



LABOR MOVEMENT ON THE RISE IN 2021

“We are fed up!” Workers went on strike and pushed Union drives in swelling numbers after many major corporations, such as Starbucks and Kellogg’s in the U.S. made enormous profits despite the pandemic. The results of the year clearly indicate that in 2021 workers stood together, rose up and said *“enough.”*

Corporations and industries large and small, cried out last year about the inability to attract or retain workers – citing a labor shortage even as the economy was slowly beginning to recover from the pandemic. The “shortage” is a result of many factors which has resulted in demands for better pay, greater flexibility, and more favorable working conditions.

At the beginning of the pandemic many workers suddenly found themselves without any work at all. Industries that include hospitality, food service, and retail were suddenly in lockdown. Our own industry faced the same economic meltdown that led to a drastic elimination of flying. The economy demanded some balance, and corporate America was quick to divide us by those who could work from home and those of us who were deemed “essential workers.”

While corporate executives were able to work from the safety of their homes, Flight Attendants, for example, were “essential” and called upon to be on the front line in the midst of a pandemic the likes of which none of us had ever seen. The two sets of rules shined a painfully bright light on the disparity between the privileged and the essential workers.

Thousands of workers went on strike in 2021 at Frito-Lay, Nabisco, Kellogg’s, John Deere, Volvo, Frontier Communications, New York University, Columbia University, Harvard, carpenters in the Pacific Northwest, at coalmines in Alabama, and at hospitals and airports across the country. Essential workers at several fast-food and retail chains including McDonald’s, Walmart, Wendy’s, Burger King, Bojangles, Jack in the Box, and Family Dollar, held walkouts or short-term strikes.

AFL-CIO president Liz Shuler remarked in an interview, *“When I was walking the line with those Nabisco workers, and Kellogg’s workers, I kept thinking about all of them in the plant, making Oreos and the Ritz crackers, while the rest of us were inside consuming those. Those are the folks that really made the sacrifices and the whole time, they were told that they were essential. Then they go to the bargaining table, and they are basically disposable because the companies continued to profit through the pandemic and then say, ‘Thanks, but we’re not going to compensate you, we’re not going to protect you, we’re not going to value and reward you for making those sacrifices.’”*

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As a result of significant and meaningful action from workers who have been pushing employers and elected officials to raise wages, improve working conditions, and benefits such as paid sick leave through walkouts, protests, rallies and strikes, the labor movement was on the rise in 2021. The last few months of 2021 saw workers quit at record or near record rates, while an uptick of strikes occurred around the U.S. in October and November 2021.

The hardship of the pandemic, when the focus was on how essential the workers were in manual jobs, ignited the movement of labor politics in America, while corporations have tried to just go back to the way things were previously.

But too much has changed, we have changed.

One of 2021's more significant strikes is playing out in Alabama where approximately 1,100 coalminers at Warrior Met Coal went on strike on April 1, 2021. Their fight is for better wages after accepting concessions in their previous Contract.

In another notable strike, at the Tenet Healthcare-owned St. Vincent hospital in Worcester, Massachusetts, about 700 nurses went on strike on March 8, 2021 over understaffing and cuts at the hospital before and during the pandemic, resulting in the longest strike in Massachusetts' history.

The hospital wanted to replace the nurses on strike permanently, even as the hospital faced scrutiny from the state for closing down inpatient behavior health beds due to the strike. Tenet Healthcare proposed an agreement last August, which was rejected by the Massachusetts Nurses Association, which would have prevented some of the nurses from returning to their previous jobs.

Their efforts were rewarded with a tentative agreement on December 18, 2021, which required the intervention and mediation of U.S. Secretary of Labor, Marty Walsh, serving in the final negotiation session and ending the strike.

Labor market conditions provide workers with more leverage. But that's only part of the equation: change requires organization from the ground up, support from within and inevitably will always require incredible sacrifice. Change does not automatically happen, and it is never easy.

Looking back, Unionization rates in the U.S. have declined over the past few decades, but several organizing efforts were launched in 2021 in response to pandemic working conditions, while labor leaders and Unions continue pushing for labor law reforms to rein in anti-union employers and facilitate U.S. workers' ability to organize Unions and engage in collective bargaining.

According to unionelections.org, 890 Union elections in the private sector were held in the U.S. in 2021 as of December 11, 2021, with 573 resulting in a new Union certification. Union election rates and Union density in the U.S. have been in a downward decline over the past several decades, though approval of labor Unions in the U.S. is at 68% according to a September Gallup poll.

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Change may be coming this year. Between tight labor markets and the intense media coverage of the strikes and recent elections, experts believe we may see an increase. Starbucks workers in Buffalo, New York, also won a historic Union election on December 9, 2021 forming the first Union at a Starbucks corporate store in the U.S. A second branch is likely to have won their Union election after challenged ballots are resolved and three more stores are set to hold Union elections in Buffalo, New York, and another in Arizona.

While the recent elections at Starbucks, may appear small, they are a significant step forward. Amazon workers in Bessemer, Alabama, attempted to form the first Union at the retail giant in the spring and though the Union lost the election, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has ordered a new election to be held due to Amazon's anti-union misconduct. With the Union victory spurring optimism, it could lead to more stores requesting to Unionize.

Despite decades of declining membership, labor Unions are currently seeing their highest approval ratings in the United States since 1965, according to a recent Gallup poll. Issues like pay, benefits, paid sick time, paid family leave, minimum staffing levels, schedule flexibility, mental health, and workplace safety have become increasingly urgent in the midst of the pandemic. According to the Labor Department, four million people quit their jobs in April of 2021 alone, those who have remained are shown to be joining Unions and organizing in ways they previously had not.

We are fortunate to have a strong Flight Attendant Union in place that has the experience and wisdom to guide us on our best path forward. Corporate America is always looking to find ways to exploit worker productivity and increase profits. Our Union has the responsibility to face down those challenges, even while the cards are stacked against us.

As we move forward in our negotiations, we directly benefit from the progress made by our sisters and brothers in other industries, as we work collectively to raise the standard for all workers. Standing with workers at Starbucks, Amazon, Kellogg, St. Vincent nurses and Warrior Met coalminers supports their efforts, the labor movement and ultimately raises the bar for our industry as well.



Demonstrators rally in front of Jeff Bezos' home in New York City in November. Photograph: John Lamparski/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock



Members of the Michigan Nurses Association picket Sparrow hospital to protest inadequate staffing in November.