

Global Issues

US Labour at the Dawn of the Biden Era

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Trump is gone, and we are all breathing a sigh of relief. But the United States labour movement enters the Biden era facing a host of challenges that have contributed to the dramatic weakening of unions and working-class power over the past several decades: a moribund labour law regime which employers have become experts at exploiting; a continued inability to make big breakthroughs in organising in many of the most dynamic and growing sectors of the economy; capital's relentless ability to move not just offshore but also to areas with a weak union presence within the United States (that is, the South and rural areas more generally); the "fissuring" of the workplace, with employers outsourcing all but their most core functions or relying on a franchise model that allows them to escape responsibility; the wholesale misclassification of workers as independent contractors in large and growing sectors of the economy, among them package delivery, rideshare, residential construction and trucking, in order to deny basic employment protections; the relentless pressures of automation, itself responsible for a large share of the job loss more commonly attributed to offshoring; deepening inequality that has magnified the political power of the billionaire class; and so on. The labour movement has not, on the whole, shown a capacity to meaningfully build power under these conditions.

On top of all that, of course, is the ongoing pandemic and its devastating economic consequences. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), unemployment stood at 6.7 per cent in December, down from a peak of 15 per cent in April but still not projected to return to near pre-pandemic levels until the end of 2023. Nine million fewer workers are on payrolls than a year ago; 3.7 million of these have dropped out of the labour force, while 4 million now find themselves in the ranks of the long-term unemployed, having failed to find a job for more than twenty-seven weeks (US BLS, 2021a). The anaemic support typically offered to the unemployed in the United States was bolstered, for a time, by \$600 a week supplemental unemployment benefits under the CARES Act. Yet still, as of mid-November, 26 million adults reported not having enough food to eat (US Census Bureau, 2021) – and the pandemic has gotten significantly worse since then, forcing new rounds of closings and layoffs (and claiming 4 000 lives a day).

US unions enter the Biden era with 14.3 million members, roughly split between the private and public sectors. New figures released by the BLS in late January show a 2.9 per cent drop in membership in 2020, given the devastating job losses suffered in general, and with UNITE HERE hit particularly hard by the impact of the pandemic on the leisure and hospitality sectors (US BLS, 2021b). That union in particular put many of its members to work hitting the doors for the Democrats, proving pivotal in the excruciatingly narrow margins in Georgia, Arizona, Pennsylvania and Nevada.

While the Democrats won control of the Senate with two unexpected January wins in Georgia – a profoundly important development for Biden's ability to get various executive branch appointments through – their razor-thin majority includes conservative Democrats who will act as a brake on ambitious reforms.

Biden, an establishment Democrat par excellence, will need a real push from below by labour and other social movements. While he opened his term by installing a bust of farmworker leader Cesar Chavez in the Oval Office and firing the union-buster Trump had appointed as the top lawyer at the National Labor Relations Board, his administration's corporate ties are deep – a union-busting law firm sponsored a virtual inaugural event, “Biden's Home States”, organised by the Pennsylvania and Delaware Democratic parties. Some unions, in a campaign led by the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades, are attempting to at least keep the long-overdue issue of labour law reform alive by campaigning for the Protecting the Right to Organize Act (PRO Act), which passed the House last year. Movements for Medicare for All and the Green New Deal are alive at the grassroots, but have little purchase in the halls of power, and even less with Biden himself. Thus far, however, he has put forward a relatively ambitious economic and political agenda, including more than doubling the federal minimum wage to \$15, providing hundreds of billions in relief to state and local governments, and establishing a pathway to citizenship for the country's eleven million undocumented residents. Whether the Senate will go along, and how hard Biden will push these proposals (including through executive orders) are of course other questions. But Democratic control of the presidency, House and Senate means at least a two-year window of possibility of reform, and the party will be eager to deliver high-profile economic relief to boost their chances in the 2022 mid-term elections, which almost always go poorly for the sitting president.

The far right, emboldened by their success in storming the Capitol, poses an ongoing threat (as does the wild card of what Trump will do out of power). But a growing and outspoken electoral left is good news for labour's long-term prospects. This grouping includes four card-carrying Democratic Socialist representatives – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Jamaal Bowman and Cori Bush – plus about a dozen other progressive fellow travellers joined together as part of a reformed Congressional Progressive Caucus, which could hold significant leverage in the House. Not to mention socialist Bernie Sanders in the Senate, whose two presidential campaigns have revealed a broad base for bold, class-based demands like taxing the rich, Medicare for All and abolishing student debt. This Congressional left, and their counterparts in city councils, state legislatures and district attorney's offices around the country, will be an outspoken voice for pro-worker reforms, help raise expectations about what workers can demand from the government of the richest country in the history of the world, and, in the best cases, use their offices as a platform to aid working-class organisation.

The Future for Essential Workers?

Over the past year, tens of millions of essential workers – bus drivers, grocery store workers, janitors, postal workers, nurses, package delivery workers – have been heralded as heroes. But they have also gotten the strong sense that they are expendable – that their lives are less important than ensuring the smooth flow of goods and production.

Job losses have been concentrated among the lowest earners, particularly in sectors like retail, restaurants and hotels, part of what the *Washington Post* has deemed [“the most unequal recession in modern U.S. history, delivering a mild setback for those at or near the top and a depression-like blow for those at the bottom”](#) (Long et al., 2020). Black and Latino workers, with unemployment rates of 9.9 per cent and 9.3 per cent, respectively, have been the hardest hit. The division also extends to who is able to work remotely: [one study](#) found that just 18 per cent of workers with household incomes under \$50 000 could work from home, versus 45 per cent of those in households making over \$100 000 (Bick, Blandin and Mertens, 2020). Meanwhile, a booming stock

market has helped US billionaires amass nearly \$1 trillion more in wealth since the pandemic began, with Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos alone seeing his net worth jump more than \$80 billion since last March (Bloomberg, 2021).

What will be the long-term effects? It is too early to know, but workers who were told they were essential and reported to work throughout the pandemic may be less likely to sit back and take concessions or just watch as managers and executives who worked from home rake in bonuses.

A feeling that “We were here for you when you needed us. This is how you thank us?” could fuel contract fights among the hundreds of thousands of union members at the US Postal Service who have expiring contracts this year. The same is true for the 250 000 Teamsters at United Parcel Service, whose collective bargaining agreement is up in 2022, and who may have a new, more combative leadership during negotiations (Levin, 2020).¹ Could battles here – at two of the biggest union employers in the country, whose workers interact with every household in the country – provide a high-profile example of workers’ collective power and help inspire organising by non-union workers? Could fights against austerity budgets and right-wing initiatives at the state and local level lead to the next West Virginia teachers’-type of struggle (DiMaggio and Furman, 2018; Blanc, 2019)?²

Then there are the perennial battles over health care – often the top issue at bargaining tables in the United States, given our employment-based health insurance system – which will now occur with COVID-19 in the background. Workers – including those in the public sector, whose generally better benefits may come up against the pinch of declining tax revenues – may feel emboldened and more militant in their defence of these benefits after the experience of the pandemic. After all, it was a fight over health insurance that pushed the West Virginia teachers to strike in 2018.

Racial Justice Protests

Finally – and intertwined with much of the above – there is the question of the lasting impact of last summer’s Black Lives Matter protests, one of the largest protest movements in US history.

While union leaders generally issued supportive statements, what will determine the movement’s impact is how it echoes in the ranks of Black workers, union and non-union alike, many of whom participated in the protests. Black workers make up a disproportionate share of essential employees, from nursing home and hospital workers to postal workers and bus drivers. And many of the best jobs in African-American communities are in the public sector, meaning that, [as Philadelphia teacher Paul Prescod writes in *Labor Notes*](#), “resisting the brutal austerity drive over the next few years is inseparable from the larger fight for racial justice” (Prescod, 2020).

As [Tim Schermerhorn and Lee Sustar](#) write,

A deep look at U.S. labor history shows that labor can make big steps forward when Black workers are in motion in their communities. In our past, a mobilized Black community has brought the energy and self-confidence of powerful collective action in the streets into workplace organizing. It’s also brought a grassroots orientation that challenges top-down conservatism. Will the same be true for unions today? (Schermerhorn and Sustar, 2020).

¹ See also: <https://www.oz2021.com/battle-pages> and <https://www.oz2021.com/platform>.

² A fight to defend their health insurance pushed teachers in West Virginia to strike in 2018, launching a wave of teachers’ strikes across the country including state-wide ones in Arizona and Oklahoma.

That is a live question entering Biden's term.

Labour's rebirth as a major force in the United States remains a distant prospect. The economic ramifications of the pandemic and the millions it has thrown into the ranks of the unemployed will weigh down on organising. But it has also shone an even brighter spotlight on the glaring inequalities that characterise the United States in the twenty-first century, and given tens of millions of workers a sense of their essential role. Whether the labour movement can turn that into organised strength is the essential question.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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