

It's Not the 'Future of Work,' It's the Future of Workers That's in Doubt

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Sarita Gupta, Stephen Lerner, & Joseph A. McCartin, *American Prospect*, August 31, 2018



As another Labor Day passes, the stakes have never been higher for workers, unions, and people who believe in a just economy and a decent country. The capitalism of recent decades has relentlessly undercut worker bargaining power, triggering an explosive rise in inequality that has undermined democracy itself. Driven by an ideological embrace of “creative disruption and destruction” and supercharged by the fusion of Wall Street’s financialization of the economy with Silicon Valley’s techno-monopolies, this profoundly destabilizing version of capitalism is reshaping every aspect of the economy.

Meanwhile, however, the architects of inequality are brilliantly distracting us from their growing domination by defining and controlling the debate about what is inevitable and what is possible.

Nearly every discussion of labor’s future in mainstream media quickly becomes mired in a group of elite-defined concerns called “The Future of Work.” Rarely has a phrase been so ubiquitous in discussions of the economy or social policy. Plug it into a search engine and you’ll generate 50 million hits. Scarcely a week goes by without a new convening, report, or foundation initiative focused on the Future of Work that details hair-raising scenarios about the potential disappearance of jobs before sweeping waves of robotization, artificial intelligence, and machine learning.

Clearly, technological change holds important implications for workers and the labor movement. Yet discussions of the Future of Work as they are currently constructed threaten to become a dangerous distraction. Such discussions usually overstate and sensationalize the technological threats workers currently face, while consistently ignoring the forces that are *driving* the changes that most threaten workers’ security. They draw us into fruitless futuristic policy debates that divert us from addressing the nation’s most urgent needs. They tend to be dominated by the thinking of the very consultants who are engineering changes in the workplace. They accept as inevitable a future in which jobs will

be scarce and a firmly entrenched wealthy elite will be setting our priorities. They narrow the range of social vision to the question of how to ensure that the citizens of the future simply get enough to survive.

We argue that it is not the Future of Work that must concern us at this crucial moment, but rather it is the future of workers—whose future is inextricably linked to our ability to promote and preserve equality and democracy—that must be our most urgent concern. Unless we center our thinking around the intertwined and interdependent fates of working people, and their struggles for economic, racial, and gender justice, we cannot plan for a humane and sustainable future.

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It is the concentration of wealth and power in this new economy, not computerization or artificial intelligence, that represents the gravest threat to our future. It is that concentration that will determine how innovative technologies are deployed and in whose interests they operate. The future of work will be determined by who wields power and for what purposes.

The Making of a Dominant (and Distorted) Paradigm

From the beginning, the Future of Work discussion has been overwhelmingly framed and driven by people who seek to profit from it. Consulting companies like [McKinsey](#), [Deloitte](#), [Accenture](#), and [Catalant](#) not only hype scenarios that stress imminent, cataclysmic, and technology-driven changes that are about to radically redefine work and the workforce, but also offer their services to companies that seek to “take advantage of the Future of Work.” Nor are the consultants the only ones steering this discussion. [Bank of America](#) and [Barclays](#) are big boosters of Future of Work talk. So is the business press. [Fortune](#), [Forbes](#), [Wired](#), [Fast Company](#), and [The Economist](#) all run regular features under the Future of Work rubric.

Thought-leader organizations from the [Aspen Institute](#) to the [Hamilton Project](#) to [TED](#) also publicize the Future of Work framework. None has been more influential than the World Economic Forum (WEF), whose annual gathering of the world’s financial and political titans in Davos, Switzerland, both structures and reveals the agendas of the global elite. Klaus Schwab, the chairman of the WEF, [argues](#) that we are in the midst of a fourth industrial revolution and it is all about disruption. “The speed of current breakthroughs has no historical precedent,” he says.

Yet the Future of Work framework would not have gained such traction had it been solely the product of Davos denizens and the business press. Academics and technology writers played an important role in legitimizing it. Indeed, a 2013 [study](#) by two Oxford University scholars helped set off the recent craze of Future of Work discussions by claiming that nearly half of all U.S. jobs were vulnerable to replacement by computerization—findings that have since been [debunked](#) as vastly overstated.



AP Photo/Julio Cortez

A woman shouts while marching with service workers asking for \$15 minimum wage pay during a rally at Newark Liberty International Airport in Newark, New Jersey

Driven by powerful and self-interested forces and legitimized by academics and serious writers, it is little wonder that within the last few years it has become “an article of faith,” according to [Robert D. Atkinson](#) and [John Wu](#) of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, “that workers in advanced industrial nations are experiencing almost unprecedented levels of labor-market disruption.” Worried governments and governmental organizations have been scrambling to address what they’ve been told is a looming crisis. They’ve ranged from the California State Assembly, which hosted a “[Future of Work Summit](#)” in 2017, to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which recently [created](#) a “[Future of Work Fellowship Scheme](#),” to the [International Labor Organization](#) (ILO), which is preparing a massive report on the Future of Work, the release of which will coincide with the organization’s centennial next year.

A number of influential foundations have joined and promoted the Future of Work discussion in recent years. The Open Society Foundation’s U.S. Programs conducted a sprawling [collaborative inquiry](#) into new technologies and their impact on the future of work from 2013 to 2015. Others were right behind. The [Rockefeller Foundation](#) teamed up with Arizona State University to open [ShiftLabs](#), a “**design lab and pilot program that will work in partnership with communities across the country to help them diagnose how technology is changing work**” in their local and regional markets.” Both the [Field Foundation](#) and the [Ford Foundation](#) have recently launched Future of Work initiatives. (Given Ford’s commitment and history of supporting workers’ rights, we hope their initiative will take a more nuanced approach that will re-frame this discussion in ways that put the future of workers, equality, and democracy at its center).

Unions themselves have followed the lead of these foundations, jumping into the Future of Work fray late but with urgency. Internationally, the UNI Global Union (which brings together unions of workers in finance, commerce, communications, and other service sectors) held a Future of Work summit in November 2016 and launched an initiative called the Future World of Work. In the United States, the AFL-CIO decided at its October 2017 convention to create a Commission on the Future of Work and Unions, which held its first meeting on “The Future of Work in a Digital Age” in May. Among the experts who informed its inaugural deliberations was Michael Chui of McKinsey Global Institute, co-author of its 2017 report on automation and the threat of job loss, a testament to how pervasive the influence of consultants tends to be in Future of Work inquiries.

Chui’s appearance notwithstanding, the AFL-CIO’s Future of Work and Unions inquiry is in some ways a throwback. In fact, the labor federation was arguably the first institution to actually use the phrase *Future of Work*. In 1982, the federation formed the Committee on the Evolution of Work, which convened labor’s top leaders and advisers to think strategically about the future of unions in light of a changing economic picture. That committee produced a 1983 report entitled “The Future of Work.” Much like the AFL-CIO’s current inquiry, it analyzed the effects of technology on changing employment patterns and its implications for workers. Eerily, the language of that report could have been lifted from any one of dozens of reports written in the last few years by Future of Work scribes. “Technology is changing the structure of the U.S. economy,” the 1983 report concluded. “Robots in the factory, word processors in the office, scanners at the checkout counter, push-button banking, computers in the home, and communications satellites in the sky” were threatening to create conditions of “labor surplus.” “There won’t be enough ‘high tech’ jobs to replace the jobs lost in declining industries,” it predicted.

The AFL-CIO followed up with another report in 1985 on “The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions,” which recommended a number of policies seeking to stem the tide of union losses, including the development of associate memberships. None of those recommendations had much impact on labor’s downward trajectory over the following decades.

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Given the urgent problems labor now faces, the AFL-CIO cannot afford to recapitulate its 1980s exercise. It is heartening to see that it has charged its commission to examine the future of unions as well as the future of work. Yet if it is to effectively point the way forward, it must also resist the shiny-object distractions that tend to characterize most Future of Work discussions. If it falls victim to fretting again over the technology’s impact on work and fails to generate a more successful strategy for labor’s revival than the AFL-CIO’s 1980s inquiry did, there will be no third union-initiated Future of Work exercise decades from now. By then, there will be no movement to convene such an inquiry and there will be nothing to discuss. The elite will have thoroughly programmed the system and our descendants will have become its wards.

Three Distractions of the Future of Work

Three distractions tend to characterize Future of Work inquiries. First, they usually overstate the threat of technological change. The current fixation on the menace of automation is not new, and if the past is any guide, the mass automation of jobs is *not* imminent. As Louis Anslow reminds us, fears of “technological unemployment” have periodically swept through the ranks of labor advocates since John Maynard Keynes invented that term in the 1930s. In the late 1950s and early 1960s in particular, worries about technological unemployment flared. President Kennedy’s secretary of labor, W. Willard Wirtz, feared that a “surging population and driving technology is splitting the American labor force.” “This division of people threatens to create a human slag heap,” he warned. In fact, unemployment fell in the 1960s rather than rose. And to date, while automation has contributed to the shifting of jobs from one sector to another, it has never reduced the total number of jobs.

Most careful research on the question does not see any indication of overall job loss stemming from automation. According to data gathered by Heidi Shierholz for the years between 1953 and 2016, faster adoption of technology was not associated with higher unemployment rates. Not only are jobs not disappearing overall, add Robert D. Atkinson and John Wu, but labor market transformation has actually slowed in recent years. In their view, the real threat is that “technological change and resulting productivity growth will be too slow, not too fast.” Lending credence to these arguments are the recent findings of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), which surprised economists by reporting that the proportion of people working in the “gig economy” or in alternative work arrangements has not grown, as many prophets of the Future of Work have predicted. Most of the top 20 fastest-growing occupations listed by the BLS, including home health care, are also impervious to automation.

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We realize that just because the Future of Work seems to be unfolding more slowly than many have predicted, this does not mean that big changes won’t eventually come. Yet when even the direst warnings predict that deeply negative impacts of automation are still many years off, why do unions and progressives continue to worry about the Future of Work when our movement is facing challenges that threaten to make it an utterly marginal force by the time that future arrives? We are not opponents of technology. Properly deployed and democratically accountable technology has the ability to shorten workweeks and improve workers’ lives and living standards. But we will not get such technology by talking about the Future of Work. We will only get it if we begin to challenge the reigning assumptions that are currently guiding Future of Work discussions.

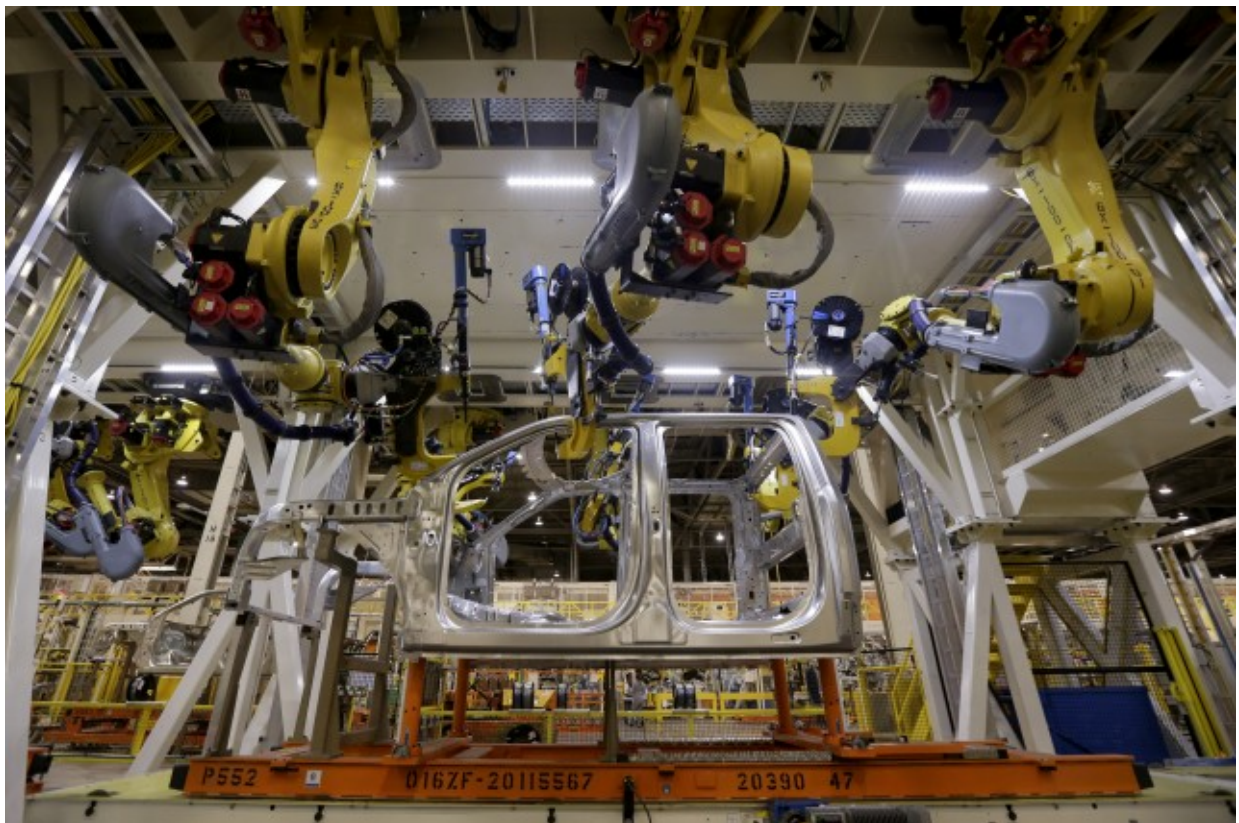
Second, Future of Work discussions tend to push us prematurely into debates on policy proposals that do not address our main problems—proposals such as the creation of a Universal Basic Income (UBI). It is no coincidence that leading prophets of the Future of Work tend to be among those most avidly promoting UBI. These range from the anti-union founder of Tesla, Elon Musk, who says “we’ll end up doing universal basic income” because it will be necessary when we find that there will be “fewer and fewer jobs that a robot cannot do better than a human,” to former SEIU President Andy Stern, who believes a “tsunami of change” is on its way that will give us an “an economy with far fewer jobs,” and

that UBI will “allow people to be entrepreneurs” in a world of constant economic change.

As a recent study commissioned by the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) suggests, however, the UBI is no “silver bullet.” Even many who are sympathetic to the idea, including labor law professor Brishen Rogers, understand that the features of any UBI enacted prior to a revival of worker organization and bargaining power would be determined by those who hold power, and thus would at best reinforce and more than likely exacerbate inequality. We agree with Rogers and with Robert McChesney and John Leonard, who argue that if we are to organize a “gigantic battle” to enact new social rights, we ought to fight for a world where workers’ concerns are central, and “not struggle to be extras in a world of, by, and for the rich.”

Third, and most important, talk of the Future of Work tends to ignore the forces that are driving the changes in our economy that are disempowering workers and concentrating income and wealth at the top. The problem is not whether artificial intelligence is about to eliminate jobs; it is about as who is driving this change, why they are driving it, and whether there is any democratic accountability for how change will happen and who will be advantaged or disadvantaged by it. The fundamental question we must address is about power and who has it.

We must remember that automation and the reorganization of the employee-employer relationship are taking place in a world economy that has been transformed by financialization and globalization in ways that have allowed a tiny number of individuals and entities to gain enormous, unprecedented power. Consider, for instance, the power of the Blackstone Group, the world’s largest private equity firm, which is headed by Steve Schwartzmann, a key ally of President Donald Trump. Blackstone controls 150 companies with a combined value of more than \$400 billion, which employ approximately 600,000 workers. It is the largest owner of hotels and offices in the world, the world’s largest private owner of real estate, the largest owner of logistics companies in Europe, and the world’s largest investor in hedge funds. We shouldn’t be surprised that the introduction of new technologies and reorganized work relations in an economy increasingly dominated by gargantuan entities like Blackstone has weakened workers’ power and led to increased income and wealth inequality.



AP Photo/Charlie Riedel

Robots fasten parts on a new 2015 aluminum-alloy body Ford F-150 truck in the body shop at the company's Kansas City Assembly Plant in Claycomo, Missouri

Although many business apologists argue that rising inequality inevitably flows from the bias that new technologies have for skilled over unskilled labor, careful investigations of “skill-biased technological change,” undertaken by the likes of David Card of the University of California at Berkeley, find that the evidence for this is “surprisingly weak.” Rather, as Frederick Guy and Peter Skottz, among others, have found, inequalities are being exacerbated not by technological change as such, but by “power-biased technological change.” Which means we shouldn’t focus on the smoke-beclouded image of “the great and powerful wizard”—the robots and artificial intelligence machines that have so captured the imaginations of Future of Work prophets—but instead on those behind the curtains who are pulling the levers.

Focusing on the Future of Workers, Equality, and Democracy

How *should* labor and its allies think about the future? We argue that our focus should be fixed firmly on the intersection of three intertwined and interdependent fates: that of *workers* (rather than work), *equality*, and *democracy*. The quality of workers’ lives, the extent of equality, and the health of democracy are deeply interdependent. We cannot improve one of these without improving the others. By the same token, the erosion of one undermines the others.

Focusing on workers means expanding our vision beyond the workplace. What happens to workers on the job is intimately connected to what happens in their communities, in their schools, and in their lived environments. It is also intimately connected to their gender, racial, ethnic, and citizenship status. The same forces that are weakening worker

bargaining power and making work more precarious are also undermining public institutions like schools and mass transit, profiting from rising household debt, and shaping policies that are contributing to climate change and environmental injustice. Improving workers' lives on the job cannot be separated from improving their lives off work.

Workers in turn cannot improve their lives without gaining an effectual collective voice in shaping their world, on and off the job. That requires revitalizing democracy and making it real. For the first three-quarters of the 20th century, efforts to expand political democracy went hand in hand with efforts to make the workplace more democratic. Progressive Era reformers predicted that democracy would die in a world dominated by what were then the new corporate behemoths—unless workers secured *industrial democracy* in the workplace. They argued that “Political freedom can exist only where there is industrial freedom; political democracy only where there is industrial democracy.” That logic was embedded in the New Deal’s labor reforms and in the vision of those who fought for and won collective-bargaining rights for government workers in the 1960s. As workplace democracy expanded, so did political democracy. Racial, age, gender, and income restrictions on the electorate all fell as collective bargaining spread.

We are now experiencing a true crisis of democracy, however, one decades in the making. Since the 1970s, democracy has been weakened and rolled back both in the workplace and in the nation at large. The battle to roll back workplace democracy began in earnest with the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 and gathered steam as the 20th century drew to a close. Collective bargaining was stifled in the public sector and sharply eroded in the private sector; the rights of workers to bargain were undermined by the spread of private-sector “right to work laws” to 28 states and by a growing assault on public-sector bargaining that has culminated with the Supreme Court’s *Janus v. AFSCME* decision.

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As workplace democracy was undercut, so too was political democracy. The same courts that diminished workers’ rights also gutted both campaign-finance and voting-rights laws, and turned a blind eye toward partisan gerrymandering. The power to make economic policy was ceded to the unaccountable courts established by trade treaties—courts with the power to override environmental protections enacted by the nation’s lawmakers. As democracy has diminished, some voters have become discouraged and withdrawn from political participation, while others, frustrated by their inability to have their voices heard either at work or in shaping the direction of their society, have turned to a *faux* and often racist populism. Tragically, a decisive group of such voters turned to Donald Trump in 2016 in the belief that the system was broken and impervious to their concerns, and thus needed to be “shaken up.”

Unless we can revive democracy amid the increasingly inhospitable conditions that it faces in the 21st century, workers will not be able to improve the quality of their lives. By the same token, we cannot revive democracy without addressing the toxic impact of exploding inequality.

Since democracy's origins among the ancient Greeks, its proponents have repeatedly warned that massive inequalities would be fatal to democracy's survival. That belief informed Lincoln's eventual conclusion that slavery and democracy could not co-exist, and FDR's efforts to tax wealth, increase worker bargaining power, and provide jobs for the jobless. In large part due to Roosevelt's policies, and the explosive growth of unions, inequality sharply diminished between 1940 and 1975, an era that economists call the "Great Compression." But since the mid-1970s, inequality has been rising rapidly and has now reached unprecedented levels. The massive increases in income and wealth have chiefly benefitted the 1 percent, and even more so the .01 percent.

Today, the wealthiest Americans wield power seldom matched by their forebears even in the original Gilded Age. The Koch brothers, the Waltons, the Mercers, and their like have funded the rightward turn in the Republican party, shaped such social policies as "education reform," and bankrolled the legal cases that have weakened union power, voting rights, and campaign-finance laws. Democracy cannot co-exist with their overweening power any more than it could co-exist with what Lincoln-era Republicans called the Slave Power.

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Moving Forward: Organizing, Disrupting, and Bargaining for the Future

How can we translate a focus on workers, equality, and democracy into concrete action?

Senator Elizabeth Warren's recently introduced Accountable Capitalism Act provides one promising approach. It would end the practice of state-granted corporate charters and require that all corporations obtain charters from the federal government, which would in turn compel companies to consider the interests of stakeholders and host communities, not just stockholders, as they set and pursued their corporate agendas. Warren would also require that corporations with more than \$1 billion in annual revenues designate 40 percent of seats on their boards of directors for representatives elected by employees. (Senator Tammy Baldwin's recently proposed Reward Work Act also provides for worker-elected representatives on corporate boards.)

While legislative initiatives like these and political mobilizations to free Congress and state legislatures from corporate domination are clearly necessary, they are also insufficient. Change on the scale that's needed will not come without collective action and strategic disruption. At a time when many unions and progressive groups have slipped into a defensive crouch, they need instead to go on offense with big and innovative organizing and bargaining campaigns that tackle the intertwined issues of expanding democracy, combating inequality, and winning a better future for workers.

In recent years, SEIU's Fight for 15 has demonstrated the power of audacious demands, as an initial call for a \$15 minimum wage for fast-food workers not only won them that wage but also spread to encompass workers in multiple industries and cities, and became a litmus test for politicians across the nation. More recently, New York's city council capped the number of Uber and Lyft drivers, while establishing a higher minimum wage for those drivers. Neither of these efforts would have succeeded absent political initiatives supported

by mass mobilization and protest. Our task now is to multiply such efforts, engaging in “creative disruption” of the inequality machine.

We believe that must begin with revolutionizing the tool that has been bequeathed to us by more than a century and a half of workers’ struggles—organizing through collective action and negotiating with those who control the economy and our future through collective bargaining. The form of workplace-centered organizing and bargaining that evolved over the course of the 20th century, however, is not up to the challenge that workers and citizens face in this century.

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We need to forge new ways of organizing and bargaining appropriate to a world in which power is concentrating in the hands of fewer economic actors; where “fissurization” has created a situation where workers’ direct employers increasingly do not have the ability to meet their demands due to the market pressures they themselves face; where financialization has altered the goals and behavior of employers, making management of private enterprise increasingly subject to fickle financial markets or the manipulations of private equity; where the public sector is being starved of resources, saddled with debt, and privatized; where the burden of taxation is being shifted away from corporations and the wealthy to the backs of working people; where concentration of wealth and power at the top is producing increasing atomization and alienation for those at the bottom; where government is either unwilling (under Republicans) or incapable (under Democrats) of enforcing labor standards or challenging and curbing corporate power.

One promising response to these new realities has emerged from public-sector unions that have sought to “Bargain for the Common Good.” Campaigns pioneered by teachers in Chicago, St. Paul, and Seattle, state workers in Oregon, county workers in San Diego, and municipal workers in Los Angeles have consciously sought to redefine collective bargaining. In these settings, unions joined with community allies to craft bargaining demands that advanced the shared goals of workers and their allies, demanded that those allies be seated at the bargaining table, and used the bargaining process to identify, educate, and mobilize a broad constituency around an agenda that challenged the ways in which big money was dictating the public agenda. They have challenged the strictures that have confined collective bargaining to issues that tend to divide unions from taxpayers, bringing militancy to bear by striking—with the public’s support—when needed to advance their cause (as the Chicago teachers did in 2012).

Until recently, much of the Bargaining for Common Good (BCG) work has been primarily focused on workers already covered by collective-bargaining agreements. That ceased to be the case earlier this year. The recent wave of teachers’ walkouts in the spring of 2018 were organizing, bargaining, and political campaigns all at once. In West Virginia, teachers refused to return to work until all state workers had received a pay increase equal to theirs. In Oklahoma, teachers protested the state’s failure to fairly tax wealthy oil and gas interests. In Arizona, teachers demanded that the state enact no further tax cuts until the state’s per-pupil spending on education reached the national average (their initiative raising taxes on the rich has qualified for the November ballot). Since the vast majority of strikers

were not union members, these walkouts were both massive organizing campaigns and democracy campaigns as well, since they posed such explicit political demands as raising taxes to fund public schools more adequately. They instinctively adopted a Bargaining for the Common Good approach in that they were not just about wages or benefits but also about improving education and fighting for fairer taxation.

The efforts to redefine organizing and bargaining or to apply the insights of Bargaining for the Common Good need not remain confined to the public sector. Important initiatives in three employment-growth sectors of the “new economy” also promise the sort of fresh approaches we will need in the years ahead. One of these is embodied in Caring Across Generations, a campaign that seeks to address the growing demand for elder care, how we fund that care, and how we ensure that the workers who provide it have the training, pay, and benefits they need to do their best work, winning dignity for themselves in the process. While Future of Work prophets stoke fears about technology replacing workers, frontline health-care jobs like those involved in elder care, many of which are done by women, people of color, and immigrants, are five of the top eight fastest-growing occupations.



Workers assemble Volkswagen Passat sedans at the German automaker's plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee

A second opportunity is emerging among workers who are contesting the monopoly power of their employers. Still in its early stages, organizing at Amazon is challenging not just the company’s treatment of workers but also its growing monopoly control of multiple industries. This campaign is connecting warehouse workers globally, organizing U.S. workers, challenging the massive tax subsidies that the company receives, and calling out Amazon’s mistreatment of Muslim workers and the sales of hate-mongering products on its

platforms. Working on multiple levels, the campaign seeks to expose the often horrible conditions at the company's warehouses, and the larger perils posed to equality and democracy by massive vertical monopolies like Amazon.

A third area of promising growth-sector organizing and bargaining targets banks and private equity. The Communications Workers of America (CWA), the Committee for Better Banks, and allied organizations are organizing to improve pay and benefits for the nation's more than one million non-union bank workers, to end the sales goals and metrics that force workers to sell predatory financial products as a condition of employment, and more broadly to reform the finance system so that it serves the common good instead of operating as a driver of inequality. As part of this campaign, Wells Fargo workers were the whistleblowers who exposed the bank's cheating scandals. Santander workers have helped expose Santander's subprime auto loan practices. These and their fellow bank workers have now launched a global campaign to "regulate from below," which envisions workers playing a growing and increasingly central role in exposing and stopping banks from cheating consumers and engaging in practices that threaten the broader health of the economy. Bank workers are simultaneously organizing for a union, for better wages, and for a banking system that serves society instead of the finance sector.

The titans of private equity also present a promising target, particularly since such firms control a range of companies in multiple sectors and multiple nations. Blackstone offers an example of how multiple campaigns targeting one such firm could be run at once, tying together a variety of different issues and organizations that could challenge the full scope of the company's activities. One part of the campaign would organize the non-union companies Blackstone owns. Another could organize a tenant's union, since Blackstone is now the largest landlord in the country, and mobilize unions, using the leverage of their pension funds, to stop Blackstone from foreclosing on homes in post-hurricane Puerto Rico. Legislation has been introduced in several states that would tax private equity executives to recover the states' shares of the billions that are lost to the carried-interest loophole that protects the hyper-wealthy executives of Blackstone and other private equity giants.

The current battle with KKR, Bain, and other such firms to make them pay severance to the 30,000 Toys 'R' Us workers who lost their jobs when the company was liquidated challenges the private equity companies that hide behind complicated corporate structures to avoid compensating workers after destroying their jobs. Given the increasing power that firms like these wield over an ever-widening range of companies, campaigns like this one will have to multiply if workers are to defend their most basic rights, and hold corporate power accountable in the decades ahead.

If they are to survive as a significant force in this century, unions will need to deploy the tools they developed in the last century—collective action and collective bargaining—beyond the workplace and the binary employer-employee relationship. Workers are also taxpayers, renters, mortgage-holders, consumers, students, student-loan debtors, and citizens of an endangered biosphere. In each of these roles, they are being abused and exploited by a form of increasingly unaccountable capitalism. Ultimately, workplace struggles must link up with fights outside the workplace—not only because the battles for a decent life transcend such distinctions, but also because in the current form of financialized and globalized capitalism, the same people and institutions are increasingly controlling

workers' lives and constraining their horizons both on and off the clock.

Whatever the target, our goal must be to develop new instrumentalities for broad, disruptive collective action. Only when workers and their allies create vehicles capable of challenging concentrated economic and political power can we hope to shape a future of work that works for all. Building such vehicles, not fretfully ruminating about the threats we face from robots and AI, must be our most urgent task. The good news is that the important work we need is already under way. We must expand it exponentially. We have no time to lose.