US Workers Are in a Militant Mood

BY

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Across the US, a more militant mood among workers is beginning to make itself felt. An uptick in private-sector strikes and record numbers of workers quitting their jobs are just two signs that the pandemic has changed workers' willingness to accept a bad deal.

Evidence is growing of an uptick in labor militancy across the United States. This week, ten thousand United Automobile Workers (UAW) members at John Deere began their first strike at the company since 1986, and there are several other private-sector strikes still ongoing, including two thousand nurses at a Catholic Health hospital in New York, fourteen hundred workers at Kellogg's cereal plants across the country, eleven hundred coal miners at Warrior Met in Alabama, and four hundred twenty United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) members at Heaven Hill Distillery in Kentucky.

While these actions do not add up to a strike wave, they might if we were to add two more huge — by recent standards — impending potential strikes, one by sixty thousand International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) members in the film and television industry, another by twenty-four thousand workers at health care giant Kaiser Permanente.

Joining these private-sector strikes is a restiveness among the broader working class, one that can be discerned in data released by the Department of Labor (DOL) on Tuesday. The biggest takeaway from the DOL report is that people are quitting their jobs in record numbers, with some 4.3 million quits in August, about 2.9 percent of the country's workforce.

Sectors with particularly high quit rates are hospitality — restaurants, bars, and hotels — which saw 892,000 people quit last month, and retail, which saw 721,000 people quit (health care is another significant one, with 534,000 quits). These, too, are seeing the highest "switch" rates, i.e., workers moving to a different sector. This should come as no surprise: these are sectors where workers are at higher risk of COVID-19, raising the stakes of remaining at the job.

The numbers reflect what some have called the "Great Resignation," a trend among workers across the country who are responding to their increased bargaining power as labor demand outstrips supply, as well a reevaluation of priorities brought on by the traumatic event we have all been living through, by jumping ship in search of a better deal. Indeed, a Gallup poll from July of this year found that at the time, 48 percent of the workforce was "actively job searching or watching for opportunities."

Strikes in a range of industries across the private sector — where only 6.3 percent of workers are unionized, compared to 34.8 percent of public-sector workers — and the record number of quits by individual workers are two expressions of a shared situation. (As to the unusually low strike numbers in the public sector, part of the story may be about unions taking contract extensions to get them through the pandemic, as well as the focus of their activity being on bargaining over safely returning to work, as has been the case with the Chicago Teachers' Union, to name one example).

If you have a union, you fight for more. If you don't, you quit.

While it's true that some union workers have left their jobs, too, and that there has been a lot of organizing among nonunion workers who are willing to stick it out and fight — see, to name but one high-profile example, Amazon worker organizing — the broad story remains. A union is a means by which to improve one's wages and benefits, one's hours, one's working conditions. So, if you're one of the many more workers without a union? You're on your own — you can ask the boss for a raise, for a better schedule, but if he won't part with his profits, your only option is to leave in search of a better deal.

Now, wages have risen by 4.6 percent, more than $1 an hour, compared to a year ago, and job switchers have seen slightly higher growth than those who have remained at their current jobs. But navigating from one crappy job to the next, be it in your current sector or a different one, is a challenge, a wager that is unlikely to result in a genuinely livable job — imagine switching from Burger King to

Amazon, or from Gap to, well, Amazon — your wages will increase but the job, famously, still sucks. And, importantly, without a union, there is no guarantee you can lock in those gains. Should the dynamic change and your boss find it easier to hire next year, he can claw back whatever gains you have made. This is the union difference, and it may well determine which workers keep these raises and improvements and which ones don't.

Importantly, while there are gains being had by workers, these increases are nowhere near the ballooning profit growth bosses are enjoying, and come on top of decades of stagnant wage growth, which brings us back to strikes.

Take John Deere, the current largest strike (at least until Monday, when IATSE will strike should their employer counterparts fail to present them with a fair offer). Deere has reported record profits in 2021, with a $4.7 billion profit recorded in the first three quarters of the year. Its stock has shot up. But the only people seeing that money are the executives and shareholders: Deere CEO John C. May got a 160 percent raise. The workers, meanwhile, were offered raises of around $1 an hour and told that the company would eliminate pensions for new hires. For workers who saw the company through the pandemic, the take-backs and stinginess are a slap in the face, which is why they rejected the tentative agreement by a remarkable 90 percent, with 90 percent of members voting. With the tighter-than-usual labor market making it harder for employers to replace workers, they decided to strike.

While Deere may be a particularly clear case of a corporation refusing to share the wealth with its workers, it is representative of the dynamic fueling the uptick in fightback among workers. Millions of people were told they were essential — they risked their health and worked overtime to produce profits for their bosses. Now, informed by a change in priorities brought on by the pandemic — as one EMT put it, "When you realize your boss will kill you, it changes your relationship to work" — they aren't willing to accept the old deal.

The labor movement will need to seize this moment (which, it is worth saying, would look different had the PRO Act — the slim-chance labor-law reform bill nominally supported by Joe Biden — passed by now). Unions can devote resources to new organizing, and further democratize themselves so as to meet the upsurge in worker activity (indeed, efforts are afoot to do just that, especially among UAW and Teamsters members). The Left can use the present to take the politically transformative possibilities of workplace action and make them real, connecting the dots between one employer's abuse and the broader ecology of a capitalist system that ensures such exploitation at the level of the working class as a whole.

The mood is unmistakable, the moment is ripe. As one worker on the UAW Local 74 strike line at John Deere described it, there is a sense that the strike is not isolated. As that worker said, “Labor is finally ready to fight.”

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