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Unions: The Key to Protecting the Working Class

For as long as America has existed the working class have been starved, abused, and killed. They have lived under the constant violent threat of poverty while their government looked the other way. To this day full time workers are still forced to choose between rent or food. Minorities are still being paid less and given less opportunities than their counterparts. Essential workers still do not have health insurance during a pandemic. The reason that corporations can get away with this cruel treatment is that the working class have no way of defending themselves. To the uncritical eye this is the inherent power imbalance of our system and there is no changing it. However, by looking to the past one can easily see the truth. When the working-class act as a united force they are a power to be reckoned with. It is imperative that American labor unions are revived so that, the working class can receive better wages, reduce runaway income, alleviate discrimination, and secure a safer and more prosperous future. If this country is ever to become a meritocracy it is vital that unions are restored.

It was a chilly Sunday morning on August 22nd, 1909, when a shot that would change the fate of the American laborer was fired. A warehouse just outside of McKees Rocks Pennsylvania was nicknamed “the slaughterhouse” because every single day someone would die and many more would be permanently maimed from dangerous and inhumane work conditions. After years of being abused and underpaid workers had enough and started the McKees Rocks strike that July. With the backing of the Industrial Workers of the World union, rallies with 5,000+ people of various nationalities came together to fight against their oppression. Although,

peaceful at first by August the constable would shoot into the crowd of strikers igniting a riot. By the end of this chaos, at least 12 people died, most of the people harmed were laborers who sacrificed their lives ensuring a better future for the working class. Finally, wages were raised and working conditions were improved. (De Leon). The McKees Rocks strike was one of the first successful labor movements in the United States by the year 1960 30% of American workers would be part of a union (Pearson). Yet today, many people now believe that unions are inept organizations that only want to take money out of the hands of the working class. That avarice is why union membership has decreased. By looking through history it is clear to see that these are merely propagandized lies set forth by greedy corporations. The true reason that the era of the American labor union has passed is because of the changing political climate of the late 1970s and aggressive anti-union lobbying efforts (Pearson). By the year 2000, the unionization rate would fall to just 13% (Pearson). This drop in unitization correlated with increasing runaway income, stagnating minimum wage, workplace discrimination, and reduction in employee benefits (Rowell).

In recent news, there was lots of coverage on the unionization effort in Bessemer Alabama. During the voting process amazon would use many union-busting tactics such as; texting employees, putting up flyers in bathrooms, and holding captive audience meetings. They even went so far as to turn off streetlights where union representatives would try to speak to amazon employees (Wallace). Some may wonder why these employees even wanted to unionize in the first place. The minimum wage in Alabama is \$7.25 an hour and amazon's starting pay is \$15.00 an hour (Schreiber). This pay may seem pretty good to an outsider looking in, however, in an interview with amazon warehouse worker and social justice activist Francis Wallace she discussed how many employees have reported difficulty paying for rent and food (Wallace). One

reason for unionization is that unions raise wages: not just for those in a union but also for those in related fields (Rowell). Unionized workers can earn up to 20 percent more than their non-unionized counterparts. Those that are not unionized but work in an industry with 25 percent unionization or more can expect to earn 5 percent more than those in less unionized areas (Rowell). These workers wanted to be fairly compensated for their labor and paid similarly to union warehouse workers in the area who have a starting pay of \$18 to 21 dollars an hour (Schreiber). If the union had succeeded and their pay increased there would have been little difference for shareholders or Bezos himself. But for the employees, it could have been the difference between housed, or homeless. Over the past 40 years, the top one percent have gained 70 percent of the economic growth in America but with a stronger union force, the runaway income could be constrained (Walter, Mishel). By increasing the union density by just one percent the percent share of a nation's net income for the bottom and middle class increases tremendously. A stronger middle class is important as they are the drivers of economic growth for a nation (Rowell). Supporting unions is the best way to create a stable and strong middle and working class.

Unions do not just increase wages. They also fight against discrimination. When an employee is not part of a union, they have no way of defending themselves against discrimination in the workplace. Often workers fear that if they go to H.R., they will face retaliation from their boss. But with the backing of a union people are better equipped to protect and defend themselves from discrimination. Unions often negotiate for things such as pay transparency, protections from discrimination and harassment, and clear procedures for pay raises and promotions. This information equips workers with the necessary tools for self-defense. In an interview with Professor Thomas Sugrue about the connection between unions and civil

liberties, he said, “Labor unions were critical allies of the African-American freedom struggle,” ... “that questions of economic security and anti-discrimination were joined at the hip.” (Sugrue). Economic inequality has long been a tool for oppression against minority groups, and the correlation between being working class and being a P.O.C. is not something that can be ignored (Rowell). Dr. Martin Luther King was an avid union supporter, and it is no coincidence that his famous “I Have a Dream Speech was given at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Before his assassination Dr. King addressed striking sanitation workers who were paid “wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the mainstream of the economic life of our nation.” (King). When addressing their labor movement, he said “Along with wages and all of the other securities that you are struggling for, you are also struggling for the right to organize and be recognized.” (Rowell). By being affiliated with unions black workers can see a 14.7% increase in wages and Latino workers can see a 28.4% increase in wages (Traub). Being unionized is also correlated with higher economic mobility for family members. Meaning future generations will be able to give back to their communities (Rowell). Unions are key to uplifting and supporting these often neglected and underserved communities. Alone it is difficult for a single employee to fight against or even prove that there is inequality in the workforce. However, with the backing of a union people can better defend themselves against managerial biases or corrupt policies. This is because unions are not blind forces of opposition against companies but instead, are forces of equality for all people.

Unions provide more than just better paychecks for people though. They often help to provide fringe benefits to their members. These benefits can include things such as healthcare, paid sick leave, and retirement. Although these things are labeled benefits the COVID-19 virus has made it apparent that these things are needed. Throughout the pandemic places like amazon,

warehouses have become modern “slaughterhouses”. A study done by the University of California showed that there was a 50% increase in the mortality rate for warehouse workers, line cooks, agricultural workers, and construction workers (Cory). Making these jobs some of the most dangerous during the pandemic. These people were all working-class and likely didn’t have benefits provided by their employers. If these people had the support of a union from the beginning their lives could have possibly been saved. According to the 2015 National Compensation Survey, “94 percent of union workers have access to retirement benefits, while only 65 percent of nonunion workers do. In addition, 85 percent of union workers can take paid sick leave, compared to 62 percent of those without union representation. And union workers in the United States are 28 percent more likely to have health insurance—and pay a lower share of premiums for it” (Walters). As someone who worked at Walmart during the 2020 pandemic, I have personally lost two of my coworkers to the COVID19 virus. Yet, many of my coworkers still come to work sick, and when asked why the answer boils down to the fact that they don’t have any paid time off or insurance and cannot afford to lose their job. Although this is purely anecdotal similar situations can be found across the country. These are the people that ensure that everyone is fed and safe. Most people can agree that their work is necessary, yet their lives are not treated as necessary. Without union support, these people will continue to suffer needlessly in the name of profits they will never see. It is no coincidence that union membership is correlated to higher life satisfaction (Rowell). By not having to stress about paying out of pocket for these things people are better enabled to spend their money on things that they enjoy leading to a prosperous economy (Rowell). The best way to achieve a happy and safe workforce is with unions defending workers from corporate greed.

The shot fired by the constable was not the first unjust death at McKees Rocks. The violence against the working class started the first time the company chose profits over lives. And that violence is still happening to this day. "Men are persecuted, robbed, and slaughtered, and their wives are abused in a manner worse than death -- all to obtain or retain positions that barely keep starvation from the door," said a local priest at McKees Rocks (De Leon). This observation was true back in 1909 and is still applicable to our modern workforce. If the sole purpose of a company is growth at any cost, then the sole purpose of a union is sustainability at the cost of growth. Unions act as a shield against the brutal and bloody hands of corporations. By standing in solidarity with labor union workers, the working class of the United States would receive better wages, reduce runoff income, reduce workplace discrimination, uplift black, and brown neighborhoods, create a better standard of living, and a happier workforce. If the United States of America is ever to become a place of prosperity and equality unions, will be at the forefront of that change.

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