

## **Rights, Representation, & Repair: The Undeniable Utility of Unions in America**

**Connor Dalgaard**

It is no coincidence that the pandemic made people—particularly young ones—think about unions. The picture is complicated: in America, the share of workers who report membership to a labor union has fallen in half since 1983<sup>1</sup>. While union membership has decreased, recent years have brought on a stark rise in the community sentiment surrounding labor unions, with a Gallup poll revealing that a record-high 71% of Americans approve of labor unions<sup>2</sup>. Despite this haze in the public perception of labor unions, the power of unions to cement workers' rights, increase worker representation, and repair the American workplace is undeniable. Unions are back and they are here to stay.

Sector-based unionization is on the rise. Starbucks, one of the most visible examples of unionization efforts, has seen workers at over 250 stores demand better treatment, fair scheduling, and freedom from unfair dismissal<sup>3</sup>. Industry giants are unable to operate unchecked; companies must collaborate with, rather than control, the employees who are the vital spark of their business. Luckily, baristas are not alone. The pandemic exposed many shortcomings of the American healthcare system: a system that employs 22 million<sup>4</sup>. Refusing to sit idly by, healthcare workers embodied the American spirit by banding together to fight for reform in the workplace in the midst of the pandemic. For instance, nurses at Mission Hospital in North Carolina voted to unionize after being left out of important COVID-19 decisions<sup>5</sup> and UPMC employees in Pittsburgh called for higher pay, shorter hours, and a union itself<sup>6</sup>. Teachers, too, have exercised their right to unionize<sup>7</sup>. How can teachers be expected to cultivate the young minds that are inheriting multigenerational societal issues without having adequate working conditions themselves?

Baristas, nurses, and teachers are not alone in their utilization of labor unions. After all, history has shown that unions have immense power to provide workers with rights and representation while also repairing the workplace itself. Employment in a rapidly industrializing

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthews, *Vox*

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, *Gallup*

<sup>3</sup> Yang, *NPR*

<sup>4</sup> Laughlin et al., *United States Census Bureau*

<sup>5</sup> Pattani, *NPR*

<sup>6</sup> Sheehan, *CBS News Pittsburgh*

<sup>7</sup> Gershon, *JSTOR Daily*

America was gruesome, but it was labor unions that helped secure workers with basic protections. For instance, workers organized themselves in protest against shifts as long as 14 hours per day in mills and factories. Despite the absence of an immediate reward for these nationwide strikes, Congress eventually passed the Fair Labor Standards Act that cemented the eight-hour work day and five-day work week<sup>8</sup>. Some facets of the American workplace that modern workers take for granted are due to the handiwork of labor unions. Before unions, millions of children worked in factories and thousands of industrial workers died yearly due to unsafe working conditions. But by pushing employers and legislators to make workplaces safer, America saw the abolition of child labor and the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration<sup>8</sup>. The records make it clear: unions are an asset for innovation and prosperity.

Some have branded unions as *unnecessary* and *political*<sup>9</sup>. If unions fail to adapt to the times, then these sentiments may prove true. Yet, it is undeniably clear that the tides are turning. Young people are leading efforts to revitalize unions. After all, unions are appealing. They are inherently social movements—the likes of which have gained traction during the digital advocacy amidst the social isolation brought on by the pandemic—that promise tangible benefits. Positive views of capitalism among Gen Zers and millennials have decreased since 2019<sup>10</sup>. While unions do not offer a solution to the bleak economic future for many young workers burdened with student debt and high costs of living, they do offer a glimpse of hope.

American workers are less protected today compared to workers in other countries. In particular, America places very low in comparison to other developed nations when it comes to national policies regarding healthcare, unemployment, parental leave, retirement, and paid vacation<sup>11</sup>. This is in no doubt due to the decline in union membership and approval that occurred in the late twentieth century. However, the pandemic was a wake-up call for many American workers who were, for the first time, exposed to the unfairness and inequalities in non-unionized workplaces and industries. Recent news coverage has featured striking Starbucks workers and nurses who were treated unfairly by their respective employers. Unions are rising to prominence once again as an invaluable tool to create safe, equitable workplaces. Considering the extent to which labor unions bolstered efforts to improve workplaces over the last 150 years,

---

<sup>8</sup> Cole, *Time*

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *The Atlantic*

<sup>10</sup> *Pew Research Center*

<sup>11</sup> Iacurci, *CNBC*

only time will tell how these reformed workplaces will look in the future. Young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow, but they are also the leaders of today: leaders who are catalyzing the rebirth of labor unions.

## Bibliography

- Cole, Peter. "Beyond Labor Day: 3 Ways Unions Have Helped American Workers." *Time*, 30 Aug. 2019, <https://time.com/5663465/labor-day-union-history/>.
- Gershon, Livia. "The Rise of Teachers' Unions." *JSTOR Daily*, 9 May 2016, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-rise-of-teachers-unions/>.
- Iacurci, Greg. "U.S. is worst among developed nations for worker benefits." *CNBC*, 4 Feb. 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/02/04/us-is-worst-among-rich-nations-for-worker-benefits.html#:~:text=Americans%20have%20it%20worse%20than,Zenefits%2C%20a%20human%20resources%20firm..>
- Laighlin, Lynda, et al. "22 Million Employed in Health Care Fight Against COVID-19." *United States Census Bureau*, 5 Apr. 2021, [https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/who-are-our-health-care-workers.html#:~:text=There%20were%2022%20million%20workers,American%20Community%20Survey%20\(ACS\)](https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/04/who-are-our-health-care-workers.html#:~:text=There%20were%2022%20million%20workers,American%20Community%20Survey%20(ACS)).
- Matthews, Dylan. "Labor unions aren't 'booming.' They're dying." *Vox*, 10 Jun. 2023, <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2023/6/10/23754360/labor-union-resurgence-boom-starbucks-amazon-sectoral-bargaining>.
- McCarthy, Justin. "U.S. Approval of Labor Unions at Highest Point Since 1965." *Gallup*, 30 Aug. 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>.
- "Modest Declines in Positive Views of 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism' in U.S." *Pew Research Center*, 19 Sep. 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/09/19/modest-declines-in-positive-views-of-socialism-and-capitalism-in-u-s/>.
- Pattani, Aneri. "For Health Care Workers, The Pandemic Is Fueling Renewed Interest In Unions." *NPR*, 11 Jan. 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/01/11/955128562/for-health-care-workers-the-pandemic-is-fueling-renewed-interest-in-unions>.
- Sheehan, Andy. "Mayor Ed Gainey joins UPMC workers in calling for higher pay, shorter hours and union." *CBS News Pittsburgh*, 1 May 2023,

<https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/mayor-ed-gainey-upmc-workers-higher-pay-shorter-hours-union/>.

Thompson, Derek. “‘Unnecessary’ and ‘Political’: Why Unions Are Bad For America.” *The Atlantic*, 12 Jun. 2012,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/06/unnecessary-and-political-why-unions-are-bad-for-america/258405/>

Yang, Mary. “Starbucks union organizing gave labor a jolt of energy in 2022.” *NPR*, 9 Dec.

2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/12/09/1140424418/starbucks-union-organizing-gave-labor-a-jolt-of-energy-in-2022>.