

ORGANIZED LABOR — Year in Review

Looking back on 2014, much of the movement in the U.S. labor movement took place outside of — but with crucial support from — traditional labor unions. Nonunion workers — fast food and WalMart workers, Los Angeles port truckers, even taxi drivers — conducted short strikes, sit-ins and labor actions. And labor-community coalitions pushed pro-worker legislation in city halls and state legislatures — because Congress wasn't responding to the needs of working people.

More than ever, labor is backing experimental strategies to escape a legal framework that gives employers the upper hand in union organizing and in collective bargaining. In 2014, that shift began to see results: Some big minimum wage wins were labor's top success story of 2014, but state and local paid sick leave mandates also spread, and in November, San Francisco became the first city to crack down on the inhumane scheduling practices of retail chains.

LOW-WAGE WORKERS ON THE MOVE

The progress began with a campaign among America's lowest-paid workers. About 1,200 fast food worker activists met for a first-ever national convention in Chicago in July 2014 — a year and a half after their movement began with strikes at 40 fast food outlets in New York City. On May 15, demonstrations took place at fast food restaurants in 150 cities, and on Sept. 4, the campaign upped the ante with restaurant sit-ins in about 150 cities. Service Employees International Union has spent more than \$10 million underwriting the fast-food worker movement, which has united behind demands for \$15 an hour and a union. In July, the campaign got a boost with a favorable legal development: The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) said it will hold McDonald's "jointly liable" for labor law violations by franchise owners. Since the strike movement began in November 2012, at least 291 charges have been filed against McDonald's alleging that it illegally fired, threatened or otherwise penalized workers for pro-labor activities. The NLRB found enough evidence to pursue the charges in at least 86 of those cases, and 71 other cases remain under investigation.

Meanwhile, labor activism continued in 2014 among Walmart workers in the group OUR Walmart, which is supported by United Food and Commercial Workers Union. In January, the online collective Anonymous leaked internal Walmart documents telling managers how to combat OUR Walmart activity. On Nov. 28, OUR Walmart reported protests at 1,600 Walmart stores, as well as the first-ever sit-in at a store near Los Angeles.

MINIMUM WAGE AND SICK LEAVE BREAKTHROUGHS

Demands by fast food workers for \$15 an hour really bore fruit in 2014. In June, the Seattle City Council passed an ordinance (unanimously) that will

raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour over the coming years. In July, San Diego City Council passed an increase to \$11.50 an hour. In November, San Francisco voters approved a measure raising the minimum wage to \$15. Voters also approved minimum wage increases in Alaska, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Arkansas. And in Oakland, voters raised it to \$12.25 — and guaranteed paid sick leave. Sick leave measures also were passed by the California legislature, Eugene, Oregon, city council, and voters in Massachusetts and two New Jersey cities.

Local action was necessary because Republicans in Congress prevented national action. House Republican leaders wouldn't allow a vote on a minimum wage increase, and in April, a Senate proposal to raise it to \$10.10 died when a motion to end debate failed 54 to 42 (it needed 60 votes).

The notion of \$15 as a new wage floor also caught on in public sector collective bargaining. For example, the Los Angeles Unified School District, Los Angeles International Airport, and Multnomah County in Oregon all incorporated \$15 minimums into their union contracts.

UNIONIZING THE SOUTH

2014 saw fights to unionize big employers in the South, often with substantial opposition from local politicians. In February, United Auto Workers lost a union election among

2014: Year of the robot?

They work without pay, never tire or complain, and are positively incapable of unionizing: Robots were on the rise in 2014.

In July, Daimler demonstrated a self-driving truck. The "Mercedes-Benz Future Truck 2025" can respond to traffic while driving completely autonomously down a freeway at speeds of up to 52 miles per hour. The idea, says the company, is that a driver sits in the cab to take over when something goes wrong. But who knows? Maybe that could eventually be done remotely, one worker overseeing multiple trucks.

Then on Nov. 30, Amazon opened its doors to reveal that its warehouses are now staffed by a reserve army of robots. Over the summer, the company put more than 15,000 robots to work in 10 U.S. warehouses. The robots bring shelving units to human workers, who pick items off the shelves and box them for shipping. The robots then return the shelves to their location in the warehouse.

And in December, a Lowe's home improvement store in San Jose debuted a customer service robot. The OSHbot greets shoppers, asks them what they're looking for, uses voice recognition to listen to their answer, and then tells them where it is in the store. It can even take them there.

1,500 workers at a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga by 53 to 47 percent — after facing a high-profile opposition campaign from Republican politicians and outside political groups. But UAW moved ahead anyway, formed a union local, and in December was recognized by the company as a "minority" union, representing 45 percent of the plant's workers. UAW is also campaigning at a Mercedes-Benz factory in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Nissan plants in Canton, Mississippi, and Smyrna, Tennessee.

In March, the Machinists union

opened an office to talk to Boeing workers in South Carolina.

September saw the biggest union win in the South in decades: 14,500 American Airlines agents voted by 86 percent to unionize with Communications Workers of America and the Teamsters, and three-quarters of them are in Texas, North Carolina, Florida or Arizona.

PRESIDENTIAL ACTION

In his sixth year office, President Barack Obama issued a number of ex-

ecutive orders that move the ball forward for working people. Some of the executive orders pertain to federal contractors — requiring them to pay at least \$10.10 an hour, banning them from discriminating against gay workers, requiring them to disclose previous violations of labor law, and barring them from requiring their employees to submit legal complaints to binding arbitration. In November, he issued an executive order allowing undocumented parents of U.S. citizens and permanent residents to apply for work authorization and relief from deportation if they can show they've resided in the country for at least five years.

HOSTILE COURTS

2014 was a bleak year for workers' rights in the courts. In June, a California Superior Court judge tossed out a state law on teacher tenure in *Vergara v. California*. And the U.S. Supreme Court hit labor with a triple whammy. Its ruling in *Harris v. Quinn* created a "right-to-work" situation for home care workers. In *NLRB v. Noel Canning*, it invalidated years of pro-worker decisions by the National Labor Relations Board on the grounds that its members had been improperly appointed by the president. And in *Integrity Staffing Solutions v. Busk*, it said Amazon warehouse workers don't have to be paid for the time — up to 25 minutes — they spend waiting in line for security screenings before they can leave work.

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