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### Plan

#### The United States ought to recognize the unconditional right of workers to strike.

#### The plan enforces all relevant parts of the PRO Act that restores worker’s right to strike

Rhinehart 21 Posted February 26, 2021 at 12:09 pm by [**Lynn Rhinehart**](https://www.epi.org/people/lynn-rhinehart/) (J.D., Georgetown University Law Center  
B.A., University of Michigan, Lynn Rhinehart is a senior fellow at EPI, where she works on labor and employment policy, with a focus on collective bargaining. ) <https://www.epi.org/blog/six-ways-the-protecting-the-right-to-organize-pro-act-restores-workers-bargaining-power/> [Working Economics Blog](https://www.epi.org/blog)///(\*ak)

When it was passed in 1935, the National Labor Relations Act declared that its purpose was to promote the practice of collective bargaining, where workers and their union sit down with their employer to negotiate over wages, safety, fairness, and other important issues. But over time, this promise has become hollow because weaknesses in the law have been exploited by [employers and the courts](https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/private-sector-unions-corporate-legal-erosion/) to undermine workers’ bargaining power. Here are six ways the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act helps to level the playing field and restore workers’ bargaining power: The PRO Act has a process for reaching a first collective bargaining agreement. When workers first form a union, too often employers drag out the bargaining process and avoid reaching an initial agreement, because there are no monetary penalties in the law for bad faith bargaining. A year after forming their union, [more than half](https://www.epi.org/publication/bp235/) of all workers do not yet have an initial bargaining agreement with their employer. This leads to worker frustration, which employers exploit to undermine the new union. The PRO Act addresses this problem by establishing a mediation and arbitration process for reaching an initial agreement. The PRO Act requires employers to continue bargaining instead of taking unilateral action. Current law gives employers too much power to force its position on workers by unilaterally declaring that the parties have reached an impasse in bargaining and then either locking out workers—preventing them from working and getting paid—or implementing the employer’s proposals. This power, either alone or combined with the restrictions on workers’ ability to strike or put other economic pressure on the employer, puts employers in the driver’s seat in bargaining and greatly undermines workers’ bargaining power. To address this problem, the PRO Act prohibits employers from declaring impasse and locking out workers—a so-called “offensive lockout.” And the PRO Act requires employers to maintain the status quo on wages and benefits during bargaining—no more unilateral changes to put pressure on workers to cave in to the employer’s demands. The PRO Act gets the economic players to the bargaining table. Under current law, staffing firms, contractors, temporary agencies, and other employers try to evade their responsibility to bargain with workers and their union even when they have power over workers’ health and safety, schedules, wages, and other key issues. This leaves workers without the real economic players at the bargaining table. The PRO Act fixes this problem by adopting a strong joint-employer standard that will bring employers with power over wages or working conditions to the bargaining table. The PRO Act eliminates the ban on so-called “secondary” activity. In order to win a wage increase, a voice on new technology, safety improvements, or other bargaining priorities, workers need leverage to put economic pressure on their employer to accept their demands. But current law robs workers of their leverage in many ways, including a prohibition on so-called “secondary” activity that was enacted by Congress in 1947. In fact, current law instructs the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to give top priority to shutting down so-called “secondary” activity. These cases are given even higher priority than cases alleging that employers have illegally fired union activists, and statistics show this has in fact been the case. For example, in the first 12 years after the restriction on secondary activity was first implemented, the number of injunction proceedings against unions for engaging in illegal secondary activity [skyrocketed by 1,188%,](https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/private-sector-unions-corporate-legal-erosion/) while virtually no injunction proceedings were brought against employers for violating workers’ rights. This restriction on secondary activity forbids workers from picketing or otherwise putting pressure on so-called “neutral” companies other than their employer, even if those companies could influence their employer’s practices by, for example, withholding purchases until workers and their employer reach a collective bargaining agreement. The restriction has been interpreted so broadly as to prohibit janitors from picketing a building management company over sexual harassment by its janitorial subcontractor. The Trump NLRB General Counsel [unsuccessfully tried to argue](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/biden-labor-appointee-frees-scabby-the-rat-from-legal-peril_n_6022e83dc5b6c56a89a4fa6a) that floating an inflatable Scabby the Rat balloon at a labor protest was illegal secondary activity, even though courts have consistently said such protests are protected by the First Amendment. Given the prevalence of subcontracting and the interrelated nature of business relationships, the ban on secondary activity does not reflect the realities of today’s business structures. It deprives workers of an important tool in the bargaining process and unfairly tips the power balance to employers. To correct this imbalance, the PRO Act repeals the ban on secondary activity. The PRO Act prohibits employers from permanently replacing strikers. Workers’ ultimate leverage in bargaining is to withhold their labor—in other words, to strike. The law technically protects workers from being fired when they go on a lawful strike, but this right has been gutted by a 1938 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court that stated that employers can permanently replace, i.e., terminate, workers who are on strike over economic issues. Despite a slight increase in strike activity last year, the number of strikes continues to be at a historic low in part because of this weakness in the law. The PRO Act restores the right to strike by prohibiting employers from permanently replacing economic strikers. The PRO Act overrides state “right-to-work” laws that weaken unions. So-called right-to-work laws have nothing to do with getting or keeping a job—they are about weakening workers’ collective voice on the job. Under the law, unions are required to represent all workers protected by the collective bargaining agreement, but so-called right-to-work laws prohibit unions and employers from voluntarily agreeing that all workers covered and protected by the agreement should share in the costs of union representation through union dues or fees. This creates a “free rider” problem, where workers get the benefits of unionization but do not contribute toward the costs, creating a financial drain on unions. The PRO Act overrides state right-to-work laws and allows unions and employers to negotiate fair share agreements whereby all workers covered by the collective bargaining agreement share in the cost of representation.

#### The right to strike is guaranteed by U.S. law but it’s conditionality depends on the status of the limitations placed on it.

NLRB ND <https://www.nlrb.gov/strikes> | [National Labor Relations Board](https://www.nlrb.gov/) (The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is comprised of a team of professionals who work to assure fair labor practices and workplace democracy nationwide)///(\*ak)

Section 7 of the [National Labor Relations Act](https://www.nlrb.gov/how-we-work/national-labor-relations-act) states in part, “Employees shall have the right. . . to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection.” Strikes are included among the concerted activities protected for employees by this section. Section 13 also concerns the right to strike. It reads as follows: Nothing in this Act, except as specifically provided for herein, shall be construed so as either to interfere with or impede or diminish in any way the right to strike, or to affect the limitations or qualifications on that right. It is clear from a reading of these two provisions that: the law not only guarantees the right of employees to strike, but also places limitations and qualifications on the exercise of that right. See for example, restrictions on strikes in health care institutions (set forth below).

#### The right to strike brings companies to the negotiating table

White 08 [White, Chris. *Firewalling the Right to Strike in Australia?* 10 Nov. 2008, <https://www.aph.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=9cf0ca0d-c2c1-4a77-8392-53536d1847c5>.] *// thanks Strake Jesuit JW, recut CHS AD*

“Skilled industrial relations advocates settle collective bargaining and workplace disputes by fair negotiation and agreement without any recourse to [strikes] industrial action. So most HR managers are not afraid of the firewall right to strike. For example, many employers accept the Australian Institute of Employment Rights AIER book Australian Charter of Employment Rights 2007 (pages 97-100). They have no issue e.g. with statements, such as by former Justice Munro: ‘[9] Union membership: Every worker has the right to form and join a trade union for the protection of his or her occupational, social and economic interests. The worker has the right to require the relevant union to uphold its Constitution and Rules, to spend union funds and conduct activities, including affiliations, participation in community wide engagement and lawful industrial action in support of its interests, in accordance with the union’s rules free from employer and governmental interference.’ ‘[11] Collective bargaining and industrial action: Every worker has the right to bargain collectively in pursuit of an individual or collective agreement about the work relationship and, without being in breach of contract, and without threat of dismissal or discrimination, to take industrial action to protect their occupational or economic interests to secure agreement about matters that are or are reasonably related to work. Such industrial action should be taken in accordance with legislated procedures enabling exercise of the right in a manner consistent with the ILO standards to which Australia is bound.’ In industrial relations practice, most HR managers do not resort to penal sanctions. The firewall protection is not too much for reasonable employers. 2 ‘Strikes will erupt everywhere’ line This is again just not reality. Strikes do not simply erupt if they become legal. Countries that have a collective bargaining system that has an effective right to strike and a system of preventing and settling disputes often have fewer strikes. Right-wing politicians assert policy to repress strikes, but Romeyn (2008) argues it is not a power balance. Waters (1982) shows there are deeper and more significant economic and workplace issues contributing to strikes. Paradoxically, a key factor in producing strikes is the belief by right-wing politicians that they can be eliminated. History shows that under repressive anti-strike regimes, workers still struggle and take industrial action to defend their interests. The issue for unionists is: are we slaves or are we to be free?

### ADV---Unions

#### Current strike protection is weak which decks unions---the AFF is key

HRW 21 April 29, 2021 6:00AM EDT Why the US PRO Act Matters for the Right to Unionize: Questions and Answers | <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/29/why-us-pro-act-matters-right-unionize-questions-and-answers> HRW (Human Rights Watch investigates and reports on abuses happening in all corners of the world. We are roughly 450 people of 70-plus nationalities who are country experts, lawyers, journalists, and others who work to protect the most at risk, from vulnerable minorities and civilians in wartime, to refugees and children in need.)///(\*ak)

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the [difficult economic and social realities](https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/02/united-states-pandemic-impact-people-poverty) for many working people in the United States and has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. Low-wage workers, who are disproportionately women, migrants, and Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, have largely borne the brunt of the pandemic’s economic fallout.

Weaknesses and deficiencies in US labor law have made the situation worse. Workers face major obstacles to organize, unionize, and collectively bargain for [fair wages](https://www.ilo.org/legacy/english/inwork/cb-policy-guide/declarationofPhiladelphia1944.pdf), decent benefits, and safe working conditions. On numerous fronts, US laws fall far short of international standards on freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Now there is an opportunity to strengthen US labor laws. The Protecting the Right to Organize Act (the PRO Act), H.R. 842, S. 420 passed the US House of Representatives on March 9, 2021 with a bipartisan vote. If approved by the Senate, it would significantly strengthen the ability of workers in the private sector to form unions and engage in collective bargaining for better working conditions and fair wages. If enacted into law, the PRO Act would be the most comprehensive worker empowerment legislation since the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935.

This question-and-answer document addresses the PRO Act through a human rights lens, with a focus on the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining. It examines the challenges of unionizing in the US and explains how the PRO Act would be a corrective. Current US law excludes certain categories of workers, makes it difficult for workers to join unions, hampers the fight for better working conditions, and has failed to keep up with the disruptive role of workplace technologies in organizing efforts. Addressing these shortcomings could help to bring US law closer to international human rights standards, and slow or reverse decades of rising economic inequality.

#### The AFF resolves captive audience AND permanent replacement---both substantively contributed to the trend against unions since the 70s

Mishel & Bivens 5-13, Lawrence Mishel is a distinguished fellow at EPI after serving as president from 2002–2017. Josh Bivens is the director of research at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). Before coming to EPI, he was an assistant professor of economics at Roosevelt University and provided consulting services to Oxfam America. He has a Ph.D. in economics from the New School for Social Research and a bachelor’s degree from the University of Maryland at College Park. EPI 2021. “Identifying the policy levers generating wage suppression and wage inequality” <https://files.epi.org/pdf/215908.pdf> brett

An increasing volume of research demonstrates that erosion of worker bargaining power and collective bargaining have led to wage suppression and the deterioration of labor’s share of income. At the same time, bold and robust policy proposals to strengthen workers’ bargaining power have risen to a new level of priority for the center-left. President-elect Joe Biden has produced an extensive proposal to strengthen workers’ ability to form unions, and a comprehensive reform of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) recently passed the U.S. House of Representatives.

A full appreciation of the need for comprehensive labor law reform requires an understanding of the serious shortcomings in current law and how they have been exploited over the years by employers resisting efforts by their workers to form unions. Structural weaknesses in the law, exacerbated by anti-union amendments to the NLRA in 1947 and aided by a series of rulings by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and courts, have allowed employers to interfere in and defeat efforts by their workers to organize unions and to face no real consequences for doing so. The full effect of these trends can be seen by analyzing how dramatically new unionization fell in the 1970s—a trajectory from which the labor movement has never recovered.

This paper explains what happened to private-sector unionization in the 1970s by examining data on union elections and workers’ ability to achieve an initial collective bargaining agreement. After showing that a dramatically smaller percentage of workers have been successful at forming a union and winning a first contract, the paper examines the changes in employer anti-union behavior that contributed to this result.

Among its key findings, the paper shows that in the 1950s and 1960s more than 1% of those employed participated in an NLRA election each year. In the 1970s that share fell to 0.78% and in the 1980s to 0.29%. In addition, workers began to lose elections at a higher rate in the 1970s in the face of increased employer resistance. In the 1940s, workers won a union in 80 percent of NLRB representation elections, but by 1977 workers were losing more than half of these elections. And, while 86% of workers who chose a union were able to win a first contract in the 1950s, that share declined to less than 70% in the 1970s. By the 1990s, it was down to 56%. Putting these three pieces together—participation in elections, successful elections, and winning a first contract—we show that while 0.46% of the workforce was able to make it across the unionizing finish line in the 1966–1968 period, only 0.17% of the workforce was able to do so by 1978–1980.

In addition, by the 1970s employers were charged with committing significantly more unfair labor practices (ULPs), such as firing union activists during organizing campaigns. ULP charges against employers rose sevenfold between 1950 and 1980. Starting in the 1970s, employers also made greater use of the “free speech” rights included in the Taft-Hartley amendments of 1947, holding mandatory “captive audience” meetings to voice opposition to unions and make thinly veiled threats about what could happen if workers organized. Employers also began far more extensive use of a growing “union avoidance” industry of consultants. While there were just a handful of anti-union consulting firms in the beginning of the 1970s, by decade’s end there were hundreds, and a management consultant told Congress in the late 1970s that his industry had grown tenfold over the preceding decade.

Employers were able to defeat unions so effectively because, over the years, labor law had become heavily tilted against workers and toward employers. Though these employer-friendly laws were on the books in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, it was not until the 1970s that employers began to take full advantage of their power. Several key sources set the stage for this 1970s unraveling of workers’ bargaining power under the law. First, a Republican Congress largely neutered workers’ leverage in passing the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act over President Truman’s veto. Second, Taft-Hartley forced the NLRB to prioritize litigation against unions for engaging in so-called secondary activity over all other cases, including cases involving illegal firings of union supporters. Third, the law’s ineffective remedies became obvious, and the NLRB’s efforts to hold employers accountable for violating the law were stymied in the courts. Fourth, employers increasingly found an ally in the U.S. Supreme Court, which issued a series of decisions restricting workers’ rights and limiting employers’ bargaining obligations. Finally, employers started making greater use of replacement workers during strikes—a trend that grew in the 1970s and 1980s and significantly undermined workers’ right to strike. The cumulative impact of these factors meant that by the 1970s the law did not effectively protect workers’ bargaining power and gave employers a wealth of tools to resist unionization.

Legislative efforts to strengthen the law in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s were thwarted by an organized and united business community that stepped up to vigorously oppose and, through a filibuster by a minority of senators, defeat all attempts at legislative reform.

By telling the story through statistics, labor history, and the law about the various factors that resulted in the decline of unionization, this paper provides a more accurate accounting of the decline of unionization than do the frequent assertions of globalization or automation as the driving forces. Our empirical assessment of the role of globalization and automation focuses on the impact of the shrinkage on manufacturing employment. We provide detailed statistical analyses showing that at most one-fifth of the decline is due to manufacturing’s erosion, and provide evidence of the severe declines in union coverage in nonmanufacturing sectors (e.g., utilities, transportation, construction, mining, and communications) and in many nonmanufacturing industries (e.g., grocery stores, bus transportation, newspapers, metal ore mining, and building services). A review of various analyses of wage determination also casts doubt on a dominant role of automation and globalization on private-sector union decline. Last, an examination of international comparisons of union erosion also confirms a minor role for manufacturing decline, finding that the pace, intensity, and timing of union decline does not correspond to manufacturing’s decline.

Survey research confirms that working people want unions: Recent polling shows that nearly half of nonunion workers would vote to have union representation if given an opportunity to do so on their current job.

Labor law has not kept pace with workers’ interests and needs and provides a classic example of “policy drift,” the failure to update the law to reflect changing external circumstances, with the result that and the outcomes of the policy start to shift. Labor law’s support for workers’ ability to pursue union organizing and collective bargaining has declined over many decades, and efforts to remedy this drift have been blocked by a minority of senators despite majority support in both houses of Congress and presidential support for reform.

As policymakers and others concerned about the erosion of workers’ bargaining power and its impacts on today’s workforce debate measures to strengthen the ability of workers to organize, the background information and analysis in this paper should be of assistance in understanding the shortcomings in current law that need to be addressed if workers are to truly have the freedom to form and join unions.

#### Also removes restrictions on secondary strikes---that restores unions

**Bahn***, Kate (***2019***) The once and future role of strikes in ensuring U.S. worker power*. Equitable Growth. (2019, August 28). https://equitablegrowth.org/the-once-and-future-role-of-strikes-in-ensuring-u-s-worker-power/.

Washington University in St. Louis sociologist Jake Rosenfeld examines the role of work stoppages in his recent book [What Unions No Longer Do](https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674725119), 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](https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/05/reagan-fires-11-000-striking-air-traffic-controllers-aug-5-1981-241252), 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](https://www.nlrb.gov/about-nlrb/who-we-are/our-history/1947-taft-hartley-passage-and-nlrb-structural-changes) limited the ability of workers to strike. This included restrictions on [secondary boycotts and picketing](https://www.nlrb.gov/rights-we-protect/whats-law/unions/secondary-boycotts-section-8b4), 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](https://onlabor.org/captive-audience-meetings-a-backgrounder/) and lack of enforcement of labor protections, have ultimately made strikes less effective as a tool for collective bargaining in the United States.

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](https://equitablegrowth.org/examining-the-links-between-rising-wage-inequality-and-the-decline-of-unions/). 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](https://equitablegrowth.org/what-kind-of-labor-organizations-do-u-s-workers-want/) 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.

[Monopsony power](https://equitablegrowth.org/understanding-the-importance-of-monopsony-power-in-the-u-s-labor-market/) 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](https://equitablegrowth.org/working-papers/how-does-market-power-affect-wages-monopsony-and-collective-action-in-an-institutional-context/) 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](https://equitablegrowth.org/rethinking-collective-action-and-u-s-labor-laws-in-a-monopsonistic-economy/), 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.”

In short, policies and enforcement that support collective action such as strikes not only creates benefits for workers directly but also addresses a larger problem of concentrated market power.

Within the past few years, strikes have been revived as a bargaining tool. “Red for Ed” became the name referring to teachers strikes that took place across traditionally conservative right-to-work states. Beginning with the closure of all schools in West Virginia in 2018 following 20,000 teachers across the state walking out, this movement spread to Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, and Colorado, among other places. These strikes were led by rank-and-file union members, rather than by union leadership, rendering them illegal under the Taft-Hartley Act, which prohibits so-called wildcat strikes. These strikes led to [significant gains](https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/29/us/what-teachers-won-and-lost/index.html) for these public-sector workers through organizing against policymakers rather than direct management.

Before Red for Ed, the “Fight for Fifteen” movement starting in 2012 and “OUR Walmart” starting in 2010 exemplified labor organizing in new mediums by conducting worker-led actions against large corporations that directly employ or control the employment (as in the franchisor-franchisee model) of low-wage workers. The efforts of [Fight for Fifteen](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/nyregion/15-minimum-wage-new-york.html) directly impacted New York state’s minimum wage increase to $15 per hour and has paved the way for a national movement for a higher minimum wage. OUR Walmart led [walkouts and Black Friday protests](https://www.thenation.com/article/great-walmart-walkout/) in the years leading up to [Walmart’s decision to increase wages](https://finance.yahoo.com/news/walmarts-hourly-wages-for-employees-will-go-beyond-15-probably-over-time-ceo-doug-mc-millon-160008612.html).

Many structural changes, such as the fissuring of the workplace, have reduced the ability of private-sector unions to make gains against employers, yet these strikes and labor actions represent an opportunity for growth. With the U.S. labor market increasingly dominated by the services sector, these strikes were conducted by workers whose jobs cannot move elsewhere and whose work we interact with in our daily lives. Ruth Milkman of the City University of New York [describes these labor actions](https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/LISCenter/2019%20Inequality%20by%20the%20Numbers/Instructor%20Readings/Milkman-2.pdf) as similar to those that existed before the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 protected the right strike (before these rights were subsequently chipped away by the Taft-Hartley Act 20 years later) in order to unionize.

With popular and successful strikes in unexpected places, what will the role of strikes be in the future? Will workers continue recognize the strength of the strike and other labor actions, and will policymakers and enforcers make it a successful tool for increasing worker bargaining power? Research by Alex Hertel-Fernandez, Suresh Naidu, and Adam Reich of Columbia University [looked at](https://onlabor.org/polling-the-teacher-walkouts-strong-support-for-the-teachers-unions-and-future-labor-action/) the response to strikes following the Red for Ed movement in conservative states and found that residents of areas affected by the teacher walkouts broadly supported the strikes, with 39 percent saying they strongly supported the walkouts and another 27 percent somewhat in support of the walkouts, including half of self-identified Republicans supporting the strikes.

What’s more, the three researchers found that families that learned about them from their teachers or directly from the union had even stronger support for the strikes, compared to those who learned about them from other sources, such as talk radio. First-hand knowledge of strikes increases support for them.

In addition to Hertel-Fernandez’s work showing broad support for unions generally and increasing support for bold labor actions, more policymakers and advocates are providing much-needed proposals on how to foster a robust U.S. labor market and strengthen institutions that would make collective action more successful. Emblematic of this is Harvard Law’s Labor and Worklife Program’s [Clean Slate Project](https://lwp.law.harvard.edu/clean-slate-project), led by Sharon Block and Ben Sachs of Harvard University, which gathers academic experts and labor organizers to develop strong proposals that would increase worker bargaining power. Multiple 2020 presidential campaigns have followed suit, with new proposals to boost unions.

Unions in the United States are at their [lowest level of density](https://www.hamiltonproject.org/papers/the_shift_in_private_sector_union_participation_explanations_and_effects) since they became legal around 80 years ago, with 6.4 percent of private-sector workers in unions today. Yet there is increasing energy for bringing back this crucial force to balance the power of capital and ensure the fruits of economic growth are more broadly shared among everyone who creates it. Strikes are a compelling tool for dealing with [rising U.S. income and wealth inequality](https://equitablegrowth.org/the-federal-reserves-new-distributional-financial-accounts-provide-telling-data-on-growing-u-s-wealth-and-income-inequality/)—just as they were in an earlier era of economic inequality, when unions first gained their legal stature in the U.S. labor market.

#### Scenario 1 is the economy:

#### Best evidence concludes AFF---decreasing worker power causes inequality AND slow growth

Bivens & Shierholz 18, Josh Bivens is the director of research at the Economic Policy Institute (EPI). Heidi Shierholz leads EPI’s policy team, which monitors wage and employment policies coming out of Congress and the administration and advances a worker-first policy agenda. EPI (2018) “What labor market changes have generated inequality and wage suppression?” <https://files.epi.org/pdf/148880.pdf> brett

Some economists and policymakers might express unease at the view that the downsides of one deviation from “competitive” markets (either labor market frictions or market concentration or some other source of employer power) should be countered by introducing another market imperfection (e.g., unions or a binding minimum wage). But this unease is unwarranted. The “theory of the second best” clearly argues that once markets depart at all from perfect competition, efficiency may well be increased by further departures. For example, in the case of monopsony power in low-wage labor markets, legislated minimum wage increases can potentially move wages closer to efficient levels and increase employment.

At the macroeconomic level, this claim that stripping away bulwarks to workers’ power has failed to lead to efficiency gains seems extremely well supported by the evidence. While many of the policy changes that have limited workers’ market power since the 1970s were done explicitly in the name of efficiency-seeking, the rate of productivity growth (a measure of how much income is generated in an hour of work—the most common macroeconomic measure of economic efficiency) slowed radically in the years after the mid-1970s, as seen in Figure B.13 This slowdown was briefly reversed in the late 1990s by the large investment in information and communications technologies associated with the widespread adoption of the internet and by a period of tighter labor markets (Bivens 2017b). But this brief surge soon failed and productivity continued growing much more slowly than in previous periods—when policy had consciously supported the leverage of typical workers. In short, the policy movement to disempower workers not only led to less equal growth, but was also associated with significantly slower growth.

When we assert that most of the policy change that led to inequality and slower growth was focused on disempowering workers—and that policy going forward needs to work to reempower workers—we certainly do not mean to imply one should ignore potential policy opportunities that could erode employer power (e.g., through more robust antitrust enforcement). But the larger opportunities are likely those that lead to more labor market balance in the power between employers and workers by increasing worker power—not trying to move the labor market toward a competitive ideal that is not attainable.

#### Scenario 2 is democracy:

#### Unions are key to it AND the link is reverse causal

Levitz, 19 (Eric, “Democracy Dies When Labor Unions Do,” New York: Intelligencer, 9/18/19, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/09/democracy-dies-when-labor-unions-do.html>)

But these facts say less about the deficiencies of democracy than they do about about the insufficiency of elections — by themselves — to produce popular self-rule. The alternative to naive faith in the omnicompetence of the individual voter need not be an equally naive faith in that of unelected technocrats. The most vital mediating institutions in a liberal democracy are not those formed by elites to check the irrational appetites of ordinary voters, but rather, those formed by ordinary voters to check the avarice of elites. Democracy asks too much of the individual. But if individuals organize collectively, they can force democracy to give them a better deal.

Which is a fancy way of saying: To repair American democracy — and fortify it against future threats — Democrats must not only bring more Americans into the electorate, but also, more American workers into labor unions.

Democracy begins at work.

There’s a strong argument that giving ordinary Americans a say over how their workplaces are governed is just as fundamental to democracy as giving them the ballot.

These days, political liberty is often defined narrowly as the freedom to vote in fair elections. But in earlier eras of American history, genuine political freedom was thought to have a material component: To truly participate in self-government, one needed not only a voice in public affairs, but also a modicum of power in one’s economic life. Franklin Roosevelt articulated this principle when introducing his economic bill of rights in 1944, telling Congress, “We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.” This sentiment might have struck some of FDR’s fellow “economic royalists” as un-American. But the notion that self-government is impossible without a degree of economic autonomy was common among our republic’s founding generation. The historian Terry Bouton writes of America’s original grassroots revolutionaries:

[M]any Pennsylvanians believed that economic equality was what made political equality possible. They were convinced that “the people” would never have political liberty until citizens had the economic wherewithal to protect their rights. To them, concentrations of wealth and power led to corruption and tyrannical rulers, while widely dispersed political and economic power promoted good government.

… Farmers and artisans declared that the Revolution was about “the freemen of this Country” stating that “they do not esteem it the sole end of Government to protect the rich & powerful.” … [G]overnment should promote the interests of “the mechanicks and farmers [who] constitute ninety-nine out of a hundred of the people of America.” In short, the objective of the Revolution was bringing “gentlemen men … down to our level” and ensuring that “all ranks and conditions would come in for their just share of the wealth.”

The revolution’s elite architects had other objectives. But while they typically did not believe that all white men (let alone, all people) were entitled to political liberty, they agreed that one needed economic power to exercise such freedom. As Alexander Hamilton wrote in the Federalist Papers, “[A power over man’s subsistence amounts to a power over his will.”](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed79.asp)

If we accept our founders’ premises, then the true measure of a democracy — which is to say, a system of government in which all citizens enjoy political liberty — cannot merely be how many offices its people get to vote on. Rather, to gauge how democratic a society is, one must examine how much power ordinary citizens have over the terms of their own subsistence, and how evenly economic resources are dispersed across the demos. Judged on these terms, it is clear that the contemporary United States is the [opposite of “excessively democratic”](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/12/inequality-is-rising-globally-and-soaring-in-the-u-s.html) — and that it will remain so, absent a revival of its labor movement.

In the founding era, classical republicans imagined that the great masses of ordinary (white male) Americans could attain the economic autonomy necessary for political liberty by becoming small landholders, or independent artisans. But the industrial revolution rendered that vision obsolete. Today, the vast majority of Americans are not self-employed, and spend the bulk of their waking hours answering to bosses who have power over their subsistence. In this context, most workers can only secure a degree of control over their economic lives by organizing collectively to check the power of their employers. Which is to say, they can only do so by forming unions.

That trade unions do, in fact, increase their members’ power over their own working lives is confirmed by the [wage and benefits premiums](http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/union-effect-in-california-1/) that unionized workforces enjoy. But organized labor does not merely democratize individual firms; it also democratizes economic power throughout the economy. As America’s [private-sector unionization rate](http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2018/01/democrats-paid-a-huge-price-for-letting-unions-die.html) collapsed over the past half century, the middle-class’ share of productivity gains went down with it. And [a large body of economic research](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/05/unions-are-not-a-special-interest-group.html) confirms that this is no mere correlation. When workers organize, they secure a voice within the “[private governments](https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/7/17/15973478/bosses-dictators-workplace-rights-free-markets-unions)” that rule their economic lives, and they (typically) use that voice to rationally advance their own material interests — which, most of the time, also advances the self-interest of most Americans (a.k.a. the public interest). In other words, by forming trade unions, ordinary citizens achieve much of what critics of democracy insist it can’t deliver.

Thus, even if organized labor did nothing to increase voter participation, or the responsiveness of elected officials to popular demands, it would still serve an indispensable democratic function by fostering the material preconditions for popular self-government.

Unions make electorates more representative.

Many items on the Democratic Party’s democracy reform agenda are aimed at making the American electorate look more like the American people. Automatic voter registration, a federal Election Day holiday, and felon enfranchisement are all aimed at reducing class and racial disparities in voter participation. And such reforms are laudable. But no plan for lifting America’s low voter turnout rates is complete without a plan for boosting its [piddling rate of unionization.](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/09/democrats-unions-2020-labor.html)

As the Center for American Progress (CAP) [has noted](https://www.americanprogressaction.org/issues/economy/reports/2012/01/25/10913/unions-make-democracy-work-for-the-middle-class/), the U.S. states with the highest unionization rates also have the highest rates of voter turnout, and the same correlation holds between nations. And the political science literature suggests this is not coincidental. As David Madland and Nick Bunker wrote for CAP in 2012:

A 1 percentage point increase in union density in a state increases voter turnout rates by 0.2 to 0.25 percentage points according to[analysis](http://www.jstor.org/pss/2669299) by Benjamin Radcliff and Patricia Davis, political scientists at the University of Notre Dame and the State Department, respectively. In other words, if unionization were 10 percentage points higher during the 2008 presidential election, 2.6 million to 3.2 million more Americans would have voted.

Similarly,[research](http://lera.press.illinois.edu/proceedings2006/zullo.html) by Roland Zullo, a labor studies professor at the University of Michigan, shows that self-described working-class citizens — whether unionized or not — are just as likely to vote as other citizens are when unions run campaigns in their congressional district. Yet when unions don’t run campaigns, working-class citizens are 10.4 percent less likely to vote than other citizens.

A similar pattern holds for communities of color. Voters of color are just as likely to vote as white voters in districts with union campaigns but are 9.3 percent less likely to vote in districts without campaigns.

A [2018 study](https://jamesfeigenbaum.github.io/research/pdf/fhw_rtw_jan2018.pdf) of the electoral impacts of so-called “right to work” (RTW) laws lend credence to these findings. Such laws undermine organized labor by allowing workers who join a unionized workplace to enjoy the benefits of a collective bargaining agreement without paying dues to the union that negotiated it. This encourages other workers to skirt their dues, which can then drain a union of the funds it needs to survive. On the plus side, such state-level right to work laws provided political scientists at Boston University, Columbia, and the Brookings Institution with a natural experiment to test the relationship between unionization and electoral outcomes. By examining how voter turnout changed before and after the passage of RTW in a given state’s border counties — and comparing those shifts to the control group of adjacent counties in non-RTW states — researchers found that right to work laws are associated with 2 to 3 percent reduction in voter participation.

Separately, unions also appear to facilitate the kind of cross-racial civic solidarity that scholars like Rosenberg fear our species may be evolutionarily ill-equipped to achieve. Although the American labor movement has often been a bastion of white supremacy — one that channeled the “economic anxiety” of white male workers into causes like the Chinese Exclusion Act — it was also at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, and helped to keep the bulk of white workers in the Midwest in a partisan coalition with African-Americans for decades after backlash politics painted the non-union South red. According to that 2018 study, the passage of right to work laws is associated with [a 3.5 percent drop in the Democratic Party’s share of the presidential vote](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/01/democrats-paid-a-huge-price-for-letting-unions-die.html). Which is to say: Had tea party governments not passed such measures in Wisconsin and Michigan, it’s plausible that the union movements in those states would have kept a critical mass of white non-college voters from chasing the siren song of white identity politics in 2016.

The proletariat needs lobbyists, too.

One testament to American democracy’s dysfunction is the cartoonish incompetence of its commander-in-chief. A less conspicuous — but more consequential — one is the chasm between popular preferences and public policy. The Trump administration’s decision to prioritize tax relief for corporate shareholders over new spending on infrastructure, public education, health-insurance subsidies, or addiction treatment [in the middle of a historic drug overdose epidemic](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/10/the-opioid-crisis-is-an-emergency-for-american-conservatism.html) didn’t merely buck majoritarian opinion among Americans writ large, but also,[among self-identified Republicans](https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/28/16375174/tax-cut-poll). And the same can be said of the White House’s prioritization of various polluters’ profit margins [over the cleanliness of America’s air and water](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/05/democrats-are-ignoring-their-partys-strongest-2020-issue.html), or Congress’ perennial prioritization of the [pharmaceutical industry’s profitability](http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/08/poll-marijuana-legalization-data-for-progress-radical-ideas-popular-aoc.html) over the affordability of prescription drugs, or the myriad other ways that well-heeled interest groups overrule the bipartisan consensus of ordinary Americans in opinion polls.

One could attribute such policy outcomes to the median voter’s failure to meet democracy’s heavy demands; her struggle to sift through large amounts of information, and refusal to sacrifice her limited free time to the obligations of civic engagement. But the average American worker — and typical American CEO — are each working with the same archaic evolutionary hardware. The fact that the latter has proven so much more adept at using democratic freedoms to advance her interest is a function of resources, not psychobiology.

Influencing elections and legislative processes requires investments of time, money, and attention. Wealthy individuals and corporations can easily shoulder such expenses; ordinary voters can’t.  For this reason, if the average House member betrays the interests of the oil company based in her district, she will see her voice-mail box fill up, and campaign coffers empty out; if she betrays her median constituent’s avowed desire to see carbon pollution more tightly regulated, by contrast, said voter probably won’t even notice.

This simple reality — that economic power is easily converted into the political variety — is an inherent constraint on popular sovereignty in all capitalist democracies. But trade unions help to mitigate it, both by reducing inequalities in economic power (as we’ve already seen), and by enabling working-class voters to collectivize the costs of political engagement.

#### Strikes increase democratic participation which reinvigorates democracy.

McElwee 15 [Sean; Research Associate at Demos; “How Unions Boost Democratic Participation,” The American Prospect; 9/16/15; https://prospect.org/labor/unions-boost-democratic-participation/]

Labor organizer Helen Marot once observed, "The labor unions are group efforts in the direction of democracy." What she meant is that more than simply vehicles for the economic interests of workers (which they certainly are), labor unions also foster civic participation for workers. And nowhere is this clearer than in voter turnout, which has suffered in recent years along with union membership. Indeed, new data from the Census Bureau and a new analysis of American National Election Studies data support the case that unions' declining influence has also deeply harmed democracy.

In 2014, voter turnout was abysmal, even for a midterm. Census data suggest that only 41.9 percent of the citizen population over 18 turned out to vote. However, as I note in my new Demos report Why Voting Matters, there are dispiriting gaps in turnout across class, race, and age. To examine how unions might affect policy, I performed a new analysis of both Census Bureau and American National Election Studies data. The data below, from the 2014 election, show the differences in voter turnout between union and non-union workers (the sample only includes individuals who were employed, and does not include self-employed workers). While only 39 percent of non-union workers voted in 2014, fully 52 percent of union workers did.

As part of ongoing research, James Feigenbaum, an economics PhD candidate at Harvard, ran a regression using American National Election Studies data suggesting that union members are about 4 percentage points more likely to vote and 3 points more likely to register (after controlling for demographic factors) and individuals living in a union household are 2.5 points more likely to vote and register. This is largely in line with the earlier estimates of Richard Freeman.

These numbers may appear modest, but in a close national election they could be enough to change the result.

Other research has found an even stronger turnout effect from unions. Daniel Stegmueller and Michael Becher find that after applying numerous demographic controls, union members are 10 points more likely to vote.

What's particularly important is that unions boost turnout among low- and middle-income individuals. In a 2006 study, political scientists Jan Leighley and Jonathan Nagler found that, "the decline in union membership since 1964 has affected the aggregate turnout of both low and middle-income individuals more than the aggregate turnout of high-income individuals." In 2014, the gap between unions and non-union workers shrunk at the highest rung of the income ladder. There was a 15-point gap among those earning less than $25,000 (40 percent turnout for union workers, and 25 percent turnout for non-union workers). Among those earning more than $100,000, the gap was far smaller (49 percent for non-union workers and 52 percent for union workers).

Individuals living in union households are also more progressive than those in non-union households. I examined 2012 ANES data and find that union households aren't largely different from non-union households on many issues regarding government spending, but they are more likely to have voted for Obama, identify as Democratic, and support a robust role for the government in reducing income inequality. When looking at union members specifically, the gaps become slightly larger.

More upscale union members are far more progressive than their non-union counterparts. Non-union households with an income above $60,000 oppose government intervention to reduce inequality by 11 points, with 32.2 percent in favor and 43.4 percent against. But richer union households support government intervention, with 42.5 percent in favor and 29.9 percent opposed. As Richard B. Freeman has pointed out, "union members are more likely to vote for a Democrat for the House or Presidency than demographically comparable nonunion voters." He similarly finds that "unionism moves members to the left of where they would be given their socioeconomic status," in line with the data I examined from 2012.

A 2013 study by Jasmine Kerrissey and Evan Schofer finds that union members are not only more likely to vote, but also more likely to belong to other associations, and to protest. They also find that these effects are strongest among people with lower levels of education, suggesting that unions may help mobilize the least politically active groups. A recent study of European countries finds union members vote more and identifies those aspects of union membership that contribute to the higher turnout.

The strongest factor is that workers who engage in democratic organizations in the workplace (via collective bargaining) are more likely to engage in democracy more broadly by, for instance, voting.

Other studies support the idea that civic participation creates a feedback loop that leads to higher voting rates. Another factor is that union members make more money, and higher income is correlated with voting behavior. Finally, union members are encouraged by peers and the union to engage in politics, which also contributes to higher levels of turnout.

It's not entirely surprising that politicians who savage unions often share a similar contempt for the right to vote. Democracy in the workplace leads to democracy more broadly throughout society. Workers with more democratic workplaces are more likely to democratically engage in in society. Further, when unions and progressives demonstrate that government can benefit them, Americans are more likely to want to participate in decision-making. For all these reasons, unions play a unique and indispensable role in the progressive project. As Larry Summers, certainly not a leftist, recently argued, "the weakness of unions leaves a broad swath of the middle class largely unrepresented in the political process."

#### Strong US democracy is vital to global stability and human rights

Kasparov 17, Chairman of the Human Rights Foundation, 2/16/2017 Garry, “Democracy and Human Rights: The Case for U.S. Leadership” <http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/021617_Kasparov_%20Testimony.pdf>

The Soviet Union was an existential threat, and this focused the attention of the world, and the American people. There existential threat today is not found on a map, but it is very real. The forces of the past are making steady progress against the modern world order. Terrorist movements in the Middle East, extremist parties across Europe, a paranoid tyrant in North Korea threatening nuclear blackmail, and, at the center of the web, an aggressive KGB dictator in Russia. They all want to turn the world back to a dark past because their survival is threatened by the values of the free world, epitomized by the United States. And they are thriving as the U.S. has retreated.The global freedom index has declined for ten consecutive years. No one like to talk about the United States as a global policeman, but this is what happens when there is no cop on the beat. American leadership begins at home, right here. America cannot lead the world on democracy and human rights if there is no unity on the meaning and importance of these things. Leadership is required to make that case clearly and powerfully. Right now, Americans are engaged in politics at a level not seen in decades. It is an opportunity for them to rediscover that making America great begins with believing America can be great. The Cold War was won on American values that were shared by both parties and nearly every American. Institutions that were created by a Democrat, Truman, were triumphant forty years later thanks to the courage of a Republican, Reagan. This bipartisan consistency created the decades of strategic stability that is the great strength of democracies. Strong institutions that outlast politicians allow for long-range planning. In contrast, dictators can operate only tactically, not strategically, because they are not constrained by the balance of powers, but cannot afford to think beyond their own survival. This is why a dictator like Putin has an advantage in chaos, the ability to move quickly. This can only be met by strategy, by long-term goals that are based on shared values, not on polls and cable news. The fear of making things worse has paralyzed the United States from trying to make things better. There will always be setbacks, but the United States cannot quit. The spread of democracy is the only proven remedy for nearly every crisis that plagues the world today. War, famine, poverty, terrorism–all are generated and exacerbated by authoritarian regimes. A policy of America First inevitably puts American security last.American leadership is required because there is no one else, and because it is good for America. There is no weapon or wall that is more powerful for security than America being envied, imitated, and admired around the world. Admired not for being perfect, but for having the exceptional courage to always try to be better. Thank you.

### FW

#### The standard is maximizing expected well-being—to clarify, saving lives. Calc indicts don’t link—our impacts are bad because as far as we know, it would cause death.

#### Prefer:

#### 1] Actor spec—governments must use util because they don’t have intentions and are constantly dealing with tradeoffs—outweighs since different agents have different obligations—takes out calc indicts since they are empirically denied.

#### 2] Only consequentialism explains degrees of wrongness—if I break a promise to meet up for lunch, that is not as bad as breaking a promise to not kill. Only the consequences of breaking the promise explain why the second one is much worse than the first which is the most intuitive.

#### 3] Extinction must outweigh – moral uncertainty demands we preserve the conditions for life, even a tiny risk outweighs, and future gains in quality of life ensure it’s a prior question

Todd 17 [Ben has a 1st from Oxford in Physics and Philosophy, has published in Climate Physics, once kick-boxed for Oxford, and speaks Chinese, badly. "The case for reducing extinction risk." <https://80000hours.org/articles/extinction-risk/>] brett

In this new age, what should be our biggest priority as a civilisation? Improving technology? Helping the poor? Changing the political system? Here’s a suggestion that’s not so often discussed: our first priority should be to survive. So long as civilisation continues to exist, we’ll have the chance to solve all our other problems, and have a far better future. But if we go extinct, that’s it. Why isn’t this priority more discussed? Here’s one reason: many people don’t yet appreciate the change in situation, and so don’t think our future is at risk. Social science researcher Spencer Greenberg surveyed Americans on their estimate of the chances of human extinction within 50 years. The results found that many think the chances are extremely low, with over 30% guessing they’re under one in ten million.3 We used to think the risks were extremely low as well, but when we looked into it, we changed our minds. As we’ll see, researchers who study these issues think the risks are over one thousand times higher, and are probably increasing. These concerns have started a new movement working to safeguard civilisation, which has been joined by Stephen Hawking, Max Tegmark, and new institutes founded by researchers at Cambridge, MIT, Oxford, and elsewhere. In the rest of this article, we cover the greatest risks to civilisation, including some that might be bigger than nuclear war and climate change. We then make the case that reducing these risks could be the most important thing you do with your life, and explain exactly what you can do to help. If you would like to use your career to work on these issues, we can also give one-on-one support. Reading time: 25 minutes How likely are you to be killed by an asteroid? An overview of naturally occurring existential risks A one in ten million chance of extinction in the next 50 years — what many people think the risk is — must be an underestimate. Naturally occurring existential risks can be estimated pretty accurately from history, and are much higher. If Earth was hit by a 1km-wide asteroid, there’s a chance that civilisation would be destroyed. By looking at the historical record, and tracking the objects in the sky, astronomers can estimate the risk of an asteroid this size hitting Earth as about 1 in 5000 per century.4 That’s higher than most people’s chances of being in a plane crash (about one in five million per flight), and already about 1000-times higher than the one in ten million risk that some people estimated.5 Some argue that although a 1km-sized object would be a disaster, it wouldn’t be enough to cause extinction, so this is a high estimate of the risk. But on the other hand, there are other naturally occurring risks, such as supervolcanoes.6 All this said, natural risks are still quite small in absolute terms. An upcoming paper by Dr. Toby Ord estimated that if we sum all the natural risks together, they’re very unlikely to add up to more than a 1 in 300 chance of extinction per century.7 Unfortunately, as we’ll now show, the natural risks are dwarfed by the human-caused ones. And this is why the risk of extinction has become an especially urgent issue. A history of progress, leading to the start of the most dangerous epoch in human history If you look at history over millennia, the basic message is that for a long-time almost everyone was poor, and then in the 18th century, that changed.8 Large economic growth created the conditions in which now face anthropogenic existential risks This was caused by the industrial revolution — perhaps the most important event in history. It wasn’t just wealth that grew. The following chart shows that over the long-term, life expectancy, energy use and democracy have all grown rapidly, while the percentage living in poverty has dramatically decreased.9 Chart prepared by Luke Muehlhauser in 2017. Literacy and education levels have also dramatically increased: Image source. People also seem to become happier as they get wealthier. In The Better Angels of Our Nature, Steven Pinker argues that violence is going down.10 Individual freedom has increased, while racism, sexism and homophobia have decreased. Many people think the world is getting worse,11 and it’s true that modern civilisation does some terrible things, such as factory farming. But as you can see in the data, many important measures of progress have improved dramatically. More to the point, no matter what you think has happened in the past, if we look forward, improving technology, political organisation and freedom gives our descendants the potential to solve our current problems, and have vastly better lives.12 It is possible to end poverty, prevent climate change, alleviate suffering, and more. But also notice the purple line on the second chart: war-making capacity. It’s based on estimates of global military power by the historian Ian Morris, and it has also increased dramatically. Here’s the issue: improving technology holds the possibility of enormous gains, but also enormous risks. Each time we discover a new technology, most of the time it yields huge benefits. But there’s also a chance we discover a technology with more destructive power than we have the ability to wisely use. And so, although the present generation lives in the most prosperous period in human history, it’s plausibly also the most dangerous. The first destructive technology of this kind was nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons: a history of near-misses Today we all have North Korea’s nuclear programme on our minds, but current events are just one chapter in a long saga of near misses. We came near to nuclear war several times during the Cuban Missile crisis alone.13 In one incident, the Americans resolved that if one of their spy planes were shot down, they would immediately invade Cuba without a further War Council meeting. The next day, a spy plane was shot down. JFK called the council anyway, and decided against invading. An invasion of Cuba might well have triggered nuclear war; it later emerged that Castro was in favour of nuclear retaliation even if “it would’ve led to the complete annihilation of Cuba”. Some of the launch commanders in Cuba also had independent authority to target American forces with tactical nuclear weapons in the event of an invasion. In another incident, a Russian nuclear submarine was trying to smuggle materials into Cuba when they were discovered by the American fleet. The fleet began to drop dummy depth charges to force the submarine to surface. The Russian captain thought they were real depth charges and that, while out of radio communication, the third world war had started. He ordered a nuclear strike on the American fleet with one of their nuclear torpedoes. Fortunately, he needed the approval of other senior officers. One, Vasili Arkhipov, disagreed, preventing war. Thanks to Vasili Arkhipov, we narrowly averted a global catastrophic risk from nuclear weapons Thank you Vasili Arkhipov. Putting all these events together, JFK later estimated that the chances of nuclear war were “between one in three and even”.14 There have been plenty of other close calls with Russia, even after the Cold War, as listed on this nice Wikipedia page. And those are just the ones we know about. Nuclear experts today are just as concerned about tensions between India and Pakistan, which both possess nuclear weapons, as North Korea.15 The key problem is that several countries maintain large nuclear arsenals that are ready to be deployed in minutes. This means that a false alarm or accident can rapidly escalate into a full-blown nuclear war, especially in times of tense foreign relations. Would a nuclear war end civilisation? It was initially thought that a nuclear blast might be so hot that it would ignite the atmosphere and make the Earth uninhabitable. Scientists estimated this was sufficiently unlikely that the weapons could be “safely” tested, and we now know this won’t happen. In the 1980s, the concern was that ash from burning buildings would plunge the Earth into a long-term winter that would make it impossible to grow crops for decades.16 Modern climate models suggest that a nuclear winter severe enough to kill everyone is very unlikely, though it’s hard to be confident due to model uncertainty.17 Even a “mild” nuclear winter, however, could still cause mass starvation.18 For this and other reasons, a nuclear war would be extremely destabilising, and it’s unclear whether civilisation could recover. How likely is a nuclear war to permanently end civilisation? It’s very hard to estimate, but it seems hard to conclude that the chance of a civilisation-ending nuclear war in the next century isn’t over 0.3%. That would mean the risks from nuclear weapons are greater than all the natural risks put together. (Read more about nuclear risks.) This is why the 1950s marked the start of a new age for humanity. For the first time in history, it became possible for a small number of decision-makers to wreak havoc on the whole world. We now pose the greatest threat to our own survival — that makes today the most dangerous point in human history. And nuclear weapons aren’t the only way we could end civilisation. How big is the risk of run-away climate change? In 2015, President Obama said in his State of the Union address that:19 “No challenge  poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change” Climate change is certainly a major risk to civilisation. The graph below shows estimates of climate sensitivity. Climate sensitivity is how much warming to expect in the long-term if CO2 concentrations double, which is roughly what’s expected within the century. Does climate change pose an existential risk? Wagner and Weitzman predict a greater than 10% chance of greater than 6 degrees celsius of warming. Image source The most likely outcome is 2-4 degrees of warming, which would be bad, but survivable. However, these estimates give a 10% chance of warming over 6 degrees, and perhaps a 1% chance of warming of 9 degrees. That would render large fractions of the Earth functionally uninhabitable, requiring at least a massive reorganisation of society. It would also probably increase conflict, and make us more vulnerable to other risks. (If you’re sceptical of climate models, then you should increase your uncertainty, which makes the situation more worrying.) So, it seems like the chance of a massive climate disaster created by CO2 is perhaps similar to the chance of a nuclear war. Researchers who study these issues think nuclear war seems more likely to result in outright extinction, due to the possibility of nuclear winter, which is why we think nuclear weapons pose an even greater risk than climate change. That said, climate change is certainly a major problem, which should raise our estimate of the risks even higher. (Read more about run-away climate change.) What new technologies might be as dangerous as nuclear weapons? The invention of nuclear weapons led to the anti-nuclear movement just a decade later in the 1960s, and the environmentalist movement soon adopted the cause of fighting climate change. What’s less appreciated is that new technologies will present further catastrophic risks. This is why we need a movement that is concerned with safeguarding civilisation in general. Predicting the future of technology is difficult, but because we only have one civilisation, we need to try our best. Here are some candidates for the next technology that’s as dangerous as nuclear weapons. In 1918-1919, over 3% of the world’s population died of the Spanish Flu.20 If such a pandemic arose today, it might be even harder to contain due to rapid global transport. What’s more concerning, though, is that it may soon be possible to genetically engineer a virus that’s as contagious as the Spanish Flu, but also deadlier, and which could spread for years undetected. That would be a weapon with the destructive power of nuclear weapons, but far harder to prevent from being used. Nuclear weapons require huge factories and rare materials to make, which makes them relatively easy to control. Designer viruses might be possible to create in a lab with a couple of biology PhDs. In fact, in 2006, The Guardian was able to receive segments of the extinct smallpox virus by mail order.21 Some terrorist groups have expressed interest in using indiscriminate weapons like these. (Read more about pandemic risks.) In fact, in 2006, The Guardian was able to receive segments of the extinct smallpox virus by mail order. Relevant experts suggest synthetic pathogens could potentially pose a global catastrophic risk. Who ordered the smallpox? Credit: The Guardian Another new technology with huge potential power is artificial intelligence. The reason that humans are in charge and not chimps is purely a matter of intelligence. Our large and powerful brains give us incredible control of the world, despite the fact that we are so much physically weaker than chimpanzees. So then what would happen if one day we created something much more intelligent than ourselves? In 2017, 350 researchers who have published peer-reviewed research into artificial intelligence at top conferences were polled about when they believe that we will develop computers with human-level intelligence: that is, a machine that is capable of carrying out all work tasks better than humans. The median estimate was that there is a 50% chance we will develop high-level machine intelligence in 45 years, and 75% by the end of the century.22 Graph of expert prediction from Grace et al: The median estimate was that there is a 50% chance we will develop high-level machine intelligence in 45 years These probabilities are hard to estimate, and the researchers gave very different figures depending on precisely how you ask the question.23 Nevertheless, it seems there is at least a reasonable chance that some kind of transformative machine intelligence is invented in the next century. Moreover, greater uncertainty means that it might come sooner than people think rather than later. What risks might this development pose? The original pioneers in computing, like Alan Turing and Marvin Minsky, raised concerns about the risks of powerful computer systems,24 and these risks are still around today. We’re not talking about computers “turning evil”. Rather, one concern is that a powerful AI system could be used by one group to gain control of the world, or otherwise be mis-used. If the USSR had developed nuclear weapons 10 years before the USA, the USSR might have become the dominant global power. Powerful computer technology might pose similar risks. Another concern is that deploying the system could have unintended consequences, since it would be difficult to predict what something smarter than us would do. A sufficiently powerful system might also be difficult to control, and so be hard to reverse once implemented. These concerns have been documented by Oxford Professor Nick Bostrom in Superintelligence and by AI pioneer Stuart Russell. Most experts think that better AI will be a hugely positive development, but they also agree there are risks. In the survey we just mentioned, AI experts estimated that the development of high-level machine intelligence has a 10% chance of a “bad outcome” and a 5% chance of an “extremely bad” outcome, such as human extinction.22 And we should probably expect this group to be positively biased, since, after all, they make their living from the technology. Putting the estimates together, if there’s a 75% chance that high-level machine intelligence is developed in the next century, then this means that the chance of a major AI disaster is 5% of 75%, which is about 4%. (Read more about risks from artificial intelligence.) People have raised concern about other new technologies, such as other forms of geo-engineering and atomic manufacturing, but they seem significantly less imminent, so are widely seen as less dangerous than the other technologies we’ve covered. You can see a longer list of existential risks here. What’s probably more concerning is the risks we haven’t thought of yet. If you had asked people in 1900 what the greatest risks to civilisation were, they probably wouldn’t have suggested nuclear weapons, genetic engineering or artificial intelligence, since none of these were yet invented. It’s possible we’re in the same situation looking forward to the next century. Future “unknown unknowns” might pose a greater risk than the risks we know today. Each time we discover a new technology, it’s a little like betting against a single number on a roulette wheel. Most of the time we win, and the technology is overall good. But each time there’s also a small chance the technology gives us more destructive power than we can handle, and we lose everything. Each new technology we develop has both unprecedented potential and perils. Image source. What’s the total risk of human extinction if we add everything together? Many experts who study these issues estimate that the total chance of human extinction in the next century is between 1 and 20%. For instance, an informal poll in 2008 at a conference on catastrophic risks found they believe it’s pretty likely we’ll face a catastrophe that kills over a billion people, and estimate a 19% chance of extinction before 2100.25 Risk At least 1 billion dead Human extinction Number killed by molecular nanotech weapons. 10% 5% Total killed by superintelligent AI. 5% 5% Total killed in all wars (including civil wars). 30% 4% Number killed in the single biggest engineered pandemic. 10% 2% Total killed in all nuclear wars. 10% 1% Number killed in the single biggest nanotech accident. 1% 0.5% Number killed in the single biggest natural pandemic. 5% 0.05% Total killed in all acts of nuclear terrorism. 1% 0.03% Overall risk of extinction prior to 2100 n/a 19% These figures are about one million times higher than what people normally think. In our podcast episode with Will MacAskill we discuss why he puts the risk of extinction this century at around 1%. In his his book The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity, Dr Toby Ord gives his guess at our total existential risk this century as 1 in 6 — a roll of the dice. Listen to our episode with Toby. What should we make of these estimates? Presumably, the researchers only work on these issues because they think they’re so important, so we should expect their estimates to be high (“selection bias”). But does that mean we can dismiss their concerns entirely? Given this, what’s our personal best guess? It’s very hard to say, but we find it hard to confidently ignore the risks. Overall, we guess the risk is likely over 3%. Why helping to safeguard the future could be the most important thing you can do with your life How much should we prioritise working to reduce these risks compared to other issues, like global poverty, ending cancer or political change? At 80,000 Hours, we do research to help people find careers with positive social impact. As part of this, we try to find the most urgent problems in the world to work on. We evaluate different global problems using our problem framework, which compares problems in terms of: Scale – how many are affected by the problem Neglectedness -how many people are working on it already Solvability – how easy it is to make progress If you apply this framework, we think that safeguarding the future comes out as the world’s biggest priority. And so, if you want to have a big positive impact with your career, this is the top area to focus on. In the next few sections, we’ll evaluate this issue on scale, neglectedness and solvability, drawing heavily on Existential Risk Prevention as a Global Priority by Nick Bostrom and unpublished work by Toby Ord, as well as our own research. First, let’s start with the scale of the issue. We’ve argued there’s likely over a 3% chance of extinction in the next century. How big an issue is this? One figure we can look at is how many people might die in such a catastrophe. The population of the Earth in the middle of the century will be about 10 billion, so a 3% chance of everyone dying means the expected number of deaths is about 300 million. This is probably more deaths than we can expect over the next century due to the diseases of poverty, like malaria.26 Many of the risks we’ve covered could also cause a “medium” catastrophe rather than one that ends civilisation, and this is presumably significantly more likely. The survey we covered earlier suggested over a 10% chance of a catastrophe that kills over 1 billion people in the next century, which would be at least another 100 million deaths in expectation, along with far more suffering among those who survive. So, even if we only focus on the impact on the present generation, these catastrophic risks are one of the most serious issues facing humanity. But this is a huge underestimate of the scale of the problem, because if civilisation ends, then we give up our entire future too. Most people want to leave a better world for their grandchildren, and most also think we should have some concern for future generations more broadly. There could be many more people having great lives in the future than there are people alive today, and we should have some concern for their interests. There’s a possibility that human civilization could last for millions of years, so when we consider the impact of the risks on future generations, the stakes are millions of times higher — for good or evil. As Carl Sagan wrote on the costs of nuclear war in Foreign Affairs: A nuclear war imperils all of our descendants, for as long as there will be humans. Even if the population remains static, with an average lifetime of the order of 100 years, over a typical time period for the biological evolution of a successful species (roughly ten million years), we are talking about some 500 trillion people yet to come. By this criterion, the stakes are one million times greater for extinction than for the more modest nuclear wars that kill “only” hundreds of millions of people. There are many other possible measures of the potential loss–including culture and science, the evolutionary history of the planet, and the significance of the lives of all of our ancestors who contributed to the future of their descendants. Extinction is the undoing of the human enterprise. We’re glad the Romans didn’t let humanity go extinct, since it means that all of modern civilisation has been able to exist. We think we owe a similar responsibility to the people who will come after us, assuming (as we believe) that they are likely to lead fulfilling lives. It would be reckless and unjust to endanger their existence just to make ourselves better off in the short-term. It’s not just that there might be more people in the future. As Sagan also pointed out, no matter what you think is of value, there is potentially a lot more of it in the future. Future civilisation could create a world without need or want, and make mindblowing intellectual and artistic achievements. We could build a far more just and virtuous society. And there’s no in-principle reason why civilisation couldn’t reach other planets, of which there are some 100 billion in our galaxy.27 If we let civilisation end, then none of this can ever happen. We’re unsure whether this great future will really happen, but that’s all the more reason to keep civilisation going so we have a chance to find out. Failing to pass on the torch to the next generation might be the worst thing we could ever do. So, a couple of percent risk that civilisation ends seems likely to be the biggest issue facing the world today. What’s also striking is just how neglected these risks are. Why these risks are some of the most neglected global issues Here is how much money per year goes into some important causes:28 Cause Annual targeted spending from all sources (highly approximate) Global R&D $1.5 trillion Luxury goods $1.3 trillion US social welfare $900 billion Climate change >$300 billion To the global poor >$250 billion Nuclear security $1-10 billion Extreme pandemic prevention $1 billion AI safety research $10 million As you can see, we spend a vast amount of resources on R&D to develop even more powerful technology. We also expend a lot in a (possibly misguided) attempt to improve our lives by buying luxury goods. Far less is spent mitigating catastrophic risks from climate change. Welfare spending in the US alone dwarfs global spending on climate change. But climate change still receives enormous amounts of money compared to some of these other risks we’ve covered. We roughly estimate that the prevention of extreme global pandemics receives under 300 times less, even though the size of the risk seems about the same. Research to avoid accidents from AI systems is the most neglected of all, perhaps receiving 100-times fewer resources again, at around only $10m per year. You’d find a similar picture if you looked at the number of people working on these risks rather than money spent, but it’s easier to get figures for money. If we look at scientific attention instead, we see a similar picture of neglect (though, some of the individual risks receive significant attention, such as climate change): Existential risk research receives less funding than dung beetle research. Credit: Nick Bostrom Our impression is that if you look at political attention, you’d find a similar picture to the funding figures. An overwhelming amount of political attention goes on concrete issues that help the present generation in the short-term, since that’s what gets votes. Catastrophic risks are far more neglected. Then, among the catastrophic risks, climate change gets the most attention, while issues like pandemics and AI are the most neglected. This neglect in resources, scientific study and political attention is exactly what you’d expect to happen from the underlying economics, and are why the area presents an opportunity for people who want to make the world a better place. First, these risks aren’t the responsibility of any single nation. Suppose the US invested heavily to prevent climate change. This benefits everyone in the world, but only about 5% of the world’s population lives in the US, so US citizens would only receive 5% of the benefits of this spending. This means the US will dramatically underinvest in these efforts compared to how much they’re worth to the world. And the same is true of every other country. This could be solved if we could all coordinate — if every nation agreed to contribute its fair share to reducing climate change, then all nations would benefit by avoiding its worst effects. Unfortunately, from the perspective of each individual nation, it’s better if every other country reduces their emissions, while leaving their own economy unhampered. So, there’s an incentive for each nation to defect from climate agreements, and this is why so little progress gets made (it’s a prisoner’s dilemma). And in fact, this dramatically understates the problem. The greatest beneficiaries of efforts to reduce catastrophic risks are future generations. They have no way to stand up for their interests, whether economically or politically. If future generations could vote in our elections, then they’d vote overwhelmingly in favour of safer policies. Likewise, if future generations could send money back in time, they’d be willing to pay us huge amounts of money to reduce these risks. (Technically, reducing these risks creates a trans-generational, global public good, which should make them among the most neglected ways to do good.) Our current system does a poor job of protecting future generations. We know people who have spoken to top government officials in the UK, and many want to do something about these risks, but they say the pressures of the news and election cycle make it hard to focus on them. In most countries, there is no government agency that naturally has mitigation of these risks in its remit. This is a depressing situation, but it’s also an opportunity. For people who do want to make the world a better place, this lack of attention means there are lots high-impact ways to help. What can be done about these risks? We’ve covered the scale and neglectedness of these issues, but what about the third element of our framework, solvability? It’s less certain that we can make progress on these issues than more conventional areas like global health. It’s much easier to measure our impact on health (at least in the short-run) and we have decades of evidence on what works. This means working to reduce catastrophic risks looks worse on solvability. However, there is still much we can do, and given the huge scale and neglectedness of these risks, they still seem like the most urgent issues. We’ll sketch out some ways to reduce these risks, divided into three broad categories: 1. Targeted efforts to reduce specific risks One approach is to address each risk directly. There are many concrete proposals for dealing with each, such as the following: Many experts agree that better disease surveillance would reduce the risk of pandemics. This could involve improved technology or better collection and aggregation of existing data, to help us spot new pandemics faster. And the faster you can spot a new pandemic, the easier it is to manage. There are many ways to reduce climate change, such as helping to develop better solar panels, or introducing a carbon tax. With AI, we can do research into the “control problem” within computer science, to reduce the chance of unintended damage from powerful AI systems. A recent paper, Concrete problems in AI safety, outlines some specific topics, but only about 20 people work full-time on similar research today. In nuclear security, many experts think that the deterrence benefits of nuclear weapons could be maintained with far smaller stockpiles. But, lower stockpiles would also reduce the risks of accidents, as well as the chance that a nuclear war, if it occurred, would end civilisation. We go into more depth on what you can do to tackle each risk within our problem profiles: AI safety Pandemic prevention Nuclear security Run-away climate change We don’t focus on naturally caused risks in this section, because they’re much less likely and we’re already doing a lot to deal with some of them. Improved wealth and technology makes us more resilient to natural risks, and a huge amount of effort already goes into getting more of these. 2. Broad efforts to reduce risks Rather than try to reduce each risk individually, we can try to make civilisation generally better at managing them. The “broad” efforts help to reduce all the threats at once, even those we haven’t thought of yet. For instance, there are key decision-makers, often in government, who will need to manage these risks as they arise. If we could improve the decision-making ability of these people and institutions, then it would help to make society in general more resilient, and solve many other problems. Recent research has uncovered lots of ways to improve decision-making, but most of it hasn’t yet been implemented. At the same time, few people are working on the issue. We go into more depth in our write-up of improving institutional decision-making. Another example is that we could try to make it easier for civilisation to rebound from a catastrophe. The Global Seed Vault is a frozen vault in the Arctic, which contains the seeds of many important crop varieties, reducing the chance we lose an important species. Melting water recently entered the tunnel leading to the vault due, ironically, to climate change, so could probably use more funding. There are lots of other projects like this we could do to preserve knowledge. Similarly, we could create better disaster shelters, which would reduce the chance of extinction from pandemics, nuclear winter and asteroids (though not AI), while also increasing the chance of a recovery after a disaster. Right now, these measures don’t seem as effective as reducing the risks in the first place, but they still help. A more neglected, and perhaps much cheaper option is to create alternative food sources, such as those that be produced without light, and could be quickly scaled up in a prolonged winter. Since broad efforts help even if we’re not sure about the details of the risks, they’re more attractive the more uncertain you are. As you get closer to the risks, you should gradually reallocate resources from broad to targeted efforts (read more). We expect there are many more promising broad interventions, but it’s an area where little research has been done. For instance, another approach could involve improving international coordination. Since these risks are caused by humanity, they can be prevented by humanity, but what stops us is the difficulty of coordination. For instance, Russia doesn’t want to disarm because it would put it at a disadvantage compared to the US, and vice versa, even though both countries would be better off if there were no possibility of nuclear war. However, it might be possible to improve our ability to coordinate as a civilisation, such as by improving foreign relations or developing better international institutions. We’re keen to see more research into these kinds of proposals. Mainstream efforts to do good like improving education and international development can also help to make society more resilient and wise, and so also contribute to reducing catastrophic risks. For instance, a better educated population would probably elect more enlightened leaders (cough), and richer countries are, all else equal, better able to prevent pandemics — it’s no accident that Ebola took hold in some of the poorest parts of West Africa. But, we don’t see education and health as the best areas to focus on for two reasons. First, these areas are far less neglected than the more unconventional approaches we’ve covered. In fact, improving education is perhaps the most popular cause for people who want to do good, and in the US alone, receives 800 billion dollars of government funding, and another trillion dollars of private funding. Second, these approaches have much more diffuse effects on reducing these risks — you’d have to improve education on a very large scale to have any noticeable effect. We prefer to focus on more targeted and neglected solutions.