

Dave Zirin: Has Anyone Done Less With More Than Michael Jordan?



Become a Movement of All Workers

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When public sector union workers fought back against a severe attack in Wisconsin, millions of workers—low-wage laborers, immigrants excluded from collective bargaining, and people struggling through chronic unemployment—saw a reflection of their own fight. They cheered from the margins of power, the front line of struggle. But unless organized labor steps wholeheartedly onto that same front line of struggle, we will never build a powerful movement.

About the Author

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Bhairavi Desai is the founder and executive director of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance.

Over the past decade, nothing has advanced the consciousness and courage of our people more than the immigrant rights and Occupy movements. Through the May Day strikes for amnesty and the massive civil unrest for equity, capital and its politics were brought to a public trial. Capital spends billions to divide us, painting unions as narrow-minded, corrupt interest groups. Unless we become a movement with a membership that recognizes its historic responsibilities—rather than just a set of institutions answerable

only to our own members—we will lie under capital's feet. Labor must embrace its role as the movement of the oppressed, animated by progressive ideals and an unapologetic militancy.

Wars and drones, "free trade" agreements, police abuse, racist incarceration rates, and a sickening inequality rooted in (generational) poverty, hunger, homelessness and chronic unemployment—these are all working-class issues. The labor movement must champion an end to the servitude of immigrant workers, as well as an end to a cruel and antiquated immigration system that exploits, oppresses, fragments and then spits out millions of men and women whose labor is the heartbeat of the economy, and who are especially concentrated in the low-wage, high-risk service sectors that enrich and enable the lords of capital. About 5 percent of the American workforce consists of undocumented workers, and yet immigrants work in the lowest-paid, most dangerous jobs in the country. It would be unforgivable for the labor movement to show complicity in such an exploitation of the poor—and by refusing to champion amnesty, it would do exactly that.

In an ever-shifting capitalist system in which contingent labor is the fastest-growing segment of the labor force, grassroots, ground-up, mass-based organizing is the only thing that will build the power of our movement. Traditional labor has to move away from a National Labor Relations Board-dependent (and -deadlined) organizing approach, which is dismissive of the real potential of workers to build power. Laws are necessary to keep the other side in check, and so we need to fight for better ones. But we don't have to wait for the law to tell us whether we have a right to organize, or to define who we as unions and union members are. Workers alone do that.

They've got the money, but we've got the people. And the people beckon a movement to usher in the new world that their struggle and labor, their blood and sweat, create every day.

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