



# Steph Sorensen: Unions will never be obsolete

And they're the only hope for real democracy in America

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At the worst job I've ever had, I counted things. I wore a heavy calculator on my belt and tapped in the quantities of inventory I counted — soup cans, screwdrivers, a nest of children's shoelaces. I had no breaks, and if I took too long to enter a number, my calculator would alarm, summoning my supervisor. This was especially demeaning when it happened in a restroom stall.

On the worst day of my worst job, I was up a ladder in the back of a sweltering semi-truck behind a clothing store, counting sweaters. I passed out from the heat and awoke in a pile of long underwear to that awful squealing alarm.

There are worse jobs, unfortunately. Sometimes the labor itself is terrible: repetitive, dangerous toil. Or rude, abusive customers. Often it's the bosses:

disrespectful, condescending or worse. We've all had bad jobs.

These complaints are often dismissed: get a different job! Why don't workers in horrible conditions leave? Because we have no choice. An August report released by LendingClub shows that 61% of Americans now live paycheck to paycheck. The majority of us couldn't scrape together \$400 in an emergency. Capitalism is the knife at our throats, the sour whisper in our ears: work or die.

Under this life-threatening ultimatum, we endure abuse. We accept less than our work is worth. We dress how we are told, and keep our mouths shut. We ask permission to use the bathroom, and we relinquish control of our time and freedom to move about at will. We perform our jobs in ways we know are less efficient, more painful or just worse than how we'd otherwise do them, because our bosses — who may never have done the work themselves — say so.

There are sometimes perks like higher wages, benefits, time off. These privileges obscure the fact that workers are coerced to labor under threat of starvation, homelessness and deprivation of necessary medical care for themselves and their families. Even those who can afford to risk leaving one job for another, who find their work rewarding, consider their bosses friends, who claim to love their jobs cannot escape the trap of toil under capitalism.

Would you keep working after winning the lottery? Perhaps. But would you work as much, in the same way, under a boss's dictates? Probably not, given real freedom to choose.

If you primarily earn money through your labor, you're a member of the working class. If you do uncompensated work enabling others to labor (i.e., caregivers), you are working class. If your income predominantly comes from owning something (real estate, equipment, stocks, patents), you are not a member of the working class and this article is not for you. Almost every American is working class. We are the vast majority.

But as individuals, workers have no leverage to effectively improve our conditions. If I quit, I can be replaced. If my department quits, bosses are inconvenienced. If every worker at my company quits, profits halt. Unions are simply workers banding together to achieve collective material gains.

Here's the secret to our power: the bosses can't profit without us. Only together can we leverage that truth, and demand owners compensate us fairly for the value we generate. Unions are our best mechanism for balancing this system where we provide our labor for their profits.

Unions uphold the fundamental ideals of our nation. Unions are multi-racial; Black workers are the demographic most likely to be represented by a union, and union membership correlates with a lower wage gap between Black and white workers.

While polarization starkly divides American politics, union members know we don't need to agree about social or economic policies to find solidarity as workers. Unions welcome and improve conditions for workers of any political identity, and the unaffiliated.

Unions are democracies, with every member having a vote. (In some unions, as in America itself, true democracy remains more an ideal than reality. But this is changing through member involvement. And workers belonging even to flawed unions have more power than those without.) Though imperfect, unions represent the only viable path to realizing a genuinely democratic multi-racial America.

Historically, unions have functioned as a political arm of the working class, winning crucial victories that shape our lives today: weekends, abolition of child labor, the forty-hour workweek and eight-hour workday. None of these rights existed before workers joined together in unions and fought for them.

The powerful resisted these gains for decades, often with violence. These basic labor rights are nonpartisan issues today (at least for now) because unionized workers before us forced politicians from both parties to accept the same conclusion as the bosses: They can accomplish nothing without the working class.

Today, both Republicans and Democrats feel frustrated by the inaction of their elected representatives. Members of both parties view American democracy as under threat. Politicians benefit from the unending tug-of-war over the power to obstruct their opponents, a fundraising tool.

Democrats treat unions as special interest groups, useful only for their endorsements. Republicans pay lip service to the value of workers, but

regard us as little more than a cultural identity, a pawn in their games of grievance. The GOP has vowed to curtail the National Labor Relations Board's ability to protect workers' rights, should they win the House majority in November. Workers would do well to keep this in mind when casting their ballots.

Today, we need unions more than ever. We need unions to demand better pay, fairer treatment, more control over our time. We need unions to force movement from stalemated politicians, to respond to the myriad crises we face — climate catastrophe, inflation, pandemics.

Though union density is at a relative low, there are reasons to be hopeful. Teachers unions are more powerful than ever. The labor movement has broken new ground organizing workers at Starbucks, Amazon, other tech companies and beyond. Corporations have taken advantage of lax antitrust enforcement, swallowing small businesses and gouging workers with low pay and consumers with inflated prices — all while reaping record profits. Workers can use the size of these monopolies against them as chokepoints of power. But first, we must organize.

Labor Day is a wonderful time to learn about organizing a union in your workplace by checking out the AFL-CIO, the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee, or contacting a local union member or organizer. Support unionizing workers by donating to solidarity funds, and don't cross picket lines! Cast your ballot in November with your rights as a worker in mind.

For the vast majority of Americans who labor in order to live, we have only our numbers. We don't have the money, power or access of the capitalist class, who do not work to earn their living. But we have one another, the right to vote, and the right to form a union. When you consider what we're up against, and the tools we have to fight with, it becomes clear that organizing and supporting unions, like voting, is not only a right: It's a civic duty.

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