



Unions are a voice for workers during and after the pandemic

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Christian Smalls was fired from his warehouse job in Staten Island, New York on March 30. for protesting against unsafe working conditions at Amazon, where a number of warehouse workers had tested positive for Covid-19. In the weeks that followed, three more Amazon workers were fired while trying to raise awareness about glaring inadequacies in the company's safety policies and trying to form a union on the job.

A 2018 U.S. Supreme Court decision, funded by anti-union millionaire CEOs, made it much more difficult for all public sector workers to stand together in a union on the job. Groups like the so-called Freedom Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, and the Cato Institute, which are backed by corporate billionaires like David Koch, all cheered this move, claiming their support was based on concerns over First Amendment rights in the workplace. Yet none of these organizations defended the First Amendment rights of Christian Smalls. Not one.

Despite the challenging environment that exists for workers who want to speak in a collective voice on issues ranging from safety to pay to the right to organize themselves, the current pandemic shows the value inherent in having a voice at work. If a worker has a union on the job, they have some power. And that power leads to meaningful change. Never has that been more important than it is now.

- The National Nurses Union is throwing its resources behind the desperate calls from our emergency rooms and intensive care units for more personal protective equipment.
- The United Food and Commercial Workers Union is leading the fight to protect our frontline food workers, including meatpackers ordered back into unsafe processing plants by the federal government.
- The International Association of Firefighters is making sure firefighters and paramedics infected with the coronavirus on the job get the care they need.
- The California State Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO made sure that any essential worker who contracts Covid-19 is eligible for workers compensation and unemployment insurance, whether they belong to a union or not.

Working people standing together in unions are essential to protecting workplaces and communities during this crisis. That fight will have to continue as we deal with the economic and human toll of this pandemic.

The enormous expense of this crisis, expressed both in job losses and the very real costs of constructing a rudimentary safety net from scratch after years of dismantling social programs, will last long after we defeat the virus. The same billionaires who turned a deaf ear to Christian Smalls will make every effort to prioritize profitability and corporate incentives as a solution to our depressed economy. They value profit rates at the expense of living wages and working conditions in the private sector, and at the cost of draining revenue from essential services provided by state and local governments, including health care, education, and public safety.

Just as unions are leading the fight to protect workers in the heat of the pandemic, it is the labor movement that will have to fight the calls for corporate welfare as we clear the wreckage and rebuild. The regressive tax rates that have led to the highest levels of income inequality since the 19th century cannot be sustained in post-Covid-19 America. The tax giveaways to the wealthy few that steal revenue from our schools, hospitals and fire departments have to end. Wealthy America, the party is over. We can't afford it.

The national and international structure of labor unions will be a key weapon in this fight. To avoid an endless race to the bottom as companies threaten to move from city to city and state to state to get a better deal, workers and communities have to stand together with a unified response: pay your fair share everywhere.

Just as important, workers in unions have to join the efforts of brave men and women like Christian Smalls as they work to organize the new corporate giants. A single voice, standing alone, is vulnerable, but together we can win. As the old labor song goes, "What force on Earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one? But the union makes us strong."