

The Necessary Radicalism of Bernie Sanders

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Abstract

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Full Text

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You may have missed it, but late last month, **Bernie Sanders**'s presidential campaign released the senator's proposal for revitalizing the American labor movement. If passed into law, his Workplace Democracy Plan would end "at will" employment (employers could no longer dismiss employees for any reason without warning), institute industrywide "sectional" bargaining (versus organizing at individual companies) and curtail "right to work" laws.

Those measures alone would give unions a little room to breathe in an otherwise anti-labor atmosphere. More than half of Americans have a favorable view of unions, but in 2018 only 10.5 percent of workers were unionized. And nearly three years into his presidency, Donald Trump has been unabashedly hostile toward labor, even after selling himself as a tribune of the "forgotten man."

But the most important parts of **Sanders**'s plan have to do with striking and other powerful levers. He would give federal employees the right to strike and ban the permanent replacement of any striking workers. He would also end the prohibition on secondary boycotts, which keeps workers from pressuring "neutral" employers — like suppliers and other service providers — in the course of an action against their "primary" employer. This prohibition closes an important avenue for collaboration among workers. Lifting the restriction would open new paths for collective action.

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This push to enhance workers' freedom to strike is more consequential than it might look at first glance. Conflict was the engine of labor reform in the 1930s. And mass strikes and picketing, in particular, pushed the federal government to act.

In 1934, the historian Irving Bernstein writes in "The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941," "there were 1856 work stoppages involving 1,470,000 workers, by far the highest count in both categories in many years." In that year, nearly five years into the Great Depression, "labor's mood was despair compounded

with hope.”

The despair was self-explanatory. The hope came from the growing conviction that workers had to act of their own accord – to, Bernstein wrote, “take matters into their own hands and demonstrate their collective power to recalcitrant employers through the strike.” And strike they did.

In Toledo, Ohio, for example, workers demanding union recognition organized a strike against Electric Auto-Lite, an automobile parts manufacturer, and its related firms. When Auto-Lite and its partners hired strikebreakers and kept their factories open, the union worked with the American Workers Party, a small, radical political party that organized jobless workers to keep them from breaking strikes.

Together, unionists and labor radicals led mass pickets against Auto-Lite. Thousands of workers, employed and unemployed, surrounded the plant. Fighting broke out when a strikebreaker attacked a striker. The police and company guards attacked, and a battle ensued. The National Guard arrived and the fighting continued. In their attempt to break the siege and evacuate the strikebreakers, troops killed two strikers and injured more than a dozen others. After a week of violence, Auto-Lite agreed to close the factory. The next month, after additional mass protests and the threat of a general strike, the company backed down, recognizing the union and agreeing to rehire the strikers.

Mass pickets appeared elsewhere in the country. Late that summer, the United Textile Workers of America called a national strike, demanding union recognition and a shorter workweek. Hundreds of thousands of workers formed pickets at mills as far north as Maine and as far south as Alabama. “This strike now in progress,” Joseph Shaplen reported in *The New York Times*, “is obviously a mass movement.”

The strike was most active in North and South Carolina, where strikers closed hundreds of plants. “Moving with the speed and force of a mechanized army,” Shaplen wrote in a Sept. 4, 1934, report, “thousands of pickets in trucks and automobiles scurried the countryside in the Carolinas, visiting mill towns and villages and compelling the closing of the plants.” He continued: “The growing mass character of the picketing operations is rapidly assuming the appearance of military efficiency and precision and is something entirely new in the history of American labor struggles.”

Mill owners and management responded with private militiamen and armed strikebreakers, all backed by state and local authorities. A police officer killed a picketer in Augusta, Ga. In one South Carolina mill town, sheriff’s deputies fired on picketers, killing seven. In Rhode Island, armed state troopers – equipped with machine guns – drove a crowd of 600 strikers from a mill that refused to close. And during a confrontation in Burlington, N.C., soldiers bayoneted several picketers.

The strike ended when the Board of Inquiry for the Cotton Textile Industry, established by President Franklin Roosevelt at the start of the strike, issued its report, which recommended a federal study of work conditions and pay. The union announced victory and ordered the strikers back to work. The strikers themselves felt differently. “Mill workers were extremely bitter at the union and its officials for claiming a victory, calling off the strike, and putting their faith in government boards, when the employers had conceded nothing,” the historian Jeremy Brecher notes in “Strike!”

The year saw many other monumental strikes. After the San Francisco police killed four workers in a confrontation with striking longshoremen and their allies, local unions announced a general strike. More than 150,000 workers left their jobs, paralyzing the city. And in Minneapolis, tens of thousands of workers walked off

the job in solidarity with a Teamsters strike in the city.

It was this widespread labor struggle — as well as an overwhelming victory for New Deal Democrats in the 1934 midterms — that created new space for political action in 1935. Senator Robert Wagner of New York introduced a labor bill that would give workers “the right to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing.” Facing re-election and eager to shore up support from labor, Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act that summer.

We are not living in an era of mass unemployment and inescapable deprivation. But we’re also very far from broad prosperity. And if the past is any indication, achieving it will require agitation and conflict. Giving workers more freedom to organize and act might produce the confrontation that makes reform possible.

Indeed, **Sanders** could probably go further. Mass picketing has vanished from the arsenal of organized labor, dwindling in the 1950s and ’60s in the wake of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 — which put new restrictions on the power and activities of labor — and rendered ineffective by deindustrialization as well as legal prohibitions in the 1970s and ’80s. Conventional picketing is still around, but as the labor scholar Ahmed White notes, it “simply isn’t effective enough to give real substance to labor rights in this day and age.”

There is an opportunity, in other words, for **Sanders** or any other labor-friendly politician to give even more teeth to the right to strike, to dramatize exploitation through conflict and confrontation and to give labor the tools it needs to forge a path to a better world for people without the privileges of wealth or the power of capital.

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