKE WAS A TURNING POINT IN Rosario's life. He joined UPS two years after his father's death, to help his mother avoid foreclosure. By 23, he was working two split shift part-time jobs.

Part-timers earned as little as \$8 an hour, and they accounted for 83% of the 46,300 workers UPS had hired since 1993. The union saw the writing on the wall: "It wasn't going to be long before a decisive majority of workers at the company were going to be working these part-time, throwaway jobs, and it's not a big step from there to weakening, if not breaking, the union," recalls TDU staff director David Levin, who worked for the International at the time.

The union saw its first democratically elected reform leadership back in 1991. An honest reformer, President Ron Carey buffed away the patina of mob corruption from the Jimmy Hoffa era. He slashed his salary from \$225,000 to \$150,000 and got rid of the union's private jets. He also led the UPS Teamsters on a historic strike.

"Part-Time America Won't Work" was the rallying cry. The strike became not just an effort to stop the slide into a contingent workforce, Levin says, but to make that cause universal for the entire working class.

Rosario was featured in the union's newsletter. Next to a photo of a young, muscled Rosario in a black T-shirt, his quote reads: "I am a perfect example of what this strike was all about. I work almost 35 hours a week as an air driver and preloader, but I get paid part-time wages."

The strike was victorious: wage and pension increases, and the conversion of 20,000 part-time jobs into 10,000 full-time careers, Rosario's among them.

Today, it's Amazon that's driving down standards, having surpassed UPS in drivers and parcel delivery volume. The 390,000 drivers at Amazon's DSPs receive no benefits and their starting salaries range from roughly \$16 to \$23 an hour, while UPS drivers start at \$21 with benefits, a pension and guaranteed raises up to \$45. They load upward of 400 packages into their vans per shift, compared with 175 for UPS drivers. Turnover at Amazon warehouses is about 150%, part of a business strategy to prevent a "march to mediocrity."



EVEN IF THE PEOPLE HE'S ORGANIZING WITH AREN'T MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THE YOUNG KNUCKLEHEAD WHO JOINED THE TEAMSTERS AT 20, ROSARIO HAS COME TO UNDERSTAND THEY ARE LIVING A DIFFERENT MOMENT.

Rosario returned to the picket line in 2024, just six days before Christmas, when drivers and warehouse workers struck Amazon. It was a small test intended to mobilize eight facilities and try out picket line extensions nationwide, part of a bigger effort to force Amazon to negotiate with 10,000 workers who had demanded voluntary recognition or won an election.

Hundreds of workers participated; among the most active picket line was DBK4 in Queens.

"It's really poetic justice," Levin says of Rosario, "that he is now one of the activists in the union who's championing taking on the same destructive forces—this time, at Amazon, where they're gunning for jobs in the logistics industry, which have been good, full-time jobs that you could raise a family on, and creating low-wage, throwaway, high-turnover jobs."

WHEN I ASKED PEOPLE TO GIVE ME SOME DIRT, Kioma Forero, a package car driver and Teamsters 804 steward, answers: "What you hear about him is not a lie. What you hear is exactly who he is."

"If I were to look up New York Teamster in the dictionary, I would absolutely expect a picture of Tony Rosario to pop up," says Bryan Trafford, a Teamsters Local 89 member working on the Amazon drive.

Rosario is stocky, with a closely cropped haircut and a Teamsters bomber jacket. But it's not just the look, Trafford says. It's his militant ethos: "We stand up to the company. We enforce the contract. ... Never cross a picket line."

That last one proved to be a challenge during the pre-holiday strike. Rosario had formed a bond with a worker over their shared Puerto Rican background and hardscrabble lives. After grueling shifts where he slung more than 400 packages in 130 stops, the worker would call up Rosario to go to the park and work out.

Several days into the strike, the worker crossed the picket line.

When Rosario heard the news, he thought, "This can't be." He texted the worker. "He's like, 'Nah, I just came inside to grab something. I'll be right out.'"

But the worker drove out behind the wheel of a DSP van.

As strike marshal, Rosario was letting groups of trucks through, but when the worker's truck came up, Rosario led the marchers up to block it. "I'm looking at him through his window, and I'm asking him, 'Why, man?'"

Eventually, the worker pulled over, and Rosario tore into him: Whatever the bosses are telling you, they're not going to be there for you once the strike is over, he said to no avail.

"I remember being on the side in tears, just looking off," Rosario says. "And I got all these people owning the picket line, and here I am hurting about one person."

Another organizer, Cody Eaton, had to remind him: "For every one they take from us, we'll bring 10 more," Rosario says. "And he snapped me out, and I was right back."

IRA POLLOCK, A WAREHOUSE WORKER AT DBK4, remembers how Rosario's Teamster rhapsodizing rubbed the wrong way for committed socialists—like Pollock—who had taken jobs at Amazon to build an independent union.

As a UPS driver in Seattle, Pollock had been angered by a concessionary contract in 2018, and again when his Teamsters local came out against two progressive tax laws to help deal with the housing and climate crises. He decided to "salt" at Amazon to create an alternative to the existing labor movement, and helped build the independent Amazonians United union.

"And then Tony comes, and he's like, the Teamsters are great; UPS has an excellent contract," Pollock says.

But once Rosario started getting to know the workers and their hardships, he changed his approach. "I had to get down to the nitty gritty," Rosario says. "And that's when it changed." Workers started talking about times they were bit by dogs, twisted ankles, firings without cause during pregnancy. "It became something where it wasn't just about saving Teamsters jobs anymore—it was genuinely wanting to help these workers have a better life."

Pollock saw the change in Rosario. "Now anytime the issue of what to fight for comes up, it's not 'here's what the UPS contract says'; it's 'what do you think we should fight for? How are we going to get this together?'"

The political motivation of socialist salts like Pollock has led them to play an outside role in an Amazon movement still in its infancy. Rosario joined Democratic Socialists of America in 2021. He admits he felt a little out of place in his first meetings, but the more concrete discussion was about how to fight for working people, the more he felt at home. "The things that I was listening to people talk about were things I care about—people having problems with their rent and trying to bring tenant unions together."



ORGANIZING AMAZON HAS RUN UP AGAINST

President Donald Trump’s attacks on immigrants and Teamsters President Sean O’Brien’s attempts to curry favor with the Trump administration. Rosario, who is co-chair of TDU, was tightlipped and circumspect about the politics of the International, but he beamed about how the Teamsters Joint Council 16—covering New York and Puerto Rico, representing 26 locals—reaffirmed its 2017 support for union sanctuary to immigrant members.

That’s important for the labor movement, and even more so at Amazon, which has a heavily immigrant workforce. Todd Lyons, acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, has stunningly said the government should treat rounding up immigrants with a deportation process “like [Amazon] Prime, but with human beings.”

“They just want to segregate us,” Rosario says. “They want to keep us apart. But we got to find ways to find commonalities and bring people together.”

As we drive to Flushing, Queens, to meet up with Amazon workers one night in March, Rosario keeps his eyes on the road, his iPhone tucked into the center console, shooting an occasional sideways glance toward me. You can almost see the careful driver and relational organizer come together. Wending his way through neighborhood stop signs in Queens, he flashes a big smile, telling me about his dad.

Like the Amazon drivers Rosario is organizing, his father worked as a third-party subcontractor, driving a Chevy van for a company called Courier Systems. “Don’t smoke crack,” Rosario recalls his father joking. “Buy a Chevy; smoke a Ford”—a tip on what car will win a drag race.

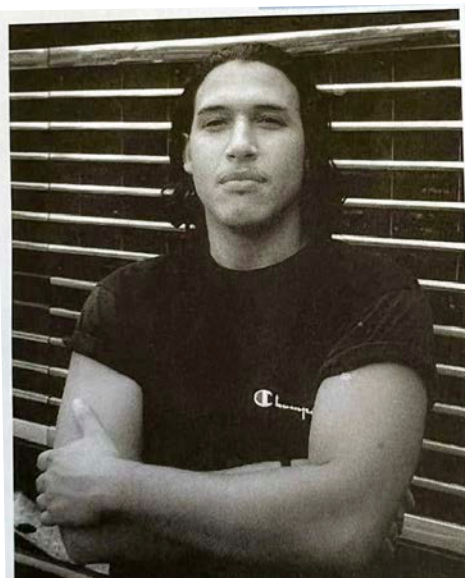
At 50, Rosario has no aspirations to race cars, but he’s driving a Chevy Traverse as we head to a Flushing Dunkin’, where he and other Teamster organizers meet with a dozen drivers straggling in from Amazon or one of the other jobs they work to make ends meet.

Not all of them work for Amazon anymore. According to the Teamsters, more than 50 workers at DBK4 were fired and blacklisted from any future job in the subcontracting network, in what the union alleges was a fierce retaliation campaign by Amazon. (Amazon denies the charges.)

The fact that they are sticking around, even after many lost jobs, speaks to the bonds Rosario has formed.

Basil Darling, a 17-year Teamster Local 804 member working on the Amazon campaign, recalls a time

Right: A young Rosario was featured in the Teamsters’ newsletter after the 185,000-strong UPS strike in 1997. His quote read, “I am a perfect example of what this strike was all about.”



when a worker involved in an underground drive was fired and stopped participating. While another organizer might have moved on, Rosario kept following up to make sure the worker was alright. For Rosario, Darling says, it’s always personal: “‘This is my guy. I don’t care if you got fired or not, I want to make sure you’re good.’” Around the same time, Darling continues, another Amazon worker’s brother was killed; Rosario made sure people in the organizing division knew there was no shame in grieving and told the worker, when the time was right, they could talk.

It was part of the “each one, teach one” union culture they’ve built under Rosario’s watch—meaning that workers have responsibility to look out for those coming in. Those are the same lessons Rosario learned when he first started at UPS, as old-timers taught him how to stay hydrated on the road, buy the right winter boots, stay cool in scorching heat (a wet rag over the neck) and even prevent chafing (baby powder with vitamin E and aloe).

During the December Amazon strike, Rosario was brought back to those days and what they taught him about camaraderie in union life. “We were all huddled around a little propane heater, and we were fucking heating the pizza on the propane,” he says. “And I looked at them and I said, ‘This is it, guys. These are moments that you guys are gonna remember forever.’”

“He’s a very savvy organizer, but he’s also just a warm and charismatic person, and he leads from his heart,” Levin says. “I think he’s both managed to teach people a lot of practical organizing skills, but through the power of his own example, he’s taught people that being a Teamster is a lot more than filing grievances. It’s really about putting yourself on the line, on picket lines, and organizing drives by practicing solidarity.”

When workers struck Amazon last December, police arrested Rosario on the picket line along with striking worker Jogernsyn Cardenas, then threatened mass arrests before breaking the line to allow vans through. After he was released, Rosario made a defiant speech, flanked by striking workers. “They’re violating not only our First Amendment rights, but they’re violating all the workers’ rights on this picket line,” he said. But “they’re not going to stop what’s happening here, because these workers are not going to back down to Amazon’s greedy billionaire status.”

During the arrest, when police tried to force Rosario’s head down into the van, he shouted, “Who are we?” The line roared back: “Teamsters!” ■

LUIS FELIZ LEON is an associate editor and organizer at *Labor Notes*.



BY MAURIZIO GUERRERO

BRAVING A CAMPAIGN OF TERROR: ANONYMOUS

IN A SOUTHERN, REPUBLICAN STATE, AGAINST INCREDIBLE ODDS, AN INDIGENOUS IMMIGRANT MANAGED TO ORGANIZE HER COWORKERS—MOST OF WHOM WERE, LIKE HERSELF, UNDOCUMENTED—AND OBTAIN LEGAL PROTECTIONS AGAINST LIFE-THREATENING WORKING CONDITIONS IN A NOTORIOUSLY EXPLOITATIVE INDUSTRY.

She's one of the recipients of our Labor Organizer of the Year awards, and her story is compelling—but with so many unknowns right now regarding how far Immigration and Customs Enforcement will go to target someone, we can't share details without putting her at risk. Despite having obtained a legally protected status, she decided she could not accept the award publicly and has requested to remain anonymous.

For now, she has quit organizing and is lying low, in fear of retribution and deportation.

Hers is a case study in how the Trump administration's detention and deportation practices are terrorizing immigrants and dampening their willingness to organize, protest and demand better working conditions.



“WE’RE SEEING VERY LITTLE ACTIVITY with immigrant workers right now to empower themselves the way they could under the previous administration,” says Lorena Gonzalez, president of the California Federation of Labor Unions, composed of 1,300 unions representing 2.3 million workers across multiple industries. **“Immigrants are just very afraid.”**

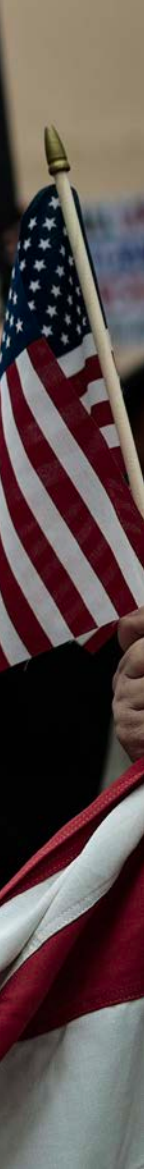
The terror campaign constitutes not only an attack on immigrants, but on the entire working class, impacting the labor rights and conditions of citizens and noncitizens alike. Any worker should be concerned about a class that, by virtue of living under paralyzing fear, is prevented from asserting its rights, says Xóchitl Bada, professor of Latin American and Latino studies at the University of Illinois, Chicago, and vice president of the faculty union. The situation both erodes the rights of everybody, she explains, and will trigger a race-to-the-bottom competition among low-wage, precarious workers.

In its first two months, the Trump administration—which pledged to conduct the largest mass deportation in history—expelled more than 200 Venezuelans

to an infamously brutal prison in El Salvador without due process, revoked hundreds of student visas, and abducted legal residents for expressing support for Palestine. It has also detained and repatriated immigrants who had lawful immigration documents. The administration has also threatened to punish attorneys who defend noncitizens in court.

Prominent immigrant labor organizers have also been targeted. On March 17, ICE agents in Colorado detained Mexico-born Jeanette Vizguerra, a labor activist for Local 105 of the Service Employees International Union and an immigrant

Above: Faith groups and immigrant rights organizations rally in downtown Los Angeles on March 1 in protest of the Trump administration’s immigration policy.



rights advocate, “for her community organizing and critiques of the deportation system,” according to a letter signed by more than 200 labor and immigrant rights organizations and allies.

On March 25, Mexico-born Alfredo “Lelo” Juarez, cofounder of Familias Unidas por la Justicia—an Indigenous farmworkers union in Washington state—was violently arrested during a traffic stop.

Rank-and-file workers have also been targeted. On April 2, about 50 masked ICE agents arrested 37 roofers in Washington state. ICE also arrested 16 workers at a concrete factory in Mississippi and nine at a mill in New York state.

The mass deportation pledged by President Donald Trump has not yet been carried out, but arrests of immigrants rose sharply in the four weeks after Inauguration Day, according to ICE records from the Deportation Data Project. Detentions in ICE centers increased 22% in the first two months of the administration, reaching 47,892 individuals.

The power of protection

For Teresa, who has lived in the United States for 25 years, this administration “looks terrifying, looks like a monster above us.”

Identified only by her first name to protect her from potential retaliation, Teresa—an El Salvador-born member of SEIU Local 32BJ who works at a cleaning company in Boston—is under Temporary Protected Status. She has publicly

advocated for the program’s extension for all of the approximately 860,000 people, from more than a dozen countries, under its protection.

As an immigrant, “It’s not easy to go with a banner leading a demonstration, because it comes to mind that anything can happen,” Teresa explains. Still, she is convinced it’s key to demand protected rights for as many workers as possible, even through temporary programs. “We’re between a rock and a hard place,” she adds. “But if we don’t try to fight now, tomorrow we may regret it.”

In 2023, pressured by immigrant rights organizations during the Biden administration, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) approved a program to provide temporary protection from deportation to workers who report workplace abuse. A worker filing a complaint through, for example, the National Labor Relations Board, could receive a two-year work permit—four years after July 2024—to allow labor agencies to investigate the alleged wrongdoing. The program is known as Deferred Action for Labor Enforcement, or DALE.

“DALE was huge for organizing,” says Alberto Barraza, director of organizing of the Painters District Council 14

in Chicago. “It gave people a voice.” The program aimed to prevent unscrupulous employers from intimidating undocumented laborers into silence with the threat of reporting them to immigration authorities.

Although the exact figure is unclear, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services confirmed to *In These Times* that the last report issued on the program was in October 2024, when 7,700 workers had benefited from DALE.

Now, the Trump administration has thrown those protections up in the air. DALE has not officially shut down, but immigrant rights organizations are urging workers not to apply. It would “be extremely risky,” they say, because applying reveals their undocumented status. Many who were awarded DALE are currently living in fear, as they self-reported information that could lead to their deportation.

“It just makes organizing a lot harder,” Barraza says. Consequently, he expects a significant increase in the main scourge of immigrant workers—wage theft.

Industries with large percentages of foreign-born workers—like the cut-and-sew garment industry, agriculture, building maintenance, hotel work, food services, construction, nursing homes, warehouses and car washes—have high rates of wage theft. Employers routinely pay below the minimum wage and deny overtime pay; if workers complain, they’re intimidated with threats of deportation.

The race to the bottom

Stephen Miller, deputy chief of staff for policy in the Trump administration, has claimed that deported workers would be replaced by U.S. citizens, “who will now be offered higher wages with better benefits to fill these jobs.” Vice President JD Vance has made similar arguments.

But the opposite is happening.

Florida, one of the most stringent anti-immigrant states in the country, is a prime example. Florida seems to be loosening its child labor laws, says Roxana Rivera, assistant to the president of Local 32BJ, “to make up for the potential loss of immigrant workers.” In March, the state’s legislature proposed a bill, endorsed by Gov. Ron DeSantis, to allow 14-year-olds to work unlimited hours and days, without breaks and during the school year.

Florida is not only considering supplementing its exploitable labor force with children. It is also the leading recruiter of H-2A guest agricultural workers—47,396 in the fiscal year 2024.

The agricultural industry as a whole has increasingly relied on guest laborers under the H-2A visa program. Unscrupulous employers favor the H-2A visa program, long called a modern form of indentured servitude, as they effectively own workers’ visas, according to United Farm Workers President Teresa Romero. H-2A workers are legally bound to a single employer who can block them from future employment—sometimes after they denounce abuse.

A 2023 investigation led by Prism found the program “rife with wage theft and exploitation,” resembling more of a human trafficking scheme than a labor initiative. Documents obtained by Prism in 2021 reveal \$7.2 million in unpaid wages owed to thousands of H-2A workers over the previous decade. Discrimination, sexual harassment and health and safety violations are also common, as well as “a startling lack of recourse for workers,” according to another study.

It’s not uncommon that H-2A visa holders flee the farms that recruit them to toil elsewhere as undocumented laborers, Bada notes. “Oftentimes, those conditions are better than the conditions offered by the legal guest worker programs,” she says.

In 2024, the Labor Department certified 384,900 H-2A visas, the vast majority from Mexico. In the first quarter of 2025, the Labor Department received nearly 20% more applications for H-2A visas compared with the previous quarter. The department has no limits on the number of H-2A visas it issues annually—usually valid for 10 months.

To counter the widespread abuse of guest workers, civil society organizations pressured the Labor Department to publish, in April 2024, a regulation that protected the rights of H-2A workers to organize. Several industry organizations and at least 17 states pushed back, filing four lawsuits

to block these protections, which the current administration is unlikely to enforce regardless. “It’s tougher to organize workers who are here on a work visa,” Gonzalez says, as “they are in a very vulnerable position.” Guest workers have even been used inappropriately to displace U.S. farmworkers and circumvent basic labor protections, she adds.

Take the case of Sakuma Brothers Farms, in Washington state, which recruited H-2A workers amid a labor dispute with its U.S. workforce. “It’s what corporate America does—burn through workers in the cheapest way possible,” Gonzalez explains.

Agribusinesses are not the only ones benefiting from vulnerable laborers. The H-2B visa program is used by hospitality and tourism, landscaping, construction, forestry and seafood processing, industries with “extensive wage theft and lawbreaking by employers,” according to the Economic Policy Institute. The number of these visas are also set to increase in 2025.

“You have already seen the consequences [of the anti-immigrant policies] in Florida,” Bada says. Mass deportations are not going to bring better jobs, she adds. On the contrary, increasing the number of vulnerable H-2 guest workers and children in the workplace will only intensify the quest of employers for the cheapest and easiest labor to exploit.



Labor fights back

On March 24, Chicago teachers rallied on the Near West Side to demand a fair contract, after more than 11 months of bargaining. Chicago firefighters, who have gone without a new contract for nearly four years, were also protesting.

Alejandra, a Mexico-born member of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), planned to participate—but ultimately decided not to, afraid of the consequences as a noncitizen.

“I would have liked to show solidarity with the movement,” says Alejandra—who agreed to be interviewed on the condition of being identified only by her first name—“but right now, I don’t think that’s very prudent.” Alejandra arrived in Chicago in 2008 and has a green card. Still, the Trump administration has targeted even permanent residents for deportation, and Alejandra doesn’t want to take any chances.

Alejandra’s apprehension comes as some immigrant students across the country who are sympathetic to Palestine have been detained for political speech. Many other immigrants, including college students who apparently have been racially profiled, have been targeted for no apparent reason. In the face of the Trump administration’s current war on immigrants, she concedes: “I’m afraid.”

The labor movement is fighting back.

In 2019 CTU fought for and won contract language aimed at protecting members, students and their families who could be targeted because of their immigration status. And on April 14, CTU ratified a new contract that maintains these protections. The union also holds regular know-your-rights trainings for employees, parents and other community members.

On April 1, more than 100 protesters, including members of Local 32BJ, protested in Boston against the targeting of immigrant students and faculty with pro-Palestinian sentiments. Union members also rallied outside 10 ICE detention centers across the country. Local 32BJ is also a plaintiff in a lawsuit challenging the decision to cut short the Temporary Protected Status program for Haitians, which would expose 200,000 workers to deportation in August.

In Tacoma, Wash., hundreds of people, led by the AFL-CIO, protested outside an ICE center for the release of Juarez and another union member, Lewelyn Dixon. Four days later, on March 31—Cesar Chavez Day—thousands of United Farm Workers and members of SEIU California State Council and the California Federation of Labor Unions rallied in Delano to denounce “mass deportation policies as an attack on the entire working class.”

Organizers say it was the largest mobilization of union workers on behalf of immigrant rights since Trump’s election. “We want to make sure that people aren’t in the shadows,

“It’s very clear that Trump’s disdain for differences doesn’t only impact immigrants. It threatens so many other vulnerable groups. I think we have an opportunity right now to actually play the role of helping to unite folks.”

that they’re able to work and organize like anyone else into a union,” Gonzalez says. She adds that it’s essential because it “puts everybody on an even playing field—that’s what helps even non-immigrant workers.”

The displays of labor solidarity may only be starting. On April 7, more than two dozen labor organizations—the American Association of University Professors, the Association of Flight Attendants, the American Postal Workers Union, National Nurses United, the National Writers Union, the United Auto Workers and SEIU, among others—published a petition urging the administration to immediately release immigrant workers, while calling on unions “to organize rallies, demonstrations and other actions” to demand an end to the detention and deportation campaign.

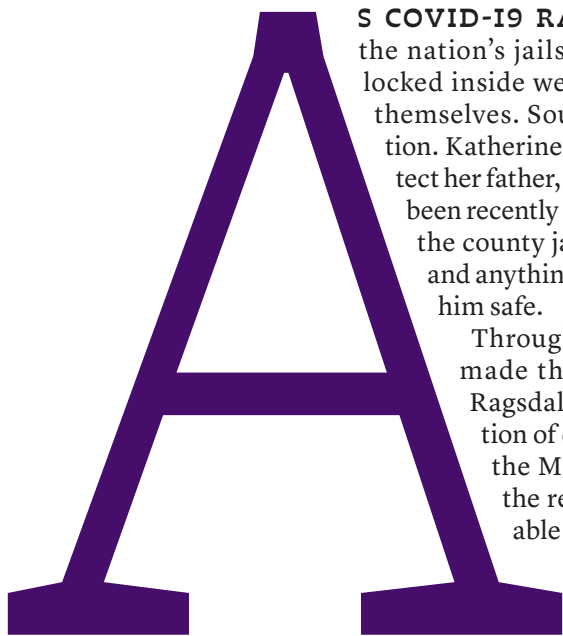
“Trump has been very blatant about pitting working people against each other,” Rivera says. “Not just immigrants, but women and students and the elderly and people of color. But unions have, in the past, made strides to build solidarity across races, across ethnicities.”

By rallying alongside immigrants, Rivera says, the labor movement can play a special role in demanding labor protections. “It’s very clear that Trump’s disdain for differences doesn’t only impact immigrants. It threatens so many other vulnerable groups. I think we have an opportunity right now to actually play the role of helping to unite folks.” ■

MAURIZIO GUERRERO is a journalist based in New York City. He covers migration, social justice movements and Latin America.

Left: United Service Workers West, United Farm Workers and allies march for immigrant rights in Delano, Calif., on March 31, otherwise known as Cesar Chavez Day.

BUILDING BRIDGES AND ERASING JAIL DEBT: KATHERINE PASSLEY



S COVID-19 RAMPAGED THROUGH the nation's jails and prisons, the people locked inside were largely left to fend for themselves. South Florida was no exception. Katherine Passley was frantic to protect her father, who was in his 50s and had been recently arrested. She advocated for the county jail to provide masks, soap and anything she could think of to keep him safe.

Through that work, Passley also made the acquaintance of Maya Ragsdale, a lawyer who led a coalition of civil rights groups in suing the Miami-Dade jail system for the release of medically vulnerable prisoners.

"The lawsuit ended up not winning, which is crazy to me, but [Ragsdale] was just like,

'Well, lawsuits aren't the only way to change things,'" Passley says. "So I said, 'OK, let's start meeting.'" Ragsdale linked Passley with other women trying to protect their own relatives behind bars, as well as two formerly incarcerated people. "And so us eight started meeting on Zoom on Thursdays," Passley says. "We went from eight to 15, then it was 20—and then we were writing our demands."

Those demands led to the creation of Beyond the Bars, where Passley and Ragsdale now serve as co-executive directors. Starting with a campaign to make phone calls free (after Covid shut down visiting hours), the group eventually convinced the Miami-Dade County commission to wipe out \$10 million in jail fees and more than \$100 million in jail debt,

alleviating a major financial burden for an estimated 60,000 formerly incarcerated workers and their families.

Beyond the Bars is a member-led worker center for people with criminal records and their families—the first organization of its kind in the country. A current focus is teaching temp workers impacted by the criminal justice system how to advocate for themselves and improve their working conditions. "Traditionally, criminalized workers have been deemed 'unorganizable,' trapped in extreme precarity, many with average annual incomes of less than \$10,000, and subjected to background checks and employer discrimination that relegate them to the lowest rungs of the labor market," explains Richard Wallace, founder and director of the Chicago-based nonprofit Equity and Transformation, which organizes Black informal workers. "Katherine is determined to shatter this false narrative, proving that these workers are not only organizable—they are essential leaders in the labor movement."

Right: Katherine Passley is one recipient of our inaugural Labor Organizer of the Year award for her work with Beyond the Bars in South Florida.





AT THE HEADQUARTERS OF BEYOND THE BARS

in Miami, about four dozen people listened as a tall young Afro-Latina woman with a crown of shiny black hair translated in rapid Spanish for a Black man named Terrence. “[There] should be more jobs that go from temp to permanent,” Terrence said, drawing “yeahs” and “mmhms.” The translator—Passley—radiated warmth, pausing frequently to crack jokes or flash an encouraging smile to latecomers.

It was a meeting of the organization’s temporary workers’ organizing committee. “Temp work is one of these really insidious ways of giving people labor when they have a record,” Passley explains. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, six out of 10 people with felony convictions are unable to secure employment within four years of their release. Many formerly incarcerated people end up turning to temp agencies, and employers are well aware of how easy it is to exploit those with few options.

Corporations hire formerly incarcerated workers through temp agencies to avoid taking on liability, Passley explains. “You’re doing the exact same thing as a worker that’s hired there permanently, but you can’t be hired permanently just because you have a record.” Once the temp agency takes its cut, “You’re making a lot less money.”

Beyond the Bars began running a daily door-knocking operation to reach temp workers this year. Miami-Dade publicly posts a staggering amount of personal information on every person released from jail, including phone numbers and addresses, so Passley and her team visit everyone released to let them know they’re on this public list, identify whether they’re a temp worker and then invite them to a meeting. People tend to be less than delighted to find out that their personal information has been made so public, but Passley explains it works as “a point of agitation for us, because we’re like, ‘Well, you could do something about it’ by joining Beyond the Bars.”

That’s how Terrence and the other attendees ended up in that conference room. As Terrence spoke, an energetic toddler nicknamed Princess chased a friend around, her chubby cheeks breaking into a joyful grin. The meeting was just getting started and already everyone had been given a free plate of tasty Cuban food, dropped off their kids in the childcare room (watched by Passley’s mother), viewed a presentation from a labor lawyer and joined an icebreaker with their seatmates. Miami is a predominantly Spanish-speaking city and attendees relaxed once it became clear the meeting was fully bilingual.

Passley and Ragsdale were nominally in charge, but the tightly knit Beyond the Bars crew shared every task, from dishing up rice and beans to handing out worksheets to scooping up Princess if she veered too far outside safety. According to Passley, that familial vibe is no accident.

“It’s at the core of what it means for us to organize,” explains Passley, who grew up in an Afro-Dominican household



in North Miami. “If you speak Spanish, if you speak Creole, we have that for you; the materials are also in all of those languages. If you need it, we’re gonna have childcare. We’re gonna have food. Sometimes that’s the only place that folks can get a good, decent meal. These organizers are our brothers or sisters or cousins, folks that are directly impacted, people that are coming out, people that just want to see their communities be better.”

Like Passley, all of Beyond the Bars’ eight staffers have had family inside or were incarcerated themselves, and all initially became involved in the organization as members. Among them is Freddy Pierre, a formerly incarcerated, formerly super-shy Beyond the Bars community organizer whose brilliant smile and infectious energy lit up the room. As Passley and Ragsdale walked through a Know Your Rights training, Pierre kept an eye on Princess and the elders and newcomers, offering encouragement and a chair.

For Passley, who spent four years working with victims at the state’s attorney’s office, identifying with people on the other side was a shift. As a field paralegal on the domestic violence task force, she had been focused on the needs of survivors. “Every single time I went to a person’s house, they’d

Above: Katherine Passley (right) gets ready for daily doorknocking with Beyond the Bars members on April 3. Right: Passley shares a quick hug with a Beyond the Bars member after a long day of visiting and advocating for formerly incarcerated temp workers.

PHOTO BY MELODY TIMOTHEE



Beyond the Bars was founded from a place of deep personal connection, love and fear for those on the inside, which guided the first campaign.





be like, ‘Yes, this crime was committed, but I don’t want this person to go to jail,’” she recalls. “Even though I’m like, ‘Yo, what they did was F’d up, and you need help,’ they’d say, ‘Yeah, but they also need help.’”

It was challenging for Passley to understand, but that perspective changed after her father’s arrest. “I think I really had to make that shift within myself, where it was like, ‘OK, yeah, people are getting arrested for a million reasons,’” she says. “Some did it, some didn’t, but all of them need help.”

Passley has a bachelor’s in pre-law from Florida Memorial University—the only historically Black college in South Florida—and a master’s in criminal justice from Florida International University (where she’s working toward a Ph.D. in legal psychology). After her stint at the state’s attorney’s office, she worked at a police department as an administrative specialist. But her education in justice really started earlier, thanks to her father and their church, Columns of Fire in Allapattah, where she has served as education and outreach director since 2013.

“Growing up, my dad was really active in helping people, like writing affidavits for people when they were going to immigration court,” Passley explains. “And our church was always really active in the justice system since I was little. They

all spoke Spanish and I was the one in church who spoke English, so even though I was young, nine or 10, I was reading people’s court documents and helping the secretary write things in English. My dad was like, ‘You’re gonna be a judge, and that stuck with me, so I just studied for a legal career.’”

Beyond the Bars was founded from a place of deep personal connection, love and fear for those on the inside, which guided the first campaign. Thanks to the Miami-Dade County Corrections and Rehabilitation Department’s then-practice of charging 14 cents per minute for a phone call, Passley was regularly paying \$50 a week just to talk to her dad; others were paying hundreds. Anyone who sought to contact a loved one inside—and anyone in lockup who needed to contact their employer, child’s school or lawyer—had to pay. As Covid raged, Beyond the Bars started pressuring the county to change its policy. In 2021, the group won a significant price reduction—from 14 cents to 4 cents a minute. A year later, they won 90 minutes a day of free calls, although rollout has been delayed, Passley explains, by a contentious multiyear restructuring of the jail system. “But we’re not letting up,” she says.

Above: Katherine Passley braves the Miami heat nearly every day to visit temp workers across the city with Beyond the Bars members.

PHOTO BY MELODY TIMOTHEE



BEYOND THE BARS' ULTIMATE GOAL IS TO spread its message and tactics way beyond Miami-Dade. The group has worked closely with the University of Miami, Rutgers University and Harvard Law School to conduct research into the temp work issue for its forthcoming May 2025 report, "Temp Trap: Temporary Jobs, Permanent Struggles for Workers with Criminal Records in South Florida," as well as with Worth Rises' #EndTheException campaign, which highlights the need to close the 13th Amendment's loophole for forced prison labor. Right now, Beyond the Bars is leading a statewide fight to stop HB 6033, which, as Passley explains, would eliminate the few legal protections temp workers have in Florida. They successfully got the bill stalled in committee in April.

"We're building a model for how criminal justice organizations can engage in labor fights, not just theoretically (by reframing reentry through the political economy of incarceration), but also narratively and practically—showing that reentry means demanding dignified work, not just any work, and teaching people how to take on corporate targets and campaign with labor where our stakes are shared," Passley says.

Beyond the Bars also engages with labor organizations, which often "don't understand how community organizing can impact union density [and] don't know how to organize workers with records (especially those under state supervision)," Passley says.

Even in the Miami local of the dockworkers' union—the International Longshoremen's Association, which has a historically Black membership—problems arise, Passley says, as the union doesn't accept members with certain records, which stops some criminalized workers from applying at all. But "you can have a misdemeanor or a low felony and be a dock worker," Passley says. "It's just the way things are explained."

That's why she's trying to work on ways to bridge gaps between the labor and criminal justice movements, build education and make space for her members to thrive. When janitorial staff launched a union drive in the building that houses Beyond the Bars, for example, Passley and her co-workers put together a *cafecito* social to help union organizers with SEIU Local 32BJ get building access.

"Our focus has been heavily on allyship and we need to bring everyone, whether you're Black, brown, Hispanic, a poor white person, all people," she explains. She describes a meeting at which a clash between Latino and Black workers over jobs led the organization to intentionally beef up its political education program. "We had to do a lot of education and narrative work around how we're systemically kept apart, and how the fight is going to take every single one of us," she says. "And the times now call for a mass leadership development of the working class. ... This is a revival of the Rainbow Coalition. We need everyone in this fight."

That's why Passley takes the most pride in watching someone like Freddy Pierre develop as a leader. Pierre joined Beyond the Bars during the early days of the jail phone call campaign. He and his wife, Stacy (now training as an organizer with Beyond the Bars herself), had been burdened with paying Pierre's fines, court fees, child support and other costs upon his release. For them, fighting back alongside other affected people, many of whom Pierre had known inside, felt urgent and necessary. Years later, he now helps other formerly incarcerated folks find their own power—and Passley has been there to offer support every step of the way.

"I think that's what I learned to love about myself," Passley says. "It's allowing other people to shine in space and being able to sit back and see that has been the most rewarding thing for me."

She adds, "That's what I hope people do for my dad when he gets out, that they don't see the record, they just see the power of him as a worker and him as a dad, him as a friend." After all those years of worrying, Passley is finally preparing to welcome her dad home in August. ■

KIM KELLY is a labor journalist for *In These Times* based in Philadelphia and author of *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor*.

STARBUCKS WORKERS UNITED



Left: Starbucks workers around the country—pictured here on strike in Burbank, Calif., Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City in December 2024—demand a collective bargaining agreement for better working conditions.

The union's response was to shut down more than 300 stores in 2024's "strike before Christmas" (though Starbucks claims the number is 170), asking patrons to boycott the coffee shops during the strike in solidarity. Following the strike, Starbucks agreed to enter mediation with the union to try to reach a deal.

In April, workers at a Starbucks store in Sartell, Minn., became the latest to join the union.

—FATIMAH JALLOH

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY OSCAR DUARTE

HONORABLE MENTION: ACADEMIC WORKERS

THE LABOR MOVEMENT IN HIGHER education far predates Trump's attacks. The past decade has seen professors, adjuncts and grad students organizing with more than a dozen unions, including the AAUP, AFSCME, AFT, SEIU, CWA, NEA, UE, the Teamsters and more.

According to a 2024 report from the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions, unionization rates among grad students leapt 133% since 2012 and faculty unions grew 7.5%, with strong new organizing among adjuncts and contingent faculty. And that's before the huge wins of 2024: Organizing by UE culminated in six first contracts covering 18,000 academic workers. At the University of Minnesota, hard-won reforms allowed access to unionization for more than 23,000 workers and opened the door for grad students to win their first collective bargaining agreement.

United Auto Workers Local 4811 reported the University of California used mace, flashbang grenades and rubber bullets against students speaking out against the genocide in Palestine, while also allowing counter-protesters to "physically assault protesters en masse." In response, the union mobilized a two-week strike involving thousands of campus workers, which ended following a judicial injunction.

The fight goes on. A wave of expulsions, suspensions and degree revocations—spurred by the Trump administration—has impacted scholars around the country, including the president of Columbia's grad student union. With federal funding and freedom of speech on the line in 2025, higher education unions are standing against not only their employers, but an increasingly fascist federal government.

—FATIMA JALLOH





53,500
newly unionized
workers in 2024

27
new faculty unions

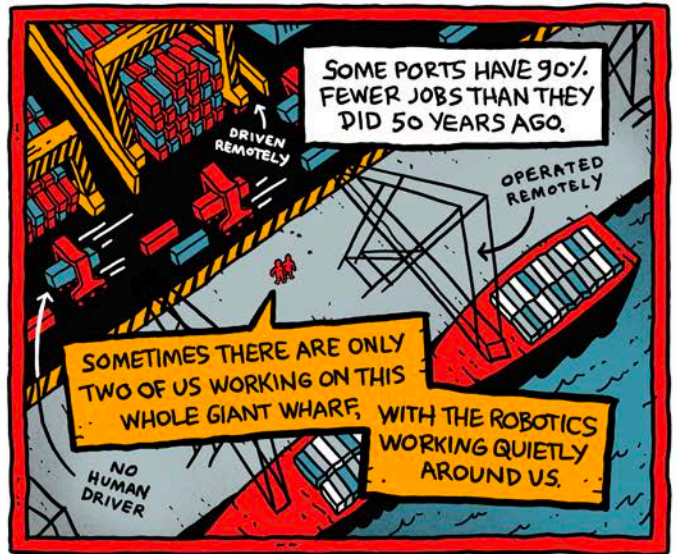
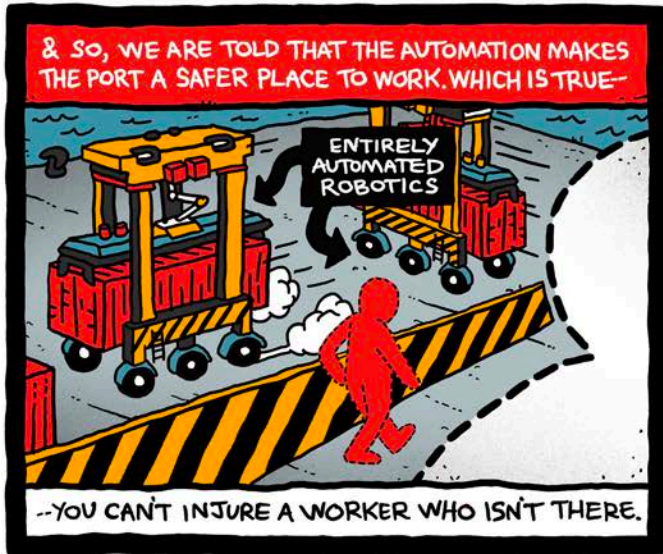
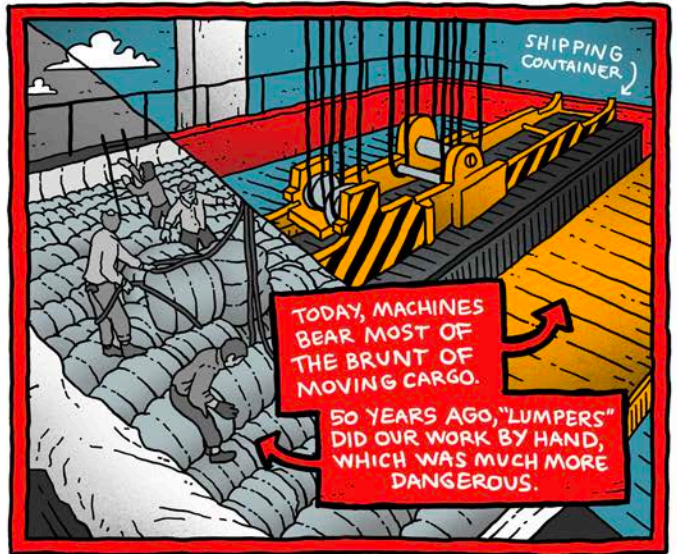
22
new grad student
and postdoc unions

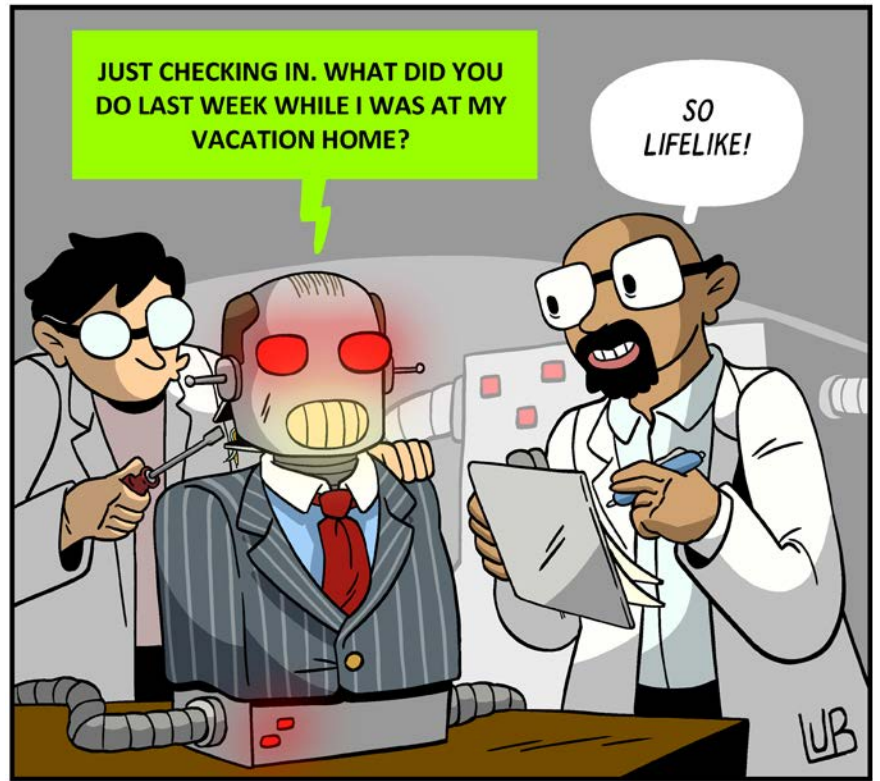
530%
increase in unionized
undergraduates

Left: Academic workers strike for improved learning facilities and conditions—pictured here at Boston University, California State University, the University of California and Indiana University.

FATIMA JALLOH is a poet, freelance journalist and editorial intern at *In These Times* from Jacksonville, Fla., currently based in Chicago. They are studying journalism, Black studies and poetry at Northwestern University.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY OSCAR DUARTE





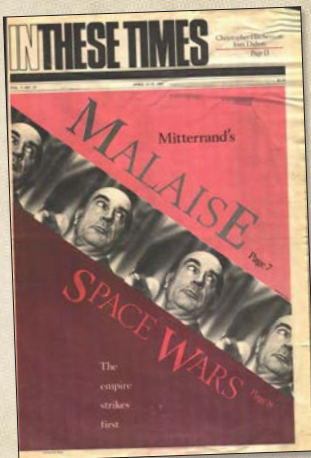
After years of research, Jeremy finally cracks a job AI can *actually* replace.



Arms and L'eggs: Workers Organize Around Job Ailments

In 1983, *In These Times* labor reporter David Moberg investigated the physical toll of industrial labor at Hanes knitwear factories—and the lengths a company would go to ignore that reality. Workers' repetitive strain injuries from working on the line were routinely dismissed, misclassified or hidden so Hanes could avoid accountability. Workers took charge

to organize and expose those dangerous conditions and fight for their health and dignity. Now, as the Trump administration rolls back federal workplace safety rules and weakens the enforcement of Occupational Safety and Health Administration work, this story highlights the importance and continual power of organizing in the workplace.



IN 1983, DAVID MOBERG WROTE: Rose Bennett faithfully came to work at the Rockingham, N.C., factory of Hanes knitwear last December 7, just as she had for the past 12 years. She took her place at the sewing machine, ready to seize L'eggs nylon stockings in one hand, the gusset—or crotch—portion in the other, and sew the pantyhose together. In a normal day she would sew 100 dozen stockings, each with the same grasping and

turning movements of her hands and arms.

On that day the stockings coming down the line were Big Mommas, larger and more difficult than standard pantyhose. For the past year she had contended with a growing weakness in her hands, and in November she had noticed cysts were developing. But there were few other jobs around that could compare with the pay she made if she really pushed herself—up to \$8 an hour.

Suddenly as she was sewing the Big Mommas, her arms became very tired. Then they became paralyzed. “I told my girlfriend I couldn’t move my arms,” she said. “I went to the doctor, and that’s when he said I was probably suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome. I just couldn’t sew anymore.”

Carpal tunnel syndrome—a disabling occupational disorder caused by scarring and swelling damaging the nerve in the central passage, or carpal tunnel,

of the wrist—is only one of a number of ailments lumped together as “repeated trauma disorders.” Tendonitis and bursitis are other examples. All are caused by the repeated stresses of the grasping, turning, twisting and pushing of assembly line work, such as the garment, auto, electronics and other industries.

Although recognized for at least four decades by occupational health experts, unions and workers have only recently focused on these potentially crippling illnesses. “These disorders are as serious to garment workers as roof fall-ins in a coal mine or explosions in a chemical factory,” said Eric Frumin, health and safety director of the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU). “It can do damage that prevents a worker from earning his livelihood.”

Two nuns from the Sisters of the Divine Providence are leading the investigation of tendonitis and related problems at Hanes plants. Sisters Imelda Maurer and Bernie Galvin sought the assignment that led them to Bennettsville in 1981. Bennettsville is a poor town of 9,000 in the center of a region where cotton farming was recently mechanized, driving many people from agricultural work. As Maurer and Galvin made the rounds of homes there, they found many women and men who had been working in the Hanes hosiery factory suffered from similar pains, numbness, weakness, temporary paralysis and swelling in the hands, wrists and arms.

They began to investigate and concluded that Hanes was drastically underreporting the incidence of tendonitis. In the year ending July 3, 1982, Hanes claimed there were only 29 cases among its 18,000 workers. But a survey made by employees of just one-third

of the 6,100 workers in eight southern plants turned up 137 instances of tendonitis-like symptoms. An occupational health specialist, Dr. Peter Orris, reviewed Hanes' Occupational Safety and Health Administration records, which some workers regard as incomplete. On the basis of symptoms reported there, he estimated that it was likely there were at least 150 cases among those 6,100 workers.

The two religious women organized a Citizens Commission on Justice at Hanes that convened on March 21 in Chicago, home of the corporate parent of Hanes, Consolidated Foods Corporation. There Maurer charged that Hanes was involved in a "coverup"—failing to record some cases, using descriptions such as "painful left hand" instead of tendonitis—and that the company was trying to deny workers' compensation for some afflicted workers.

Now they are working with allies from women's groups, labor and others to force Hanes to open itself to investigation by an independent fact-finding commission.

But the campaign has significance beyond improving the lives of Hanes workers and making the public more aware of a new occupational danger. If workers organize themselves to defend their well-being, they may conclude that it is worth remaining organized—in a union.

One of the strongest local workers groups fighting tendonitis is in Galax, Va. ACTWU won a union election at the Galax Hanes plant in 1979, but the National Labor Relations Board overturned the victory on the basis of union leaflets attacking the company's lawyer as a "shyster."

Galax worker Mary Jennings, the sole support of her family, told the Commission how tendonitis affects her. "The pain is so sharp that it can keep me awake all night, just like a toothache. Ordinarily I cook, wash dishes and do other chores. When the pain gets bad, I can't do anything."

When she complained, the company eventually cut the work, but also the pay of Jennings and every other worker in the department. "I guess they thought that this was a good way to discourage workers from reporting tendonitis problems by cutting all their fellow workers a dollar or more an hour."

Maurer says that tendonitis problems are particularly bad at Hanes because the company has pushed the minute division of labor and old principles of "scientific management" to greater extremes than at most comparable factories. When that is combined

If workers organize themselves to defend their well-being, they may conclude that it is worth remaining organized—in a union.

with piecework pay, which starts with a low base of \$4.50 an hour, the chances of developing tendonitis are accentuated.

Consolidated Foods, which bought Hanes in 1979, is a major consumer products company, with a return on investment of 17.3% in the 1982 fiscal year on sales of more than \$6 billion.

Although Hanes officials declined to testify before the Citizens Commission, the corporation flew three top officials and a consultant from the South to be available to answer reporters' questions. Hanes was cited by OSHA in 1980 for using work methods that produced tendonitis, and its own consultant and its insurance company criticized various procedures. Although engineering changes were made, on March 7 the Virginia state OSHA found continuing problems and a need for more engineering changes to meet "the spirit of the agreement."

Robert C. Radcliffe, Hanes vice president for human resources, said the charges by the two nuns and the workers were "unsubstantiated." "If we're doing something improperly, we need to know about it," he said. "We don't challenge the issue that there are things to be addressed. We are in the forefront."

Although Sisters Maurer and Galvin and the campaign for worker health at Hanes have no direct connection with the union, workers' experience in organizing themselves could make them more willing to join ACTWU, which quietly continues to reach workers in the Hanes mills. Now many workers report that they do not mention health problems because they fear losing pay or even their jobs.

"I'm anti-union, but the company has made me pro-union," Rose Bennett said, as she sat with elastic bandages wrapped around her lean black arms. "With this company I think we'll have to have an outsider." ■

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