

The Unravelling of American Labour Optimism (and how to get it back): Has Trump killed the union “moment” of the past few years?

A burst of recent organising happened despite the labour establishment, not because of it. The campaigns had dynamism, but workers also need financial resources and good advice

Over the past few years, the US labour movement has gone from experiencing an unusually hopeful moment to being mired in its greatest crisis in recent memory. So, what went wrong and what are the lessons for the future of organised labour in the US?

Public popularity – even in the face of organisational weakness: In the summer of 2022, organised labour in the United States was having its best moment in decades: according to Gallup polls, unions were enjoying their highest public approval ratings since 1965: over 71 percent of respondents said they agreed that unions were a positive thing for American society. However, what’s seldom commented upon is that unions are now popular *despite their organisation weakness*. In the mid-1960s, when unions last enjoyed over 70 percent support, they represented almost one-third of the private sector workforce. By 2024, they represented, for the first time in over a century, fewer than 6 percent of private sector workers. It’s even more remarkable that *unions are so popular when they are so weak* and a reflection of the enormous “representation gap” in the US. Tens of millions of American workers would like union representation but can’t get it under the existing system of weak legal protections for the right to organise, and strong, and often unlawful, corporate opposition to unionisation.

Moreover, the occupant of the White House from January 2021 to January 2025, Joe Biden, described himself as the “most pro-union” president in US history, and this wasn’t simply bluster: the Biden Administration took several actions that benefited the established labour movement: it poured billions of dollars into clean energy and infrastructure projects, which created thousands of jobs for members of industrial and building trades unions; it prioritised union-sponsored apprenticeship and training schemes operated by the building trades unions through new rules at the Department of Labor; it bailed out massive Teamsters pension funds that were teetering on the verge of insolvency to the tune of billions of dollars; it appointed pro-labour policy experts to the Department of Labor, National Labor Relations Board (whose General Counsel, Jennifer Abruzzo, was hailed by many labour lawyers as a modern day Joan of Arc-type figure), National Mediation Board and other government agencies. And in addition to helping unions through concrete

government actions, Biden called out Amazon’s unlawful union busting, invited young organisers to the White House, and walked the picket line with striking UAW workers.

Reaching the parts the established labour movement could not reach: Perhaps most important of all: 2022–2023 saw some of the most remarkable union victories in US labour history, notably at Starbucks and Amazon. Across the country, young workers were inspired by these victories, thus setting off an unprecedented organising wave at Trader Joe’s, REI, Apple retail stores, Barnes & Noble, Chipotle, and lots of lesser-known brands, as well as among graduate and undergraduate students, non-profit workers, cultural workers, journalists, tech workers, video game designer, digital media workers and others. Much of this organising, moreover, seemed to be happening *despite the labour establishment, not because of it*: the overwhelmingly young workers were powerfully attracted to the idea of organising their own workplace; they were not attracted to the “dynamism” (or lack thereof) of existing labour organisations. That is, they were excited and energised by the labour movement as a process, not the labour movement as an institution, as it currently exists.

Two of the highest profile union victories – the Amazon Labor Union victory at Staten Island in April 2022, and the Trader Joe’s United victory at four stores, starting with stores in Massachusetts and Minneapolis – were the result of workers forming entirely new and independent unions, a rare occurrence in US labour history. Their organising campaigns had the kind of dynamism that’s completely lacking in the mainstream labour movement, but the independent union model is arguably not a good model for winning again and again at a multi-billion-dollar corporation such as Amazon that will do anything, lawful for unlawful, to crush their workers efforts to form a union. The hot shop model of organising will take unions only so far: workers also need significant financial resources, and good advice. The ALU, for example, was not able to repeat its original April 2022 victory at a second Staten Island warehouse, where the workers were mostly part-time and lack the job-attachment that had helped produce the organic organising committee – assisted by “autonomous salts” (young workers who took jobs there to help the organising

John Logan
is Professor and Chair
of Labor Studies at San
Francisco State
University



drive, but not under direction of any established union) – which had resulted in the first victory.

At the most successful and innovative, and dynamic of these campaigns, Starbucks Workers United (SBWU), workers were affiliated with an established union, Upstate New York Workers United. But from the start, SBWU operated as a quasi-independent union. The campaign was created and designed by a group of young “salts” (workers who got jobs in Starbucks stores with the intention of forming a union) in Buffalo, New York, and had a rank-and-file dynamism, energy and imagination that the “labour establishment” and its uninspiring, top-down approach to organising could only dream of. During the first year of its existence, the campaign was controlled by these young worker-organisers, but was based on principles of decentralisation, respect for local autonomy, and developing leadership from rank-and-file Starbucks worker-organisers around the country.

Making vivid and concrete the fight over union representation: As a result of its innovation, dynamism and authenticity, the SBWU campaign enjoyed traditional media coverage – including multiple stories by Noam Scheiber in the *New York Times* and Lauren Gurley in the *Washington Post* – and social media coverage of the kind that unions had arguably never enjoyed in their histories, and in the process, these campaigns breathed new life into the entire American labour movement, and especially among young (often college educated, often LGBTQ) workers. Even in labour’s heyday, there has always been a parochialism that defined the issues of unions and collective bargaining in the United States. Only insiders with a professional interest understand how labour law works (or, more frequently, doesn’t work) and for most Americans labour rights are a black box. Starbucks and Amazon campaigns started to break down that parochialism. At least for a short time, it seemed that labour had entered the media mainstream: more people were engaged with labour issues than has been true for decades, and more people understood what illegal actions companies like Starbucks and Amazon take to crush worker organising.

Unions and their allies need to make visible and understandable the right to organise: American workers will never gain a stronger legal right to choose a union unless people understand the issue, care about it, and feel that they have a stake in its outcome. Labour law reform is not the kind of issue union allies can ever hope to push through the Senate – no matter what the make-up of the upper chamber – while no one is looking, because the corporate lobby will always be more powerful than the union lobby. Unions need to make the issue visible and concrete – which requires, among other things, the kinds of grassroots organising campaigns started by Starbucks workers in Buffalo in 2021 – so that people feel that their rights are being violated.

Under the correct circumstance, nothing energises people more than the feeling that their rights are being violated.

It wasn’t just that they won, but how they won that mattered. Starbucks Workers United was the polar opposition of the top-down, staff-driven, bureaucratic, multi-million-dollar SEIU and UFCW campaigns at MacDonald’s and Walmart that lasted for years and yet both resulted in not one single worker voting for a union. Within six months of its first victory in December 2021, Starbucks Workers United was on its way to organising two hundred stores (now over 600 union stores), despite facing one of the most aggressive and unlawful anti-union campaigns in US history. The campaign inspired tens of thousands of young workers across the country, put union busting on the front pages of the *New York Times*, week after week and it scared the bejesus out of large sections of corporate America. It should have been the model for the labour movement revitalisation nationally, thus taking advantage of this pandemic organising moment.

Seizing the moment: The labour movement in the United States has always been a “secondary institution”: i.e., it does not have the power to shape its own environment. But when the larger socio-economic environment changes – as arguably happened during the Covid 19 pandemic – it can take advantage of such an opportunity. It did so during the 1930s – when the economic and political environments were transformed by the Great Depression and the political realignment of the New Deal – and SBWU showed it could do so during the pandemic. The SBWU campaign showed that, at times, the labour movement could be organisationally flexible enough to incorporate the kinds of self-assured, independent-minded baristas that worked at Starbucks. It demonstrated that, when controlled by and used for young workers, social media such as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok could be powerful organising tools. It showed that Zoom and encrypted group chats could be powerful organising tools, especially during the pandemic. And it proved, yet again, the dynamism rarely comes from the top of the US labour movement; the “labour establishment” largely sat on the sidelines during the organising wave of the past few years.

Everything Falls Apart: Six months into the Trump Administration, the labour environment seems unrelentingly bleak.

Corporate America strikes back: At the time of writing, none of workers in these historic organising campaigns – Starbucks, Amazon, Trader Joe’s – have gotten first contracts. This failure has demonstrated beyond doubt the limitations of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) system: even under what many considered the smartest, most imaginative, hardest working general counsel in NLRB history, Starbucks, Amazon and Trader Joe’s were, due to

Unions became dependent on government finances and patronage. In the current climate, campaigns in which union leadership negotiates with Democrats behind closed doors are going nowhere

Trump has fired members of the NLRB, but even after four years of Biden, the Board wasn't able to force hostile corporations to follow the law and bargain in good faith

their almost unlimited financial resources, able to throw sand in the gears and gum up the works at the NLRB and prevent workers from getting the unions they obviously want. They have used their scores of Littler Mendelson and Morgan Lewis “union avoidance” lawyers to delay the organising and bargaining at every opportunity and appeal every NLRB decision against them. Under the current system of union representation, if a corporation has the resources and is prepared to do whatever is necessary to win, it will prevail in most cases, and even a Democratic NLRB won't be able to change the dynamics of these campaigns. Along with Elon Musk's SpaceX, Amazon and Trader Joe's (all three of whom are represented by anti-union law firm Morgan Lewis) are challenging the constitutionality of the 90-year-old National Labor Relations Board, which, for several months, lacked a quorum after Trump fired Democratic-appointed member Gwynne Wilcox. Corporations such as Amazon-owned Whole Foods argue that the Board lacks the authority to certify worker votes for unions in NLRB elections. Apparently, these corporations believe that workers' right to organise only exists if there's an administrative body to enforce it.

Internal and external struggles: In addition to intense corporate union-busting, the campaigns have faced internal challenges which have robbed them of much of their original dynamism and promise: the grassroots-led SBWU effectively faced a hostile takeover by the top leadership of two international unions, Workers United and SEIU, both of whom were obsessed with getting control of and credit for a campaign they did not understand. The worker-organiser-led, store-by-store approach by SBWU did not fit with SEIU's new mantra of “sectoral bargaining” (effectively state wage boards for workers such as fast-food workers and homecare workers in Democratic states such as California and Minnesota). For years, their message has been that workplace organising doesn't work – it's a dead end because even when you win you ultimately lose – but at Starbucks, store-by-store organising worked spectacularly well. The original quasi-independent union had a replicable model that achieved something that no other union has managed in recent US history: it won again and again at a multi-billion-dollar corporation that was determined to crush it.

As a result of the takeover, the Starbucks campaign is now effectively a pallid imitation of SEIU's fast-food workers Fight for Fifteen campaign – which is going nowhere under the current hostile political climate – in which union leadership negotiates with companies and Democratic lawmakers behind closed doors, and workers are largely used as props for media events, when and if they are needed. The new SBWU (now controlled by the international) announced a “groundbreaking” truce with Starbucks in February 2024, which was negotiated behind closed doors by the union leaders, lawyers and outside consultants, along with

members of Starbucks corporate. But since then, almost no meaningful progress has been made, and the prospects of a good agreement seem bleak.

From the start, the Amazon Labor Union was beset by internal conflicts and after fighting among themselves for two years, ALU leaders decided to affiliate with the Teamsters union. Thus far, it has offered limited support and appears to lack a coherent national strategy for organising at Amazon. Amazon has still not recognised the ALU's April 2022 union victory, never mind engaged in good faith bargaining, few workers who voted for the union still work at the Staten Island facility, and those that remain are discouraged because the union campaign seems to be going nowhere. Likewise, after fighting the company for over three years, talented worker-organisers at Trader Joe's United were largely burned out and exhausted by the company's stalling at the bargaining table and union busting at the stores and believed that affiliation with a larger national union was effectively their only option.

Is right-wing populism a threat to the US labour movement? In the first six months of 2025, the Trump administration has ripped a gaping hole in the heart of the labour movement, exposing its vulnerability both to anti-union executive orders and to right-wing populism. Following the playbook of *Project 2025* – the right-wing Heritage Foundation's blueprint for a second Trump presidency – Trump has issued executive orders stripping collective bargaining rights from about 800,000 federal workers, the biggest single union-busting act in US history. In a first ever, he has fired, for no cause, Democratic members of the National Labor Relations Board and Federal Labor Relations Authority and has taken dozens of other sweeping actions undermining decades-long worker rights and protections. Every week seems to bring a barrage of attacks on working people: undocumented workers, trans workers, farm workers, homecare workers, scientific researchers, public media workers, teachers, journalists, creative workers and others.

Whose side are they on? But it would be wrong to assume that the US labour movement is united in opposition to the Trump agenda. Unions such as the Teamsters, UAW, ILA, building trades and several other national unions have welcomed some parts of Trump's economic nationalism – such as UAW president Shawn Fain's vocal support for Trump's on-again-off again haphazard and destructive tariff policy – and many of their members voted for the Trump administration. Unlike most traditional Republicans, right-wing populists like Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Missouri Senator Josh Hawley (who is especially close to Teamsters President Sean O'Brien) don't want to destroy unions like the Teamsters, steelworkers and the building trades; rather, they want to coopt them. They believe – with some justification – that the members of these unions are

often more conservative than the leadership of the unions.

Influenced by conservative thinker Oren Cass (whose influential book, *The Once and Future Worker*, is effectively the bible of many right-wing populist Republicans who want to appeal to blue collar workers), they have adopted positions not normally associated with Republican politicians: support for a significantly higher minimum wage, support for first contract arbitration in a labour law reform bill, opposition to certain welfare cuts, such as cuts to Medicaid (state healthcare for low-income Americans) that were contained in Trump's "Big, Beautiful Bill," and so on. How serious the Trump Administration is about its economic populism (which was notably absent from Trump's massive tax cutting bill) – and how many blue-collar union leaders will cozy up with the proto-fascist administration hoping for favourable treatment – remains to be seen. But the ability of reactionary populism to divide the US labour movement should not be underestimated.

Where are the silver linings? In short, there are none. But that doesn't mean there won't be critical opportunities for unions and their allies to exploit during Trump's second term. Here are three quick observations about how unions can survive and fight back during the existential threat posed by the second Trump Administration.

Live by politics, die by politics: Too much of the labour movement has arguably become too dependent on support from federal or state governments for survival. Trump's sweeping executive order removing collective bargaining rights from 800,000 federal workers and his other actions reveals a deeper vulnerability: unions, like research universities (with whom Trump is also at war) have grown too dependent on government finances and patronage. As stated in the introduction, US private sector union membership fell to under six percent in 2024 for the first time in over 100 years. But a century ago, the labour movement had a much more solid foundation than it does today – most unions were based in trades and were used to surviving during periods of government hostility. Today, too many unions look to politics first, such as attempts to get the state to create a form of sectoral bargaining for certain workers in California and Minnesota. But the Trump administration has concentrated political power in the hands of the president in a way not seen for decades, and unions are finding out that those who live mostly by politics can also die by politics.

Stop playing by the old rules: Trump, at heart, is a wrecker. He doesn't care about the rule of law, separation of powers or the constitution, except for how they affect him. In response to his unprecedented, and frequently unlawful, attacks, the

labour movement and its political allies still seem to be relying on federal judges, public opinion, or the outcome of the 2026 midterms to rein in the excesses of the administration. Democratic governors in California, Minnesota and Colorado have clashed with unions as they seek to position themselves as centralists in preparation for a potential presidential run. Worse still, some Democrats have given rhetorical support to the anti-regulation crusade by citing some labour protections as an obstacle to the "abundance" agenda, as outlined in Ezra Klein's influential book of the same name. In short, they are still playing by the old rules. But playing by the old rules doesn't work when the other side refuses to play by the rules. As soon as labour leaders and their allies realise that the country's political culture is fundamentally out of kilter, and that the old rules, norms, and alliances that labour and their Democratic allies have depended on for decades no longer apply, the better.

When the opportunity arises, go on the offensive: I have always believed that it would take something big to change in the US labour relations environment to open an opportunity for unions to grow in a meaningful way, like they last did in the 1930s. And the current political and constitutional crisis, if nothing else, is "something big". Part of the problem with labour rights is the relative impotence of the National Labor Relations Board and given that it was still impotent after four years of the Biden Administration – it couldn't force an Amazon, Starbucks or Trader Joe's to follow the law and bargain in good faith – there's arguably not that much riding on the Board's current impotence under the Trump Administration. We don't yet know how Trump's attack on the constitution is going to play out, but his firing of members of the NLRB and other government agencies, and his attack on the collective bargaining rights of federal workers, are arguably right up there with this illegal acts. Pure power plays.

If Trump succeeds politically, labour's prospects are dim. But that's far from certain and if his power grab implodes, more may be in play for the labour movement that has been true for many decades. Part of the problem has always been that labour law reform is too parochial an issue – a black box, so to speak, which is understandable only insiders. But US politics is unpredictable right now, in a state of unusual flux, and unions and their allies could yet come out of this crisis with a much stronger shot at labour law reform. The labour movement must go on the offensive, because firefighting alone will not be enough to save it this time round; and it will almost certainly need more compelling legislation – legislation that resonates with a more engaged and educated public – than either the Employee Free Choice Act or the PRO Act. Whether or not the labour establishment can rise to this challenge remains to be seen.

The Trump administration ripped a hole in the heart of the labour movement, but at least half a dozen (big) unions have welcomed parts of Trump's economic nationalism