

COMMUNICATIONS WORKERS OF AMERICA

# Report of the CWA National Committee on Civil Rights and Equity

Presidents Meeting  
June 2020

**CWA**

## CWA National Civil Rights & Equity Committee

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\*Denotes Committee Chair

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## Building A Mass Movement: The Key to Protecting Our Vote

*Sylvia Chapman, CWA Local 4250; Tim Fitzgerald TNG-CWA Local 32035;  
& Fred Smith, CWA Local 3902 (Committee Chair)*

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed countless attacks on our neighbors and the viral spreading of misinformation on how the virus will impact the upcoming election. The pandemic has not only exacerbated existing injustices in our country but made it clear that systemic issues require big structural reforms. However, greedy corporations and the corrupt politicians in their pockets are constantly on the lookout for ways to exploit working people and stand in the way of such reforms.

As working people, one of the most effective methods of fighting back is exercising our right to vote. The upcoming election is one of the most critical elections in the country's history. We have the opportunity to organize at this unique moment to elect progressive pro-worker politicians. Seizing this historic opportunity requires increasing voter turnout by galvanizing a mass movement of working-class voters and building solidarity with grassroots organizations.

In the 2016 elections, we witnessed one of the lowest voter turnouts in recent history. According to the *U.S. Census Bureau*, only 50% of 18-29 year-old eligible voters participated in the 2016 Presidential elections, and 40% of eligible voters did not vote at all. The United States, with a 2016 voter turnout rate under 60%, ranks 26 of 32 on a list of developed countries, with the countries at the top of the list having rates nearing 90%<sup>1</sup>. Since the last election CWA, other unions, voting rights organizations, and progressive groups have made significant efforts to increase voter turnout. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 threatens voter turnout for the upcoming election in ways we couldn't have predicted.

CWA and other unions must take a leadership role in curbing the impact of COVID-19 and misinformation on voter turnout. Our members in TNG-CWA and NABET-CWA are essential to combating misinformation and keeping us informed about the issues that affect working people. This pandemic highlights the importance of a free media and the risk our Media sector members face in bringing us the news. As of today, the first known death of a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/21/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/>

member of the CWA family due to COVID-19 is our brother Larry Edgeworth, of NABET-CWA Local 51011 who worked at NBC News.

We rely on accurate information about changes to voting and safety measures that ensure everyone can participate in this election. We must engage in a union-wide voter registration campaign while keeping members informed about their rights, mobilizing, and putting pressure on Congress and state legislatures to take necessary steps. No-excuse absentee ballots should be automatically available to voters to ensure everyone can participate in our democracy without jeopardizing their safety.

The type of change we need at this moment is going to require a mass movement of working-class people to come together and fight for our shared goals of dignity, respect, and justice for all. Through its movement-building efforts, CWA has built solidarity with grassroots movements. One example of this is our engagement with the Poor People's Campaign (PPC): A National Call for Moral Revival. This campaign aims to build a multicultural, multiracial and intergenerational group of people from across the country to confront the interlocking evils of systemic racism, poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism. Building solidarity with such grassroots movements will not only amplify voter turnout in the upcoming election, but it will also harness the power we need to bring long term structural change.

CWA's involvement in the Poor People's Campaign has ranged from mobilizing members to participate in actions, to training and developing members to become leaders in the campaign. Most notably, CWA Human Rights Activists and leaders engaged in the Poor People's Campaign's 40 Days of Moral Action. The action galvanized activists across several states to participate in direct actions and the PPC's Moral Action Congress, a three-day gathering of activists for training and development in Washington, D.C. National CWA leadership, including President Chris Shelton and Secretary-Treasurer Sara Steffens, stood side by side with campaign leaders and community allies to participate in non-violent direct actions on the steps of the U.S Capitol. Currently, CWA members are actively engaged in the Poor People's Campaign in more than ten states. In addition, lead activists Kwami Barnes (CWA Local 4603 in Wisconsin) and Fred Smith (CWA Local 3902 in Alabama) have joined the Poor People's Campaign Coordinating Committee in their respective states to partner with local activists on organizing social justice actions in their communities.

On June 20, 2020, the Poor People's Campaign is going digital for the Moral March on Washington, D.C. The event aims to increase activism all across the U.S and demand that

the working class and low-income communities in our nation are no longer ignored. We encourage all CWAers who are able to join in this online event and make our voices heard loud and clear. In the wake of COVID-19 and its disproportionate impact on the poor and the working class, one thing is clear: we cannot go back to the way things were. We have to set a new normal where access to healthcare, housing, food, and a living wage are universal human rights guaranteed to everyone. The harder we work to ensure the membership is informed and aware, the better we can succeed in these difficult times.

## Defending the Rights of Immigrant Workers

*Doug Johnson, CWA Local 6215 & Joaquin Chavez, CWA Local 9119*

Immigrants in the U.S have repeatedly been under attack from this Administration ever since President Trump took office. Instead of focusing on comprehensive immigration reform, President Trump has chosen to excite his base by enacting measures such as the Muslim ban, separation of families at the border, restricting the rights of people to enter this country with a complete disregard for our own asylum laws and international laws, enacting public charge rules, detaining immigrants seeking refuge under inhumane conditions, building a costly and ineffective border wall and many more. These continued attacks do not reflect our union values of inclusion and diversity. CWA is committed to the fight for a just immigration system because we know that attacks on immigrants make all of our communities unsafe and take away from our power as working people.

Immigration is a union issue. Being able to exploit vulnerable populations gives employers more leverage over working people. It makes it harder for our union to negotiate higher wages and benefits when the rights of immigrant workers are not protected. Additionally, many CWA members are immigrants themselves or have family members who immigrated to this country. For example, Animal Technicians in the University of California system are the second-largest represented job title in our technical bargaining unit. Roughly 50% of the employees in this bargaining unit are Latinx - and of that 50%, many were not born in the United States. Similarly, many members of our research staff were not born in this country.

Our country and our union movement are stronger because of immigrant workers. After all, immigrant workers make up 17% of the overall workforce in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Yet across many different industries, immigrant workers are underrepresented in unions.<sup>3</sup> CWA is a big tent that brings all working-class people together to fight for the same goals we all share: freedom, respect, dignity, and the ability to take care of our families. We can play a critical role in increasing the representation of immigrant workers and defending the rights of immigrant workers, and by extension, the rights of the working class.

The rest of the report details a few steps we have taken to continue fighting for the rights of immigrant workers on all three sides of the CWA triangle.

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<sup>2</sup><https://immigrationforum.org/article/immigrants-as-economic-contributors-they-are-the-new-american-workforce/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/foreign-born-wage-and-salary-workers-us-labor-force-and-unions>

One of the ways that we can fight for the rights of immigrant workers is through our political program. Our current federal government refuses to take humane action to respond to the crisis at our southern border. This vacuum of national leadership has created space for local and state governments to step up and develop policies like municipal drivers' licenses or laws that prevent local law enforcement from collaborating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to protect more people from deportation. As CWA members we can use our political power to pressure more local governments to pass policies that protect immigrants in our communities, even if our federal government fails to act.

We can also fight for immigrants' rights through representation, making sure people have access to information about their rights, and by building international solidarity. One of the issues that can cause fear among our members who are immigrants is the fear of deportation. One of the steps taken at UPTE is to work with an Immigrant Legal Resources Center to produce "Know Your Rights" cards. These cards summarize legal rights and civil liberties in case people have interactions with ICE, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), and any other law enforcement agencies. At Local 6215 in Dallas, TX members joined with Texas AFL-CIO to host a Citizenship Clinic to provide union members and their families with tools and resources to help them navigate the naturalization process. The Citizenship Clinic assisted hundreds of families across the state in completing the application process and understanding qualifications. CWA members also participated in "Solidarity Without Borders," to build solidarity among working families in El Paso and Mexico. Organized by the AFL-CIO, Texas AFL-CIO, and other national unions, the delegation delivered clothing and supplies to families seeking refuge; held a listening session with surviving victims of the Walmart shooting; and participated in rallies and conversations supporting comprehensive immigration reform.

We can also take action through our bargaining. In our recent negotiations with the University of California, we introduced bargaining language to include immigration status as part of nondiscrimination in employment at the UC system. We were not successful during this round of bargaining in getting that clause into our contract, but it did reveal the University's eagerness to leave exploited communities unprotected.

We also must organize systematically and strategically to reach all of our members, particularly our members who are immigrants. Intentional recruitment and development of leaders who represent all the different types of people in our union is also a critical element of building solidarity across differences. One of the ways we have reflected this in our work at UPTE is through working intentionally to provide lost time and deploying



members in the field who come from immigrant communities and reflect the diversity of our membership.

We can build on each of these ways that CWA has already mobilized and engaged members around the rights of immigrant workers. We must continue to organize systematically within our membership, particularly among members who are immigrants. We must also commit to making sure union materials and resources - particularly our contracts - are available in all of the different languages our members speak so that immigrant workers feel welcome, part of, and able to exercise leadership in our union.

We must fight to build the power of immigrant workers in our union and beyond. The marginalization of immigrant workers not only presents a direct threat to those workers themselves but weakens the power of the entire working class. We must educate each of our members to understand that immigrants' rights are workers' rights and workers' rights are immigrant rights - and why our union should engage in external fights for immigration reform, as well as take steps internally to ensure that our members who are immigrants feel welcomed, empowered, and engaged in the life of our union. Si se puede!

# Healthcare Reform

*Pamela Bell, CWA Local 9003 & Reginald Pierre-Louis, CWA Local 1106*

The issue of healthcare reform has been at the forefront of our political and social discourse for decades. Proponents of government-run healthcare argue that it will reduce costs, eliminate inefficiencies, and provide access to every American, especially the poor and elderly. Opponents of a federalized system suggest it will destroy the free market private healthcare system, eliminate jobs, and stifle innovation.

What is an unarguable fact is that the U.S stands almost entirely alone among developed nations in not guaranteeing healthcare as a human right to all its citizens. As a result, there are currently 50 million Americans, including 8 million children, who do not have health insurance<sup>4</sup>.

The increasing cost of healthcare in this country makes it difficult for uninsured and underinsured populations to access quality healthcare. Expenditures for healthcare, health research, and other health items and services have risen sharply in recent decades. Some have even increased ten-fold since 1980, and now cost the nation more than \$2.6 trillion annually<sup>5</sup>. According to projections published by Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) in 2019, overall healthcare costs will increase by 5.5% over the next decade from \$3.5 trillion in 2017 to \$6 trillion<sup>6</sup>. All the while, healthcare insurance companies are raking in record profits. In the first nine months of 2018, the eight largest health insurers in the U.S made over 21 billion dollars, a 31% increase over the same period the previous year<sup>7</sup>.

The steep rise in healthcare costs makes it particularly difficult for the most vulnerable among us, including the poor, elderly, minority, and immigrants, to gain healthcare access. Lack of access to quality and affordable healthcare can have deadly consequences. Vulnerable communities are less likely to receive preventative healthcare for various conditions and illnesses.

A healthy population is more productive and less costly, but the ever-expanding costs of medicine, services, and access to quality care have put working people at a disadvantage.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.kff.org/uninsured/issue-brief/key-facts-about-the-uninsured-population/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-socialproblems/chapter/13-4-problems-of-health-care-in-the-united-states/#barkansoc\\_1.0-ch13\\_s04\\_s01\\_f01](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-socialproblems/chapter/13-4-problems-of-health-care-in-the-united-states/#barkansoc_1.0-ch13_s04_s01_f01)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cms.gov/Research-Statistics-Data-and-Systems/Statistics-Trends-and-Reports/NationalHealthExpendData/Downloads/ForecastSummary.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fiercehealthcare.com/payer/big-eight-insurers-set-to-finish-strong-year-raking-132-4-billion-total-q3>

Access to affordable healthcare is about more than an individual's well-being; good health is a critical national asset.

Union members have fought hard to keep the healthcare benefits we have but contract after contract greedy corporations and the politicians in their pocket are stripping away our access to quality healthcare. The benefit packages are shrinking, and we are unable to negotiate lower costs for healthcare at the bargaining table. A universal healthcare system would greatly benefit working people, as that would be one less thing employers would be able to hold over us during contract negotiations. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the dire need for widespread healthcare access as the health of one person can affect the health of all.

CWA has championed the fight for affordable healthcare not only for our members but for all working families. We have built solidarity with community organizations that advocate for access to quality healthcare. We have been at the forefront of the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, and continue to fight against eliminations of any of its provisions. CWA and other unions must fiercely keep fighting for structural changes to our healthcare system. We have to educate and mobilize our members around the issue of healthcare as a right for all Americans and not a privilege for the few.

## Homelessness and Affordable Housing

*Reginald Small, CWA Local 6215, Kasie Garcia, CWA Local 7250  
& Gwen Ivey, CWA Local 13301*

As a union, it is our job to fight for the power, dignity, and respect of all working-class people. This responsibility extends beyond the workplace to all the different issues that impact our members. One of these issues is homelessness and the rights of all working people to affordable housing.

One of our fellow union members recently had an experience that drove home the importance of fighting for the rights to housing for all people. Some of their co-workers noticed a fellow union member lingering around the workplace before and after shifts and collecting quite a few items in their cubicle - beyond the basic items most members keep at work. It was later revealed that after a divorce and eviction, this member was experiencing homelessness. Shame and embarrassment prevented the member from asking for help - this is a classic case of hidden homelessness.

Homelessness is a growing problem in our country. A 2018 study found that on any given night, around 553,000 people experienced homelessness<sup>8</sup>. As thousands of new cases are reported every year, there are many different causes of homelessness and many different ways homelessness presents itself. In some cases, we have hidden homelessness like in the story above, and in many instances, we have people sleeping out on the streets in the wealthiest cities in the world.

While people experience homelessness for all kinds of reasons, rising income inequality and lack of access to affordable housing and good jobs are leading factors.<sup>9</sup> As Corporate America continues to do anything possible to maximize profits, we see CEO salaries skyrocketing as wages flatline; meanwhile, rent keeps rising.

In 2019 alone, the average rent of a one-bedroom apartment increased by 4.1 percent,<sup>10</sup> while wages only rose at roughly 3.5% annually, after accounting for inflation.<sup>11</sup> The reality is many people who are working full-time, and in some cases, two or three jobs, still struggle to remain in their homes.

Over 11 million Americans already spend more than half their paycheck on housing. Studies show the median wage to afford a two-bedroom apartment is approximately \$21.21, while the federal minimum wage is just \$7.25 an hour. This means a

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2019-09-23/10-facts-about-homelessness-in-america>

<sup>9</sup> <https://invisiblepeople.tv/lack-of-affordable-housing-remains-the-leading-cause-of-homelessness/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.abodo.com/blog/2019-annual-rent-report/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.epi.org/nominal-wage-tracker/>

minimum-wage worker would have to work 122 hours every week to afford to rent a two-bedroom apartment<sup>12</sup>.

This issue is not unique to renters. We see similar increases in property taxes each year as working people struggle to pay their mortgages and monthly bills.

As union density in the private sector hovers around 6%, even fewer people have access to a well-paid job to make ends meet - and for those who do have a job, it's not always enough. Most working-class people are just one emergency away from bankruptcy, and homelessness is often a side effect.

Dominant narratives in this country tell us that people who are homeless should "just work harder," or "get a job." Yet, researchers at the Urban Institute estimate that roughly 25% of homeless people are employed<sup>13</sup>. The National Coalition for the Homeless imagines that an even higher number - between 40 and 60% - of homeless people shift in and out of full-time and part-time work.

We know that Corporate America has spent the past 50 years waging war against working people, through advancing a political agenda that maximizes their wealth at the expense of the working class. Legislation that regulates increases in rent, caps on rent, as well as property taxes, would go a long way toward reducing levels of homelessness, as would mandated increases in affordable housing.

As a union, it is our obligation and duty to ensure our members have equal rights to affordable housing, protection from big businesses, corrupt banking, and other unfair tax legislation that oppresses the working class.

CWA has always been very active in supporting and partnering with organizations that provide shelter and services to our brothers and sisters experiencing homelessness.

One example of this is in Dallas, Texas. CitySquare Housing addresses homelessness in Dallas through a model they call "Housing First." Housing First provides immediate permanent housing solutions for the chronically homeless in the city of Dallas<sup>14</sup>. Members of Local 6215 took the initiative to do a laundry basket drive, providing essential items such as brooms, mops, laundry detergent, dishwashing detergent, and toiletry packs for people on move-in day. In addition to these efforts, this moment demands our efforts go even further to address this crisis for union members and our communities as a whole.

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<sup>12</sup><https://www.citylab.com/equity/2019/06/affordable-housing-minimum-wage-rent-apartment-house-rental/592024/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://parade.com/643064/beckyhughes/working-homeless-population-grows-in-cities-across-the-u-s/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.citysquare.org/citysquarehousing>

We can engage in this fight politically through expanding our local, state, and national political agenda to include the fight for local, state and, national rent control laws and other legislation that increases affordable housing. For example, in June 2019, a bipartisan group of Senate and House members proposed a bill (Affordable Housing Credit Improvement Act of 2019) to help solve the affordable housing issue. If passed, the bill expects to create 1.9 million additional affordable units over the next ten years<sup>15</sup>.

We can also engage in this fight through our bargaining. Through bargaining for the common good, we use our power to fight for our members as well as our communities. Particularly in our work through the Committee for Better Banks, we can prioritize the housing crisis in our bargaining through fighting to stop banks from engaging in predatory lending practices.

We can also fight to eradicate homelessness by building knowledge and power through continued education and awareness within CWA through programs like the Human Rights Department Fight Forward training. In addition to engaging our members in the fights mentioned above, we can encourage our members to treat each other and all people experiencing homelessness with the same respect and dignity we demand daily in the workplace.

We must continue to be advocates for the underserved. An injustice to one is an injustice to all. An injury to our neighbor is an injury to all of us.

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<sup>15</sup><https://www.cantwell.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cantwell-delbene-bipartisan-colleagues-introduce-new-legislation-to-combat-affordable-housing-crisis>

# Law Enforcement and Mental Health

*Ken Youngblood, CWA Local 9110*

Mental illness has a widespread impact on our communities. Most of us, if not all, have directly or indirectly dealt with the issue of mental illness. For police officers, the staggeringly high number of individuals who deal with mental illness presents a unique challenge. The goal of this report is to provide an update on the ongoing efforts in the criminal justice field to address the impact of critical mental health issues.

My previous report on the same topic offered detailed information on the increased contact police officers are having with individuals experiencing a mental health crisis and how several police departments have instituted Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) as a solution. CIT trained officers who come in contact with an individual experiencing a mental health crisis are equipped to de-escalate a situation safely. This allows the officer to assess the individual and possibly prevent the use of force. In addition, officers can provide subjects in crisis the necessary medical help instead of taking them to jail.

The importance of training officers in crisis intervention cannot be overstated. Failing to safely de-escalate situations where individuals dealing with mental illness come in contact with police officers can have potentially dire consequences. According to the *Washington Post* database of police shootings, in 2017 officer-involved shootings resulted in 987 deaths, and mental illness was associated with about 25% of those victims<sup>16</sup>. CIT training can play a critical role in decreasing these figures by bringing potentially critical incidents to a different resolution. The outbreak of COVID-19 makes CIT training more critical than ever. As the number of Coronavirus cases increases, so does the associated anxiety, which may trigger a mental health breakdown. The techniques of de-escalation taught in CIT training can be critical for officers who are already facing numerous challenges when serving the community in the wake of COVID-19.

The good news is more and more departments are instituting CIT training for their officers, and a status update on officers receiving CIT training is becoming a critical component of training and development of officers. In Las Vegas Valley, most officers are now CIT certified, and according to an article on *Psycom.net*, there is an increase in states that are training their officers on CIT<sup>17</sup>. However, there is much more work to be done to better equip officers in handling situations involving individuals with mental illness.

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/four-years-in-a-row-police-nationwide-fatally-shoot-nearly-1000-people/2019/02/07/0cb3b098-020f-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/four-years-in-a-row-police-nationwide-fatally-shoot-nearly-1000-people/2019/02/07/0cb3b098-020f-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f_story.html)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.psycom.net/police-mental-health-training>

CWA can play a critical role in bridging this gap by engaging in an advocacy, training and education program. We can partner with other law enforcement unions and mental health professionals to offer training to members at CWA meetings and conferences. Not only would members have the tools to handle situations involving those experiencing a mental health crisis properly, but they can also actively participate in lobbying efforts to educate policymakers and secure adequate funding for such programs.

As local officers, leaders, and activists, we must actively promote the inclusion of CIT training within the police departments that serve our communities. We must also educate ourselves and others about mental health. Only by addressing this issue head-on will we be able to curb its impact on our communities.



## Putting Workers First in the Wake of COVID-19

*Christian Stephens, AFA-CWA Local 21085*

The outbreak of COVID-19 is having unprecedented impacts on our economy. As of mid-April, more than 22 million Americans have filed for unemployment aid since the national emergency was declared bringing joblessness to a level that has not been seen since the Great Depression.<sup>18</sup> Many small businesses are closing down for good and several industries have taken massive hits in the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak. The pandemic has particularly impacted workers in the airline industry. As air traffic and revenue continue to decrease, more and more flight attendants, passenger service agents, and other airline workers are being faced with furloughs and unpaid leaves. In some instances, entire airlines have ceased operations.<sup>19</sup> Those who are still on the job have raised several concerns regarding the risks they face in being exposed to and spreading COVID-19<sup>20</sup>.

AFA-CWA has taken significant steps in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak to implement safety measures for flight crews still on the job. Per the CDC guidelines, passengers who have traveled to high risk areas or have potentially come in contact with COVID-19 should self-quarantine and contact health professionals. However, the CDC guidelines exempt flight attendants who are considered essential workers. AFA-CWA does not believe that flight attendants should be exempt and advises all working crews who have been to high-risk areas or potentially exposed to the virus to follow passenger CDC guidelines and inform the company that they do not feel safe to fly.<sup>21</sup> In addition, AFA-CWA has been working with airline companies to provide proper resources and implement procedures to reduce risk to working crews, which has led management to take actions that exceed CDC guidelines.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to ensuring the safety of working crews, CWA has been fighting every step of the way to ensure that any relief effort taken by the government puts workers first. This led to historic provisions being included in the Coronavirus Economic Stimulus Package or otherwise known as the CARES Act, which became law on March 27, 2020. In addition to including 32 billion dollars in direct payroll grants to the aviation industry, it also included a ban on layoffs and involuntary furloughs for those receiving funds and restrictions on stock buybacks and executive compensation for companies accepting taxpayer-funded

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/16/unemployment-claims-coronavirus/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-airlines-that-failed-bankrupt-covid19-pandemic-2020-3#trans-states-airlines-us-march-2020-2>

<sup>20</sup> <https://time.com/5815492/flight-attendants-coronavirus/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.afacwa.org/coronavirus>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.afacwa.org/coronavirus>

grants and loans.<sup>23</sup> However, the fight is not over. There is still more work to be done to make sure the provisions of this bill are implemented. CWA will continue to advocate for any future relief packages to prioritize workers first.

We have a difficult battle ahead of us. All CWAers have to come together and demand the companies in all of the industries we represent prioritize worker safety. We have to work with other unions and community allies to curb the impact of COVID-19. We have to continue to demand bold action from our elected representatives and hold them accountable. Greedy corporations and the politicians backing them are not going to back down from exploiting this pandemic to their advantage. We have to stand together and fight to make sure workers are not left behind.

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<sup>23</sup><https://cwa-union.org/news/releases/statement-cwa-president-chris-shelton-on-airlines-provisions-in-coronavirus-economic>

# Social Justice Unionism during the Coronavirus Pandemic

*Penny Franklin, IUE-CWA Local 82160*

Working-class people organized long before the majority of workers in the private sector won the right to bargain collectively in 1935. The early struggles of working-class people in this country were not just struggles for contracts but rather were over health and safety issues, a living wage, and basic dignity and respect on the job. Workers across different industries came together to fight for the good of their communities.

Today, union membership in the private sector is at 6.2%.<sup>24</sup> This is a devastating reality for working people who believe that our power and voice is found through the union movement. In fact, we had higher union density - roughly 15% - in the early 1930s when unions were still considered illegal institutions.

This is in large part because of the 50-year war that corporate America has waged on working-class people and unions. Strategies designed to prioritize profit above everything else, attack collective bargaining rights, as well as privatize and offshore the jobs of hard-working people have weakened our union's power. We also have to acknowledge that as we have solidified our power through collective bargaining agreements and labor law provisions, we have not been as unified across the labor movement in the struggle for all working-class people.

Social justice unionism begins from the idea that building a strong union movement requires broadening the fight beyond the specific demands of one union, to class-wide or "social justice" demands - which include traditional "bread-and-butter" issues, but are not limited to them. Social justice unionism teaches us that we have to understand our future as union members as inextricably linked to the interests of the entire working class and the communities where we live and work.<sup>25</sup> It also teaches us that we can leverage our power as union members in struggles that benefit the common good.

IUE-CWA members have given us a powerful example of what social justice unionism looks like in practice in their response to coronavirus pandemic. Most of our members at IUE-CWA work in manufacturing, producing essential goods that keep this country running. One of our biggest employers is General Electric, where workers make products ranging from healthcare technologies to aircraft engines.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>


<sup>25</sup> [www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/a-revitalized-teacher-union-movement-reflections-from-the-field](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/a-revitalized-teacher-union-movement-reflections-from-the-field)

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/companies/GE.N>

Just weeks after the coronavirus began to rip through communities all across the United States, General Electric announced 10% layoffs of workers in its domestic aviation workforce (2600 workers), as well as a 50% reduction in maintenance workers.<sup>27</sup> The announcement of these layoffs came as Congress prepared to pass a “multi-trillion dollar corporate bailout that would include at least \$50 billion in federal assistance, \$25 billion in loans, and temporary tax relief for the aviation industry, according to an article in *Vice*.. The article also noted that the bailout provided \$17 billion for federal assistance to companies deemed “crucial to national security,” and that GE did not plan to request funds from the stimulus<sup>28</sup>

This announcement was infuriating to my union as many of our members are uniquely capable of manufacturing ventilators in order to keep more people alive during the COVID-19 crisis. General Electric is already one of the largest manufacturers of ventilators in the country.<sup>29</sup> As one of our IUE-CWA local presidents Jake Aguanaga in Arkansas City, Kansas, stated, “If GE trusts us to build, maintain, and test engines which go on a variety of aircraft where lives are at stake, why can’t they trust us to build ventilators?”<sup>30</sup>

Our union came together and took action all across the country. These actions, however, were not just calling on GE to keep our members safe. We were not just asking GE to give our members back their jobs. We were calling on GE to use their resources as a large wealthy corporation to benefit the good of the American people and to give their hard-working employees an opportunity to be a part of the solution. This is what social justice unionism means.



**General Electric Facilities  
With Capacity to Produce Ventilators**

- **Dallas, Texas**, IUE-CWA Local 86788. On February 20, 2020, GE announced the intent to close this shop with highly skilled employees that keep our national electric grid running.
- **Salem, Virginia**, IUE-CWA Local 82161. On November 28, 2018, GE closed this factory that has over 1 million sq feet that sits empty.
- **Arkansas City, Kansas**, IUE-CWA Local 86004. On March 23, 2020, GE announced they would be putting 353 members on layoff because of a temporary lack of work. Our member overhaul and repair jet engines both commercial and military.
- **Madisonville, Kentucky**, IUE-CWA Local 83701 has over 13,000 square feet that's empty and could used immediately. Our members here produce parts for military jet engines.
- **Lynn, Massachusetts**, Local 81201. This GE facility manufactures jet engines and parts for military aircraft. The facility at one time employed 20,000 workers. Now only 1230 work there amid cavernous, empty manufacturing spaces.
- **Schenectady, New York**, IUE-CWA Local 81301 produces generators for the power grids in the USA and throughout the world. This facility which also formerly employed 20,000 workers now employs just over 800 and clearly has significant excess capacity.
- **Ohio**, Both Cleveland, Ohio, IUE-CWA Local 84707 and IUE-CWA Local 84704 in Bucyrus Ohio manufacture state-of-the art lighting components and have the capacity and skills to bring in equipment immediately to start production of ventilators.

AN INFORMATION SHEET PUT OUT BY THE IUE-CWA

<sup>27</sup>[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/y3mjxg/general-electric-workers-walk-off-the-job-demand-to-make-ventilators](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/y3mjxg/general-electric-workers-walk-off-the-job-demand-to-make-ventilators)

<sup>28</sup> Same as above.

<sup>29</sup> Same as above.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/ge-walkout-lynn-coronavirus/>

In Lynn, MA, the local union there did a “stand out” in front of the main gate to the factory where workers stood six feet apart and held up posters, calling on GE to protect workers and “protect America.”<sup>31</sup> They also organized a march in front of the company’s headquarters in Boston, MA.

In addition to our organizing efforts, we engaged politicians and the media to pressure the company. We used a national press call to release a set of specific demands, calling on GE to allow highly skilled workers to do critical work that can help keep more Americans alive during this pandemic. Local union leaders from across the country, as well as medical personnel, participated.<sup>32</sup>

When workers in Lynn, MA, returned to work after their direct action, new areas of the factory were zoned off to encourage social distancing, and new sanitary stations with hand soap and gloves were set up. The company had also provided touchless scanners for clocking in and out and added sick time for workers with symptoms who could provide a doctor’s note.

These changes in Lynn, MA are just one example of the power of our union. And our fight doesn’t stop here because workers at GE are still facing layoffs and we still don’t have enough ventilators to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

Our union must continue to build on these fights and find new and creative ways of leveraging our bargaining power to improve the lives of all working-class people. This is how we will protect as many people as possible from the dangers of the coronavirus, and this is also how we will rebuild our union movement in this country.

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<sup>31</sup> Same as above.

<sup>32</sup>[https://cwa-union.org/news/releases/cwa-demands-general-electric-use-expertise-and-excess-capacity-manufacture-ventilators?link\\_id=24&can\\_id=293b4d3f7af5f1cf167b23399abd262d&source=email-new-covid-19-resources-for-workers&email\\_referrer=email\\_766891&email\\_subject=new-covid-19-resources-for-workers](https://cwa-union.org/news/releases/cwa-demands-general-electric-use-expertise-and-excess-capacity-manufacture-ventilators?link_id=24&can_id=293b4d3f7af5f1cf167b23399abd262d&source=email-new-covid-19-resources-for-workers&email_referrer=email_766891&email_subject=new-covid-19-resources-for-workers)