

Workers Need More Rights and Economic Democracy

By [Howie Hawkins](#)

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As someone who has been a union member since I was a Marine with the American Servicemen's Union until I retired last year as a Teamster as well as a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, I have lived the reality of mistreatment of workers in the United States.

It is good to see labor rising with teacher and other strikes increasing across the country and with the US public showing its highest support for unions in decades. The next president should harness the energy of working people and build political power for a transformation agenda for working people who have not gotten a real raise in decades, while executives and investors have been getting rich off of higher rates of exploitation with increased productivity and globalized markets and corporate-managed trade deals that enable global corporations to pit the working classes of different countries against each other in a race to the bottom.

Urgent Reforms Needed, Time to Transform the Workplace

The centerpiece of my campaign for president is an [ecosocialist Green New Deal](#). Responding to the climate crisis is going to require changes to many sectors of the economy. We need to create a new democratic and ecological economy. We must define this economy with the rights of workers in mind, not only their right to collective bargaining but the need to make workers into owners to end the capitalist crisis highlighted by the reality that three people have wealth equal to 50 percent of the population.

We need social and cooperative ownership where workers receive the full value of their labor. Now we are exploited. We get a fixed wage and all the surplus value we create with our work is taken by capitalists as profits simply because they own the company, not because they did any work.

The Green New Deal requires the United States to reconstruct all economic sectors for ecological sustainability, from agriculture and manufacturing to housing and transportation. This means millions of new jobs in a democratized economy where some sectors are nationalized, others are controlled by state and municipal government and more are re-made into cooperatives that are worker-owned.

A Green New Deal must include a Just Transition, which means income to compensate all workers whose jobs are eliminated by steps taken to protect the environment. Displaced workers should be guaranteed up to five years of their previous income and benefits as they make the transition to alternative work.

As part of the Green New Deal, I am calling for an Economic Bill of Rights, which includes a job guarantee and a guaranteed minimum income above poverty for all. The housing crisis will be alleviated with the institution of universal rent control and expansion of public housing in walkable communities with access to regional mass transit. Air and water pollution will be relieved by putting in place a 100% electrified transportation system emphasizing freight rails, high-speed inter-city rails, and urban light-rail mass transit, with electric powered cars and trucks where they are still needed.

A crash program of federal government investment and public enterprises to rebuild our economy for zero greenhouse gas emissions and 100% clean energy by 2030 will create will create full employment and shared prosperity. But not everyone is able to work. And some things should be by human rights, not commodities you can only get if you have enough money. That's why we need a social safety net of social services funded publicly, not privately out of pocket. That means a national health service for universal health care, lifelong free public education, student debt relief, and a secure retirement by doubling Social Security benefits. The ecosocialist Green New Deal is a plan to remake the economy so that it serves the people and protects the ecology and the climate. Those objectives require a socialist economic democracy so that we the people—not big business interests—have the power to choose economic justice and ecological sanity.

Immediate Reforms For Working People

In addition to changes coming as a result of putting in place an ecosocialist Green New Deal, we need are immediate labor law reforms.

Repeal Repressive Labor Laws: Repeal the sections of the Taft-Hartley Act, the Landrum-Griffin Act, the Hatch Act, and state “Right-To-Work” laws that have crippled labor’s ability to organize by outlawing or severely restricting labor’s basic organizing tools: strikes, boycotts, pickets, and political action. This should include putting in place Card Check which extends union bargaining status to majority sign-up or card-check recognition.

A Workers’ Bill of Rights: Enact a set of legally enforceable civil rights, independent of collective bargaining. This should include:

- (1) Extending the Bill of Rights protections of free speech, association, and assembly into all workplaces.

- (2) Establishes workers’ rights to living wages, portable pensions, information about chemicals used, report labor and environmental violations, refuse unsafe work, and participate in enterprise governance. OSHA must be funded adequately to protect workers and communities and workers empowered to enforce safety and health regulations. Retirement should include a mandatory system of Guaranteed Retirement Accounts that provide a return of at least 3 percent above inflation guaranteed by the federal government.

- (3) Establishes workers’ rights to freedom from discharge at will, employer search and seizure in the workplace, sexual harassment, and unequal pay for work of comparable worth. These rights should ensure that workers can take legal action to stop wage theft. In addition to a living wage, workers should have subsidized, high quality child care and elder care. Workers should receive six week of paid vacation annually in addition to federal holidays. For every seven years worked, they should receive one year of paid educational leave and one year of parental leave for each child with no loss of seniority.

Employer Accountability: There must be strong and speedy penalties for employers who break labor laws. In addition, federal law needs to ban striker replacements provide, triple back pay for illegally locked-out workers, and there must be unemployment compensation for striking and locked-out workers.

Labor Law Protections for Farmworkers: Extend to farmworkers the same rights under labor law as other workers, including A Day of Rest, Overtime Pay, Collective Bargaining Protections, Disability Insurance, Unemployment Insurance, Child Labor Protections, and Occupational Safety and Health Standards.

Labor Law Protections for Prisoners: Enact legislation to end the super-exploitation of prison labor at pennies per hour, which undercuts the wages of workers outside the prison system. The prison labor system as it exists now is akin to slavery and the prison labor camps in other authoritarian countries. Work done by prisoners can be part of rehabilitation and enable prisoners to acquire job skills, support their families, and have savings upon release. Work done by prisoners for private contractors and for public works and services should be paid prevailing wages. Prison workers should have all the protections of labor law, including the right to organize unions.

Fair Trade. Trade deals should be rewritten to uplift labor and environmental standards across borders. Fair trade pacts should eliminate secretive trade tribunals to which only governments and corporations have access. Trade disputes should be adjudicated in public courts to which workers, unions, and public have access.

It is time to correct the decades of diminishing worker rights and shrinking unions as well as low-pay. The United States is about to begin a transformation to a clean, sustainable energy future. The new economy we create must prioritize the rights of workers to create an economy that works for the 99 percent, not just the 1 percent.

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Howie Hawkins is seeking the presidential nomination of the Green Party. He is a retired UPS Teamster who worked mainly in construction and warehouses for 45 years. The first union he joined was the American Servicemen's Union when he was in the Marines. He joined the Industrial Workers of the World as a construction worker in the 1970s and remains a member.

Featured image: Striking workers during the 2016 Verizon walkoff. (Source: joegaza / Flickr)

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