

Why All Workers Should Support Unions

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It's official: Republicans have declared war on organized labor. Unclear to millions of unorganized workers is whether or not they should care. Thanks to years of rightwing propaganda — and labor union inertia — millions of Americans are “union skeptics,” unsure as to the nature of the union animal. These fence-straddlers have no direct experience with organized labor, but they will be absolutely crucial participants in this war of corporate power versus working people.

Why is a war against labor unions a war against working people at large? At bottom, unions represent the human right to work with respect, to receive decent wages and benefits, and to organize with your co-workers to ensure this right is enforced.

As millions of working people in America understand, a non-union work site typically means living with poor wages, poor or nonexistent benefits, and zero job security. The boss can fire you for glancing at him with a less than kind look, or because you complained about a workplace safety issue, etc. Unions empower workers to perform their jobs with dignity, without fear of the boss.

The AFL-CIO's website helps explain how unions help all workers:

“Unions have made life better for all working Americans by helping to pass laws ending child labor, establishing the eight-hour day, protecting workers' safety and health and helping create Social Security, unemployment insurance and the minimum wage...”

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The right wing cannot answer the above arguments, so they avoid them, focusing instead on the greedy “union boss.” Unfortunately, partial truths aid this rightwing attack on unions; some labor leaders in the U.S. today act as self-serving rulers over their union kingdom, collecting large salaries via dues money while ignoring the demands of their members and the needs of unorganized working people.

This insular thinking of some union leaders has helped distance the labor movement from the rest of the working class, at the expense of both. The right wing is now exploiting this separation, painting labor unions as “ruining America” while corporations claim they cannot afford the high wages of union workers, and state and federal governments blame union workers for their budget problems.

Unions have become the right wing’s ultimate scapegoat for the recession in their attempts to funnel the rage that many working people feel against labor unions. The right wing maniacally works to shift attention away from those who caused the recession and even benefited from it — the banks and corporations — to those who suffer from it — workers, immigrants, and the poor. It is the classic syndrome of blaming the victim.

Re-shifting the blame to where it belongs will take a re-shifting of the labor movement. The stagnant thinking of union officials will need to be replaced with inspiring actions, for example, in Wisconsin, and with inspiring slogans, such as “No Concessions” and “Tax the Rich.”

Wisconsin proves that organizing massive demonstrations with aggressive tactics inspires all working people, who are eager to push back against the corporate power that has dominated American politics for decades, through both the Democratic and Republican Parties.

The more that rank and file union members are inspired by these collective actions, the less willing will they be to accept reductions in their wages and benefits, which, over time, has led to a steady demoralization of the labor movement. The harder that union members fight to maintain or increase their wages and benefits, the more willing will unorganized workers be to join unions, since all workers become hopeful when they see other workers fighting for their rights.

Ultimately, labor unions must work extra hard to re-connect with the non-union working class. Massive resources must be put into organizing private sector workers. Unions must lead coalitions of labor and community groups to demand Jobs For All, Medicare For All, the Defense of Social Security, and other policies that benefit all working people.

By doing this, labor unions will re-ignite the hope of a better life in millions of non-union workers, who will then actively support the cause of labor unions and ask to join them. Only then will labor unions be strong enough to repel the attack on union wages and benefits that both Republicans and Democrats have participated in, by balancing state budgets on the backs of state and federal workers. State workers must demand that budgets be balanced on the backs of the corporations and rich instead.

As state and local public sector workers in Wisconsin, and for that matter, working people throughout the country demand “No Concessions,” they can make their slogan more tangible by demanding “Tax the Rich and Corporations,” as the way to resolve the fiscal crisis, which is something that millions of non-union workers would eagerly support and fight for.

If the Governor of Wisconsin still refuses to remove the union-busting, benefit-slashing legislation, even after the majority of people have expressed their desires, then workers must be prepared to enforce democracy by using one of their most powerful weapons. The Madison Central Labor Council has advocated a statewide strike in support of Wisconsin’s

public workers. Unions in both the public and private sector across the state should respond positively to this call. And by raising the demand of Jobs For All to be paid for by taxing Wall Street, the unemployed will see that the unions are fighting for their interests as well and will be inspired to join the struggle.

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