

IDEAS

# It's time for an expansive new labor movement

Redistributing wealth through higher wages — rather than government spending — is likely to appeal to people across the political spectrum.

By **Leslie McCall and Jennifer Sherman** Updated October 27, 2023, 3:00 a.m.



United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain, center left, stood for pictures with the Rev. Jesse Jackson, bottom center, after a rally for striking workers in Chicago on Oct. 7. JOHN J. KIM/ASSOCIATED PRESS

This has been a year of strikes. Hollywood was brought to a standstill by the Writers Guild and SAG-AFTRA unions. For the first time ever, the United Auto Workers launched a strike against the three major American automakers at once. In mid-October, 75,000 health care workers from Kaiser Permanente walked off the job.


The strikes have broad public support among voters from both parties. [Nearly 60 percent](#) of Americans approve of the UAW and WGA/SAG-AFTRA strikes, including almost half of Republicans, who have historically been less keen on unions. [Gallup polls](#) show that overall support for unions in the past three

years is at levels we haven't seen in decades.

This growing labor momentum presents an opportunity to mobilize people from across the political spectrum around the idea that all workers — not just those in unions — should share in the profits they help create. Our research suggests that [redistributing America's wealth](#) through the labor market may enjoy wider support among voters and, given Congressional gridlock, be more politically feasible than fixing inequality through increased government spending alone.

For decades, [real wages](#) for workers, adjusted for inflation, have remained stagnant, and the divide between the wealthiest and everyone else has grown. The federal government has failed to enact a consistent program for reducing inequality through tax reform or initiatives that provide a safety net for the working class, expand affordable housing, or lower the cost of college.

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Yet people on both sides of the aisle support efforts to make sure hard work pays fairly.

One of the authors of this piece, [Leslie McCall](#), has done research analyzing the [2021 General Social Survey \(GSS\)](#) and found that 58 percent of Americans, including 38 percent of Republicans, believe companies should reduce the pay gap between executives and their lowest-paid employees. This gap has ballooned in recent years. A [report](#) from the Economic Policy Institute found that, in 2021, CEOs at top companies earned 399 times what the typical American worker was paid, compared with a ratio of 59 to 1 in 1989 and 20 to 1 in 1965.

The other coauthor of this piece, [Jennifer Sherman](#), has interviewed hundreds of people in rural areas, many of whom are white, working class, and conservative. They talk about the virtue of hard work and desire good-paying jobs rather than handouts. They express frustration that the secure jobs their fathers and grandfathers



had no longer exist.

“You can’t do the same work that your parents did and still get by,” a 33-year-old in rural Washington said. Another lamented not being able to buy a home or earn a living wage, saying “I don’t know if it is possible anymore . . . Maybe that’s just how America is now.” [Other researchers](#) have discovered similar sentiments among Black and white workers across the country.



Kaiser Permanente health care workers picketed in Los Angeles on Oct. 6. The unions representing 75,000 Kaiser Permanente workers staged a three-day strike this month. They got a 21 percent raise over four years, with a new minimum hourly wage of \$25. DAMIAN DOVARGANES/ASSOCIATED PRESS

In recent years, we’ve seen a growing “[diploma divide](#)” as people with college degrees increasingly veer to the left politically and those without a college education skew more to the right. But the idea that anyone who works should be able to secure a middle-class life for their family resonates with people of all political persuasions and education levels.

To win back blue-collar, working-class voters, progressives should seize this moment and [build a broad-based movement to make work pay for everyone](#).

There are many ways to redistribute wealth through the labor market. First, we should continue to strengthen public support for unions and expand union membership, which is [half](#) of [what it was](#) 40 years ago. According to a [recent report](#) from the Treasury Department, unionization has spillover benefits for

workers at nonunion businesses, such as higher wages, better benefits, and stronger workplace safety standards.

Second, we should rebalance how profits are distributed. As 62 percent of Americans support [raising the minimum wage](#) to \$15 an hour, many communities are leading the charge by instituting minimums that exceed the federal standard. But we don't just want to raise the floor; we should also curb pay at the top: 73 percent of Americans say [CEOs are paid too much](#), an issue that has become a focal point in the [recent strikes](#).

Lastly, we can increase worker involvement in corporate decision-making. Senators Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts and Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin have proposed legislation in the past to give workers control over a portion of [corporate board seats](#), a system that has been used successfully in Germany for years. In the 2021 GSS, 72 percent of Americans said they support this idea, including 65 percent of Republicans. Board seats would grant workers input on issues like free trade, executive pay, job conditions, and the use of AI in the workplace — key points of contention in current labor disputes. Some businesses could go even further by exploring [profit-sharing models and worker ownership](#).

The labor movement, and public support for it, has momentum right now. Let's seize this moment and rally people from across the political spectrum and across career, class, race, and educational divides. We can build a broad movement around the idea that hard work deserves fair pay and that there is a better way to distribute the wealth created by American workers.

*Leslie McCall and Jennifer Sherman are professors of sociology at The CUNY Graduate Center and Washington State University. They are both members of the [Bridging the Diploma Divide Working Group](#), a network of scholars dedicated to healing political divisions.*

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