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COMMENT

The "naming of things": US labor in the time of Covid-19

Sharryn Kasmir[1,2]

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Since the first Covid-19 cases were diagnosed in the US in 2020, the landscape of labor has changed in meaningful ways. Perhaps most conspicuously, October 2021 was dubbed "Striketober" by the mainstream press and by respected labor commentators. At the time of this writing, tens of thousands of union workers are on strike. Thousands more are preparing for strike authorization votes, carrying out contract campaigns to secure favorable collective bargaining agreements, or signing strong union contracts. Three thousand Amazon warehouse workers Staten Island, New York, sent union cards to the National Labor Relations Board to force a unionization vote. If successful, they will inaugurate the independent Amazon Labor Union. Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the largest and most powerful service union in the country, is organizing three Starbucks stores in the Buffalo region of New York State. These examples stand out for the long list of unions defeats these corporations have delivered, and for their strategic positions in the service and logistics sectors. However, they are not unique fights. Faculty at University of Pittsburgh voted to join the United Steel Workers, and unionized graduate and undergraduate students engaged in a work stoppage at Harvard. Industrial stalwarts are also on strike, including 1,400 Kellogg's factory workers and 10,000 United Automobile Workers (UAW) members at fourteen John Deere facilities across five, industrial-heartland states. Service workers, predominantly women and people of color, are making an even bigger showing; 24,000 nurses and health care workers on the west coast threaten to walk off the job at the giant medical provider Kaiser Permanente. ('Striketober', 2021; All About Striketober, 2021; Dukes, 2021; Flaherty, 2021a; Flaherty, 2021b; Furman and Winant, 2021; Sainato, 2021a)

The workplace issues on the table are many, and they reflect a well of anger among "frontline" or "essential" workers whose workplaces (hospitals, farms, supermarkets, restaurants, transport, etc.) remained open during the height of the pandemic, and who showed up for their shifts, worked overtime, and were exposed to Covid-19 risks that white-collar employees working from home were spared.

✉ Sharryn Kasmir
anthsmk@hofstra.edu

1 Hofstra University, Hempstead, USA

2 University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

Non-union workers at McDonald's in more than ten cities walked out over sexual harassment, wages, and health and safety concerns related to Coronavirus. They carried Fight for $15 signs on the picket line, and these signs testified to their connection to the long-standing union/community organizing drive in fast food.

Simultaneously, union workers demand raises beyond the meager increases that management put on the table. The rising cost of the consumer market basket is in their line of sight. Food, energy, and housing prices are up, and strikers fear that management proposals will put them behind the rate of inflation. They are also saying "no" to cuts to health and retirement benefits. Even more interestingly, at John Deere, union members roundly rejected the two-tier system, a contract provisions they first conceded in 1997 and which pays new hires lower wages and benefits. The current management proposal creates a third-tier that would be still more disadvantaged. The two-tier workforce is also top-of-mind at Kellogg's. Union members seem to be refusing to continue to eat their young. More, they seem to be attempting to rewrite the neoliberal playbook that authored four decades of concessions, two-tier workforces, and weaker local and national unions (Kasmir and Carbonella, 2014; Sainato, 2021b; Sainato, 2021c).

Despite the notable upsurge, commentators make plain that tens of thousands of strikers will not bring to bear the kind of power needed to create a crisis for the capitalist class. Even if the numerous October actions result in wage hikes, as they seem to be doing, they will not necessarily yield greater union density or real power for organized labor at the national level. Union membership in the US is at a historic low of 10.8% or 14.3 million; this is a long way from the post-WWII highs, when a third of the workforce was unionized and when organized labor showed its power and won position for sectors of the US working class by sending 1–2 million workers to the streets. These facts should make left scholars wary of too rosy forecasts for US labor. Indeed, only 10 months before the Striketober actions, the progressive economic analyst Doug Henwood shared his assessment that in the US, organized labor's strike muscles were atrophied. It is surely correct to be cautious in our predictions (US Bureau of Labor Statistics Major Work Stoppages (Annual), 2021; Henwoood, 2021).

This wise cautionary notwithstanding, several developments during the Coronavirus pandemic should broaden and deepen our assessment of labor in the current moment. Since the 2008 Great Recession, there is growing support for unions, including among self-identified Republican voters: A recent 2020 Gallup poll found 65% of all respondents "approved" of unions. And labor news coverage is expanding; nationwide there is a growing number of labor reporters and labor is being covered by new outlets across social media platforms (Smith, n.d.; Brenan, 2020).

More fundamentally, when we use an "Anthropology of Labor" perspective, we can see more clearly the heterogenou*s* processes of working-class formation are underway. The Anthropology of Labor subjects the concept of labor to close critique. This research program begins with an awareness of all the human effort—the *totality* of labor—that is involved in the process of social reproduction. It then puts at the center of analysis the power-laden processes of categorizing, differentiating, or unifying those labors. Equally in view are the protests and accommodations, organizational forms, and cultural understandings that reflect engagements with capital,

the state, and other workers. That is to say, labor is a historical and political formation. Divisions among laborers—free and unfree; waged and unwaged; visible and invisible; essential/frontline/excluded, and the ways race and gender always underwrite those differences—shape the historical inheritance and the political terrain of the day. This approach does not foretell the inevitable consolidation of a working "class in-itself," understood as a homogenous collective with a common relation to capital. Nor does it assume the realization of a "class-for-itself" with an achieved consciousness and common identity and interests, able to exert power. Instead, if we have in our frame the epochal disorganization and disempowerment of the Fordist working class by the neoliberal regime of accumulation, then the research program directs us to ask questions about the role of labor struggles in bringing about a new value regime (Cabonella and Kasmir, 2014; Harvey, 2018; Kasmir, 2020; Kasmir and Carbonella, 2008; Kasmir and Gill, 2018; forthcoming 2022).

W.E.B. Du Bois's monumental study of the historic, ground-shifting years of the post-Civil War period *Black Reconstruction in America* is a valuable guide for the anthropology of labor. Du Bois introduced the volume by parsing the concept of labor and by enumerating the many, divided labors of the then-transforming US economy. He started with the "naming of things" and a chapter titled "The Black Worker." Cedric Robinson astutely observed that Du Bois's exact words matter. Robinson exhorted us to attend carefully to what Du Bois was saying:

> [S]lavery was the specific historical institution through which the Black worker had been introduced into the modern world system. However, it was not as slaves that one could come to an understanding of the significance that these Black men, women, and children had for American development. It was as labor (Robinson, 2000).

Du Bois wrote against the prevailing view of his day that regarded slavery as a vestige of primitive accumulation rather than modern capitalism. He instead insisted that "beneath its appearance as 'feudal agrarianism,' lay the real relation of slavery to modern capitalism" (Robinson, 2000). His precise terms—slave, worker, labor—put slavery in historical relation to global capitalism. As much as free wage labor, slavery was the foundational social relationship of capitalist development. For Du Bois, the failure of unity among Black workers and white—that is the failure to define themselves in a common position to capital, and the move by impoverished white laborers for what Du Bois considered the "public and psychological wage" of racial privilege—helped set the terms for a new capitalist value regime in the US after the compromise of 1877 when the federal government removed troops from southern states, defunded the Freedmen's Bureau, and betrayed Reconstruction. The continued super-exploitation of Black labor was set in motion as a result (Du Bois, 1935).

An important "naming of things" is currently taking place, making this a decisive time for labor, beyond the significant impact of the October strikes alone. In what follows, I sketch four developments that are sign posts for thinking about labor in the US. The list is not meant to be exhaustive but rather to offer pointers toward understanding contemporary politics of labor:

1. The October strikes are coincident with what some commentators call the "great refusal." Approximately four million workers left their jobs in August 2021, and they did so individually and quietly, without collective protest. The full story of who is quitting and why they are doing so is not yet told, and close ethnography on this topic will certainly be welcome. Still some relevant factors are apparent. Women are leaving their jobs because they lack affordable, quality day care, and because Covid outbreaks periodically shut schools and send their children home. Unsafe working conditions and low pay lead many to look for better employment, and a strong labor market makes such movement possible. Furthermore, an ethical reevaluation of work seems to be in play; people report that they want better, more rewarding employment, fewer hours on the job, and more flexibility. These murmurings echo the "take this job and shove it" upswell among young, blue-collar workers in the 1970s, when factory speed-ups, a strong labor market, and the counter-cultural ethos conspired to intensify both dissatisfaction on the job and aspiration for more meaningful work. There are surely diverse strands of refusal today, and motivations are likely distinctive along lines of gender, race, age, pay level, and skill. Yet they may cohere in broad demands for higher wages and a shorter, flexible work week.
2. Rather than a spontaneous expression of a new ethos, the great refusal rests upon a political substratum that is longer in the making. Just as the 1970s "blue-collar blues" counted upon decades of union power that won high wages for a sector of the Fordist industrial labor force, today's refusal should be logged as an achievement of the Fight for $15 and of new social movement organizations and hard-fought alliances on the left.

   The $15 an hour campaign was announced in 2012, when the non-profit Communities for Change organized a walkout of 200 fast food workers in New York City. The stagnant $7.25 per hour federal minimum wage and decades of unsuccessful union drives in fast food shifted the union-community strategy out of the workplace and into the loca and state political arena. SEIU and other progressive unions in alliance with social movement actors Communities for Change and Black Lives Matter and the immigrants-rights group Make the Road pursued $15 minimum wage ordinances in cities and states. The worker-of-color led movement sought allies in city councils, state assemblies, and other municipal and state elected offices. Their wins over a decade are many: State and local laws and executive orders raised the minimum wage in locations across the country, and hundreds of employers felt the pressure and raised wages. The movement netted an estimated $150 billion for 26 million workers in service jobs and health care, especially people of color and women (Lathrop et al., 2021).

   The achievements of Fight for $15 therefore make today's job refusal possible. Anthropologists critique the non-profit/NGO sector for its professionalization and for defanging left politics: These organizations are funded by foundations that often set their agendas; they are staff-led rather than grassroots; and they occupy a niche once the realm of more radical, member-based institutions. The fact remains, however, that non-profits play a critical role organizing important fractions of the US working class.
3. The $2.1 billion New York State "Excluded Workers Fund" won by Make the Road, Center for Popular Democracy, and other immigrant-rights groups further underscores the point that non-profits and a growing union/social movement alli-

ance are pivotal for labor. Advocates secured this first-in-the-nation fund after undocumented immigrants and those without a social security number were cut out of federal- and state-issued Covid-relief cash payments and unemployment benefits. Their significant victory in getting this money is perhaps eclipsed by the repeated, unsuccessful efforts to force Congress to legislate a path to citizenship for undocumented residents. Nonetheless, the excluded and essential workers fund followed a year of immigrant-rights protests and actions, (https://fundexcludedworkers.org/). During that time, social movement groups put historic divisions of labor at the center of their struggle.

As anthropologists have forcefully told, the Fordist compact in the US excluded whole categories of workers and segmented the working class. Agricultural, domestic, tipped, and informal workers were written out of 1930s New Deal legislation that guaranteed the minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and social security. This carve-out etched the racial legacies of slavery, share-cropping, and Black women's domestic service into the New Deal. The Fordist working class that was subsequently made by state-designation, on the one hand, and mass strikes, the establishment of unions, and collective bargaining with capital, on the other, was consequently a racial and gendered formation, disproportionately white and male. Labor forces of largely Black and brown, immigrant, and women workers were cut out of the post-WWII wage bargain, with long-term economic, social, and political consequences (Baca, 2004; Mullings, 1986).

The fact that many immigrant workers were ineligible for government-issued pandemic relief replayed and magnified those past exclusions. This fact felt particularly unjust since many were deemed essential workers, and they therefore faced sickness and death on the job in meat packing, nursing homes, construction, child care, supermarkets, and restaurant delivery. But the state-initiated category was also turned on its head, as the designation of essential workers became a rallying cry for recognition and protection for devalued and invisible labor. For protestors and advocates, ‘essential’ was a potent symbol with which to make their claims. In so doing, they advanced the deeply rooted struggle over whose work will be named and valued. They thereby foregrounded critically important questions about labor formation in the US.

4. This struggle was also forwarded by the racial justice uprising in the spring and summer of 2020 that was sparked by the police killing of an African American man named George Floyd. The brutality of Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer was captured on video and widely disseminated via social media. The counter-response was immediate, as protests were held in cities and suburbs throughout the US and worldwide. Years of organizing by Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the coalition Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) undergirded these seemingly spontaneous eruptions that mobilized veteran political actors, as well as first-time activists. Floyd's killing occurred in the early months of the Coronavirus pandemic in the US, and when intersecting crises were announcing themselves: The failure of the federal government to manage COVID-19 had deadly results; there was mass unemployment due to pandemic shutdowns; and racial disparities in health and economic well-being and security were fully on display. The resulting uprising urged hundreds of thousands of people out of theirs homes during pandemic lock downs. The marches were notably inter-racial, and they lasted for months.

> The mass mobilization presented an historic opportunity to command the public stage, and BLM spokespeople and allied scholars seized the day to articulate radical analyses of racial capitalism. The focus of the Black Lives movement was on state violence, mass incarceration, and police killings of Black people. Their demand to defund the police was a mandate to shift government spending away from policing and jails and toward public investment in Black and poor communities. They traced those forms of state violence and oppression to the history of enslavement and the development of post-Civil War capitalism. The minimum wage, student debt, immigrant rights, gender equity, and supporting unions were on their broader agenda to improve conditions of life for working people of color. The effect was to inject a critique of capitalism into the mobilizations (Kelley, 2017; Kelley, 2021; Movement for Black Lives, 2021; Ransby, 2018; Robinso, 2000).

Taken together, these developments make the current moment more auspicious than the tens of thousands on the streets during Striketober would alone suggest. Caution is still in order, to be sure, but the ground is shifting more than the strike numbers on their own reveal. The examples sketched above also delineate processes of labor and class formation. Different segments of the US working class are currently expressing resistance in distinct ways. They deploy a range of political language and symbols to press their claims. They participate in labor actions through a variety of institutions. Some are union members, while other are unorganized or are affiliated with grassroots or non-profit organizations. They struggle over whose work is made visible by the designation "labor" and whose is marginalized.

This a consequential time for labor in the US, when a meaningful "naming of things" is underway. The four arena of labor processes outlined in this essay should be understood as struggles over differentiation and lines of division and unity. They involve shouts in the street for unwaged, undocumented, and previously invisible labors to be counted, and they are buttressed by new organizations and alliances that mobilize multi-racial workers across sectors through social movement activism. They build power via leverage on elected officials and relationships with established unions. Furthermore, they are pointers to indicate how on-the-ground politics of labor can lend shape to a future regime of accumulation, including working-class making.

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