

Can Occupy Save Labor? The People United Will Never Be Defeated

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The labor movement has been in decline for decades, while more than one-third of employed people belonged to unions in 1945, union membership fell to 24.1% of the U.S. work force in 1979 and to 13.9% in 1998. Today, including all workers public and private, 11.4% are union members, for workers outside of government it is only 6.5%. Restrictive laws make organizing workers very difficult so a new strategy is needed to increase worker power. That strategy needs to include uniting unions, non-union workers and the people. The 99% needs to see that it is everyone's interest to have a strong labor movement.

The Occupy Movement has shown itself to be very pro-labor, as can be seen in the outline of Occupy Washington, DC's position statement: [Worker's Rights and Jobs](#). But, we are not lockstep with union leadership. Indeed, perhaps the most important difference is we are independent of the two political parties, while most unions are closely tied to the Democratic Party - and have been closely tied to the Democrats throughout the decline of the union movement.

One task of the Occupy Movement will be to pressure both parties to end restrictions on the rights of worker's to organize. Many see the passage of the [Taft-Hartley Act in 1947](#) as the foundational step to union decline. The law, which passed with [majority votes from both parties](#) to override a presidential veto, limited the rights of workers to organize, support each other and made it difficult to start new unions. In addition, [lack of enforcement of laws](#) that protect unions from plant closings weakened union power. Race to the bottom corporate strategies seeking lower wages in states not friendly to unions, and now leaving a country to go to developing countries for cheap, virtual slave, labor has been a key to weakening workers. Policies can be developed to protect workers, but there is no backbone in the Democratic Party to do so, and the Republican Party is hostile to unions.

No doubt new approaches and new militancy is going to be required for the labor movement to be revived. Merely managing the shrinkage of union members is a strategy for failure. Not challenging laws that block union organizing ensures union failure. Staying allied with a corporate-funded Democratic Party that has stood by while unions declined is a sure way to the end of labor power. A break from the past fifty years is needed to deal with globalization, change to an information and service worker-dominated country from a manufacturing country. These are all very challenging tasks for labor leadership.

The Occupy Movement could be a critical ingredient in the revival of unions. Unions had been an essential weight balancing against the power of concentrated wealth. With the decline of unions we have seen wages for Americans peak in 1973, the minimum wage

losing one-third of its value since its peak in 1968 and workers having a smaller and smaller percentage of the GDP. The weakening of labor has been a key ingredient to the increasing concentration of wealth and political power in the hands of the 1%.

Yesterday we saw an example of how the Occupy Movement, working with labor, can achieve victories for workers. West coast longshoremen seem to have resolved an important multi-year labor dispute, with the help of the Occupy Movement. In "[Showdown Averted](#)," after describing the valiant militancy of longshoreman, Ben Shreiner writes:

“. . . one cannot overlook the impact the Occupy movement also had in bringing pressure to bear on EGT. For example, the December Occupy-led West Coast port shutdown, called in solidarity with Local 21, succeeded in shutting down port terminals in Oakland, Portland, and Seattle.

“Moreover, a solidarity caravan set to ferry both ILWU rank and file and occupiers from Seattle to Oakland in an attempt to block EGT’s looming attempt to begin operations at its terminal had raised the specter of thousands of protesters converging on the Port of Longview. In fact, fearing a potential mass protest, EGT had resorted to calling on the US Coast Guard to safeguard its vessel and terminal.

“Undoubtedly, such a combination of pressure coming from both the union and the greater community factored heavily into EGT’s calculus to return to the bargaining table.”

It is not just the Occupy Movement that was key to this seeming success, longshoreman militancy was also key, Shreiner writes:

“On two separate occasions, for instance, ILWU Local 21 and their supporters blocked trains from reaching EGT’s scab facility. And back in September, longshoremen stormed the EGT terminal, allegedly dumping grain from an idle train car.

“Of course, such militancy has also extracted a heavy toll. To date, the union faces more than \$300,000 from numerous fines and federal injunctions. The longshoremen and their families, meanwhile, have been subject to 75 arrests, 200 citations, and various other means of police intimidation and harassment.”

The uniting of union militancy with Americans in revolt seems to have turned this conflict into a victory for workers.

Before claiming victory, the details of the settlement will have to be released and approved by the workers, but even so, this example shows how the Occupy Movement — united with labor — can protect worker’s rights. This is an example we can build on to weaken corporate power and strengthen worker power as part of our efforts to shift power to the people.

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