

# Why Teach Labor History?

By JAMES GREEN

Many retired union members I know worry that their struggles have been forgotten. They fear that few now understand the sacrifices of their forebears who fought for the eight-hour day and the 40-hour week—"the folks who brought you the weekend," as one union bumper sticker reads. Like the character in Milan Kundera's novel,<sup>1</sup> who believes the struggle against power "is the struggle of memory against forgetting," the elder generation of union members and retirees I have spoken with believe that ignorance of labor history will disempower today's workers and students.

So, the reason for teaching labor history in our social studies classrooms is obvious to these union veterans. They want young people to study the contributions that generations of union activists have made to building a nation and to democratizing and humanizing its often brutal workplaces. While their predecessors successfully fought for monumental changes that benefited all Americans (not just union members), such as passing the Social Security Act of 1935 and ending child labor, today's union veterans can take pride in their own accomplishments. For example, they

pushed for mine safety laws and workers' compensation laws. They fought for the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993.\*

Of course, their struggles included not only legislative activism, but also work-site organizing and pushing reluctant state officials, federal officials, and judges to grant workers the right to collectively bar-

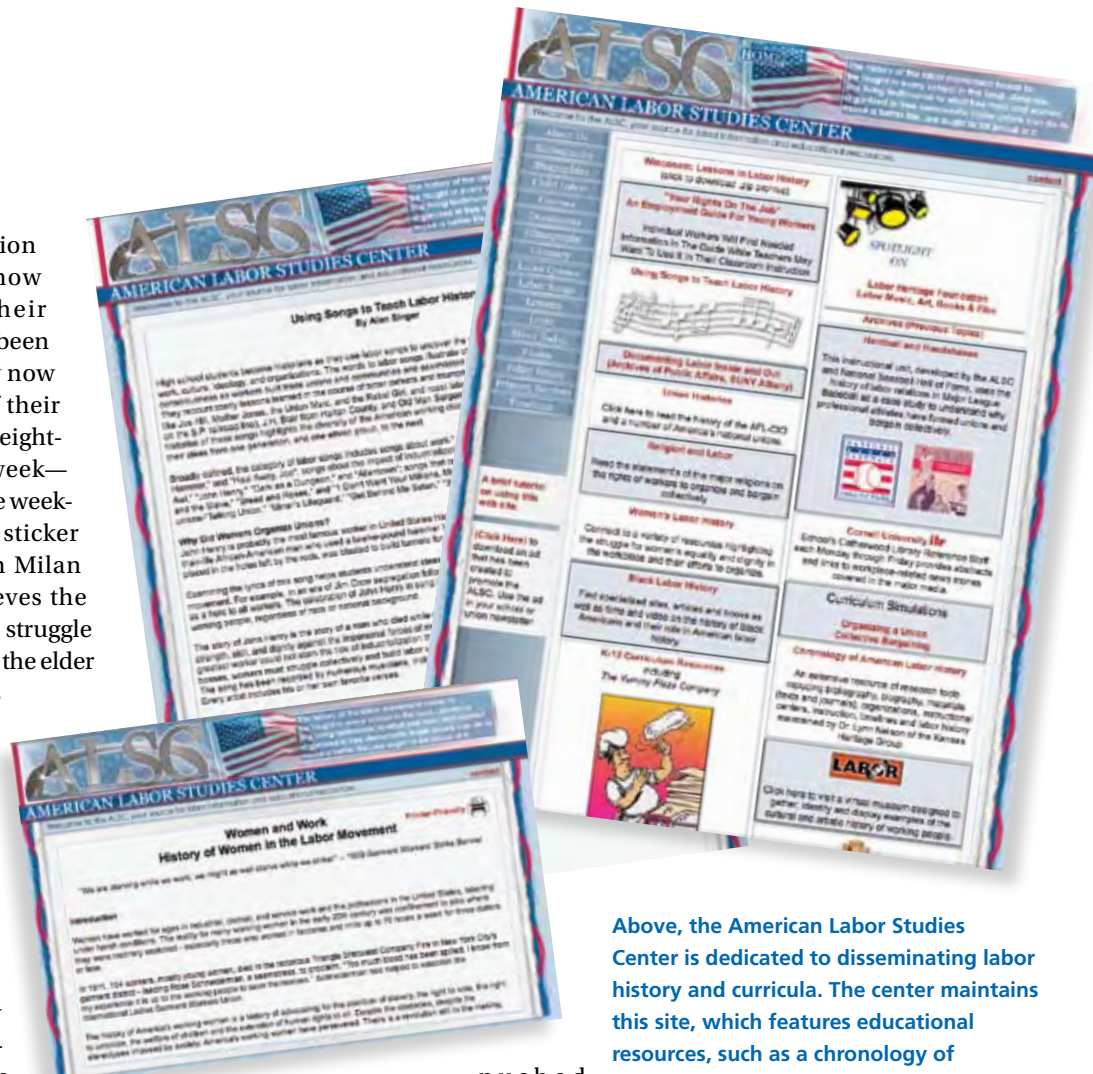
Above, the American Labor Studies Center is dedicated to disseminating labor history and curricula. The center maintains this site, which features educational resources, such as a chronology of American labor history, information on the roles that women and African Americans played in the labor movement, labor quotes and songs, and information on child labor. [www.labor-studies.org](http://www.labor-studies.org)

gain. And so, most of all, our elder workers hope young people will learn from labor history that individual workers can achieve some dignity if they assert their collective power.

Looking back, there have been several obstacles to the inclusion of workers' history in our K-12 classrooms. Until the 1960s, the history profession included few scholars of labor history. Even after the emergence of the new social and labor history 40 years ago, textbook writers were

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\* Today's active union members continue in this proud tradition. In the past couple of years, they helped win passage of a federal law raising the minimum wage and supported the State Children's Health Insurance Program. Currently, they are fighting for the passage of the Employee Free Choice Act, which would reinforce workers' right to join a union.





Left and below, a virtual museum displaying “the cultural artifacts of working people,” Labor Arts includes powerful images from labor history and culture, as well as works of art representing labor’s struggles using various media such as photography, painting, and sculpture, and organizing paraphernalia including buttons, fliers, and posters. [www.laborarts.org](http://www.laborarts.org)



WOMEN'S EQUALITY BUTTON, 1978 (IMAGE COURTESY LABOR ARTS)



"RAISING WALLS," OIL PAINTING BY JOE PASTOR, 2005 (IMAGE COURTESY OF SULLIVAN GOSS GALLERY, PAGE COPYRIGHT LABOR ARTS)

slow to adopt the insights of new scholarship. In other words, for some time, the specialized studies of labor historians were not incorporated into a wider synthesis that fully integrated labor history into the national narrative. That challenge has now been met by the American Social History Project and the excellent text *Who Built America?*<sup>†</sup> Moreover, in the past few decades, labor historians, teachers, students, and activists have created a professional association of their own, the Labor and Working-Class History Association, to promote civic engagement and encourage the study of working people’s history.<sup>‡</sup>

which outlawed child labor and created the 40-hour work week, came after the age of industrial violence ended—so too did health and safety protection, and the legalization of organizing and collective bargaining by federal workers and other public employees, including school teachers.

Neither the conflicts nor the peaceful victories tell the whole

Nonetheless, to some of the policymakers and educators who determine our social studies standards and influence the content of our textbooks, it seems that labor history is no longer relevant—that it is a bloody story of conflict, a depressing chapter from the dark ages of America—and thus the union story is not told as thoroughly as it could and should be. These conflicts are, of course, worth studying. They raise important questions: Why did so many people who demanded their rights suffer from such violent repression in a free society? Why was American labor history so much more violent than the labor history of other industrial nations?

The conflict-free events and issues are, of course, also worth studying. In fact, U.S. labor history shows that the most important achievements unions have gained for working people have been achieved peacefully. Historic accomplishments like the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938,



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM, EDUCATION DEPARTMENT



Above, this instructional unit, “Hardball and Handshakes,” uses the history of professional baseball to examine the relationship between employer and employee. Developed by the American Labor Studies Center and the Baseball Hall of Fame, the unit focuses on collective bargaining and is geared toward high school and college students. [http://education.baseballhalloffame.org/experience/thematic\\_units/labor\\_history.html](http://education.baseballhalloffame.org/experience/thematic_units/labor_history.html)

<sup>†</sup> To learn more about *Who Built America?*, go to the American Social History Project’s Web site at [www.ashp.cuny.edu](http://www.ashp.cuny.edu).

<sup>‡</sup> To learn more about the Labor and Working-Class History Association, go to <http://lawcha.org>.

# The AFT: Committed to Social Justice

The AFT has always been a force for human advancement and social justice, even when such activities were politically unpopular. In the first half of the 20th century, when many trade unions excluded African Americans from membership, the AFT was one of the first to extend full membership to minorities. African American teachers in segregated Southern school districts organized their own locals and readily affiliated with the AFT. And African American teachers elsewhere joined on equal footing with their white counterparts to organize integrated AFT locals in their school districts.

In 1918, the AFT called for equal pay for African American teachers and the election of African Americans to local school boards. In 1919, the AFT demanded equal educational opportunities for African American children and, in 1928, called for the contributions of African Americans to be taught in the public schools.

By the middle of the 20th century, the AFT was taking bolder steps. In 1948, the union stopped chartering segregated locals. In 1954, the AFT, virtually alone among teachers' organizations, filed an amicus brief in support of the plaintiffs in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional. And finally, in 1957, the AFT expelled any local unions that refused to admit African Americans. The AFT, then only a small union, lost nearly 7,000 members (roughly 14 percent of its membership) during the 1950s, but the result—a fully integrated union—was worth it.



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In the 1960s, AFT members and staff helped organize the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In 1964, 1965, and 1966, hundreds of AFT members traveled to the South to register new African American voters and to teach in Freedom Schools. The AFT lobbied for passage of key civil rights legislation, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, the Fair Housing Act, and the Voting Rights Act.

Over the past few decades the AFT has continued in this tradition by working to improve public schools, particularly those in high-poverty neighborhoods, and to close achievement gaps. To learn more about the AFT's history, go to [www.aft.org/about/history/index.htm](http://www.aft.org/about/history/index.htm). An in-depth video on the AFT's history, titled "A Proud Tradition," is available for \$10 at [www.costore.com/aft/productenlarged.asp?peid=283&pid=695247](http://www.costore.com/aft/productenlarged.asp?peid=283&pid=695247).

—EDITORS

story, however. Labor unions should be no more exempt from critical historical study than corporations. Scholars of union history have fully documented the ways some labor officials have engaged in corrupt and undemocratic activity, and how labor organizations have actively discriminated against immigrants, women, and workers of color. It is important for students to understand these failings, just as it is for them to understand the historic failures of business and government. But after 40 years of teaching

labor history to college students and union members, I am confident that an honest examination of "labor's untold story" will show that, overall, unions have been far more democratic than other private institutions and less exclusionary than businesses or the professions. In fact, union history shows that labor organizations have made much more progress at including women, immigrants, African Americans, and Mexican Americans than banks, law firms, or other private corporations—they have even been more inclu-

sive than universities. Public sector and service sector labor unions are now among the most integrated private institutions in the country. (The American Federation of Teachers, in particular, has much to be proud of; for a brief look at its history regarding desegregation, see the box above.)

We should teach our students the lessons of how union members helped democratize America, particularly during the New Deal era when the labor movement created active voters and engaged



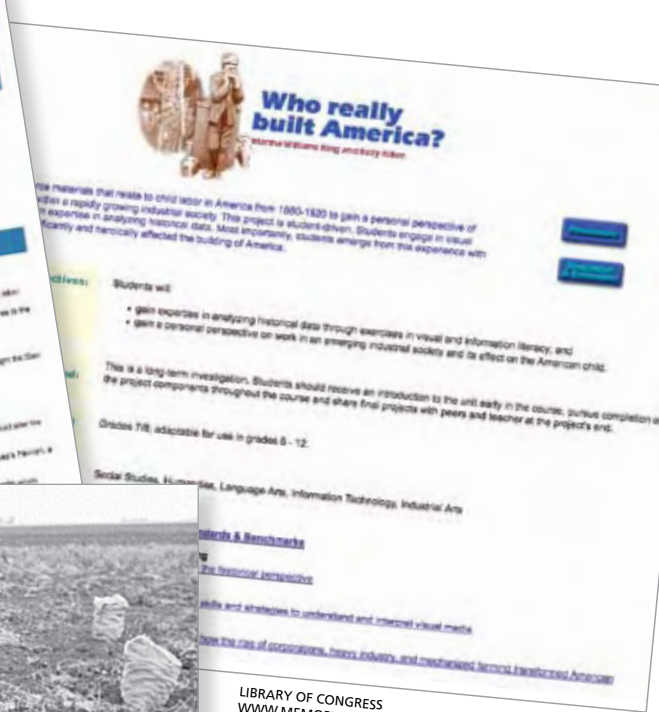
Resources  
for teachers,  
students,  
union members  
& the public



What if every student had opportunity to learn about union history classes included **labor his**



Left, the California Federation of Teachers' Labor in the Schools Committee maintains this site, which features curricula and educational activities for elementary through high school students. Lesson plans, biographies of union leaders, and photographs of children at work reflect the long struggle by unions to improve the lives of working people. [www.cft.org/about/comm/labor/elementary.html](http://www.cft.org/about/comm/labor/elementary.html)



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
WWW.MEMORY.LOC.GOV/LEARN/COMMUNITY/  
CC\_LABOR.PHP (ACCESSED NOVEMBER 7, 2008)



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION,  
FSA-OWI COLLECTION, LC-USF33-011324-M4 D1C

Above, this Library of Congress site features lesson plans on child labor and working conditions at the turn of the 20th century. The site also provides an extensive list of links to online resources such as films and photographs, as well as a bibliography of reference books about labor in America. [www.memory.loc.gov/learn/community/cc\\_labor.php](http://www.memory.loc.gov/learn/community/cc_labor.php)

citizens out of millions of blue collar workers, most of them disfranchised African Americans and Mexican Americans, as well as immigrants and the children of immigrants. Infusing at least a little labor history into American history or government courses need not take a lot of time. For example, during Black History Month,

consider a lesson on A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and on the Memphis sanitation workers' strike, which brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to the Lorraine Motel in 1968. Or, while studying the Constitution,

# Additional Resources for Teaching Labor History



## The Dramas of Haymarket

Produced by the Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University, this online project examines the Haymarket affair, a riot that began when striking workers clashed with police on May 4, 1886, in Chicago. The site recounts the incident and its aftermath, and contains collections of images, and video and audio clips.

[www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/overview/over.htm](http://www.chicagohistory.org/dramas/overview/over.htm)



## The Triangle Factory Fire

This site tells the story of the fire at the Triangle Waist Company in New York City on March 25, 1911. The fire claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers. Photographs, illustrations, testimonials, and newspaper and magazine articles posted on the site depict the inhumane working conditions that caused this tragedy.

[www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire](http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire)

## Child Labor Photographs

For a collection of compelling images, visit this site featuring photographs of child labor. Taken by Lewis Hine, a New York City schoolteacher and photographer, the black and white images include children working in factories and in the fields in the early 1900s. The site also includes lesson plans that focus on Hines's photography.

[www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/hine-photos)



teachers could lead discussions with questions such as: Where do workers' rights come from? Should the First Amendment be interpreted as protecting free speech and the right to free association in the workplace? Why are most American workers "employees at will" (meaning they can be terminated at any moment without any legal recourse, except in the case of workers who can hire attorneys to sue employers for intentionally violating laws against discrimination based on race, gender, age, or disability)?

Teachers who wish to delve deeper into labor history or to look more broadly at the history of working people will find an

abundance of fairly recent scholarship on the working class since the Industrial Revolution. As the Web sites shown here demonstrate, high-quality teaching resources on everything from child labor in the early 1900s to collective bargaining in baseball to labor-related works of art are readily available.

Today, with union membership reduced, government standards for worker rights and safety under assault, and job security in jeopardy everywhere, young people entering the labor market are still vulnerable to abuse in the workplace. And yet, most are alarmingly unaware of the decades of struggle that previous genera-

tions engaged in—and that union members are still engaged in today—to extend human and civil rights to the workplace. At work, all too many Americans are instructed that "democracy stops at the factory or office door," as if democracy could be "relegated only to evenings and weekends."<sup>2</sup> Studying the labor movement is one good way to counter this limited notion of citizenship and this restricted concept of democracy. □

## Endnotes

1. Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 3.
2. Elaine Bernard, "Why Unions Matter," *Open Magazine Pamphlet Series 36* (Westfield, NJ: Open Media, 1996).

# The Ongoing Need for Strong Unions

## A Primer for Your Students

BY FRED GLASS

Arturo Perez worked in a large grocery store in Berkeley, California, famous for its huge selection of fresh produce and healthy foods. In the progressive Berkeley community, such a reputation attracts customers. But the workers weren't as pleased with the store as the customers were. Confronting low wages, poor working conditions, and favoritism in hiring and promotion, they decided that they needed a union to represent them. During the union organizing drive, store managers accused Perez of stealing some garbanzo beans, and fired him. Perez was an outspoken supporter of the union campaign. Union organizing is legal. What happened to Perez—being fired on a flimsy pretext, but really for being a union activist—is illegal. It is a common occurrence nonetheless. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, up to 20,000 American workers are fired for union organizing every year.

Luckily, Perez did not face store management on his own. His co-workers defended him, and the union—the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 120—persuaded the National Labor Relations Board to hold hearings on whether the store management had committed unfair labor practices, including Perez's firing, during the organizing drive. Rather than face the bad publicity resulting from such hearings, the store negotiated agreements to recognize the union, pay back wages to Perez (as well as another fired worker), and post a notice inside the store promising not to engage in such practices again. The union bargained a contract that included health benefits for all workers, substantial wage increases, and regular pay for jury duty.

Perez's story had a happy ending. Not all workers are so lucky. Even when the laws are observed, work in today's economy can be rough. As many as 30 million people—nearly one-quarter of the

work force in the United States—are classified as the working poor: people who work hard, but still can't make ends meet and are just one or two paychecks from homelessness.

These are the workers at the bottom of the economy, and they are the people who could benefit the most from belonging to a union. But over the past few decades, the percentage of union members in the work force has shrunk,

from about 33 percent to just over 12 percent. Plenty of new jobs have been created during that time, and a lot of new wealth. But the new jobs have tended to be either high skill/high wage, or low skill/low wage. Jobs in the middle—the jobs that used to be available in manufacturing, with decent wages and benefits, enough to support a family—have been disappearing.

Coincidentally, these are the jobs that used to belong to union members. So there are parallel developments under way. The number of workers enrolled in unions is shrinking, and so is the number of jobs that support a middle-class way of life.

Some people interpret the decline of organized labor as if unions belong to the past, and have no role to play in the global economy of the 21st century. They point to the numbers and say that workers are choosing not to join unions anymore. The real picture is more complex, and contradicts this view. Most workers would prefer to belong to unions if they could. But many are being prevented from joining, rather than choosing not to join. Unions remain the best guarantee of economic protection and political advocacy for workers. But as



AP PHOTO/CHARLES KNOBLOCK

PHOTO BY JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

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unions shrink, fewer people know what unions are, and do. And fewer remember what unions have to do with the prosperity of working people.

### What Is a Union?

A union is a group of workers who have organized themselves for mutual aid and collective action. It is a tool developed by and for working people, to provide them with a collective voice in their place of employment and in the broader society. Like any tool, it can be used well, badly, or not at all. Used properly, a union provides workers with a means to improve their lives in many ways.

Unions bring working people increased pay and benefits, and legal, legislative, and political remedies addressing the issues workers and their families care about: secure jobs and safe communities; necessary social services like public education, health care, and public safety; and a measure of support in old age through employee pension plans and government programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

The reason why workers need unions



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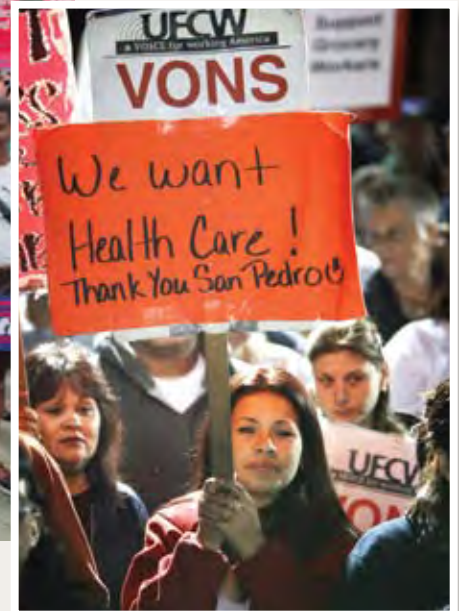


PHOTO BY DAVID MCNEWGETTY IMAGES

boils down to this: employers have far more power than workers do, especially if workers have to negotiate with them over wages and working conditions as individuals. On the side of employers, we find greater financial resources, favorable laws, and the power that comes from the ability to hire and fire people who need to work for a living. However kind or well intentioned they might be as individual human beings, employers are motivated by maximizing profits in their businesses. All too often, that motivation overrides fair treatment of employees.

By forming unions, workers gain the power that comes with being part of a group created for collective action. As a group, workers can negotiate with their employers with greater chance of success than they can as individuals. This is why Cesar Chavez, for example, became a union organizer. After many years of attempting to address the poverty and powerlessness of California farm workers through community organizing, Chavez decided that a union was the most effective vehicle for achieving a better life for farm workers. His singular achievement was to build the first farm workers union that lasted more than a few years—the United Farm Workers of America. As a result, tens of thousands of farm workers enjoy higher salaries, have health insurance and old age pensions, and experience a greater measure of safety on the job.

### How Do Workers Organize?

A union is formed when workers agree that they need the strength of numbers and a collective voice on the job. In most cases, this means that they seek the assistance of an organizer from an already existing union. The organizer helps the

workers form a committee, which provides an effective way of reaching out to more workers until a majority has decided to establish a union in the workplace. This is the key to effective unionism: it is the result of the democratic process, the actions of workers themselves, and the backing of an organization with resources.

Once a majority of workers have indicated they want a union, the employer has the opportunity to recognize the organization as the official representative of the workers, and to sit down and negotiate a contract with them. If the employer does not readily agree to recognize the union and bargain, then usually the workers move to an election. In the private sector, this is overseen by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and in the public sector, by various agencies.

If a majority of those voting cast ballots in favor of the union, and the employer does not file a challenge to the election results, then the union is certified as the exclusive collective bargaining agent for the workers. (An alternative to this method is called “card check,” in which the employer recognizes the union through a simple presentation of cards signed by a majority of workers indicating they want representation by the union.)

After a union has been elected by the workers and certified by the NLRB or a public-sector labor agency, the law requires that the employer begin the collective bargaining process with the union. Collective bargaining means worker representatives sitting down with management representatives to discuss and decide matters such as how much workers will be paid and how to resolve conflicts, when they arise, in a manner fair to everyone involved.

But a union is often much more than that. It is a measure of dignity for workers on the job. It is a kind of extended family, where workers take care of each other.

### The Meaning of Labor’s Decline for Working People

The power of collective bargaining supports higher wages and benefits, better safety and health conditions, and greater confidence among workers when they need to speak their minds. With such a clear set of advantages, why don’t more workers belong to unions? In today’s political environment, unions are often not allowed to function the way they are meant to. The laws designed to enable workers to form unions of their own choosing were passed many years ago. The workplace has changed, the economy has changed, and the society has changed. The laws have not kept up, and no longer provide the protections they were written to provide. A sustained, decades-long employer offensive has weakened unions, and as membership has declined, so has awareness of the benefits of unionism. As a result, many of the problems that were eradicated when the labor movement was stronger have reemerged.

### Economic Disparities

In 1980, the differential between the average chief-executive-officer salary of Fortune 500 companies and the average worker income in his company was 42 to 1. By 2004, the differential was 430 to 1. This is the highest ratio of its kind in the world, and demonstrates an alarming trend: an unequal distribution of wealth worse than the United States has seen since the 1920s.

Besides the growing gap between the

wealthiest class and working families, there are other signs of an economy tilting against people who work for a living. In the three decades following World War II, the income of all groups rose at more or less the same rate. For the past quarter century, there have been growing numbers of poor people at the bottom, substantial numbers (but comparatively fewer) leading upper-middle-class lives, and a diminishing number of working families in the middle. The very rich remain few, but their share of the wealth is increasing dramatically.

More and more jobs can be found in low-paying areas of the economy. Fewer jobs are permanent, or offer health benefits or retirement plans. The largest private employer in the United States is now Walmart, where wages are so low that many workers are eligible for and receive government assistance. For instance, in 2005, 24 percent of Walmart workers had no health coverage or were enrolled in a public health program.

### The Return of Forced Labor

Most people in the United States think that slavery disappeared in the 19th century, with the end of the Civil War. As a matter of fact, today, here in the U.S., it continues to exist, just as it does elsewhere in the world. This isn't the slavery of the Old South, of course. It looks different—when you can see it. Mostly it's hidden, behind the walls of old buildings, where lawbreaking employers hold workers against their will for long hours and little pay, where minimum wage laws are but a rumor, and common sense health and safety rules—let alone laws—are ignored every moment of every day. It is reliably estimated that more than 10,000 people in the U.S. are currently employed under conditions of forced labor—in restaurants, agriculture, garment factories, and other industries with a high demand for cheap workers.

### Failing Health Care Coverage

As union density has declined, employment-based health coverage has slid down

a similar slope. In 1973, with about a quarter of the work force organized, health care coverage was nearly universal. One of the benefits of widespread collective bargaining was that even nonunion employers were pressured to match union-negotiated wage and benefit levels, or risk losing workers to the companies with unions and collective bargaining. Over the three decades since then, the decay of union density has been accompanied by a loss of health care coverage for enormous numbers of people. As of 2006, employer-based health coverage had been jettisoning a million people a year for five years. Worse, more than 45 million people, or about one in every six people in the United States, have no health care coverage at all.

### Deteriorating Health and Safety Standards

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was created in 1970 because unions convinced Congress that U.S. workers needed an agency devoted to overseeing their welfare in often dangerous workplaces. At its peak in 1980, OSHA employed 2,951 workplace inspectors. Today, in a work force that has grown by nearly 30 million workers, the number of OSHA inspectors has been reduced to just 2,208.

### Employer Coercion

Over half of all union organizing campaigns face threats by management or owners to close the company if the union election is successful. Workers are typically harassed, threatened, disciplined, or fired if they openly support the union. While precise statistics are not possible to keep, somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 workers are fired each year for activities related to union organizing.

Such threats and firings are illegal under the National Labor Relations Act, which was originally enacted explicitly to “level the playing field” between workers and bosses. But over the decades, the act has been amended so many times, and so many court decisions have modified the

regulations, that little effective machinery remains to deter employers from engaging in such unfair and supposedly illegal activities. When the NLRB finds a company has engaged in unfair labor practices—often after years of legal maneuvering—the only “remedy” might be that the company must post a notice admitting guilt, and promise not to do it again. Even if an employee is found to have been fired for legally protected activities such as union organizing, and the company is forced to hire her or him back with full back pay, years may have gone by, the other workers involved in the campaign might have moved on to new jobs, and the union will have to start all over again, with no guarantee that anything different would happen this time around.

This blatant culture of intimidation works quite effectively. The surprising thing is that workers keep trying, and their election win rate is over 50 percent. This is a testament not only to the courage of the workers who persist in the face of such obstacles, but to the continuing need for unions in the American workplace. Nonetheless, the number of elections has declined over the years, a clear sign of the effectiveness of the anti-union industry and illegal tactics arrayed against workers. According to a recent survey, were it not for the fear of being fired, 57 million workers would readily join a union.

**W**hen collective bargaining was widely recognized as the best model for conflict resolution between labor and capital, it had a leveling effect on income distribution. Fewer people were very poor or very rich, and most working families were not only able to get by, but could expect to advance beyond their parents' economic position.

The union advantage continues to give workers an incentive to fight back against employers unwilling to pay decent wages, even with all the obstacles to organizing that workers face today. The higher standards of union workplaces, and access through collective bargaining to fair, open rules for conflict resolution, provide an important alternative for workers who wonder what they can do about unfair bosses. And union values, summed up in the slogan, “an injury to one is an injury to all,” continue to inspire workers to seek improvement in their lives by trusting in the power gained when they stand together.

This primer on unions is adapted from *Work, Money, and Power: Unions in the 21st Century*. To read the full-length version, which also includes information on labor history and details on the economic benefits of unionization, go to [www.cft.org/uploads/resources/docs/workmoneypower.pdf](http://www.cft.org/uploads/resources/docs/workmoneypower.pdf). *Work, Money, and Power* was published by the UC Berkeley Labor Center. To purchase classroom copies (for \$1.25), go to [http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/publications/work\\_money.shtml](http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/publications/work_money.shtml).

