

Labor Unions Must Act Now to Survive US Supreme Court Deathblow

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Unions have a decision to make: organize or die. It's that simple. These are the only two options now that the Supreme Court announced it would hear the case "Friedrichs v. California Teacher Association."

The court intends to take aim at the head of organized labor by ruling against the California Teachers Association, and in the process fundamentally change labor law in a way that would cripple public sector unions, the last bastion of significant social power in the U.S. labor movement. If the public sector unions are destroyed, the private sector and building trades will be targeted next, as the [devastation in Wisconsin proved](#).

Although the Supreme Court is expected to be anti-union, there is still time to change the Court's mind. The Supreme Court is like any other political organization: it is incredibly sensitive to public sentiment and flexed social power.

For example, gay marriage wouldn't be legal today if not for the boldness, tenacity and mobilization of the LGBTQ movement. The labor movement has much to learn from this experience. Like labor unions today, gay marriage wasn't very popular too long ago. But activists fought like hell to change public opinion and display their power, winning their rights in the process.

Most unions on the other hand seem terrified of their own power. Instead of acting boldly and mobilizing, unions stay passive and quiet, and consequently their members often feel powerless. But there is inherent power in a union that waits to express itself.

For example, the national movement for a \$15 minimum wage was started by unions, and unions helped lead the successful campaigns for a \$15 minimum wage in Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Such victories weren't conceivable two years ago, but unions finally flexed their muscles and won big.

Unions also acted boldly in opposing the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), Obama's free trade deal that is certain to lower wages in the U.S while favoring corporate profits. Unions helped educate millions of people about the TPP and threatened politicians who voted "yes," causing a crisis in Congress in the process. And while the TPP may still pass, unions have promised the politicians who voted for "fast track authority" that they will be unemployed after the next election.

The "fight for \$15" and the anti-TPP organizing are just small examples of what unions are capable of. And more action is needed, now. The Supreme Court will decide on the future of the union movement in the fall. The clock is ticking.

All unions should create action plans now, which should address two fundamental questions:

1. how to better engage and represent their members
2. how to better engage the community, especially by fighting for and winning issues important to union and non-union workers.

If unions successfully engage their members and their community nationally, the Supreme Court will likely think twice. And even if the Supreme Court does rule against unions, the blow will be deflected by this organizing, serving only to spur more pro-union action.

Below are some suggestions that unions can adopt to engage the community and their members. Other ideas may be better for different unions. The important thing is that unions have a plan and act, now!

ACTION PROPOSALS:

- Hold community town halls about what unions are, how to organize one, and the impending Supreme Court decision. Invite local politicians and insist that they become public champions against the Supreme Court decision.
- Have events in the union hall that are open to the community. Allow neighborhood and community groups to use the union hall for meetings or events.
- Fight for good union contracts. Educate members about the importance of organizing a credible strike threat to win a good contract ([here](#) are “strike school” materials created by SEIU 1021 that may help).
- Fight for and win a \$15 minimum wage for all workers, which will also serve to strengthen the bargaining hand of all workers who make over \$15. In states where there are voter ballot initiatives unions should aim for a statewide minimum wage of \$15. Unions in Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles have won a \$15 minimum wage; and now people in those cities are much more “pro union.” Unions who have members that make under \$15 should demand \$15 for a base wage in the next contract negotiations while asking for community support of the campaign, as unions [have done in Portland](#), OR and elsewhere.
- Fight for and win rent control for communities facing exorbitant rents, which is nearly every city in the country. Working people in general will be won over to the union cause if they see organized labor fighting for affordable rent for all. Unions should be fighting for ANY important issue to a particular community, especially since rank – and – file union members are also members of that community.
- Create member-run union committees whose mission is to educate and build community within the union. Give members control over what the committee does, and give union resources to the committee. Some possible activities may include: “member appreciation” for the whole family; a BBQ at a park, union education workshops, movie screenings at the union hall, happy hour, etc.
- Give support and coordinate with the Black Lives Matter movement. There is tremendous energy across the nation that unions must organize with and support. Many of the issues most immediate to African Americans are often issues directly connected to the labor movement. [Martin Luther King , Jr. once remarked](#) at an AFL-CIO convention:

“Our needs are identical with labor’s needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old-age security, health and welfare measures,... the duality of interests of labor and Negroes makes any crisis which lacerates you, a crisis from which we bleed.”

This quote gets to the heart of the matter. MLK understood that the very existence of strong unions is a counterbalance to the giant power of corporations and the wealthy that oppress African Americans as well as other minorities, the poor, and working people in general. MLK knew and appreciated the significance of unions being the only organization of working people that was organized and sufficiently resourced to protect broader layers of working people.

There are many unions across the country that have taken MLK’s words to heart, enabling them to create strong connections with their communities.

One excellent example is SEIU 1021 in northern California. Local 1021 led the campaign for a \$15 minimum wage in San Francisco, and also worked in a coalition to win the important “Retail Workers Bill of Rights”.

Local 1021 has also taken a more aggressive attitude towards winning better contracts for its members by organizing strikes and focusing on education and internal organization.

The important thing is that SEIU 1021 is trying new ways to strengthen their union and their union’s ties to the community. They are taking risks and acting boldly, something the national labor movement must do immediately.

Some unions think that they must either focus on internal union representation, or focus on new organizing or community work. This is wrong. Unions must do it all, and it can only be done if members are either engaged in the work of the union, inspired by the work of the union, or connected to the union in some other way. Members must really feel like the union is “their union,” and the broader community should feel the same way.

Although the above tasks seem gargantuan, there are no short cuts to saving the labor movement. If public sector unions are squashed, the remaining private sector unions will be scattered like ants and stomped.

If unions are made relevant to their members and the community, they will again be immune to the threats of the wealthy and corporations, as they were in the decades following World War II when the union movement was made strong through collective action and fighting for all working people.

The only way to win the allegiance of the broader community is to fight for issues important to them. In an era where tens of millions are experiencing a social crisis, unions can no longer rely on lobbying Democrats for half measures. A deeper change is being demanded everywhere.

Given the seriousness of the situation, every union has a duty to its members to explain the significance of the upcoming Supreme Court decision, what can be done to prevent it, and to immediately prepare the ground for a more engaged, energetic, and relevant union movement.

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