

Occupy Pittsburgh Now

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Labor Rights Are Human Rights



Hotel workers at the Wyndham Grande Hotel picket for a fair contract.
Photo By Tom Jefferson

Negotiations Continue at the Wyndham for Unite HERE

By Jeff Cech

On Thursday April 19th, members of Unite HERE (Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees) Local 57 picketed outside of the Wyndham Grand Hotel in Downtown, Pittsburgh. The union has 200 members working at the hotel, and they took turns in the picket line during their off hours and their breaks. Throughout the afternoon roughly 60 Unite HERE members in bright red t-shirts marched in a long chain rotating counter clockwise along the Liberty Avenue side, chanting union slogans, holding signs and drumming on the bottoms of plastic five gallon buckets. One sign in the picket line read, “We Make the Wyndham grand.”

For the last six-months members of Unite HERE Local 57 have been working under an expired two-year contract signed in 2009. Negotiations with the Wyndham have been ongoing since August.

Picketing housekeepers, laundry workers, servers, and others stood together demanding a fair contract and good faith bargaining. According to Unite HERE Organizer Helena Herring, the major issue holding up negotiations comes in the form of “takebacks” the Wyndham is looking for from previous contracts. She says “[they] have asked for major concessions that took out long standing protections.” Jean Stevenson an employee at the Wyndham for 12 years says that even though “the hospitality industry in Pittsburgh has been at its highest in twenty-years,” the hotel is trying to take away overtime pay, seniority rights and vacation time.

Stevenson stood outside of the Picket line with her sister Kim McGowan, who is also an employee at the hotel. McGowan has been working at the Wyndham for 15 years. She says, “We’ve all been here for a long time. There’s a lot of employees that have been here for years and years and years, and we’ve stuck through the hard times. This is a second family to us. This is my sister here. That’s how nice of a place this was, because I got my sister a job here, and her daughter works here.”

Stevenson says the hotel workers want a fair contract so they can support their families. “We’re trying to raise our families and make an honest living. It’s kind of hard when we don’t have enough hours.” According to McGowan, the hotel is “freezing hours” to where “it would be really hard to get medical insurance with the hours they want us to have.”

Both sisters feel optimistic about ongoing negotiations. Stevenson says, “Each time we do these rallies we come closer to a deal,” McGowan added, “It will be good again.”

Recently the Wyndham Hotel asked some of the union’s committee members and negotiators meet in New York to speed up the negotiation process. Stevenson says, “We’re pretty pleased with that.” Herring says the next meeting to continue negotiations with the Wyndham has not yet been scheduled, but the hotel is communicating with the union.

Unite HERE Local 57 has successfully negotiated seven contracts for its members in the Pittsburgh area in the last six months. They include hotel employees at the Weston, Omni William Penn and Crown Plaza, The Pittsburgh Athletic Association employees, Levy employees working at the David L. Lawrence Convention Center and Aramark employees at the Consol Energy Center.

By Michael Goodhart

Historically, organized labor has played a pivotal role in driving social and economic reform in this country. Limits on the length of the working day, improvements in workplace safety, minimum wages, and many other reforms we take for granted would have been impossible without unions. Here in Pittsburgh that history remains vivid to us, with events such as the Great Rail Strike and the Homestead Steel Strike figuring prominently in local legend and shaping our collective identity.

Yet as Pittsburghers we are also aware that the labor movement has had trouble adapting to the post-industrial economy. Union membership has been declining for decades, especially in the private sector, and attitudes toward unions nationally are increasingly hostile – witness the Republican campaigns against labor rights in Wisconsin, Ohio (overturned by voters), and Indiana. The causes behind these trends are complex and controversial, and I won’t go into them here. I want to focus instead on a promising new model of labor organizing and mobilization that emphasizes the rights of working people as human rights.

Two articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) deal directly with labor and related issues. Article 23 guarantees the rights to work, to choose one’s employment, to enjoy just and favorable conditions of work, to equal pay for equal work, to unemployment protection, and to a living wage, as well as the right to form and join trade unions. Article 24 guarantees the right to rest and leisure, including paid leave and limits on working hours.

Two other articles put these rights in context: Article 22 guarantees a right to social security and to “the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for ... dignity and the free development of ... personality.” Article 25 guarantees a decent life, specifically, “the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of [people and families], including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond [their] control.”

Many people in this country don’t realize that these rights, including those we associate with the labor movement, are human rights. This realization is important, however, because it

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Occupiers mock tax dodging corporations & the politicians that protect them.
Photo by Tom Jefferson

Tax Dodger’s Dodgeball

Occupy Pittsburgh gathered in Market Square on Tuesday, April 17 for a game of Tax Payer’s Dodge-Ball. The 99% faced off against the 1% in a dodge-ball game where, like the American political economy, the odds were stacked in favor of the rich. Nevertheless, demonstrators battled for economic justice and demanded tax dodging corporations pay their fair share.

The corporations had help from friends like Pennsylvania’s Governor Tom Corbett. Corbett has a flawless corporate record. He refuses to tax Natural Gas Extraction, and he applauds as the Delaware loophole robs Pennsylvania of \$550 million in tax revenue each year. The Corbett administration has reduced business taxes while making cuts to public health funding, and as a result 88,000 children in Pennsylvania lost access to healthcare. Governor Corbett proposed a \$100 million dollar corporate tax cut by reducing the Capital Stock and Franchise Tax, meanwhile, unemployment is still over 8% in the Keystone State, and there has been no action out of Harrisburg to address the jobs crisis. He’s pursuing further cuts to education in 2012 following last year’s cut of nearly \$1 billion that caused many schools across the commonwealth to shut-down. Public transit in Pennsylvania is collapsing because it is woefully underfunded, and we may lose our bus system in Allegheny County. Corbett is certainly a strong opponent of the 99% and an equally strong ally to the 1% in tax dodging.

The entire corporate defensive-line in Harrisburg and Washington D.C. has been a great asset to the 1% team. In 2010 Verizon paid no federal taxes, but got a rebate of \$705 million. PNC Bank also paid no taxes, and was given a \$208 million dollar rebate from the federal government. Hometown favorite, UPMC evades taxes entirely because lobbyists wrote the tax code that helps them dodge the \$204 million they rightfully owe.

Throughout the game, the 1% team was able to avoid the taxes thrown at them, but in the end, the 99% revolted and pummeled their opponents.

It's About Memory and Resistance:

Remembering Labor History on May Day

By Kate Luce Angell

These days, the site of one of the most famous labor battles in the U.S. is better known as the home of The Waterfront at Homestead, a strip of big box stores, chain restaurants and franchised entertainment joints adjoining an apartment complex.

On a recent Saturday, there were a few people around Pump House No. 1 on the Monongahela river, the location of the 1892 Battle of Homestead. Most were in spandex shorts, en route from the Pump House's parking lot to a nearby bike path, but some stopped by the bronze historical plaque or peeked through the windows to the historical displays inside.

The plaque informs visitors that this is where men died to protest the world's largest company at the time, the Carnegie Steel Corporation, for slashing their wages and trying to break the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers union.

But despite living in a city that has one of the richest labor histories in America, many Pittsburghers don't know this story. And even for those who do, the lessons of history—that workers' rights are the very definition of democracy, and that labor is of the few forces with



the potential to stand against the influence of corporations—tend to escape us just as much as they have the rest of the nation.

After all, the Pump House stands only a few hundred feet from a shopping center where the vast majority of goods for sale are manufactured overseas, by workers who are paid very little, do their jobs in appalling conditions, and have no collective bargaining rights. Even at the grocery store, much of the produce for sale is imported and/or has been harvested by the same kind of worker.

Forgetfulness is only part of the problem: deliberate erasure is another. Polls show negative opinions about unions at an all-time high, and anti-union legislation—so-called “Right to Work” laws—has passed in 23 states and is pending in others. While the opposition blames unions for being inflexible, union leaders point to the deluge of negative propaganda spread by right-wing politicians and by well-funded “pro-business” organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), all of it bent on discrediting the labor movement and obscuring its historical importance.

In opposition to all this are organizations like the Battle of Homestead Foundation. Charles McCollester, author, professor emeritus of industrial and labor relations at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and President of the Foundation, recently described the struggle of labor historians.

“It's about memory and resistance,” he said.

Supporters of the Foundation call themselves the Pump House Gang, and meet nearly every week for breakfast at the Waterfront Eat'n'Park, not a mile from the battle site.

This morning, there is discussion of the full slate of events the Foundation holds at the Pump House, but the group is aware their activities constitute a kind of battle, as well.

Millie Beik, retired labor historian, said that popular history emphasized wealthy industrialists like Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick while ignoring the role of working men and women.

“This kind of history isn't important to many people,” she said, adding that the massive diaspora touched off by the decline of industry in Pennsylvania and surrounding states had eroded that history.

“250,000 jobs lost from Youngstown to Johnstown,” Dr. McCollester pointed out. “We lost the guts of a whole generation.”

“We used to have a balance of public and private power in this country,” he added. “Private corporations realized that balance was good for them. There was wide acceptance of the provisions of the New Deal, because they had seen people starving [during the Depression] and they weren't going back to that.”

Bill Yund, Board Vice President, artist and retired industrial insulator, agreed. “There was a sense of community, of interdependence. The Depression made people realize that communal values were necessary for survival.”

Ms. Beik said that historical revision tended to disguise the fact that opportunities were once more plentiful, too.

“I'm not going to idolize the 1950s, but there were more opportunities then, through work and education,” she said. Her father was a miner who went to work at age 11, so the family didn't have the resources for college. “But I went to community college in 1960 for free. Who is able to do that now?”

Dr. McCollester pointed also to the many trades that used to provide a living wage in exchange for manual skills.

“These jobs were vehicles into the middle class for those who couldn't afford college,” he said. “We've thrown all that away. Not only that pathway to advancement, but Americans' ability to make things, do things. People used to fix their own cars.”

Several members of the group described the 2008 ceremonies celebrating Pittsburgh's 250th as sometimes engaging in a deliberate attempt to cover up history that some found inconvenient.

“They didn't want to use the word ‘steel,’ except in names of sports teams,” said Dr. McCollester, referring to the city's industrial history and the loss of its manufacturing. “They didn't want to be asked, ‘Who was in charge when all this happened?’”

He cited another example of erasure, when a member of the Pump House Gang had tried to donate a 1900 map of Homestead to that very Eat'n'Park.

“We were told, off the record, that Corporate would never approve its display,” he said. “They didn't want people reminded of those days.”

With all the forces militating against remembering labor history, including the increasing control of information by corporate interests, how do Dr. McCollester and the rest of the Foundation see their way forward?

“Young people need to listen and pass it on,” said Bette McDevitt, who writes for the Pennsylvania Historical Society.

“Labor history has been suppressed before,” agreed Ms. Beik. “Working people used to tell their families in company towns. You have to fight.”

Foundation members said they'd started to see an increase in people's interest in labor history, along with younger people attending their meetings and events.

“What's going on, it's beginning to affect everyone now, even the higher-ups,” said George Szalanski, a retired consultant. He pointed to recent actions in Pittsburgh and other cities where protestors obtained company shares and attended shareholder meetings, drawing attention to the companies' violations of workers' rights and exploitation of tax loopholes.

Dr. McCollester takes the long view. He pointed to the Homestead Steel Strike itself, which despite its fame, led to a dramatic curtailing of workers' rights for decades.

Locked out of the steel mills for refusing to accept cuts to their wages, union members, non-union workers and many Homestead residents joined in opposition July 6, 1892, attacking 300 hired and armed strikebreakers from the Pinkerton Detective Agency as the barge they were in tried to come ashore just below the Pump House.

After a battle in which both sides saw men die, the Pinkertons were captured and forced to run the gauntlet. Government and Carnegie officials promised they would stand trial for



murder, but instead they were whisked out of town by rail and never charged.

The governor ordered the state militia in, and after Frick and Carnegie imported scabs from as far away as Europe, and many non-union men started to cross the picket line, the strike collapsed. By 1900, not a single steel plant in the state was union.

A defeat, indeed, admitted Dr. McCollester. “But Homestead, and other labor defeats over the years, actually advanced the cause of labor each time,” he said. By the 1930s, unions had returned and were recognized nationally.

The long view isn't easy to see from the Pump House, surrounded as it is by big box retailers. But in such times, just remembering labor history, and repeating it, is an act of resistance.

More information on the Battle of Homestead Foundation is at battleofhomesteadfoundation.org



The Ivory Tower's Basement Sweatshop

By Robin J. Sowards, Ph.D.
Duquesne University English Department

A group of adjunct faculty at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh is currently organizing a union.

This undertaking may not inspire much sympathy even among union supporters, since college professors aren't considered a particularly oppressed group.

After all, even as going to college is increasingly treated as a career necessity, it is still largely an elite phenomenon. Only 1% of Americans have a Ph.D., only 6% are currently college students, and only 27% have any college degree. It follows that a faculty union at a private university might seem politically inconsequential at best.

But the elite phenomenon of college and graduate school education masks an exploitative labor system that undermines not only the workers and college students who participate in it, but the entire institution of higher education.

Many are unaware that only a small minority of college faculty these days are actual professors, if by that term you mean a permanent faculty position. In 1970, around 80% of college faculty fit that definition of professor, with the remaining 10% or so made up of professionals who taught a course now and again; and some new Ph.D.s stepping in for professors on sabbatical, before moving on to professorships of their own (which they were almost certain to get.).

Today, only around 30% of college faculty are professors. The other 70% are in a much more precarious position. As in years gone by, many are new Ph.D.s taking an adjunct faculty position in the hopes of landing a professorship later on, but the likelihood of this happening nowadays is vanishingly slim (in English literature, my field, the likelihood of obtaining a professorship in any given year is about 5%). Others have M.A. degrees, so adjunct positions are the only faculty positions they can hold.

Adjunct positions are often technically part-time, contracted on a course-by-course basis even if an instructor teaches multiple courses. The pay for the maximum course load often falls below the poverty line: at Duquesne, for example, the lowest-paid group of professors earns an average yearly salary of \$65,300. An adjunct teaching the same number of courses earns \$15,336.

Consequently, adjuncts frequently have to string together classes from several different schools to make ends meet. Since adjuncts are officially part-time, they do not have any access to health insurance through the University. And regardless of their performance or their years of service,

they can be let go between one semester and the next for any reason, or for no reason. Even though some of us have taught at the same institution for 25 years and our courses need to be staffed semester after semester, we are treated as contingent, "temporary" employees by the University in order to keep our labor cheap.

During the same period in which administrators have increasingly whittled down full-time professorships in favor of contingent adjunct positions, and even professors' salaries have stagnated, students and their families have been paying more each year for them to attend college. The average cost per year of tuition, fees, and room and board at Duquesne University in 1976 was \$8,321 (in 2008 dollars); in 2008 it was \$17,012. The average amount of student loan debt per year in 1992 was \$3,880; the average in 2009 was \$9,480.

As a result, a student who earns a four-year degree often ends up with \$40,000 in student loan debt, creating a strong incentive to choose a lucrative career rather than, say, working for a non-profit or being an activist. The supposed political "apathy" of today's college students has less to do with generational differences than it does with the shadow of debt hanging over their heads.

In return for all that debt, students are largely taught by people who are massively overworked and underpaid, often don't have offices (or, like me, share their three-person office with ten people), and may not even be there next semester.



This situation makes students and their parents accessories to exploitation, and is demeaning to the adjuncts themselves. But the adjunct system also dramatically undermines the very soul of the university. Universities are the only existing social institutions that are, in principle, devoted to rational inquiry free from any obligation to be profitable. Universities therefore have the potential to be a major source of the critical and constructive thinking that can lay the groundwork for a better society.

But such work can only be done with a certain amount of job security. Without it, adjuncts remain dependent upon the whims of their superiors, as well as other factors, such as student evaluations, which may not reflect honestly the quality of the work an adjunct is doing. Adjuncts therefore are less able to contribute in any intellectually honest way to the sum of knowledge of the institution they work for. Adjuncts are in a position where they have to ask themselves if they can afford critical thinking when they're simply scrambling to hold onto a poorly paid job.

Unionizing adjuncts would encourage better job security and fair pay, which in turn encourage better quality work—and this is as true in the halls of academia as it is in the fields, factories and other workplaces of the world.



Labor Rights As Human Rights

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clarifies the link between labor struggles and the broader Occupy movements and suggests a powerful strategy for organizing for social justice.

The rights set out in the UDHR represent a very robust and comprehensive set of protections for the 99% -- for the 100%, really, but especially for those whose low incomes and limited resources leave them particularly vulnerable to simple bad luck. They also provide a framework in which we can think critically about all of the injustices that plague our society today.

This framework helps us see the connections among superficially unrelated issues. Let me offer an example. United Workers is a Baltimore-based anti-poverty organization founded and led by poor people (unitedworkers.org). In 2008 it launched a campaign for living wages in Baltimore's famous Inner Harbor development, where huge public subsidies of various kinds contribute significantly to the profits of developers and national chain retailers and to poverty and indignity for workers.

Workers in the restaurant industry are often paid below-minimum wages, they lack access to health care, and they often work in unsafe and degrading conditions. When this

kind of "poverty development" is allowed to enrich the 1%, not only do individual workers and their families suffer, but entire communities are dragged down. Spill-over effects, including limited educational opportunity for workers and their children, unsafe neighborhoods, and the reinforcement of poverty in the heart of the city, all result from the channeling of resources to the 1%. These related injustices can be made visible through the lens of human rights.

United Workers' campaign against these wrongs differs significantly from a traditional labor organizing effort. Instead of emphasizing union organizing, United Workers strives to educate workers and the community about human rights, to cultivate human rights leadership, and to demand work with dignity and living wages. Their campaigns have proven highly effective. They declared the Inner Harbor a "human rights zone" in 2008 to publicize their grievances and bring pressure on the developers, their tenants, and city officials. All of this work centers around the idea of "fair development," a model of investing in people and communities that benefits everyone.

Unemployed workers and irregularly employed workers have been left out of traditional union organizing. In addition, unions often share the consumerist culture and mindset of business, with an emphasis on benefits for

workers in specific industries or sectors. A human rights culture encourages us to frame the struggle as a wider one against poverty and for social justice, a struggle that unites all of the 99%. The human rights frame thus helps to broaden the appeal and effectiveness of the arguments for social justice. It brings into focus a whole range of ills and emphasizes the interests of the entire 99%. The human rights frame helps to build bridges to diverse movements, to arouse public indignation, and to mobilize a wide array of people.

Building these kinds of bridges and fostering a human rights culture are essential to the work of Occupy. Here in Pittsburgh we have been using the human rights frame successfully. Our Human Rights Day event in December was a big success, and organizing around human rights locally continues to be a priority. Human rights are a powerful tool for explaining what we stand for, clarifying the connections among issues like poverty, transit, education, and health, and unifying people in an effective movement for social justice for everyone. From this perspective, the work of Occupy is nothing less than to build a human rights culture in our communities and our nation.

OCCUPY PITTSBURGH NOW ASKS:

What is the biggest challenge Labor currently faces?

Tom Hall, UWUA (Utility Workers Union of America) Vice President Area E, Local 102
In my opinion, the biggest challenge is to get the younger generation to think along the lines of organized labor. The younger generation doesn't understand or appreciate what organized labor does for every worker. It's been difficult getting young people engaged because most of the struggles over workers' rights happened long ago, they didn't witness or experience what it took to get those rights.

Foo Conner, Social Media Activist
Capitalism's inherent nature to expand profits by any means—including destruction of its own workers.

Andrew "Standing Bear" Jamison, Operation Desert Storm Veteran
No money for small businesses, and too high of an unemployment rate for the average worker to achieve financial security."

Ed Connelly, President, AFSCME Local 297 (Department of Transportation for Pittsburgh metro & surrounding area)
Privatization. On one hand, the threat of contractors coming to take our work has made us more productive and given us a chance to prove that we can do it better. But much of this push for privatization doesn't seem like it's about increased productivity, but more about privatization for the sake of it, for some principle, whether it's the right thing or not.

Torrey Seeley, Pittsburgh Computer Doctor
Greed, apathy and ignorance, just like all movements.

Patrick Young, United Steel Workers Technician in Strategic Campaigns
Our organizations are shifting to operate more like social movements and embracing more dynamic and aggressive organizing models, but we are struggling to hold onto our organizational history and our responsibility with our members.

Work Connects Us All

By, Jeff Cech

In early 2012 the AFL-CIO launched a campaign and Web site to promote the idea that “Work Connects Us All.” Catherine Balsamo from Working America, the community affiliate of the AFL-CIO, says the idea is that “The work of each person is built on the work of many people, and that deserves to be recognized, appreciated.”

Working America Canvass Organizers and Activists spent a day in March handing out “thank you” postcards to workers and passersby in Downtown, Pittsburgh. The cards read, “Thank You. It takes the work of hundreds of people just like you to make Pittsburgh a world-class city.” Recipients took the cards promising to deliver them to bus drivers, baristas and other folks whose work helps to make the work of others possible.

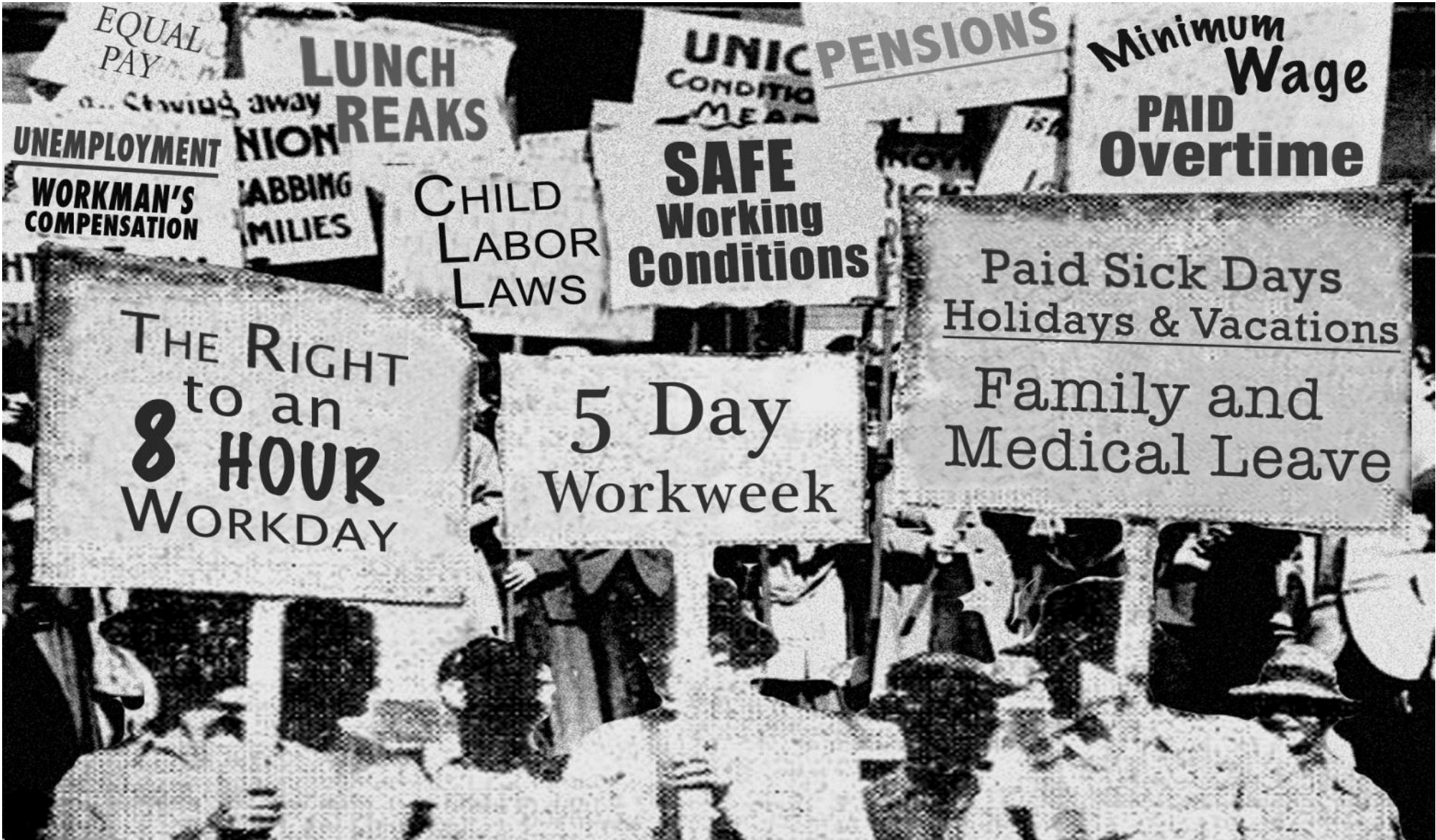
Balsamo says, “it was such an exciting action to participate in, even though it was freezing that day, by the end of the conversations, people were smiling because they appreciate being thanked for the work that they do and because the suggestion that they take the ‘thank you’ card to another worker was a pleasant idea that they were happy to engage in.”

“Thanks in large part to the Occupy Movement, “ Balsamo says, “Right now we’re having a conversation about income inequality, across the country and right here in Pittsburgh. The work of the 99% unites us as opposed to dividing us. That’s extremely important to recognize, especially as we face the growing gulf between the 1% and the 99% in terms of power and wealth.”

Visiting WorkConnectsUsAll.org, individuals are invited to plug in their name and occupation to see how they link to like-minded workers across the country. An illustrated web offers connections to a rancher named Sveta in Jacksonville, Elana a bike manufacturer in Los Angeles and “millions of Americans” who are all connected by their role as workers.

“Regardless of whether or not you’re in a union, the work of the labor movement benefits everyone,” says Balsamo, “Whether your name is on your front pocket or the front door of your office.”

Thank Unions For...



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