

# EARTH IS A HOT SHOP



## FINDINGS FROM THE YOUNG WORKER LISTENING PROJECT

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2024 proved to be yet another record-breaking year for climate change. The year registered as the hottest on record and weather patterns continued to shift in chaotic and often unpredictable ways. [1] Greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels also continued to rise, with 2023 once again hitting record highs [2] that carried forward into 2024 alongside a heat surge brought on by El Niño. All signs indicate that we are barreling past climate tipping points with little meaningful movement towards making the necessary changes in our political economy that could reverse these trends.

The past decade has witnessed a growing, if slow and at times fraught, convergence between the labor and climate movements. These movements have been historically pitted against one another through persistent myths that environmental action hurts jobs and that working-class people don't care about the environment. Young workers who have inherited the problem of climate change recognize that a sustainable future is only possible through building a powerful and militant labor-climate movement.

This report presents findings from the Labor Network for Sustainability's (LNS) Young Workers Listening Project (YWLP), a study designed to understand the challenges facing young workers and how they think we can solve them. In 2021 and 2022, we surveyed 400 young workers (ages ~18-35) about their experiences and perceptions of work, the economy, and climate change. We then conducted 70 follow-up interviews with young workers from across the country, representing a wide variety of industries. Interview participants represent rank-and-file workers and a few union staff and elected officers at the forefront of bridging the labor and climate movements. As such, their insights point to a path forward for creating a more powerful and effective labor-climate movement capable of meeting the challenges of today.

A transformation in the labor movement is already underway. Some of the changes young worker leaders were beginning to think about in their interviews three years ago have already come about: a Starbucks worker reflected on food waste at their store; now more than 550 Starbucks stores across the country are engaged in collective bargaining, with many more in the process of organizing, often around issues of waste and climate control in their shops. [4] Multiple members of UFCW 3000 in Oregon were surprised to see their union disseminating the survey for this project to surface member perspectives on climate change; now this local is proactively engaging members in climate justice organizing and is leading an effort to democratize their international union. [5] An organizer for UAW felt that though their members care about climate change, the union didn't have capacity to meaningfully engage on the issue; now the UAW has launched a massive national organizing campaign with a just transition analysis, building off of wins from a historic strike with support from climate organizations and a partial focus on ensuring





**Table 1. Survey and Interview Participant Demographics**

		Survey Participants (N=389)		Interview Participants (N=64) <sup>a</sup>	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
AGE	16-20	34	8.7	2	3.1
	21-25	76	19.5	11	17.2
	26-30	133	34.2	19	29.7
	31-35	140	36.0	30	46.9
	36+	6	1.5	2	3.1
	Union Member	228	58.6	44	68.8
	Climate Org Member	40	10.3	14	21.9
REGION	Northeast	34	8.7	11	17.2
	South	57	14.7	17	26.6
	Midwest	41	10.5	9	14.1
	West	223	57.3	27	42.2
	Missing	34	8.7	--	--

\* Sample size lower than total interview sample (N=70) because six participants who we did not collect demographic information from were excluded from the table.

## KEY FINDINGS

The study findings are divided into three sections. In ***Young Workers on the Frontlines***, we explore the worldviews of young workers leaders, focused on key events and seminal experiences that shape their perspectives, including early formative experiences with education and work. In particular we examine how these worldviews shape young worker perspectives on work and activism. ***Surviving to Organize*** <— → ***Organizing to Survive*** charts the pathways of young workers as they bring these perspectives into the workforce, describing young workers' attempts to achieve economic stability and organize for radical change at the same time, made more necessary and more difficult by compounding crises that came to a head during 2020. ***Envisioning and Organizing for the Future*** presents young workers visions for the future and recommendations for how we can collectively achieve it.

## YOUNG WORKERS ON THE FRONTLINES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Young workers today face multiple overlapping and intersecting crises that shape their collective experiences and approaches to labor and climate organizing. This section gives voice to young workers' worldviews and experiences to contextualize their climate work and challenges within the broader political context.

- ▶ **Young workers had early formative experiences that cemented the urgency and importance of climate change and set them on a pathway towards collective action.** Many young workers recounted formal and informal education about climate change as particularly impactful, while others described childhood experiences with climate disasters and industrial pollution. For some young workers, the youth climate movement and student activism provided valuable experience and early lessons in collective action.
- ▶ **Climate change and its impacts have followed young workers into the workplace and reshaped their understanding of meaningful work, as well as the quality of many jobs.** Many young workers pursued work that they believed could make a positive social or environmental impact but often found the mission hampered by hierarchical workplace structures and a lack of autonomy and control. The same problems made them vulnerable to climate impacts at work, increasing their exposure to unsafe and unhealthy working conditions.
- ▶ **The events of 2020, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd uprisings, cemented many young workers' understanding** of the connections between racial injustice, state violence, economic inequality and public health, and the necessity for organizing around these issues in their communities and workplaces. As such, many sought out deeper engagement with worker organizing to address questions of health and safety as well as justice and equity through collective action.

## SURVIVING TO ORGANIZE <— —> ORGANIZING TO SURVIVE

This backdrop of precarity has led many young worker leaders to recognize and seek out the multifaceted benefits of unionism as they attempt to hold multiple priorities, including meeting their material needs in a context of increasingly frequent and severe environmental health and safety hazards and growing economic inequality; the need for connection and community; and the need to effect positive change so that they can have a livable future.



- ▶ **Many young worker leaders find unions to be a sort of antidote,** providing shelter from the storm of overlapping forms of precarity through layered benefits that promote economic stability and facilitate organizing for necessary change. This is particularly relevant for workers who are historically and/or currently underrepresented in any given industry, workplace or union. As such, young worker leaders recognize key overlapping needs and challenges with women, queer workers, workers of color, and non-union workers.
- ▶ **Still, the reality of union membership often differs from their expectations, and many struggle to access the key benefits of unionism** through their contracts with employers and through engagement in union

spaces. In attempts to organize around intersecting issues of economic, environmental and social justice young worker leaders encounter internal challenges in how the unions as institutions engage with their membership, as well as external challenges in how they engage with community partners and issues. These are in part a response to systemic challenges due to decades of attacks on American organized labor. Still, young worker leaders believe the American labor movement can and should do more to push back against these systemic issues in order to have a shot at ensuring a livable future for workers and communities through an economy that is designed to support their wellbeing.

- ▶ **Young worker leaders have used a number of strategies in their efforts to engage in labor-climate organizing**, including bargaining for protections against the impacts of climate change, surveying members, passing resolutions, forming caucuses and participating in mass mobilizations. Due to the challenges outlined above, these attempts tend to be ad hoc and enjoy limited success. As such, they see a need for more infrastructure in the labor movement to support and sustain this organizing as they work to develop new strategies to meet emerging needs in the context of the climate crisis and a rapidly changing economy.

## ORGANIZING AND ENVISIONING THE FUTURE

Young worker leaders articulated a holistic understanding of sustainability, and highlighted the need to build power within and across organizations and movements to reverse patterns of extraction in their workplaces and communities and deal with the impacts of decades of attacks on worker and community organizing. They want support from unions and other organizations to not only survive in a hazardous political economy, but transform this economy into one that can meet their evolving needs.

- ▶ **Overlapping crises make it difficult for young worker leaders to imagine their personal and collective futures** when they don't know what jobs will be available or what communities will be affordable and environmentally safe to live in even a few years from now. Still, their most positive visions of their personal futures include lots of space to prioritize rest and relationships, with less work that is more meaningful to them and more helpful to their communities.
- ▶ **Many young worker leaders believe these visions are contingent on radically reshaping the political economy** to prioritize sustaining people, communities, and the environment, and that this can only be possible through a powerful, intersectional and highly organized labor-climate movement. They envision such a movement connecting workers' skills and expertise to their knowledge of what their communities need, and bringing decision making closer to the people who deal with the impacts and are responsible for the implementation of decisions.
- ▶ **The scale of these crises can be overwhelming, requiring people to hold a number of contradictions in navigating short and long term needs.** Young worker leaders need meaningful support in holding these contradictions, from each other and from position holders who are committed to building the future labor movement with them. They also need organizing approaches that help them bridge the gap between short- and long-term needs, through careful use of time, space and resources that respects if not expands their limited capacity, and strategic support in developing bold new approaches to organizing that are responsive to the ever changing context of climate crisis.





## 2. INTRODUCTION

It seems that everyone has preconceived notions about what's going on with young workers – they don't want to work anymore; they're quiet quitting; they are our only hope and the future of our movements; they are making our movements and organizations more democratic, diverse and powerful; they are paralyzing our movements with their obsession with identity politics and call out culture. [8] Few, if any, of these conclusions have been developed through a thoughtful and thorough attempt to understand these ongoing dynamics from the perspectives of young workers themselves. The Labor Network for Sustainability, in pursuing this report, sought to hear directly from young workers about how they see themselves, their organizing, and their unique set of obstacles to progress in this era of climate disaster and the broader labor movement. As an organization dedicated to bridging the gap between labor and environmental justice, understanding young workers who will soon be at the helm of both is an integral component in building a militant labor climate movement. Through in-depth interviews with a broad geographic and sectoral cross section of young workers, we found that there are many young worker leaders who are attempting to organize at the intersection of labor, climate protection, and social justice because they believe in the power of the labor movement to improve their lives in the short and long term in ways they feel other institutions have not. "Earth is a Hot Shop" is an account of those young worker leaders.

Young worker leaders have been learning about climate change since before they can remember, with many interviewees referencing Al Gore's 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth* and posters reminding them to Reduce, Reuse and Recycle on the walls of their elementary schools. But they have also been living the climate crisis, their families navigating extreme weather and environmental disasters without the proper infrastructure, and making choices about where to live to avoid extreme heat, flooding, or pollution that could exacerbate existing health issues and financial insecurity. Through the intersection of this learning and experience, they came to recognize

that political and economic elites overwhelmingly advance false solutions that emphasize personal responsibility for a crisis fueled by corporations. The systems driving climate change were often invisible in the textbooks, news stories, and policies that sought to address the crisis.

Meanwhile, many young workers also experienced extreme economic insecurity, particularly through the Great Recession of 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their formative experiences with work have been characterized by a pervasive sense of precarity and a growing understanding that their employers and government value private profit over their wellbeing. Despite a notable lack of formal education on questions of economic inequality, collective action, and labor organizing, nearly every major event of young workers' lives has provided an education on the inextricable links between economic inequality, environmental injustice, white supremacy and extractive capitalism. Today's young workers came of age in a period marked by government austerity, as access to the social safety net has increasingly been tied to employment, and employment becomes increasingly precarious. [9] At the same time budgets for policing and military conflicts have not only ballooned, but have made the link between access to oil and gas supplies, repression of collective action and dissent, and state violence increasingly visible. [10] Young workers have come to expect financial insecurity, but they have also come to understand that this



insecurity is fueled by choices made by corporations and government without democratic input about how resources are distributed.

All of this has shaped the way young workers make choices about their lives and attempt to plan for the future. They feel an urgent need to do work that addresses or at least does not exacerbate climate change and other social injustices, while also holding a deep appreciation for material stability and how it is shaped by their institutions and social networks. And they are hopeful about the potential of unions as democratic institutions that can hold these multiple priorities and provide the infrastructure to articulate and fight for transformative demands.

Despite the energy young workers are breathing back into the labor movement, their vision for a more powerful movement capable of challenging and transforming existing power structures has yet to be actualized. This is in part because unions, already challenged themselves by decades of assault on organized labor, have struggled internally to create effective infrastructure for members to engage on climate protection and other social justice and community issues. Tired of feeling overworked and undervalued, young workers are pushing for a more democratic, diverse, intersectional and proactive movement, and they're ready for meaningful leadership.

## THE YOUNG WORKER LISTENING PROJECT

The Network for Sustainability (LNS) launched the Young Worker Project in 2020, in part as a response to the increasingly visible leadership of young people in the climate movement, particularly through the youth climate strikes of 2019. As young people took to the streets to demand climate, racial, gender and broader social justice, we wondered how this dynamic was playing out in unions and workplaces, and how young workers could channel their energy and analysis to push for systemic change through these institutions. The Listening Project, launched in 2021 by the LNS Young Worker Organizing Committee (YWOC), sought to identify and connect young worker leaders at the grassroots of the labor movement, as well as understand their perspectives, priorities and challenges. This report synthesizes 70 interviews and nearly 400 surveys of workers ages 18-35 collected between April 2021 and July 2022, as well as several group workshops facilitated in collaboration with the Center for Story Based Strategy. Throughout the report we will refer to people who contributed their insights to this process as “young worker leaders.”

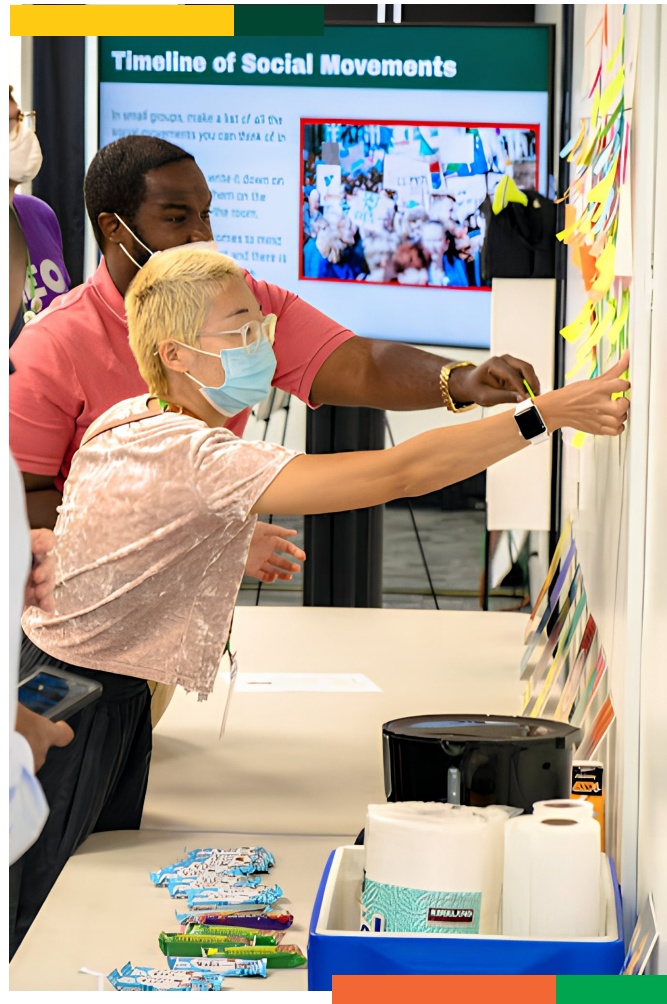
This project also builds on LNS's previous Just Transition Listening Project, in which interviewees repeatedly articulated the ways that just transition looks different for folks nearing retirement compared to those just beginning their careers. [\[11\]](#) We heard the expressed need to engage young workers in sustaining both the labor and climate movements, and therefore to get a deeper understanding of what young workers themselves need in order to be more deeply engaged.

The YWOC designed the listening project to capture key concerns and interests members have encountered in their advocacy for climate justice within their unions. We distributed the survey through the LNS network, built over years of work at the intersection of labor and the environment. Through these networks, we connected with the leadership of union locals interested in understanding their young members better, and rank-and-file workers looking for space to have these conversations. We then invited survey respondents who indicated they were willing to participate in a follow up interview over Zoom. Our interview sample includes young workers from twenty-four states and the District of Columbia, including forty-four union members and five union staff members (two of whom are also union members) from more than twenty unions (see Table 1). Key sectors included the building trades, nonprofits, education, and government—industries central to discussions about climate change either because they play a key role in responding to it or because their work is threatened by it. While we did not ask every interviewee about

their racial identity, we know that our sample is overwhelmingly white, reflecting historical gaps in organized labor and the mainstream U.S. environmental movement. Notably, we did not reach key sectors that disproportionately employ young workers of color, including farmworkers, restaurant and service workers, and warehouse and logistics workers.

The interviews for this project largely took place in 2021 amid multiple crises and upheavals. Congress debated how to “Build Back Better” even as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to claim tens of thousands of US lives per week. The country grappled with questions of racialized state violence in the aftermath of the George Floyd uprisings. Threats to democracy loomed in every branch and level of government, culminating in the January 6th right-wing insurrection at the Capitol. And all the while, families and workers faced increasingly intense climate change impacts that forced them to navigate extreme heat, floods, fires, air pollution, and snow storms in unprecedented ways.

The authors of this report are engaged in ongoing organizing in the labor and climate movements. As such, our interviewees are not subjects but comrades: these relationships inform our analysis, and in turn our analysis shapes our efforts to continue to build on this work. We hope to not only represent them with the same care they bring to their work and organizing, but to make that work a little bit easier by amplifying their needs and perspectives. Ultimately our goal is to support young workers’ leadership in the labor movement and their fight for a worker-led transition to a sustainable economy.



## 3. FINDINGS

### A. YOUNG WORKERS ON THE FRONTLINES OF CLIMATE CHANGE

#### I. THE CLIMATE GENERATION: FROM AL GORE TO SUNRISE

Today’s young workers have never known a world without climate change. As children of the 1990s and early 2000s, their parents drilled the three Rs into their heads, entreating them to reduce, reuse, and recycle (but mostly recycle) ad nauseam. Once in school, their teachers, often with the help of Al Gore, introduced the perils of climate change—rising sea levels, catastrophic flooding, melting ice caps, starving polar bears, and a planet sliding into uninhabitable chaos. The less fortunate ones did not need authority figures to sound the alarm. They experienced climate catastrophes firsthand, witnessing the devastation wrought by wildfires on the west coast, Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast (2005), and Superstorm Sandy along the Jersey shore and New York (2012).

For the young worker leaders we spoke to, these lessons and experiences stuck—if perhaps too much. Climate breakdown has become the backdrop of their lives, an unrelenting existential threat that informs



every major life decision and at times induces paralyzing fear and anxiety. But the climate threat also compelled action for many of our interviewees. Many sought out deeper education on the causes and solutions to the climate crisis and some, especially those at the younger end of our sample, became active in the youth climate movement, demanding more sustainable practices in their schools and cities, and educating their parents and peers. This was all before entering the workforce. Today's young workers are the climate generation.

### EARLY CLIMATE CONSCIOUSNESS: “SOMETHING JUST FEELS WRONG ABOUT THIS FOR ME”

In 2006, US politician and environmentalist Al Gore released *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary following the former Vice President's national education campaign on climate change. The film received two Oscars and helped its protagonist win the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize (along with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Americans began paying attention to the climate crisis. Many young worker leaders shared the experience of this union graduate student worker: “In terms of how I became aware, I was in middle school when *An Inconvenient Truth* came out. And all of a sudden, people were talking about this movie and Al Gore.”

Other young worker leaders recalled developing an environmental consciousness early in life but without a specific trigger or easily identifiable origin—their environmentalism seemed to have always been there. For those growing up in more progressive areas, environmental values were simply absorbed through the local culture, by watching children's programming, spending time outdoors, learning to recycle at school, and, in some instances, witnessing the activism of family and friends.

For those in more conservative communities, their first exposure to climate change often came with chatter of hoax and conspiracy. Adults said they needn't worry. Even if the planet was warming, it was hubris to think humans were to blame. God was in control. But science classes often altered their trajectory, leaving a lasting impact on young people who believed in climate change but did not yet fully grasp its severity. A union graduate student worker in North Carolina recalled hearing about global warming from their first-grade teacher and worrying that their grandkids would never get to see snow. For a non-union climate organizer in West Virginia, the first thought to enter their mind after learning about climate change in sixth grade Earth Science was, “Oh my God. The world's literally going to burn up.”

Many young worker leaders, particularly those who grew up in rural communities, began to be concerned about the climate simply because they loved to spend time outside and their community instilled an appreciation for nature. A union grocery worker described growing up in an agricultural community where adults were always talking about environmental issues such as heat and water supplies. Still, it wasn't until they were a senior in high school that they realized, “Oh, my upbringing actually had something to do with my interest and involvement in climate policy and sustainability.” <sup>[12]</sup> A non-union private sector worker from a rural community described being taught to love the earth as God's creation. “The faith I was brought up in is what partially informs my activism from the environment side,” they said. “And then I see that disconnect with [my family], like we heard the same thing, but we arrived at different conclusions.” Their experience paralleled that of a union staffer, who reflected: “Anybody can look at nature and say, that's beautiful and worth protecting. The complicated matter becomes then, who do we blame for the environmental justice issues or the environmental degradation?”

Others recounted direct and early experiences with climate disasters, toxic exposure, or local pollution that made them aware of the importance of a healthy environment. A graduate student worker described their disaster experience as a “radicalizing moment” that, while destructive, also introduced new possibilities:

**I GREW UP ALONG THE COAST IN JERSEY, SO I EXPERIENCED HURRICANE SANDY... I LIVED IN A SMALL COASTAL TOWN, SO I KNEW PEOPLE WHO HAD THEIR WHOLE HOUSE DESTROYED AND STUFF. AND I THINK AT THAT MOMENT, I SAW COMPLETE DEVASTATION, BUT [ALSO] THE POSSIBILITY OF PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER.**

A union electrician recounted visiting family in Los Angeles as a 5- or 6-year-old child and struggling to breathe while outside and feeling a “deep, deep pain in my chest... and I had no idea why.” Years later, they began learning about air pollution in school, “and I thought back, and I was like, that’s why my freakin’ chest was hurting when I would come out here, when I would be outside.” Our survey results show that these experiences and concerns are not unique (Figure 1).

## Climate Experiences & Concerns

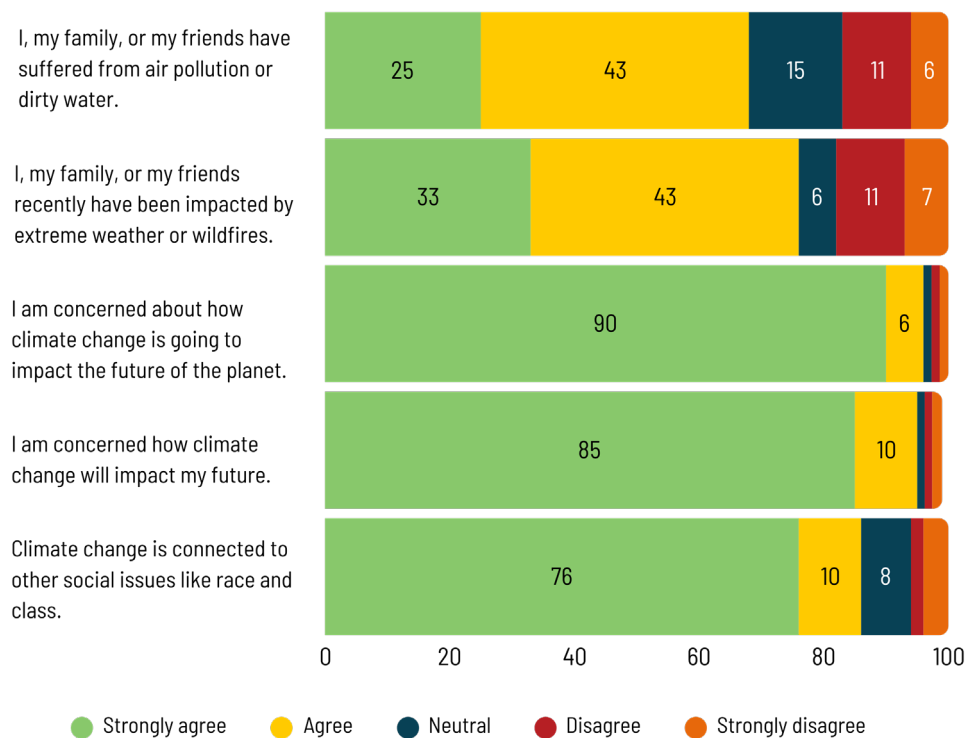


Figure 1. Survey findings on young workers' climate experiences and concerns (N=389). The majority of respondents experienced impacts from air pollution and dirty water (68%), as well as extreme weather or wildfires (76%). These experiences contributed to high levels of concern for both the planetary future (96%) and their personal futures (95%).

Regardless of how they first learned about the climate crisis, young worker leaders described feeling paralyzing sadness or fear upon learning about the impacts of the crisis without learning about viable solutions. A union non-profit worker from Pennsylvania described watching *An Inconvenient Truth* in high school:

**[IT'S] A WHOLE MOVIE ABOUT THE CLIMATE REALITY AND SCIENCE AND TIMELINE AND HOW OUR INFRASTRUCTURE IS GOING TO COLLAPSE, A NUMBER OF CITIES WILL BE UNDERWATER, SEA LEVELS RISING, FIRES. AND THEN IT'S LIKE, "SO YOU SHOULD RIDE YOUR BIKE TO WORK." THAT'S THE END OF IT. AND I WAS LIKE, AHH! SOMETHING JUST FEELS WRONG ABOUT THIS FOR ME. [13]**

Many young worker leaders' described similar early educational experiences that had glaring omissions: a clear naming of the root causes of climate change, a recognition of its unequal impacts, and an analysis of the role of people as workers who drive the economy, rather than simply consumers of its outputs. [14] For many young worker leaders these inconsistencies were impossible to ignore, and they internalized not only an urgent need to protect the environment but to fill these gaping holes. This is in large part because global warming was not the only looming catastrophe in young worker leaders' formative years.

### **THE BROADER BACKDROP: "ANY TIME YOU THREATEN THE MONEY, THEY START BRINGING THE GUNS OUT"**

A year before the release of *An Inconvenient Truth*, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf South. Accusations of racism against the president and government agencies entered public discourse as the region struggled to recover and Black New Orleanians were criminalized for seeking basic resources the government failed to provide. Several young worker leaders recalled survivors of the hurricane moving into their communities, and their families starting to consider the risks of living near coasts or in communities with precarious infrastructure. This came on the heels of mounting public anger with President George W. Bush, as two years prior in 2003 millions of people worldwide participated in one of the largest global days of protest in history to oppose the invasion of Iraq. Some young worker leaders participated in their first protests against the Bush administration, on issues ranging from war to immigration to women's rights.

Three years later, after winning the 2008 election with the slogan "Change We Can Believe In," young worker leaders watched President Barack Obama bail out bank and auto company CEOs as their families struggled to make ends meet through the Great Recession. This prompted some young worker leaders to think more critically about questions of power and economic security. They again noticed the disconnect between what they were hearing from authority figures and what they were seeing in reality. A union electrician described:





**WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, EVERYONE SAID “GO TO COLLEGE,” BUT NOT WHY. JUST, “YOU GO FOUR YEARS AND THEN THEY GIVE YOU ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS A YEAR.” BUT GROWING UP IN A VERY WORKING CLASS AND POOR FAMILY, I KNEW A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO’D GONE TO COLLEGE AND STILL HAD MINIMUM WAGE JOBS AND A BUNCH OF DEBT. THAT SEEMED LIKE A BAD IDEA.**

These college-educated “downwardly mobile Millennials” were among the protesters who occupied Zuccotti Park in New York City’s Financial District for 59 days in 2011, launching what would become a global movement. The Occupy Wall Street Movement strongly shaped young worker leaders on the older side, in their 30s at the time of the interviews. The movement’s slogan, “We are the 99%,” drew popular attention to long-standing economic inequalities and rhetorically united the masses against the country’s economic elite. A union grocery worker recalled, “It wasn’t until the Occupy movement swept through my social networks and the news and everything else [...]

that I was able to take [my] internal upheaval and connect it to external upheavals that were happening.”

Other more localized fights over racial and economic injustices captured the attention of young worker leaders. Also in 2011, thousands of people occupied the Wisconsin State Capitol to oppose Governor Scott Walker’s attack on public sector workers’ rights. Shortly thereafter the National Guard was deployed against US citizens in Ferguson, Missouri protesting the police murder of 18-year-old Mike Brown in 2014. And at Standing Rock in 2016, the Sioux Nation and their allies fought to protect their land and water from the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.

For many young workers leaders, these events complicated their view of authority figures, as they navigated contradictions between what they were hearing from parents, teachers, and politicians, and what they saw for themselves. One union tech worker remembered the introduction of right-to-work legislation in their state. “That started a lot of talk about [unions] with my grandmother and different people,” they recalled. “And so that was around the time I learned what a union was and actually argued with a teacher over right to work because the teacher was going to actually vote for it, even though the teacher was a union member.” Later, as a young adult, they witnessed the “militaristic response to unarmed and nonviolent movements” in visits to Ferguson, Standing Rock, and Flint, Michigan in solidarity with these struggles. Their main takeaway was that “any time you threaten the money, they start bringing the guns out.”

Teachers strikes’ were among the few labor actions young worker leaders witnessed as children and teens, and multiple young worker leaders recalled learning the importance of solidarity in supporting their teachers in these struggles. A postal worker remembered:

**AT ONE POINT IN MY HIGH SCHOOL CAREER, MY TEACHERS DID GO ON STRIKE AND MY WORLD HISTORY TEACHER WAS VERY VOCAL ABOUT HER UNION PARTICIPATION. AND SO ALL I KNEW ABOUT UNIONS WAS ESSENTIALLY THAT THEY WERE NECESSARY TO ENSURE THAT MY TEACHERS COULD AFFORD TO LIVE.**

Several young worker leaders recalled these and other mass mobilizations as moments where they began to understand the power of collective action, as well as the risks.

For many young worker leaders, the gap between the promise of the American Dream and the inequality they were witnessing and experiencing instilled the importance of critical thinking. These critical events and experiences prompted

many young worker leaders to seek out self education and personal reflection to understand the precarity they were feeling on multiple levels. They sought language for what they were seeing, and in doing so began to deepen their understanding of climate justice issues such as environmental racism and climate migration, as well as the intersection of climate change with militarism, imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy and systemic racism. As changes in weather patterns became increasingly visible, young worker leaders concluded that biking to work, following a vegetarian diet, and recycling religiously wouldn't cut it if the 1% are driving our political and economic systems. Thus they came to believe that an unjust economic system is causing climate change, and that responding to it requires taking on political and economic power structures directly at the intersection of these struggles for justice and a living planet.

## **CLIMATE GENERATION(S) & THE EMERGENCE OF A YOUTH CLIMATE MOVEMENT: "I'VE SEEN THINGS CHANGE REALLY FAST BEFORE AND MAYBE THEY WILL AGAIN"**

Young worker leaders felt climate change and its impacts deeply and personally—shaping their priorities, politics, and generational identities—but they did not allow it to remain a personal issue. In response to the mental and emotional impacts, many sought out opportunities to engage with climate organizations and actions both to fight against a sense of isolation and for a better future. Their varied early experiences with activism convey an important reality: the climate generation is really multiple generations spanning nearly 20 years in a time of rapid social and political change.

The youngest climate activists we spoke to, still in their teens at the time of the interviews, described connecting their school environmental groups to national youth climate spaces, gaining organizing skills, learning climate policy, and engaging with nonprofits, and in some cases unions, before they entered the workforce. They benefited from a huge growth in infrastructure for youth climate organizing with the founding of organizations like the Sunrise Movement, Zero Hour and Fridays for the Future in 2017 and '18. Several young worker leaders referenced Greta Thunberg and School Strikes for Climate that started in 2018 and exploded globally in 2019, as well as the lawsuit Juliana vs. United States, filed in 2015 by 21 youth plaintiffs against the US government for violating their right to "life, liberty and property" through its support of the fossil fuel industry. Still more referenced the Green New Deal Resolution introduced in 2019 as a framework that validated and clarified the connections between economic and environmental justice they had been attempting to uncover for themselves. These moments awakened young worker leaders, and the broader public, to the fact that young people have power to push for change, providing an antidote to the depression and anxiety that often accompanies discussions of climate collapse.

## **WORKER SPOTLIGHT: STUDENT ORGANIZING**

One 17-year-old union grocery workers' story was particularly demonstrative of the power of youth climate organizing, as well as the challenges of transitioning into the labor movement. They began their climate activism with their high school's environmental group: WE PLANNED OUR SCHOOL

**INVOLVEMENT IN [THE 2019 GLOBAL CLIMATE STRIKE]. [...] I THINK SOMETIMES WHEN I TELL PEOPLE, "OH, YEAH, I WAS PART OF THIS ENVIRONMENTAL CLUB AT SCHOOL," THEY'RE LIKE, "OH, CUTE." I'M LIKE, OH NO, WE ACTUALLY DID THINGS AND WROTE OUT PROPOSALS AND ALLOCATED OUR BUDGET AND REALLY ACTUALLY DID THINGS.**

This work included engaging with cafeteria staff around lunch logistics, understanding the heightened organizing risks for international students and creating an alternative action plan for them, and engaging directly with administrators, both allied and otherwise, in their school. Taking on these meaningful responsibilities allowed them a deeper understanding of the various stakeholders in organizing efforts, including workers whose crucial role is often ignored.

Considering their future, the young worker has decided to pursue a degree in civil engineering because they see it as a “sweet spot” in contributing to “transitioning into a more green society.” Though their climate organizing has already equipped them with skills relevant to union engagement, they are unsure of how to bring climate concerns into their union: “Sometimes I can kind of pay my dues and maybe be a little bit more removed just because I don’t think it’s my area of expertise.” Admittedly, they “don’t know too much about [unions]” and are curious “to just see what they actually do day-to-day.”

In contrast, older workers recalled early experiences with organizing in spaces that were less attuned to the needs and interests of young people. A 29-year old graduate student worker reflected that though they were interested in social justice from a young age, “The term youth organizer was not a thing when we were in school. We really wanted to be involved, but [...] didn’t have access to a lot of things, and that included activism and the language of activism and organizing.” Others observed that concepts like socialism, unionism, racial justice, and mutual aid have moved from the fringes of movements to the mainstream, opening space for conversations and demands that didn’t feel possible in their earliest organizing attempts. A 31-year old public sector worker reflected on how these dynamics play out in their workplace:

**THE NEWER FOLKS WHO ARE YOUNGER AND WORK AT MY AGENCY ARE JUST LIKE, “WE DON’T CARE, WE’RE JUST DOING IT.” I FEEL LIKE THEY’RE JUST DRIVEN IN A DIFFERENT WAY THAN I AM. I FEEL LIKE I HAVE TO FIGHT A HEALTHY RESPECT FOR RULES AND THE SYSTEM SOMEWHAT. AND I THINK GEN Z IS LIKE, “SCREW IT, WE’RE CHANGING THINGS.”**

Observing these intergenerational dynamics, workers described a collaborative relationship, with older workers charting new territory for difficult conversations in their unions and organizations, and younger workers leveraging this groundwork for bigger and bolder wins.

Young worker leaders noted in particular the shift in the mainstream environmental movement from a narrow focus on conservation to a more intersectional climate and environmental justice analysis as evidence that change is possible and that young people can lead it. A 35-year-old union electrician reflected: “I’ve already watched the world change so much so fast that even though [climate change] seems like an insurmountable problem to

me, I also know, what the hell do I know? I’ve seen things change really fast before and maybe they will again.” Participating in and witnessing collective action and its impacts was far and away the most common source of hope for young worker leaders. They believe change is possible because they have witnessed, shaped, and in some cases benefited from it. Their early experiences with work deepened their understanding of how necessary and difficult enacting this change is.



## II. SHAPING CHOICES, LABORING THROUGH THE STORM

Young worker leaders' early years represent a multitude of pathways to awareness of environmental and economic precarity, and the underlying systems inequality. This awareness contributes to a concern about their personal futures as well as an understanding of how these futures are shaped and limited by systems of power, and therefore contingent on collective decisions and actions. Whether they call it "climate grief" or "climate anxiety," a sense of personal, societal, and planetary instability that will only worsen shapes how young worker leaders make major life decisions as well as how they show up for work every day. Many shared the sentiment of this union higher education worker, who said they "think about climate change constantly every day. It's like an intrusive thought. It's the background noise of life. You can't avoid it now." This feeling of instability is in turn compounded by the impacts of climate change on work, and the knowledge of how this work contributes to further climate destruction.

In addition to an uncertain planetary future, young workers must still contend with economic insecurity. Indeed, almost half of young people describe high levels of financial anxiety. [15] A union public sector worker said that a lack of stability made them prone to immobilizing panic attacks:

**IT'S REALLY UNFORTUNATE THAT WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY THAT MAKES [ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION] NORMAL FOR PEOPLE. I MEAN, SOMETIMES JUST THE THOUGHT OF WORKING UNTIL I'M SIXTY SEVEN AND A HALF [MAKES IT] HARD TO GET OUT OF BED IN THE MORNING. IT'S A SIGN THAT SOMETHING NEEDS TO CHANGE.**

Though work holds different meanings for different groups, employment has been broadly accepted as the primary means by which people earn wages to sustain themselves and their families in the present, while also laying the foundation for a better life in the future. [16] This meaning is complicated when the two purposes conflict: when the work we do to sustain ourselves today jeopardizes the possibility of better lives in the future. Young worker leaders navigate this tension as they attempt to make choices about their futures, frequently bumping up against the reality that these choices are limited by systemic barriers. For instance, a

graduate student from the Gulf South who has been concerned about the climate from a young age has many friends who work in the oil and gas industry, because "whenever my friends and siblings would graduate from high school, right at eighteen they could go make six figures on a rig. And that's not the reality of solar."

Many young worker leaders shared the experience of this union construction worker who relayed that "You can't miss one monthly billing cycle without things going to shit, like you just can't. So I think that people get so tied up in their personal and work lives." Though they recognized their self-interest in climate advocacy and therefore want to be more engaged in climate organizing, varying degrees of insecurity, low capacity, and other barriers keep these workers from being able to act as fully as they would like. Thus climate change complicates both core purposes of work, as young worker leaders become acutely aware of how participating in our current economic system forces them to advance climate destruction even as its impacts make it more difficult to make ends meet.

## SUSTAINING THEMSELVES: “WHO IS GOING TO SAVE US? OR “THIS IS THE REST OF MY LIFE” OR “COMPLETE INSTABILITY ALL THE TIME”

As they enter the workforce, many young worker leaders across industries described feeling trapped in an unjust economic system which keeps them from meeting basic needs. “We have fallen into this habit of working - as a norm - ten, twelve [or] more hours a day,” said a union stagehand:

**FROM A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE, IT'S NOT SUSTAINABLE. IT WEARS PEOPLE DOWN. THEY WIND UP WITH HEALTH ISSUES – PHYSICAL, MENTAL, EMOTIONAL. IT DISCONNECTS PEOPLE FROM FAMILIES. IT MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE BECAUSE OF THE SOCIETAL PRESSURE ON WOMEN TO BE MOTHERS AND CAREER PERSONS.**

A union pharmacist went into more detail about the insecurity that comes with tying essential services like healthcare to employment: “I have it all worked out for where I’m at right now, but if I were to lose my job, it would mean a lot of changes as someone with a chronic illness.” And if the employer can’t be relied on for healthcare, then young workers have to rely on someone else. A non-union university researcher told us about their reliance on family for childcare, and how this factored into their choice to move when they had a child, concluding, “If people don’t have those support systems, I don’t know how you make it on your own these days.”

Some young worker leaders have attributed

this economic uncertainty and insecurity to shifts in the kinds of jobs available to them. As contracting becomes more pervasive, local economies rely on large, often multinational corporations, and fewer and fewer jobs include benefits that contribute to long-term stability, including professional development, pensions, healthcare and union membership, contributing to a sense of “downward mobility.” There is a pervasive sense that people are working more and earning less, despite advances in technology that could contribute to opposite outcomes. But there is another force making this struggle for basic needs harder: climate change.

### WORKER SPOTLIGHT: EXTREME WEATHER

When discussing their experience with climate change at work, one young worker leader described a scene that could come straight out of a dystopian novel. They had just moved into a dorm to begin job training at a college in the northwest. Although they had become accustomed to wildfire season, in recent years, it had gotten worse. And 2020 was the worst yet. On their first day of work, they awoke to ash seeping through the dorm room window. “It looked literally apocalyptic outside,” they said. “The sun turns orange, and you can’t see the building next to you... you couldn’t see your hand in front of you, it was so smoky.”

Yet work continued. Coworkers laughed and joked like nothing was out of the ordinary. Virtual trainings proceeded as planned, with everyone expected to join with cameras on and actively participate. There was “zero acknowledgement” from their employer; instead, the attitude was “let’s just try to ignore it and keep working.” Neither did the employer provide any personal protective equipment (PPE) or safety guidance as they navigated smoke and ash “so thick it was like raining.”

Then their phone started ringing. Coworkers at a nearby camp where they worked as the director told them that the fires were fast approaching. Family members called in a panic, trying to decide whether to evacuate and where to go. They were terrified and it all became too much. “I would just lay on the floor of

my dorm room and cry because I felt like this is the rest of my life. Terrifying things are going to happen like this... and I'm going to be expected to work through it until I die."

Although one of the more extreme examples, many aspects of this young worker leaders' experience resonated with stories we heard from others. Climate change was increasing young worker leaders' exposure to unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and employers expected them to just work through it. At the same time, the need to work to sustain themselves was increasing their exposure to these climate impacts. Few employers seemed to take the climate threat and reality seriously, and workers paid the cost.

When asked about climate impacts on their job and work, young worker leaders cited health and safety as top concerns and described working in extreme heat (e.g., working outdoors or in unairconditioned buildings), exposure to increased air pollution (e.g., from wildfires), and dangers getting to and from work (e.g., driving through snow and ice storms, last minute evacuation for hurricanes). Disasters and extreme weather events, in particular, had endangered many workers. A union grocery worker in the northwest, for example, described working during a record-breaking heat wave where temperatures reached 110°F. At night, the employer refused to run the AC and during the day, "the AC doesn't circulate into the freight room. We're back there sorting freight, and there is literally no air movement. [...] It was awful, honestly. It was really, really terrible."

Other young worker leaders encountered dangerous conditions commuting to and from work during disasters and extreme weather events. A public sector worker in California explained that, being without a car, they now have to figure out new ways to get to work or make arrangements to work remotely during wildfire season because biking in the smoke causes nausea and headaches. [17] A postal worker in the northwest described a harrowing experience trying to get home from work in a winter storm after rescuing a coworker who had gotten stuck in the snow:

**WE'RE TRYING TO MAKE OUR WAY IN THE ONLY AVAILABLE PATH, WHICH IS KIND OF THE MOST TREACHEROUS, AND WE'RE DRIVING ACROSS THIS LITTLE BRIDGE AREA WHERE WE ARE VERY COGNIZANT OF THE FACT THAT WE COULD SLIDE OFF THE BRIDGE INTO THIS ICY RIVER. IT'S 2:00 IN THE MORNING. WHO WAS GOING TO FIND US? WHO WAS GOING TO SAVE US? AND SO AT THAT POINT, I JUST KEPT THINKING TO MYSELF. [...] "I'M GOING TO DIE OUT HERE AND MY BABY IS GOING TO GROW UP WITHOUT A MOTHER. ALL FOR WHAT? FOR WHAT?" IT'S JUST LIKE, THIS IS RIDICULOUS.**

Shaken by the experience, they collected similar stories from coworkers in hopes of pushing management to make a change but the effort failed to go anywhere. Though they have a union contract which includes "Act of God" provisions, arbitrators determined that this storm did not meet the definition despite the clear danger it presented to workers who risked their lives to get to work only to be stranded in snow banks for hours instead. In these instances, as in many others, workers approached management only to have their concerns downplayed or dismissed.

Climate disruptions at work and lack of accommodations from employers were relevant even for workers with the flexibility to work from home, in some cases made more poignant by geographic separation that locates workers from the same "shop" in different environmental conditions. A union nonprofit worker recounted their experience during the 2022 water crisis in Jackson, Mississippi when flooding damaged the water treatment plant and left 150,000 residents without water:



MY EMPLOYER DIDN'T OFFER ANY CHANGES IN OUR WORK SCHEDULE... [THEY WERE] JUST KIND OF EXPECTING PEOPLE TO CONTINUE THEIR NORMAL DUTIES, WHICH, IN RETROSPECT, WAS REALLY STRESSFUL AND DIFFICULT. [...] IT WAS PRETTY STRESSFUL TO NOT HAVE WATER AND BE WORRYING ABOUT PEOPLE AROUND YOU AND IF THEY WERE OK, AND NOT REALLY HAVING MUCH DIRECTION OR SUPPORT FROM YOUR EMPLOYER.

Though remote work often conflates living and working conditions, compounding climate impacts on the home for these workers, workers of all kinds are encountering the reality that climate impacts beyond the workplace make it more difficult to achieve economic stability.

Issues of housing, transit, health and safety were of particular concern for young worker leaders. A graduate student in the Gulf South described layering crises when they had a hit-and-run the day before a major hurricane devastated their community. They explained that high insurance rates due to

flooding make this kind of situation more common in their city. "I am running out of money for all of these emergencies," they stated simply, adding that "it comes back to complete instability all the time. I have no routine." Thus young worker leaders across a range of industries have come to realize that the choice between climate protection and economic stability is one they literally can't afford to make.



### WHAT IS A GOOD JOB?:

**"NO ONE NEEDS A RETIREMENT FUND IF EVERYTHING IS ON FIRE"**

Early experiences with work in a warming world shape how young worker leaders conceptualize meaningful work and "good jobs," contributing to an evolving understanding of what they need from their employers and what kind of work they want to do. In addition to changing working conditions, climate change threatens the very existence of some jobs, rendering them either impossible or unnecessary. Some young worker leaders recognize that their interest in a more sustainable economy means that their job must be radically changed if not eliminated entirely. Still others enter the workforce with visions of how their work can contribute to climate solutions, only to have their sights quickly narrowed by the challenges of sustaining themselves within a system that prioritizes profit over people. The struggle to balance material and emotional needs in the immediate and long term creates unavoidable contradictions in young worker leaders' lives.

In the long term, many young worker leaders wanted to invest in their futures by buying houses, having children, building retirement funds, or seeking professional development opportunities. But they also felt the burden of choosing between enjoying their lives by pursuing their passions, hobbies and interests, or fighting for a planet that will be livable for the children they are too anxious or depressed to have. A postal worker described struggling to decide whether to buy a house: “With climate change, what’s the point of even owning a home, because it’s gonna be underwater by the time you’re looking to retire anyway. Or you’re going to have to evacuate from wherever you’re at because it’s going to burn down.” A union graduate student worker talked about saving for retirement: “I put money into a 401k, but I’m like, why am I doing this? The world’s going to burn down, I’m just going to end up in a Mad Max world and be able to keep pulling money out of a 401k?” As a result, the traditional markers of adulthood – having children, purchasing a home, establishing a stable career—became questionable goals for many, in addition to often feeling out of reach economically.

As such, many young worker leaders struggled to think concretely about their personal futures when asked what they ideally envision twenty years from now. “I’d just like to build stuff that isn’t stupid,” said a union construction worker:

**TWENTY YEARS FROM NOW, MAGIC WAND, WE’RE 20 YEARS INTO A TRANSITION PROJECT IN TERMS OF OUR TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUR ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE AND OUR HOUSING. AND ALSO I’M WORKING 20 HOURS A WEEK GETTING PAID FOR 40. AND I’VE GOT TIME TO SIT ON THE LABOR COUNCIL THAT I’M ON AND TO BE ABLE TO SIT ON MY PORCH AND LOOK AT THE FLOWERS.**

Other workers were more vague: a tech worker in California aspires to “finding the least evil thing with the most work life balance”; a care worker in Oregon hopes to “be in a collective of people doing the work that I’m interested in”; a union organizer in Pennsylvania said, “I want to do work that I care about. I want to have health insurance. I want to not be a jaded alcoholic.”

### Futre Outlook on Ecnomic Security & Climate Solutions

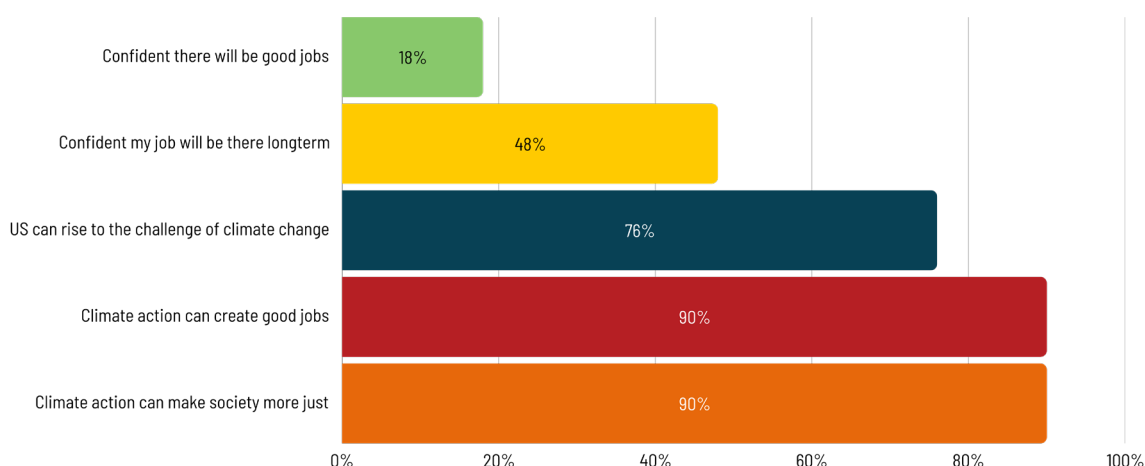


Figure 2. Survey findings on young workers’ outlook on economic security and climate solutions (N=389). Out of young workers surveyed, only 18% agreed that in the future there will be ample opportunity for good jobs in their community that include good pay and benefits. Less than half (48%) expressed confidence that their own job would exist long term. At the same time, young workers saw the potential for climate action to address social and economic problems. 90% of survey respondents agreed that addressing climate change offers opportunities for good paying jobs, as well as opportunities to make society more just. More than three quarters believed that the American people have the potential to rise to the challenge of addressing climate change at the scale of the crisis.



Put simply, they want to be helpful, healthy, connected to the people and land around them, and plugged into a broader movement that makes all of this possible. They envision themselves as building a better future but also getting lots of rest, and putting more energy toward cultivating friendships and families and gardens. But right now they are encountering the reality that this may not be possible within our current political economy, as they struggle to find work with good wages and benefits, stable schedules and adequate paid time off. To many young worker leaders it seems impossible to have long-term career prospects that also include room for personal growth and learning, positive relationships with coworkers and community members, and work that contributes to a good or service that people want without exacerbating racial and economic inequality or environmental harm. As a result, many young workers were pessimistic about the future of work but also saw the potential of climate action to address many of these challenges (Figure 2).

With visions of home ownership or retirement, some young worker leaders seek out work they hope will be a viable long-term career only to realize climate change poses a threat to their job security. A refinery worker described this dynamic:

**WHEN I'M AT THE REFINERY AND I'M HIGH UP, I DO SEE THE SMOKE AND THE GAS UP IN THE AIR, AND I KNOW THAT'S NOT GOOD. BUT I HAVEN'T REALLY HEARD MY COWORKERS TALK ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT YET. BUT I AM AWARE OF WHAT IT'S DOING TO THE WEATHER AND THE AIR AND ALL THAT STUFF. I KNOW THE FIELD THAT I'M IN RIGHT NOW, THE MONEY'S GOOD AND ALL, BUT ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN, BECAUSE OUR JOB IS NOT IN HIGH DEMAND AS MUCH AS ELECTRICIANS.**



A union construction worker shared a similar experience: “There seems to be a general consensus even on union jobs that are like, ‘OK, [climate change] is a problem.’ But everyone is kind of living day to day and that’s kind of how I live.” They went on: “Construction gets more difficult in crazy temperatures, so that’s definitely an issue that people are talking about on sites.” These workers struggle to reconcile the reality that discussions about climate change are often either taboo or politicized in the workplace even as they have a self interest in understanding and responding to the climate crisis.

Beyond those with work directly tied to the fossil fuel industry, climate impacts pose a threat to the nature of work for anyone who works outdoors. For some, this means



eliminating the aspects that attracted them to the work in the first place and disrupting or reducing the meaning they ascribed to their work. One childcare worker, for example, told us that poor air quality and extreme heat meant that they were no longer able to take children outside as much. Because of this, they were reconsidering their career choice: “I don’t want to work with children if I’m going to be stuck inside all day, every day. That’s not fun and enjoyable and inspiring for me. That’s not the work that I want to be doing for my life.”

As such, some young worker leaders felt called to careers that centered on climate protection. Sometimes this felt like an obligation driven primarily by anxiety and uncertainty. One student, for example, felt that choosing anything else was irresponsible and meaningless in current conditions:

**EVER SINCE I WAS A REALLY LITTLE KID, I LOVED PHYSICS AND SPACE, ASTRONOMY AND THINGS LIKE THAT. BUT AS I GOT OLDER [...] I JUST FELT LIKE I COULDN’T DO THAT [...] IT FELT IRRESPONSIBLE PERSONALLY [...] BECAUSE I FELT LIKE WHAT’S THE POINT IN STUDYING STUFF LIKE THAT IF WE’RE ALL GOING TO BE DEAD FROM CLIMATE CHANGE IN A FEW DECADES? THAT SOUNDS REALLY MORBID, BUT THOSE WERE ACTUALLY THE THOUGHTS THAT WERE GOING THROUGH MY HEAD.**

A union grocery worker shared a similar sentiment. Reflecting on their families’ economic struggles through the Great Recession, the experience “made me want to be financially stable in the future. [...] I thought, I want to be a doctor. I want to make a lot of money, and that’ll make me better.” This changed through self reflection and seeing the current state of the world. Now, they focus instead on stability through “a solid support system. I need to work with my community and be involved, and also make sure the Earth isn’t dying because no one needs a retirement fund if everything’s on fire.”

Others sought out work they hoped would positively impact the climate, only to realize how difficult this is within our current economic system. A public sector landscape architect expressed frustration that, while their work had the potential to alleviate climate impacts, it was also making cities hotter:

**IT EATS ME UP INSIDE JUST TO SEE THAT WE’RE PUTTING MORE BLACKTOP ASPHALT TO CONTRIBUTE TO MORE HEAT ISLAND EFFECT. AND SO TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT IN THE WORK THAT I DO IS VERY FRUSTRATING. THERE’S NOT MUCH OF AN AVENUE TO PUSH BACK ON THAT.**

Though an interest in green development brought them into this work, they quickly realized that the “industry is captured by real estate and it is just as tied to the fossil fuel industry as energy.” This meant that a “growth at any cost” mentality dominated development: “build it, build it on the shoreline, build it in the low lying water plain. It doesn’t matter. If they can bring out a year’s worth of profits, they will.”

Several young worker leaders came to understand the funding structures of their industries as limits to their ability to enact meaningful change. This was particularly relevant for public sector workers, who described shifting priorities, directives and budget allocations with changes in political leadership. A technician in a national lab entered the field in part because they loved soil microbiology and wanted to use this knowledge to restore the environment through bioremediation. But once they started the job, they realized little of this work happens in practice: “I’m holding out, perhaps, that they’ll eventually try to clean up all of our toxic waste and pollution in the environment. But until then, it pays the bills.” Still, they’ve learned that compromising on this vision doesn’t guarantee present-day stability:

**SINCE DONALD TRUMP, ESPECIALLY, EVERYONE'S BUREAUCRATIC SURVIVALIST IMPULSE SORT OF HIT [...] WHEREAS BEFORE IT WAS LIKE, "BE PROUD AND SHOW THE WORLD YOUR WORK," NOW IT'S LIKE, "STAY LOW OR YOU'RE GONNA GET SHOT." [...] PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE THOUGHT THIS WOULD CHANGE WITH BIDEN AND IT HASN'T BECAUSE OUR WORK IS JUST AS TIED TO WHATEVER FEDERAL BUDGET PRIORITIES THERE ARE.**

They struggled to envision being able to use their full expertise, in part due to a highly siloed workplace, noting: "There's no organization [...] There's nothing that's going to preserve your right to speak some strong scientific truth to power."

Government and non-profit workers described especially how the funding structures of their sectors create inherent contradictions for their mission-driven work. A water regulation worker for a city government said, "We're telling people not to use water, but that's how we get our income. We've successfully advertised for water conservation, but that means we have less money. If we have less

money, that means we need to cut money somewhere." Thus the outcome of advancing their mission is draining their resources for continuing this work, straining workers' capacity and impacting their ability to further advance the mission.

Other workers described how bureaucratic processes tied to funding require a lot of time and energy that might otherwise be used to move their work forward. A non-profit worker attempting to organize around the massive emissions of the transportation sector reflected on this challenge:

**I WISH THERE WERE MORE PEOPLE FUNDING TRANSPORTATION POLICY. [...] I WISH THERE WAS MORE LONG-TERM FUNDING, I WISH PEOPLE WOULD GIVE FOR LONGER PERIODS OF TIME, MORE SUSTAINED FUNDING, MORE FUNDING FOR JUST GENERAL OPERATING [...] I THINK THERE'S A LOT OF THOUGHT IN THE PHILANTHROPY SECTOR THAT THEY WANT TO GET THE BALL ROLLING, BUT THEY DON'T WANT TO HAVE YOU BE DEPENDENT ON THEM, AND I THINK THAT ALSO NEEDS TO CHANGE TO HAVE PEOPLE JUST MORE RELIABLY FUND THINGS.**

Another worker reflected on the strategic implications of this dynamic on the national environmental non-profit they work for, explaining that many of the nonprofit workers are "a lot more radical than probably the organization's stances" because the organization is "influenced by its big donors and by whatever grants that they get."

Ironically, multiple young worker leaders described their roles as staff of mission-driven organizations inhibiting their ability to engage in meaningful organizing. Limiting factors included "workloads that are not human," low wages, and an inability to impact the strategic approach of the organizations. As one non-profit worker reflected:

**ONE THING THAT REALLY FRUSTRATES ME ABOUT ORGANIZING WORK IS THAT PEOPLE DON'T PUT THE VALUE ON ORGANIZING AND THE WORKERS THAT I FEEL LIKE THEY SHOULD BECAUSE THE ORGANIZERS ARE THE ONES WHO ARE DOING THE GRUNT WORK AND THEY SHOULD BE PAID MORE ADEQUATELY.**

Several mission-driven workers described how this reality shapes the demographics of their industry, ultimately excluding those with the deepest experience with equity and justice from the work. A sustainability manager for a

city government reflected that though they have seen discussions of environmental justice become more prominent in their work, “There’s still a need for a deepening of the work, because a lot of the people still in power, who can make decisions, at least in the policy realm, are still white folks, so there still needs to be that kind of power shift.” As such, this worker also advances environmental justice through volunteer community organizing, with other folks who share their experiences, identities and priorities. In their paid job, they do “a lot of teaching people how to do things the way I think it should be done based on what I’ve learned through community organizing.” They see their role as an intermediary between paid and unpaid organizing as a major contribution to both spaces, bridging gaps of infrastructure and information. Yet when they attempt to share insights from their community at work, “I’m often told that, Oh, this is the way that we’ve done things, so we can’t just do it that way.”

Several nonprofit workers cited these struggles as motivation for unionizing their workplace, with the hope that giving the staff a collective voice will allow them to not only improve working conditions but also influence the organizations’ strategic direction. Another prominent approach young worker leaders described was balancing paid work with unpaid work to meet their various needs for economic stability, professional development and skill building, a community and support system, and the opportunity to enact meaningful change.



Others pivoted their career trajectories entirely in search of this balance. A union construction worker chose to leave nonprofit work after six years upon reaching “a good point in my career and want[ing] to get more involved back with community organizing and things like that, but it just [didn’t] pay very well.” They went on: “I was looking at either going back to college [but] I didn’t want to go into debt. I remembered my time in Americorps doing a little bit of electrical work and so I just decided to quit and go become an electrician.” Similarly, a union grocery worker described feeling like they had “aged out” of the youth climate organization they worked for, and sought out more leadership as a volunteer

member of a national organization. They transitioned to private sector work because “I knew that it was unsustainable to continue doing paid organizing work and volunteer organizing work at the same tempo and pace that I was doing it.”

Through early experiences with work, young worker leaders across a range of industries have come to realize that all jobs are climate jobs – both impacted by and contributing to changes in the environment. Many feel stuck in the cycle of taking jobs with healthcare and good wages while their work negatively impacts the health of their bodies and communities. They struggle to reconcile their needs as workers and as whole people, with needs beyond the workplace that impact their ability to achieve the economic stability, climate protection, and community engagement that allow for truly sustainable lives. They recognize that environmental conditions are working conditions. As such, some are attempting to change their working conditions to allow them to better execute the mission of their work, while others realize that the mission of organizations and companies they work for must change in order to allow for sustainable working conditions.

Though their paths are diverse, many young worker leaders came to a similar conclusion: that in order to sustain themselves, they need a community support system and they need to change the fundamental nature of their work. Thus, as we’ll discuss later on, organizing became a survival tactic. Nothing made this reality more clear than the events of 2020.



## THE PANDEMIC AND THE UPRISINGS: “I FEEL LIKE THE LAST FEW YEARS HAVE MADE ME REALLY HESITANT TO MAKE PREDICTIONS ABOUT ANYTHING EVER” OR “2020 WAS A CRAZY YEAR”

The overlapping COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in the spring of 2020 brought public health and safety concerns to the forefront in every home, workplace and community. Young worker leaders suddenly felt the direct impacts of a mismanaged global crisis that cut across lines of class and race, and were forced to make choices that previously seemed unimaginable. Their calculations changed as they began to reconsider their relationships to the spaces they live and work in, the people they choose to share that space with, the demand for their work and the way it is valued. COVID-19's impacts were highly disparate, with pre-existing health conditions and inequitable access to health care providing a visceral and heartbreaking display of the impacts of systemic racism and an economy designed to generate profit at any cost. The seeds of distrust for public and private sector decision-makers who were supposed to be in charge grew as young workers navigated life threatening health and safety issues, often as new or low-level employees. With the murder of George Floyd, these seeds exploded into bloom, bringing young workers into the streets and rapidly arming them with organizing and direct action skills.

While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted everyone globally, young worker leaders shared some of the unique ramifications for people in their age range. Young workers are more likely to have young children, exacerbating the challenges of childcare, both for those who worked remotely and those who could not. Many of them also suddenly found their workplace responsibilities shifting as they were asked to provide tech support to older colleagues or take on more of the rapidly growing digital workload for their organizations. Others found that being at the bottom of their organizations meant added responsibilities providing direct services that people so desperately needed in ways they were not trained or equipped for. And many young worker leaders missed out on hands-on training experiences that are fundamental to success in their fields, as well as opportunities to build relationships with colleagues and older workers in their organizations. A union nurse shared, “With COVID, we’re trying to minimize risk, minimize time. You’re not able to sit in that room for hours on end practicing your skills and stuff, we have to get in and get out. It wasn’t beneficial to my new graduates that were learning.” A public sector worker described the lasting impacts of pandemic workplace policies: “There was a hiring freeze during the pandemic and then even before that, my team was understaffed [...] So ever since I’ve gotten here, they’ve just been throwing work at me.”

Several young worker leaders shared how living through the pandemic shifted their world view in fundamental ways. A graduate student shared that while they had previously felt guilt whenever they weren’t working, they learned to give themselves the grace to spend time doing things they enjoy and care about, reflecting that, “just with all of the loss and grief and funerals, it’s like, no, life has multiple purposes and I can hold space for all of them. I just can’t hold space for all of them all the time.” A union organizer reflected, “It’s really hard to envision what’s going to happen. I feel like the last few years have made me really hesitant to make predictions about anything ever.” Echoing this sentiment, an independent contractor said: “It’s really hard to envision the future, especially with what’s going on in politics and democracy and climate change.” This made planning or investing in the future difficult when “we just have no idea what the world is going to be like.”

This sense of uncertainty gave new meaning to the concept of a safety net for many young worker leaders, contributing to a heightened awareness of the protections and privileges of different groups. A union construction worker in New England shared:

**I LOST MY HEALTH INSURANCE LAST YEAR DURING THE PANDEMIC BECAUSE OUR HEALTH INSURANCE IS BASED ON THE NUMBER OF HOURS THAT YOU WORK. AND SO I FELL INTO THAT CAMP OF WHEN YOUR HEALTH INSURANCE IS LINKED TO YOUR JOB, THEN YOU NEED TO GO TO WORK, OR YOU DON'T HAVE HEALTH INSURANCE.**

A union educator described the ways the COVID-19 put broader economic disparity in sharp relief:

**FOR SOME FOLKS THE LAST YEAR AND HALF WAS LIKE, "OH, IT'S ANNOYING. I HAVE TO ORDER TAKEOUT." THERE'S A CLASS THING OF LIKE, "OH, I JUST WANT TO GET A HAIRCUT, I JUST WANT TO GO SEE A MOVIE IN THE THEATER," THAT KIND OF THING, VERSUS PEOPLE WHO ARE WORKING IN A WAREHOUSE OR IN A MEAT PACKING FACILITY OR IN CLOSE PROXIMITY AND HAVE TO GO THROUGH ALL THIS.**

Many turned to grassroots community organizing when they realized they couldn't expect the government or their employers to protect or provide for them. Mutual aid became a particularly prominent approach for young people to provide for each other. In the words of a union pharmacist, young people who were "left out to dry by the government establishment" realized that "we can just figure out what we have and share it among ourselves."

As the pandemic dragged on and more and more workers were urged to return to work in unsafe conditions, many young workers began to encounter the narrative that, "People don't want to work anymore. They don't want to get coughed and sneezed on and unemployment's too high." For this young worker leader and many others, the pandemic was an education in identifying and understanding the uneven social impacts, or "what the problem is and for whom it's a problem and why it's a problem and how it's a problem and what the ultimate impact is." Asking these questions led to the realization:

"The whole thing in the beginning was, 'Oh, we're all in this together.' And then it turned out, no, we're not. We're not all in this together at all." Several young worker leaders tied this to rhetoric surrounding climate change, with a graduate worker from Appalachia reflecting that "we talk about it as though climate change is this great equalizer and we are all facing it, but I think that that is used to shield from criticism and from the recognition that we're upholding these systems." Many young worker leaders believe that COVID-19 only exposed existing inequalities that are likely to remain prevalent as public health and safety crises become more common due to climate change. Because of this, they are thinking about how to be more organized for the next crisis.

Simultaneously, the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in the spring of 2020 catalyzed a summer of protest as simmering tensions brought on by police repression exploded into a cacophony of uprisings. "2020 was a crazy year," a refinery worker stated simply. "People got tired of the police brutality and all of the shooting, all that stuff. It just wasn't a small group of people that tried to stop the chaos that was going on, it was a large group of people." Many people found themselves reflecting on racial dynamics in ways that pushed them to challenge systems of power both in the streets and on the job site.

For many young worker leaders, the George Floyd uprisings contributed to a renewed sense of hope in the potential of grassroots people power, while also cementing a deep distrust for government and in particular the police, as they experienced or witnessed civilians engaged in peaceful protest being brutalized by these institutions. A nonprofit worker reflected,

NO ONE SAW THAT COMING, BUT IT ALMOST FELT LIKE A YEAR CAN HAPPEN IN A DAY. SO I STILL HAVE HOPE THAT EVEN THOUGH WE'RE NOT WHERE WE NEED TO BE AS A LABOR MOVEMENT, THAT WE CAN STILL BUILD POWER QUICKLY AND HOPEFULLY DO SOMETHING, HARNESS THAT POWER AND WIELD IT ENOUGH IN TIME TO MAKE AN IMPACT ON CLIMATE.



George Floyd protesters, 2020 Photo credit: [Dan Aasland](#), Flickr.

Through participation in the uprisings, they also came to believe that “having police as militarized and violent as they currently are will make it harder for any movement to move forward.”

## Important Social Issues

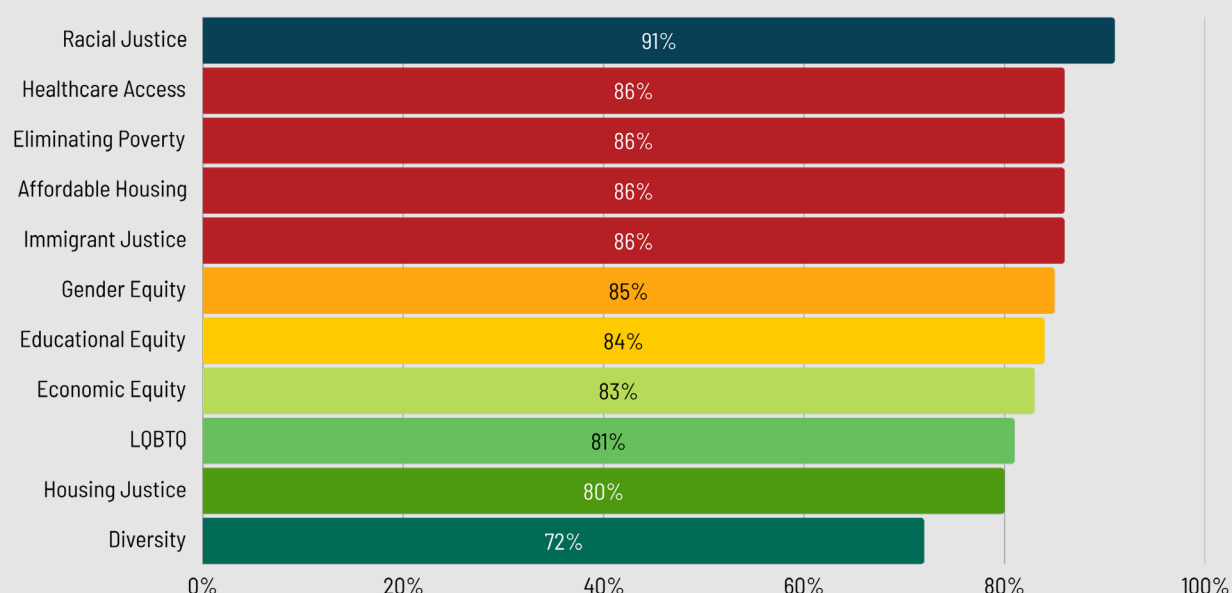


Figure 3. Survey findings on social issues important to young workers (N=389). While the majority of respondents chose all 12 of the listed options, it is notable that the highest percentage (91%) selected “Racial Justice” while the lowest percentage (71%) selected “Diversity.” Where previous generations may have identified these concepts as synonyms, for young worker leaders there is a clear distinction between an analysis rooted in justice, and what a union graduate student worker described as “the inadequate liberal framing” of diversity.

Through the convergence of the pandemic and the uprisings for Black lives, many young worker leaders were introduced to frameworks of divestment, abolition and decolonization that furthered their thinking about what is wrong with our current political economy and how it might be fixed. A union careworker reflected on the need to reallocate public resources to support caregivers: “If we shifted money that’s going to the police and prisons and put it into caregiving and got caregivers good paying jobs, we would see everybody doing a lot better.” A union graduate student worker reconsidered whether their job should exist at all, sharing that:



**I REALLY DO THINK THAT A DECOLONIZATION OF THE INSTITUTION OF ACADEMIA IS WHERE WE NEED TO BE GOING. [...] I DON'T WANT [MY CAREER IN ACADEMIA] TO BE SUSTAINABLE. I WANT TO REALLY DISRUPT THAT SYSTEM TO THE POINT WHERE IT DOESN'T EVEN LOOK LIKE WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE NOW. AND SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT'S GOING TO LOOK LIKE.**

A union staffer drew parallels between government and employers' choices about how to handle the pandemic and the unequally distributed impacts of environmental harm: "It's not an accident. It's not, oops, we accidentally put all these power plants here behind your house. [...] I find that racism and white supremacy are the core contradictions in our society that most of the other decisions get made around."

The simultaneous and global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the George Floyd uprisings prompted deep reflection on

intersecting systemic injustices for many young worker leaders, including interconnectedness and inequality across borders (see also Figure 3). Sustained protests in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd took place on every continent, contributing to movements to reform policing in other countries. [18] Palestinian organizers shared strategies for navigating state violence with Black American organizers, [19] while multinational corporate management of our supply chains and vaccine access highlighted life-threatening inequities in our global political economy. [20] The devastating impact of the pandemic on Indigenous communities in the United States and across the world, as well as the innovative strategies these communities used to protect themselves from the virus, raised questions of sovereignty and an interest in the landback movement. [21] These simultaneous public health and public safety crises against the backdrop of sustained economic and environmental precarity motivated many young worker leaders to rethink their roles in their families, communities, workplaces and the broader global economy.

In struggling to sustain themselves and their communities while still advancing their visions for change, young worker leaders were once again oriented toward the importance of belonging to a collective and the crucial connection between such belonging and the possibility of effecting systemic change. Their concerns about economic inequality and the climate crisis were exacerbated by an increasingly urgent and tangible question, articulated by a union educator: "How are we going to make sure that billionaires don't just blast off into space and say, 'Bye everybody, you should have recycled more!'" Young workers leaders had come to recognize the importance of building working class power to address climate change and found that in order to meaningfully organize for more sustainable lives, they had to build a political home for themselves in the labor movement.



"I hope that we can have cities that are livable, communities that are walkable, systems and societies that are built for what people actually need, not what drives profit."

## B. SURVIVING TO ORGANIZE <— —> ORGANIZING TO SURVIVE

### I. SHELTER FROM THE STORM: YOUNG WORKERS FIND LABOR UNIONS

A surge in support for organized labor over the last several years has been well documented, with strike waves and new organizing formations emerging to meet evolving needs, particularly in the context of compounding crises. According to a recent Gallup poll, approval of unions in the United States is at its highest point since 1965, with 77% of workers ages 18–34 expressing support for labor unions. [22] And a recent AFL-CIO poll found that 90% of people under the age of 30 view labor unions favorably. [23] For anyone who had not already been thinking about the importance of workplace protections, the events of 2020 put questions of labor, health and safety, and equity front and center. In search of institutions they could trust to promote and protect their economic stability, as well as avenues for pressuring government and employers to promote justice and equity, many young worker leaders found a foothold in the democratic infrastructure of unions.

Through the pandemic, some young worker leaders who were already union members became aware of benefits of unionism they had previously taken for granted or felt they didn't need. They received crucial information about workplace protections and public benefits from their unions, including support in accessing unemployment benefits for those who had been laid off. Others were able to provide input on workplace health and safety policies through management consultation with their union. In some cases, particularly in mission-driven organizations, young worker leaders described union infrastructure benefitting management in cohering and communicating feedback from staff at a time when capacity was limited. Several young worker leaders used grievance processes and participated in direct actions for the first time as contract violations suddenly became issues of life or death for both workers and the communities they serve. [24]

Many young worker leaders described the emotional impacts of the isolation they experienced during the pandemic. Restrictions on their ability to see the people and do the things they love outside of work deepened their appreciation for joy and community as core human needs. [25] Some union members turned to this infrastructure as a way to connect with people. An educator described union organizing as “a place for me to channel my helplessness and my rage” in order to “build something bigger that will create a change”:

**I FEEL LIKE I FOUND IN MY UNION LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE WHO WANT TO FIGHT TO MAKE OUR SCHOOLS BETTER AND OUR JOBS BETTER AND GET MORE RESPECT AT WORK. THAT HAS FELT VERY PURPOSEFUL FOR ME IN A YEAR THAT OTHERWISE I FELT REALLY HELPLESS AND REALLY ENRAGED.**

On a more “practical level,” the union also provided a means to “get protections and push back against the administration or against our district on things that change our work.”

Many young worker leaders became conscious of the complete lack of recourse for non-union workers facing the same challenges. As of 2023, only 10% of workers in the US are union members, with the percentage dropping to 6% in the private sector. [26] A union grocery worker who worked multiple jobs through the pandemic

noted material benefits of unionism in contrast to their non-union service sector jobs. Previously, they had “never interacted with a union” and just took “whatever the working conditions were for what they were.” This changed when their union advocated for them to get a COVID-19 vaccine.

**THAT REALLY CHANGED MY PERSPECTIVE. ALL MY PREVIOUS EMPLOYERS REALLY DIDN'T CARE AT ALL ABOUT OUR HEALTH AND SAFETY. [...] I WAS MORE EXPOSED EVERY DAY AS A SERVICE WORKER THAN I EVER WAS IN A GROCERY STORE. BUT I GOT MY VACCINE MUCH QUICKER IN A GROCERY STORE.**

injustice in their workplaces, or becoming more engaged in their existing unions to push for broader systemic change in their industries and in government policy. A union nonprofit worker reflected on this dynamic:

**I THINK FOR A LOT OF FOLKS, IT WAS LIKE, OK, WE'RE LISTENING AND GROWING AND LEARNING THROUGH THE UPRISING ABOUT HOW OUR SYSTEMS HAVE PERPETUATED RACIAL AND ECONOMIC INJUSTICE ALL THROUGHOUT SOCIETY, BUT PARTICULARLY IN THE WORKPLACE. AND IF I LOOK AT THAT AND I LOOK AROUND IN MY WORKPLACE, I SEE THAT THE ISSUES ARE STRUCTURAL AND TO HAVE POWER TO CHANGE STRUCTURE, A UNION IS NECESSARY.**

their collective voice, as well as integrating broader questions of justice and equity into their day to day lives.

Some young worker leaders who had already been engaged with their unions witnessed a surge of member engagement that opened up new possibilities, particularly for workers who were most vulnerable and burdened by the pandemic. In many instances, this also posed issues with capacity as unions struggled to keep up with unanticipated organizing drives in addition to increased contract violations and unfair labor practices. A service worker turned union organizer reflected on the opportunities that arose with the introduction of the concept of “essential workers,” and the challenge of seizing these opportunities amidst a struggle for survival:

**DISRESPECTED AND REALIZE THAT THEY ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE FUNCTIONING OF SOCIETY IN A WAY THAT THE BANKERS ARE NOT. [...] I WANT US TO HAVE AN INDUSTRY WIDE CONVERSATION ABOUT IT BECAUSE WE'RE IN A REALLY POWERFUL POSITION, AND I THINK, RIGHT NOW, ORGANIZATIONS ARE FEELING LIKE THEY'VE BEEN SPRINTING FOR TWO YEARS AND IT'S LIKE, WE'RE ALIVE, BUT WE'RE REALLY TIRED AND THAT'S REALLY REAL. BUT I'M ALSO LIKE, THIS IS A REALLY KEY POINT IN TIME AND WE NEED TO TALK TO EACH OTHER. [27]**

This led them to conclude that “service workers definitely need a union, especially after what happened in the pandemic.”

Beyond the struggle for survival, a number of young worker leaders directly attributed their engagement with union activities to their concerns about racial justice, with several forming unions to address racial

At the same time, they saw an urgency within people to take action: “There was this energy like, ‘I have to do something. What do I do? Where do I go?’ And I think it was easy for people if they had a union to be like ‘OK, I’ll get involved with that.’ Or if they didn’t, being like ‘Oh, maybe we should.’” Several young worker leaders described pushing their unions to pass resolutions, participate in actions, and create space for education and dialogue about racial justice in their workplaces and industries. They sought out unions as a means of exercising

Pre-COVID-19, many young worker leaders were awakening to the necessity of organizing. Now they know: worker organizing, particularly in labor unions, can make a life-or-death difference in times of crisis and being a union member opens up new opportunities to organize for issues beyond your most immediate needs. Thus the majority of young workers can now be categorized as non-union members who are supportive of unions, which poses a major organizing opportunity. [28] In order to close the gap, turning aspiring union members into active ones, we must interrogate why it exists.



## BENEFITS OF UNIONISM – WHY IS THE APPROVAL RATE SO HIGH?

Beyond the events of 2020, growing economic inequality and stagnant wages and benefits have shaped many young worker leaders' thinking about work, as we have seen. Being in a labor union appears as a significant source of security for young worker leaders on multiple levels. Benefits and protections that can come with being a union member offer one solution to easing the challenge of meeting your needs and also engaging in political action. As a building trades union member described:

**I JOINED BECAUSE OF THE OPPORTUNITY AND THE NEED TO ACTUALLY MAKE A MIDDLE-CLASS LIVING. BUT I ALSO HAVE JUST ALWAYS REALLY BEEN INTERESTED IN LABOR HISTORY AND LABOR POLITICS, AND I REALLY THOUGHT IT WOULD BE GREAT TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GET MORE POLITICALLY INVOLVED IN AN ORGANIZATION.**

Unions have always been vehicles for helping workers hold multiple priorities at once, facilitating collective action around shared interests so that individual workers aren't forced to compete for and compromise between fair wages and benefits, job security, health and safety, and a sense of solidarity, among other necessities. This role is only becoming more relevant in the face of climate change. Early experiences with work in a precarious environment have ingrained the importance of the many benefits unions can provide to young worker leaders, ranging from health and safety policies to Weingarten rights to a political home base.

At baseline, young worker leaders described economic stability, including good wages and benefits and regular and realistic work schedules, opening up space for people to think beyond their immediate needs and engage with their communities outside of work. Many compared experiences with union and non-union jobs. A union construction worker said:

**BEFORE JOINING THE TRADE, I WORKED REALLY LONG HOURS, SO IN ADDITION TO [...] THE FINANCIAL ASPECT THAT THE UNION HAS BEEN, IT'S ALSO CUT MY WORK HOURS. [...] AND THAT'S OPENED UP A LOT MORE TIME FOR ME TO SPEND WITH MY KIDS AND MY WIFE AND ALSO FOR ME TO DO RECREATIONAL THINGS, LIKE GOING TO MEETINGS, AND NOW I CAN BE MORE INVOLVED JUST OVERALL, LIKE WITH OUR UNION.**

Some young worker leaders have gone through apprenticeship programs, and highlighted the job security and economic mobility this paid training provides.

Further, several young worker leaders highlighted health and safety issues in giving them a tangible understanding of how unions improve their lives, therefore motivating them to become active members. Another union construction worker said: "When I joined the union, I didn't know what a union was. I just wanted to be an electrician. [...] Now that I've experienced unionism, I understand what it's about [...] No job is more important than

your life, than coming home safe. Safety's number one." They joined their union's apprenticeship program after working non-union construction jobs, and are committed to recruiting others into the union, in part because, "I feel like I owe the union something. Literally they pulled me out of poverty, and it's like this thing is amazing, we need to keep it going." In addition to regulations around health and safety, several young worker leaders highlighted the role of unions in ensuring that workers are properly trained for their jobs and aware of potential risks. Indeed health and safety concerns are the very reason many unions exist, and have laid the foundation for key moments of solidarity between the labor and environmental justice movements. [29]

Beyond physical and environmental health, unions promote the health and wellbeing of their members by connecting them to a community, thus mitigating the deep and unrelenting mental health impacts of the climate crisis young worker leaders described. Amidst a crisis of isolation, [30] young worker leaders sought community connections that give them the will to stay engaged in the fight for better lives. A graduate student described their union engagement as “one of the ways that I am able to relieve that stress” of living through “the collapse of an empire,” and feeling like they don’t have a future. [31] A union educator agreed:

**I’VE WORKED IN NONUNIONIZED CONTEXTS AND THEN I’VE WORKED IN UNIONIZED CONTEXTS AND I THINK THE MAIN THING IS I JUST DON’T FEEL ALONE. I TRULY HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING THAT I’M PART OF SOME OTHER LARGER THING. WHEN THERE ARE SPACES WHERE PEOPLE ARE ORGANIZING AND THERE IS A SENSE OF WORKING TOGETHER TOWARD A COMMON FUTURE, THAT’S WHERE ALL OF A SUDDEN, THERE’S THIS SENSE OF RELIEF FROM THE ALIENATION, THE ISOLATION, THE CONSTANT SENSE THAT YOU’RE GETTING FED INTO A WOODCHIPPER.**

Several young worker leaders described how membership in their union breaks down silos, allowing them to connect with workers in other departments, trades or job sites in ways they otherwise would not have an opportunity to. A postal worker shared how through union engagement, “I got to kind of see this bigger picture that it wasn’t just this little isolated post office I was working at, it was this bigger company that had a lot more moving parts to it.”

Belonging to a collective is not only a feel-good measure, but a crucial dimension of worker advocacy in the struggle for climate and social justice, giving workers more space to speak

openly and use their knowledge and expertise without fear of retaliation or job loss. Several young worker leaders became active members or joined union drives due to grievances and a sense that without a union they were completely at the will of managers’ moods, preferences and opinions, leaving them at risk of unfair treatment. A nonprofit worker described their organization before and after a successful union drive:

**IT REALLY CHANGED THE DYNAMICS OF MY WORKPLACE COMPLETELY ONCE WE HAD A UNION, JUST IN TERMS OF, BEFOREHAND, HAVING NO RECOURSE WHEN THINGS WEREN’T OKAY, BUT THAT WAS NORMAL, SO YOU WERE THE CRAZY ONE IF YOU SPOKE OUT OR TRIED TO CHANGE SOMETHING [...] AFTER THE UNION, WE TRANSITIONED FROM BEING AT-WILL EMPLOYEES TO NEEDING JUST CAUSE TO BE FIRED, SO THAT ENABLED PEOPLE TO SPEAK TRUTH A LOT MORE OPENLY.**

Young worker leaders articulated the importance of this kind of protection inside and outside of the workplace. A public sector worker shared that while their paid job can often feel bureaucratic and slow:

**WORKING THROUGH THE UNION HELPS ME DO THINGS THAT SEEM TO HAVE A MORE IMMEDIATE IMPACT AND ACTUALLY HELP A LOT OF PEOPLE AND PROVIDES ME THE BACKING WHEN I WANT TO PUSH ON THINGS A LITTLE BIT, KNOWING THAT I CAN’T GET FIRED JUST FOR SAYING, “ARE WE SURE THIS IS A GOOD IDEA?” OR THINGS LIKE THAT.**

Beyond the workplace, many young worker leaders articulated their faith in unions as a vehicle for helping people understand the connections and organize around meeting basic needs, building community and advancing for social change. An architect in the midst of a union

drive described the value of a union primarily as “a forum, as a place where people can talk about the issues they have in their daily life.” As such, they shared that “labor organizing gave me a lot of optimism, because [it] gave me a framework through which to put my energy towards people.” A construction worker described the political platform they had access to because of their union membership:

**I WENT TO EVERY UNION MEETING WHEN I GOT INDUCTED AND IT WAS MY BUSINESS MANAGER, OUR ELECTED LEADER, WHO CAME TO ME AND SAID, “HEY, YOU SEEM LIKE SOMEBODY WHO WANTS TO BE INVOLVED. WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO? WHAT CAN WE GET YOU TO DO?” I SAID I WAS INTERESTED IN LABOR POLITICS. AND HE SAID, “HEY, OUR POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE HASN’T MET FOR TWO YEARS DUE TO LACK OF INTEREST. YOU ORGANIZE IT AND YOU CAN RUN IT.”**

As a result, they got the opportunity to “be a delegate to our state labor council to lobby on behalf of our union.”

Several young worker leaders described unions as avenues for effecting broader change, particularly on questions of racial and climate justice. An educator shared how through union membership they learned that “things are not the way that they have to be, there is a possibility to change things, to organize for change, to actually build out democracy.” Regarding the climate crisis, one young worker leader shared: “It’s part of why I joined the building trades, I was like, well, this is going to be a disaster for the rest of my life. And I thought the building trades would be an interesting place to [do climate work].”

Thus for some young worker leaders, union engagement provides a sense of meaning and purpose that their day jobs do not. A public sector worker and union elected officer shared, “to me, work has always been about, just make your money and get out. Don’t stay late. Don’t dedicate your weekend if you’re not getting paid for it.” Nonetheless, they said “I’ve always been interested in social justice issues, and I think that’s exactly what our union is.” A recent experience with a leadership program, “made me realize how privileged I am to be able to do my union job now full time. I would have never thought that doing something that you’re passionate about is possible.” Another public sector worker shared a similar sentiment, saying: “I have my day job, but then what really gets me working and excited about stuff is actually just the opportunity to participate in union activities.”

Thus unions are seen as a sort of antidote to the impacts of compounding crises, with layered benefits allowing workers greater self determination and broadening pathways to better personal and collective futures. This is of particular relevance for workers who are not privileged by our current economic system, including but not limited to young workers.



## EQUITY & JUSTICE

While unions provide crucial privileges and protections for all members, these are particularly important for the workers who are most at risk without them, notably women, people of color, queer and trans workers, and young workers. Young worker leaders’ political consciousness development and recent experiences with public health and safety crises have given them a more holistic and personal



understanding of how questions of justice and equity are bound up with issues of economic security, health and safety, and workplace discrimination.

Union members have higher wages and more access to wealth-building benefits such as job stability and pensions, and as such pathways to unionism for young workers, women and workers of color can help close the wealth gap for these groups. [32] Several young worker leaders described the value of such programs in building trades unions in particular, where there have been recent efforts to balance the demographics of this majority white male industry through innovative recruitment strategies and equity based hiring requirements through policy tools like project labor agreements (PLAs). A union carpenter had been struggling to figure out how to start a career in the trades until:

**I WENT TO AN INFORMATION SESSION THAT WAS SPECIFICALLY FOR WOMEN IN THE TRADES [...] AND I WAS LIKE, THIS SOUNDS GREAT, AND I'VE BEEN IN EVER SINCE. [...] IT'S NOT A COMMON WAY IN. A LOT OF PEOPLE, EVEN THE WOMEN IN THE TRADES, THEY HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS WHO ARE IN THE TRADES SO THEY KNOW ABOUT IT OR HAVE BEEN RECRUITED MORE HEAVILY.**

An operating engineer described how their union engagement was kickstarted by a large construction project with a PLA with diversity requirements:

**THERE WERE JUST SO MANY WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR ON THIS JOB SITE, AND SO MANY OF US WERE YOUNG BECAUSE THE UNIONS HAD TO BRING IN A BUNCH OF WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR INTO THEIR APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS TO FILL THE SEATS, BASICALLY, WHEN THIS JOB WAS COMING OUT. SO IT WAS JUST A GREAT ORGANIZING OPPORTUNITY.**

She had been waiting for such an opportunity in large part because, "I just knew I needed a strong base of women before I could do anything."

Many young worker leaders—particularly women, nonbinary folks, and people of color—highlighted the heightened importance of belonging to a collective as a safety measure. Uplifting health and safety is of vital importance for these workers who experience more and more severe health and safety issues, both on and off the job site. [33] A service worker was motivated to unionize in part after repeated sexual harassment from a co-worker, who she reported to HR several times with no meaningful response. Eventually, another co-worker went with her to talk to HR, which she said was "the first time that somebody had really had my back in that situation and had solidarity with me," despite having endured years of this kind of treatment in the service sector. She began to understand the value of collective action, realizing: "I know what it feels like to be powerless at work. I'm going to do whatever I can not to feel that way again. And for me, that was the union and finding other workers to have each other's backs."

Similarly, a public sector worker struggled to feel connected to her union until she joined the Women's Council: <sup>h</sup>

I THINK THE THING THAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE FOR ME IS THE THEME WAS SAFETY, INSTEAD OF TALKING ABOUT THESE TINY LITTLE PERCENTAGES OF RETIREMENT ACCOUNTS THAT WE MAY OR MAY NOT EVER HAVE ACCESS TO [...] ESPECIALLY AS YOUNGER WORKERS, IT'S LIKE, THIS IS POINTLESS. I'M NOT GOING TO MAKE IT THAT MANY YEARS IF I DON'T FEEL SAFE, IF I DON'T FEEL LIKE I AM BEING RESPECTED AT WORK, AND THAT'S WHAT WE WERE TALKING ABOUT AND TALKING ABOUT SPECIFICALLY, WHAT DOES SAFETY MEAN FROM A JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE? [...] I FELT THAT IT WAS MORE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CORE OF WHAT I FEEL THE UNION SHOULD BE, BECAUSE, BRINGING IT BACK, IT'S ABOUT WORKING CONDITIONS. IT'S NOT ABOUT HOW MUCH YOU'RE PAID. YES, THAT'S PART OF IT, BUT IF YOU AREN'T SAFE AT WORK, THEN WHAT'S THE POINT?

Several young worker leaders highlighted the importance of caucuses within unions as spaces that can surface and advocate for the priorities of groups that are not adequately represented by the broader institution.

In recognizing the common needs and interests of marginalized groups, many young worker leaders see the need to build a powerful labor-climate-racial justice coalition and envision a future thriving labor movement with women, young workers and workers of color at its helm. These groups have the potential to grow the labor movement tremendously and, in the process, infuse it with the skills and knowledge to navigate the climate crisis. Indeed, young workers and workers of color continue to grow their union membership even as the overall rates are in decline. [34]

These efforts are already shifting the broader makeup of the labor movement. Young people in fields that have been traditionally viewed as a professional class separate from the working class, particularly academics and nonprofit workers, as well as those in notoriously precarious and young sectors of the workforce, including service and retail, are organizing in unprecedented ways. Some of them are changing the demographics and dynamics of existing unions: notably one quarter of the members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) are now graduate students; [35] The News Guild, an affiliate of the Communication Workers of America (CWA), now represents over 100 nonprofit and union staff units in addition to its historic base in journalism; [36] and architects and designers are collaborating with the Machinists Union (IAMAW) to unionize in their field. [37] Young workers are also forming new unions, including Amazon Labor United, Starbucks Workers United, and the Progressive Workers Union, as well as other organizations intended to support new organizing by workers and provide focused support for collective action, such as the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC). [38]

Young worker leaders demonstrate a readiness to organize in their workplaces and unions, including organizing around climate issues. Yet their efforts have largely been relegated to the margins of their unions as they attempt to pivot a slow moving labor movement to meet workers' needs in a rapidly changing economy. The experiences of subordinate groups in organized labor illuminate a need for more infrastructure to support these workers and to prioritize their needs and interests.

## CHALLENGES & LIMITATIONS

Young worker leaders described significant challenges in building their leadership and pushing for a labor movement our current and future context requires. Some managed to secure leadership positions in their unions but, as members of subordinate groups, encountered discrimination and other challenges that

made it difficult to fulfill the corresponding responsibilities, or utilize these positions to their full potential. A public sector union officer shared that despite deep concern about economic and environmental justice issues, she feels “like I don’t have technical expertise to tell you exactly what’s happening,” making it difficult to take action despite her platform as a union leader and relevant experience in the housing sector. Another public sector elected officer agreed, sharing that she struggles to be heard in meetings despite her official role: “I’m young and I’m a woman [...] Now that I’m in such a high leadership position, I’m actually interacting with people, like executives at the company. And now I see, it’s very clear, the disrespect and the sexism.”

Despite the promise of unionism in accounting for historic injustice and inequality, young worker leaders find that the systems of oppression they are attempting to respond to are often replicated within union structures. This is in part because the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the original legislation recognizing the right of American workers to unionize, placed very explicit limits on this right, locating thousands of disproportionately non-white and women workers outside of its bounds through different sectoral policies. [39] But many young worker leaders also feel that their unions could be doing more to account for this history of discrimination and exclusion.

## WORKER SPOTLIGHT: DISCRIMINATION IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

The story of one Latina electrician is particularly demonstrative of the challenges faced by young worker leaders from marginalized backgrounds. She praised the union apprenticeship program that pulled her out of poverty, even as she recalled that she was only admitted because of skills she had gained and thoroughly documented on her own through years of unsafe non-union work, “because at the time the business manager for our local union was really wary of female electricians.” Still, she became an active member, taking on leadership roles on the jobsite and in the union hall. In the process, she got involved in efforts to mobilize members to vote for a member of another local union who was running for city council, as well as solidarity work in support of local fast food workers in their fight for a \$15 minimum wage:

**THAT WAS A PRETTY BIG DEAL, TO HAVE SOMEBODY THAT’S PART OF THE UNION ON OUR CITY COUNCIL. AND I REMEMBER WHEN HE WAS RUNNING, [...] I WAS TELLING PEOPLE AT THE UNION MEETING, “HEY, THIS GUY’S A UNION MEMBER. YOU SHOULD REALLY VOTE FOR HIM.” AND THIS ONE GUY WAS LIKE, “I CAN’T.” AND I WAS LIKE, “WHY?” AND HE JUST REALLY SUBTLY DID THIS [POINTING TO ARM], LIKE SKIN COLOR, LIKE HE’S BLACK. I’M LIKE, “WHAT? OH MY GOD.” SO IT’S REALLY TOUGH. AND THEN THE OTHER THING IS THAT I FEEL LIKE ESPECIALLY TRADE UNIONS ARE VERY DISCONNECTED FROM THE PLIGHT OF THE WORKING CLASS. THEY DON’T RELATE TO FIGHT FOR \$15 BECAUSE ENTRY LEVEL [PAY] STARTING OUT FOR US IS \$15. SO IT’S LIKE, “THERE’S NO WAY THAT SOMEBODY THAT’S FLIPPING BURGERS SHOULD MAKE \$15. I MAKE \$15.” IT’S LIKE, MAYBE YOU SHOULD MAKE MORE MONEY.”**

She sees this as a major barrier to building union density in her right-to-work state, and to maintaining membership and engagement in her local union. As such, she concluded:

**IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT RECRUITING MORE YOUNG PEOPLE TO BE ELECTRICIANS, IT’S LIKE YOU HAVE TO GET CERTAIN PEOPLE FROM CERTAIN WALKS OF LIFE, LIKE MID- DLE- TO LOWER-CLASS PEOPLE FROM BACKGROUNDS LIKE MY OWN. [...] SO IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT EMPLOYING YOUNG PEOPLE, IT’S ABOUT EQUITY, MAKING SURE THAT YOU’RE PULLING PEOPLE OUT OF POVERTY, BECAUSE IT’S A GREAT JOB.**



As such, several young worker leaders highlighted the need to look to expertise outside of the traditional sources of power in the labor movement, and in particular learn from the strategies of Black, Indigenous and immigrant workers in navigating compounding economic, racial and gender-based oppression. For example, union members in North Carolina described their unions' history of building on the work of Black civil rights organizers in Greensboro to build power in a famously anti-union state. A union graduate student worker is researching the creative tactics that allowed for successful undocumented immigrant organizing in Los Angeles in the 70s and 80s, as most unions struggled to keep their foothold through the rise of neoliberalism and globalization. A public sector worker reflected on growing up in an agricultural community, where they learned that:

**MIGRANT FARM WORKERS TRAVEL THOUSANDS OF MILES VERY ACCURATELY, VERY FRUGALLY, VERY ENVIRONMENTALLY CONSCIOUSLY AND WE RELY ON THEM FOR FOOD. IF THEY CAN'T SHOW UP AT THE RIGHT PLACE, AT THE RIGHT TIME WITH THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS WE DON'T EAT. [...] AND IT'S DISPROPORTIONATELY INDIGENOUS [WORKERS] AND ALWAYS REMEMBERING THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLE INVENTED AGRICULTURE AND IF THEY DIDN'T HAVE EXPERTISE AND THEY WEREN'T REALLY, REALLY SMART, WE WOULDN'T EAT.**

Many young worker leaders highlighted the need to build trust between unions and frontline communities, often communities of color, in order to address common environmental justice issues that threaten the health and safety of workers and community members who are breathing the same polluted air and drinking the same contaminated water. As a union nonprofit worker said: "Labor needs to own the ways in which it hasn't cared about polluting local communities, particularly black and brown communities, and [prioritized] work over the health and safety of communities." In order to benefit from their energy and expertise, labor must recognize and integrate the particular needs, perspectives and visions of these workers. Addressing discrimination within the labor movement is a key component of building the capacity and infrastructure to respond to

the major challenges unions face. This includes integrating an understanding of the environmental justice issues and climate change impacts that disproportionately affect these workers.

These inequities point toward a broader reality – though young worker leaders across sectors were hopeful about the multiple benefits of unionism, they often struggled to access all of the benefits described above. Systemic challenges contribute to internal dynamics within unions and the labor movement more broadly that make it difficult for young worker leaders to articulate and advocate for their needs through the union. Though many young worker leaders have found greater economic stability and belonging to a collective that can provide emotional support as well as a political platform through their unions, the latter was often the exception rather than the norm, or came only after much trial and error that may have turned off other young worker leaders after failed repeated attempts.

## **II. CHALLENGES - LOW MEMBERSHIP & THE STRUGGLE TO FIND GOOD JOBS**

Young worker leaders believe unionism to be one of the most critical pathways toward climate and social justice. However, in attempting to use this pathway, they often encountered *systemic constraints* that limit unions' ability to build and flex power, *internal union challenges* in how they relate to members, and *inter-organizational challenges* related to how unions engage with external community groups and interests.

## SYSTEMIC CONSTRAINTS

As we have begun to explore, a number of systemic challenges, exacerbated over decades of anti-union policy and rhetoric, make it difficult for unions to organize new workers and fight for the needs and interests of their members. The vast majority of workers in the United States are not union members, even if they want to be. This is in part due to a lack of understanding of what unions are and how to join or start one. A union stagehand summed this up:

**THE THING ABOUT UNION ACTIVISM IS THAT IT TIES INTO EVERYTHING AND PEOPLE DON'T REALLY KNOW THAT, ESPECIALLY YOUNG MEMBERS. THEY COME IN AND THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT BEING A UNION MEMBER IS BECAUSE NO ONE TEACHES YOU THAT, ON PURPOSE. THEY'VE BEEN SPENDING YEARS DESTROYING UNIONS ON PURPOSE BECAUSE IF YOU HAVE AN UNEDUCATED WORKFORCE, THEN YOU HAVE A PLACATED WORKFORCE. IF PEOPLE KNEW IN HIGH SCHOOL WHAT UNIONS REALLY DID, AND NOT JUST GENERICALLY, IMAGINE HOW MUCH BETTER LIFE WOULD BE FOR AVERAGE PEOPLE.**

A union grocery worker attributed this lack of knowledge in part to a generational dynamic, saying that young people, even those who are “politicized or part of student or youth organizing,” tend to view organized labor as “the realm or the territory of old people, which is really unfortunate.” A non-union graduate student theorized that teaching young people to “confront power where we see it the most, which is typically in our jobs” can lead to big social changes. Yet the lack of “tangible experiences with unions” and difficulties “build[ing] one under the law today” make it hard to even know “where to start.”

Beyond a lack of education, labor law itself makes it difficult for unions to fulfill their mission of organizing and protecting workers. In addition to its racist and patriarchal

underpinnings, the NLRA limited protections for direct actions such as strikes, institutionalizing the role of unions as bargaining agents rather than organizing entities at their moment of greatest historic power in the United States. Since then, legislation such as Right to Work and the Janus vs. AFSCME Supreme Court ruling have threatened the member-funded model American unions rely on, with dramatic decreases in membership simultaneously slashing budgets and increasing the urgency of new organizing. Further, bargaining over elements of a basic social safety net, including and especially healthcare, requires a great deal of capacity from unions that might otherwise be used to negotiate more forcefully around other needs and interests of their membership.

Young worker leaders are feeling the impacts of these strains on union capacity, as slashed budgets prevent them from getting the support they need from union staff. A service worker shared that when they started to organize their workplace:

**[MY CAMPAIGN] WAS UNDER-RESOURCED FOR A LONG TIME AND THAT WAS REALLY FRUSTRATING. WE KEPT GETTING ORGANIZERS WHO DIDN'T REALLY HAVE TIME TO FOCUS ON IT. AND IT WAS HARD BECAUSE I KNEW THEM AND I KNEW HOW HARD THEY WORKED, BUT I ALSO WAS LIKE, WE NEED SOMEBODY TO BE HERE.**

Similarly, a nonprofit worker reflected on recent unionization efforts in their sector, noting that their union “grew a lot basically around the time that we asked for recognition, there’s been a lot of growth in a very short amount of time, but that means we don’t have a lot of signed contracts.” As such, they began to organize without staff support until the larger international parent union granted their affiliate money to hire staff. Recognizing the invaluable difference this support made, they said: “I’m so excited to finally start paying dues once we get a contract so that we can get more support like that.”

Beyond under resourced unions, the underfunded and/or unfriendly government bodies tasked with regulating and enforcing labor law make it difficult for unions and workers to make use of existing accountability mechanisms such as grievance procedures and unfair labor practices (ULPs), especially when their needs are time sensitive, as so many of the issues created by climate change are. As such, young worker leaders described struggling to access some of the benefits they legally have access to through their union contracts. A postal worker described their union as “a grievance machine,” with contract violations occurring at a pace that is impossible to keep up with. Though the grievance procedure provides an avenue for responding to these violations, they find that this process too often leads nowhere or takes months to arbitrate, leaving workers unprotected in the face of ongoing mistreatment as they struggle to enforce their contracts.

Funding and understaffing challenges presented an issue for young worker leaders across sectors, not just in the institutions they look to for support but in their own workplaces and industries. As described above, this dynamic is particularly relevant for government and government-funded workers due to decades of austerity measures that negate the fundamental value of this work and the need for adequate staffing to provide crucial public services. [\[40\]](#)

## WORKER SPOTLIGHT: UNDERSTAFFING

A union organizer highlighted the intensity of understaffing and overwork in the healthcare sector where “people work 80 hours a week” and “are only in the union for like three years.” The organizer thus spent a lot of time getting workers up to speed on their basic rights, like “if you think your boss is going to discipline you, you should either call me or call [your] elected leaders.” The overwork also posed a major challenge for workers to find the time and space to advocate for themselves. The organizer went on:

**I WOULD LOVE IF PEOPLE WANTED TO MAKE A COMPREHENSIVE ISSUE OUT OF HOW MUCH THEY WORK. I THINK IT FEELS TOO DAUNTING TO A LOT OF THEM. IT'S JUST KIND OF THE WAY THINGS ARE, WHICH, IT'LL BE THAT WAY UNTIL SOMEONE CHANGES IT. IT USED TO BE 100 HOURS A WEEK, AND NOW IT'S AT 80, SO IT'S DUE TO BE RATCHETED DOWN AGAIN. IT'S BEEN LIKE 20 YEARS.**

They believe more manageable schedules are a prerequisite to freeing up the expertise of these workers to improve the healthcare system they work in, and that unions have a key role in making this possible:

**WE NEED OUR WORKERS, OUR MEMBERS TO NOT HAVE TO WORK 80 HOURS A WEEK SO THEY CAN BE POLITICALLY ACTIVE AGENTS IN THEIR COMMUNITIES WHERE THEY LIVE. DOCTORS ARE REALLY IMPORTANT. IT'S A REALLY IMPORTANT ROLE IN SOCIETY AND THEY NEED TO NOT BE SADDLED WITH DEBT SO THAT THEY'RE NOT CONSERVATIVE—NOT IN THE REPUBLICAN WAY, BUT JUST LIKE, “OH MY GOD, I HAVE TO MAKE SURE I'M MAKING ENOUGH MONEY TO PAY OFF MY \$300,000 LOANS.” WE NEED TO UNCHAIN PEOPLE FROM THEIR DEBT. WE NEED PEOPLE TO HAVE TIME TO THINK CRITICALLY ABOUT THE WORLD AND ENGAGE WITH IT. [...] WE NEED TO BE FIGHTING WITH THAT VISION IN MIND AND NOT JUST LIKE, “OK, LIKE WE GOT A THREE PERCENT RAISE.” AND WE NEED TO BE HELPING – REALLY IT'S UP TO OUR MEMBERS AT THE END OF THE DAY, BUT I THINK WE NEED TO BE DOING THE WORK TO HELP THEM SEE THAT BIGGER PICTURE AND FEEL THAT THEY CAN ACT ON IT THROUGH THEIR UNION.**



Beyond funding and legislation, employers create barriers for unions, with recent economic transitions illuminating the importance of worker organizing even as they make this organizing more difficult. Though this often takes the form of explicit union busting, young worker leaders described the structures of their workplaces and industries as inherently challenging for organizing, due to tiered, fragmented, overworked and transient workforces. Many young worker leaders experienced their workplaces and other social spaces as extremely fractured, leaving them isolated on and off the job. Remote workers described a sense of isolation and challenges around organizing remotely, with coworkers working in varied home and environmental conditions, even as some appreciated the flexibility of working from home.

A nonprofit worker who helped unionize their workplace during the pandemic reflected that, “There’s nothing that can really replace the in-person relationship building that can be done.” Another nonprofit worker stated simply, “people burn out a lot faster when you’re working in a remote environment without that kind of community support.” A technician working in-person for a federal contractor struggled to envision pathways to organizing due to geographic isolation and a lack of interaction across siloed departments in a workplace with several hundred employees: “You’re not near much of anything, so your chances of social engagement [are low]. [...] It’s kind of hard to organically meet people unless you’re out at some meeting or whatever. [...] I do get the sense that people want to be more involved, I think most just don’t know where to start.”

Silos and shifting work responsibilities and conditions pose challenges not only for new organizing, but for identifying common priorities where unions already exist. A union staffer reflected on the dynamics of representing membership across different sectors, from nonprofit to public sector to manufacturing:



“20 years from now, I hope that unions are the groups that people look to when they’re trying to deal with a disaster. I hope that community organizations are tightly connected with unions that young people are continuing to be labor leaders and really be the people fighting for community resilience.”

**SOME UNIONS THAT REPRESENT ONE KIND OF WORKER, LIKE A NURSES UNION [...] THERE’S LIKE, OK, THIS IS OUR IDENTITY, BECAUSE THIS IS THE WORK THAT ALMOST ALL OF US DO. WHEREAS WHEN OUR LOCAL IS [REPRESENTING] VERY DIFFERENT KINDS OF WORKPLACES, HOW PEOPLE DEVELOP AN IDENTITY OF BEING A UNION MEMBER OF THE LOCAL HAS ALWAYS BEEN A LITTLE BIT INTERESTING.**

This poses particular challenges in addressing the impacts of climate change:

**IT’S NOT LIKE WE HAVE TO FIGURE OUT, OK, FOR THIS ONE WORKPLACE, WHAT’S THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO CLIMATE BASED ON THEIR WORK AND THEIR EMPLOYER? AND THEN HOW DO WE KIND OF DEVELOP OUR MORE LONG-TERM INITIATIVES AND THOUGHTS FROM THAT? WE ACTUALLY HAVE TO BE LIKE, OH, WE HAVE TWENTY FIVE DIFFERENT WORKPLACES [...] WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR OUR LOCAL MEMBER LEADERS AND STAFF TO BE THINKING ABOUT HOW WE’RE APPROACHING CLIMATE CHANGE IN A CONCERTED THOUGHT OUT POLITICAL WAY?**

Thus systemic changes and issues are felt deeply in both identifying pathways to unionism and in shaping the internal dynamics of unions.

Young worker leaders recognize the major challenges these systemic realities represent, but refuse to believe that unions are powerless to push back. As a union staffer concluded:

**THE PROBLEMS THAT I SEE THAT WE HAVE TO TACKLE WITH CLIMATE CHANGE EXIST AT SUCH A LEVEL THAT OUR UNION WOULD HAVE TO BECOME A POLITICAL AGENT IN ATTACKING THOSE CORPORATIONS AND MAKING IT SO THAT THOSE CORPORATIONS ARE HELD ACCOUNTABLE AND THAT THE GOVERNMENT CHANGES ITS PERSPECTIVE AND THE WAY THAT IT ALLOWS THESE CORPORATIONS TO RUN.**

Indeed many young worker leaders believed that unions are our best shot at enacting this much needed accountability and reversing decades of expanding corporate power at the expense of the environment and the working class. But they also recognized that unions need to change in order for this to be possible. A non-union private sector worker shared their vision:

**I THINK ONCE WE HAVE A STRONGER LABOR FORCE IN THE UNITED STATES THAT ARE MORE COMFORTABLE STANDING UP FOR THEMSELVES OR THEIR WAGES AND FOR SAFETY CONDITIONS AND IMMEDIATE NEEDS, THAT THEY CAN START TO LOOK BEYOND THAT INTO, HOW CAN WE MAKE CHANGE IN HOW OUR GOVERNMENT OR CORPORATIONS, THE BUSINESSES THAT WE WORK FOR, OPERATE? BECAUSE WE HAVE JUST AS MUCH POWER TO DO THAT AS WE DO TO ASK FOR MORE MONEY. IF WE WORK TOGETHER. I THINK THE KEY THING IS WE HAVE TO WORK TOGETHER.**

Thus building the counter-power this requires is contingent on understanding and addressing problems within unions themselves. These can primarily be categorized as internal challenges, in the ways unions relate to their memberships, and external challenges, as union members look toward building relationships and collaborating with other community groups around shared interests in economic and environmental justice.

## INTERNAL UNION CHALLENGES

For those fortunate enough to be members of a labor union, it can sometimes feel as if those unions have adopted a resistance to change similar to our wider political system - often indifferent and sometimes even hostile to young worker participation, needs, and priorities. Young worker leaders described how unions have responded to systemic constraints by narrowing their approaches accordingly. Many described the limitations of a servicing model of unionism, in which paid union staff provide services to members largely through grievance and bargaining processes rather than investing in meaningful organizing. Other young worker leaders encountered the challenges of business unionism, where leadership aligns with employers in the hopes that higher profits will trickle down to better wages and benefits for their membership rather than promoting meaningful worker input and control. Both approaches deprioritize and in some cases actively discourage building systems of democracy and transparency that are necessary for building and mobilizing the capacity of memberships to fight for their needs and interests. As a result, union action on climate and other issues young workers care about can feel out of reach or not worth pursuing.

Some young worker leaders reported that their unions did not communicate with members in regular, consistent, or transparent ways. Even basic orientation of new membership can be a struggle. As one union entertainment worker related, in part due to COVID-19, “there was almost a three or more year gap of time between the last in-person orientation and the first online member orientation [...] That’s a really big window of time where you don’t have members even getting the most basic information.”

Many young worker leaders expressed frustration and were turned off by the lack of a culture or practice of internal member engagement, organizing, or a sense of direction. This lack of organizing practice often resulted in members mentally distancing themselves from their union. As a postal worker put it, “I joke with people that [the union is] kind of like a vaccine where we have done our jobs so effectively that you’ve got the people who think that we’re not necessary. And then we’ve got the other people who are just like, whatever, all I gotta do is pay my dues.” A union educator explained how this type of arrested member engagement resulted in a critical work-to-rule action during the COVID-19 pandemic falling completely flat: “It didn’t pass general membership and then later a representative assembly passed it but the action was a mixed bag when it happened because [we] don’t have a super strong organizing union.”

In the most difficult circumstances, the lack of organizing, accessibility, and participation is such that young worker leaders feel not only a separation of themselves from the union, but as if the union is an oppressive third party. One union grocery worker said that their job is “minimum wage and I’ve been working there for almost a year and still don’t have health care or any other benefits because it’s basically a two tier CBA [...] No one knows their rights, and [everyone] complains about [the] union taking money out of their paycheck.” Their union rep shows up once every 4 months for “H.R. day” to hand out pens. Tiered contracts replicate broader silos and divisions within unions, assigning value based on seniority or skill level in ways that pit workers against each other, often along lines of age and income, as well as race and gender as described above. [41] Thus some members come to see the union as an arm of management rather than a source of collective power.

The separation members felt from their unions can also create a “that’s just the way it is” outlook, leaving young worker leaders demoralized. Now they are seeing how being unorganized leaves them unprotected in extreme climate impact scenarios. A postal worker described discussions around increasingly frequent wildfires: “Typically with these sorts of natural disasters, I think people just accept that it is what it is, like, What could we do about it? [...] Most people are just like, ehh, I guess that’s why you have sick leave, just call in.” They related their anxiety that even in these moments that should be clarifying, members seem to not be grounded in the mentality that “we are our union, we need to be getting us out of this scrape.”

On rare occasions when unions do make dedicated spaces for membership engagement on the issue of climate, young worker leaders often still felt they were left without support and ran into issues with wider political dynamics. As one union construction worker related, “There used to be a green energy group in our union [...]. So I think there are those people who talk about it, but it [...] becomes so political and so tied to different political parties that people don’t necessarily want to talk about it at work.” They told a story about their city’s proposed policy of ceasing the use of natural gas in new building construction, instead building all electric, and felt that “as electricians we should have been really excited about [the policy]. But people were still not exactly happy about it, saying that it was kind of an overreach of the government.” They expressed frustration that the union wasn’t doing anything to offer education and development for members on the issue, saying, “I feel like if we’re trying to keep membership, trying not to divide membership, we’re not willing to do the work to try to bring membership along with it.”

In some cases, a lack of internal communication infrastructure means that when unions do attempt to take action regarding the impacts of climate change on their members, these actions are disconnected from the reality of those members’ daily lives. A public sector worker highlighted the disconnect between

their union's policy work, which members are encouraged to participate in through lobby days, and the immediate concerns of workers:

**[I WANT TO KNOW,] LIKE, OK, IT'S 118 DEGREES. MY AC JUST WENT OUT. CAN I GO TO THE UNION HALL AND HANG OUT FOR AN HOUR? JUST PRACTICAL THINGS. [...] IT'S ALWAYS REALLY LOFTY STUFF, AND IF I CAN'T LEAVE THE HOUSE BECAUSE IT'S SUPER SMOKY TO GO TO THE LOBBY DAY, WHAT USE IS A LOBBY DAY?**

In other instances, opportunities for engagement that might interest young workers don't reach members or even staff. During their interview, a union staffer learned that their union had established a Climate Justice Committee years prior that they had never heard of despite being passionate about climate justice:

**I DON'T THINK IT'S WIDELY KNOWN TO THE MEMBERSHIP [...]. THERE MIGHT BE MENTION OF IT AT AN ALL STAFF CALL, SO THERE MIGHT BE STAFF MEMBERS WHO'VE HEARD OF IT, UNLIKE ME. BUT I THINK THE WAY THAT THESE THINGS GET PASSED DON'T ALWAYS NECESSARILY TRANSLATE INTO THE PEOPLE DOING THE WORK SEEING A CHANGE.**

Thus even when members and leaders' priorities are aligned, a lack of communication often prevents them from working together to advance shared goals.

When unions fail to meet young worker leaders' needs—when they are not open, accessible, and nurturing to build power to solve fundamental issues of insecurity, unsafety, and injustice brought on by our wider system—then young worker leaders see the union as complicit in hastening wider system breakdown and feel structurally disempowered to do anything about it. A union construction worker expressed their anger thusly:

**WE'RE ALL AWARE THAT THE WORLD WE LIVE IN COULD ALLOCATE RESOURCES TOWARDS FIGHTING CLIMATE CHANGE AND WE KNOW THAT WE'RE BEING SCREWED OVER BY PEOPLE WHO HAVE ALL THE POWER AND ALL THE MONEY. AND IT'S CRAZY THAT WE WORK 40-HOUR WEEKS JUST TO SURVIVE AND DON'T HAVE A LOT OF TIME WITH OUR KIDS, AND WE WORK IN THESE CONDITIONS WITH DANGEROUS CHEMICALS AND FIBERGLASS AND ALL KINDS OF THINGS. [...] [BUT] WHEN IT COMES TO HOW WE BUILD THINGS, WE KNOW THERE'S A BALANCE BECAUSE THE UNION HAS TO BE MARRIED TO CORPORATIONS, AND IF CORPORATIONS AREN'T DEMANDING THIS CHANGE, THE UNION IS GOING TO BE SILENT ON IT, BASICALLY.**

Although the worker wanted their union to be more engaged in pushing for a sustainable industry, as a new member and apprentice, they did not “really feel like it's my job to bring it up.”

Internal union challenges that hinder more robust climate organizing also make it more difficult to build coalitions with other groups and organizations who are fighting the same fight. Several young worker leaders shared stories of attempting to take the initiative to do this work but receiving little to no meaningful institutional support for these efforts. A public employee described trying to get their local union to endorse a climate march: “It didn't feel like we knew what to do, I guess. They didn't really get back to us. It was kind of like a black box



when we tried to send them letters and stuff, we wouldn't really hear back." A graduate student worker described their attempts to push their union to take up climate issues in their collective bargaining and other work. They envisioned their statewide union taking "labor action focused on these sort of broader societal issues that members want to fight for, that workers want to fight for, but the bureaucracy says this is not part of our labor conditions, so we can't." They went on: "I think the union has been quite hesitant to focus on issues that are not deemed to be labor issues by management, which is obviously a huge problem," given their belief that "the resources we have in the union are our labor power, and if workers want to do this, then we should do this."

Many young worker leaders believed that navigating compounding crises of inequality and climate change requires unions and other aligned organizations to advocate for workers as whole people, especially as environmental health issues and economic transitions blur the lines between working conditions, living conditions and environmental conditions. As they attempt to build and use the solidarity and creativity of different groups with different bases and approaches to the same problems, they encounter further challenges.

### INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Advocating for workers in the context of the climate crisis requires looking beyond collective bargaining to identify innovative strategies for addressing impacts at home, at work, and in between. As such, unions need community allies who have been building the skills and bases for this work. However, young worker leaders often saw unions as out of touch or inattentive to external engagement with the community and wider political issues. They relate a story of unions being stuck in their ways and having little tendency for boldness or creativity in organizing, little appetite for campaigns to take on wider issues that affect members as well as their communities, and a lack of willingness to join other coalitions in meaningful ways. Young worker leaders described some unions as either unwilling or unable to recognize the potential and necessity of different pathways of building worker power and engagement that can happen at the intersections of issues like racial justice and climate change. For some, this came as a rude awakening because these were the very issues that motivated them to engage with the union in the first place.

Some young worker leaders reflected that this work must start with relationship building to account for the distrust between labor and environmental or social justice groups, built over years of being pitted against each other, often along lines of race as described above. While unions have often failed to stand in solidarity with broader social justice and working-class struggles, many young worker leaders also described feeling alienated from a mainstream environmental movement that has prioritized conservation over environmental health and economic security. A union construction worker summed this up:

**THERE'S NOT A LOT OF TRUST IN TERMS OF LIKE, ALL RIGHT, WE'RE NOT GOING TO SCREW OVER WORKERS BECAUSE WORKERS HAVE BEEN SCREWED OVER AND WORKED THEIR ASSES OFF. MIGHT GET SILICOSIS OR EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS, DIE, AND NOBODY GIVES A SHIT. SO THAT'S THE TRACK RECORD. SO IF THERE'S SOMETHING BETTER, THAT WOULD BE GREAT, BUT I DON'T THINK THERE'S ANY TRUST AT ALL.**

While these young worker leaders recognized that a lack of trust is justified for workers and community members who have long been the victims of the false debate around jobs vs. the environment, they are unwilling to let it stop them, urging their leadership to make a visible and meaningful effort to act in solidarity with other struggles for justice even and especially when it doesn't seemingly directly impact them.

Further, some young worker leaders encountered union opposition to climate and social justice actions in ways that seemingly worked against their own interests. A former nonprofit worker described the economic justice organization

they worked for recruiting a building trades union to their board in an effort to integrate the perspectives of those workers into their work. When the organization attempted to join a coalition opposing the construction of a pipeline under a major river, the union blocked them from joining and later resigned from the board. A union organizer summed up a common view of the problem that faces institutional labor in engaging with their responsibility on social justice issues:

**I THINK THAT A LOT OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT IS VERY SCARED ABOUT LOSING THE WORKERS THAT THEY HAVE AND THEY'RE NOT THINKING ABOUT THE NEXT GENERATION. [...] [T]HE FACT IS YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE A LOT OF YOUNG ORGANIZERS. [...] IT IS REALLY NOT THE TIME TO PLAY IT SAFE POLITICALLY. [...] THERE'S A LOT OF DIFFERENT WAYS WE'RE FIGHTING FOR OUR LIVES.**

Many young worker leaders described missed opportunities for unions to connect membership demands and interests to broader community fights. Some continued to engage in these fights as individuals, outside of their union membership but experienced this as a drain on their personal capacity, as they seek out several spaces for engagement on different political issues or must choose between prioritizing union activities and engagement with other groups. They also believed that this makes the organizing less effective, as they reflected on the possible benefits of union infrastructure and organizing approaches to broader movement

struggles, and the skills, knowledge and power other community allies could provide in pushing for the bigger and broader protections workers need to navigate the climate crisis.

### **III. STRATEGIES, EXAMPLES & OPPORTUNITIES**

Young worker leaders refuse to believe that this is the best labor can do – they want to see unions and their allies fighting back against decades of attack, and they are doing what they can to lead this fight. Interviewees described numerous strategies and approaches to organizing at the intersections of climate and labor. They are attempting to push for the changes they need at every level, on the job site and throughout their industries, in their local and international unions, in their communities, states and throughout the country. Some are focusing on responding to the impacts of climate change on workers and their communities; others are pushing back against the causes of climate change by pushing their employers and industries to prioritize more sustainable practices for workers and the environment. Many are connecting with allies wherever they can find them, within and outside of their unions, as they work to build power and achieve tangible wins through approaches such as bargaining for the common good.

As union members, young worker leaders sought to make their workplaces safer from climate impacts, reduce the environmental impact of their work activities and employers, and use their labor power to contribute to climate actions and debates within society more broadly. Different tactics included participatory research, direct action, and collective bargaining, with varying degrees of success. Mutual aid, for example, was one way through which unions and workers responded to extreme weather and climate impacts when employers failed to do so. These efforts at times extended into the community more broadly, such as distributing cold weather supplies to unhoused people in the winter. An entertainment worker who had been active in such efforts explained, “There’s just so much that we can do as union members to impact our community because we are really good at working together. And so it can be fun to [...] raise money for the environment or to do beach clean ups.” Young worker leaders also described political education efforts to encourage their coworkers to think more deeply about climate change. For instance, a union rep noted that the education committee in their area labor federation “has been doing a lot to try to talk about, how do we educate union members about climate change and about just transition?”

Larger workplace or legislative campaigns incorporating climate concerns occurred occasionally as well. A union graduate student worker and union member from the South described a campaign to improve worker conditions and fully fund the university system in part by divesting nearly \$300 million from fossil fuels. Unions and rank-and-file members also participated in legislative campaigns, such as advocacy around the Green New Deal, in an effort to shape and pass climate policy that benefited workers. A construction worker shared that the state's teachers' association had been working with the building trades to retrofit school buildings: "Those kinds of connections I think are inspiring. Obviously we need better ventilation in these schools, and while we're at it, can we turn them into green buildings?"

Collective bargaining agreements represented a powerful tool for integrating climate action more strongly into workplaces and union activity. Extreme weather provisions in union contracts, for example, appeared relatively common. However, young worker leaders envisioned more ambitious ways that negotiations could be used to advance climate action. In one example, a graduate worker described how they were working to ensure workers had a voice in the university's climate mitigation plan:

**[OUR THINKING HAS BEEN,] OK, WELL, IF THE UNIVERSITY HAS A CLIMATE MITIGATION PLAN OR A PLAN TO GET TO NET ZERO EMISSIONS, LET'S MAKE SURE THAT [...] WORKERS HAVE A SAY IN THAT. SO THAT'S JUST A MATTER OF VOICE IN ONGOING THINGS. IF THERE'S ALREADY A COMMITTEE THAT'S FOCUSING ON THIS, WELL, LET'S HAVE [CONTRACT] LANGUAGE THAT SAYS WORKERS HAVE TO BE ON THOSE COMMITTEES, WORKERS NEED TO BE CONSULTED. TRYING TO USE OUR NEGOTIATIONS TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'RE GIVING WORKERS A SEAT AT THE TABLE IS ONE BIG THING.**

Several young worker leaders described attempts to advance bargaining for the common good demands through contract negotiations, particularly around issues of transit and housing that fall outside of the mandatory subjects of bargaining but are fundamental to workers' quality of life and ability to get and keep work.

In this vein, one union university worker described their union conducting surveys of membership interests and concerns where "there's been one or two instances where climate change was a topic. And then I did obviously get put in touch with [Labor Network for Sustainability] through my union. So they did partner that way."

While other groups can help fill current organizational gaps in labor unions, these spaces cannot replace the need for organized labor to create supportive, meaningful spaces for young worker organizing on issues like climate change. [42] Still, it represents some positive forward movement, as this worker went on to describe: "It seems like [climate action] is more of a recent thing. I did not hear the union talking about climate three years ago, but here we are, and they're making that change and I value that. They're a little late to the party, but who isn't right now?"

Other young worker leaders know their unions are attempting to engage on climate issues, but they see a need for this engagement to be more sustained and strategic in employing the skills and interests of their membership. A union staffer said, "We're probably doing more than a lot of unions, it's just that I feel like we have more capacity and we have certainly a lot of members who care about this stuff that we could probably be much more strategic and less ad hoc." Currently, their unions' engagement is mostly reactive, like "Oh, these folks are doing this. OK, we'll write something in support or we'll donate." Instead, the organizer wanted to see their union actively "thinking about our politics, our organizing, our negotiations from the point of view of [...] climate justice. What does that look like? So I think we have the potential but we're not there."

As such, the majority of young worker leaders we spoke to are starting internally, by trying to build a culture and structure that allows for more intersectional and adaptive organizing. Several young worker

leaders emphasized their commitment to recruiting and opening space for other young workers in their unions and organizations. This was particularly true for the few interviewees who had achieved positions of power, as staff or elected officers, who were determined to broaden the pathways they had to create for themselves. One local union vice president described learning about their union only because of their proximity to human resources policies as a low-level employee. They began to notice the importance of the union in this context, and curiosity led them to attend a meeting, where they were surprised to realize that they “had knowledge not everybody else does” and that no one volunteered for several key leadership positions, in part because many of the members were at retirement age. As vice president, they saw this as an opportunity: “It was great having so many senior people there. They weren’t willing to volunteer [...] but they were so knowledgeable and I would consider some of them mentors.” They began working to bring in newer employees into leadership positions and connecting them with older members who could act as mentors.

Some expressed appreciation for their unions’ existing culture of member engagement, coupled with an awareness that this is not the reality for most union members. A minority union member in the South emphasized their international unions’ commitment to member leadership, explaining that “any member can go to any collective bargaining [session]” and the union “wants membership to be involved.” The union’s communication strategy also centered member involvement and leadership:

**WE PUT OUT FLIERS REGULARLY LIKE, “HERE’S WHAT WE’RE DOING. HERE’S WHAT THE BOSSES ARE DOING. THE BOSS TOLD YOU THIS. HERE’S HOW IT’S AFFECTING PEOPLE.” [...] BE CLEAR ABOUT WHY WHAT THE BOSSES ARE DOING IS NOT GOOD FOR YOU. AND IF IT IS GOOD FOR YOU, GREAT. SAY THAT. BUT TELL THE TRUTH. BE OPEN, BE COMMUNICATIVE. AND WHEN YOU CAN, GET MEMBERSHIP INVOLVEMENT.**

A union stagehand expressed a similar sentiment at the level of their local:

**WE HAVE A VERY ENGAGED LEADERSHIP WHO, WHEN YOU SHOW INTEREST AND SHOW UP, THEY MEET YOU AT THAT BRIDGE, AND THEY WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU. [...] NOT ALL LOCALS HAVE THIS SAME EASE OF COMMUNICATION. AND A LOT OF THE YOUNGER UP-AND-COMING LEADERSHIP ARE WORKING TOWARDS CHANGING THAT WITHIN THEIR LOCALS. THEY’RE FIGHTING TO SEE A MORE ENGAGED LEADERSHIP WHO HAVE A BETTER FINGER ON THE PULSE OF WHAT THE MEMBERSHIP ACTUALLY WANTS OUT OF THEIR LEADERSHIP.**

These reflections offer insights for other labor leaders wanting to engage young workers more.

The compounding challenges described above mean that too often young worker leaders find that the tremendous amounts of energy they are prepared to put into labor-climate organizing become wasted capacity, despite frequent lip service to young workers as the future of the movement. A graduate student and climate organizer summed up this experience with older generations telling them: “Oh, this is your generation, blah, blah, blah, you’re going to take over the world. But also we’re going to dismiss every single thing you do and not mobilize our resources and status to support what you’re doing.” They went on:



**YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE IDEAS, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SMART, YOUNG PEOPLE ARE COMMITTED, YOUNG PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE WORLD. LET THEM DO THINGS WITHOUT NEEDING TO MANAGE IT. WE CAN COLLABORATE, WE CAN HAVE SYNERGY. WE CAN HAVE MENTORSHIP. [...] MENTORSHIP IS IMPORTANT, BUT MENTORSHIP IS NOT TELLING PEOPLE WHAT TO DO. IF YOU BELIEVE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE FUTURE, THEN MATCH YOUR ACTIONS TO THAT BY ACTUALLY GIVING UP SOME OF YOUR POWER OR GIVING UP SOME OF YOUR SECURITY, TO ACTUALLY PUSH FOR CHANGE.**

The labor movement must break out of this cycle if it hopes to recruit and empower the next generation of leadership. Young worker leaders see an opportunity to address these challenges and expand capacity for broader and more intersectional worker organizing through deeper member and community engagement to return the labor movement to its true source of power: people. Young worker leaders want a union organizing with workers to keep workers safe and to open up processes of working as a part of the community. They embrace a vision of unions getting back to basic worker organizing, from member to member, stirring up participation and agency from the grassroots, but which also make cross-union and community connections that build up the wider working class. And they know that implementing this vision can't wait.

## **C. ORGANIZING AND ENVISIONING THE FUTURE**

### **I. HOLDING CONTRADICTIONS – ENVISIONING PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE FUTURES**

When we asked young worker leaders how they envision the future, their first response was almost always something along the lines of “I don’t know” or “I can’t really think about that.” Having started their careers in the context of the great recession or the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of trying to plan toward a concrete future feels absurd if not impossible to many young worker leaders who don’t know what jobs will be available or which communities will be livable even just a few years from now.

The main thing young worker leaders know about the future is that it will look radically different from the past and present. They know our economy is unsustainable; by definition this means that it is changing and we have no choice but to either be agents or victims of that transition. Their visions of what this means for the future tended toward either the dystopian or utopian. On the one hand, they predicted food and water wars leading to a more extreme version of the supply chain issues we saw due to the pandemic, as issues like the ongoing water crises in Flint, Michigan and Jackson, Mississippi become more common and our natural resources are increasingly exhausted and/or polluted. They anticipated sea levels and temperatures continuing to rise, making some of their cities and towns unlivable, and some of their jobs increasingly hazardous if not outright impossible for parts of the year. They are bracing themselves for more power outages due to mismanaged grids like



“20 years from now? It’s hard to picture that far ahead.”

the one in Texas in the winter of 2021, [43] and increasingly severe health concerns of every kind due to a lack of clean air, water and investment in healthcare as a human right.

But they also described how responding to climate change can mean redefining our political and economic systems and values by investing more in affordable housing, accessible transportation, and public infrastructure that facilitates recreation, health, and community building.<sup>44</sup> They envisioned building on the social infrastructure of mutual aid that inspired and sustained so many people through the pandemic by both meeting their material needs and reminding them that they belong to a community even when they are feeling most isolated. They know that building this future will require improving and creating more jobs in the sectors that provide for these needs, including care work, education, service, construction, and disaster relief. They are ready to take on that work.

As such there is a deep sense of contingency in the way young worker leaders move toward the future – they are hoping and organizing for a just transition led by workers and communities, while bracing themselves for life on a burning planet owned by multinational corporations and billionaires escaping to outer space. A union staffer summed up a common sentiment:

**I THINK CLIMATE ACTION—IF IT DOES HAPPEN, THE KIND WE NEED—IT MIGHT NOT LOOK LIKE WE THINK IT WILL. WORKERS MIGHT BE DEMANDING A SHIFT AWAY FROM FOSSIL FUELS NOT PURELY FROM AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE, IT MIGHT BECOME SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE DESIRE FROM A LABOR RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE. WE DON'T KNOW HOW IT'S GOING TO PLAY OUT, BUT WE NEED TO BE A LOT STRONGER AND MORE ORGANIZED AND MILITANT. AND WE NEED MOVEMENTS TO STOP SEEING THEMSELVES AS SINGLE-ISSUE [ORGANIZATIONS].**

Similarly, a non-union graduate student worker hypothesized:

**THE REAL QUESTION IS WHETHER OR NOT WE CAN TRANSFORM. I AM MORE HOPEFUL THAN I THINK I PROBABLY WAS A FEW YEARS AGO BUT WE'RE WORKING AGAINST SOME PRETTY POWERFUL INTERESTS. I THINK THAT YOU HAVE TO HOLD BOTH OF THOSE POSSIBILITIES IN YOUR HAND AT ONE TIME: THAT WE COULD DO AMAZING, TRANSFORMATIVE THINGS THAT PROTECT MILLIONS OF PEOPLE'S LIVES, OR AT THE SAME TIME, WE DON'T CARRY THE BALL TO THE FINISH LINE AND WE'RE JUST ADAPTING TO THE EFFECTS OF THAT DECISION OR THAT LOSS.**

A core contradiction emerged as young worker leaders navigate this uncertainty: climate change forces us into rapid response mode, where we are constantly burning out ourselves and our resources to survive and support each other, but it also necessitates long-term, big-picture organizing that relies on sustaining these people and resources. This manifests in dozens of other related contradictions as young worker leaders navigate their day to day lives: they desperately need rest and they feel like they can't rest until they've stopped climate change; they want stable jobs with good incomes and they want to create positive change in their communities; they love their unions and they are consistently heartbroken by feeling undervalued or unrepresented in union spaces. These contradictions are only more apparent at work, where young workers hope their jobs will set them up for a better future even as the work they do often makes it less likely they will arrive at retirement age in good health, with strong relationships and communities intact.

All of this gives us some insight into the incredible fatigue and frustration young workers are feeling. It's hard enough to plan for retirement when there's a formula; doing it while you lobby the government and other institutions to protect you from further calamity and build up skills and systems for community resilience in the event that they do not, feels like too much to ask of any one person. Although our conversations elicited a diverse set of creative ideas for addressing the unique challenges the climate crisis creates for workers across industries and geographies, young worker leaders seemed to align strongly on the broad strokes: we can and must hold all of this uncertainty by organizing for a more resilient, progressive and intersectional labor-climate movement.

Young worker leaders articulated a holistic and interconnected understanding of sustainability – failure to prioritize environmental sustainability makes it harder for people to do their work and meet their material needs; as people struggle to sustain themselves it becomes harder to find the time and build the trust to engage in organizing that could alleviate this burden; as it becomes more difficult to sustain the robust engagement organizing requires, organizations become increasingly hierarchical and closed off from their membership; and as they close off from their membership, these organizations miss out on opportunities to fundamentally understand and advocate for the needs of their bases, often defaulting to advancing the interests of those already in power against the interests of these members. They see a need for approaches that are responsive to this reality, working with the challenges of their day-to-day lives, to allow them to do transformative organizing that can push back on the systems that impose these contradictions.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the Spring of 2024, we held group discussions with participants in the Young Worker Network from different sectors to generate recommendations for the report. These discussions focused on a key question: “How can position holders and young workers build meaningful young worker leadership in your union, organization or industry to create a more sustainable labor movement and economy?” The recommendations below emerged from these discussions. For the sake of clarity, the language is primarily addressed toward unions as institutions with a stated interest in helping workers sustain themselves with quality wages and benefits while empowering them to articulate and advocate for their interests. However, there are many other organizations and institutions that exist to advance these goals, including in the public sector and NGOs, and we believe that many of these recommendations can be applied to any organizing effort that seeks to meaningfully engage and empower the next generation of workers movement leaders.

### FACILITATING INTERNAL INSTITUTIONAL TRANSITIONS

People with positional power (formal or informal) in unions and organizations must use it to welcome, educate, and empower young workers		
Mentorship & Sponsorship: Young workers need 1:1 relationships with workers who have more experience and power in the organization.		
Visible and proactive support in organizational spaces	Continuous access and support for leadership opportunities	Organic & mutual relationships
Young workers need mentors who will support them publicly and use their authority to help others hear what young workers have to say. This means not waiting to express support privately or after a young worker has succeeded at a given effort, but being a meaningful ally at every step along the way. This includes sharing information, relationships, material resources, and platforms as relevant and possible to increase the likelihood of success in young worker efforts.	<p>Mentors should provide not only verbal support but tangible opportunities to be at the table to understand how and why decisions are made, gain new experiences and contribute their perspectives. Young workers often need someone to vouch for them to get access to such spaces, and also need support in making sure they're prepared to succeed in a new role or context. This means sustained relationships with space for reflection and improvement.</p> <p>However, young workers often feel they can't say no to opportunities they may not have capacity for and may feel a need to develop their own leadership by taking on additional work to prove their worth and commitment to unions, organizations and workplaces. Good mentors can help mitigate burnout by making sure young workers know it's ok to say no when they don't have capacity to take something on, by working to understand why they are saying no in a certain context, and making sure that saying no once doesn't mean they will be excluded from future opportunities.</p>	Mentorship can't be forced, and young workers need mentors who can understand and relate to their experiences in order to share relevant insights and advice. This can start with a foundation of shared identities (such as race, gender or sexuality), experiences (such as trades or roles), areas of interest, political orientation or compatible personalities. This also means relationships of mutual respect, where sharing and respect for knowledge goes both ways.



**Accessible leadership: Young workers need accessible leaders who can welcome them into the organization and facilitate positive engagement between young workers, other members, and leadership.**

Maintaining open lines of communication	Prioritizing transparency & consistent information sharing	Understanding, relating to, and representation of diverse members
<p>Young workers emphasized the positive impact of visible and present leaders who consistently show up and talk to workers about their roles in the union, what they see as priorities, and the value of the union for members.</p> <p>This communication must go both ways. Leaders should proactively be communicating opportunities for engagement and helping members identify avenues for building collective worker power around shared interests. But it also means regularly listening to members, through formal means (e.g. surveys, 1:1s, meetings, forums, etc.) and informal ways (e.g. casual conversations, sharing contact info so workers know who to call when they have a question, idea or concern). This will help to have an accurate and up-to-date understanding of what members' shared interests are and where members are prepared to put their energy.</p>	<p>Accessible leaders create cultures of and mechanisms for broad transparency and real-time information sharing between workers.</p> <p>This includes maintaining accessible communications platforms, training and information about how to access and use these platforms, and making information available in multiple formats (e.g. through meetings, newsletters, digital forums, written policies, data tracking &amp; analysis, social media and other digital communication.)</p>	<p>Young workers articulated a need for leaders with the lived experience to meaningfully understand the interests of the people they represent. While this can be a challenge in representing diverse memberships, labor unions and other member led organizations tend to have many leadership roles to fill.</p> <p>Organizations should strive for leaders who reflect and can in turn support the particular needs of different identities, geographic locations, sectors, workplaces or working conditions within the broader structure. More specifically, this means dedicated positions for young workers in leadership roles such as nonprofit and executive boards, and key staff positions, so that they can directly articulate the interests of their peers at the decision-making table.</p>

**Positive Intergenerational relationships: Young workers need a general culture of positive intergenerational dynamics that allow them to feel comfortable & welcome in union spaces**

Older members who are allies	Anti-bias training across generations
<p>Not everyone has the capacity or skill set for formal mentorship, but people can still support young workers in their day to day actions, by making an effort to look out for young workers on their job site or team, integrating ideas or habits from young workers into their approaches to work and organizing (e.g. sharing pronouns).</p> <p>The organization should create dedicated spaces for intergenerational socializing, where members can pass along information they've gained from years of experience (e.g. social spaces and events, collaborating on a work project, more facilitated activities and discussions). This can lay the groundwork for forming deeper mentorship relationships, and help mitigate broader generational divides that may arise as young workers attempt to engage more actively in organizational spaces that are new to them.</p>	<p>Young workers notice and appreciate their organic allies who make these efforts on their own, but they also recognize that there are a lot of older workers who may want to support young workers, but struggle to actually listen to them because of inherent biases about the value of what they have to say. As such, training is needed to help older members understand these biases, why they are harmful to the broader goals of the collective, and how to better hear and understand each other. In order to not provoke reflexive hostility in members about participating in these kinds of trainings, these activities must be administered in a context of the other more formal and informal recommendations in this table, thereby creating a culture of tolerance, understanding, and mutual empowerment. Members should be supported to feel like willing participants in creating this culture, not like they are being compelled.</p>

Unions and organizations must create dedicated space for young workers to identify, articulate and implement their visions for change

Respect young worker autonomy: Young workers need spaces to practice their leadership, surface shared issues and needs, and organize

These spaces must be by and for young workers	These spaces must have a stated purpose, and must be resourced to fulfill this purpose.	These spaces must be connected to the broader institution
<p>Though young workers' specific needs and interests are varied, across the board they expressed a need for spaces where they can share openly and honestly, where they feel safe to ask questions and voice opinions without retaliation.</p> <p>They also need spaces that are joyful and fun, and can ground them in the communities they are fighting to protect and empower, through social gatherings and building authentic relationships. This means spaces that don't just add more work to their plate, but are responsive to their needs and interests, with a low barrier to entry for folks who are new to the space, and room to step in and out of leadership as folks' capacity shifts.</p>	<p>Young workers must be able to set their own agendas, which includes organizing new young workers and advocating for young workers who are already in the space to allow them to see and build a future for themselves within the existing structure.</p> <p>This means the space must have a clear mandate that is understood and agreed upon by members of this space as well as by the broader organization, with material resources to allow them to fulfill this mandate, including access to funding and other material resources such as space, meeting supplies, software, communication channels (e.g. social media, member contact information), educational materials, and the ability to make decisions about how these resources are used.</p> <p>Young workers also highlighted the necessity for reflection, debriefing, and assessment to strengthen their skills &amp; strategies as they take on organizing experiments, as well as support to enable facilitated shared leadership of these spaces so that young workers can engage according to their ability and capacity at any given time.</p>	<p>Young worker spaces must be integrated into the organization in both purpose and structure, without compromising their autonomy. This requires clear avenues for raising and advocating for issues that arise in these groups within the broader organization, and an understanding that the issues raised by these groups are core to the broader organization because they were core to these members.</p> <p>This can be facilitated in part through resourced education in these spaces around the structures and processes the wider organization uses (e.g. by-laws, constitutions, contracts, elections, Robert's Rules of Order), as well as through accessible and representative leadership as outlined above.</p>

**Support young worker leadership development: Many young workers are already leaders, and highlighted the need for this leadership to be recognized and respected in and of itself, beyond their identities as young workers.**

Trainings, funds & opportunities for developing leadership	Clear, transparent, and fair processes for taking leadership roles and exercising power	Opportunities for different kinds of leaders
<p>Setting up processes for systematic young worker participation in educational &amp; political events, and bringing back information from these events to report back on.</p> <p>Opportunities to engage in education for the broader public about unionism and distribute resources for the unorganized;</p> <p>Participation is a skill!!! Not everyone knows how to be a good “member”</p>	<p>Clear &amp; consistent processes for both day to day roles and big picture roles</p> <p>This will empower young workers to set their own goals &amp; work toward them without the goal posts being moved on them</p> <p>Having bureaucratic processes laid out and explained to folks, information available in multiple formats, and importantly, integrating accountability measures into these processes such as term limits, campaign finance transparency and fairness, and voter empowerment (e.g. 1 member 1 vote policies)</p>	<p>Valuing different kinds of labor, e.g. roles for outreach, spokespeople, logistics, etc, based on comfort level, interests &amp; areas of expertise... NOT everyone can be or wants to be a spokesperson, expanding capacity by embracing this</p>

**Nurture grassroots militance: Young workers need strategies that channel their energy rather than divert it or co-opt it**

Helping young workers assess their risks, benefits, & rights in taking concerted actions	Taking strong social justice stances as part of the mission of unionism	Protecting & uplifting members expertise in & outside of the union
<p>Supporting job action, especially spontaneous rank and file action (e.g. even wildcat strikes) and other efforts to escalate should workers choose to take them</p> <p>Assessing and reporting on risks for different kinds of workers for taking actions, creating space for them to make choices about whether or not they take these risks, and protecting them as best they can at whatever risk level they choose (e.g. don't assume YW aren't willing to risk their jobs over social justice issues like Palestine solidarity);</p> <p>Implementing political education &amp; dedicated space for understanding and leveraging different kinds of power through different strategies and tactics (e.g. against employer; within industry; within community &amp; broader politics); creating resources and messaging for reference</p> <p>Creating mechanisms for organizing in parallel ways, e.g. synergy in caucus formations like Young Worker and Environmental Caucuses or Committees</p>	<p>This is why many Young Workers came into unions. It is also how unions can recruit &amp; retain Young Workers</p> <p>By giving them a vehicle for this organizing in an open system with other community groups and shared issues</p> <p>By issuing statements &amp; resolutions of support and commitments to mobilize</p> <p>Creating and resourcing and folding into the workings of the union dedicated spaces for this work (e.g. caucuses and committee structures),</p> <p>Generally more visibility around workers as whole people using the union as a voice</p>	<p>Whether as whistleblowers, experts on technical &amp; political questions, combatting greenwashing &amp; holding employers accountable through participatory research - Young Worker voices must be amplified by the union and its coalitions in service of union and community issues and campaigns (and pushing for more intentional overlap between these two).</p>

Unions and organizations must have structures and processes in place to deal with the realities of overwork, fragmentation, the fallout from neoliberalism, and to effect transitions on worker and community terms

Thoughtful use of time & space that (1) accounts for capacity limits and (2) is additive to other activities & priorities in Young Workers' lives

Careful, trained facilitation	Logistical support for participation in events, given that YW often have a lot going on	Staff support	These spaces must be connected to the broader institution
Facilitation that accounts for the fact that young workers, women, people of color and other underrepresented folks are less comfortable speaking & more likely to have things to say that are interpreted as "controversial" or "outside of the mission" because they are outside of the dominant group	<p>Providing childcare (at home and/or at events), covering personal costs for attendance (e.g. lost time, paying for travel &amp; event fees, per diem)</p> <p>Convenient meeting times &amp; locations for workers' schedules, virtual &amp; hybrid participation options, sharing notes</p> <p>Updates and information in multiple formats (e.g. meetings, texts, emails, 1:1s)</p> <p>Access to resources for planning events (e.g. space, supplies, software/digital platforms, labor)</p> <p>Mechanisms for shifting responsibilities/schedules/work loads to account for taking on these additional responsibilities or opportunities</p>	<p>Sustained staff support from people who share experiences with the folks they're working with (e.g. shared identities, come from the same sector);</p> <p>Staff support for research on the specific climate impacts of different work that inform bargaining, advocacy, and other strategies and tactics to change these impacts</p> <p>Staff support for workers to develop shared demands, goals and messaging across different kinds of work/ different locations in fragmented job sites/locals</p>	<p>Integrate education about unionism, education about climate and sustainability impacts on work AND of our work/sector on the climate and public health</p> <p>Training that looks toward the future (skills for jobs we need given the climate reality; environmental health &amp; safety training); transferable skills &amp; memberships across sectors/geographies</p>



Worker organizing to influence the political economy so we can all have good green jobs

Redefining good jobs	Working less/more reasonable work expectations for everyone	Strategic new organizing with an orientation toward good jobs for the future (that are key to a decarbonized economy; that a lot of young workers work in or want to work in)		
Expanding the Department of Labor definition/other existing metrics to align to encompass questions of sustainability, including impact on environmental and physical health of workers & community members, work life balance/hours of work, and broader social impacts of particular work	<p>Public provision of good healthcare, childcare, retirement, and elder care</p> <p>Cutting hours without cutting pay to create room for additional positions; shorter work weeks &amp; shifts, adequate staffing;</p> <p>MORE LEAVE (family leave, personal leave, training leave, union leave, climate leave); compensated overtime (&amp; supporting YW to say no to uncompensated overtime)</p> <p>Stable, reliable AND flexible schedules for both better planning/space to form more sustainable habits in e.g. use of transit, consumption, and for handling emergencies that are more common due to climate change</p>	Project based work	Mission driven work	Organizing in your sectoral & along your chain of production
		Hiring halls and other infrastructure to promote economic stability as well as create room for solidarity and organizing rather than create competition	<p>Incorporating a labor-climate analysis into organizations that claim to promote sustainability and/or justice, i.e. staff unions and strong labor standards at climate orgs and other nonprofits, particularly those that work for racial, economic or environmental justice;</p> <p>Also at public &amp; private sector jobs, e.g. hospitals, schools, green energy work – organizing that resources &amp; supports workers to carry out the work they were hired &amp; trained for, making sure people doing mission driven work have space to participate in events/spaces as workers and not just people who support other workers</p>	Identifying shared demands and strategies for workers who engage with the same institutions, e.g. unions, employers connected in a sector, or along a chain of production, gov't agencies

## 5. CONCLUSION

When we were gathering the stories of young workers and writing this report, our organizing conditions were characterized by the Biden administration's friendly National Labor Relations Board and the Inflation Reduction Act that held promise for meaningfully advancing a just transition. But they were also marked by the lingering instability of COVID-19, inflation, and an ongoing genocide in Palestine that was met with both significant resistance by young workers globally and significant repression of those movements by the state. Despite those challenges, young workers continued to build up union density in the private sector and help win labor campaigns that [prioritize climate justice](#).

At the time of this report's publication in 2025, we are in the wake of the latest hottest year on record, devastating wildfires that scorched entire communities in Los Angeles, and President Trump's return to the White House where in just a few months his administration has begun dismantling the federal government and directly attacking federal protections for the climate and workers. While the barrage of unwelcome news and newly unprecedented times appears to significantly raise the stakes for workers everywhere, the stakes have always been high, and there is solace in the resilience of young workers who remain steadily dedicated to building a future that sustains everyone on a living planet.

Meeting this moment requires a deep solidarity between workers across sectors, industries, borders, and generations; most importantly, it requires labor leadership that is willing to heed the calls and initiatives of young workers who are already spearheading resistance networks to the right in pursuit of immigrant defense, LGBTQ+ protections, Palestinian solidarity, and just transition and recovery. In the face of a hostile government and a failing opposition party, the labor climate movement is uniquely poised to push workers toward a sustainable future if it can learn to take the activism of young workers seriously.

Incoming changes to legal protections for workers and the potential loss of organizing rights in the workplace threaten the nature of the labor movement as we've known it for decades, but it is prescient to remember that workers have been here before, and we've won. With a commitment to collective struggle, climate justice, and a willingness to let young workers lead, we will again.

## AUTHORSHIP

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# ENDNOTES

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impacts of the chemicals they were dealing with and to elevate their voices to push for much needed legislation. This effort was largely led by Tony Mazzocchi, a notably young labor leader (he became president of his local at the age of 26), who was also a fierce advocate for gender equity, dedicated much of his career to building partnerships between the labor and environmental movements, and is credited with introducing the concept of just transition to the labor movement. Thus health and safety work has always been envisioned by forward thinking labor leaders as part of the broader project of making work more sustainable.

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- [42] This is in part because of the very challenges these spaces exist to address. The process of conducting this project provides a useful example: we had little success in getting wide swaths of union leadership to share the survey, even in locals with young worker groups or resolutions. Thus most young workers have connected to us through word of mouth and other overlapping worker and climate organizing spaces. However, members of the few union locals who received outreach through their leadership expressed surprise and enthusiasm about receiving our survey, indicating their eagerness to engage on climate issues through their union.
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