

# Labor: #MeToo!



Behind today's harassment headlines is a deeper crisis: pernicious sexism, misogyny and contempt for women. Whether in our movement or not, serious sexual harassment isn't really about sex. It's about a disregard for women, and it shows itself numerous ways.

For the **#MeToo moment** to become a meaningful movement, it has to focus on actual gender equality. Lewd stories about this or that man's behavior might make compelling reading, but they sidetrack the real crisis—and they are being easily manipulated to distract us from the solutions women desperately need. Until we effectively challenge the ideological underpinnings beneath social policies that hem women in at every turn in this country, we won't get at the root cause of the harassment. This requires examining the total devaluation of "women's work," including raising and educating children, running a home and caring for the elderly and the sick.

It's time to dust off the documents from the nearly 50-year-old Wages for Housework Campaign. The union movement must step in now and connect the dots to real solutions, such as income supports like universal high-quality childcare, free healthcare, free university and paid maternity and paternity leave. We need social policies that allow women to be meaningful participants in the labor force—more of a norm in Western Europe where unionization rates are high.

Sexist male leadership inside the labor movement is a barrier to getting at these very solutions. This assertion is sure to generate a round of,

## **"She shouldn't write that, the bosses will use it against us."**

Let's clear that bullshit out of the way: We aren't losing unionization elections, strikes and union density because of truth-telling about some men in leadership who should be forced to spend out their years cleaning toilets in a shelter for battered women. And besides, we all know the bosses are far, far worse—and have structural power over tens of millions of women in the United States and beyond.

Some of the sexual harassers who see women as their playthings are men on "**our side**" with decision-making roles in unions. This mindset rejects real organizing, instead embracing shallow mobilizing and advocacy. It rejects the possibility that a future labor movement led by women in the service economy can be as powerful as the one led by men in the last century who could shut down machines. Factories, where material goods are produced by blue collar men are fetishized. Yet, today's factories—the schools, universities, nursing homes and hospitals where large numbers of workers regularly toil side by side—are disregarded, even though they are the key to most local economies. Educators and healthcare workers who build, develop and repair humans' minds and bodies are considered white and pink collar. This workforce is deemed less valuable to the labor movement, because the labor it performs is considered women's work.

While presenting on big healthcare campaign wins at conferences, I've had men who identify as leftists repeatedly drill me with skeptical questions such as, "*We thought all nurses saw themselves as professionals; you're saying they can have class solidarity?*" I wonder if these leftists missed which workers got behind the Bernie Sanders campaign first and most aggressively. I've hardly ever met a nurse who didn't believe healthcare is a right that everyone deserves, regardless of ability to pay.

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When I began negotiating hospital-worker contracts, which often included the nurses, I routinely had men in the movement say things like, "*It's great you love working with nurses. They are such a pain in the ass at the bargaining table.*" These derogatory comments came from men who can't stand empowered women who actually might have an opinion, let alone good ideas, about what's in the final contract settlement. Many hold a related but distinct assumption: that the so-called private sector is more manly—and therefore, important—than the so-called public sector, which is majority-women. This belief also contributes to the devaluation of feminized labor.

## **Capitalism is one economic system, period.**

The fiction of these seemingly distinct sectors is primarily a strategy to allow corporations to feed off the trough of tax-payer money and pretend they don't. This master lie enables austerity, which is turning into a tsunami post-tax bill. And yet white, male, highly educated labor strategists routinely say that we need totally different strategies for the public and private sectors. Hogwash.

This deeply inculcated sexist thought—conscious or not—is holding back our movement and contributing to the absurd notion that unions are a thing of the past.

The union movement has increased the number of women and people of color in publicly visible leadership positions. But the labor movement's research and strategy backrooms are still dominated by white men who propagate the idea that organizing once worked, yet not anymore. This assertion is presented as fact rather than what it is: a structuralist argument. The erosion of labor law, relocation of factories to regions with few or no unions, and automation are the common reasons put forth. The argument omits the devastating failure of business unionism, and its successor—the mobilizing approach, where decision-making is left in the hands of mostly white male strategists while telegenic women of color with "good stories" are trotted out as props by communications staffers.

If you think these men are smarter than the millions of women of color who dominate today's workforce, then an organizing approach—which rests the agency for change in the hands of women—is definitely *not* your preferred choice. Mobilizing, or worse, advocacy, obscures the core question of agency: Whose is central to the strategy war room and future movement? As for loud liberal voices—union and nonunion—that declare unions as a thing of the past,

**the forthcoming Supreme Court ruling on NLRB v Murphy Oil will prove most of the nonunion "*innovations*" moot.** Murphy Oil is a complicated legal case that boils down to removing what are called the **Section 7 protections under the National Labor Relations Act, and preventing class action lawsuits.**

Murphy Oil blows a hole through the legal safeguards that non-union workers have enjoyed for decades, eviscerating much of the tactical repertoire of so-called **Alt Labor**, such as class-action wage-theft cases, and workers participating in protests called by nonunion community groups in front of their workplaces. The timing is horrific and uncanny: As women are finally finding their voices about sexual harassment at work, mostly in nonunion workplaces (as the majority are), Murphy Oil will prevent class action sexual harassment lawsuits.

The central lesson the labor movement should take from the #MeToo movement is that now is the time to reverse the deeply held notion that women, especially women of color, can't build a powerful labor movement. Corporate America and the rightwing are out to destroy unions, in part, so that they can decimate the few public services that do serve working-class families, including the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security and public schools. Movements won these programs when

unions were much stronger. It makes sense that unions, and the women's movement, should throw down hardest to defend and grow these sectors, largely made up of women, mostly women of color, who are brilliant strategists and fighters.

The labor movement should also dispense of the belief that organizing and strikes can't work. It's self-defeating. Unions led by Chicago teachers and Philadelphia and Boston nurses, to name a few, prove this notion wrong. The growing economic sectors of education and healthcare are key. These workers have structural power and extraordinary social power. Each worker can bring along hundreds more in their communities.

It's time for unions to raise expectations for real gender equality, to channel the new battle cry to rid ourselves of today's sexual harassers into a movement for the gender justice that women in Scandinavian countries and much of Western Europe enjoy. To think of winning what has become almost normal gains in many countries—year-long paid maternity and paternity leave, free childcare, healthcare and universities, six weeks' annual paid vacation—is not pie-in-the-sky. To fight for it, people have to be able to imagine it.

The percentage of workers covered by union-negotiated collective agreements in much of Western Europe, the countries with benefits women in this country desperately need, is between 80 percent and 98 percent of all workers. This compares to a paltry 11.9 percent in the United States, as of 2013. This is far beyond a phased-in raise to \$15 and hour—still basically poverty, and a wage that most women with structural power in strategic sectors already earn.

The results of second-wave feminism are clear: Even though some women broke corporate and political glass ceilings and won a few favorable laws, individual rights will not truly empower women. Unions—warts and all—are central to a more equal society, because they bring structural power and collective solutions to problems that are fundamentally societal, not individual.

Women in the United States are stuck with bosses who abuse them, because to walk out could mean living in their cars or on the streets—or taking two full-time jobs and never spending a minute with their kids. Similarly, women are stuck in abusive marriages, because the decision to stop the beating means living on the streets. European women from countries where union contracts cover the vast majority of workers don't, to the same extent, face the decision of losing their husband's healthcare plan, or not having money to pay for childcare or so many of the challenges faced by women here. This country is seriously broken, and to fix it we must build the kind of power that comes with high unionization rates, which translate into political—not just economic—power.

## **Naming and shaming is not sufficient.**

Women need to translate the *passion* of this moment into winning the solution that will help end workplace harassment. A good union radically changes workplace culture for the better. The entire concept of a human resources office changes when a union is present. For example, when entering the human resources office, women aren't alone: They've got their union steward. Union contracts effectively allow women to challenge bosses without being fired. Good unions do change workplace culture on these and many issues. Why else would the men who control corporations, and now the federal and most state governments, spend lavishly on professional union busters and fight so damn hard to destroy unions?

Whether it is union leaders ignoring the experience and genius of workers in today's strategic employment sectors of education and healthcare, politicians following the corporate line or individual bad bosses harassing their employees, all of it comes down to a disrespect and disregard for women, especially women of color. If we focus on the power analysis, the answer is staring us in the face. There is no time to waste.

## **Everyone has to be all-in for rebuilding unions.**

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