

USA: Working class against repression and racism

L!NX, CC BY 4.0 - Storytelling: Dario Azzellini - Illustration: Carina Crenshaw

During the Trump presidency, U.S. unions initially opposed the rise of authoritarianism only symbolically. Over time, they acted more decisively. Where union members became active in the workplace, they succeeded in slowing the trend toward authoritarianism and sometimes achieved significant successes.



During the Trump presidency, U.S. unions initially opposed the rise of authoritarianism only symbolically. Over time, they acted more decisively. Where union members became active in the workplace, they succeeded in slowing the trend toward authoritarianism and sometimes achieved significant victories.

The level of unionization in the U.S. was only 10.7% in 2016. It had been falling for 50 years, as was worker income. Donald Trump promised to "Make America Great Again" through strict immigration policies, tough trade policies, and strengthening the police and military. He won a majority in the Midwest, once a union haven, and became president. 52% of white union members voted for him.



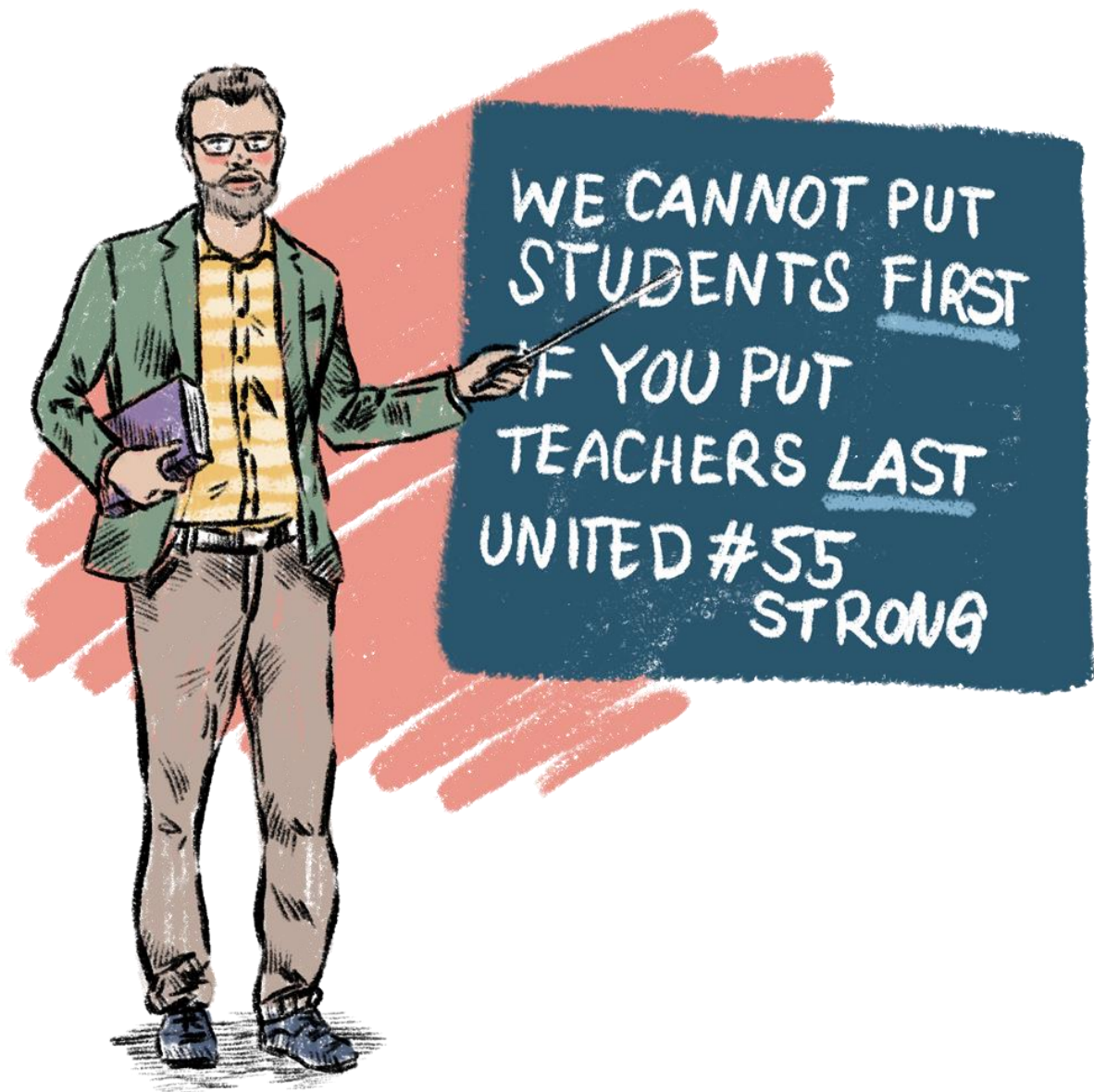
Once in office, Trump quickly began to implement his authoritarian policies, especially against immigrants and Muslims. As millions of people protested against this, U.S. labor unions offered symbolic support. The Trump administration passed one by one executive orders that undermined the rights of working-class people. But no major union responded with labor struggles.

Teachers show the way towards organizing

The first massive workers' protest began in February 2018 in West Virginia, where Trump won by a 42% margin. In the US, teachers have been experiencing falling real wages and austerity for years.

How come?

In West Virginia, their salaries ranked 48th out of the 50 states and public employees are banned from striking.



However, when the Board of Education required them to agree to a pay cut, the teachers forced their unions to vote to strike. The governor and attorney general threatened prosecution. After all 55 West Virginia counties voted in favor of the strike, the government waived criminalization. After three weeks on strike, teachers obtained a five percent pay increase. After that, teachers in Oklahoma and Arizona also went on strike with success.

System-relevant or sentenced to Death?

In the summer of 2020, the U.S. recorded the highest Covid 19 infection and death rates in the world. Systemic workers - including large numbers of immigrants, blacks, and people of color - were forced to continue working, often without adequate protective equipment or pay.



From March to the end of May 2020 alone, there were more than 260 strikes to demand Covid-19 protections. These were mostly strikes organized by the workers themselves. However, given the life-threatening situation, unions often supported them.

Anti-racist struggle = A class uprising!

On May 25, 2020, police officers in Minnesota murdered George Floyd, an unarmed black man. The murder was filmed and went online. Huge protests against racism and police violence followed. It was a black-led class uprising.

The labor federation AFL-CIO declared its support for Black Lives Matter. But it was only gradually that individual unions became active. On June 19 (a holiday commemorating the end of slavery), the dockworkers union ILWU went on strike for an eight-hour shift at all 29 Pacific Coast ports.



In July, a labor alliance partnered with Black Lives Matter to organize the Strike for Black Lives on July 20, 2020. Unions organized demonstrations in hundreds of workplaces where workers knelt down,

held a moment of silence, or walked off the job for eight minutes and 46 seconds (the duration of Floyd's death throes).

The action was largely symbolic, but organizing workplace action on a large scale was a novelty for U.S. unions. They had previously insisted on a clear separation of labor struggle and political action.

With the current inflationary crisis, a new terrain is emerging for organizing workers who are once again most affected by neoliberal policies and their impact on unemployment.