

Workers Want to Unionize. Will Union Leaders Respond?

BY

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Conditions are ripe for labor's revitalization. So why aren't unions stepping up with massive financial and organizational support for workers' organizing efforts?

The most important labor revival in generations marks its one-year anniversary this month. From the uptick in walkouts last October, to the unionization drives at Amazon, Starbucks, and beyond, labor is finally showing some signs of movement. As barista organizer Jaz Brisack puts it, "Unions are now cool."

But despite the past year of bottom-up unrest, most unions remain stuck in business as usual.

Consider the case of the young workers in Lansing, Michigan who on their own initiative recently unionized the first Chipotle store in the United States. To their surprise, one of the hardest parts of the organizing process was finding an established union willing to let them affiliate: "We reached out to about a dozen different unions and the sad thing is that a lot of them literally never even called us back — and others said they weren't interested in taking us on," one of them told me.

Unfortunately, this experience is not unique. It reflects a real disconnect between organized labor and the 71 percent of the public that supports unions, a fifty-seven-year high.

Trade unions *do* have the resources to reach these workers. According to one recent study, the financial assets of the US labor movement now total a whopping \$35.8 billion, a third of which is "highly liquid." These holdings nearly doubled from 2010 to 2020, a period in which the number of union staffers dropped by 19 percent.

Yet the past year of unrest has not proved sufficient to snap the leaders of most national unions out of their defensive posture. Instead, the AFL-CIO's June 2021 convention set an exceedingly modest goal for growth: a million new members over the

next decade. Achieving this objective would actually result in an overall drop in union density, given projected workforce growth rates.

It is true that banking on new organizing is a risky investment, which is why unions have placed so much emphasis on lobbying for labor law reform. Employees face a broken labor law regime, ruthless opposition from management, and a multimillion-dollar “union avoidance” industry epitomized by the notorious firm Littler Mendelson.

Yet workers are still continuing to take big risks to win a voice at work. Unions should follow their lead.

Conditions are exceptionally ripe for labor’s revival. Zoomers and millennials — radicalized by economic inequality, Bernie Sanders, the pandemic, and Black Lives Matter — have shown themselves to be overwhelmingly pro-union and eager to fight. Their ability to do so at work has been bolstered by conjunctural factors: a tight labor market and a new Biden-appointed National Labor Relations Board that, despite being systematically underfunded, is proactively aiding unionization for the first time in decades.

In the absence of a concerted organizing push from most national labor unions, many workers have begun to take matters into their own hands. Some of these new do-it-yourself efforts have eventually affiliated to a national union; the Lansing Chipotle workers, for example, eventually joined the Teamsters. Other employees have formed entirely new independent unions, as seen at Amazon, Trader Joe’s, Geico, and Home Depot.

This growth in self-organization from below is essential for labor’s revival. But the experience of labor takeoff in the 1930s — when mine worker leader John L. Lewis bet his union’s treasury on organizing the unorganized — suggests that it is not sufficient. Overcoming the most powerful employers in America also requires a major influx of union resources, staff, and strategic coordination.

Fortunately, some unions are starting to seize the moment. Significant nationwide organizing is being done by Workers United (an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union), the NewsGuild, the Communications Workers of America, the Teamsters, and UNITE HERE, among others. Many good initiatives have been taken on a local and statewide level. And the AFL-CIO’s new Center for Transformational Organizing could potentially become an important hub for new organizing.

These are positive developments. But they are the exception rather than the norm. And they are hardly the massive investment needed to fund new nationwide unionization drives and to help DIY efforts scale up.

Bringing intransigent employers to the bargaining table will require not only more resources for organizing, but also more union efforts to challenge Democratic leaders. Though President Biden has taken numerous pro-union steps, he has so far refused to use his bully pulpit, or his ability to withhold federal contracts, against the union-busting wave that is engulfing the United States. Much of this employer intimidation is legal. But some of it is also blatantly against the law, such as Starbucks’s firing of worker organizers and its decision to double down on withholding benefits from unionized stores.

Labor needs a strong ally in Washington to expose and check this employer counteroffensive, which has undercut organizing not only at Starbucks and Amazon, but at other unionizing companies as well. But unions should not expect Biden or Democratic politicians to champion labor’s cause, let alone pass transformational labor law reform, unless they initiate an escalating campaign of agitation, protest, and disruption to oblige the White House and Congress — as well as the public and media — to start treating the systematic suppression of employees’ voices at work as an intolerable national scandal.

Openings for labor movement growth are as rare as they are short-lived. Faced with momentum-checking union busters, the looming threat of a Federal Reserve-induced recession, and a possible return of the Republicans to power in the midterms,

there is no time to lose. Workers are knocking on organized labor's door — let's hope union leaders start responding.

CONTRIBUTORS

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