

# Owning Our Labor

## Productivity, Profits, and Power

by *Rithika Ramamurthy*

Ownership over work is the right to be safe, the right to have a say over our time, and the right to a life of dignity. To realize a world beyond our capitalist present, to leave behind staggering inequality and crushing productivity, we need workers to take the wheel and steer society into these fairer waters.

If you performed a task at four times the rate of productivity, shouldn't you receive four times the pay?

In his 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, mechanical engineer and management consultant Frederick Winslow Taylor tells the story of how he convinced a worker at the Bethlehem Steel company, whom he named “Schmidt,” to increase the amount of crude iron he was able to load onto a railroad car.<sup>1</sup> Taylor did this by promising him a raise, to be determined by management. Schmidt was eager to accept, as he had worked hard to own a small plot of land, and hoped to build a house on it. Taylor told Schmidt that he should walk, rest, and load when/as he was instructed by a manager, minimizing any inefficiencies or inconsistencies in the process of carrying the crude iron onto the train. Schmidt went from loading around 12 tons of iron to almost 48 tons per day—an increase of 400 percent. For this, his pay rose from \$1.15 to \$1.85—an increase of 60 percent.

Taylor's method turned into an entire system of management focused on minimizing waste and maximizing profits, which became known as “Taylorism.”<sup>2</sup> By breaking down every task into its smallest components, Taylorism took control away from the worker executing the task and gave it to another person, a manager, who decided the “one best way” for it to be done. As workers lost more and more control over how their work was done, management was able to streamline the labor process, squeezing every last drop of efficiency out of it without paying in kind. From 1979 to 2020, according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute, net productivity rose 61.8 percent, while the hourly rate of pay for the average worker increased by only 17.5 percent.<sup>3</sup> In other words, even though today's worker is more productive than







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ever before, she has seen wages stagnate, prices increase, profits disappear into deep pockets, politics favor the wealthy, and working conditions worsen.

## **THE FRUITS OF OUR LABOR**

In Taylor's story about Schmidt, everyone made more money than the steel loader himself, whose increased productivity was met with disproportionate compensation. A century later, this has stayed true: as workers struggle to make ends meet, pay for top-level executives and profit for the ownership class have grown exponentially. The Economic Policy Institute found last year that in 2020, CEOs made 351 times as much as the average worker.<sup>4</sup> And even as those in the C-suite are being paid at such asymmetric rates, the owners of the companies they manage are making away with even more. Over the course of the last two years alone, wealth inequality has soared: American billionaires, many of whom are owners of the largest corporations in the world, have grown their assets by over \$2 trillion since 2020—totaling over \$5 trillion in October 2021, as one report shows.<sup>5</sup> This kind of mind-boggling math is proof that the numbers don't lie: the scales of the American economy are tipped in favor of those who already have the most. And that ownership relies on a system that funnels wealth away from workers and toward owners and the management class.

*Giving workers back the fruits of their labor would completely alter the distribution of wealth in our economy and reverse economic inequality.* At a very minimum, ownership over labor would be constituted by a fair wage. The federal minimum wage, which is at \$7.25 per hour, has not been raised in over a decade, and fails to be sufficient pay as inflation steadily increases and prices soar. Lowering the value of the minimum wage hurts workers in the economy who often have the least bargaining power in the workplace—Black, Brown, immigrant, and women in low-wage jobs. Better wages are only

one aspect of ownership in the workplace, but they are the main site of struggle for labor, because they are the most concrete illustration of one group's efforts being controlled by another for profit. Tackling this disproportion in profit head on is the first step toward taking back control of how work is done.

## **STRUGGLE FOR POWER**

The political terrain on which the struggle for ownership over work is taking place does not exactly favor workers. Over the second half of the twentieth century, management responded to worker struggles for power with brutal techniques to inspire fear and tamp down resistance, such as delaying negotiations, firing strikers, and even threatening or terminating union activists.<sup>6</sup> While companies consolidated political power, federal labor law was not up to the task of defending workers and unions from political assault. As deindustrialization led to U.S. production being moved abroad, unions had less leverage to protect workers from closures and cuts. The American economy changed in its composition, turning to precarious work schedules and lean production to increase productivity, while giving U.S. workers less power and fewer protections than ever before.

Federal agencies and laws that support labor have been political targets since the middle of the twentieth century, when the labor movement was at its heyday. For example, the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act amended the 1935 National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act)—the nation's fundamental law protecting workplace rights—by taking aim at some of labor's most effective weapons: solidarity strikes (striking in support of other unions), secondary boycotts (calling for boycotts of companies that do business with a company engaged in a labor dispute), and closed shops (an agreement that employees will require membership as a condition of employment). The passage of Taft-Hartley led to the decline of union victories nationwide.<sup>7</sup> If the legal apparatus of Taft-Hartley and other antilabor laws limited what unions could do, other political efforts attempted to limit what the nation knew about the labor movement altogether. For example, the Reagan administration cut funding for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 1982, forcing it to limit documentation of work stoppages to those involving only one thousand or more workers who complete at least one entire

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shift.<sup>8</sup> Because more than 80 percent of businesses have fewer than one thousand employees, the majority of work stoppage activity, from slowdowns to walkouts, goes undocumented.<sup>9</sup> The consequences of this exclusion are vast, but the major loss is that workers all over the country have no way of knowing about workplace activity of various kinds—making it harder to inspire organizing efforts and learn from other fights.

Today, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) is a federal agency that is in desperate need of support. Since last October, when the media buzz around labor activity was at an all-time high, union representation petitions—filed by employers or employees to hold an election to determine whether workers want a union—have increased by an impressive 57 percent at the NLRB, according to a report released in April 2022, with increased cases coinciding with critical shortages in both funding and staffing. Budgetary apportioning by the federal government, the report details, has not increased in nine years, and field staffing has decreased by half. “Right now, there is a surge in labor activity nationwide, with workers organizing and filing petitions for more union elections than they have in the last ten years,” NLRB General Counsel Jennifer Abruzzo said. “This has caused a significant increase in the NLRB’s caseload, and the Agency urgently needs more staff and resources to effectively comply with our Congressional mandate.”<sup>10</sup> Without this funding, workers all over the country will be much less likely to succeed in their organizing efforts, especially when they are up against employers with resources dedicated to anti-union campaigns.<sup>11</sup>

There have also been legislative efforts to give workers back control over their workplaces, beginning with the right to organize. The Protecting the Right to Organize Act, also known as the PRO Act, is one proposed piece of legislation that would protect worker power.<sup>12</sup> The PRO Act proposes to end right-to-work laws (which financially undermine unions by preventing them from requiring membership as a condition of employment), protect workers from corporate exploitation, and put forward civil penalties for employers that violate labor law—including anti-union practices that undermine union elections and collective bargaining. This comprehensive reform aims to position unions as a powerful entity to stand up to corporate power, reversing close to a century of repression of the labor movement. With the PRO Act, the

federal government has a chance to mitigate four decades of economic polarization and the brutalization of the working class. But achieving this kind of historic legislation to make labor law work for the people will require strong pushback from the working class and its allies.

## **MOBILIZATION**

As of now, it seems that many workers are seizing the moment to insist that they deserve better. In what has come to be called “The Great Resignation,” almost 47 million American workers quit their jobs in 2021, an overwhelming if unorganized response to the increased pressures of low-wage jobs.<sup>13</sup> Workers—predominantly in the areas of retail, hospitality, and food services—quitting in the tens of millions is part of a larger trend of pushing back against the way we work now.<sup>14</sup> This unprecedented wave of individual resistance—significant expression of a larger collective dissatisfaction—has sparked a national conversation about the nature of work. As Ophelia Akanjo wrote in a recent article for *NPQ*, employees are “treated as one-dimensional expendable beings with very little care for their three-dimensional complex lives outside of work.”<sup>15</sup> Whether workers are fed up with low wages, despotic management, or limited flexibility, their mass quits suggest that work as we know it—wages, working conditions, and workplace power—is in desperate need of transformation.

As the widespread sentiment that “work sucks” became reflected in various spheres of media coverage, worker activity began to pick up steam. Last October, over 100,000 workers in the private sector were ready to walk off the job or were already walking picket lines—a phenomenon the media has called “Striketober.”<sup>16</sup> But as Luis Feliz Leon and Maximilian Alvarez wrote in *Labor Notes* during this flurry of work stoppage activity, the labor movement—unions, worker centers, journalists, and other allies—has to both stoke the fires that fuel worker activity *and* clearly assess its obstacles: “We need to identify and cultivate the passions among

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America's rank and file that have made this a special moment, but we also need to be clear-eyed about the deep challenges preventing this moment from becoming a movement."<sup>17</sup> Even though it has been widely repeated, for example, that more Americans are supportive of unions than ever before,<sup>18</sup> that public opinion doesn't translate directly to the incredible effort that workplace organizing requires: sitting through captive audience meetings (mandatory anti-union sessions run by management), running successful elections despite the arcane process, and growing membership to supermajorities in order to build power in local communities.

Without both strategies—telling positive stories about labor while also honestly recognizing its political challenges—movement building will be divorced from the material context that makes it real: the workers themselves. Because the labor movement is an uneven and complicated one, grasping its ebbs and flows and mapping its moments of defeat is the only path forward with the strength required to take on multibillion-dollar corporations. As labor scholar Naomi R. Williams has noted, paying attention to the stories of workers struggling for power in the workplace will allow us to better understand where revolutionary potential lies across various sectors of the economy, which are constantly being restructured by the pressures of capital.<sup>19</sup>

Amazon is the most prominent example of a company that has restructured the economy and, by extension, the labor process. Employing over one million people in the United States, the company has set unprecedented productivity standards and reshaped consumer expectations—all at the expense of worker health and safety.<sup>20</sup> Insider accounts of working at an Amazon fulfillment center, like the one by journalist Emily Guendelsberger, detail the brutal expectations of this low-wage work. "Working in an Amazon warehouse outside Louisville, Kentucky," Guendelsberger recounts, "I

walked up to 16 miles a day to keep up with the rate at which I was supposed to pick orders. A GPS-enabled scanner tracked my movements and constantly informed me how many seconds I had left to complete my task."<sup>21</sup> Amazon has consistently been in the press for ignoring health and safety protections and imposing efficiency requirements that force workers to relieve themselves in plastic water bottles, miscarry pregnancies due to overexertion, or even die on the shop floor of a heart attack.<sup>22</sup> As workers at Amazon have pointed out, this production pace is set, as at other low-wage jobs, by technology: algorithms and trackers that count a bathroom break as a "TOT" (time off task).<sup>23</sup> Subverting the safety and dignity of workers to Amazon's two-day delivery model via various modes of technological surveillance is not just a feature of the logistics sector. Technological surveillance for productivity purposes has become a near ubiquitous feature of the modern workplace,<sup>24</sup> ranging across sectors from food service to healthcare, and prioritizing output above all.

A company of this insidious influence and economic power is unlikely to take kindly to attempts to curb its insatiable pace. This is one reason why Amazon spent over \$4 million on anti-union consultants when workers at JFK8, a Staten Island fulfillment center, began to organize an independent union.<sup>25</sup> Considering this well-resourced attack—alongside the conditions that make organizing at Amazon extremely hard (including high employee turnover and technological surveillance)—the Amazon Labor Union's historic election in favor of union representation at JFK8 is no small feat.<sup>26</sup> There is no straightforward path to worker sovereignty, however: earlier this May, workers at the fulfillment center LDJ5 warehouse voted against the union.<sup>27</sup> But the uneven character of struggle within the corporation itself does not necessarily change the labor movement's energy on a national scale; nor does it change the fact of the ALU's first and essential win. Organizing efforts at Amazon fulfillment centers are important first steps toward taking back the reins of a global infrastructure that increasingly surveils and profits off us all. When workers see other workers winning power at their workplaces, especially at a giant like Amazon, it tends to spread like wildfire.<sup>28</sup>



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The famous slogan of the labor movement—“eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will”—articulates the spirit of many worker struggles we are seeing today. Workers, from manufacturing to higher education, understand that power in the workplace is the first step toward living whole and healthy lives. Without control over the eight hours of the workday, the remaining sixteen, for rest and what we will, are bound to suffer.

This control looks like many things. Beyond demanding good, high-paying jobs for all, the labor movement also struggles for other kinds of equality in the workplace: freedom from discrimination and harassment, transparency around

working conditions and wages, and decision-making power—all aspirational features of a worker-owned economy. Ownership over work is the right to be safe, the right to have a say over our time, and the right to a life of dignity. To realize a world beyond our capitalist present, to leave behind staggering inequality and crushing productivity, we need workers to take the wheel and steer society into these fairer waters.

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