

Why Union: Supporting Workers

By: Sarah Lawton

"[We] reaffirm the right of workers in the United States to organize and form unions. We especially affirm the right to organize and form unions for seasonal and migrant workers who historically have been deprived of those rights. We support the right to organize and form unions as a means to securing adequate wages, benefits, and safety conditions for all workers. We encourage all levels of the church to be informed about, and act accordingly, when rights of workers to associate is being jeopardized"
The 75th General Convention of The Episcopal Church, in resolution [2006-C008: Reaffirm the Right of Workers to Organize and Form Unions](#)

"[We] support the right of care workers to organize in unions to have a voice in their working conditions and collective bargaining, and to seek innovative solutions to the problem of organizing worker voice in an industry with multiple employers"

Proposed resolution [D023: Support for Care Workers](#), 80th General Convention of the Episcopal Church



An Amazon warehouse on Staten Island; an Apple store in Maryland; a Trader Joe's store in Central Massachusetts; more than 150 Starbucks stores all over the United States. Workers, many of them young workers of color, are filing for union recognition in an upsurge in organizing not seen in decades, and in many cases winning unexpected victories in the face of anti-union campaigns, especially in warehouse, retail, and food retail industries whose workers bore the brunt of being "essential workers" during the pandemic but lacked voice in safety decisions, working for companies that made huge profits during COVID but didn't raise wages by much if at all. It's not easy organizing a union in the United States, much less winning a contract. But we may be entering a new era of labor unrest and activity. And the Episcopal Church is called to be involved.

What is a Union?

A union is an organization formed by workers who join together to use their collective voice in their workplace. Through their union, workers negotiate with their employers over wages, benefits, workplace health and safety, job training and other work-related issues. Unions serve an important role making sure that management acts fairly and treats its workers with respect. Unions can also be a voice for workers in the public square. Unions are democratic organizations whose leaders are elected by the membership.

The first unions arose from skilled craft guilds of medieval times, but the labor movement grew enormously during the Industrial Revolution, sparking a reaction of repression and violence aimed at workers trying to organize. Unions demanded a living wage, and also, during a time when many workers were expected to work 12-14 hours days, adequate sabbath time: "8 Hours for Work, 8 Hours for Rest, 8 Hours for What We Will."



[Silkscreen poster created by Ricardo Levins Morales as part of the 100th anniversary of the St. Paul Union Advocate newspaper; original prints can be ordered here: <https://www.rlmartstudio.com/product/eight-hours/>.]

Unions also demanded better safety and working conditions and protested gross violations of worker safety—perhaps today the best remembered campaign for occupational health and safety is the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union’s effort in the wake of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City in 1911, which killed 146 workers, 123 of them women, most of them young Italian and Jewish immigrants. The fire, and the women jumping to their deaths from the upper floors of the building, was by chance witnessed by Frances Perkins, later President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Secretary of Labor, and also faithful Episcopalian.

Throughout the period of labor union formation countered by (often state-sponsored) repression, surging worker movements were increasingly led by immigrant workers, who had the worst pay and working conditions. Tensions within and between the unions reflected the divisions of the larger society: racial and ethnic tensions, encouraged and exacerbated by bosses who brought in strikebreakers of different ethnic and racial groups, but also led by union members themselves, who voted to keep out Chinese workers, Black workers, and other groups. There were tensions between skilled worker unions, who often felt they could demand better wages, and unions of unskilled workers, such as the Wobblies, who led the famous Bread and Roses strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912, with seventeen languages represented on the strike committee. There were also tensions between men and women—should women be allowed to participate in unions at all? Would women also undercut labor standards?

And over all of this, repression from the bosses and aided by the state was the order of the day—with some gains in labor rights at the state levels through the Progressive Era, but rarely at the federal level. Repression of the Progressive Era culminated in the anti-immigrant, anti-worker Palmer Raids of 1919-1920 under Woodrow Wilson (the American Civil Liberties Union was founded in 1920 in response to these raids).

The New Deal

In the 1930s, in the throes of the Great Depression, and in the wake of explosive strikes in 1934, such as the West Coast Longshore Worker strikes that led to general strikes in West Coast cities, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) was formed out of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to focus on organizing workers in industrial mass production industries, including unskilled workers. Unlike many unions in the AFL, CIO unions were open to Black workers. The CIO met with initial success in the Flint, Michigan sit-down strike of 1936-1937, which brought CIO chief and former mineworker John L. Lewis to the bargaining table with General Motors and led to recognition of the United Auto Workers.



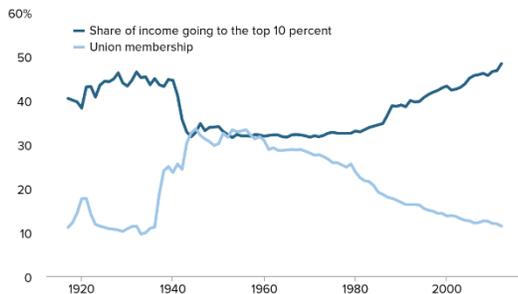
The high level of militant labor action set the stage for FDR’s New Deal, which was largely carried out by his Labor Secretary, Episcopalian Frances Perkins. The recent book [*The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkins--Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the Minimum Wage*](#), by Kirsten Downey, is well worth a read for any Episcopalian; it describes her faith journey and its relationship to her work in public policy. (It’s said that she wrote the Social Security Act at her parish church’s rectory kitchen table.) This short [article](#) from Forward Movement also gives a quick snapshot of this remarkable woman of faith and her accomplishments. She was the first woman cabinet secretary, and is widely understood to be the architect of the New Deal. She has a place on our own church’s calendar of [Lesser Feasts and Fasts on May 13](#). See also the [Frances Perkins Center](#) for more!

With the New Deal came new labor rights, including the National Labor Relations Act, giving rights to workers to organize in unions; the Fair Labor Standards Act (finally lowering the work week to 44 hours); the Social Security Act; child labor laws; and occupational safety laws, among many others. Excluded from the National Labor

Relations Act, however, were agricultural and domestic workers—jobs held mainly by Black workers at that time—in order to secure votes from Southern Democrats.

The 1950s and 1960s, while hardly a time of labor peace, were at least a time in which “industrial relations” was understood as a baseline practice, and up to a third of the U.S. workforce was part of a union – with many of the rest benefiting from prevailing labor standards set by union contracts. During this time, the AFL and CIO merged to become one big labor federation devoted less to militant organizing of new workers and more to serving its existing members. Meanwhile, the lowest levels of inequality in American history are correlated with the highest levels of union membership and density in American history.

Union membership and share of income going to the top 10%



Data on union density follows the composite series found in Historical Statistics of the United States; updated to 2012 from unionstats.com. Income inequality (share of income to top 10%) from Piketty and Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 118(1), 2003, 1-39. Updated and downloadable data, for this series and other countries, is available at the Top Income Database. Updated September 2013.

Economic Policy Institute

1980 – 2020: Attack and retrenchment

The 1980s ushered in a period of union-busting and deregulation of industry and financial services and a retreat by organized labor. With the new era of “free trade,” companies increasingly headed offshore seeing lower wages and higher profits; shareholders demanded higher, quicker returns for their stocks, exerting downward pressure on wages; and labor unions density grew weaker, both from ossification, in some cases, but also through an erosion in labor rights and in government enforcement of labor rights. Real wages stagnated, with the minimum wage stuck at 1968 levels in real dollars in recent years, even as productivity and profits increased.

Nevertheless, the labor movement has held on, and in some places has been invigorated especially by new immigrant workers who have brought a new organizing spirit to previously unorganized industries. The Justice for Janitors fight has won contracts even in an industry with many subcontractors, by targeting the companies hiring janitorial services and demanding industry-wide contracts. Similarly, the Fight for Fifteen movement, led by fast food and other low-wage workers, has fought both for a new minimum wage, from the current federal wage of \$7.65 to at least \$15 per hour, and a union—with some successes at the city and state levels in terms of wage rises, though less success in organizing shops.

Post-Pandemic: A New Era for Labor?

After the Covid pandemic hit, we have seen an upsurge in organizing among frontline workers in food retail, warehouse work, and also among caregivers. The most startling victory of recent years, the [Amazon Staten Island warehouse vote](#), was led by a diverse coalition of workers who organized their own independent union from within the warehouse itself. Meanwhile, over 150 Starbucks stores have voted for a union. This new militancy is coming more and more from the shop floor itself rather than from unions organizing from the outside, drawing comparisons to the upsurges of the 1910s and 1930s.

[original drawing by Carolyn Olsen; see more about her series of paintings of essential workers here: <https://www.pbs.org/.../by-drawing-essential-workers-this...>]



The Episcopal Church: Supporting Care Workers in 2022

This year, the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice is endorsing a resolution on [Support for Care Workers, 2022-D023](#). The burdens on caregivers during the pandemic have been both well described yet also underreported. Nursing home workers were among the first to get sick from COVID, and many suffered from isolation as care facilities shut their doors to visitors. Home care workers and other domestic workers, such as home cleaners and nannies, either continued to work under adverse conditions or were told not to come to work—often with no pay and no recourse to seeking unemployment or other benefits, as so many work “off book” for multiple employers.

Caregiving is underpaid (often unpaid) and undervalued. As a society we pay lip service to care work, but in an economic system that values short-term profit, the needs of children, elders, and people with disabilities are too often disregarded as costing money rather than bringing it in. Our economic system does not value caregiving and has failed to sustain a functioning market system for care, as it is both deeply unaffordable and deeply underpaid. Care work is also largely carried out by women, especially poor and working-class women, women of color, and immigrant women. [A few statistics illustrate this point](#):

- **Wages:** On average, child care workers in the U.S. are paid **\$13.51**/hour and home health care workers are paid **\$13.81**/hour—roughly half what the average U.S. worker is paid (**\$27.31**).
- **Benefits:** While **52.2%** of all workers have employer-sponsored health coverage, only **25.8%** of home health care workers and only **20.7%** of child care workers do.
- **Gender:** Women make up **88.6%** of the home health care workforce and **94.0%** of the child care workforce.
- **Race/ethnicity:** Women of color make up **17.8%** of the workforce overall but **54.6%** of the home health care workforce and **40.9%** of the child care workforce.

[Child care workers across the country are seeking union representation](#) as states have opened up to collective bargaining for care workers who have been excluded from collective bargaining in the National Labor Relations Act—remembering that, when the law was passed during the New Deal, the workers were (and still are) disproportionately Black women; this is a racist legacy. But states have the ability to grant those rights, and about a third of U.S. states have done so. Home care workers in many states, shut out of state labor organizing rights, [have pressed for state laws to create public authorities](#) that allow home care workers as independent contractors to unionize and bargain with those public authorities over wages and job standards. Other workers have organized through [cooperatives](#) and [worker centers](#) to push for policy changes and find solidarity.

The Episcopal Church is already on record supporting the right of workers to organize and form unions:

[Call for Public Investment and Community Participation in Transition to New Economies](#) [2018-D006]
[Support Policies Addressing Workplace Harassment and Exploitation](#) [2018-D017]
[Urge Governments to Follow Principles in Adopting Trade Policies](#) [2012-A012]
[Support the Labor Movement](#) [2012-D028]
[Reform Labor Laws to Protect Collective Bargaining Rights](#) [2009-D039]
[Reaffirm the Right of Workers to Organize and Form Unions](#) [2006-C008]
[Support Worker Unions and a Living Wage](#) [2006-D047]
[Recommend Criteria for Re-industrialization Plans](#) [1982-A058]
[Support Extending Legal Protection to Agricultural Workers](#) [1973-D027]

Passing D023 would sharpen and deepen our position to focus on a greatly underrepresented set of workers that historically has been excluded from labor union organizing both by law and in practice. It would lift our collective voice as the Church to support the care workers who do the hard “reproductive labor” that supports, sustains, and nurtures human life and maintains kin and community ties that bind us together. As Christians we must speak, counterculturally, to deeply rooted attitudes that elevate money over people, and lift up with conviction our understanding that every person is beloved of God and worthy of care, nurture, community, and love.