

## American Labor: Fundamentally Flawed

In the past three months, American organized labor has mobilized to the highest degree seen in years responding to legislation introduced in Wisconsin and Ohio that eliminated the right for public employees to collectively bargain for wages and benefits. The worst setback to American labor since Ronald Reagan's dissolution of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization has ironically allowed for its greatest mobilization in recent memory. This labor crisis is a new chance for the Left to reevaluate the state of the American Labor Movement. Sadly, labor's deficiencies go much farther than the virulently anti-union sentiment and legislation so common on the Right, and its power is far weaker than the recent protest movement may seem to indicate.

Since the 19th century, American organized labor has been stricken with corruption and structural deficiencies that make it more like a disorganized fiefdom of corrupt and often antagonistic factions rather than a coherent working class movement. The shameful history of corruption and crime among American trade unions has remained extant into the 21st century, and prefigures the nature of modern unions as headed undemocratically and coercively. Recent examples of this include the indictment of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees local leaders in 2000 of larceny and embezzlement alongside accusations of voter fraud, and the regular accusations of involvement with organized crime against the well-respected garment workers union, Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees-Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union (UNITE-HERE). The nature of many unions as undemocratic and headed by overpaid strongmen has continued for far too long. Another unusual deficiency of American unions is their competitive, rather than cooperative, nature. UNITE-HERE's recent embarrassing rivalry with the Service Employees International Union reveals that the history of union competition, the most notable example of which was the often bloody feud between the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization in the early 20th century, continues to be an obstacle for class progress. Unlike the social democracies of western Europe, where national unions work together for progressive political reform, the closest that American unions have to a labor party is the Democratic party, which has done almost nothing in recent years to halt the onslaught of austerity and anti-union sentiment against workers. American unions often have little democratic political power outside of the threat of striking, which rarely produces net gains for employees and inflames tension between management and labor.

Among the political left, the division between the oversimplified camps of "pro-union" versus "anti-union" has stymied any real criticism of American labor, rather than simply criticism of those who try to destroy it. As a proud member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), I find it disheartening that so many of my DSA comrades have devoted themselves to union organizing for major trade unions that do not make progress towards social democratic goals for all citizens, regardless of employment or union affiliation. Those who identify with the cause of workers' rights or social democracy not only need to address the constant attacks on organized labor from the right and center, but also must work to reform from the side of labor. Although the radical dream of an all-encompassing industrial union essentially died with the factionalization of the Industrial Workers of the World, it is clear that the divisive and workplace-specific model of trade unionism that persists in the U.S. is no longer functional.

Amidst the growing gap between rich and poor, backsliding on labor rights and the death of an ideological working class, a new, more radical and universal movement must come to American labor that will not get stymied by divisions of trade or union affiliation. For the American labor movement to renew itself, workers must unite and demand benefits from the state as U.S. citizens, rather than benefits from management as members of a particular union.