



**DON'T STARVE
—FIGHT:
PEOPLE POWER IN THE
CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC**

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LABOR NETWORK
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INTRODUCTION

In the early days of the Great Depression of the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people participated in street protests, anti-eviction "riots," strikes, marches, and occupations of city halls and state capitals. Sometimes their actions won immediate relief. They also laid the groundwork for the greatest period of social reform since the Civil War and the greatest period of worker organization ever.

As the coronavirus pandemic spread across the U.S., someone in a quarter of all households lost a job—the deepest economic collapse since the Great Depression. Millions faced eviction and hunger. A stimulus package, an eviction moratorium, and other public policies countered some of the worst effects, but by the end of 2020 such relief had shrunk to barely a pittance. As the pandemic grew worse, food lines, evictions, and unemployment soared. In the week before Christmas, 2020 one in four Americans—more than 80 million people—experienced "food insecurity," meaning they did not have reliable access to sufficient nutritious food.¹

The COVID era has seen strikes, rent strikes, unemployed organization, mutual aid, and other expressions of "people power." But while much attention has been paid to the hardships of the Coronavirus era, these fledgling efforts at self-help and revolt have received far less.

The COVID era has confronted working people with unique threats and problems—and working people have turned to unique strategies to counter them. This mini-book represents a first effort to recount and evaluate the efforts of ordinary people to meet their needs in the first year of the Coronavirus Depression – and to force government and business to help them do so. It uses the movements of the early Great Depression as a reference point, identifying both the similarities and the differences of the Great Depression and the Coronavirus Depression.²

[The Prologue](#), "Fighting the Great Depression from Below," gives an overview of the popular movements of the early Great Depression—the unemployed organizing, eviction protests, self-help mutual aid, strikes, and demands for emergency relief.

[Chapter 1](#), "The Unemployed vs. the Coronavirus Depression," describes self-organization and action by the unemployed during the Coronavirus Depression.

[Chapter 2](#), "Self-Help and Mutual Aid in the Coronavirus Depression" examines rent strikes and exchanges of labor, goods, and services that people developed to survive and live better under conditions of joblessness and community stress.

[Chapter 3](#), "Striking in the Coronavirus Depression," describes how workers in hundreds of workplaces conducted strikes and other forms of on-the-job action



to demand safer working conditions and hazard pay in the pandemic. These were primarily self-organized wildcat strikes with little or no union backing.

[Chapter 4](#), "Workers vs. the Coronavirus Depression," describes two "mini-revolts"—the Strike for Black Lives and the recent strikes and strike threats by teachers—that also show new forms of organization and action, often with union support.

[Chapter 5](#), "Popular Action in the Coronavirus Depression," examines the grassroots response to the coronavirus era as a whole.

[Chapter 6](#), "The Great Depression and the Coronavirus Depression" draws lessons from the Great Depression for people power in the coronavirus era.

[Chapter 7](#), "The Future of People Power in the Biden Era" examines what role direct action from below might play in the very different dynamics of the Biden era.

At the outset of the pandemic, I began chronicling the emerging direct action movements in my series [Strike! Commentaries on Solidarity and Survival](#). This mini-book developed out of that series; its chapters retain birthmarks of the times in which each was initially written.

No account of history in the making can include all relevant material, let alone provide a faultless interpretation. I apologize for what I should have included but didn't. I hope this account can nonetheless be useful for those who have to live and act in the present and provide a starting point for those who may compose histories with more perspective in the future.

The movements of the early 1930s used demonstrations and mass marches, occupations of state capitols, strikes, and various forms of self-help to force local, state, and federal governments to address the needs of those hit by the Great Depression. Their role was critical in shaping the outcome both before and after the shift to Democratic political control and the proclamation of the New Deal. A movement utilizing people power direct action may be as important in shaping the Biden era. Indeed, given the sharp divisions within the system of institutionalized power, such action may play an even more important role.

This mini-book recounts the grassroots movements of the Coronavirus Depression and asks what they might contribute to the amelioration of pandemic and hardship in the time of Build Back Better and the Green New Deal.



PROLOGUE: FIGHTING THE GREAT DEPRESSION FROM BELOW



Photo: The United States has entered the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. This web book describes the grassroots movements of the early years of the Great Depression in order to learn something about the dynamics of popular response to depression conditions. The early unemployed, self-help, labor, and other movements helped lay the groundwork for the New Deal and the massive labor struggles of the later 1930s.

The Coronavirus Depression has been the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. This prologue describes the grassroots movements of the early years of the Great Depression in order to learn something from history about the dynamics of popular response to depression conditions.

In the early years of the Great Depression of the 1930s, unemployed and impoverished workers turned to dramatic forms of self-help to survive. Anti-eviction "riots" led by organizations of the unemployed made it possible to protect hundreds of thousands of families from being evicted from their homes and ultimately forced government in many cities to halt evictions. And the unemployed in hundreds of communities formed mutual aid organizations through which they exchanged food, services, and labor outside the cash economy. These early unemployed, self-help, labor, and other movements helped lay the groundwork for the New Deal and the massive labor struggles of the later 1930s.

At the pit of the Great Depression in 1930, an American country music group called the Carter Family recorded a song called The Worried Man Blues. It began:



*I went down to the river and I lay down to sleep
When I woke up there were shackles on my feet.*

Though many subsequent verses describe the devastating cascade of events that followed for the singer, there is no explanation of what had happened or why – just an awakening to a seemingly endless litany of tribulations. The song immediately became an unprecedented national hit. It's hard to believe that its success didn't have something to do with capturing the sense of being the helpless victim of incomprehensible disaster that so many felt in the face of the Great Depression.



Photo: Carter Family promotional portrait by the Victor Talking Machine Company. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons, Victor Talking Machine Company

While the 1930s are sometimes portrayed as a time of revolt, the early years of the Great Depression were marked more by bewilderment and despair at what appeared to be an inexplicable catastrophe. But like today, there were also flickers of resistance, which not only helped people survive, but also built the momentum for greater changes to come. Both the similarities to and the differences from today's Coronavirus Depression are revealing.

The Great Depression brought enormous misery—loss of jobs, homes, farms, savings, even the means to eat. Within three years, some fifteen million workers were unemployed. Yet the philosophy of most governments, articulated by President Herbert Hoover, was that the unemployed should take care of themselves, or if absolutely necessary receive assistance from private charities, not from government, and certainly not from the federal government.

Misery and hunger unabated generated new forms of revolt. By early 1932, according to a New York journalist, groups of thirty or forty men would enter grocery stores and ask for credit: "When the clerk tells them business is for cash only, they bid him stand aside; they don't want to harm him, but they must have things to eat. They load up and depart."

Labor writer Charles R. Walker observed and wrote about the movements of the early Great Depression. He prophesized "increasing outbursts of employed and unemployed alike—a kind of spontaneous democracy expressing itself in organized demonstrations" by large masses of people. "They will not be mobs—though the police will often break them up—but will march and meet in order, elect their own spokesmen and committees, and work out in detail their demands for work or relief." They will "present their formulated needs to factory superintendents, relief commissions, and city councils, and to the government at Washington."³ That's pretty much what happened.



DON'T STARVE FIGHT!

African Blood Brotherhood (1919-1925)



Photo: Cyril Briggs; public domain.

A prime example of the process Walker described were the Unemployed Councils and other movements of the unemployed.⁴ Walker wrote, "the Unemployed Council is a democratic organ of the unemployed to secure by very practical means a control over their means of subsistence."

Communists organized Unemployed Councils in most cities and usually led them, but as Frances Fox Piven explains, "it wasn't only communists; local religious leaders often became leaders of the unemployed, or leaders of the rural people who gathered to resist foreclosures of farms."⁵ According to Walker, "the councils are organized democratically and the majority rules." In Lincoln Park, Michigan, the chairman of the Council was also the local commander of the American Legion. In Chicago there were forty-five branches of the Unemployed Council, with a total membership of 22,000.

The Councils' weapon was democratic force of numbers, and their functions were: to prevent evictions of the destitute, or if evicted, to bring pressure to bear on the Relief Commission to find a new home for the evicted family; if an unemployed worker has his gas or his water turned off because he can't pay for it, to investigate the case and demand their return from the proper authorities; to see that the unemployed who are shoeless and clothes-less get both; to eliminate through publicity and pressure discriminations between Negroes and white persons, or against the foreign born, in matters of relief; for individuals or families and children of the unemployed who have no relief as a penalty for political views or have been denied it through neglect, lack of funds, or any other reasons whatever, to march them down to relief headquarters and demand they be fed and clothed. Finally, to provide legal defense for all unemployed arrested for joining parades, hunger marches, or attending union meetings.

Many unemployed councils were interracial and many Blacks participated in unemployed demonstrations. Black Communist leader Cyril Briggs described one demonstration as "the successful breaking down of the wall of prejudice between white and Negro workers fostered by the employers and the substitution of working-class solidarity and fraternization." According to Black sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Jr., "Here was something new" — "Negroes and whites together rioting against the forces of law and order."⁶

The unemployed also took part in local and national marches and demonstrations, frequently demanding relief payments, public works jobs, and unemployment insurance and usually led by Communists; a national



demonstration in 1930 claimed over a million participants. Many actions of the unemployed were met by police violence, arrests, and sometimes deadly shooting. An American Civil Liberties Union pamphlet reported, "Bans against assembly, refusal of permits to speak, the stationing of squads of police at relief stations, attacks by the police on peaceful meetings, clubbings, arrests, abuse of prisoners, infliction of maximum sentences, prosecution for criminal syndicalism or conspiracy" were "monotonously familiar."⁷

The unemployed movement often supported the strikes of employed workers. The actions of the unemployed forced state and municipal governments to expand relief programs and, when they went broke, led the federal government to start paying for them. With the coming of the New Deal, the Councils transformed themselves into the Workers Alliance, a quasi-union for workers in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other federal public works programs. The Workers Alliance developed its own proposals for social security legislation and in 1936-7 held extensive protests that helped preserve Social Security from gutting by Congressional conservatives. When jobs opened up in the factories, many of its members became rank-and-file activists in the union organizing campaigns of the mid-1930s.

SELF-HELP AND MUTUAL AID

In many places the unemployed also made attempts to organize economic life on their own outside the cash economy. In Seattle, for example, members of the Unemployed Citizens' League were loaned fishing boats by the fishermen's union, allowed to pick unmarketable fruits and vegetables by nearby farmers, and permitted to cut wood on scrub timberland. Members throughout the city organized twenty-two locals, each with its own commissary at which the food and firewood thus acquired was exchanged with barbers who cut hair, seamstresses who mended clothes, carpenters who repaired houses, and doctors who treated the sick. According to a massive study by Clark Kerr, by the end of 1932 there were 330 such self-help mutual aid organizations in thirty-seven states with membership over 300,000. But by early 1933, most of them, including the Seattle Unemployed Citizens' League, were in disarray, as they began to discover the limitations of a self-help movement living off the scraps of an already collapsed economy.⁸

"WE AIN'T GOING TO STAND FOR NO MORE BAD TREATMENT"

Although trade union strikes were rare and usually ineffectual during the early years of the Great Depression, employed workers nonetheless organized themselves, protested, and struck. For example, in High Point, North Carolina a few hundred stocking boarders walked out at six hosiery mills one July morning in 1932 when the second wage cut of the year was posted at their



mills. Other hosiery workers joined and by the end of the day 1,600 had walked out. The next day bands of strikers and unemployed workers marched through High Point and nearby towns, closing 100 factories of all kinds employing 15,000 workers.



Photo: Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Destitute in pea picker's camp, Nipomo, California, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Of the twenty-five hundred people in this camp most of them were destitute. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons, [Dorothea Lange](#).

The next day twenty-five unemployed workers forced their way into a High Point movie house and demanded admission, saying that they were out of work and entitled to entertainment. When the police drove them out, they wrecked a motor and turned off the town's electricity, "to teach the big fellows that we ain't going to stand for no more bad treatment." The hosiery strike was finally settled through the intervention of the governor, with a revocation of the wage cut. Out of the conflict developed the Industrial Association of High Point, a union open to all industrial workers in the city, with 4,000 members and committees in each of the mills.

We Are All Leaders: The Alternative Unionism of the Early 1930s, edited by historian Staughton Lynd, has shown that such self-organized, community-based, "horizontal" forms of worker organization were widespread in the early years of the Great Depression. According to Lynd, they were "democratic, deeply rooted in mutual aid among workers of different crafts and work sites, and politically independent." Their organizational

form included "federal" labor unions directly affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, ad hoc factory committees, and "improvised central labor bodies" based on "horizontal networks."⁹

WHAT THE "FIGHT FROM BELOW" ACCOMPLISHED

The unemployed, self-help, and strike movements of the early 1930s did not by any means halt or even significantly ameliorate the Great Depression. In fact, notwithstanding ups and downs of the business cycle, depression conditions continued until 1940 and the beginning of World War II. That doesn't mean that these actions were pointless failures. As is often the case throughout history, it was the fight from below that created the base and momentum for the needed changes ahead.

- First, these movements often won immediate benefits for participants and other working people that ameliorated their misery and helped them to survive under depression conditions. Anti-eviction actions often restored families to their homes, and in Chicago and other cities they eventually forced governments to end evictions entirely. According to one estimate, "rent riots" restored 77,000 families in New York to their homes.¹⁰ Charles R. Walker reported that in cities he visited the amount of relief was directly proportional to the strength and struggle of the local unemployed



council. Hundreds of thousands of people made it through the worst years of the Great Depression through the barter and labor exchange activities of the mutual aid movement. The strikes of the early 1930s established a floor below which wages could not be cut without threat of resistance.

- Second, these movements had significant impact on governments and other institutions. Direct action like hunger marches and occupations of government buildings put pressure on local, state, and at times even federal officials to establish relief and public works programs to replace private charity. With the coming of the New Deal in 1933 pressure from those states as well as from the unemployed themselves led federal government officials to take over and enormously expand provision for the unemployed. In 1933 Congress created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and Civil Works Administration to provide relief payments and construction jobs; in 1935 it established the Works Progress Administration to create mass employment across occupations. As Frances Fox Piven says, "it was direct action that forced them to do it." It was important to get that money out "to preserve order in the cities." There are "archival records of local officials writing to Congressional committees" saying, "Send money now or troops later." The unemployed movement and the fiscal pressure it put on local and state governments led "mayors, governors, social workers, and labor officials" to become "the lobbying arm of the unemployed workers movement" in the early 1930s.¹¹
- Third, the militant unemployed actions created what one federal official later called "A period of social danger."¹² These "increasing outbursts of employed and unemployed alike" created a fear—or hope—of greater upheavals that might make fundamental social and economic changes irrepressible. They put both the legitimacy and the viability of the status quo into question. Such an atmosphere was essential in making possible the reforms of the New Deal.
- Fourth, these movements played a critical role in developing the ideas, capacities, and networks that would help make subsequent movements possible. Staughton Lynd portrays the early "horizontal" unionism of the early years of the Great Depression as the predecessor to the 1934 wave of strikes and general strikes. The organizations of the unemployed radicalized and trained many of those who became rank-and-file activists in the great industrial union organizing campaigns of the later 1930s. As historian Roy Rosenzweig wrote, "to the extent that the unemployed movement fostered trade-union consciousness and helped break down barriers between black and white workers, it contributed importantly to the strength of the American working class."¹³

While the self-help mutual aid movement petered out, the idea of economic reconstruction through government support to worker cooperatives was experimented with by the WPA and became the basis for Upton Sinclair's wildly



popular 1934 End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign.

The early years of the Great Depression were marked by governmental indifference to colossal misery and the rise of corporatist and proto-fascist responses to it. The grassroots movements of workers and the unemployed formed a crucial part of the process that led instead to the emergence of the New Deal and the development of new and expanded forms of working-class organization.



CHAPTER 1: THE UNEMPLOYED VS. THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION



Photo: [Russ Allison Loar](#), Wikimedia Commons

A popular slogan of the Unemployed Councils of the Great Depression was "Don't Starve – Fight." In 2020 it became a rallying cry of a new movement of the unemployed.

More than 40 million people lost their jobs in the early months of the Coronavirus Depression. Including those not actively looking for work, nearly half of adults were jobless by June. In April the official unemployment rate reached 14.8%, the highest level since the Great Depression.¹⁴ Young workers, women, workers with low educational attainment, part-time workers, and racial and ethnic minorities had still higher unemployment rates. The leisure and hospitality industry unemployment rate reached 40% in April and was still at 16.7% in December.¹⁵

While many of those initially laid off returned to work, others who thought their layoffs were temporary found themselves reclassified as fired permanently. A substantial proportion stopped looking for jobs even if they wanted them and therefore were not counted in the official unemployment rate. At its peak the level of unemployment was comparable to the Great Depression – but it took barely two months instead of three years to get there.

By December the official unemployment rate declined to 6.7%, still almost twice as high as before the pandemic. But the official rate radically underestimated



the number of jobless. According to Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell, including those who dropped out of the labor force or were misclassified the figure for January 2021 was close to 10%. And five million workers “left the workforce” – aka stopped even looking for work–in January 2021 alone.¹⁶

THE UNEMPLOYED

In the Coronavirus Depression lockdowns, social distancing and other public health measures presented unfamiliar barriers to many of the forms of collective action seen in the Great Depression. And in contrast to the early years of the Great Depression, in 2020 the federal government moved quickly to provide expanded unemployment benefits and supplemental payments as well as a \$1200 “helicopter payment” to most individuals as part of a series of stimulus packages. Although the lion’s share of federal largesse went to large corporations and financial institutions, the promise of these payments retarded initial mass organizing of the unemployed. Indeed, a Brookings study found that poverty actually decreased in April and May, the months following the start of the pandemic. The entire decline in poverty for April and May can be accounted for by the one-time stimulus checks the federal government sent out during these months and the expansion of unemployment insurance eligibility and benefits.¹⁷

Getting access to unemployment and other benefits has been a different story. Millions of people were unable to get through to unemployment offices despite dozens or even hundreds of phone calls. Millions more were unable to get their applications accepted. And many who managed to apply faced long delays before their payments were actually received.

The initial organizing of the unemployed largely occurred in response to these frustrations with the process of applying for benefits. Online communities developed on Facebook, Reddit, and other social media platforms to provide advice and camaraderie to those having trouble with their applications. For example, a mother of three named Cyara Neel was furloughed from her job at a go-kart track in Las Vegas. When she applied for unemployment, an alert popped up that blocked her application from being processed– but the website offered no clear way to resolve the problem. She ended up creating a Facebook group to help Nevada residents applying for unemployment benefits. Her group gained nearly 7,000 members in a week. She recruited nine additional moderators to help. By early April they were fielding 200 comments per hour.¹⁸

The *New York Times* reported that many such groups developed around the country. Some were geographical, covering states or regions like the “Louisiana Coronavirus Unemployment Legal Advice Group.” Others covered occupations like recreation vehicle workers, dog walkers, delivery workers, restaurant employees, court reporters, and Cheesecake Factory workers in Las Vegas.¹⁹

At times, these networks spilled over into organized protest. In Zephyrhills,



Florida, a 59-year-old bartender named Kim Donley got laid off and tried to apply for unemployment compensation, but she found, "You call the phone numbers and all you get is 'we can't take your call right now.'" She learned from social media that lots of other people were having the same experience. She discovered a Facebook page called "action group for COVID-19 unemployment" and decided to organize a protest with them.

We're going to drive to Tallahassee on Monday at 2 p.m. We're going to meet at the Capitol because we're all coming from all parts of Florida. We're not going to get out of our cars. We're just going to drive around holding signs out the window. Try to get some attention to this situation.

At the same time they planned to host a virtual protest on the Facebook page for those who couldn't drive to the Capitol.²⁰ And that was just a start. On May 1, for example, a Florida newspaper reported,

Unemployed Floridians who've spent weeks navigating the broken system are now taking to the street to protest. A caravan of unemployment protesters drove up and down Kennedy Boulevard in Tampa on Friday, honking their horns with signs hanging from their cars. Many of the protesters Friday say they've run out of money and are living on credit cards and charity from relatives. They've gone six weeks without any unemployment benefits and say they're getting desperate. "I am losing my home, I am borrowing money from family to get groceries," said Julia Shear of St. Petersburg. "I had to go and get \$20 from my daughter to go get \$13 of supplies to make this sign. It's ridiculous and it's criminal." Powell says she's not stopping until everyone gets paid.²¹

In Philadelphia in March, a coalition of local labor unions, worker organizations, and public interest law firms organized a campaign for a city \$5-10 million emergency fund for workers left out of state and federal relief efforts, such as undocumented workers and those in the "cash economy." They also called for an expansion of the city's paid sick leave law. They held a "digital low-wage worker town hall meeting" with laid-off low-wage workers as speakers that was attended by 400 on-line participants. Ten of the 17 members of the City Council attended the digital town hall, and many said they supported local relief efforts for low-wage workers. The Mayor's spokesperson, however, said such a fund was not possible given the city's resources.²² May 21 the Philadelphia Unemployment Project organized a "virtual town hall for the unemployed" via Zoom to "get involved to put pressure on the governor and the Department of Labor to release our benefits now!"²³ There were similar campaigns for local relief programs in other cities. The federal CARES Act passed in March included many workers outside of regular employment but excluded undocumented immigrants.



FEDERAL RELIEF

By the beginning of the summer, the CARES act and other emergency federal stimulus programs passed in the spring were approaching their termination. While the Democrat-controlled House soon passed the HEROES Act providing significant aid for the unemployed, the Republican-controlled Senate stalled month after month. To directly mobilize the unemployed to fight for the program, an advocacy group called the Center for Popular Democracy helped launch Unemployed Action. Its Facebook page states,

Unemployed Action is a group for unemployed workers fighting to extend federal UI programs (PUA, PEUC, and the \$600 PUC) for as long as the economic crisis continues. We seek relief for all workers. UI has been designed to exclude people of color, especially Black workers and immigrants, and we are committed to challenging racism in our UI system. We demand an overhaul of the broken UI system so it is fair, accessible, and a true safety net in times of crisis. We want good jobs to return to: at least \$15/hour, stable hours, paid leave, and safe workplaces.²⁴

Unemployed Action recruited 16,000 jobless members who lobbied congress to extend the \$600 weekly federal unemployment supplement that was scheduled to expire in July. According to Rachel Deutsch of CPD, Unemployed Action members bombarded members of Congress with phone calls for months and organized car parades and protests outside of congressional offices to demanding more unemployment aid. Many people "are being active in protesting and organizing — many for the first time in their lives."²⁵

Ten million people were scheduled to lose their only source of income as the CARES Act programs expired at the end of December. Unemployed workers organized locally in support of federal legislation. The community-based organization Step Up Louisiana, for example, worked with unemployed workers to organize a campaign for unemployment relief. Their pressure helped persuade Louisiana Senator Bill Cassidy to support the extension of unemployment relief and negotiate its passage in Congress. "We believe that nationally the Congress is in a place to be able to pass these extended benefits in part because of Louisiana's unemployed workers, Step Up Louisiana's, and our partner organizations' campaigning and leadership ultimately moving Senator Cassidy to do the right thing." They organized a rally of unemployed workers at the office of Senator Cassidy for bipartisan legislation that included \$300 weekly unemployment benefits. Then unemployed workers, faith leaders, and elected officials participated in a "The Bills Don't Stop" Rally outside Senator Kennedy's office. Unemployed workers were encouraged to "bring their bills to show the Senator what we are going through."²⁶

The expiration of the CARES Act was indeed followed by a series of other stop-gap relief measures that provided extended unemployment benefits and additional "stimulus payments." Each time benefits were on the verge of



running out, Congress extended them. Surely a factor in their doing so, was awareness of the potential for organized action by the unemployed—and concern about how the unemployed would react if relief was cut off. The benefits from the last of the COVID relief bills, the Biden administration's American Rescue Act passed in March 2021, began to run out in September, 2021, leading 10 million people to lose their benefits. In October 2021, it was unclear whether Build Back Better legislation would provide additional help for those facing pandemic-era hardship.

HARBINGERS OF THINGS TO COME?

Unemployed workers are even more structurally disempowered than those who remain in the workplace. They cannot strike, engage in slowdowns, directly confront a boss, or engage in other forms of concerted action on the job. Yet, as we saw in the previous chapter "Fighting the Great Depression – From Below," in a time of mass unemployment and misery with government aid blocked or sporadic the unemployed developed ways to exercise power through organization and direct action. Hunger marches, demonstrations, occupations of state capitols, confrontations with police and National Guard led cities and states and eventually the federal government to provide relief funds, public works jobs, and unemployment insurance. The action of the unemployed put significant pressure on government officials, labor leaders, and social workers that eventually changed government policy. The social dynamite represented by millions of impoverished, angry unemployed helped make radical change seem both necessary and possible. And the movement of the unemployed laid much of the groundwork for the public policy changes and labor organization of the New Deal era.

In addition to the usual obstacles to organization of the unemployed, the Coronavirus Depression presented significant additional barriers. Public health restrictions like social distancing and banning of gatherings made demonstrations, occupations, and other direct action tactics difficult – though, as we have seen, not impossible. The unemployed can't strike, but they can use socially-distanced and on-line demonstrations, rent strikes, boycotts, self-help, and other tactics.

The unemployed have shown a capacity for rapid formation and mobilization of networks. They have made effective responses to immediate needs, such as unemployment compensation delays and snafus. So far these have not had mass participation – only a small minority of the unemployed have been involved. The networks have generally involved particular localities, states, and industries, though a coalition of left groups tried to promote nationwide action around May Day. There is so far little definition of common goals or a common identity as unemployed—hardly surprising considering how new mass unemployment is.

Common interests and the elements of a common program for the unemployed



are not hard to envision. The unemployed need to resist pressure to go back to work prematurely under unsafe conditions – and to be protected from retaliation if they refuse to do so. “Nonessential” workers need acknowledgement that by not going to nonessential jobs they are making a sacrifice that helps keep everyone safe. That sacrifice needs to be recognized in some form of income maintenance – what has been called a “social distancing wage.”²⁷ They need to have a voice in shaping future stimulus packages and to ensure their passage. They need free food, shelter, utilities, and medical care—or the cash to pay for them. In the longer run they need what Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell called “a society-wide commitment” to their employment.²⁸

Most of the organization and self-organization of the unemployed so far appears to have focused on overcoming the obstacles to actually getting the relief being offered by state programs and federal stimulus packages, and their denial to specific groups like immigrants and gig workers. Action so far by the unemployed to affect the contents of proposed future stimulus packages or to ensure their passage has been limited. Networks of unemployed in various regions and industries have developed; whether they will become a vehicle for affecting federal stimulus policy remains to be seen.

In the early 1930s, the movements of the unemployed forced local, state, and national governments to make efforts, however inadequate, to address the needs of the unemployed. Whether their needs are addressed in the Coronavirus Era is likely to depend largely on whether the unemployed organize themselves to demand it.

Emergency relief packages that only last a few months are no solution to the massive unemployment—much of it the permanent result of economic restructuring—that is likely to persist for years at least. But our society and political system are all too able to disregard the human impact of economic degradation on a marginalized population. The insistent demands of the unemployed themselves are the one force likely to prevent them from doing so.



CHAPTER 2: SELF-HELP AND MUTUAL AID IN THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION



Photo: Migrant family looking for work in the pea fields of California. Date: 1935. Source: Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Wikimedia Commons.

With mass unemployment, short time, wage cuts, loss of health insurance, cutbacks in social programs, and other effects of the Coronavirus Depression, tens of millions of people faced an inability to meet their most basic needs. While temporary government programs forestalled some catastrophic results, local and state resources ran low, and federal stimulus programs were only renewed on a stop-gap basis. Blocked from turning to either employers or government for help, people began experimenting with forms of self-help that fell outside of conventional politics and conventional economics.

RENT STRIKES

In March, as coronavirus layoffs spread across the country and tenants began wondering how they would pay their April rent, the idea of rent strikes began to surface in diverse locations. In cities across the country, people began hanging white sheets from their windows indicating that they intended not to pay their rent.



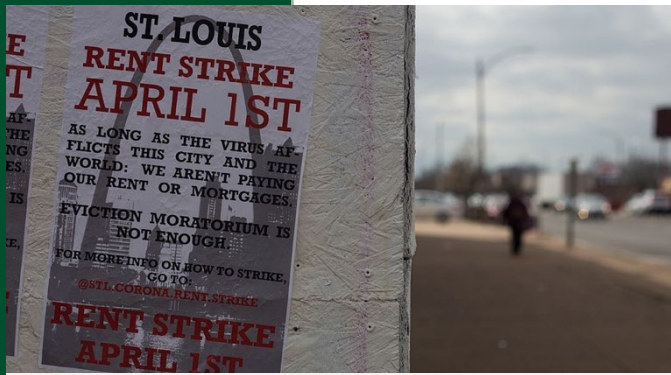


Photo: St. Louis Rent Strike. Date: March 21, 2020. Source: [Paul Sableman](#) of St. Louis. Wikimedia Commons.

The idea behind the rent strikes was not just for individuals to avoid paying rent, but to initiate a movement powerful enough to force changes in housing policy. In North Carolina, for example, the group Rent Strike Raleigh asked authorities "to freeze rent and utility payments and open up vacant housing, including hotel rooms, for those who have nowhere to go, as well as workplace protections, free health care, freedom for at-risk prisoners, and an end to ICE deportations." Rentstrike ATX in Austin, Texas asked renters to "talk to your friends, your neighbors, your landlord's tenants. Coordinate across complexes and neighborhoods. Spread the strike, and

lay the foundation for a group action against your landlord."²⁹ By early April there were at least 71 rent strikes across the country.³⁰ In El Sereno in Los Angeles homeless families took over a dozen state-owned vacant houses to secure a safe place to live during the pandemic.³¹

Organizers called for millions of tenants to withhold rent starting May 1 and held actions throughout the country to build momentum. In New York state, tenants wrote their landlords stating they wouldn't pay rent; draped sheets reading "Cancel Rent" from their windows; and demonstrated with posters and blowhorns outside Gov. Andrew Cuomo's daily coronavirus briefing.³²

Estimates for participation in the May 1 rent strikes vary wildly. Housing Justice for All in New York said that 50 buildings had between 30% and 70% of tenants participating in the strikes, and roughly half of the tenants occupying 2,000 units across those buildings didn't pay rent. Smaller groups of renters from an additional 45 buildings also went on rent strike.³³ In Austin TX 20 people were charged with obstructing a highway and two people charged with criminal trespassing in May Day rent strike protests.³⁴ A very different picture comes from the National Multifamily Housing Council, which said that only 2.1% fewer apartment households made a full or partial rent payment in May than a year before. (The Council only includes professionally managed buildings; rent strike participation may have been higher in houses owned by small landlords.)³⁵

The tenant movement continued after May Day. New York tenant organizer Cea Weaver said in early May, "When we say rent strike what we are saying is that we're turning a moment where people cannot pay into a moment of political activity and turning our individual inability to pay into collective action, calling on the government to intervene."³⁶ On May 12, tenant advocates delivered a petition with 230,000 signatures to Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan demanding the suspension of rent, mortgage, and utility payments during the pandemic. The organizers included such organizations as Lansing Tenants Union, Traver Crossing Tenants Association, Detroit Renter City, University of



Michigan YDSA, Village Properties Tenants Union, and Michigan Youth Climate Strike. The Michigan effort was part of a national petition drive supported by the group Rent Strike 2020, which had been initiated by the Rose Caucus, a group of candidates running for offices around the country. Nationwide the petition had garnered over two million signatures.³⁷

The overall impact of the tenant movement has been substantial. By the end of March, New York City, Seattle, Washington, DC, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, Atlanta, and Chicago, and Texas, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania had ordered eviction proceedings temporarily paused. To forestall further tenant action and to prevent an impending humanitarian disaster, the March federal CARES Act included an eviction moratorium for federally-backed rental properties – but it expired before the end of July.

According to the group We Strike Together, as of mid-May there were 190,317 individual and group rent strikes under way around the country.³⁸ But more extensive rent strikes were probably forestalled by the promise of government payments that would allow unemployed workers to pay their rent. The head of a property management software company commented on the relatively small scale of May 1 rent strikes, "Government stimulus checks and the extra \$600 a week that the federal government is providing unemployed workers appears to be making a difference."³⁹

According to the Census Bureau, 25 million adults in mortgaged or rented households reported a late or deferred housing payment in May. Economist James Galbraith predicted that "People sheltering at home without income" will "refuse to accept the terms" of their housing contracts. So "the contracts will have to be suspended, and the debts cleared away, or there will be a confrontation on a vast scale."⁴⁰

Local housing activists were preparing for confrontation. The Crown Heights Tenant Union Organizing Committee in Brooklyn, New York held a day of action on June 22 demanding a universal eviction moratorium and the continued closure of housing courts. In 2019 the group got arrested shutting down Governor Cuomo's office. Esteban Giron, a member of the group, said that future direct action includes "plans to block marshals from evicting people from their homes and blocking the entrance at housing court."⁴¹

In an unprecedented move based on the likely effect of mass homelessness on the pandemic, on September 4 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an order for a "Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions To Prevent the Further Spread of COVID-19" until the end of 2020. Within hours of his inauguration President Joseph Biden extended the eviction moratorium to the end of March, 2021.

Stimulus payments and eviction moratoriums undoubtedly limited the extent



of rent strikes and other tenant actions. But as an end to the eviction moratorium approached, housing groups began preparing for what would happen when the eviction moratorium was lifted. Many called for rent and mortgage debt relief. The group Unemployed Workers United, for example, wrote, "Moratoriums and extensions are not enough. We need housing debt relief for millions of renters and homeowners at risk of losing their homes when the CDC moratorium is lifted in March."⁴²

On August 26, 2021 the US Supreme Court ruled the CDC eviction moratorium unconstitutional and millions faced the threat of eviction.

MUTUAL AID

In March 2020, wrote journalist Jia Tolentino in the New Yorker, "even before widespread workplace closures and self-isolation, people throughout the country began establishing informal networks to meet the new needs of those around them."⁴³ She listed examples:

- In Aurora, Colorado, a group of librarians started assembling kits of essentials for the elderly and for children who wouldn't be getting their usual meals at school.
- Disabled people in the Bay Area organized assistance for one another.
- A large collective in Seattle set out explicitly to help "Undocumented, LGBTQI, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, Elderly, and Disabled, folks who are bearing the brunt of this social crisis."
- In New York City, dozens of groups across all five boroughs signed up volunteers to provide childcare and pet care, deliver medicine and groceries, and raise money for food and rent. Relief funds were organized for movie-theatre employees, sex workers, and street vendors. Three restaurant employees started the Service Workers Coalition, quickly raising more than twenty-five thousand dollars to distribute as weekly stipends.
- Undergrads helped other undergrads who had been barred from dorms and cut off from meal plans.
- Prison abolitionists raised money so that incarcerated people could purchase commissary soap.

Such mutual aid activities have proliferated since. They range from simple efforts by neighbors to help neighbors to political projects deliberately aiming to create alternatives to governmental relief and public health efforts.

In Chatham County, North Carolina the Hispanic Liaison, Chatham Habitat for Humanity, Chatham County Partnership for Children, Chatham Literacy Council, El Futuro, Kidscope and Chatham Organizing for Racial Equity established a



"Chatham Solidarity Fund" to support Chatham County residents who don't qualify for federal stimulus checks or unemployment during COVID-19. "It's no family left behind in our county," said Ilana Dubester, executive director of the Hispanic Liaison. "I am super proud of our community and its generosity," Dubester said. "We are in this together. That's the message Chatham County is sending out to our community. We are neighbors. We are friends. We work together and we're here for each other."⁴⁴

The website Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, which describes itself as "a grassroots disaster relief network based on the principles of solidarity, mutual aid, and autonomous direct action," listed hundreds of national resources and local efforts.⁴⁵ A Google News search May 18 for "mutual aid" turned up multiple stories just within the previous day with headlines like "Grassroots Mutual Aid Network Provides Services for King County's Unsheltered Community," "Hudson: Mutual-aid network fills in the gaps," "Northeast Mississippi mutual aid networks builds community ties to address pandemic needs," "Building a better world through mutual aid," and "With mutual aid fund, NY sex workers take on crisis relief."

As in the early years of the Great Depression, informal bartering also grew. In Los Angeles, an avid gardener found neighbors coming by to trade oranges or muffins for her produce. Groups like the Buy Nothing Project and Freecycle (which said ten thousand new members had been joining per week) promoted such exchange networks. A CBS story, "Bartering Goods, Services Becomes the Norm In Long Island Neighborhood During Coronavirus Pandemic," described how people in Port Washington, NY had begun exchanging tutoring for beer and blueberry cakes for grocery store runs. Interviewed participants stressed that the benefits not only included getting the goods they needed but getting to know and interact with their neighbors.⁴⁶

Mutual aid activities continued throughout the first year of the pandemic. A November 23, 2020 *New York Times* article described how "across the country, students have created mutual aid networks: raising and redistributing tens of thousands of dollars to help their peers cover housing, medical costs, food and other essentials."⁴⁷ A February 12, 2021 story in New York's *The City* reported that dozens of mutual aid organizations that sprang up at the start of the pandemic were still operating, some "morphing into mini-relief powerhouses offering diverse services to neighbors in need." The Astoria Mutual Aid Network was running a food pantry and a diaper bank among other services. South Brooklyn Mutual Aid Network had more than 900 volunteers who had delivered over 30,000 grocery boxes to hungry neighbors from Park Slope to Bensonhurst.⁴⁸

New developments in mutual aid may lie ahead. For example, community activist Pierce Freelon of the Durham City Council proposed in November that the city establish a \$750,000 "community capacity building and violence



intervention fund" to help establish "mutual aid centers" created by several community groups, many led by Black women.⁴⁹

Mutual aid in itself does not inherently contradict the status quo; indeed, it may provide people an alternative to more militant forms of action. But it can also be a launching pad for collective expression. For example, after the murder of George Floyd, the Astoria Mutual Aid Network in Queens, NY, which normally provided help with transportation, groceries, and deliveries, began also offering water, hand sanitizer, and legal information to protesters in the streets for the Black Lives Matter Uprising. Mutual Aid NYC, which coordinates mutual aid groups citywide, publicly criticized New York City's budget for excessive funding for the police. The Bronx Mutual Aid Network made rent cancellation a priority.⁵⁰

In a country that provides few economic rights and little in the way of a social safety net, the Coronavirus Depression can lead overnight to homelessness and hunger. Self-help strategies like rent strikes and mutual aid may develop in response simply as a means of survival. But that doesn't mean they can't also be the starting point for collective action for something more.⁵¹



CHAPTER 3: STRIKING IN THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION

In response to COVID-19 and the COVID-19 Depression, workers have developed unique strategies and forms of organization to protect their lives and livelihoods. We saw in the Prologue, "Fighting the Great Depression — from Below," how in the early years of the Great Depression conventional trade union strikes became a rarity, but workers organized themselves in community-based, "horizontal" ways to fight for their survival. This chapter and the next describe the emergence of strikes for protection against COVID-19.

Brian Smithmyer/KDKA



Pittsburgh Sanitation Workers Refusing To Work Until They Are Given Protective Gear



Author: [CBS Pittsburgh](#)

On March 25, sanitation workers in Pittsburgh refused to pick up garbage and held a rally outside their employer's headquarters. It was one of the first reported walkouts for protection against the coronavirus pandemic that was officially declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11.

According to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*,

During the 90-minute rally, workers parked trucks to block the entrances and exits to the parking lot of the building on Railroad Street. Employees demanded better protective gear, such as masks, to protect them from



LABOR NETWORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY

potential coronavirus exposure and hazard pay to help cover co-payments on medical visits in case they are injured on the job.

They also asked for an additional set of work boots — the workers said they are given just two pairs of boots per year — as well as better gloves. One worker said the gloves they currently use don't protect their hands and allow water and liquids to drain down inside. Most workers have been purchasing their own surgical gloves since the coronavirus outbreak began, they said.

"Here we are at my job. Ain't picking up no 'rub,'" Pittsburgh sanitation worker Fitzroy Moss said. "The rubbish is sitting there. That's all they care about is picking up the garbage. They don't even care about our health."⁵²

Within a week, former *New York Times* labor reporter Steven Greenhouse was describing at least nine strikes for coronavirus protection nationwide.⁵³ For example:

- More than half the workers at the Bath Iron Works in Bath Maine stayed home demanding that their employer clean up the plant.
- In Warren, Michigan, Fiat Chrysler workers struck to demand hot water for washing.
- In Birmingham, Alabama, bus drivers struck for protection from infected passengers.
- Pittsburg sanitation workers struck for protective equipment and hazard pay.
- Two hundred Kroger warehouse workers walked out when a worker came down with coronavirus – and to protest a 97-hour workweek.
- In Kathleen, Georgia, 50 workers at a Perdue poultry processing plant struck – one strike leader said, "We're up here risking our life for chicken."
- Cooks and cashiers at a McDonald's in San Jose, California, walked out to protest lack of hand soap, gloves, masks, or hand sanitizers.
- Twenty McDonald's workers in Cicero, Illinois walked out to demand the sick pay they were entitled to under state law.

The website *Payday Report* started keeping track and soon was listing dozens of wildcat strikes or, as some people started calling them, "stand downs."⁵⁴ *Payday Report* wrote that in some places, workers simply called out sick en masse and refused to show up so bosses shut down their plants. In other places, workers protested for an hour or two before bosses agreed to workers' demands. Many areas have no reporters with connections to the labor movement so many strikes went completely uncovered. Some union leaders hesitated to get the media involved out of fear of retaliation.



MAY DAY



Author: [Democracy Now](#)

Starting in late March 2020 a string of strikes and other actions spread through large commercial operations like Amazon, Instacart, Whole Foods, and Shipt. A strike at an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island, NY to demand safety protections was met by retaliatory firing of a strike organizer – and by provision of personal protective equipment and enforcement of social distancing rules.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, a variety of groups began calling for mass action on May 1. A coalition of left groups called for what they termed a general strike, including walkouts, rent strikes, and a halt to shopping. Workers at large commercial operations began meeting over Zoom to plan a May Day walkout. An anonymous organizer of the Whole Foods sick-out said, "A general strike is something we've talked about idly before but it has become a recurring conversation for us once corona broke out. We couldn't have anticipated how neatly a general strike has started to coalesce this week. We didn't know Instacart and Amazon workers were also going to strike."⁵⁶ Instacart strike organizer Vanessa Bain told Vice, "Bosses and CEOs across sectors and industries have failed to act, so workers are taking matters into their own hands. The time for a general strike is now."⁵⁷



A flyer circulated on social media called for a "May Day General Strike" and asked customers to boycott Whole Foods, Amazon, Target, and Instacart on May 1.⁵⁸ Chris Smalls, who was fired for helping organize a previous Amazon strike, explained, "It's more powerful when we come together."

We formed an alliance between a bunch of different companies because we all have one common goal which is to save the lives of workers and communities. Right now isn't the time to open up the economy. Amazon is a breeding ground [for this virus] which is spreading right now through multiple facilities.

On May 1, hundreds of workers called in sick at Amazon, Whole Foods, Target, Instacart, and Shipt as part of a coordinated one-day national strike to protest inadequate safety protections. The group Target Workers Unite reported that over 100 stores and distribution centers participated in the action. The demands of the sick-outs typically included increased hazard pay, paid sick leave for workers who choose to isolate or self-quarantine, and the closure of stores in response to confirmed coronavirus cases among workers.

An Instacart shopper in San Francisco who helped organize the action said,

We're trying to build a movement across companies and elevate each other's demands. We're all in the same position as frontline workers making similar demands that companies have failed to meet that are basic and essential to be able to do our jobs safely.⁵⁹



PROLIFERATION



Photo: From Familias Unidas Por La Justicia on Facebook.

In mid-May, worker coronavirus protests were growing, taking new forms, and broadening demands. On May 7, fifty workers at Allan Bros fruit packing factory in Naches, Washington walked off the job demanding hazard pay, paid time off, health protection measures, and greater transparency about coronavirus threats.⁶⁰ Ten days later the strike had spread to six Yakima Valley fruit packing houses. Groups like the farmworkers union Familias Unidas por la Justicia were supporting the strikes, but said workers at individual plants were leading them. According to Edgar Franks of Familias Unidas por la Justicia, "Worker committees from each of the fruit packing houses met" to "discuss strategies and also to encourage each other."⁶¹

Signed agreements were reached at Allan Bros and three other companies. Workers at Columbia Reach Pack provided a signed agreement to a local newspaper. The company agreed to provide personal protective equipment at no charge, comply with all government standards, and implement best practices to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The company also said it would not expect employees to work in a way that would endanger health and safety. Rosalinda Gonzalez, who has worked for Columbia Reach for 19 years and was a member of a worker-appointed committee that submitted requests to the company, said, "I feel like we have the power to change things."⁶²

On May 19, *The Guardian* reported wildcat strikes, walkouts, and protests in



food service, meat processing, retail, manufacturing, transportation and healthcare industries.⁶³ Truck drivers in California, Arizona, Michigan, Washington D.C., and Illinois coordinated on Facebook to organize convoys to protest the collapse of freight rates in a "race-to-the-bottom" competition spurred by the collapse of demand in the Coronavirus Depression. Fight for \$15 and a union held one-day strikes and protests in California, Illinois, Florida, Missouri and Tennessee. In San Francisco, Uber drivers held a caravan to demand Uber stop funding a ballot initiative to repeal a law requiring that drivers be classified as employees not contractors.

Late in May, four workers at McDonald's in Oakland, CA contracted COVID-19. Within ten days later eleven workers and seven family members had tested positive. In response, 33 of the restaurant's 35 workers struck against unsafe working conditions – shutting down the restaurant and initiating the longest strike the McDonald's chain had ever seen. The next day the McDonald's parking lot was filled with a street rally. The strikers, many in quarantine, addressed the rally by amplified telephone. Striking McDonald's worker Angeli Rodriguez said, "Until today the owner of this franchise has ignored our demands, we have been asking at least twice to meet with us. He didn't close the store when he should have, that's why 33 of us joined the strike."⁶⁴ Socially-distanced community members held thirty-three cardboard silhouettes to represent each of the striking workers. Representatives of faith communities spoke.

Workers returned to work after winning some demands for improved sanitation, PPE, and safety practices. Five of the workers sued the franchise owner, whereupon an Alameda County Superior Court judge ordered the employer to follow many of the health and safety practices the striking workers had demanded.⁶⁵ Maria Ruiz, another 16-year McDonald's worker who had led strikes for PPE and safety in nearby San Jose, was fired in retaliation. A Bay Area McDonald's Workers Strike Fund was set up to sell commemorative strike posters. The struggle continued: On Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday in February, 2021 Oakland McDonald's workers took part in a 12-city walkout and protest against the company's working conditions and wages.⁶⁶ And on April 15, 2021 fast food workers travelled across California demonstrating for state legislation that would create a Fast Food Accountability and Standards (Fast) Recovery Act that would establish a statewide fast-food sector council to advocate on behalf of workers, set new standards specific to the fast-food industry, and require corporations to be responsible for their franchises.⁶⁷



CHAPTER 4: WORKERS VS. THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION

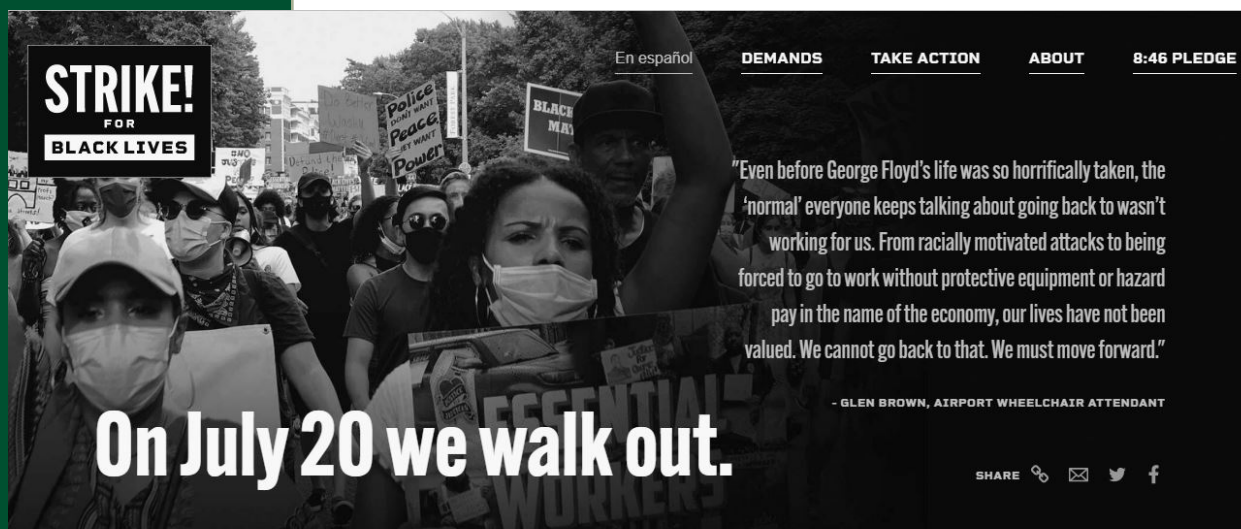


Photo: While the number of trade union strikes this year are lower than previous years, there have so far been hundreds of wildcat strikes without union authorization, primarily in the fight for worker safety amid COVID and racial justice. The Strike for Black Lives, which took place on July 20, 2020 is one such example.

Like the early years of the Great Depression, the opening of the Coronavirus Depression saw a sharp decline in conventional trade union strikes. While the number of trade union strikes in 2020 was even lower than previous years, 2020 simultaneously saw a proliferation of wildcat strikes and walkouts, often organized by co-workers through social media as well as workplace conversations and meetings.

Conventional trade union strikes have become rarer and rarer in the COVID-19 era. According to an analysis in *Bloomberg Law*, unions have been "slow to stage traditional, wide-ranging workplace strikes amid the snowballing health and economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic." *Bloomberg Law's* database of work stoppages indicates that there were 23 strikes in unionized workplaces in the first quarter 2020, idling a mere 16,829 workers. These were the lowest first-quarter totals in four years.⁶⁸ There were only two strikes in April and in May, the lowest level since 1990. In the first half of 2020, unions called a record-low 33 strikes. By comparison, in the first half of 2019 they called 80.⁶⁹

On the other hand, as we saw in [the previous chapter](#), hundreds of wildcat strikes have occurred without union authorization. These have generally been strikes for protection of workers health and extra pay for hazardous work. In addition, there have been some large-scale actions that, while far from conventional strikes, saw unions supporting work stoppages. These include the



Strike for Black Lives, the strike by professional athletes protesting racial killings, and the teachers strikes over school reopening.

STRIKE FOR BLACK LIVES



Photo: One hundred @Teamsters building service workers at Stuy Town take a knee in honor of #GeorgeFloyd with the #StrikeForBlackLives. #J20. Source: [SEIU tweet](#).

In an action unprecedented in American labor history, on July 20 national unions and labor and political groups took part in a "Strike for Black Lives." The action was led by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Movement for Black Lives. Union supporters included the Teamsters, the American Federation of Teachers, the United Farm Workers, the United Food and Commercial Workers, the Communications Workers of America, the Amalgamated Transit Union, and UNITE HERE.

The action focused on four demands: (1) justice for Black communities; (2) that elected officials use their authority to rewrite the rules so that Black people can thrive; (3) that corporations dismantle racism, white supremacy and economic exploitation including at work; and (4) that every worker has the opportunity to join a union.⁷⁰ Participating workers often added their own demands for better pay and COVID-19 safety measures. While some workers actually struck, organizers encouraged those who were not in a position to strike to protest in other ways, such as taking a knee, holding a moment of silence, or walking off their jobs at noon local time for 8 minutes and 46



seconds in memory of George Floyd and other victims of police violence.⁷¹

While organizing focused on 25 cities, actions occurred in 200. 1,500 janitors struck in San Francisco. 6,000 nurses picketed 85 nursing homes in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Outside a St. Louis McDonald's, workers marched for higher wages. In Detroit they marched for better coronavirus protection. In Memphis, AT&T call center and logistics workers demonstrated. In New York, 100 UPS workers demonstrated in front of their workplace to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and to protest growing inequality. In Washington, DC strikers demonstrated at the Capitol to support the HEROES act.⁷²

The unions participating had millions of members. Notably, they did not call their members out on strike, or even promise to protect them if they decided to strike on their own initiative. Nonetheless, this may be the first time in history that major American unions have advocated strikes and other workplace action to affect broad social issues. Not only did the country's second largest union (SEIU) put its muscle behind Black Lives Matter, but the Strike for Black Lives deliberately promoted the idea of workers using their workplace power as a vehicle for political action through an enlarged concept of strikes and general strikes. The action was also unusual in its spread across industries and occupations and in combining strikes with other forms of protest action.



Photo: "The Bucks have decided to boycott Game 5 of the #NBAPlayoffs against the Magic in the wake of the shooting of #JacobBlake. Some things are bigger than sports. Our humanity is worth a little discomfort. Nothing but RESPECT for the @Bucks!!" Source: [@MrAhmednurAli](#)

The Strike for Black Lives had an equally unprecedented sequel. On Sunday, August 22, police in Kenosha, Wisconsin shot Jacob Blake, a 29-year old Black man, more than six times while his children looked on. On Wednesday the 25th,



the Milwaukee Bucks professional basketball team declined to show up for their scheduled game, launching what would become a nationwide strike. They read a statement calling for justice for Jacob Blake and for the Wisconsin State Legislature to "reconvene after months of inaction" and "take up meaningful measures to address issues of police accountability, brutality, and criminal justice reform." That evening NBA players held an emergency meeting to discuss the strike, and soon all that evening's playoff games were postponed. Soon after that the Women's National Basketball Association decided to join them. And the strike spread so rapidly to other sports that before the day was over five major league men's soccer games, three major league baseball games, and at least one international tennis tournament were cancelled.⁷³ It took the personal intervention of former president Barack Obama and a pledge to open up stadiums as voting centers in the next election to persuade the NBA players to go back to work.

TEACHERS



Photo: [This graphic was used for the #DemandSafeSchools action that took place on August 3, 2020.](#)

The past few years have seen a swelling wave of strikes by public school teachers and other education workers. *Strike for the Common Good* by Rutgers professor Rebecca Kolins Givan spells out the extent and character of this rebellion:

- 92 strikes in 21 states since January 1, 2012.
- More than 672,000 teachers walked out, affecting 6.7 million students.
- Close to half of the strikes, 42, were illegal in the state where they took place.
- More than 80 percent of the illegal strikes (35 of 42) occurred in 2018 and 2019, beginning with West Virginia.
- About 412,000 teachers participated in illegal strikes in 2018 and 2019, compared to fewer than 14,000 for the previous six years combined.

Givan says,

If there's one thing we've learned since West Virginia, it's that teachers are not afraid to walk out. Strikes are contagious. A successful strike emboldens teachers in other states, cities, and school districts, leading to more strikes and stronger demands. Teachers know that they can use their collective voice to advocate for high quality schools, whether they're fighting for adequate funding or standing up for safety during a pandemic.⁷⁴

Indeed, as the pandemic progressed, teachers increasingly used their power to



strike to become protagonists in a local, state, and national struggle over education and health policy in the COVID-19 era – opening a new pathway for asserting a workers' voice and challenging "management's right to manage."

In March, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the country, governors, mayors, and school districts began ordering that in-person schooling be replaced by remote on-line teaching. Teachers had limited voice in these decisions, and in response they began demanding that they be represented in the policy making process.⁷⁵ As the fall 2020 school year approached, President Donald Trump began demanding that schools reopen face-to-face. The CDC and other agencies put out standards for safe return to classrooms, but few school systems made plans that would actually meet those standards. Millions of teachers were afraid for their lives. They began vocally opposing school reopening plans they considered unsafe and demanding that authorities negotiate with them about COVID-19 policy.



Video: [AFT Supports Safety Strikes for Teachers](#). Author: Bloomberg Markets and Finance.

Under pressure from their rank and file, educator unions moved toward authorizing strikes – even though they violated contracts and were illegal in most states. Late in July, the American Federation of Teachers, which represents 1.7 million school employees, took an unprecedented step: it authorized its members to strike if their schools planned to reopen without proper safety measures. AFT's on-line national convention issued a resolution saying it would support any local that decided to strike over reopening plans. The union pledged to provide its locals financial resources, legal backing, communications support, and staffing. It said buildings should reopen only in areas with lower virus rates, and only if schools require masks, update ventilation systems, and provide for social distancing. AFT president Randi Weingarten said, "If authorities don't protect the safety and health of those we represent and those we serve, as our executive council voted last week, nothing



is off the table." The National Education Association, the largest education union, said its members would do "whatever it takes" to protect students. President Lily Eskelsen García said, "Nobody wants to see students back in the classroom more than educators, but when it comes to their safety, we're not ready to take any options off the table."⁷⁶

Monday, August 3 was a national day of action to protest opening of schools without necessary safety precautions. In Chicago, 500 teachers circled City Hall for hours in cars opposing the Chicago Public School's plan to reopen schools under conditions the teachers considered unsafe for them and for their students. USA Today noted, "The demonstration had hallmarks of the massive strike the Chicago Teachers Union waged 10 months prior during a contract dispute with the city."⁷⁷ The union's vice president, Stacy Davis Gates, said, "It's long past time for our nation's educators to come together and fight collectively for the common good — up to and including striking to ameliorate the social and economic inequalities at the root of the consequences of this insidious virus." Any safety strike would include broader demands to support front-line workers, to provide broadband access to every student, to ensure universal health care and to get "a hard commitment from public officials to protect Black and Brown lives, whose neighborhoods are disproportionately bearing the burden of death and illness from COVID-19." Two days after the Chicago rally Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced that schools would reopen on-line only.

Chicago was one of the last big districts to decide to start the school year online, "a move largely driven by local teachers unions," according to *USA Today*. In Columbus, Ohio, 2,700 educators signed a letter calling for schools to open on-line. Shortly thereafter the school district announced that all classes would start on-line. In San Tan Valley outside of Phoenix, the J.O. Combs Unified School District announced it would resume in-person classes. 109 teachers and other school staff, about one-fifth of the district's 600 staff, called in sick. In response, school reopening was canceled. "We have received an overwhelming response from staff indicating that they do not feel safe returning to classrooms with students," said the superintendent of schools. "Due to these insufficient staffing levels, schools will not be able to reopen on Monday as planned."⁷⁸

New York was the only major US city still planning to bring students into physical classrooms in the fall of 2020. According to the *New York Times*, "The pressure to change those plans mounted this week, when the city's powerful teachers' union was poised to authorize an illegal strike for its 75,000 members."⁷⁹ After negotiations with the United Federation of Teachers, Mayor Bill de Blasio postponed reopening for ten days. Struggles over the safe reopening of public schools remained ongoing in cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, with walkouts and threats of walkouts on one side and threats of mass firing and other discipline on the other. Arizona kindergarten



teacher and union activist Kelley Fisher told a reporter, "I'd love to see a nationwide sickout."⁸⁰ No doubt she was not alone.⁸¹

These strike actions for Black Lives and for safe reopening of schools are hardly conventional strikes—indeed, they represent historically unprecedented forms of protest. So far such actions have won modest police reforms and improvements in some health protections. Beyond that, they have made worker power a factor in COVID-19 and racial justice—two of the most central national issues of this era.



CHAPTER 5: POPULAR ACTION IN THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION



The Coronavirus pandemic and the economic depression that accompanied it are already engendering new movements of both employed and unemployed workers. In some ways these resemble the worker and unemployed movements that emerged in the first years of the Great Depression; in other ways they are very different.

The early years of the Great Depression saw the emergence of new forms of popular action in response to the devastating economic conditions workers faced. Unemployed workers organized in Unemployed Councils; used "eviction riots" to protect renters; marched and occupied city halls and state capitols to demand food, jobs, and relief; organized quasi-unions in government jobs programs; and fought for legislation to provide for the needs of the unemployed. Unemployed workers in hundreds of cities created mutual aid organizations that produced and distributed goods like food and firewood and services like carpentry and health care. While the early years of the Great Depression saw a rapid decline in unions and conventional strikes, they also saw the rise of self-organized strikes and local horizontal worker organizations.





Photo: Cleaner sweeping floor after the Wall Street crash, 1929. Source, [Wikimedia](#).

Some of the differences between the Great Depression and today are evident. While the Great Depression was heralded by the 1929 stock market crash, the continuing growth of mass unemployment—though rarely discussed by politicians or the press—continued for three years. The coronavirus pandemic came on suddenly as did the accompanying Coronavirus Depression. The Great Depression had no visible cause outside the economic system itself; today's economic crisis is easily, if too simplistically, blamed on the virus rather than the economic system. Social distancing and other public health restrictions severely restrict mass action. Conversely, social media have proved to be powerful vehicles for organizing. In contrast to the early years of the Great Depression, this time the federal government initially responded rapidly with expanded unemployment insurance and other income support, forestalling though not eliminating some of the mass desperation that marked the early 1930s. The issues of health have had a centrality in the coronavirus era because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wider crisis of the healthcare system.

The movements of the early 1930s often won some benefits for participants and other working people that ameliorated their misery and helped them to survive under depression conditions. These movements often put significant pressure on governments to be more responsive to the needs of workers and



the poor. The outbursts of employed and unemployed created a fear—or hope—of fundamental social and economic change, putting the legitimacy and the viability of the status quo into question. And these movements helped develop the ideas, capacities, and networks that underlay the New Deal and the extensive worker organizing of the later 1930s.



Photo: 1937 Dorothea Lange photograph of a young Filipino man in Santa Maria, California. Source: [Wikimedia](#).

How do the results of the movements of the coronavirus era compare to those of the early Great Depression? The unemployed networks and the action of the unemployed that started in March 2020 have been effective in helping meet some of the immediate needs of the unemployed. They have provided guidance for individuals frustrated by the bureaucracies that were supposed to provide unemployment benefits and other services. They have successfully pressured states to expand services and fix glitches in providing them. They have mobilized pressure to expand the federal stimulus packages and make them more inclusive. The threat of rent strikes and other tenant actions have helped pressure dozens of states, and ultimately the federal government, to halt evictions. Burgeoning self-help and mutual aid activities have helped tens of thousands to get by in distressed circumstances and helped build communities out of the isolation of pandemic and unemployment. The hundreds of coronavirus wildcat strikes and the many less visible actions by union and non-union workers have won previously denied health and economic protections for thousands of workers. National mass actions like the Strike for Black Lives and



the wave of teacher actions for safe school re-openings have already had a significant impact on the crucial national issues of racial justice and education policy.

While the coronavirus pandemic and the massive unemployment it generated created a sense of social crisis, the unemployed and worker movements themselves have not yet created the atmosphere of looming upheaval that the unemployed movements did in the early 1930s. However, the concentration of both COVID-19 and the resulting mass unemployment in African American communities are undoubtedly factors in the Black Lives Matter uprising that followed the police killing of George Floyd, which the *New York Times* characterized as by far the largest protest movement in American history.⁸²

NEW FORMS OF ORGANIZATION AND ACTION



Video: This compilation of street scenes in Chicago include a Nov. 24, 1934 demonstration for unemployment relief. Author: Paul Snow.
[Watch the video »](#)

Mobilizing "people power" under pandemic conditions has required a high level of creativity both in organization and in tactics. Forms of action are not only different from those of the Great Depression, but from more recent pre-COVID era struggles as well. Here are some examples:

Motorcades, socially-distanced gatherings, and on-line rallies have often become the initial means of public action under pandemic conditions. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram have become



crucial means for self-organization.

Mike Elk of *Payday Report* says protest strikes associated with Black Lives Matter often enlist support from Black and Brown small business owners. "The closures put pressure on other business owners to close during these protests or to stop work to address issues of racial inequality." In Chattanooga, Tennessee, "Black workers working with I Can't Breathe CHA were able to get more than 44 businesses closed as part of a call for a strike."⁸³

In West Virginia, a campaign for governor turned its field operation into a "COVID Crisis Response Team." Three hundred and eighteen "neighborhood captains" volunteered to check in weekly on 100 of their neighbors each—making sure they have the food, medicine, unemployment benefits, and absentee ballots they need.⁸⁴

Teachers' unions formed medical panels of pediatricians to determine whether districts are creating safe environments for the teachers asked to go into the classroom.⁸⁵

Joseph B. Atkins, professor of journalism at the University of Mississippi, wrote that there were more than 230 strikes and other job actions in the meatpacking industry in the Carolinas and elsewhere in the South in the six months after the pandemic began, many of them among African American and Latino workers. The activist group the Southern Workers Assembly organized a Safe Jobs Safe Lives campaign in the meatpacking industry. In northwest Arkansas, the "non-traditional" worker justice organization Venceremos led a march to the front door of Tyson corporation's poultry plant in Springdale demanding better working and safety conditions and hazard pay during the pandemic.⁸⁶

In Connecticut, trade union activists from multiple industries, occupations, and unions called for an "emergency labor response to the COVID-19 crisis." They issued a statement signed by 200 workers, including hotel workers, food service workers, educators, grocery store workers, draftsmen, social workers, electricians, teamsters, pilots, barbers, HVAC technicians, and numerous others. Signers were listed by union, with a special category for "Non-union/Unemployed workers." They presented a plan of action that represented a full suite of policies needed to protect workers during the pandemic, including: hazard pay and childcare for essential workers; leave with full pay and benefits for all non-essential workers; health care, insurance, housing, utilities, and other needs to be met during the crisis; protection of collective bargaining, privacy, and other rights; and health care provisions including testing, production of PPE, and emergency hiring of healthcare workers; and many other demands.

The signers organized the Connecticut Workers Crisis Response, whose



campaign for these measures included a May Day rally with 200 cars surrounding the state capitol in Hartford and an on-line rally broadcast live; a "cancel rent" caravan; a regular Educator Working Group; publication of a newsletter; webinars on hot topics like the "reopening" of the state; social media work; and organizing solidarity support for various groups of workers threatened by their employers' health protection failures.⁸⁷

The state of Ohio emailed employers urging them to report workers who were collecting unemployment benefits while refusing to work—even in unsafe conditions—so they could be denied unemployment. However, a "hacker" developed a code that lets anyone submit fake information to the site. According to Vice, the hacker said his goal was to overwhelm the system with incorrect information, which would make it harder for the state to deny people benefits. Shortly thereafter the state announced it was re-considering the policy.⁸⁸

Other innovative approaches come from the Always Essential Campaign, through which a group of worker rights organizations are using the "essential work" narrative of the COVID pandemic to "transform what's possible for essential workers," particularly those in low-wage sectors who are disproportionately Black and other workers of color. Always Essential grew out of the unsuccessful effort to include an Essential Workers Bill of Rights—including health and safety protections, premium compensation, paid sick leave, childcare, and corporate accountability—in national pandemic relief legislation.⁸⁹ The campaign was designed to work around Republican opposition in Washington by campaigning for essential worker protections at state and local levels, in union negotiations, and within specific sectors and corporations.⁹⁰

At a state level, the union-backed New York Essential Workers Coalition initiated by ALIGN NY, made up of over 65 unions, worker centers, immigrant rights organizations, legal service providers, health, climate, and safety organizations, has been campaigning for the NY HERO Act, which would require mandatory, enforceable health and safety standards for workplaces, including standards for testing, PPE, social distancing, hand hygiene, disinfection, and engineering controls for ventilation. The NY HERO Act was signed into law May 5, 2021. Essential Ohio, a campaign including Jobs with Justice, immigrant rights groups, and allies, is campaigning city by city for an Essential Workers Bill of Rights. Resolutions in support of the Bill of Rights have passed in Lakewood, Toledo, and other cities.⁹¹

Always Essential is also spreading a model developed in Los Angeles to empower workers in the food and apparel manufacturing, warehousing and storage, and restaurant sectors to report COVID and other health violations directly to the Department of Public Health. In November the LA County Supervisors voted to establish Public Health Councils, supported by unions and



nonprofits, to educate workers on health orders and help them report violations.⁹² Always Essential is now spreading the model to Houston and other cities. In a related approach, the Minneapolis City Council is creating a cross-sector Downtown Workers Council consisting of food service, cleaning, security, and other downtown workers who will develop recommendations for the city regarding workplace safety through the pandemic.⁹³

A year into the pandemic an estimated ten million workers had lost their jobs permanently. Much of this loss was concentrated in specific sectors like the postal service, restaurants, and entertainment. Among the hardest hit has been public transit. Already starved for resources, bus and subway systems have been confronted by massive cuts in both ridership and revenues. Meanwhile, essential workers have found cutbacks in transit schedules and services making their lives still more difficult and the lack of proper safety precautions putting them still more at risk. And the cutbacks in transit threaten to become a permanent feature of U.S. cities, further cutting the access of workers in poor neighborhoods to jobs and services.

In response, a grassroots coalition of transit worker unions and community members has developed in cities around the country. It is largely a decentralized movement, but it has been tied together by a national Transit Equity Network built around annual Transit Equity Days. Adapting to pandemic conditions, the 2020 Transit Equity Days not only held virtual and in-person actions around the country, but also produced a series of on-line hearings in which more than 100 workers, transit users, and academic experts examined the transit crisis and laid out a program for making transit a central part of the struggle economic justice and climate protection.

Valley Transportation Authority in Santa Clara, California instituted front-door boarding, and more than 100 transit workers contracted COVID. Bus drivers demanded rear-door boarding to reduce COVID infection. Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 265, with 1,500 members, tried to negotiate the issue but management refused to budge. Drivers asked rider and community groups for support, and thirty groups led by the South Bay Labor Council signed a letter supporting their demand. The youth climate Sunrise Movement organized them for an action at VTA's headquarters with posters, speakers, a car caravan, press, and social media – scheduled for Transit Equity Day. Meanwhile, a group of rank-and-file bus drivers organized a meeting, inviting community groups to attend. The drivers decided to stop boarding passengers at the front door whether or not the VTA agreed. As one veteran worker put it, "It's come to a point where the drivers need to take matters into our own hands." The president of the local reported that when they spoke to the top manager, "She seemed to have heard that the drivers were preparing to take safety actions on their own behalf." That afternoon – the day before Transit Equity Day and the planned protests – the VTA announced it was restoring rear-door boarding. And since fares were collected at the front of the bus, that meant the public



would thereafter ride for free.⁹⁴

UNIONS AND STRIKES

North Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters



Photo: NBC Channel 10, Boston. [Watch the video »](#)

These actions had varied relations to unions. Some were union-organized. On April 6, for example, the North Atlantic States Regional Council of the Carpenters' union led a strike for Covid-19 protections by 13,000 Massachusetts carpenters.⁹⁵ On the same day, National Nurses United held walkouts at 15 HCA-Healthcare-owned hospitals in six states.⁹⁶ Some, like a Detroit bus drivers' walkout, were organized by rank-and-file workers but won union support. There is anecdotal evidence that some wildcats may have received sub rosa union encouragement, while in other cases unions have encouraged or ordered their members back to work. Some strikes were organized by non-union worker groups, such as the Instacart Shoppers and Gig Workers Collective and the NC Raise UP, an affiliate of the SEIU-backed Fight for \$15.

By May 12 the website *Payday Report* added the 200th work stoppage for coronavirus protection to their wildcat strike tracking map. Today it is over 1,400. Why are so many of these wildcats – strikes conducted without official union backing? Of course the great majority of U.S. workers don't have union representation so their strikes are bound to be "wildcat." But even where unions have bargaining rights they are usually constrained from striking both



by U.S. labor law and by their contracts with their employers.⁹⁷

While unions have demanded and bargained for Personal Protective Equipment, public health practices, and hazard pay, so far they have rarely engaged in strikes to get them.⁹⁸

Robert Combs of *Bloomberg Law* explained why:

One reason why most of the coronavirus-related strike activity has taken place outside of organized labor, rather than within, is that it's easier for nonunion workers to walk off the job, as long as they do it together. Many union employees, on the other hand, are limited by certain "no-strike" clauses in their collective bargaining agreements (CBA's). These provisions restrict a union local's ability to call a strike while the CBA is in effect. Although there are exceptions to these clauses that adept labor leaders can use if needed, it is often a wise choice to let some protests occur on a grassroots level. As long as they don't rise to the level of a wildcat strike—that is, a full-on strike not called by union locals, which can raise doubts about that local's ability to represent its workers—such protests can give unions the cover they need to advocate for their workers without triggering claims of unfair labor practices.⁹⁹

Labor leadership was certainly busy in the early weeks of the outbreak, but its role mostly revolved around supporting and promoting workplace protests that have sprung up organically by employees required to remain on the job while most of the workforce stays at home.

Most of these protests have stopped short of being defined as "strikes" by their union leaders. For example: an impromptu rally by Pittsburgh sanitation workers demanding hazard pay and better personal protective equipment; a pair of silent demonstrations at a General Electric factory in Lynn, Massachusetts, to complain about safety conditions and to agitate for switching production to ventilators; and a single-shift walkout by 19 painters at a Fiat Chrysler plant in Warren, Michigan, to protest the company's response to worker illnesses.

Combs says that "non-union walkouts fill the void."

The lack of union activity doesn't mean that there haven't been coordinated, large-scale strikes in these turbulent weeks. Quite the opposite: Work stoppages have made headlines almost every day. But most of these walkouts have been organized by unorganized workers—that is, employees in non-union companies.¹⁰⁰

But that's not the whole story. One of the significant developments of the coronavirus era is that some unions are beginning to move toward support of actions by their members that violate their contracts and even the law.¹⁰¹



Illinois Education Association President Kathi Griffin, for example, recently said,

No avenue or action is off the table – the courts, the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board, nothing, including health and safety strikes. The entire weight of the IEA and the IFT will be used in whatever way is necessary to protect the students and the staff who educate them. What we will strike over is the health and safety conditions of our students and our schools and the educational professionals that work with them.¹⁰²

One Illinois teachers union that was actively preparing to strike if necessary was the Cook County Colleges Teachers Union. The union contract contains a no-strike provision, and a strike would be illegal under the Illinois Education Labor Relations Act. But Tony Johnson, president of the union, explained why teachers felt able and justified in striking. "This strike would be based on our safety and health. Simple enough." The Illinois Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of Teachers have both endorsed or given support to "any local or councils who decide to strike on the basis of safety." While striking itself would be illegal, "if our members decide it's necessary, we will do so."¹⁰³

Other unions should take note.

In the early years of the Great Depression American workers were often portrayed as passive, even pathetic, victims, failing to take action against even the most outrageous deprivations. That illusion was maintained only by disregarding the many unemployed demonstrations, occupations of city and state governments, "rent riots," strikes, and other actions that generated widespread fear of social upheaval. While today there is some media coverage of the self-organization and action of unemployed and employed workers in the face of COVID-19 and the Coronavirus Depression, there is far more attention paid to the health and economic toll they are suffering. Yet as this mini-book documents, millions of working people have taken action against life-threatening burdens that have been placed on them. And their action has had a significant impact, both on their own well-being and on American politics and public policy.

The future significance of these actions will depend on the future course of the pandemic and its effects—and on what working people decide to do about them. It will also depend on the interaction of such struggles with the envioning context, ranging from looming constitutional crises to the devastation being wrought by climate change. But whatever the future may hold, it is time to pay attention to what working people are already doing, and what potentials for self-organization and action that may open up for the future.



CHAPTER 6: THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION



Photo: As soon as the American Rescue Plan landed in the Oval Office, President Joe Biden wasted no time signing it into effect. [Read the tweet.](#)

In the first year of the Coronavirus Pandemic and the ensuing Coronavirus Depression, "people power" played a little-acknowledged but critical role—recounted in previous chapters – in protecting health and economic wellbeing. Despite change in the national political context, this is continuing into the Biden era. Movements utilizing people power direct action may be just as important in this era. Indeed, given the sharp divisions within the system of institutionalized political power, such action may play an even more important role.

While dramatic events in Washington on January 6 held national attention, the weeks following Joe Biden's election also saw a series of "people power" actions around the country. On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, workers in more than 15 cities struck at McDonald's, Taco Bell, Burger King and other fast food



restaurants as part of Fight for \$15 and a Union.¹⁰⁴ Chicago teachers defied the city's school board and refused to return to work under conditions they considered unsafe.¹⁰⁵ Nurses held a "day of action" with demonstrations in more than a dozen states calling for personal protective equipment, COVID testing, adequate staffing, and sick leave.¹⁰⁶ In Olympia, Wash., advocates for the unhoused, saying "It's too cold for people to be sleeping on the streets, especially during a pandemic," purchased 17 rooms in the downtown Red Lion Hotel; when homeless people from nearby encampments tried to occupy the rooms, police drove them out.¹⁰⁷ Workers at the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market in New York City struck for a week, suffered police arrests while peacefully picketing, and eventually won a \$1.85 an hour raise and \$.40 cents an hour employer contribution for healthcare.¹⁰⁸

PEOPLE POWER IN THE CORONAVIRUS DEPRESSION



Detroit 15 @Detroit_15 · Aug 27, 2020

There's no economic justice without racial justice!

#JusticeForJacobBlake #StrikeForBlackLives #BlackLivesMatter



11



25



Photo: The Strike for Black Lives took place on July 20, 2020 for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. After the shooting of Jacob Blake, mobilization for Black Lives continued. [Tweet from @Detroit15](#).

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, there have been many such sporadic but significant outbursts of popular self-organization and



LABOR NETWORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY

"people power" action. Unemployed organizing brought together thousands of people in on-line networks and in the streets to demand fixing of dysfunctional state unemployment systems. Wildcat strikes—reportedly over 1000 since the start of the pandemic—demanded Personal Protective Equipment, COVID-safe workplaces, and extra pay for essential workers.¹⁰⁹ Strikes and threats to strike by teachers throughout the country have demanded classes be held only in COVID-safe schools. Thousands participated in rent strikes and other housing actions. Fifteen million people participated in Black Lives Matter demonstrations—the largest protests in American history—and Black Lives Matter strikes were backed by some of America's biggest unions. In December, a Los Angeles coalition brought together healthcare, labor and community organizations that represent tens of thousands of Los Angeles workers, including frontline healthcare workers, pre-K to 12th grade teachers and university educators, grocery store workers, hospitality workers, educational, housing and racial justice advocates to demand a four-week "circuit breaker" lockdown with safety nets for businesses, workers, and families so that they could safely stay home. Hundreds of thousands survived the hardships of the Coronavirus Depression through self-organized mutual aid.

Public policy has been strongly impacted by such people power action. Thousands of companies and local governments have been forced to provide Personal Protective Equipment and introduce protective public health policies. Teachers demands, strikes, and pressure tactics have played a major role in shaping both public health and educational policy, shutting down schools and determining the conditions under which they can reopen. Fight for \$15 strikes encouraged many states to pass \$15 minimum wage legislation and helped lead the Biden Administration to include a \$15 minimum wage as part of its American Rescue bill.

These actions provide an essential background for understanding the surprising start of Joe Biden's presidency. This conservative, pro-corporate politician known for his opposition to healthcare for all has been described—with only modest exaggeration—as taking more progressive action in his first eight days in office than Barack Obama did in his whole eight years. He has identified the great crises of our time: climate, pandemic, economic hardship, white supremacy, and now the crisis of democracy. He has pledged his "Build Back Better" program will address them. Maybe he had a vision on the road to Damascus – but more likely he is responding to the pressures from below manifested not only in electoral action but in campaigns for COVID protection, strikes and strike threats, Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and teacher and community protests for school safety. His future trajectory is also likely to be shaped in part by the strength of such pressures from below.

In early 2021, as political power appears poised between "Doctor No" Republicans and Democrats divided on whether to push for change or a return to "normalcy," people power may make a critical difference in how we address



the multiple crises of climate, pandemic, economic depression, white supremacy, and democracy. Beyond that, it can help lay the groundwork for deeper reforms and more far-reaching Build Back Better and Green New Deal programs.

The history of the original New Deal offers some hints of how this could happen.

PEOPLE POWER IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION



Photos: Top left: The Tennessee Valley Authority, part of the New Deal, being signed into law in 1933. Top right: FDR (President Franklin Delano Roosevelt) was responsible for the New Deal. Bottom: A public mural from one of the artists employed by the New Deal's WPA program. Upload date: Jan. 11, 2008. Author: [LordHarris, English Wikipedia](#).

In the early days of the Great Depression of the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of people participated in hunger marches, unemployed organizations, various forms of self-help mutual aid, street protests, anti-eviction actions, "Farm Holiday" blockades, strikes, and occupations of city halls and state capitals. Their purpose was to force local, state, and federal governments and elites to address the needs of those hit by economic catastrophe. Their role was critical



both before and after the 1932 elections that led to Democratic political control and the proclamation of the New Deal. People power helped lay the groundwork for the greatest period of social reform since the Civil War and the greatest period of worker organization ever.

Franklin D. Roosevelt entered the presidency as a fiscal conservative pledged to balance the budget with no specific plan to counter the Great Depression. His New Deal began as a program of reform that was oriented more toward saving American business than to rescuing its people. Among his first acts were to cut government salaries and veterans' benefits. But unemployed and worker movements continued to force local, state, and national governments to address hardship and enormously expand relief. Pressure from below—from the likes of the unemployed, workers, and farmers—had already turned a silent emergency into a threat to the status quo. Roosevelt responded with a series of emergency relief measures designed to limit hardship, protest, and the downward spiral of depression.

The New Deal era represented a historic realignment in American politics as urban ethnic groups, rural communities, African Americans, workers, and others hard hit by the Great Depression flooded into the Democratic Party, creating what came to be known as the New Deal Coalition. But direct action from below was a significant factor in many of the major initiatives of the early New Deal. The threat of action by the unemployed laid the groundwork for emergency programs like the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Farm Holiday movement helped call forth the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA).

But the effect of pressure from below didn't stop with the early New Deal. The unemployed, union organizing, strike, and old-age pension movements—combined with the mass movements led by demagogic populist leaders like Louisiana governor Huey Long and radio priest Father Charles Coughlin—led Roosevelt in 1935–1936 to opt for a cascade of more radical programs often referred to by historians as the “Second New Deal.” The old-age pension movement led by Dr. Francis Townsend and the labor and unemployed campaign for the Workers' Unemployment Insurance bill (aka the Lundeen bill) laid the groundwork for Social Security. The 1934 strikes and general strikes created the pressures that led to the Wagner Act and the growth of industrial unionism. Roosevelt successfully backed passage of the modest Wealth Tax Act of 1935 to steal the thunder of the Share Our Wealth progressive taxation movement backed by Huey Long. Mass mobilization by workers and the unemployed helped save Social Security from gutting by Republicans in Congress. It also helped limit the power and appeal of white supremacist, right-wing, and fascist movements that repeatedly threatened to erupt into national prominence.



The period of dramatic New Deal reforms was short-lived. In 1936 the Supreme Court began declaring major New Deal programs unconstitutional. Starting in 1937 a conservative coalition in Congress between Republicans and Southern Democratic "Dixiecrats" put an end to passage of New Deal legislation. While many of their demands were met or deflected, mass movements—above all the burgeoning labor movement—continued to use people power to address the needs of those at the bottom.

In the stories I heard in my youth from old New Dealers there were often two set of enemies. There were the right-wingers – most of the Republican Party, the Liberty Leaguers, anti-labor corporations, HUAC, the FBI, and racists and anti-Semites of many kinds. But there were another set of enemies – the New Deal coalition's "enemies within." They included the Herbert Hoover-initiated Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Roosevelt-backed J. Edgar Hoover, and the Southern white supremacists in the Democratic Party. In the argot of the day they were often referred to as "phony" New Dealers—opportunistically hiding under the popular mantle of the Roosevelt Administration while actually striving to undermine its most progressive policies and advocates. Roosevelt was the arbiter and at the same time the target of these struggles within the New Deal coalition. He was also complicit with some of the most reactionary policies promulgated in the name of the New Deal, notably those promoted by racist Southern senators and congressmen.

In a period of reform there may also be corporate and other powerful forces who want to support some aspects of a reform program. They may do so from fear of more radical challenge or of social chaos; from recognition of major social problems that threaten the whole society; or from specific gains that may be made by an individual company or sector. In the 1930s some elites supported federal relief programs because they feared riot and even revolution. Many supported the National Recovery Administration (NRA) because they felt something was necessary to combat the Great Depression. Some companies – for example General Electric – supported expanded labor rights because union wage floors would give their large, technologically-advanced companies an advantage over their smaller, technologically-backward competition. (Similarly, today some sectors of business support some parts of Biden's reform program. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce applauded the Biden Rescue plan, but said it shouldn't last too long.) The New Deal program would never have been passed and implemented without such support. But dependence on such forces also puts a limit to how far reforms can go. It can be tough to know when to cooperate with such forces and when to fight them, but both are likely to be necessary.

PEOPLE POWER IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

Within such a complex arena of struggle, action by those affected by hardship shows the public, the media, and politicians that public response is essential



and urgent. It is easy to ignore a million hungry people, but it is not so easy to ignore a million hungry people who are pressing their demands at government offices and in the streets.

Such action demonstrates to politicians that there are needy constituencies that can be appealed to – and if one politician or political force doesn't appeal to them, their competitors may do so. As one old New Dealer told me regarding the second New Deal, Roosevelt had to keep out front in the fight for social progress or people would quickly look for other leaders – like Huey Long and Father Coughlin. That same dynamic might apply in the era of the Coronavirus pandemic.



CHAPTER 7: THE FUTURE OF PEOPLE POWER IN THE BIDEN ERA

By many measures, the Coronavirus Depression is the worst since the Great Depression of the 1930s, but there are many important differences between the 1930s and today. Both the similarities and the differences affect the strategic landscape for social change. "People power" direct action played a significant role then as it does today, but the differences in context lead to differences in the nature of that role.

The Great Depression was one great national crisis that was widely perceived as including worker, farmer, environmental, and other dimensions within itself. Today we face at least five distinctive though deeply interpenetrating crises: climate, pandemic, depression, racial inequality and democracy.

The presidency of Franklin Roosevelt started with a historic electoral landslide that gave the Democratic Party control of both Senate and House. The President's charismatic appeal to a desperate public gave room to introduce reforms that would have met massive opposition in more normal times. The Biden administration, in contrast, entered office with a Congress and a public deeply divided. But it is important to realize that in both cases, a powerful bloc including Southern racists, businesses, and the Supreme Court were skeptical of reforms proposed by the President. In the 1930s, these forces were eventually able to halt New Deal reforms; what will happen to current reform programs is likely to remain contested.

While the New Deal was an entire era of social reform involving many centers of power and initiative, there was no question that President Roosevelt was its leader and the principal shaper of its agenda. The broad program of the Green New Deal preceded Biden's presidential campaign and has its own program and supporting forces. While Joe Biden has adopted many of its themes, he has eschewed calling his program the Green New Deal, referring to his own program instead as "Build Back Better." This means that the Green New Deal is not being defined as the nation's program in the way that Roosevelt defined the original New Deal. But this also creates the opportunity for the Green New Deal to serve as an independent confluence of forces that may be broadly supportive of Biden's reforms but is also able to act as an independent force, appealing to the public for deeper change and working for implementation in both the political system and civil society.

As the Coronavirus pandemic spread across the U.S. in early 2020, more than 20 million people lost their jobs, creating the highest unemployment rate since the Great Depression.¹¹⁰ At the end of 2020 the U.S. Census Bureau found that 83 million adults –one in three–reported that in the previous week it had been somewhat or very difficult for their household to cover usual expenses such as



food, rent or mortgage, car payments, medical expenses, or student loans; for Black and Latino adults it was nearly 50%. Twelve percent of adults—nearly 26 million—said their household sometimes or often didn't have enough to eat over the previous week.¹¹¹ Meanwhile more than 34 million Americans have been infected with COVID-19 and over 600,000 have died.

The next phase of the Coronavirus Depression will be affected by the course of the pandemic, the actions of the Biden administration, and what Congress is willing to pass. That will depend on epidemiology, politics—and popular action.

The pandemic is also accelerating changes in America's class structure. In the "recovery" from the Great Recession, the U.S. developed a low-wage workforce, concentrated in the service economy, that composed about 40% of the workforce.

A 2019 Brookings report shows that before the pandemic 53 million Americans—44% of all workers aged 18-64—had low-wage jobs, with median hourly wages of \$10.22 and median annual earnings of \$17,950.¹¹² Their work was normally contingent, part-time, and without benefits or job security. It included a high proportion of Black, Latino, female, immigrant, and young workers. Today hardship is concentrated in this same sector of the workforce. It includes the unemployed; those who want to work but aren't looking for work; "essential workers" working at high risk for COVID-19 at low pay; and freelance, gig, and other contingent workers excluded from job security, unemployment compensation, and other benefits. COVID-era reduction in jobs and growth of contingent work are concentrated in particular sectors like tourism and entertainment. (In the Great Depression certain sectors—notably agriculture—similarly saw disproportionate and permanent shrinkage.) Meanwhile, the collective wealth of America's 660 billionaires has increased by nearly 40%—over \$1.1 trillion—since the start of the pandemic.¹¹³

While prediction is difficult, especially about the future, we can reasonably expect continuation of our five great crises (climate, pandemic, depression, racism, and democracy); continuing hardship for at least 40% of the population; division and vacillation in the Biden administration and Congress; a continuing rightwing threat; and a potent Green New Deal coalition. This configuration makes it likely that people power action can significantly influence the balance of forces.



SOME STRATEGIC GUIDELINES

Photo: The Sierra Club, which is part of the Green New Deal Network and an endorser of the THRIVE Agenda, is pushing for A Plan for Economic Renewal in order for the Biden administration to truly "Build Back Better." This "THRIVE-aligned economic renewal plan would provide family-sustaining jobs for 15.5 million people for the next 10 years."

Source sc.org/economicrenewal.



Invest in

STRONG LABOR STANDARDS

to ensure jobs with family-sustaining wages, health benefits, and access to unions

#TimeToTHRIVE
sc.org/economicrenewal

What strategic lessons can we draw from the history of people power action in the Great Depression and the first year of the Coronavirus Depression for the new period we are entering? Here are some thoughts that may be useful for a variety of groups and constituencies, for their confluence, and for the development of the Green New Deal.

PEOPLE POWER CAN WORK. While it is notoriously difficult for people who are suffering hardship as a result of "hard times" to organize themselves and take action, the history of people power shows it is possible to do so even under depression conditions. The pandemic presents additional barriers to effective action. But the fact that the largest protest in U.S. history – Black Lives Matter – took place at the height of the pandemic shows that these obstacles can be overcome.

MULTIPLE CRISES REQUIRE SYNERGISTIC MOVEMENTS. American society is faced with multiple intersecting crises—climate, pandemic, depression, racism, and democracy, each of which is critical for the future of the others. While particular actions may address one or another, they should do so in a way that contributes to broader solutions that address them all. Supporting each other's demands is the alternative to catastrophic division. If different sectors compete for funding, policy priorities, and public sympathy, they will simply play into the hands of those who would like to defeat them all. The Biden American Rescue Plan showed awareness of this trap; it tied together in one bill the interests of many critical constituencies. Republicans tried to defeat it by trying to force the Democrats to throw some of their constituencies overboard to lighten the price tag. Fortunately they failed.



KEEP THE PUBLIC FRONT AND CENTER. The purpose of people power action is not just to put pressure on Biden, Democrats, or even on Republicans, but to educate, mobilize, and inspire the people and to help them understand the problems and what needs to be done. This has been strikingly effective in the Coronavirus era. Action for safe schools and personal protective equipment dramatized the need for COVID policies that protect workers; actions demanding premium pay for essential workers dramatized the unfairness of low-wage work, laying the groundwork for \$15 state and federal minimum wages; rent strikes made the eviction crisis visible and helped lead to the moratorium on evictions; Black Lives Matter put racial oppression at the center of national consciousness and politics. Much of the population feels that neither Republicans nor Democrats have the solution to their problems. People power action needs to define itself not in terms of Democrats vs. Republicans, but rather as an effort to address people's desperate needs.

USE PEOPLE POWER TO CREATE PRESSURE FOR POLITICAL RESPONSE. For example, there is overwhelming popular support for stimulus payments and unemployment benefits, but there has yet to be large, visible public action for them. Senators are an obvious target for the kind of pressure from below – pioneered by the Tea Party and Indivisible – by those who face economic disaster without such assistance. And it can work. For example, late in 2020 unemployed workers with Step Up Louisiana used a wide range of pressure tactics to persuade Republican Senator Bill Cassidy to support legislation that included \$300 weekly unemployment benefits, contributing to the shift of Republican Senators to support an emergency relief package in December, 2020.¹¹⁴

GO LOCAL TO GO NATIONAL. Democratic Party control of the presidency and Congress puts national politics front and center as a target for popular action – attempting to affect federal policy is no longer the futile task it often appeared to be in the Trump era. But other arenas remain crucial. The policy of an employer, a school board, or a state agency can be a life-or-death matter for those it affects. These are among the many targets that can be directly affected by people power pressure. And the struggles to affect them can have a powerful demonstration effect on national politics; witness the local action of the unemployed in the 1930s and the impact of local action by teachers and nurses in 2020

MAKE THE GREEN NEW DEAL AN INDEPENDENT CENTER FOR PEOPLE POWER. The Green New Deal has emerged as a vehicle for a wide array of forces and programs that integrate the solutions to our overlapping crises. It has become a broad movement in the whole of society which includes local, state, and national action and forces in many parts of



government and civil society. It should aim to transform the American people into an organized force for implementing its program through people power action.

USE CONFLICT CONSTRUCTIVELY. There undoubtedly will be times when popular movements will find themselves in conflict with the Biden administration and the Democratic Congress. This happened with the nascent industrial unions and the Roosevelt administration – by 1934 the New Deal's National Recovery Administration (NRA) was being scorned by local union organizers as the "National Run-Around." But the challenge is to fight in such a way as to push the overall Build Back Better and Green New Deal projects forward rather than undermining them.

FIGHT FOR BOTH BUILD BACK BETTER AND THE GREEN NEW DEAL. Despite their differences, both of these programs will meet fierce opposition from the same forces – the Republican Party, the racists and fascists who form the hardcore support for Donald Trump, and the business forces who fear their wealth will be threatened by climate protection and economic redistribution. There will also be powerful forces within the Biden administration, the Democratic Party, and the Democratic caucus in Congress that, while giving lip service to Build Back Better, will be fighting fiercely to prevent the realization of climate protection and redistribution objectives. These will include fossil fuel Democrats, corporate "portfolio Democrats," and military hawks seeking foreign adventures and global domination. Build Back Better and the Green New Deal, in short, will be less two opposed programs than one arena of overlapping struggles.

MAKE "BUILD BACK BETTER" BETTER. People ask: should movements support or oppose Biden's program? It's the wrong question! They should mobilize people to fight for what we all need.

Passage of Biden programs and expanding them when inadequate are not incompatible objectives. The goal should be not to block but to improve and expand "Build Back Better" initiatives. A crucial means to do so is to develop more radical Green New Deal programs – and transform Biden's "Build Back Better" program into the vision of the Green New Deal

President Roosevelt turned to the most radical program of social reform since the Civil War – often referred to as the "Second New Deal" – because, as one old New Dealer once explained to me, he had to either keep ahead of all of the rival forces articulating popular interests or lose his own base. There is an opportunity for people power and the Green New Deal to establish a similar dynamic today. In fact, the opportunity may be greater: Roosevelt could count on his electoral success and his ability to appeal to the people, but Biden can't depend on either clout or charisma in the same way. He already seems to be acting on an understanding that he has to maintain leadership of the



movement for reform or lose his base to his rivals.

This gives those who want deeper change a strong hand, but it is a hand that it would be foolish to overplay. For the success of both Build Back Better and the Green New Deal it is essential to strengthen Biden's support against very powerful Republican and fascist forces. A delicate balance is necessary to simultaneously undermine those forces while strengthening the Build Back Better forces and also radicalizing them.

TWO, THREE, MANY GREEN NEW DEALS

The New Deal didn't fix the Depression. After its most dynamic phase the New Deal was halted and rolled back. It is often said the New Deal saved American capitalism. A similar fate could meet Biden's Build Back Better reforms—or even the Green New Deal. We should envision not only a "Second Green New Deal," but a third, fourth, and perhaps still further ones. People power can be a crucial force in driving the process forward.

As in the Great Depression, people power in the Coronavirus Depression has not been the result of a grand scheme. Rather, it has come as a series of responses to terrible and in many cases life threatening conditions. While we can improve our future action by learning lessons from our past, future people power action is likely to be more a response to the problems people face than the result of any master plan. Nonetheless, people can learn from their own and each other's past experience and they can join together to pool their knowledge and their power. When they do, their action can make a critical difference—perhaps even the critical difference.

The crises we face are too important and too desperate to leave to politicians and experts. They require intervention by the people who are suffering from them. If those who are in hardship are silent, no one else is likely to pay much attention to their suffering. People in need must speak for themselves, act, and be heard. Updating Black abolitionist Fredrick Douglass' remark that "Power never conceded without a demand," former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich recently wrote,

The responsibility for summoning the political will to reverse inequality will fall to lower-income Americans of whatever race, progressives and their political allies. They will need to organize, mobilize and put sufficient pressure on Biden and other elected leaders to act. As it was in the time of FDR and LBJ, power is redistributed only when those without it demand it.¹¹⁵



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