#### Recognizing the right to strike strengthens the power that unions have by creating unconditional leverage against companies.

**Hennebert and Faulkner write in 2020:** [Hennebert, Marc-Antonin, and Marcel Faulkner. “Are Strikes Still a Tool for Union Action? A Qualitative Investigation into the Private Sector in Quebec, Canada.” Economic and Industrial Democracy, vol. 41, no. 1, Feb. 2020, pp. 73–97, doi:10.1177/0143831X16684963.]

Economic and structural factors. Many respondents first recognized that the decision to go on strike was a ‘strategic choice’ dictated by several variables including the particularly important variable of their economic environment. Thus, for these respondents, it was important to analyse the economic conditions and, in particular, the conditions of the industry sector involved, and to thoroughly understand the state of the labour market before even considering going on strike as a rational choice of action. At this stage, the company’s financial situation appears to have been the most important variable to consider in making an informed decision. However, the respondents’ comments revealed a paradoxical argument. In fact, in order for a strike to be effective, it must have ‘serious financial consequences for the employer’, that is, it must ‘hurt the company’, but without undermining its survival. One union representative underlined the importance of seeking such a balance: … if I want to go on strike, or even if I want to put pressure on the employer, if I undermine the work of my members and the company, I have nothing to gain by it. So, the decision to go on strike must be taken in light of the company’s situation … I will be in a better position if the economic situation of the company is positive. Although the analysis of the company’s financial situation is not a new step in the decisional process leading to a strike, according to our interviewees, it nevertheless appears to be more complex than in the past because of the changing corporate structures of companies and the increasing blurring of their organizational boundaries. Identifying ‘the real corporate entity’ involved in the negotiation, knowing who ‘the real employer’ is, or ‘simply determining the real corporate profitability level’, have become increasingly difficult tasks. These tasks become even more complex when management teams refuse to be transparent about their financial information. One of our interlocutors summed up these difficulties as follows:

#### Unions disproportionately help those most in need, and therefore are a tool to help close the racial wealth gap.

Weller & Madland write in 2018:

Weller and Madland [Christian E. Weller and David Madland, 6-27-2018, "Union Membership Narrows the Racial Wealth Gap for Families of Color," Center for American Progress, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/]

Being a union member creates a number of venues for workers to build more wealth than would be available for nonunion members.[4](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-4) Union members bargain collectively for wages, benefits, and procedures that affect their employment, such as when and how an employer can fire an employee. As a result of being covered by a collective bargaining agreement—the contract that employers and unions regularly sign and that governs these employment-related issues—union members have higher wages, on average; more benefits; and more stable employment than is the case for nonunion members**.** Higher wages then translate into more savings in absolute terms, as well as more tax incentives to save.[5](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-5) Furthermore, more job-related benefits—such as health insurance, defined benefit plans, and life insurance—mean that union members need to spend less money than do nonunion members to protect their families against future income losses. Therefore, they can save more money to pursue their own goals, such as paying for their children’s college education.[6](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-6) Lastly, union membership leads to greater employment stability and job protections that translate into longer tenures with one employer.[7](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-7) This employment stability translates into more savings, as union members are more likely to be eligible for key benefits such as retirement savings and can better plan for their futures.[8](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-8) This issue brief considers the relevant data broken down by union membership separately for whites and nonwhites. The data show that: Union members have greater wealth than nonmembers, and the difference is much larger for nonwhites than whites. From 2010 to 2016, nonwhite families who were also union members had a median wealth that was almost five times—485.1 percent, to be exact—as large as the median wealth of nonunion nonwhite families.[9](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-9) The difference between union and nonunion white families was much smaller, with the former having a median wealth that was only 139 percent that of the latter during that period. (see Table 1) Union members have higher earnings, more benefits, and more employment stability than nonunion members. Union members’ total annual earnings are between 20 percent and 50 percent greater than those of nonunion members. (see Table 2) The gap in income, benefits, and employment stability by union membership is larger for nonwhite families than for white families. The chance of having a 401(k) plan, for instance, is about 50 percent greater for nonwhite union members compared with their nonunion counterparts, but the gap among whites is only 21.7 percent. (see Table 1) The data suggest that nonwhite union members receive a particular boost in their wealth because they see larger increases in pay, benefits, and employment stability than white union members. This is primarily a result of the fact that nonwhite workers work more frequently than whites in low-paying jobs with few benefits, so they often have much more to gain.[10](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-10) This disparity in working conditions is due to a wide array of factors, including but not limited to unequal access to education, occupational segregation, and discrimination.[11](https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/reports/2018/09/04/454781/union-membership-narrows-racial-wealth-gap-families-color/#fn-454781-11) Unions help all workers, and they do the most for those with less advantages. As a result, union membership can help shrink that racial gap in labor market outcomes. And this partial equalization translates into a boost in median wealth for nonwhite union families.

#### Union leaders have both ideological and pragmatic reasons to support across racial lines. Increasing union power allows for them to better influence the workplace to protect all members.

Frymer & Grumbach write this year: [Paul Frymer is a professor in the Department of Politics at Princeton University, Jacob M. Grumbach is an Assitant Professor of Political Science at the University of Washington, Published: January 2021, “Labor Unions and White Racial Politics”, American Journal of Political Science, https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VJUOOV]

In recent decades, union leaders have had both ideological commitments and strategic reasons for building an interracial coalition. Union leaders are often ideologically committed to egalitarianism, and such a commitment can influence the rank and file. As Ahlquist and Levi (2013, 6) argue, unions politically mobilize their members more effectively when they have "an ideologically motivated founding leadership cohort who devises organizational rules that facilitate both industrial success and coordinated expectations about the leaders' political objectives." This is how some unions, such as the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), "produce membership willing to self-sacrifice on behalf of a wide range of political and social justice issues" (1). Dependent on context, union leaders' goal of maintaining and expanding their organizations also gives them strategic incentives to reduce racial animus among their rank and file.In the pre-civil-rights era, union leaders representing all-white workforces often felt the need to avoid the subject of racial diversity in order to maintain solidarity within their membership, particularly during drives to establish a collective bargaining agreement (Frymer 2005). With frequent racial segregation in employment and larger majorities of white workers, it may have made strategic sense for union leaders to increase the salience of class identity at the expense of racial identity. But even during this time, it was dependent on the context of the specific workforce. In the 1940s, CIO unions in particular saw the activism of African American workers on factory floors in the auto and steel industries, leading union and civil rights leaders alike to embrace the other movements as a way to gain members for their own (Lichtenstein 2001). As the labor movement has become more diverse in recent decades, the incentives for union leaders have increasingly changed with it. Changing demographics led many service industry unions such as AFSCME, UNITE HERE, and SEIU to embrace both racial minority and immigrant workforces. Starting in the 1980s, the AFL- CIO began to endorse pro-immigration legislative policies and agency rules in response to the rising numbers of undocumented Latino workers who were joining union campaigns (Fine and Tichenor 2009). To secure more union election victories and collective bargaining agreements, its leaders increasingly felt a strategic need to embrace interracial solidarity. National union conventions are increasingly multilingual, with large immigrant populations in many service industries now representing just about every part of the world. Starting in the 1990s, the AFL-CIO pushed the National Labor Relations Board to recognize the solidaristic benefits of racially based union campaigns centered around African American and Latino workforces, and influenced the board to cooperate with immigration officials to protect undocumented workers during union activity (Frymer 2008).

#### Strikes can push back against monopsony power to ensure workers see the benefits of production

**Kate Bahn says in 2019:**

[August 29, 2019, "The once and future role of strikes in ensuring U.S. worker power," Equitable Growth, https://equitablegrowth.org/the-once-and-future-role-of-strikes-in-ensuring-u-s-worker-power/]

In the United States, Labor Day, which falls on the first Monday of September, is when we honor the history of the U.S. labor movement in striving for benefits and empowerment of workers across the economy. Strikes play an important role in empowering workers vis-à-vis their employers. By withdrawing their labor power, workers are able to balance the scales against the owners of capital, who rely on workers for production and providing services. Strikes have declined in frequency, popularity, and success over the past four decades, yet today, amid rising economic inequality, they are once again becoming an important tool in exercising worker power to ensure that the gains of profitability and economic growth can be broadly shared. The history of strikes in the United States Washington University in St. Louis sociologist Jake Rosenfeld examines the role of work stoppages in his recent book What Unions No Longer Do, and finds that strikes at large firms began declining in the mid-1970s, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Work Stoppages file. Rosenfeld then digs deeper to estimate the trends of strikes at firms both large and small by calculating a broader measure using data from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service from 1984 to 2002. He finds a peak in strikes in the late 1980s and then a stark decline after. The decline of strikes is a result of a variety of factors. One is the increased use of replacement hires, especially after the PATCO strike of 1981, when President Ronald Reagan summarily fired 11,000 air traffic controllers who were striking for higher pay and a reduced work week. President Reagan quickly replaced those striking workers with 4,000 air traffic control supervisors and Army members, sending a powerful message to U.S. workers about the use of strikes in labor disputes. But even before this historic turning point, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 limited the ability of workers to strike. This included restrictions on secondary boycotts and picketing, both of which make striking especially difficult in today’s increasingly fissured workplace, where you cannot strike against the corporation that is at least partly responsible for your workplace conditions but not technically your direct employer. For example, workers at the franchises of McDonald’s Corporation who attempt to unionize are not protected by the Fair Labor Standards Act when picketing against McDonald’s because they are, most commonly, the employees of a franchisor, rather than of the main corporation. These factors, along with a general increasing business hostility toward unions and lack of enforcement of labor protections, have ultimately made strikes less effective as a tool for collective bargaining in the United States. Increasing interest in unions among U.S. workers today At the same time, there is an increasing consensus today that unions are a positive force for increasing worker power and balancing against economic inequality. In polling of support for unions and specific aspects of collective bargaining, Equitable Growth grantee Alex Hertel-Fernandez of Columbia University, along with William Kimball and Thomas Kochan of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, find that support for unions has grown overall, with nearly half of U.S. workers in 2018 saying they would vote for a union if given the opportunity. This is a significant increase from one-third of workers supporting unionization in 1995. According to their research, workers primarily value unions’ role in collective bargaining and ensuring access to benefits such as healthcare, retirement, and unemployment insurance. Strikes have historically been one of the strongest tools used by unions to ensure they have power to engage in collective bargaining. But striking was viewed as a negative attribute in the survey done by Hertel-Fernandez, Kimball, and Kochan. Yet, when they presented workers with the hypothetical choice of a union exercising strike power with other attributes of unions, such as collective bargaining, support increased. But strikes, of course, do not take place in a bubble. The wider climate of worker bargaining power and institutions that support labor organizing plays a role in making this historically crucial tool effective again. So, too, does the power of employers to resist these organizing efforts when the labor market lacks competition that would increase worker bargaining power. The role of monopsony power in the U.S. labor market Monopsony power is a situation in the labor market where individual employers exercise effective control over wage setting rather than wages being set by competitive forces (akin to monopoly power, where a limited number of firms exercise pricing power over their customers.) In a new Equitable Growth working paper by Mark Paul of New College of Florida and Mark Stelzner of Connecticut College, the role of collective action in offsetting employer monopsony power is examined in the context of institutional support for labor. Paul and Stelzner construct an abstract model with the assumption of monopsonistic markets and follow the originator of monopsony theory Joan Robinson’s insight that unions can serve as a countervailing power against employer power. Their model shows that institutional support for unions, such as legislation protecting the right to organize, is necessary for this dynamic process of balancing employers’ monopsony power. In an accompanying column, the two researchers write that they “find that a lack of institutional support will devastate unions’ ability to function as a balance to firms’ monopsony power, potentially with major consequences … In turn, labor market outcomes will be less socially efficient.”

#### Strikes and collective bargaining have produced successes across multiple employers, instead of just isolated businesses

**Lynn Rhinehart and Celine McNicholas write in 2020:**

[Lynn Rhinehart and Celine McNicholas, 5-4-2020, "Collective bargaining beyond the worksite: How workers and their unions build power and set standards for their industries," Economic Policy Institute, https://www.epi.org/publication/collective-bargaining-beyond-the-worksite-how-workers-and-their-unions-build-power-and-set-standards-for-their-industries/]

Despite the legal impediments outlined above, workers and unions in many industries throughout the country have found ways to broaden their bargaining relationships with employers to cover multiple worksites and, in some cases, multiple employers. A variety of approaches are described below. National bargaining Unions can win certification of a nationwide bargaining unit of a single employer and bargain a single collective bargaining agreement covering all locations of that employer, or they can bargain nationally on a multi-employer basis. Examples of both follow. Trucking industry One of the most famous examples of national multi-employer bargaining that established standards for an entire industry is the Teamsters Master Freight Agreement, negotiated by Jimmy Hoffa in the 1960s.20 When it was first adopted, the Master Freight Agreement covered more than 450,000 drivers, had literally hundreds of signatory employers, and set standards for the entire trucking industry. However, the agreement has been undermined by deregulation and by consolidation in the industry. Nevertheless, the Teamsters are still able to bargain national agreements that raise standards for tens of thousands of freight industry workers. The Master Freight Agreement covers YRC Freight, Holland, and New Penn, which together employ approximately 24,000 truck drivers, dockworkers, and clerical workers at over 200 locations across the United States. In addition, the Teamsters have national agreements with ABF Freight, covering more than 8,000 workers at over 150 locations, and UPS Freight, covering 12,000 freight drivers and dockworkers. The Teamsters also represent nearly 300,000 UPS package car, air, and feeder drivers as well as loaders, sorters, and clerks across 400 UPS sites—making the contract covering these workers the largest private-sector collective bargaining agreement in the United States. In the goods transportation logistics industry, the Teamsters have national agreements with DHL covering nearly 5,000 workers at over 50 locations.21 Telecommunications After decades of organizing and struggle, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) achieved a national collective bargaining agreement with AT&T that allowed the union to bargain for 500,000 workers in the telecommunications industry. But subsequent deregulation and the breakup of “Ma Bell” into eight regional companies (“Baby Bells”) in the 1980s destroyed the national single-employer agreement, and nonunion companies quickly took advantage of deregulation to set up operations and undermine standards. Now CWA must bargain with AT&T for 11 individual and geographically dispersed bargaining units: six for workers in traditional wireline services, four for workers in mobile wireless services, and one focused on DSL customer service. CWA also bargains separately with the other regional bell companies, which became Verizon and CenturyLink. Today the union represents about 100,000 workers at AT&T across the country and another 50,000 at the remnants of the regional bells. All of the telecommunications operations compete with nonunion cable for the same broadband market, further eroding bargaining power.22 Paper industry The United Steelworkers have used their union’s density and strength to build a national bargaining relationship with International Paper (IP). In the past, the union’s relationship with IP was contentious, and bargaining was fragmented among many different regions and locals, but the union now bargains with IP over two national agreements setting wages and benefits. One agreement covers 5,800 workers at 17 paper mills, and the other agreement covers 4,700 workers at 55 box plants around the country. Site-specific issues are then bargained at the local level. The union represents workers at about 70% of IP’s mills and 60% of IP’s box plants. In contrast, the union represents workers at only four of 18 Kimberly Clark facilities, and the union has not yet been able to win national bargaining at Kimberly Clark.23 Railroads Under the Railway Labor Act, unions that have won an election and collective bargaining rights for a craft or class of employees bargain a national agreement for that national bargaining unit with a railroad or airline. The unions are sometimes able to set standards that other employers follow. For example, the collective bargaining agreements reached by unions on the freight railroads (class 1), where there is high union density, set a pattern for unionized commuter rail and smaller railroads.24 Coordinated national bargaining Unions can join together in a coalition to bargain with a nationwide employer on behalf of different groups of employees. Manufacturing (General Electric) For decades, a coalition of unions has bargained with General Electric through a coordinated bargaining council. In the 1980s, this bargaining covered 40,000‒50,000 GE workers, and the collective bargaining agreement set a pattern that would apply to other manufacturers of electrical appliances, equipment, and component suppliers. Because of corporate changes, downsizing, and loss of jobs to outsourcing and trade, currently only approximately 6,600 workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements at GE. Pattern bargaining Under pattern bargaining, a union will bargain with an initial employer to reach an agreement that then becomes the pattern for subsequent agreements with other employers in the industry. Automakers GM, Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler Perhaps the most well-known example of pattern bargaining involves the United Auto Workers union and General Motors, Ford, and Fiat-Chrysler. The collective bargaining agreements negotiated through bargaining with the three automakers not only set wages and benefits for tens of thousands of autoworkers, but also have an impact on nonunion auto manufacturers, which try to keep their wages competitive with their unionized counterparts.25 Under the UAW’s approach to pattern bargaining, the union bargains with all three auto companies and then picks a bargaining target to set the standard. In 2019, the target was General Motors. After failing to reach an agreement by the expiration of the contract, 49,000 GM workers went on strike for six weeks in the fall of 2019 in an effort to win a better agreement from GM. As a result of the strike, workers protected their health care benefits and won a substantial pay raise in the form of base wage increases and an accelerated progression to top pay for newer workers.26 The agreement set the pattern for the industry, and the UAW was able to reach an agreement with Ford very quickly after the GM settlement, and later reached an agreement with Fiat-Chrysler.

#### Workers in the status quo are being punished for striking – but an unconditional right to strike ensures that they can strike unpunished.

**Alexia Campbell writes in 2019:** [Campbell, Alexia. “5 Questions About Labor Strikes That You Were Too Embarrassed To Ask.” Vox. September 20, 2019. Web. October 13, 2021.]

3) Can workers get fired for going on strike? No, but a company can permanently replace a striking worker by hiring someone else. I know it sounds like the same thing, and in practice it is, but there’s some nuance. The Supreme Court has ruled that companies have a right to hire replacements to keep the business running during the strike. And even when the strike is over, replacement employees have a right to keep their job. All that an employer has to do is guarantee that a striking worker will get first dibs on any job that opens up in the following year. But there’s no guarantee that a position will open up. So getting fired and getting replaced are basically the same thing. “It’s a legal distinction with very little practical significance,” James Brudney, the Joseph Crowley chair in labor and employment law at Fordham University, explained to me. However, employers have been hesitant to hire replacement workers during the wave of labor strikes in recent years. There are two main reasons: For one, unions generally negotiate the terms to end a strike, and the conditions always include the promise to let workers who walked out return to their jobs. Another reason is that workers are often hard to replace. Take the example of the GM strike: Not just anyone knows how to assemble a Chevy pickup truck. “You can’t have people walk off the street and make a car,” Dau-Schmidt said me. “That’s a skilled job.” But companies can punish workers in other ways. They don’t have to pay striking workers, and they can cut their benefits. In a drastic move, GM decided to cut off striking employees from their health insurance. But that just made workers angrier. The potential for a backlash is why Amazon probably won’t punish workers who walk out to protest the company’s lack of action on climate change. “You can do almost anything if you have the bargaining power,” Dau-Schmidt added. “It all depends on how valuable you are.” Note the “almost.”

#### Black workers are overrepresented at the lowest paid jobs, and their ability to unionize has been aggressively challenged by companies such as Amazon.

Perry and others at the Metropolitan Policy program write:

[Andre M. Perry, Molly Kinder, Laura Stateler, and Carl Romer, 3-16-2021, "Amazon’s union battle in Bessemer, Alabama is about dignity, racial justice, and the future of the American worker," Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/03/16/the-amazon-union-battle-in-bessemer-is-about-dignity-racial-justice-and-the-future-of-the-american-worker/]

AMAZON HAS GROWN EVEN MORE DOMINANT AND SHARED LITTLE OF ITS PANDEMIC PROFITS WITH WORKERS Black workers are overrepresented among the risky essential jobs (like those at Amazon’s warehouses) on the COVID-19 frontlines, and especially among frontline jobs that pay less than a living wage. Black workers comprise [27%](https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/workplace/our-workforce-data) of Amazon’s workforce, compared to just 13% of workers overall in the U.S. In Amazon‘s Bessemer warehouse, union organizers estimate that [85% of workers are Black](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/23/amazon-bessemer-alabama-union). Amazon’s disproportionately Black workforce has risked their lives during the pandemic, but the company has [shared little of its astonishing profits with them](https://www.brookings.edu/essay/windfall-profits-and-deadly-risks/). Last year, Amazon earned an additional $9.7 billion in profit—a staggering 84% increase compared to 2019. The company’s stock price has risen 82%, while founder Jeff Bezos has added $67.9 billion to his wealth—38 times the total hazard pay Amazon has paid its 1 million workers since March. Despite soaring profits, Amazon ended its $2 per hour pandemic wage increase last summer and replaced it with occasional bonuses. From March 2020 through the end of the year, Amazon’s frontline workers earned an average of $0.99 per hour of extra pay, or a roughly 7% pay increase. Amazon’s pandemic pay bump was less than half of the increased pay at competitor Costco, and a fraction of what it could have afforded from the extra profits it earned during—and largely because of—the pandemic. In fact, Amazon could have more than quintupled the hazard pay it gave its workers and still earned more profit than in 2019. And while Amazon frequently [touts](https://www.aboutamazon.com/impact/economy/15-minimum-wage) its $15 per hour starting wage, Costco’s [recent increase](https://www.npr.org/2021/02/25/971338686/costco-to-raise-minimum-wage-to-16-an-hour-this-isnt-altruism) of its starting wage to $16 per hour (despite having significantly smaller profits than Amazon) shows that $15 is a floor, not a ceiling. A DRIVE FOR DIGNITY AND RACIAL JUSTICE SEEKS TO DEFY THE ODDS Some of the workers at the Bessemer warehouse have called on Amazon to [reinstate its $2 per hour hazard pay](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/09/amazon-union-bessemer-history/). Yet Amazon’s unwillingness to share its staggering profits with its workers is not the only—or even the primary—driver of the union effort in Bessemer. In [an essay published in The Guardian last month](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/feb/23/amazon-bessemer-alabama-union), labor journalist Steven Greenhouse introduced Darryl Richardson, a 51-year-old “picker” at the Bessemer warehouse. Richardson voiced his frustration about the dehumanizing nature of his work at Amazon, including the unrelenting pace, the risk of being terminated at any point, and the constant surveillance. “You don’t get treated like a person,” Richardson said. “They work you like a robot…You don’t have time to leave your workstation to get water. You don’t have time to go to the bathroom.” As Amazon’s profits climb and its market dominance continues, workers like Richardson want a seat at the table to make their workplace humane. Bessemer’s pro-union workers face an uphill battle as they take on one of the most powerful companies in the world. Amazon’s aggressive anti-union tactics have garnered [headlines](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/amazon-warehouse-anti-union-campaign_n_604a2e8dc5b636ed3378bec0), but they are illustrative of the daunting challenges and uneven playing field facing organizing efforts in all work places. Today, [65% of Americans](https://news.gallup.com/poll/318980/approval-labor-unions-remains-high.aspx) approve of labor unions—the highest level since 2003. But after decades of [declining union participation](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/assets/files/UnionsEA_Web_8.19.pdf), only about [10%](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.htm) of American workers are members of one.

#### Black labor leaders have been successful in the past, but need stronger ability to strike and make demands of corporations in order to reduce racial wealth inequalities.This will require actions by their government in order to succeed.

Perry and others continue:

[Andre M. Perry, Molly Kinder, Laura Stateler, and Carl Romer, 3-16-2021, "Amazon’s union battle in Bessemer, Alabama is about dignity, racial justice, and the future of the American worker," Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/03/16/the-amazon-union-battle-in-bessemer-is-about-dignity-racial-justice-and-the-future-of-the-american-worker/]

BIRMINGHAM’S HISTORY SHOWS THAT UNIONS ARE KEY TO A PROSPEROUS BLACK MIDDLE CLASS While the country’s decades-old labor laws make it extremely difficult for workers to form a union anywhere, the pervasive [right-to-work laws](https://www.epi.org/publication/so-called-right-to-work-is-wrong-for-montana/#:~:text=So%2Dcalled%20right%2Dto%2Dwork%20(RTW)%20laws,s%20who%20enjoy%20the%20contract's) in the South and conservative states make organizing efforts like the one in Bessemer [even more difficult](https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-in-right-to-work-rtw-states-tend-to-have-lower-wages-than-in-missouri-and-other-non-rtw-states/)**.** In the South, anti-labor laws are inextricably linked to the historic suppression of Black workers. Racism in the form of no- or low-wage Black labor has been part of the growth model of racialized capitalism. And when workers are unable to collectively bargain and demand their fair share, economic growth becomes concentrated in the hands of a few. Fortunately, the Birmingham metropolitan area—home to Bessemer—has already proven that unionized Black workers can create economic growth and shared prosperity. At the turn of the 20th century, Birmingham labor unions facilitated the establishment of a Black middle class. [Black and white miners organized](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00236566908584085?journalCode=clah20) to form the United Mine Workers (UMW) union and, together, secured better wages. Following UMW’s success, what was then known as the Alabama Federation of Labor (AFL) followed the same strategy of a racially integrated membership—in part out of fear that nonunionized Black workers would replace striking workers. As a result, Black Alabamians earned leadership positions and spots in every committee of the AFL, and the union’s first five vice presidents were Black. This inclusive labor movement continued until the 1930s, when U.S. Steel—rife with Ku Klux Klan members—began to restrict job promotions for unionized Black workers, limiting access to senior positions they previously occupied. The Bessemer union battle comes after decades of concerted effort by business leaders and policymakers to beat back the 20th century victories of labor organizers. From Ronald Reagan’s [breaking of the air traffic controllers’ strike](https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/05/reagan-fires-11-000-striking-air-traffic-controllers-aug-5-1981-241252) to [Janus v. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/05/17/janus-unions-employment-1447266), these forces have eroded labor union protections, and with it, workers’ say in their workplaces. Fixing the country’s broken labor laws to give workers like those in Bessemer a fighting chance will require major legislative change. Last week, the [White House issued a statement](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/09/statement-by-president-joe-biden-on-the-house-taking-up-the-pro-act/) backing the [Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2474). The legislation would [enable more workers to form a union](https://www.epi.org/publication/why-workers-need-the-pro-act-fact-sheet/), exert greater power in disputes, and exercise their right to strike, while curbing and penalizing employers’ retaliation and interference and limiting right-to-work laws. The PRO Act passed in the House of Representatives last week but faces long odds in the Senate due to strong Republican opposition and fierce resistance from business. Short of ending the filibuster, the act has little chance of passage. Ultimately, change will require an empowered workforce demanding it. In the words of Frederick Douglass, “Power concedes nothing without a demand”—and that demand looks like Bessemer workers standing up to one of the most powerful companies the world has ever seen. In order for these and other workers to have a chance, they will need allies in Congress to create a more level playing field. In 1935, the 74th Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act because of the labor movement. In 1964, the 88th Congress passed the Civil Rights Act because of the civil rights movement. Today, the 117th Congress needs similar pressure from the racial and economic justice movements. The workers in Bessemer are doing just that, which should inspire others across the nation to demand better working conditions, higher wages, and stronger labor laws from both their own management and leaders in Washington.