

# ORGANIZED LABOR MEANS BUSINESS

Will 'hot labor summer' cool now that summer is over?

BY CHRISTIE PORTER

**O**RGANIZED LABOR IS HAVING A MOMENT. After the highly publicized (and politicized) events of what some are calling “hot labor summer,” that much is clear. “We do see the events of new unions forming, even at the Starbucks stores here in Utah. That didn’t happen before,” explains Dr. Eunice Han, an assistant professor in the University of Utah Economics Department. Salt Lake City Public Library workers are seeking to form the first library union in Utah and the employees of Starbucks stores in Utah have voted to unionize. This is at a time when UPS averts a strike by meeting the Teamsters Union’s demands and United Auto Workers strike. Members of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild—American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) picket the lots of major film studios. “So you can decide whether this is just one case of exceptional stuff, but if you see this everywhere, say, all across the Starbucks in the United States, then it’s some kind of a movement, right?” says Han.

## WHY NOW?

This movement began building during the pandemic, and many in the fight point specifically to Amazon employee efforts to unionize led by Christian Smalls, who first organized a walkout at a Staten Island, N.Y. Amazon warehouse over unsafe working conditions as COVID-19 spread unmitigated. Amazon fired Smalls for his trouble. Other workers faced constant uncertainty and job instability. The pandemic exposed how many so-called “essential workers” felt unrecognized, unprotected and under-compensated, despite their work being deemed necessary for society to function.

As the fear over the pandemic subsided, the hollow accolades for heroic essential workers evaporated, but their struggles did not. Meanwhile, workers’ real wages have been stagnant, while the corporations that employ them report record profits and pay out sky-high dividends and stock buybacks for shareholders. That only further highlights the overall growing economic inequality of the last 50 years, which is attributed in part to the respective weakening of the labor movement. These factors have been in motion for decades, but workers are emboldened now in ways they have not been during much of that time.



Voice actors along with SAG-AFTRA negotiators discuss the actors’ strike and the threat of AI at San Diego Comic Con 2023. From left: Linsay Rousseau, Tim Friedlander, Ashly Burch, Zeke Alton, Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, Cissy Jones.

Han says the messaging and visibility of strikes by high-profile unions like SAG-AFTRA and the WGA are likely inspiring workers across all industries. “They hear the news of writers striking in Hollywood and think, ‘Maybe it’s time for us to speak up.’” Historically, organizing collectively is one of the few ways U.S. workers have consistently been able to progress their interests. A strong labor movement put in place the worker protections we now take for granted—8-hour workdays, overtime pay, the ban on child labor, weekends, a minimum wage, etc. But, collective bargaining does not have the power it once had, in part because our work can be substituted much easier now through outsourcing or by machines. “If employers can go to other places easier instead of giving higher wages to workers, then the bargaining power of the union is lower,” explains Han. Rather than undermining the recent labor movement, the threat of being replaced has emboldened the movement and increased its urgency.

## WHAT DO WE WANT?

At an event where actors would normally be promoting their latest project to a mass of ecstatic fans, some voice actors instead held a somber panel discussion about the existential threat they face from the unchecked use of machine learning models, collectively

referred to as artificial intelligence (AI). As a sign of the times, this year’s San Diego Comic-Con was bereft of the usual movie hype and big IP fanfare because of the ongoing Hollywood strikes, and some of SAG-AFTRA’s negotiators and striking actors instead made their case to reporters and fans. They highlighted the specific use of the technology that positions voice actors at the forefront of the AI issue—an issue that they believe could eventually impact the livelihoods of workers in every industry.

Voice actors have had their voices recorded for one project and then replicated by AI without their permission in other projects. “What we’re interested in is consent and compensation of the people who are being used. So if you’re going to replicate me or any other performer, we should consent to that, and then we should be compensated for the use,” says Zeke Alton, actor and a SAG-AFTRA negotiating member.

“We’ll be fighting to make sure that AI doesn’t overtake the human element of creativity,” says Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, the SAG-AFTRA National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator, alluding to the potential harm to society at large as profit-seeking drives companies’ attempts to remove humanity from the creative process.

“There is the concept that these large algorithmic machines generate things. Well, they don’t generate anything new,” says Alton. In some cases, the technology scours the online landscape, takes content, runs it through an algorithm and generates an amalgamation. Alton says there needs to be more transparency of what those machines are taking “because it affects the entire labor force. If we can’t see into the machine, then we have no idea of whose life’s work and training are being taken for free, without consent and compensation, and turned into something that makes money for a billionaire sitting somewhere at a retreat. So that’s why this is important to us.”

The union members know the technology is here to stay, but they believe that the unmitigated and uncompensated use of machines to supplant human labor is not an inevitability. “When you look at things like the assembly line that changed the world, the internet that changed the world, that can go one way or the other,” says Alton. “It can be a tool to allow the population to rise, or it can be a tool in the hands of the masters to bring the wealth to a single point in the one percent.”

Ashly Burch, actor in *Horizon Zero Dawn* and WGA member, says this fight is necessary to ensure a future for the most vulnerable. “It is about protecting people who are new to the industries that they’re trying to enter, who don’t have the support or clout to be able to defend themselves from predatory contracts. That’s a big thing across all unions right now and all the negotiations.” As it stands, the majority of SAG-AFTRA members work day jobs and many don’t meet the union’s income eligibility threshold of \$26,470 per year to qualify for healthcare. “I think having unions and being part of a union is a massive, massive movement right now and essential to protect against this kind of technology,” says Burch. “I believe that with collective bargaining you can make protections that ensure that your livelihood is not replaced.”

## WHEN DO WE WANT IT?

So, you have a union...how do you get employers to listen to your demands? Notably, some of the targets of recent unionization and strike efforts—Amazon, Starbucks and the major motion picture studios—have not come to

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—ASHLY BURCH, SAG-AFTRA & WGA MEMBER

the table to negotiate in good faith, even with the collective action of its employees. “Employers will always come to the meeting thinking that ‘I’m really not willing to sign anything today,’” says Han. “And the atmosphere is pretty heated. It’s not peaceful, as you can imagine. So unions need to be more strategic.”

One of the most powerful strategies a union has is to get the public on their side. Public support for unions and organized labor is higher than it has been in decades. According to a Gallup poll from August of last year, 71% of Americans now approve of labor unions. That’s the highest rate of union support since 1965. Even with their more positive attitudes toward labor unions, Han says drastic action could be needed to increase visibility and attract public support. “Employees are going on a strike because they learned that the public actually understands their struggles better if they go on a strike.”

“As a consumer, you should know that these big companies do care about what you think. Maybe not individually, but collectively, they do.” As SAG-AFTRA’s Chief Negotiator, Crabtree-Ireland says, he hears about company concerns over public perception every single day through back channels. “They definitely care about consumers turning away from the things that generate revenue for them. And so you have immense power if you just inform yourself and don’t let their spin confuse you.”

As to making the decision to strike, “That kind of drastic action will bring more attention to the public. And, usually, the public view is a kind of weapon, a powerful tool, that workers can wield,” says Han. “But the strategy is kind of a last resort.”

While striking may be a last resort, when faced with something they see as an existential threat, many workers are not backing down, and that is keeping this broader labor movement alive. “There’s a philosophical difference for how the workers feel and how the employers feel...they [the employers] don’t want to get caught at a competitive disadvantage,” explains Alton. “But they’re bargaining for a competitive and financial advantage. We’re bargaining for our very existence.” As a retired U.S. Navy test pilot and commander, Alton opts for the military metaphor. “We talk in negotiations, ‘Is this the hill you’re willing to die on?’ And we are at an inflection point in history right now. We can choose to fight and die on that hill, or we will be summarily executed there. That’s the only choice we have.” ■