A New Political Generation: Post-2008 U.S. Social Movements and The Revival Of Union Activism [*]

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This article analyses the emergence of a new political generation of progressive activists in the U.S. since 2008, and documents their growing engagement in labor organizing. I argue that this development has inverted the dynamic Alain Touraine wrote about in the 1980s: rather than the new social movements learning from the traditional workers' movement, activists with experience in those movements are building on those political experiences to revitalize and transform the labor movement. I also suggest that this new political generation may embody the 'return of the actor' that Touraine envisioned in the 1980s.

Keywords: labor activism; political generations; social movements; United States.

Introduction

By the late twentieth century, many observers considered not only the labor movement but also the 'new social movements' of the 1960s and 1970s to be in terminal decline across the wealthy world. The United States was said to be a post-feminist, post-racial society, amidst seemingly unassailable neoliberalism. Although he believed that in post-industrial societies there was 'no room for … renewal of the workers' movement,' (Touraine, 1987, p. 293), Alain Touraine was unusual in his insistence that the 'return of the actor' (1988) was on the horizon. His optimism may have seemed validated by the anti-globalization protests at century's end, exemplified by the 1999 'Battle of Seattle,' when organized labor and environmentalists joined together in street demonstrations against the World Trade Organization, capturing worldwide headlines. Yet only two years later, the 9/11 attacks all but obliterated that incipient movement from public memory.

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A few years after the 2008 global financial crisis, however, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) suddenly exploded into view, along with similar uprisings across the globe. These were early examples of 'connective action,' strategically deploying social media to mobilize; they also rejected conventional organizational forms in favor of more horizontal, 'leaderless' approaches (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). In the United States, veterans of the 1990s anti-globalization movement were among the key architects of OWS, but it rapidly attracted a far wider base of support, especially among young people. As I have documented elsewhere (Milkman, 2017), OWS' leading demographic was a new political generation of college-educated Millennials, who would soon go on to spearhead the 2014 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests as well as early iterations of 'Me Too' and a variety of other social movements. In the 2010s this new generation was also engaged in unionization drives among graduate student workers and adjunct faculty. Those efforts initially attracted little attention, but they laid the groundwork for more extensive and more visible Millennial and Gen-Z labor activism a decade later.

For the new political generation, as an OWS slogan declared, 'all our grievances are connected.' Indeed, young activists seemed to move effortlessly from protests against Wall Street to those against police racism and sexual assault, as well as to organizing for LGBTQ rights, immigrant rights, and climate justice. Critical of capitalism, they embraced Bernie Sanders' presidential campaigns and flocked into organizations like the Democratic Socialists of America. In the 2020s, they increasingly turned to labor organizing and, most recently, advocating Palestinian rights.

Touraine had predicted the return of the actor, but he expected the social movements of the future to reflect a new set of social dynamics: industrial society had given rise to the workers' movement, and post-industrial society to the 'new social movements,' like feminism and environmentalism, and now this would be followed by another set of political subjects engaged in collective action: 'A slow labor of formation of new social movements is taking place through successive historical sets of circumstances' (Touraine, 1988, p. 138). He further insisted that sociology should give 'a central role to the idea of social movement,' and argued for 'a sociology for which human beings make history knowing that they do so, while still being caught up in ideologies. (Touraine 1988, p. 139).

Touraine considered the workers' movement to be 'the most imposing so far of all the figures in the huge family of social movements' (Touraine, 1987, p. 293). 'The new social movements', in contrast, were 'diffuse,' yet they 'rapidly won an audience and an influence far greater than those achieved by

the labor union movement.' The new movements were also distinctive in that they were prefigurative: 'The labor movement worked for the future, a better tomorrow' while the new social movements 'want to live immediately in conformity with what they believe social life should become.' (Touraine 1988, pp. 132, 135). He certainly did not imagine a revival of labor or socialist organizing, but he did consider the legacy of the labor movement to be a useful template that could help to incubate other movements in the 'huge family': 'The workers' movement can provide the nascent social campaigns with the image of a social movement, and in so doing can help them develop and discover their own identities' (1987: 294).

In the 21st century that dynamic seems to have been reversed, at least in the United States. There, a new political generation of activists, already schooled in various other movements, many of them identity-based, is breathing new life into labor unions all but given up for dead while embracing an agenda that is both intersectional and anti-capitalist. Seizing the opportunity presented by the tight labor market and the heightened public awareness of employer abuses fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic, in the 2020s this new generation has poured its political energy into labor organizing on a scale not seen for decades. They have scored impressive union victories among what Touraine (following Mallet, 1975) called the 'new working class' of professional and proto-professional workers. They have made some inroads in low-wage service jobs at companies like Starbucks as well, and also have helped foster new union upsurges among traditional blue-collar workers.

This article documents the recent emergence of an embryonic 'militant minority' (Uetricht and Eidlin, 2019) in the U.S. labor movement, comprised of radicalized, college-educated 'Millennials' (born between 1981 and 1996) and Gen-Zers (born between 1997 and the early 2010s). This new political generation, which also spearheaded a variety of other social movements in the 2010s and 2020s, is the vital center of 21st century efforts to reinvigorate a labor movement that until recently was widely dismissed as obsolescent and in terminal decline. In the 2020s, Millennials and Gen-Zers led high-profile unionization drives at iconic companies like Starbucks and Amazon. They also launched organizing efforts targeting professional occupations that had become increasingly precarious, building on the groundwork laid in the 2010s (and in some cases even earlier) by union drives among graduate student workers, adjunct college and university faculty, journalists, public school teachers, and other college-educated workers. The new political generation also played a role in efforts to reinvigorate long-established

unions like the United Auto Workers and the Teamsters, widely heralded for their successful use of newly aggressive tactics in 2023 and 2024.

1. U.S. Unions' Long Decline and Recent Revitalization

To an even greater degree than in other advanced capitalist countries, the power of the U.S. labor movement was eroded dramatically in the closing decades of the 20th century. From a peak of 35 percent in 1955, the share of wage and salary workers who are union members fell to 23 percent by 1980, and to 14 percent by 2000. In 2023 the density rate stood at a mere 10 percent, and only 6 percent in the private sector – lower than at any time since the early 1930s (unionstats.com). Mirroring this unremitting density decline, the frequency and scale of strikes also plummeted during and after the 1980s, following President Reagan's infamous destruction of the nation's air controllers' union after its 1981 strike In the following years, with the aid of a burgeoning industry of 'labor consultants' or 'union busters,' private-sector employers perfected an array of aggressive and highly effective 'union avoidance' tactics, which quickly became standard operating procedure across corporate America and were the single most important driver of union decline.

As these developments tilted the playing field of U.S. industrial relations increasingly in favor of capital, labor leaders and other progressives made repeated efforts to redress the balance. They campaigned for labor law reform and simultaneously attempted to transform organized labor from within, adopting a series of strategic innovations. However, such efforts consistently failed to gain traction. Instead, a steady stream of neoliberal public policy initiatives and conservative judicial decisions relentlessly degraded labor rights. Public support for unions began to waver starting in the late 1960s, and obituaries for organized labor appeared regularly in both academic and journalistic commentary, penned by friends and foes alike. The ongoing erosion of union power contributed to the skyrocketing growth of income and wealth inequality and helped pave the way for the right-wing populism that propelled Donald Trump into the White House in 2016.

In the 2020s, however, a series of unexpected developments seemed to open the door to a reversal in labor's fortunes. The COVID-19 pandemic generated an extraordinarily tight labor market, driving unemployment to a level lower than any time since World War II. The public policy response to the crisis also (albeit temporarily) improved the economic situation of many workers, especially in the early months of the Biden administration. The

pandemic also heightened public awareness of the role of 'essential workers' and the abuses they suffered at the hands of employers. Emboldened by these changed conditions, many workers abandoned undesirable jobs for better ones in the so-called 'Great Resignation,' while a spike of collective protests over employers' failure to protect workers' health and safety helped stimulate an uptick in union organizing and strikes. Polls registered a rise in pro-union attitudes, especially among young adults, while Biden proclaimed himself 'the most pro-worker and pro-union president in American history.'

In April 2022, the startling news that the independent Amazon Labor Union had won a union representation election in Staten Island, New York made worldwide headlines and captured the public imagination, as did successful unionization efforts at hundreds of Starbucks stores across the country, and at a variety of other name-brand retail outlets like Apple and Chipotle. Meanwhilea series of major strikes broke out in long-unionized industries in 2022 and 2023, riding a wave of rank-and-file outrage over soaring executive pay and corporate profits, and chalking up gains for union members on a scale not seen for decades. And in April 2024 the United Automobile Workers (UAW) won a representation election at a Volkswagen plant in Tennessee, one of the first foreign-owned U.S. auto plants ever to be successfully unionized.

Although in the 21st century context, these developments seemed impressive, by historical standards the extent of strike activity was modest, especially relative to the period before 1980. Moreover, Amazon, Starbucks and other private-sector employers aggressively resisted the new union organizing efforts, forestalling any reversal of the long-term decline in union density. The absolute number of union members did rise slightly in 2022 and 2023, but was outpaced by labor force growth. Moreover, even when workers won legal recognition for their unions at Starbucks and elsewhere, they immediately confronted a new set of obstacles: following the longstanding standard corporate playbook, the employers not only fought union organizing at the initial stage, but if that failed they also took all possible steps to prolong the process of negotiating a union contract, defying the legal requirement that they 'bargain in good faith' while depleting union resources and morale.

All that said, the U.S. labor movement *has* gained wider support and greater momentum since the 2008 financial crisis, and especially since the start of the pandemic. Amid widespread public alarm about rising inequality and growing recognition that unions are one of the few potential counterforces to that trend, a new political generation has poured its considerable energies into union organizing and labor activism. A growing share of college-educated Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and

Gen-Zers (born between 1997 and the early 2010s) have embraced a politically progressive worldview and dedicated themselves to breathing new life into the beleaguered U.S. labor movement. Their efforts began to quietly take shape in the 2010s, and then accelerated in the 2020s, capitalizing on the tight labor market and other favorable conditions generated by the pandemic, and amplified by a flood of media coverage.

2. The New Political Generation: An Embryonic Militant Minority

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Millennials emerged as a new political generation, whose distinctive lived experiences set them apart from those born in earlier years. As I have argued elsewhere (Milkman, 2017), building on Karl Mannheim's insights from nearly a century ago, the political worldview and tactical repertoire of this generation reflected a unique set of historical and social upheavals that marked their formative years. They were the first 'digital natives,' immersed in internet-based technologies from childhood, which enabled them to deploy social media and other forms of digital communication with more agility and on a greater scale than their elders. And crucially, despite achieving higher levels of formal education than any previous generation, Millennials' economic aspirations were often blocked or frustrated. Not only were many saddled with student debt and inflated housing costs, but upon entering the labor market they encountered precarious employment arrangements that had severely degraded the middle-class jobs and professional careers to which they aspired. Some had difficulty finding any work at all: as economist Jesse Rothstein (2023) has shown, employment rates for U.S. college graduates fell precipitously for cohorts entering the labor market in the mid-2000s, and the decline was even sharper after the 2008 financial crisis, with enduring 'scarring' effects. Other young workers were victims of 'elite overproduction,' as exemplified by the surplus of young Ph.D. holders relative to the numbers of tenure-track job openings, or J.D.s relative to entry-level positions for lawyers (Smith, 2022).

Although both the explosive growth of social media and employment precarity also affected older generations, these developments had outsized effects on Millennials (and later, Gen-Zers) who experienced them at the most critical, formative stage in their lives. As Mannheim pointed out, those on the cusp of adulthood are especially susceptible to the effects of major societal shifts, as their worldviews (unlike their elders') are not yet fully formed. 'Early impressions tend to coalesce into a *natural view* of the world,'

he declared. 'All later experiences then tend to receive their meaning from this original set.' (Mannheim, 1927, p. 298).

Another factor shaping the worldview of Millennials and Gen-Zers was a deep sense of political betrayal. After being encouraged by their parents and teachers to believe that they were part of a post-racial society, and one in which gender inequality had been largely eliminated, they instead discovered as young adults that racism and sexism remained virulent, even as class inequality was growing explosively. Their disappointment laid the foundation, especially for those with extensive post-secondary education, for a generational worldview centered on intersectionality and its accompanying critiques of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. As that took root, the new political generation of college-educated Millennials began to join, and often lead, a series of progressive social movements, starting with Occupy Wall Street in 2011, and a few years later the Black Lives Matter movement (see Milkman, 2017). Along with Gen Zers, they also became a leading demographic in the climate justice movement, and after October 7, 2023, they galvanized the opposition to Israel's aggression in Gaza and support for Palestinian rights.

An early example of Millennials' political awakening was their enthusiastic support for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election. Not only were they far more likely to vote for him than other Americans, but thousands joined in the organizing efforts that drove Obama's White House bid – not coincidentally, the first presidential campaign to make extensive use of social media. Once Obama took office, however, many of his young supporters, disappointed with the slow pace of change, became disillusioned with electoral politics and pivoted further to the left.

Among the results of that shift was the appearance in 2010 of a new socialist journal, *Jacobin,* with an explicit goal of serving this emerging generation; it and other such publications would accumulate a large following over the next decade. A year later, Occupy Wall Street burst onto the political stage, capturing the public imagination with its critique of soaring inequality and the shortcomings of capitalism. Millennials were highly overrepresented among Occupy activists and supporters (Milkman, 2017), and many other young people who did not directly participate embraced its agenda. A 2011 Pew poll found that 49 percent of Millennials had a positive view of socialism, nearly double the rate for Baby Boomers (25 percent) at the time. The new generation was also more progressive than its predecessors on a wide array of other issues, from race and immigration to LGBTQ rights, and more (Kohut *et al*., 2011). Although most of the available survey data examines various generational groups at the same point

in time, the limited evidence that compares the attitudes of Millennials and Gen-Zers to those of earlier generations when they were the same age indicates that both cohort and age effects are significant (Hout, 2021, p. 1029; Burn-Murdoch, 2022; Milkman, 2017).

The Occupy movement itself was famously short-lived, but its veterans later flocked to the Bernie Sanders' 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns and joined the Democratic Socialists of America by the thousands. A growing number of newly radicalized young activists also entered the labor movement. At first that occurred largely under the radar, and outside the glare of media attention, although as early as 2013, a Pew survey found that 61 percent of Millennials had a favorable opinion of organized labor, compared to 49 percent of Baby Boomers (Dinnock *et al*., 2013). A 2020 survey found that Gen-Zers were even more supportive of unions than Millennials, and that both groups were more supportive than older workers had been at the same age. Among 'baby boomers' and 'Gen-Xers' (born 1946-64 and 1965-80, respectively), non-college educated respondents were more pro-union than those with a college education, but the opposite was true for Millennials and Gen-Zers (Center for American Progress 2022). Yet another 2023 survey done for the AFL-CIO found that 88 percent of respondents under age 30 (Gen-Zers) supported unions, compared to 69 percent of those aged 30-49 and 67 percent of those over 50 (GBAO, 2023).

Like the 1960s generation of college-educated young activists in the civil rights and anti-war movements a half-century earlier, the Millennials and Gen-Zers who became radical activists in the 2010s and 2020s were prototypes of 'biographical availability' (McAdam ,1986). Not only were they unencumbered by family obligations, but also (unlike their 1960s counterparts) many were unemployed or underemployed. Reflecting the stagnant labor market created by the 2008 financial crisis, and the longer-term transformation that rendered many previously stable jobs increasingly insecure, a 2011 survey of 18 to 34-year-olds found that almost half had taken a job they did not want 'to pay the bills,' and that only 30 percent considered their current job a 'career' (Taylor *et al*., 2012).

That a larger proportion of Millennials and Gen-Zers than any previous generation had graduated from college meant that the gap between their labor market expectations and the reality they faced was especially wide. As British journalist Paul Mason (2013) put it, they represented 'a new sociological type: the graduate with no future…. a generation… whose projected life-arc has switched, quite suddenly, from an upward curve to a downward one.' Even after the Great Recession was in the rear-view mirror, few could find the career opportunities that had been available to earlier

generations of college graduates. Instead, many were employed in marginal, insecure positions as interns, freelancers, independent contractors, and the like. They soon proved ripe targets for union organizing - organizing led by members of their own generation.

Their blocked aspirations, along with their radical political worldview, gradually led the new generation of Millennial and Gen-Z labor activists, which one commentator dubbed 'Generation Union' (Meyerson, 2022) to form an embryonic 'militant minority.' Not only did they express pro-union attitudes, but a critical mass chose to dedicate themselves to labor movement revitalization, as organizers, union staffers, or rank-and-file activists. In this regard they resemble the radical labor activists of the 1930s and 1940s, widely recognized as the most dedicated organizers of that exceptional era of U.S. union growth, whose 'ideological vision informed their unionism, making it militant, dynamic, and powerful' (Uetricht and Eidlin, 2019, p. 40).

The number of 21st century leftwing labor activists is still modest relative to that earlier era, and their intersectional ideology is more capacious. But like their predecessors they are passionately anti-capitalist and share a similar 'belief in the illegitimacy of managerial authority,' along with an intense commitment to organizing that wins them respect and recognition as leaders among their co-workers. Perhaps due to their high levels of education, they are not easily intimidated by anti-union management rhetoric, and many embody a class confidence that further adds to their leadership capacities. Those with experience as activists in other social movements – whether Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights, reproductive freedom, climate justice, or LGBTQ rights – further enrich the strategic repertoire of the labor campaigns they work in, which as Voss and Sherman (2000) have shown, is often a key ingredient of union revitalization. Whereas Touraine had expected such movements to learn from the labor movement, in the 21st century the opposite is true: the labor movement is learning from the 'new' social movements.

3. 'Generation Union's' Labor Activism

Union organizing efforts in occupations and sectors where workers have high skill levels or extensive professional training – what Touraine, following Mallet 1975) called the 'new working class' – generally yield superior and more enduring results than those in fields where workers are relatively unskilled and can easily be replaced by employers. The labor shortages that emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic further

emboldened workers and made them less fearful of employer reprisals than before. Indeed, along with the emergence of a generation unusually receptive to labor's appeal, with a high capacity for leadership, the tight labor market of the 2020s was a key spur for that decade's uptick in union organizing and strikes.

4. Organizing Low-Wage Private-Sector Workers

Public and media attention were riveted by the Amazon Labor Union's (ALU) triumph in a union representation election at the 'JFK8' warehouse in Staten Island, New York in April 2022. A year earlier, however, at another Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama, workers voted against unionization by a 2-to-1 margin. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ordered a second election in Bessemer after determining that Amazon was guilty of severe violations of U.S. labor law, but the union lost that one too, albeit by a smaller margin. Organized labor's institutional power was at a low ebb, and the outcome at Bessemer was typical of 21st century efforts to unionize private-sector companies, which deployed a toolkit of proven strategies to intimidate workers and defeat union drives. A decade-long organizing effort had failed abysmally at Wal-Mart not long before, and the Bessemer outcome seemed entirely predictable – par for the course.

But at JFK8 in Staten Island the stars suddenly aligned, stunning labor experts along with the broader public. In a prototypical case of what Eric Blanc (2025) calls 'worker-to-worker unionism,' the ALU triumphed despite miniscule resources and with no institutional backing from the labor establishment. It was led by a scrappy group of young left-wing activists, including several 'salts' who had deliberately hired into JFK8 to help out with the campaign. 'One of the main divisions was age,' an ALU organizer told Blanc, declaring that 'the average age of an ALU organizer is about 26 – many older workers tended to be more skeptical of the union.' Workers' experience of the pandemic added more fuel to the fire.

The most celebrated of the ALU's young leader was Christian Smalls, a charismatic Black Millennial who had been fired by Amazon after leading a walkout over health and safety issues in the early days of the pandemic. Amazon management openly ridiculed Smalls and spent $4.3 million on anti-union consultants to counter the ALU. Ultimately, however, this arrogant display of power backfired. Workers were enraged not only by the despotic managerial regime, with its intensive electronic surveillance and automated discipline for 'time off task,' but also by Amazon's blatant indifference to

their health and safety, even as its profits grew explosively during the pandemic lockdowns. The ALU adopted a labor-intensive organizing strategy, reaching out to workers one-on-one inside the plant during breaks, with special appears to workers of color and immigrants, and distributed free food (and marijuana, already legal in New York) near bus stops in front of the warehouse. They also made extensive use of social media, especially TikTok and Telegram (Milkman, 2022).

This was a social justice drama unfolding in the public eye and amplified by a flood of media attention. It was a struggle of 'essential workers' who daily risked their lives on the job, while enduring a brutal shop floor regime, demanding union recognition from a corporate Behemoth whose CEO, Jeff Bezos, was the richest person on the planet at the time. The fact that everyone involved worked at JFK8 (or had done so, like Smalls, until they were fired for organizing) eliminated the potential for management to paint the ALU as an 'outside' organization, a standard tactic in the corporate anti-union playbook. And with the pandemic-induced labor shortage at its peak, Amazon workers knew that they could easily find other jobs if they were fired – as Smalls had been – for supporting the union.

The organizing campaign underway at Starbucks at the same time, starting with a surprise victory in Buffalo, New York in December 2021, was another effort to which underemployed college-educated young workers flocked *en masse*. Starbucks Workers United (SWU) was spearheaded by Rhodes Scholar Jen Briazck, who worked as a salt in the Buffalo, New York store, the site of the initial breakthrough that later inspired workers at other Starbucks outlets across the nation to replicate it. SWU went on to win representation elections at hundreds of the company's stores. Although unlike ALU, the Starbucks effort did have support (funding and expertise) from the established union Workers United, it too relied on a worker-to-worker organizing approach, with union staffers taking a back seat, at least at first. Like the ALU, SWU targeted an iconic U.S. company, led by ultra-wealthy entrepreneur Howard Schultz, who made no secret of his determination to defeat the fledgling union and reject the demands of its vulnerable, poorly-paid members.

Union fever spread among young workers employed by other brand-name companies, including Apple, Chipolte and a variety of smaller retailers like Trader Joes, REI and others. All of these campaigns targeted companies that disproportionately employed college-educated Millennials and Gen-Zers, who embraced the unions involved – most of them 'worker-to-worker' efforts similar to ALU – with unbridled enthusiasm. As at Amazon and

Starbucks, these efforts were aided by the tight labor market; but in all of them, workers could be easily replaced.

Indeed, even when they won legal recognition, which itself could be delayed by various employer foot-dragging tactics, these fledgling unions encountered formidable obstacles in seeking to negotiate an initial collective bargaining agreement. As labor journalist Steven Greenhouse observed in December 2023:

> When nonunion workers are eager to get a union contract, they have to climb not just one but two often forbidding mountains. First, they must win a unionization drive, frequently against a fiercely anti-union company; and second, often harder and taking far longer, they need to cinch a first contract. Climbing this second mountain is much harder than many workers realize. The first Starbucks store unionized (in Buffalo, New York) in December 2021, the first REI store (in Manhattan) in March 2022, the first Amazon warehouse (on Staten Island) in April 2022, the first Apple Store (in Towson, Maryland in June 2022. Yet workers from all four companies say a first contract remains miles away.

Under U.S. labor law, if a union wins recognition, employers are required to 'bargain in good faith,' but in recent years this provision has been honored more often in the breach than the observance. Not only do workers often become discouraged while negotiations drag on, but in the absence of a contract such fledgling unions are unable to begin collecting dues, depleting their already-limited resources. Meanwhile, at high-turnover workplaces like Amazon and Starbucks, the workers who voted for the union are rapidly replaced by newcomers.

At a few smaller companies with limited resources to devote to anti-union efforts, persistent organizing has yielded collective bargaining agreements, as Blanc (2025) has documented for the case of the regional Burgerville fast food chain in the Northwestern United States. There an independent union did win a contract in late 2021 after five years of organizing. Although the effort included a series of brief strikes, it primarily relied on naming and shaming the Burgerville company, which promoted itself as a progressive brand. In this case it helped that the employer's power and resources were more limited than at mega-corporations like Amazon. The campaign also banked on the radicalization of young workers, who as a Burgerville organizer told Blanc, 'just have stopped believing in bosses and corporations.'

Contracts remain elusive for the better-known organizing efforts at larger companies, but in February 2024, soon after Howard Schulz stepped down as CEO, Starbucks emerged as a potential exception: the company agreed to enter collective bargaining with the aim of reaching a 'framework agreement'

for the nearly 400 stores that had voted to unionize – a step it had adamantly resisted for more than two years. A key element in this breakthrough involved the Starbucks' union activists' commitment to opposing Israeli aggression in Gaza. After the company denounced a 'Solidarity with Palestine' message posted on the union's X (formerly Twitter), activists in Malaysia, Oman, Morocco, and elsewhere organized boycotts of Starbucks, and in Turkey they organized sit-in at Starbucks stores. The company's profits were impacted, as its CEO acknowledged, and soon after Starbucks agreed to bargain (Rosenblum, 2024).

It is probably no coincidence that – unlike the campaigns at Amazon, Trader Joe's and REI (as well as Burgerville), the Starbucks campaign is backed by an established union, Workers United, which contributed substantial staff and funding to the effort. A series of short strikes, along with a nascent grassroots boycott, over 100 NLRB unfair labor practice charges and other legal disputes also damaged the company's bottom line and its public reputation. It now seems possible that the union may be able to win a first contract, against all odds, although many observers have expressed skepticism about Starbucks' peace offering, especially since the company has also brought a recent lawsuit (along with Amazon and SpaceX) challenging the constitutionality of the bedrock U.S. labor relations law, the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (Greenhouse, 2024).

5. Organizing Professional Workers

Millennials and Gen-Zers have also led organizing efforts among professionals and other highly skilled workers, including groups with no previous history of unionism, like architects, doctors, research scientists, and tech workers. In such fields, where workers are difficult or impossible to replace, unions have more easily gained traction, albeit on a limited scale, than at the brand-name companies that have received the lion's share of media attention. Moreover, these campaigns among professionals and proto-professionals followed in the footsteps of others targeting highly trained workers that had been underway for at least a decade, and which already had achieved considerable success.

The first major wave of organizing of this type involved graduate student workers and adjunct faculty in colleges and universities, who began to embrace unionism in large numbers in the 2010s. Unionization of academic staff in public universities dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when many U.S. states first enacted laws permitting public-sector collective bargaining.

But around the turn of the 21st century, in response to the precipitous decline in the availability of tenure-track jobs, union organizing efforts gained momentum in both public and private colleges and universities. Adjunct and other contingent faculty were keenly aware of the vast gap between their pay, benefits and working conditions and those of tenure-track faculty. Graduate student workers, similarly, recognized that the careers they aspire to are becoming increasingly elusive. Giventhese frustrated aspirations, union organizers came to view both groups as low-hanging fruit, notwithstanding fierce opposition from college and university administrators.

In the 2010s, as various legal obstacles to unionizing student workers were gradually removed, the pace of higher education organizing picked up. The United Automobile Workers (UAW) emerged as the single largest union representing graduate student workers, while the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) took the lead among adjuncts. This was *not* 'worker-to-worker' organizing, but took a more traditional form, with experienced union staffers guiding campaigns culminating in representation elections. Most such efforts proved successful: unions won 21 of the 25 private-sector elections held among graduate student workers between 2012 and 2019 (Herbert and Van der Naald 2021: 229). Faculty unionism too surged ahead in this period: between 2013 and 2021, over 42,400 faculty members (mostly non-tenure-track) won union recognition for 126 bargaining units (Herbert, Apkarian and Van der Naald 2023, p. 9).

Initially, these developments attracted little notice outside the higher education and labor communities. But that changed with the pandemic lockdowns, which intensified stress among graduate student workers and adjunct faculty, who were also keenly aware of the high-profile union drives among their contemporaries at Amazon, Starbucks, and the rest. In 2022 and the first half of 2023 alone, 30 new bargaining units covering over 35,000 student-workers (including some undergraduates as well) won union recognition, with 91 percent of workers, on average, voting in favor of unionization. Faculty, graduate student workers, and postdoctoral fellows also went on strike in unprecedented numbers in the 2020s. There were 20 academic worker strikes in 2022 and the first half of 2023 alone, including the massive UAW walkout at the University of California among 45,000 graduate student-workers and postdoctoral scholars (Herbert, Apkarian and Van der Naald, 2023). These strikes were generally quite effective, winning major improvements in pay, benefits and conditions for academic workers. Many of the students and faculty who were active in such union drives and strikes went on to participate in or support the 2023-24 campus occupations protesting U.S. support for Israeli assaults against Palestinians.

Journalists, especially young journalists, also unionized extensively starting in the 2010s, again largely under the radar, drawing little media or public attention. Although the number of workers involved was far more modest than in higher education, between 2015 and early 2020, more than 90 successful union drives brought over 5,000 journalists into the labor fold, both at digital media outlets and at traditional newspapers and magazines (Smith, 2020). Employers did resist these efforts, but the unions prevailed in almost every campaign they undertook. Their professional training is less extensive than that of academic workers, but journalists too have substantial skill and specialized knowledge, making them difficult to replace and therefore able to exert leverage.

Like the unionization efforts in colleges and universities, those in the news media were conventional in form, relying on guidance from experienced union staff from the NewsGuild or the Writers Guild of America-East, although many of the campaigns were initiated by young journalists themselves. Few of those involved had prior experience with unions, but many were they keenly attuned to the changing political and social climate in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, on which they often reported in the course of their daily work. Moreover, they found themselves in an industry that had undergone dramatic restructuring, rendering their jobs increasingly precarious. Whereas earlier generations of journalists had relatively well-paid and stable careers, by the 2010s the typical trajectory for a budding journalist was to 'start in an unpaid internship, graduate to freelancing, become a permalancer, and change employers multiple times…. all while carrying student debt' (Cohen and de Peuter, 2020, p. 5). Once the wave of organizing among journalists took off, it snowballed from one workplace to another, much like the pattern that would unfold a few years later at Starbucks. The NewsGuild and WGA efforts chalked up a record of considerable success, winning substantial improvements in pay, benefits and working conditions.

Similar efforts developed in the 2010s among staff at museums, foundations, nonprofit organizations, political campaigns, and elsewhere; unionization drives among such white-collar and professional workers – most of them young and college-educated – continued to multiply in the 2020s. In the case of museum workers, the impetus to organize expanded with the pandemic lockdowns. Employment precarity had been an issue for them well before 2020, but now workers faced health risks, pay cuts and furloughs even as the institutions that employed them pocketed government support designed to carry them through the crisis. 'A virulent strain of unionism, born out of lockdown and pressingly of the moment, has swept the

museum sector,' *The Art Reporter*'s Tom Seymour declared in early 2022, adding:

> This is a new form of collective action, remotely formed, digitally optimized, fluent in social communications… peopled by a new demographic of museum worker, one more politicised, younger, and more diverse than previous generations. Yet it is also one saddled with high levels of student debt and having to contend with astronomical living costs.

Similar dynamics have spurred union growth in the non-profit sector in the 2020s. The Nonprofit Professional Employees Union grew from 300 workers at 12 organizations in 2018 to 1,500 workers at nearly 50 organizations by early 2023 (Rendon, 2023). As at museums, the young, well-educated workers employed by nonprofit organizations embraced unionism as the best vehicle to challenge a business model they criticized as predicated on low pay and insecure employment, despite the progressive rhetoric espoused by organizational leaders.

Although their numbers are relatively modest to date, medical residents and doctors have also begun turning to unions to combat deteriorating pay and working conditions. "A new generation of doctors struggling with ever-increasing workloads and crushing student debt is helping drive unionization efforts in a profession that historically hasn't organized," one reporter noted (Reed, 2024, see also Scheiber, 2023). Similarly, architects have begun to unionize since the pandemic, concerned about stagnating pay and long hours, as well as reduced autonomy (Scheiber, 2021).

6. Legacy Unions and the Strikes of 2021-23

The tight labor market of the pandemic years also emboldened long-established blue-collar 'legacy' unions, which had been forced to concede painful 'givebacks' to employers for decades, most recently during the Great Recession. Since the 1980s, private-sector unions have beenwary of strikes, fearing that employers might 'permanently replace' their members – as U.S. law permits (it does not require employers to rehire strikers after a settlement). Strikes were more common in this period among public-sector workers, along with nurses and other health care workers. But a new dynamic took shape starting in 2018, when teachers in West Virginia struck, sparking a wave of teachers' strikes across multiple states. The teaching workforce spanned multiple generations, but the strike leaders were disproportionately

young, including supporters of Bernie Sanders and DSA members, and used Facebook as a primary organizing tool (Blanc, 2019). These strikes were illegal, but they were in the public sector and involved relatively limited risk.

A break with the long hiatus in private-sector strikes came when the pandemic exposed blue-collar workers to a new set of health risks to which their employers often seemed indifferent, and in the face of mounting inflation. Starting in 2021, strikes (or in some cases strike threats) broke out increasingly in long-unionized companies as collective bargaining agreements expired. Workers had become increasingly discontented as they watched profitability return to the firms employing them, and as executive pay steadily rocketed upward while they were falling behind. This disparity also attracted public sympathy, while the tight labor market dramatically reduced the risk that employers would permanently replace them.

In the fall of 2021, which some pundits called 'Striketober,' workers struck at Nabisco, Kellogg's and John Deere, an agricultural equipment manufacturer where a walkout of 10,000 UAW-represented workers made headlines. In some cases, rank-and-file members rejected the initial contracts negotiated by union officials, demanding and winning increased concessions. Union leaders, beaten down for decades, were trapped in a siege mentality that made them understandably cautious, and most of them failed to recognize that the environment had fundamentally changed. The tight labor market endured, alongside public and media fascination with the new union organizing at Amazon and elsewhere, and soon after with large-scale strikes at the University of California and other universities. Gallup reported that over two-thirds of the U.S. public 'approved of unions' in the 2021-23 period, higher than any time since the late 1960s; among respondents under age 35, three-quarters approved. The Biden administration regularly proclaimed its support for organized labor, and Biden's appointee as NLRB General Counsel, Jennifer Abruzzo, stepped up enforcement of workers' rights.

Against this background, new leaders came to the helm of two large legacy unions, the Teamsters and the UAW, both of which had recently been put under government regulation amid corruption scandals. In late 2021, Sean O'Brien was elected president of the Teamsters with a militant platform, defeating the Hoffa-backed establishment candidate by a two-to-one margin. O'Brien had supported a successful effort earlier that year to abolish a union rule requiring a two-thirds majority vote to reject a contract – a rule that embittered many workers in 2018 when the union leadership signed a new contract with UPS that had been voted down by a majority of members. The UAW also elected a new, militant president in early 2023, Shawn Fain, soon after the union adopted new rules enabling members to directly elect its top

officers. Fain won in a close vote, as part of a reform slate critical of the previous leadership's timidity.

O'Brien was elected to the Teamster presidency with the support of the decades-old dissident group Teamsters for a Democratic Union, some of whose leaders are now on the union's executive board. In 2023, as the UPS contract expiration date approached, O'Brien loudly threatened the company with a strike if the union's demands were not met. UPS had racked up enormous profits amid the surge in parcel delivery during the pandemic, emboldening the Teamsters and its new leadership. They undertook detailed strike preparations, including widely-publicized practice picketing when bargaining stalled, and won major wage and benefit gains for its 340,000 UPS members without actually carrying out the strike threat. The new contract was ratified by 86 percent of those voting.

The Teamsters had enormous leverage in 2023. Along with the tight labor market, in the context of skyrocketing demand for parcel delivery, UPS risked permanently losing market share to its competitors during a protracted strike and thus had every incentive to settle the dispute. That was not the case for the UAW as its contract expiration dates with the 'Big Three' auto makers (GM, Ford and Stellantis) approached in the fall of 2023, when car inventories were ample. But the long-established UAW was able to mobilize its rank-and-file workers, many of them embittered by their vivid memories of the U.S. government's auto industry bailout after the 2008 financial crisis, when the UAW had agreed to large givebacks. Now that the Big Three were highly profitable, workers felt entitled to their fair share. Still, in contrast to the Teamsters, for the UAW the threat of a walkout alone was not enough to extract significant gains, and in September 2023 it launched an aggressive strike against the Big Three.

Fain loudly denounced the auto executives and their gargantuan salaries and opened the contract negotiations with a bold demand for a 40 percent wage increase. With rhetoric closer to that of Bernie Sanders than of his UAW predecessors, Fain publicly ridiculed the employers, at one point releasing a video in which he ceremoniously tossed Stellantis' opening offer into a trash can. Rank-and-file anger was also on full display in frequent public rallies. The union's confrontational stance seemed to take the companies by surprise, as did the strategic logic of the strike itself: targeting individual plants with 'stand-up' walkouts on short notice, one after the next. After six weeks, the companies agreed to a 25 percent wage hike and a reversal of many previous givebacks, the settlement also met some of the UAW's demands regarding Big Three electric battery plants. Building on this victory, the union announced it would invest substantial resources in

organizing the foreign-owned auto assembly plants across the U.S. South. Previous attempts to do so had consistently failed, but in April 2024 the UAW won a union representation election at the Volkswagen plant in Tennessee by a nearly 3-to-1 majority (Boudette, 2024).

No one would mistake O'Brien or Fain for members of the Millennial generation, even if as 50-somethings they were well below the average age of U.S. union presidents. Nor did the workers at UPS or the Big Three bear any resemblance to those at Amazon or Starbucks: these were non-college-educated blue-collar workers of the traditional type. Still, the Teamsters and UAW of 2023 were deeply influenced by the new generation of labor activists. Shawn Fain's top staff included three radical activists in their 30s, who by all accounts played a central role in crafting the strike strategy. Their bold approach to union communications, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, 'stunned auto executives accustomed to behind-closed-doors discussions' (Eckert and Colias, 2023). Young activists were also prominent in the 2023 UPS contract campaign and are increasingly visible among union staffers across the labor movement. Moreover, the election win at Volkswagen reflected a shift in the age profile of the workforce there: starting in 2022 the company hired over 2000 new workers for the plant, many of them young and some of them drawn from regions where unions were well established (Elk, 2024).

Other large strikes in 2023 included the Hollywood writers and actors, whose unions struck simultaneously for the first time since 1960, as well as walkouts by unionized nurses and other health care workers, hotel workers, teachers and school support workers. A total of about 500,000 workers participated in strikes in 2023, double the figure for 2022. These figures pale relative to those of the 1970s, when between 1.7 and 3.3 million workers struck each year, at a time when the nation's labor force was far smaller. But in the 2020s, established unions flexed their muscles on a far larger scale than any time in recent memory. It remains to be seen whether or not the favorable conditions of this moment – the tight labor market and the public support for unions fueled by the pandemic – will endure.

Conclusion

Labor upsurges like those of the 1930s and the 1960s were not incremental, but instead came in huge waves, and went hand-in-hand with sweeping changes in labor law. Perhaps the 2020s is the start of such a wave in the United States, even if the results of the new organizing and strikes to

date have been modest. Union density remains lower than it has been for nearly a century – a mere 6 percent in the private sector – despite the impressive organizing efforts described above. And the uptick in strikes in the 2020s could be a temporary result of the tight labor market and other effects of the pandemic. U.S. labor law remains a major obstacle to further progress, and the political gridlock in Congress offers little hope for change on that front. Yet there is a basis for optimism in the determination of the new generation of Millennial and Gen-Z activists who have planted roots in the labor movement, and who appear highly committed to continuing their organizing efforts. More than half the U.S. population is now made up of Millennials, Gen Zers and younger individuals (Frey, 2020), which could portend a workforce increasingly receptive to unionism.

Many of the young activists who constitute labor's new militant minority were previously active in other social movements. For example, one Starbucks organizer told a reporter that his 'anger over the environment had led him to… embrace the labor movement," (Kim, 2022). Similarly, in a study of retail workers' organizing in New York City, Michelle O'Brien (2021, p. 829) found that queer and trans workers were 'unusually eager to move towards collective action and labor organizing due to… their prior social movement participation.' The 2023-24 protests against U.S. support for Israel's attacks on Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon have also helped to recruit more young people into labor activism, and despite some foot-dragging on the part of the older union leaders, U.S. unions have increasingly joined calls for a ceasefire (Scheiber, 2024).

In this way the new generation of U.S. labor movement organizers has inverted the dynamic Alain Touraine wrote about in the 1980s: rather than the new social movements learning from the traditional workers' movement, activists with experience in those movements are building on those political experiences to revitalize and transform the labor movement. Nevertheless, this new political generation may yet develop into the 'return of the actor' that Touraine envisioned in the 1980s.

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