

Why unions are having a renaissance

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What do performers at Disneyland, editorial staff at the publisher Dotdash Meredith and players on Dartmouth's men's basketball team have in common? They all have recently chosen to join a union. (And that's just the D's.) Kidding aside, working people get it: We can accomplish things together that would be impossible on our own, which is why unions are having a renaissance.

The AFT represents workers who make a difference in peoples' lives—in education, in healthcare and in public services—and they are joining the AFT at a record pace. In just the last month, we have welcomed librarians in Ohio, professors in New Mexico, hospice professionals in Washington and resident physicians in Michigan. And last week, after a nearly 50-year fight to win collective bargaining, more than 27,500 teachers and staff in Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools voted to join the AFT and the NEA in one of the largest union elections in modern history.

The economic advantages of belonging to a union are clear. Union members enjoy higher wages and better benefits than nonunion workers. Union households have nearly four times the wealth of nonunion households, and they are more likely to own a home and have a retirement plan than nonunion households.

Collective bargaining is the not-so-secret sauce, and the AFT supports our members with the tools to bargain to increase wages, achieve a better life for themselves and their families, and improve the quality of their services, whether in education, healthcare or public employment.

After the United Federation of Teachers in New York City and the faculty union at Portland State University in Oregon blazed the trail for paid parental leave, others have followed. The Cleveland Teachers Union's new contract includes 12 weeks of paid parental leave for educators as well as a first-in-the-nation cellphone policy that will decrease distractions from social media in the classroom.

The Newark (N.J.) Teachers Union's new contract permits teachers to design curriculum, an acknowledgement of their professional expertise. The Saint Paul Federation of Educators in Minnesota negotiated mental health teams in every school, including social workers, counselors, nurses and psychologists.

The Oregon Nurses Association's new collective bargaining agreement for nurses at Oregon Health and Science University establishes staffing plans that build on the new state law to improve patient care and combat nurse burnout.

All these contracts also include substantial pay increases.

We can tilt the balance of power so working people can forge a path to a better life..

Support for unions is at the highest level since 1965, with two-thirds of Americans approving of labor unions, including nearly 90 percent of Americans under age 30. Nearly half of nonunion workers say they would vote to join a union if they could. Yet only 1 in 10 workers in America is in a union.

One cause is five decades of efforts to decimate unions in the United States by billionaires and businesses. Research by the Economic Policy Institute shows that de-unionization is a significant factor in the surge in inequality and the decline of the middle class over the last 40 years. Working people are now losing about \$200 billion per year because of the erosion of union coverage—with that money being redistributed upward, to the rich.

Such rapacious corporate greed is behind current efforts by Amazon, Starbucks, Tesla and other hugely profitable corporations to crush unionization drives. Under current law, there are few or no consequences when employers intimidate or retaliate against workers exercising their legal right to form a union. That is why Congress must pass the Protecting the Right to Organize Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act, which will level the playing field by holding employers accountable for violating labor laws and by empowering workers to collectively bargain.

It's not just billionaires who try to snuff out workers' rights. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is using the same tactics former Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker used to kill public employee unions. In Fairfax County in Virginia, the fight for the right of teachers and other public employees to bargain collectively goes back nearly half a century, to a 1977 law banning public sector bargaining. It took the AFT and others until 2020 to win legislation there granting local governments the option to recognize and negotiate with unions. As the great American abolitionist Frederick Douglass observed, "Power concedes nothing without a demand."

Perhaps the strongest argument for unions and collective action is also the simplest: Individuals seeking change can be powerless alone; together we can tilt the balance of power so working people can demand—and forge—a path to a better life. That's the American dream.



Weingarten, center, at Kings Park Elementary School in Fairfax County, Va., on June 7.

Photo: Brett Sherman

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