



IN SOLIDARITY

Season 5, Episode 3:

Embracing the political: Organizing for change

Transcript

[00:00:00.00] [UPBEAT MUSIC]

[00:00:05.81] This is In Solidarity, a podcast where we draw connections between power, place, and health and discuss how our lives, our fates, are all interconnected. Here are your hosts, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi and Beth Silver.

[00:00:20.45] Hi, everyone. Welcome to In Solidarity. I'm Beth Silver, here with my co-host, Ericka Burroughs-Girardi, for the third episode in our series on organizing and health.

[00:00:31.16] Excited to be here, Beth. Workers in the United States have been organizing for higher wages and improved working conditions since the late 1700s. Support for unions in this country has waxed and waned since. They received strong legislative and presidential support in the 1930s under FDR's New Deal, then disinvestment in the 1980s under Reaganomics. Today, public support for labor unions is at a high point.

[00:01:04.41] Although it's important to acknowledge, Ericka, that not all people have been included in labor unions. Not all have benefited from labor unions. Even today, those working in agriculture and child care don't have federal union protections.

[00:01:20.03] Right, Beth. And, as a result, they often don't strike, for fear of losing their jobs.

[00:01:25.88] It really shines a different light, Ericka, on the political and economic landscape of the United States at any given time. Yet research shows unions are effective at reducing health and economic disparities.

[00:01:38.94] I agree, Beth. Collective bargaining helps workers gain power to negotiate for fair wages, for improved benefits, and for safer conditions. According to a 2022 Gallup poll, less than 1 in 10 US workers belong to a union. But the majority of Americans support the benefits unions bring. That's an approval rate not seen since the 1960s.

[00:02:04.87] Exactly, Ericka. I'm looking forward to hearing about all of this from our next guest, Dr. Paul Leigh. He's a professor emeritus of health economics at the Center for Health Care Policy and Research at



UC Davis. Dr. Leigh specializes in the connection between minimum wages, labor unions, and health outcomes. And he's authored numerous articles on labor unions and health.

[00:02:28.51] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:02:32.33] Thank you, Dr. Leigh, for joining us today on In Solidarity. It's so nice to have you.

[00:02:37.58] I'm very happy to be here. Thank you.

[00:02:39.53] I wanted to start by asking you a question about the theme of our podcast, of course. What does social solidarity mean to you? And how is social solidarity linked to labor unions?

[00:02:54.33] Well, social solidarity, to me, means people working together to achieve a common end or common goal. And I think labor unions are among the premier organizations that do exactly that. Unions are democratic. People must vote on the contracts. People have to vote to go on strike. This means people have to come together, and they have to set aside their differences to work together. Solidarity cuts across all those lines.

[00:03:25.67] And today, actually, there's a disproportionate share of labor union members that are Black and Hispanic and women. And in fact, the research finds that white people in unions report lower levels of racial animosity than whites that are not in unions of the same background. So, yes, I think unions are very strong in supporting social solidarity.

[00:03:51.30] That's excellent. And throughout history, labor unions have played an important role in shaping the American workplace, whether that's protecting workers from hazardous conditions or introducing the 40-hour workweek. What can history teach us about the power of organizing?

[00:04:11.07] Well, history can teach us a lot. It teaches us first, certainly, that organizing works. And it also teaches us that not organizing works in the opposite directions. So in 1934, the percent of the workforce that was unionized was about 7%. In 1935, Congress and Roosevelt passed the National Labor Relations Act. And it spelled out the conditions under which unions were allowed to organize and the rules for employers regarding allowing workers to unionize.

[00:04:40.74] And organizing began in earnest, especially in 1935, 1936. By 1953-- that's 20 years later-- we go from 7% to about 33% in the private sector for the percent of the workforce that's unionized. And by the way, in the 1950s, this was a time when a lot of people said, well, America was great in the 1950s. Well, it turns out, in the 1950s, that's when unions were at their zenith of power.

[00:05:11.77] Now, speaking of history, I'd like to say a few words about real wages. Real wages are wages adjusted for inflation. And real wages have been stagnant or falling in about 80% of the workforce for the past 45 years. Income inequality has been soaring for the past 45 years. And union membership has been falling for at least 45 years.



[00:05:38.19] So again, it was 33% in 1953. Today, the private sector unions are about 6%. Public sector unions, by the way, are about 33%. And interestingly, Wisconsin was the first state to legalize public sector unions in 1959. So there's massive research that shows that unions lift wages-- about 20% in the private sector, but about 10% in the public sector.

[00:06:04.26] So, yes, unions can help. Unions certainly helped institutionalize the 40-hour workweek, but also the time off for weekends, overtime pay, vacation pay, sick leave, family leave, pensions, and employment security. So unions made it more difficult, also, for employers to fire employees. Employers had to have good reasons to fire people. They couldn't just fire people on a whim.

[00:06:34.10] And lastly, of course, unions helped pass the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970. And the OSHA act applied to all workplaces in the United States, not just unionized. And again, unions were instrumental in passing that act.

[00:06:50.17] You've studied the research. What did your literature review find on the connection between labor unions and health?

[00:06:59.26] Well, one thing we found was that there's a surprisingly few studies on the direct effects of unions on worker health or family health. That was a little surprising to us. And most of that involved occupational injuries. And it's certainly the case that if you introduce unions, occupational injuries will fall, especially fatal injuries. And OSHA inspections will increase.

[00:07:24.30] So what we did is we broadened the search. I'm trained as an economist. My co-author is an epidemiologist. And so we looked for links between economics and epidemiology. And we found 27 of them.

[00:07:39.48] For example, in economics, there's plenty of literature on unionization and sick leave, unionization and family leave. And unions will definitely promote those. And there's solid economic literature on that. Well, then, if you look at the epidemiologic literature or the public health literature, you're going to find that sick leave and family leave promote health for workers and their families.

[00:08:03.61] Another example is that unions will, at least in the past 30 years or so, will actually reduce discrimination. It is certainly the case that unions were promoting discrimination in the '30s, '40s, and '50s for white men. But this changed around in the 1980s. They saw the light, and they reversed course.

[00:08:25.29] So over the past 30 years or so, unions have actually been reducing discrimination against Blacks, Hispanics, and women. And there's solid economic research on that. Well, then if you look at the public health literature, you'll find the public health literature shows that if you reduce discrimination, that's good for the workers. That's good for their health.

[00:08:47.09] So there are a lot of these links that we found between economics and epidemiology. As I say, we found about 27 in all, for example higher wages. Some obvious ones-- higher wages, reduced



wage inequality at the workplace, reduced excessive overtime, more and better health insurance, improvements in and the existence of pensions, and sick leave, family leave. And I've mentioned those.

[00:09:15.81] But all these things all have links into the public health literature, where you find that all these things are actually, most of the time, promoting health. But this, by the way, is-- if there are any researchers listening-- I think this is a very fertile ground for research, to try to look at the direct effects of unions on public health, just as the literature is exploding now looking at the effects of minimum wages on health.

[00:09:42.96] Very interesting. If you were researching it, what would be the biggest question you'd be interested in getting the answer to?

[00:09:51.65] Just, overall, the effects of unions on health, unions, for example, on mortality. I mean, that would, of course, take long-run data. But there are some long-run data.

[00:10:03.61] The Panel Study of Income Dynamics, the National Longitudinal Survey, they do have information and these files on mortality. That would be terrific to look at. Again, you'd have to look at people over the long run to do that. And then, of course, things involving hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and other forms of illness and also injury.

[00:10:31.69] What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labor unions?

[00:10:37.51] Very positive. So COVID is horrible. I just had COVID a couple weeks ago the second time. It's horrible. But interesting silver lining here is that COVID had actually a very positive effect on unions. And the reason is because there's a glaring chasm between people that are exposed to COVID on the job and people that are not.

[00:11:01.64] So for a lot of people, most people I guess, working in offices when COVID hit, well, they could take their computers home, work at home. But for a lot of people, that was not the case. People in grocery stores and Amazon warehouses and of course, especially, in health care-- and health care, we know we applauded them, literally applauded them, when COVID first hit-- but they were on the front lines.

[00:11:32.00] And since then, there's been a surge of interest in unions among nurses, but now even among residents. I've had several conversations and a couple of Zoom calls actually with residents, one from Rochester, New York, where they were looking at trying to organize their MD residents into unions, and even some older physicians that are more interested in unions because unions protect workers from COVID.

[00:11:59.43] Now, if you look at the union organizing-- and actually, there's an interesting research history here that occupational injuries are strongly correlated with unionization. And the thinking here is that people that are exposed to injuries, occupational injuries, see that there's a big difference between what they're doing and what management, for example, is doing and not being exposed to the injuries.



And this makes them think, well-- it increases the feeling of solidarity, that, well, we're in this together. We need to work together to make this a safer workplace.

[00:12:35.33] This was certainly the case with the Amazon Labor Union in 2020. It was started by a fellow named Christian Smalls, Christian Smalls in Staten Island. And he has said directly that the reason that he formed that union was because of COVID and because of the management's indifference to the exposure that workers were experiencing. It made him angry.

[00:13:02.88] So you have increasing interest in forming unions at REI, at Starbucks, at Trader Joe's, many places where you have customers, where you have to face and talk to the customer. Amazon is not the only one.

[00:13:17.52] Where are we today in terms of labor unions? As you know, the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, also known as the PRO Act, would restore the right of workers to form unions and to bargain for workplace improvements. What do you think the impact would be if it were passed into law?

[00:13:36.98] Well, there has been an upsurge of interest in unions. And as I say, this starts around 2020. And of course, we have a declining unionization rate in the United States from around 1970 through 2020. And this is especially hard on the private sector.

[00:13:54.80] So the private sector goes from around 33%, as I said, to around 6%. But then again, with COVID in 2020, this starts to at least flatten out and maybe turn up. And there has been a surge of interest in labor unions. In fact, in the last couple of years, there's been a 57% increase in petitions to the National Labor Relations Board for the formation of unions. This is an unprecedented increase.

[00:14:22.48] Today, of course, 33,000 workers at Boeing are on strike. Last year, the United Automobile Workers went on strike. They won a terrific contract. UPS went on strike last August. They, too, won a very strong contract. This spring, in Tennessee, it was the first plant in Tennessee to be unionized by the UAW.

[00:14:49.23] And if you look at public support, every Labor Day, Gallup releases these public-support figures for unions. And it's at an all-time high. It's about 70%. 70% of the American public has positive things to say about unions. And it hasn't been that high since 1965. And very interestingly, the group that is most pro-union are people under 35. They appear to be the ones that have the most positive things to say about unions.

[00:15:19.26] Now, when it comes to the PRO Act, I certainly support the PRO Act. There are a lot of things. We can't go through all of them. But a couple of important ones are that the PRO Act prevents employers from holding mandatory meetings for the purposes of counteracting labor organizing.

[00:15:35.80] So what happens now is that you have-- when workers try to form a union, is that the management can counteract that and say, OK, well, we're going to require you, once a week, to go to this



one- or two-hour meeting, that they're paid for. And they get to hear information from the management side about why you should not form a union.

[00:15:56.12] And they have special firms that will do this. And they're very persuasive-- very persuasive videos and discussions on why you should not form a union. The PRO Act would outlaw that so that you could not have that on work time with the employer.

[00:16:10.38] The PRO Act also would override the right-to-work laws. Right-to-work laws are in 27 states. And they say that unions can organize there. But if you're in a right-to-work state, if you're in a union, you do not have to pay union dues.

[00:16:26.08] And of course, individually, this is good for individuals. But collectively, it's very bad. So the PRO Act would say, well, no, if you join a company that has a union, that you must pay the union dues. And this would be very good for forming more unions.

[00:16:45.41] You've also focused your research on minimum wage. What's the connection between minimum wage and health?

[00:16:52.79] There's an incredibly strong connection when we look at the long run. If we look at people in low-wage jobs, in minimum-wage jobs, and if they've been there for years or maybe a decade or more, there are strong, powerful negative effects of being in that job versus, let's say, a middle-income, middle-wage job.

[00:17:15.04] Now, one example of this is the so-called deaths of despair. Deaths of despair are a type of death that has been identified by Princeton economist Anne Case and Angus Deaton. And these are deaths due to suicide, cirrhosis of the liver-- drinking, in other words-- and then overdose. And these have been going up, beginning around the late '90s and actually up until today.

[00:17:44.83] And people talk about the opioid crisis. This is also kind of tied in with the opioid crisis. And interestingly, they find these deaths of despair prominent in places like upper Wisconsin and Michigan, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, places that used to be strongly unionized and have decent minimum-wage levels.

[00:18:15.31] They attribute this to declining unionization and, in particular, declining wages-- we're talking about minimum wages-- because what happens in these states is that you have strong wages, good wages in the '50s, '60s, and '70s. So a lot of people's dads and moms are working at these good jobs. And then, beginning in the '80s and '90s, a lot of these jobs leave for one reason or another, unions that start to shrink. And so people can't find these good jobs anymore.

[00:18:48.19] And a lot of people, unfortunately, take that personally, very personally, that, well, my dad supported the family. I can't support the family. So this has a strong effect. It really erodes the person's self-worth, feelings of worthlessness. And it leads to despair. That's why they call this deaths of despair.



[00:19:11.14] But this is strongly tied to low wages. And of course, one factor involved in low wages is the minimum wage. It has a very strong effect on health. And there's many other studies. In fact, I'm doing a literature review now that just looked at other wages, not just minimum wages, but low wages in general. And every study that we find, for the long run, shows that, yes, there are very harmful effects on health if you are working in a job like this for a long period of time.

[00:19:43.95] But people are also curious about, well, what about the short run? It turns out, in the short run, if you just have a one-year increase in the minimum wage, yes, it can be beneficial. There is evidence suggesting it reduces financial anxiety. There's some evidence interesting for women, single women with children, that there's evidence for improvements in the child health, that they are able to now take the children to the doctor and so on.

[00:20:13.02] But overall, it's not as strong evidence as it is for the long run. One-year increase, a 10%, 15% increase in minimum wage for one year, that's not going to give you diabetes or hypertension. You have to be in that job for a long period of time for it to show that.

[00:20:32.89] But if you let me-- just coming back to this idea of despair, there's a very interesting Martin Luther King quote from Memphis, when he was in Memphis shortly before he was murdered. By the way, he was in Memphis to show solidarity with the striking sanitation engineers.

[00:20:53.83] Anyway, this is what he said in one of his speeches there. "No labor is really menial unless you're not getting adequate wages. People are always talking about menial labor. But if you're getting a good wage, as I know that, through unions, they brought it up some, that is not menial labor. What makes it menial is the income, the wages."

[00:21:16.42] So I happen to agree with that, that there's an effect of low wages over and above just being able to afford things. It reflects your personal standing in the society. And that's one reason I think, certainly in the long run, the low wages and low minimum wages have such an effect.

[00:21:37.53] What does it mean to be political? And how does public health engage in politics to support labor unions and improve health?

[00:21:46.74] Well, I think public health people could help explain to-- read some of the research and explain to labor unions, let them know of these benefits and that the research supports them, the research supports their arguments about, well, this is good for public health, good for the health of the workers. And by the way, if you have healthier workers, this means the employer does not have to pay as much for health insurance.

[00:22:17.07] So there are lots of economic arguments you can make involving healthy workers. And quite honestly, I don't think a lot of union members and certainly people in the union leadership are aware of these health connections and the arguments that they can bring to their employers to say, well, this actually might be good for your productivity here at the job.



[00:22:40.48] In fact, I just talked to a couple of occupational physicians. We have written an article imploring occupational physicians to think about this idea of low wages and poor health because occupational physicians are in the business of trying to keep workers healthy. And again, you have healthy workers, you're going to have more productive workers.

[00:23:06.33] And I don't know that all union members and union bargainers are aware of this connection and aware of that research. That would certainly help with the connection between public health people and unions. I think it's also useful, if you mentioned politics, OK, I'll say something about politics here.

[00:23:28.26] Now, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, even Ohio actually, used to be called a blue wall because you had strong unions. You had blue-collar workers that would support Democrats. And you had good wages. And then, over the last 40, 45 years, there are fewer unions. And minimum wages haven't kept up. And fewer union halls, places to socialize. And now a lot of people are going to gun clubs. And we have these deaths of despair that I mentioned before.

[00:24:00.59] So this breeds, I think, a lot of anger and resentment. And it breeds a form of racism, frankly, anti-immigrant feelings and this whole deaths of despair that, well, I cannot support my family the way my dad did. So I'm angry. And I think that if we could promote unions and promote higher wages in these places, that this would not only be good for the people there, it would also have some political effect.

[00:24:36.08] Is organizing inherently partisan?

[00:24:39.89] Absolutely not. Absolutely not. You're bargaining for higher wages, better working conditions, better benefits. And as I said at the beginning, at the outset, you're working across all these different categories. And you're working together in solidarity across party lines. And we know that Teamsters, UAW, Steelworkers, and so on, there are plenty of Republicans in those groups.

[00:25:10.86] So you can work across party lines through unions. And this comes back, again, to the idea of solidarity. We're in this together. We see that, when we work together, we can improve our lives.

[00:25:24.36] What are other values around labor unions that speak across the political aisle?

[00:25:31.50] Well, they support family leave. If you have a sick grandparent or parent or if you have a child in the home, OK, we want families to thrive. OK, well, if you're required to go to work every single day, if there's no special provision every now and then that, yes, you do need to stay with your family, especially if you've just given birth, then six months, nine months off would be a big boon. And they do this, of course, in Europe.

[00:26:09.83] And in general, unions will be very supportive of family leave. So to me, that suggests, well, this is a very strong argument for family values if we're going to have family leave. Sick leave is also there, too.



[00:26:29.87] And just, in general, the idea of paying somebody a living wage so that they can spend more time with their children as opposed to having to have two jobs to keep the family afloat. If you can have one job with a living wage, then you have more time to spend with your family. So I'm glad you asked that, actually. That's a really good point. Yeah, unions would support family values.

[00:26:59.45] Great. Well, Dr. Leigh, thank you so much for being with us today. It was really nice to hear from you.

[00:27:06.36] Sure.

[00:27:06.89] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:27:10.95] It was great to hear Dr. Leigh's take on trends in labor union membership and support and how it's tied in with US politics. I thought the data he shared on political parties' views on organized labor was especially interesting, Ericka.

[00:27:25.29] Absolutely. We know the research shows that unions promote the health of workers and reduce income inequality and workplace injuries.

[00:27:35.55] I appreciated how Dr. Leigh provided context around the historic, economic, and political landscape that shapes public perception and support of unions. His perspective really bridges the connection between labor unions and our health.

[00:27:50.49] And it reminds us, Beth, that we can do something about unfair conditions, that public health has a role to play in supporting unions.

[00:27:59.81] Well said, Ericka. I can't believe the next episode is our final one in this series. We'll round out this series on organizing with Frank Southall. He's the organizing and community engagement manager at the Jane Place Neighborhood Sustainability Initiative in New Orleans.

[00:28:16.48] Mr. Southall works with renters facing evictions and helps them organize to keep them housed and to protect their rights. I'm looking forward to that conversation. Until then, I'm Ericka.

[00:28:30.50] And I'm Beth.

[00:28:31.67] And we're In Solidarity, connecting power, place, and health.

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[00:29:03.75] [MUSIC FADES]