

Confronting the Trump Era: The Roots of Labor's Crisis and the Search for a Way Forward

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We come together today at a moment of unique peril for the American labor movement. A president now occupies the White House whose election drew nearly unanimous union opposition. He is preparing to nominate a supreme court justice who will likely provide the deciding vote in a case that takes away the rights of public sector unions to collect fees from the workers on whose behalf they negotiate. He has already nominated as secretary of labor, Andy Puzder, a fast food executive opposed not only to the “Fight for 15”, but also to raising the minimum wage. Meanwhile, the president is signing and order today to build his promised wall and might soon begin deporting millions of immigrant workers who lack documentation, workers who have provided enthusiastic support to union organizing efforts in hospitality, building services, home health, and other services. No doubt the administration also intends to end the agreement between the Labor Department and the Department of Homeland Security that protect immigrants involved in a labor dispute from deportation.

And then there are the laws that Congress is currently considering. Two laws now under consideration pose a special threat to labor's future. The first is the “Employee Rights Act” which would: prevent union recognition through a “card check” even if the employer is willing to accept a card check recognition; change the “win” bar for a union certification election to include the majority of all affected employees, not just a majority of those who vote; require union re-certification elections when half of the originally unionized employees have turned over; mandate opt-in rather than opt-out systems for voluntary contributions to union political operations. The second dangerous law now under consideration is the Regulations from the Executive in Need of Scrutiny (REINS) Act: would basically strip executive agencies of the power to make regulations (such as OSHA's recent silica regulation, or NLRB regulatory changes that streamlined union election processes). The passage of either of these laws would be devastating for labor. Although a filibuster is likely to prevent their approval in the Senate, the fact that they are being advanced now illustrates the severity of the threat labor now faces.

Nor are events in Washington labor's only problem: two weeks ago Kentucky became the nation's 27th “right to work” state. Missouri is now poised to follow suit. New Hampshire might be next.

Surveying this nightmare landscape, one can't help but feel that the U.S. labor movement has reached a turning point, and an existential crisis now looms. Whether labor will survive the Trump administration as a significant social and political force is unclear.

And yet, I would argue, how the present crisis will play out is still very much up for grabs. I say this for two reasons. First, because of what many of us in this room recently saw with our own eyes. In this city, and across the country and globe an unprecedented mobilization of resistance to President Donald J. Trump took place on Saturday. Although that mobilization has scarcely knocked

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Trump from office or slowed the Congress from advancing its anti-labor agenda, it suggests the possibility that resistance might grow.

The other thing that makes me think that the future is very much up for grabs is the past. The fact is that labor's development over time has often been shaped by turning-point moments, struggles that had they gone a different way might have resulted in very different historical trajectories for labor. I wrote a book about one such turning point, the 1981 strike of air traffic controllers broken by Ronald Reagan. In some ways that disastrous event accelerated labor's decline and helped lead to the moment we now face with a president who is poised to inflict far more damage on the labor movement than Reagan ever did. But as I joined the march on Saturday, I was reminded of another turning point for the union movement, one that occurred exactly eighty years ago, in 1937.

Back then, in the space of only 102 days the world inhabited by tens of millions of US workers was suddenly transformed. On the morning of December 30, 1936, few could have predicted the scale or scope of that transformation. When that day dawned, even fervent supporters of labor reform doubted whether Senator Robert F. Wagner's National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which had been signed into law only eighteen months earlier, could withstand the scrutiny of a hostile US Supreme Court. Oral argument in the test case of *NLRB v. Jones and Laughlin* was scheduled to begin in less than six weeks, on February 9, 1937. Judging by the Supreme Court's 1935 decisions striking down the cornerstone programs of the early New Deal—the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act—there was not much reason to believe that Wagner's law would survive judicial review.

No one outside the court yet knew that a momentous shift in the nation's jurisprudence had in fact already begun. Associate Justice Owen Roberts—the court's youngest member, an appointee of President Herbert Hoover, and one who had consistently sided with the court's four most conservative justices in overturning New Deal initiatives—had only days before seemingly changed his orientation. On December 19, 1936, Roberts had cast the decisive vote in the case of *West Coast Hotel Company v. Parrish*, a vote that would not become public for three more months. Influenced by Franklin D. Roosevelt's smashing reelection, Roberts had allowed Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes to persuade him to side with the court's more liberal members to uphold the constitutionality of a Washington State minimum wage law. In retrospect, Roberts's decision would be seen as signaling the end of the *Lochner* era, in which the concept of "liberty of contract" had been used as a sledgehammer by the court to demolish one effort at labor reform after another in the years between 1905 and 1936.

But that became clear only in retrospect. On December 30, 1936, when no one yet knew what the law of the land regarding labor would be six months hence – just as we cannot know how the law will stand six months from now – in that moment of uncertainty a relatively small group of auto workers in Flint, Michigan, handed down their own decision. Several hundred members of members of the fledgling United Automobile Workers union – the UAW – shut down the assembly line and occupied Flint's Fisher Body No. 1 auto body plant, a key cog in GM's US operations. Soon the sit-down strikers' ranks swelled to two thousand. In the coming weeks they would repel multiple efforts to dislodge them. While they were barricaded inside their plant, a massive struggle was taking place in the nation's politics.

On February 5, 1937, the strikers learned that President Roosevelt was proposing an expansion of the court's membership—his "court packing" plan. But their focus remained on GM and not Washington. With strong community support, the aid of a militant Women's Emergency Brigade, and the sympathy of Michigan's recently elected governor, Frank Murphy, the sit-down strikers would hold their ground for forty-four days, until GM signed a two-page union recognition agreement with the UAW on February 11, 1937.

On the very day the Flint workers marched victoriously out of Fisher Body No. 1, oral arguments in *NLRB v. Jones and Laughlin* were wrapping up before the Supreme Court. As sit-down strikes spread across the country in the wake of Flint, the court announced its surprising shift in the *West Coast Hotel* decision on March 29. Four days later, the United States Steel Corporation signed a collective bargaining agreement with the Steel Workers Organizing Committee. Then, on April 12, the Supreme Court ended the suspense surrounding the Wagner Act, announcing a 5–4 decision in the Jones and Laughlin case that definitively upheld the law’s constitutionality.

A three-month span had delivered a series of previously unimaginable breakthroughs for labor. Although the pendulum would swing against unions once again before the year was over, with the defeat of the Little Steel strike and the onset of the momentum-sapping Roosevelt recession, there was no going back to the world that had existed before “Labor’s Hundred Days.” A definitive change had occurred. Support for collective bargaining was finally written into the law of the land, a revived labor movement had stirred to life, and the New Deal, which to that point had been a contradictory programmatic *mélange*, had begun to crystallize into an entity that was more than the sum of its parts, a political and economic constellation that would long outlive Roosevelt himself: the New Deal order.

Eighty years later, the narrative of that other turning point in US labor history might seem as ancient as the story of Exodus. Once home to an aroused working-class capable of taming the world’s largest employer, Flint is today a desperately impoverished city lacking in decent jobs, whose lead-poisoned residents are trapped, their most significant asset—the value of their homes—having been made unsellable by the same scandalous decisions that stole their children’s health. Frank Murphy’s Michigan is now a “right-to-work” state presided over by Governor Rick Snyder, a venture capitalist whose efforts to wrest local control away from distressed communities led directly to Flint’s poisoning. Nor is much left of the labor movement that was aborning in the spring of 1937. In the aftermath of Donald J. Trump’s election to the presidency, its remnants face the most significant union crisis since the early 1930s. Associate Justice Antonin Scalia’s sudden death less than a year ago on February 13, 2016, allowed unions to dodge what many called an “existential threat” in the case of *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association*, which would have denied public sector unions the ability to collect fair-share fees from the non-members they represent in collective bargaining and grievance procedures. But as we can now see, that reprieve was temporary and no “switch in time” on today’s court seems likely to save the labor movement from the disastrous decisions that now likely lie ahead of us. Unions have never faced a more dangerous moment, and, eighty years after the Wagner Act’s constitutionality was affirmed, US labor law has never seemed less able to protect them. .

The stark juxtaposition of the hopeful events of eighty years ago and labor’s dismal state today, between the turmoil and conflict that marked the birth of the modern American labor movement and the turmoil and conflict that seem to herald its possible demise today, begs for retrospection and analysis. From the perspective of eighty years, as the labor order that the Wagner Act underwrote lies in tatters, as once mighty unions like the UAW survive as mere shadows of their former bodies, two questions demand attention: How did labor get to this point, and what if anything should it do now to ensure if not its resurgence at least its survival?

This afternoon, I’d like to offer a broad interpretation of the story that brought us to this point, a brief historical narrative, and then I’d like to sketch out a few principles that might guide the labor movement as it seeks to take its future into its own hands in this important moment.

An essential point that I would like to make is this: The crisis is not so much a product of the election of Donald Trump as Donald Trump’s election is a result and symptom of that crisis. Labor’s present crisis is not the product of one development and not the product of the election of one man, it is a *systemic crisis* that solution to which will require a systemic approach, one that both confronts Trump and looks beyond him to what must be done to rebuild a worker-friendly society.

To begin, I think it is important to that we remind ourselves that the task of building a strong labor movement in the United States has always faced deep structural obstacles, obstacles that no other nation has faced in quite the same way. There has been a lot of loose talk over the years about “American exceptionalism”; much of it is overblown. But if there is one thing that has always made America exceptional it is that it has provided difficult ground on which to build labor solidarity. This is owing to the influence of four distinctive traits, the combination of which has made America different.

First, American law and political culture from the earliest days of the republic privileged individual over collective rights and looked upon any form of collective action by workers with suspicion. Efforts to form unions and stage strikes or boycotts in the early 19th century were deemed criminal conspiracies. Although the law gradually backed off of that claim and tolerated the formation of unions over the course of the 19th century, it never completely abandoned its bias against collective action. Strikes and boycotts were sharply circumscribed, subject to judicial injunctions and anti-trust charges until the passage of the Norris-LaGuardia Act in 1932. Even after the passage of the Wagner Act, the bias against collective action was not eliminated. It reasserted itself in the Taft-Hartley Act’s prohibitions of secondary boycotts and allowance of “right to work” laws.

Second, the US combined a vast labor market with a relatively weak regulatory state. Until the recent emergence of China and India as nascent industrial powers, the United States had the largest and most geographically dispersed labor market of any industrializing nation. Efforts to take workers out of competition with each other in a labor market so large and dispersed – and taking workers out of competition with each other has always been the most basic mission of a labor movement – efforts to do that in the United States were always bound to be difficult. What made that project even more problematic here was that it had to be carried out in a nation in with a strong streak of anti-statism and a constitutional structure that fragmented and limited federal power, a system of federalism that gave states enormous latitude. Successful labor movements under capitalism have always required a supportive regulatory structure that could equalize the vastly unequal power balance between mobile capital on the one hand and rooted workers who depended on jobs on the other. Although the New Deal provided a stable structural fix, by the 1980s its aging structures were no longer up to the job.

Third, American corporate culture has been uniquely hostile to labor organization. This owes in part to the first two factors I mentioned – the vast expanse of the US market and the weak regulatory power of the state. American corporate culture evolved with a higher level of hostility to union organization than the corporate cultures of other advanced industrial nations. Historically, American capitalism came closest to Joseph Schumpeter’s axiom that capitalism was about “creative destruction.” The combination of intense competition and light regulation meant that American business leaders were more loathe to engage in collective bargaining agreements than their counterparts in other countries. Their perennial fear was that submitting to such contracts would place them at a competitive disadvantage. The U.S. business community therefore never warmed to anything that smacked of corporatism as it emerged in say postwar Germany.

Fourth, the American working-class was more racially, religiously, and culturally diverse than the working classes of any other major industrial nation during the period of the construction and emergence of national labor movements. No other major industrial power of the nineteenth century had also been home to slavery. No other major industrial power of the nineteenth century saw its workers speak so many different languages or worship in so many different religious traditions. Building a viable labor movement from such a diverse working class had always been uniquely problematic. For much of its early history the US labor movement dealt with the problem by trying to exclude some in order to build solidarity among others. West coast unions agitated strongly for the restriction of Chinese immigration beginning in the 1870s. Many craft unions barred African American from membership from emancipation up through the civil rights era. Labor strongly supported immigration restriction from the era of Samuel Gompers until the AFL-CIO under John Sweeney finally abandoned

that position in the year 2000. It would be wrong to argue as some critics do that the American labor movement was racist for most of its history – too many instances of cross-racial, cross-religious, and multi-ethnic solidarity existed to sustain such a broad-brush characterization. It was always true that for all of its short-comings as an inclusive movement at any given point in its history the labor movement was the most inclusive social institution in this country at any given point in its history. Nonetheless, U.S. labor had continuously struggled with the problem of building solidarity among diverse workers.

These four structural characteristics – a legal system with an inbred suspicion of collective action; a massive, dispersed, and relatively lightly regulated labor market; an employer class uniquely hostile to unionism; and an unprecedentedly diverse working-class – made the building of a labor movement difficult from the beginning in the United States.

It is no coincidence that during the period between the mid-1930s and the mid-1970s, when a strong union movement arose in this country, each of these obstacles diminished in significant ways. Beginning with *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin*, courts stepped back from a century-long record of interference with workers' efforts to act collectively, and for decades after the Jones & Laughlin decision courts gave significant deference to workers' rights to organize unions; at the same time, a succession of crises, a Great Depression, a World War, and a Cold War finally created conditions allowing for the growth of federal administrative and regulatory power in a nation with longstanding traditions of anti-statism and allowed for the emergence of a state that brought significant regulation to the nation's vast labor market; on a third front, the rise of large oligopolistic companies that dominated American manufacturing, such as the big three auto makers, along with American dominance in the postwar global economy diminished for a time the level of employers' resistance to unionization; and finally the end of mass immigration from Europe in combination with the Great Migration of African Americans from southern fields to northern industrial cities and emergence of the first struggles for civil rights, beginning in the 1930s, laid the basis for a level of multi-ethnic and biracial labor unity than had existed before, a basis upon which unions like the UAW would be built.

These developments by themselves did not build the labor movement that arose in the middle-half of the 20th century, though. Structural obstacles or opportunities have never dictated the destiny of the American labor movement. Workers built that movement because their daily labor taught that alone they had little power to protect their dignity, win security, and fair remuneration for their work. They responded to visionary leaders who constructed organizational vehicles that were appropriate to the workers' needs, leaders like John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman who founded the CIO and brought industrial unionism to life, or Jerry Wurf of AFSCME who helped extend the vibrant energy of social unionism into the public sector.

Between World War II and the mid-1970s, the labor movement emerged as a powerful political, economic, and social force. It encompassed at its height one-third of all US wage earners and what it won for them positively influenced how at least another third of workers were treated. It brought a measure of democracy, rights, and due process to workplaces even beyond the ones it organized. It fought to expand, and defend an American welfare state. Although, as a product of the America of its time, it was never free from sexism or racism, it nonetheless embraced the causes of equal rights for racial minorities and women, produced organizations such as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, and the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and helped win legislation that propelled forward the civil rights and feminist revolutions such as the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. During the period of its greatest strength, inequality diminished sharply, so much so that economists often refer to the years between 1940 and 1970 as the "Great Inversion," years when income grew fastest for those at the bottom and slowest for those at the top. Although even at the height of its power the term "Big Labor" was misleading, for its political power never equaled that of Big Business, yet its

power was considerable and more than any other social force organized helped to make America a more democratic society in the 20th century.

From the perspective of 2017, it is becoming increasingly difficult to remember how vitally important a strong labor movement was to making the best of 20th century America. This is part of the problem. Labor's decline, and the diminishing memory of what it once built have contributed directly to the election of Donald Trump. For evidence that union decline has been the enabling factor for the rise of Trumpism, we need look no further than the voting figures we have from the so-called "rust belt states" that put Trump over the top in the electoral college. Between 2008 and 2016, Wisconsin lost 176,000 union members; Trump won the state by 23,000 votes; between 2008 and 2016 Pennsylvania lost 100,000 union members; Trump won there by 45,000 votes; Michigan lost 110,000 union members and Trump won there by 11,000.

But those union losses in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, like labor's losses elsewhere around the US in recent years were not simply a product of the Great Recession and the militant anti-unionism of Republican governors like Scott Walker in Wisconsin, Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania, and Rick Snyder in Michigan. The truth is that those losses were long in the making. They were the product of deep changes that have occurred since the 1970s in the economic, political, and demographic structure of this country.

First and foremost, the economy has changed in dramatic ways since the 1970s, so much so that we might say capitalism began to assume new forms. Globalization was a key driver of that change. It had huge impact on manufacturing. Once a stronghold of the U.S. union movement, the manufacturing industry offshored jobs in textiles, steel, electronics and much more beginning in earnest in the 1970s. When they were not sending jobs out of the US, manufacturers were increasingly automating them as the age of the computer dawned.

Yet globalization and automation were not the only characteristics of this new era of capitalism: three other phenomena accompanied them: the rise of what might be called "shareholder capitalism"; the financialization of the economy; and the reorganization of the employer-employee relationship.

The years between the 1920s and the 1970s, saw the emergence and dominance of what could be called "managerial capitalism." Corporate consolidation and efforts to vertically and horizontally integrate and later to form conglomerates that would diversify corporate holdings marked this era. It produced corporate giants whose place in the economy was secure enough that their decisions could take into account not only the interests of their stockholders, but also of some of their stakeholders, even including in some cases their workers. This was the case when 13 years after the struggle in Flint, GM signed the Treaty of Detroit with the UAW, guaranteeing workers paid vacations, health, and retirement benefits. But over time an economy in which GM acted as trendsetter has been replaced by one in which Walmart plays that role. Part of what has pushed us in that direction is the rise since the 1970s of the mantra that corporations exist for one purpose only: to maximize shareholder value. That concept brought an end to the era of "managerial capitalism" and the rise of what could be called "shareholder capitalism" with it what Gerald Davis calls "management by markets." This approach led investors to see large-scale, diversified corporate conglomerates as worth less than the sum of their parts and to pursue strategies of stripping them down and making them lean-mean profit-driven machines with clear corporate missions: raising the value of their stocks. By the 1980s corporate raiders with this vision drove the process of reorganizing American business.

Coinciding with and helping fuel the rise of shareholder capitalism was the financialization of the economy. Large pools of capital were emerging in the 1970s – in part because the union movement had won the creation of pension funds that many other non-union employers also imitated. Private

equity investors, hedge funds, and investment banks sought higher returns by mobilizing this capital to drive the reorganization of the nation's corporate structure. The FIRE sector (finance, insurance, and real estate) of the economy doubled its share of the GDP as this reorganization took place.

The reorganization of capital and corporate structures in turn drove a reorganization of the employer-employee relationship. In the years since the 1980s activist investors rewarded companies that practiced subcontracting, franchising, the lengthening of supply chains, and the development of temporary workers. This led to a phenomenon that the recent director of the Labor Department's Wage and Hour division, David Weil, has termed the "fissuring of the American workplace." As this process proceeded, it became less common for workers to work directly for the employers in whose workplaces they labored; less likely that they would remain with the same employer for most of their working lives; and more likely that they be treated as independent contractors who lacked the rights of workers.

Financialization, shareholder capitalism, and the fissuring of the American workplace both incentivized and better enabled companies to weaken or avoid unions. This reorganization both incentivized and created conditions for the emergence of a virulent new form of antiunionism. Under these new conditions, worker bargaining power plummeted, even where unions continued to hold on. Often workers found that their direct employer did not have the power to give them what they needed, for even had they been willing to do so their employer was now hostage to the imperatives of the market, the power of that employer's franchisor, contractor, or supply-chain customer.

As worker bargaining power plummeted, changes in our politics made it impossible to effect policy reforms that would compensate for the economic changes that disempowered workers. Although collective bargaining had enjoyed significant bipartisan support in the 1950s, by the 1980s, the realignment of the political parties increasingly politicized labor policy. Republicans grew increasingly anti-union, ironically under the presidency of a former union president, Ronald Reagan, and his NLRB chair Donald Dotson. For the most part Democrats, with the exception of some legislators from southern states, remained committed at least in principle to collective bargaining. But Democratic support of labor law reform was never strong enough to break Senate filibusters in 1965, 1978, 1994, and 2010. As the increasingly aging and ossified labor law proved increasingly unequal to the task of protecting workers' ability to bargain collectively under this new capitalism, some influential Democrats only compounded the problem by embracing versions of neo-liberal deregulation, from Jimmy Carter's deregulation of the airlines and trucking industries, to Bill Clinton's deregulation of communications and banking, dismantling of the welfare entitlements of the poor, and embrace of NAFTA, down to Barack Obama's support for the TPP. As a result, the union movement found itself increasingly dependent on a party that was either not strong enough or not committed enough to protect it, a party that pursued policies that in fact further weakened unions.

The polarization of the parties contributed to policy drift not only on labor issues, but also on immigration. The passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 had initiated a transformation of this nation's demographics, opening the door to immigration from east and south Asia, the middle East, Africa, and Latin America. But it provided only a temporary fix for US immigration policy. Upheaval in central America in the 1970s and 1980s and growing immigration from Mexico caused a flood of undocumented immigrants into the US. Although many of them were legalized by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, IRCA, that act also failed to provide a long-term fix. The employer sanctions written into IRCA had the unintended effect of merely driving the illegal hiring of undocumented workers further into the shadows where the undocumented were subjected to wage theft and other forms of exploitation. Meanwhile, NAFTA's devastation of Mexican agriculture by flooding the country with cheap US corn only drove more undocumented immigrants northward.

What emerged in the US for the first time since the end of slavery was a growing group of workers who lacked any path to achieving the rights of citizens. Work (and unionization) had served as vehicles for the realization of a fuller American citizenship for immigrants, women, and African Americans earlier in the early 20th century. But the link between work and citizenship rights has continuously eroded since the 1970s. As Guy Standing puts it, the social category of citizenship has been increasingly replaced by something thinner, what might be called “denizenship.” The dissolving connection between work and a rights-endowed citizenship hurt not only the undocumented but all US workers, as work for wages increasingly became a mere market transaction and no longer what it had become over more than a century of struggle: a rights-bearing, citizenship-legitimizing activity that conferred on those who did it some say over the terms of their labor and the direction of the nation that depended on that labor.

The transformation of the economy by globalization, fissuring, and financialization, the polarization of politics and the resulting ossification of labor policy, and the decomposition of the link between work and citizenship together undermined what remained of the vision that had guided US labor policy and framed the aspirations of workers for much of the 20th century—the vision of *industrial democracy*. In the 20th century, US labor policy had been shaped by progressives and labor allies who had argued that political democracy would not long survive unless democracy was brought to industry. US labor policy in many ways had sought to import into the workplace the mechanisms of democratic government: majority rule in the choice of union representation; winner take all contests in which only one agent would be certified to bargain on behalf of workers in a given workplace; the power to tax granted to majority-certified unions, allowing them negotiate contracts that allowed their collection of fees from the workers they represented. All of this was intended to bring a form of democratic governance to the workplace. A form of industrial democracy did in fact emerge in the middle twentieth century. But the very basis of that vision was undermined by the end of the century. Industrial democracy assumed a direct relationship between worker and employer; it assumed that all workers of a given employer held equal status before the employer and the law; it never contemplated a world in which some were temporary workers who worked for temp agencies even as they labored next to directly hired workers, or that some had no citizenship rights at all because they were illegal. Advocates of industrial democracy also assumed that the employer had the ability to negotiate with workers and grant their just demands; it never contemplated a world where markets, activist investors, and private equity raiders held the real power without any accountability to employers, workers, or the common good.

As the foundations of industrial democracy eroded, no compelling new vision with similar political resonance took its place. All of these developments helped accelerate the decline of unions and paved the way for the rise of Donald Trump. When Trump promised to Make America Great Again, most critics heard in that phrase a dog whistle about the return to White supremacy. No doubt Trump intended that message to be heard by those who were looking for it. But it was not that message that allowed Trump to win over voters who had twice before voted for Obama – and there were enough such voters scattered across key states to have won them for Hillary Clinton. Rather, many US workers heard in “MAGA” at least some recognition that the nation was on the wrong track and an assertion that only an out-of-the-ordinary shakeup stood a chance of setting things on a better path. On that point, I think, they just might have been right. And for that reason, even in this dark hour, the labor movement has reason to take heart. Trump is unlikely to deliver to his followers much more than symbolism of the sort we saw in his recent intervention with Carrier in Indiana. We should not underestimate the importance of symbolism; such symbolism at least pays respect to the suffering that American workers have been feeling. But symbolism is not substance, and Trumpism offers no substantive program that will truly help beleaguered American workers or counteract the economic discontent that fueled Trump’s rise. It’s on us to provide a substantive alternative to Trump’s symbolic show.

What should labor do now? As a historian I'm conscious of the limits of my competence. I know more about the past than the present; and I have no more insight into the future than any of us here. Having said that, though, I would offer three principles for consideration that might help at least start our discussion:

First, labor should remain united and not delude itself about the nature of the threat it faces. It must confront head on the fact that it is now in a fight for its very survival and should act accordingly. Although Trump has started to reach out to building trades unions, having just met with several of them on Monday, he means the labor movement no good and a divided movement will be only more vulnerable to attacks by its opponents.

Second, labor should not lose sight of the fact that Donald Trump's election – despite all of its irregularities with Russia and the FBI – was not a fluke, but was instead the culmination of the same long interlocking historical processes that have weakened the movement. The same forces that undercut labor opened the door for Trump. Labor must recognize that even if Hillary Clinton had won, the situation was going to be incredibly difficult. “Right to work” laws would still be advancing in the states; immigration and labor reform would still be stalemated on Capitol Hill; the forces that have reorganized capitalism over the past half century would still be working to weaken unions. Clinton would have lacked the power, and perhaps even the passionate commitment to reverse any of those trends. Trump's election merely confirms that a wholesale systemic breakdown which has been underway for decades has reached a new threshold. The implication is clear: even as we confront Trump, we must look beyond him. Rebuilding the union movement must now go hand in hand with rebuilding an entirely new policy structure to support it: a revamped social safety net; new ways of regulating corporate behavior and markets; new ways of defining the rights and responsibilities of worker and employer appropriate to the form of capitalism in which we now live. We need to think big about the future even as we fight the battles of the present.

Finally, labor should not despair. It should remember that its long history has been marked by both by repeated resurrections and unexpected turning points, like the one that occurred 80 years ago when workers sat down on the job at Flint. While this present moment differs in crucial respects from the moment labor faced 80 years ago – Donald Trump is certainly no FDR – this moment is not without its possibilities, as the massive protests of Saturday reminded us. If labor is to rebuild itself it must seize on the lessons of that protest and embrace its inclusivity and assertive democracy. “Tell me what democracy looks like,” chanted the marchers I walked with on Saturday, “This is what democracy looks like!” “WE ARE... the popular vote,” they also chanted. Ironically, Donald Trump who tormented the first American president to come from a racial minority, is now himself a minority president in a way Obama never was. Trump knows how damaging it is to his legitimacy that he not only failed to win a majority of voters, he failed to even come close to outpolling Hillary Clinton. That accounts for his wild and utterly baseless assertions this week that millions of fraudulent voters denied him a popular vote majority. Labor should not allow Trump to forget his minority status for one minute. And it must find ways to link its defense of its interest and of the interests of all workers to the defense of democratic self-rule itself.

Over its long history no force has played a larger role in the broadening of democracy in the United States than organized labor. If labor rises to the occasion at this moment, as those Flint strikers did in their own way 80 years ago, perhaps one day people will look back and say that this was labor's finest hour.