#### Understanding unions and labor laws is prerequisite to building effective coalitions.

Andrew Moss 25, emeritus professor from the California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, “Union Members Hold the Keys to a Restored Democracy”, June 2nd, 2025, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/06/02/union-members-hold-the-keys-to-a-restored-democracy/>, DOA: 8/4/25, Rslish

When ICE and other agencies began arresting, detaining, and deporting immigrants this past January under orders from Donald Trump, unions stepped up to support immigrant workers. They called for the release of workers detained and imprisoned without due process, offered know-your-rights workshops and legal assistance, accompanied workers to their ICE check-ins, and gave public displays of solidarity, such as the May Day marches this year.

In doing all this, unionists clearly rejected the scapegoating that’s been a hallmark of authoritarians for years. They didn’t buy the claims that immigrants were driving up housing prices or threatening the physical safety of Americans.

Yes, there were unionists who voted for Donald Trump in 2024, but a clear majority did not. Their rejection then, and their resistance now, show why unions are playing a key role in resisting authoritarianism today – and why they’ll play an equally critical role in rebuilding democracy once the Trump era is over.

When Trump is gone, unions and other American institutions will have to confront the inequality that weakens democracy no matter who’s in power. Over 800 American billionaires collectively possess $6.22 trillion in wealth, and they wield immensely disproportionate political power. At the same time, millions of their fellow citizens struggle to get by, juggling payments for rent, groceries, healthcare, childcare, elder care, and transportation. In taking in this picture, one must also consider the record 771,480 people who were reported as unhoused on a single night last year – and the 47.4 million people living in food insecure households.

It’s not surprising, then, that more than 85 million people who were eligible to vote in last year’s presidential election chose not to do so, many of them feeling that their vote would make little difference in their own lives or in the lives of their communities.

There was a time – in the mid-1950’s – when one in three American workers belonged to a union. It was a time of much greater economic equality, in no small measure due to the greater union density of that era. The reason was, and is, clear: unions are the only institutions that directly represent the economic interests of working people, and over the decades they’ve demonstrated their power by raising wages, improving working conditions, and yielding greater job security through collective bargaining.

In addition, unions foster participation in everyday democracy, keeping members informed of political issues, and promoting engagement and leadership within the union and the community at large. It’s quite possible that Donald Trump might never have reached the White House if union membership was as strong today as it was in the 1950’s.

But union strength declined precipitously in the last few decades. Corporate heads engaged in aggressive forms of union busting, and legislators at both the state and national levels have worked methodically to weaken existing labor laws and to pass hostile legislation, such as the so-called “right-to-work” laws. When Donald Trump was inaugurated this year, he joined the attack by terminating collective bargaining for federal employees and by firing thousands of federal workers.

As Trump’s anti-democratic agenda has come into sharper focus, scholars and activists have called for a broad coalition to resist the assaults on democracy and the rule of law. They’ve called on a wide range of institutions – the courts and legal profession, media organizations, colleges and universities, businesses and non-profits, advocacy groups, faith-based organizations, and unions – to work together in resisting these attacks.

But a broad-based coalition will succeed only insofar as its members understand the economic underpinnings of a democratic society – and the unique role that unions play in advancing the economic interests of working people. Union members may constitute 9.9 percent of working people today, but that percentage hasn’t stopped them from recently securing major victories on behalf of auto workers, UPS drivers, health workers, teachers, actors, screenwriters, and hotel workers, among many others.

An effective coalition will recognize the foundational role that unions and union members play in protecting and rebuilding community, and coalition members will provide support to restore union strength. This means, among other things, becoming informed about labor history and current labor struggles, and supporting critical legislation, like the PRO Act, that will protect the right to organize.

If coalition members are serious about protecting democracy as a whole – not just their own institutional turf – they’ll be willing to leave their familiar silos. If, for example, an M.L. King or a U.S. President can walk a picket line, so can the president of your alma mater, or the head of that prominent law firm in your town. Or, for that matter, so can the rest of us.

And if we’re willing to leave our comfort zones and face with clarity and discernment the uncertainty that lies before us, we might – just might – cross a threshold into a new, more expansive and creative notion of what American democracy can be.