

THE **WORKING**
CLASS  **ISSUE**

April 15th, 2021 - May 14th, 2021



WORKERS AND THE WORLD UNITE!

WE DESERVE BETTER

**How workers can win rights with collective
action in the workplace & lobbying Congress
to pass pro-labor legislation.**

Illustration by Jack E. Othon

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Neighbors,

Last month, I opened the inaugural issue of *The Working Class Issue* with an emotional appeal for a Colorado Green New Deal. However, as we kick off this labor-themed issue, I'd like to let the facts speak for themselves.

The current minimum wage in Colorado is \$12.32 per hour, which is higher than the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. While this may seem like a positive thing on the surface, that picture gets muddy when we take other statistics into consideration. The first major consideration is that wages have not kept pace with the rest of the U.S. economy. When adjusted for inflation, the federal minimum wage in 1968 at \$1.60 was the equivalent of \$14.47 in 2021 dollars. In Colorado, the rise of the minimum wage is tied to inflation and will automatically increase every year. However, we will not hit that \$14.47 mark for many years to come. If we keep on track with Colorado's current wage law, we will only have a minimum wage of \$13.31 by 2025.

President Biden has proposed to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2025, though he faces significant resistance from senators in both parties. In Colorado, a \$15 per hour minimum wage is expected to benefit 550,000 workers. Statewide, 28% of workers were earning less than \$15 an hour as of 2019 — with the number rising to 33% in Colorado Springs and 37% in Pueblo.¹ While Biden's proposal would certainly help many, unfortunately that help would be too little too late.

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2020 report², people earning last year's minimum wage of \$12 were only able to afford rent at \$624 per month. On the other hand, fair market rent prices for Colorado had studio apartments priced at an average cost of \$978 per month, one-bedrooms at \$1103, and two-bedrooms at \$1375. Going by these prices, which continue to skyrocket as Colorado's housing market experiences increasing demand, a minimum wage worker would need to work 63 hours per week to afford the studio, 71 hours weekly for the one-bedroom, and 88 hours per week for the two-bedroom. The average wage needed to afford these housing types would be \$18.80 for a studio, \$21.21 for a one-bedroom, and \$26.45 for a two-bedroom. Even for those earning the average wage for Colorado renters (\$19.49 per hour), housing prices present a heavy burden.

If renting is difficult for the average low-wage Colorado Springs worker, home ownership is almost impossible. A recent Health of Housing Report by Nationwide Economics³ found that, as of September 2020, Colorado Springs ranked 395 out of 400 areas studied for housing affordability. The U.S. Census Bureau⁴ has the median value of owner-occupied housing from 2015 to 2019 at \$269,800. But according to the Pikes Peak Association of Realtors⁵, the median home price as of August 2020 was \$380,000 (with the average home price being \$435,922), indicating a huge spike in housing prices in only a few years. While housing prices have seen an annual rise of around 8%, incomes have only increased about 3% to 4%.

This trend has directly contributed to the homelessness crisis here in the city. When the Pikes Peak Continuum of Care program conducted their last point-in-time (PIT) count survey on

January 27th, 2020⁶, they counted 1,339 individuals experiencing homelessness — of which only 981 were sheltered, meaning that 358 of our neighbors spent that night sleeping out in the winter cold. PPCoC's annual mid-2019 to mid-2020 survey found that, in that year, 7,025 unique individuals accessed their Homelessness Management Information Systems (HMIS) for services or support related to homelessness, and Colorado Springs school districts identified 2,029 children experiencing homelessness. This data only accounts for the first three months of an ongoing year-long pandemic, which is sure to impact these numbers significantly with the eviction crisis accompanying the unemployment crisis brought on by the pandemic.

As we await more information on the true labor toll of the pandemic, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that workers in the leisure and hospitality industry, meaning low-wage restaurant and hotel workers, lost 22.4% of jobs that were previously available in February 2020⁶. As of February 2021, 26,000 people were unemployed in Colorado Springs, for an unemployment rate of 7.1%.

This hardship only contributes to the struggles faced by low-income workers in the city, which, according to the U.S. Census Bureau⁴, had a 2019 poverty rate of 11.7%, with 8.9% of people lacking in health insurance — numbers that have certainly risen in the wake of the pandemic, as many more have lost health-care coverage tied to their employment and fallen into poverty. Even those who deal with an average work commute of 22.7 minutes must count themselves lucky to have a commute at all, in spite of the city's inadequate public transportation to get them to their workplaces.

All of these facts can only represent a snapshot of the reality faced by many workers in Colorado Springs. Numbers cannot paint a picture of the stress, the uncertainty, the fear, the despair, and the frustration experienced by people who live this reality. Our gorgeous mountains, our pristine parks, and our abundance of art and culture have made Colorado Springs one of the most desirable places to move to in the nation, but we must do better if we want it to be one of the best places to live. For too many, Colorado Springs is simply another hard place to survive.

Here's to working together to create a better city for ALL.

¹<https://www.coloradofiscal.org/2021/03/04/15-dollar-minimum-wage-colorado/>

²<https://reports.nlihc.org/oor/colorado>

³https://gazette.com/business/colorado-springs-one-of-the-least-affordable-housing-markets-in-the-country-report/article_55046c1c-f7a8-11ea-88f7-0b0013031d87.html

⁴<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/coloradospringscitycolorado>

⁵<https://www.ppchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PPCoC-2019-20-Data.pdf>

⁶https://www.bls.gov/regions/mountain-plains/co_colorado-springs_msa.htm

In Solidarity, Jack E. Othon (she/her/ella) &
The Working Class Issue Editorial Team

WHO ARE *the* WORKERS?

By Joe Tally-Foos



If you have ever spoken to someone who is politically Left of the Democratic party, chances are they've mentioned the importance of workers. Leftists may refer to the mass of workers as the "working class" or, if they're really fancy, the "proletariat." There are several reasons why focus on and empowerment of workers in the workplace and in politics is important. To name just a few: workers produce the goods and services we consume, their work improves our quality of life, and workers make up the vast majority of the population nationally and globally.

This is all well and good, but just talking about the importance of workers is useless if it is not obvious who we mean when we talk about "the working class." There are some misunderstandings about what a worker in this context is. When Leftists talk about workers, we aren't just talking about anybody who works. Plenty of CEOs and bosses talk about their "hard work," but that doesn't make them working class. Before any collective action by workers can be done, we must all know what makes a worker and why they are different from their bosses. The following list is intended to do that, and to hint at why workers are important. So, if you match the qualifications on this list (and even if you don't), then join us in making this country one that represents *all* our interests (not just the interests of the wealthy few)!

A Worker is someone who:

- Does not own the means by which they do their work. **For Example:** A fast food employee does not own the building, the recipes, or the kitchen equipment they use for their job.
- Must sell their work (or labor) on the market in return for wages. **For Example:** If a fast food employee is fired, they must get a new job, or they will not have the wages necessary for food, rent, healthcare, etc.

- Produces value through their work, but does not receive the profits from that value. **For Example:** The fast food employee's wages are already a part of the company budget. When the store makes a profit from selling the things or services the employee produces or provides, that extra money goes to the bosses and the shareholders.

A Worker is not:

- Someone whose main source of income comes from owning the means by which other people work. **For Example:** A fast food restaurant owner makes money from employees using the restaurant to make and sell food. If no employees showed up, no food gets sold, and the owner doesn't make any money.
- Someone who doesn't need to sell their work for wages in order to pay the bills. **For Example:** The restaurant owner doesn't need to get a job if the store is running. They might not even run the restaurant, because they can hire managers to run it instead.
- Confined to any race, religion, gender, or nationality. **For Example:** A Mexican Catholic seamstress is a worker, as is an African American Baptist working at an auto shop as a repairman, as is an Egyptian Muslim oil refinery worker, etc. Although many still think of middle aged white men when we talk about the working class, the largest demographic of people within the working class are women of color working in the service and hospitality industries. Above all, the working class is highly diverse and spans across all races, ethnicities, and walks of life.

Hopefully this has helped to make a much-needed class distinction at a time when those with all the wealth and power are working to divide us on cultural lines. When we workers band together in class solidarity, that is when we can truly tilt the world towards economic justice for all!



COLLECTIVE POWER! WE GOT IT!

BY A. BEWLEY

It is disappointing to see no change in your daily life no matter how much one votes or writes their senator. This is the very reason why voting often feels like some sort of tradition or civic duty rather than a method to enact change. However, do not get disillusioned just yet, as there is a way to change things around you for the better.

Voting, talking to your representatives, canvassing for mainstream politicians are all forms of individual power. Individual power works to an extremely limited extent. For example, if a person were to threaten to stop working unless they had a higher wage, the only bargaining power one has lies in their own skills and how essential they are to the business. Imagine if not just one person threatened to halt work, but a whole workplace did.

We do not have to imagine, because fast food workers in Oregon already did it. (1) The very first fast-food union was organized by the workers in conjunction with their local IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) union. Their fight is still ongoing, but victories such as this one show us that we can forge a better life for ourselves, our coworkers, and working people everywhere.

How do we implement this in our daily life? Well, organizing your workplace would be a start. While this can be extremely beneficial, there are more ways to use collective power. Joining or creating organizations that dedicate themselves to fixing the problems that American society is rife with, as well as ensuring those organizations are completely transparent and democratic in nature, offers a vehicle for you and your buddies to create the change you want to see.

Apathy is quite common nowadays because we feel powerless. While a few individuals with a great amount of wealth and connections can change things on their own, the masses do not share this ability. History is marked by collective action however, such as MLK's marches or the protests that happened this past summer regarding the brutal and vile systemic violence the Black

population experiences from the police.

Collective actions do a lot, but it is also important that we create collective organizations to ensure the bulk of our successes are not trampled on by the business elite. Without these groups fighting for us, the victories of the past fade away. That has happened with the federal minimum wage, which, after years of neglect, is far too low. If we had institutions that were led purely by regular, working-class folks, we could be certain that our interests as working folks are not only represented, but are actually put in place by our leaders.

No matter how much power one business executive has, the people together will always have more.

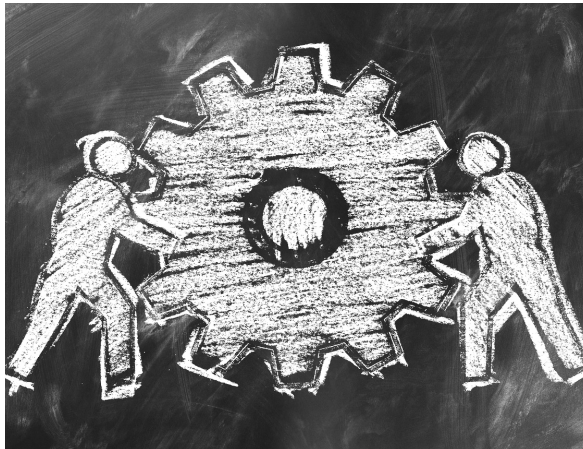


1. <https://pdx.eater.com/2018/4/24/17275346/burgerville-workers-unionize-vote-fast-food>

OPINION: LEGISLATIVE HURDLES TO WORKING CLASS POWER

BY DEREK SAWYER

Our government is supposed to be a force “of, for, and by the people,” but how often does it really feel like the wheels of government turn for the benefit of you and me? The times that it does are few and far between, breaking up long stretches of tax breaks and corporate welfare ever so slightly. It’s business as usual for working people to be left the proverbial crumbs while those at the top stuff themselves with cake. That’s not to say there aren’t lots of good allies; many left-leaning legislators have been pushing for some decent legislation of late. What we’re left with is the imperative to get these ideas past some major obstacles in Congress — obstacles that are both systemic issues and faults specific to the current administration. We’ll look at what those obstacles are, what they’re preventing, and what a person can do to fight back.



There are two major problems I see with our current situation. First, the Senate is set up in a fundamentally undemocratic way. A minority of the population is represented by the same number of Senators as the majority of the population, and thanks to the filibuster (a technical rule that allows the minority party in the Senate to obstruct any legislation introduced by the majority party even when it has wide popular support), that minority wields undue power to prevent any progress from making it to a vote. Changing the filibuster — a rule that can be altered or done away with altogether — is an act of political will that is necessary to getting good laws passed. I don’t blame the opposition party for opposing, I blame the ineffective majority.

Second, and tied directly to that need for political will, is the seeming inability of the Democratic Party to exercise power. They can dream big enough to win elections, but when it comes to actually fighting for working people, they get clammed up and negotiate against themselves. Look at the American Rescue Plan, Biden’s biggest (if only) legislative accomplishment. There was a real chance to get the minimum wage increased to \$15 an hour, but what did the administration do? They folded over the recommendation of an unelected bureaucrat (the Senate parliamentarian) rather than spending some political capital to achieve a key win for working folks everywhere. Rules and procedure meant more to the powers that be than getting a win for you and me. That’s got to change.

What forward progress is being stalled by this dynamic? As mentioned earlier, the \$15 minimum wage was kept out of a guaranteed-to-pass bill over an ignorable technicality. A raise in wages would lift millions out of poverty and give them a little more material security. Higher wages are also linked directly to increased productivity, lower turnover rates, and increased consumer spending — all of which act as boosters and stabilizers for the economy. More critical to worker’s interests

is the upcoming debate over the PRO Act, a keystone piece of legislation that provides a wide range of benefits and protections for working people all across the country. Without the PRO Act, it will continue to be absurdly difficult for working people to stand up for themselves and organize.

How does one person do anything against challenges far-removed from day-to-day life? Where the hell do you get started? Phone and text banks supporting the PRO Act have been organized by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) that I’d highly recommend joining if you want to jump into the national fight for workers’ rights but don’t know where to start. For those that want to get involved in the local fight, get in touch with us at Colorado Springs DSA, or find another local organization that is working for the change we all deserve. Getting organized is the best chance working people have to affect change.

3 COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WORKING IN THE U.S.

"EVEN IF YOU'RE WORKING FULL TIME, IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING FINANCIALLY, IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT WORKING HARD ENOUGH."

Employers (and their affluent employees) love to gaslight the working class with this false claim. While this claim is meant to suggest that struggling people should attend college or technical school to earn higher-paid jobs, the reality is that degrees no longer come with a guaranteed job, but do offer crippling student debt.

As we wrote in the Letter from the Editor, wages have remained stagnant in the U.S. while housing prices (and CEO bonuses) have skyrocketed — a troubling trend not unique to Colorado. If you're working but struggling financially, the true blame lies with employers and politicians who refuse to raise wages to a livable level.

"RAISING THE MINIMUM WAGE TO A LIVING WAGE WOULD JUST DRIVE UP THE COST OF EVERYTHING."

Employers offer this false claim to distract from the truth that raising wages wouldn't threaten the cost of living as much as it would threaten their profits. Higher wages are a direct blow to owners, CEOs, and investors, who often keep wages low in order to boost their own cuts. They justify this strategy by claiming that they do more work while assuming all the financial risk of failure — yet their profits are high enough to support them even if their employees realize that they produce all the value in the company and deserve better compensation for their work.

See the *Second Thought* video in the "Watch, Read, Listen" section to see how McDonald's pays Danish employees a living wage without driving up the cost of its food.

"IF YOUR EMPLOYER OR THE PEOPLE YOU SERVE ARE ABUSIVE, YOU JUST HAVE TO DEAL WITH IT. THAT'S JUST THE WAY THINGS ARE."

Employees hold the power when they join together to demand more rights, including the right to dignity and freedom from employer abuse.

Similarly, workers can band together to demand better treatment from the people they serve. While it's important to deliver good customer service at any job, there is a line where what service workers have to deal with crosses over into abuse. This is unique to American work culture, where employers require workers to give entitled customers whatever they want. Across the world, however, service standards are not so unreasonable. In Europe, service workers do not rely on tips for income and can stand up for themselves when customers become abusive. Remember, dignity is a human right, not a luxury.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR YOUR NEXT CAPITALIST OVERLORD!

Remember, comrades — interviews go BOTH ways. Only the best employers can earn the distinct privilege of exploiting your sweet, sweet labor, so choose your next capitalist overlord wisely. Here are a few interview questions to get you started.

If my start date is before the pandemic ends, do I get to be involuntarily sacrificed for the "greater good" while being pegged a hero? From the start of the pandemic, frontline and essential workers were forced to work while employers provided them with inadequate PPE and safety measures. However, they publicly hailed these workers as "heroes" to hide the fact that in a fiercely capitalist society, profits are more important than human lives. See the *Citations Needed* podcast episode in the "Watch, Read, Listen" section for more information.

Do you offer gamified surveillance to make micro-management fun while I work myself to injury or death? Amazon is known for a work monitoring system that is spreading to other companies: "gamified" work monitoring that tracks employee moves down to the second. See the *Mic* article in "Watch, Read, Listen" for more.

Does the company provide a bottle in place of adequate bathroom breaks, or do I need to provide my own? Once again, Amazon is notorious for draconian labor practices. A recent *Intercept* article revealed that delivery drivers often resort to urinating in bottles and defecating in bags because they are not allowed to take bathroom breaks while en route. Find the article under "Watch, Read, Listen."

What's the owner like? Do they own a spaceship? Billionaire owners often justify paying their employees starvation wages by claiming that they are using their profits to benefit all of humanity. This a reference to Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk, who wants to start a Mars colony as a solution to climate change — a controversial project that many fear will deplete Earth's scarce resources while the rich escape to the Mars colony. See the *Rumble* interview with Anand Giridharadas to debunk billionaire philanthropy.

WORKING CLASS SPEAKS



WCI writer William Smith asked four working class people the following questions: "How many jobs do you work/what all do you have to do to support yourself? If you had a voice in how your workplace ran, what would you want to change?" Here are their answers.

T.M., Grocery Store Clerk: Currently I work one job and supplement income through freelance photography. My voice and action inside my workplace would be used to implement a unionized workforce, wages that more closely reflect the average productivity of the American worker as was originally intended, and a removal of prerequisites before obtaining insurance benefits.

R.T., Barista: Currently I have one full time job, and on the side, I donate plasma and/or do food delivery to be able to pay some of my bills. I think that I would probably change the benefits and wages of the workplace. I would definitely offer opportunities for paid time off, health insurance or something similar, and opportunities for personal growth and investment. I would also change wages from minimum wage to a living wage, because minimum wage often doesn't cover all of the expenses one could have. So, I'd probably raise wages at the minimum \$3 more.

A.L., Bartender: I only work one job, but it's the first time in years that it's been that way. The only reason I'm just doing one is because I'm a full-time student as well and don't have the time for another job. The pay at my job is decent enough, and, alongside stimulus checks and grant money, I can provide for myself, but I don't make enough that I'm able to live without roommates. If I could change how my workplace ran, I would instigate break policies, as currently there are none in place. I'd also add the option for sick leave.

K.J. Barista: So currently I only work one full-time job. Luckily it has the hourly rate and a sufficient enough tip pool system for me to only have one job nowadays. But in the past I have worked two jobs pretty consistently over the last year, year and a half. To make things a little more affordable for myself I share a two bedroom apartment with a third roommate. As someone that works 40 to 50 hours a week I also try to get jobs here and there for extra spending cash since my budget is pretty tight.

Having a voice on how my workplace runs is something I always wanted throughout my professional career in the food industry. My current job gives me that opportunity, the opportunity to affect change at a higher level. For me it's always been about holding everyone to the same standard and working towards a common goal! One of the biggest things as an employee in the restaurant industry is feeling like you're being taken care of and that those above you genuinely care about your day-to-day experience and well-being. Both in a physical and mental sense. I found that at my job for the most part. However, the industry is lacking managerial awareness. I've been working in food for about eight years now and I'm currently at the highest rate of pay that I have ever been able to achieve. I think a lot of workers are underpaid and under-valued in the industry. However, not everyone puts forth the same effort.



The Working Class Issue team and Colorado Springs DSA extend our deepest sympathies to the families and friends of the victims of the Boulder King Soopers shooting on March 22nd, 2021. The COVID pandemic has been hard on most people, and especially on essential workers, who do not deserve to deal with more fear than their everyday work reality already presents.

WATCH



READ



LISTEN

Books

No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age by Jane McAlevey. *Why You Should Be a Trade Unionist* by Len McCluskey. *The Iron Heel* by Jack London.

Videos

Second Thought: "The Minimum Wage Debate Explained." *Now This:* "Malcolm Kenyatta Confronts Minimum Wage Opposers." *DSA:* "Workers and the World, Unite! DSA's Campaign Launch to Pass the PRO Act to Win a Green New Deal."

Podcasts

Citations Needed: Ep. 131: "The 'Essential Worker' Racket - How 'COVID Hero' Discourse is Used to Discipline Labor." *Rumble with Michael Moore:* Ep. 9: "Please Let Me Rob You, I'm Woke" (feat. Anand Giridharadas)

Articles

The Intercept: "Documents Show Amazon is Aware Drivers Pee in Bottles," by Ken Klippenstein. *Mic:* "Amazon is Expanding Its Gamification Model of Warehouse Work to At Least 20 States," by AJ Dellinger. *Left Voice:* "Bessemer Opens the Floodgates: Amazon Workers All Over the Country Are Trying to Unionize," by Tatiana Cozzarelli.



UPCOMING EVENTS

April 17th: DSA Social - Hike @ Pulpit Rock, 2 PM

April 18th: DSA General Meeting, 4 PM - Zoom

April 19th: The Meaning of the Paris Commune 150 Years Later, 7:15 PM - Chinook Center

May 1st: May Day March & Rally - Time and Location TBD

Please check Facebook.com/SpringsDSA for updates on our events and actions!

Chinook Center

April 24th: Pikes Peak Park Community Barbecue, 12 PM - Monterey Park

April 25th: People's College: Yoga for Activists, 3 PM - Chinook Center

April 27th: People's College: Contemporary Rap Music - What are they mumbling about? 6 PM - Chinook Center

May 2nd: Southside Alliance Brunch, 11 AM - Chinook Center

May 2nd: People's College: Activist Media College, 3 PM - Chinook Center

May 4th: People's College: Fascism in the mid-20th century, 7 PM - Chinook Center

Chinook Center is located at 2551 Airport Rd, #107, Colorado Springs. Please visit Facebook.com/chinookcenter for updates on events.

ACTION ALERT!

Please help us rezone the city for more permitted uses! This is a crucial first step in efforts to build (green) affordable housing, to cut down on homelessness, and to expand public transit, along with other progressive goals. The city government is currently accepting public comments until April 30th. Please send an email to RetoolCOS@coloradosprings.gov. Let them know you want them to "allow more permitted uses in existing single-family zones," along with a couple reasons why you think this is important. Be sure to copy your city council member and any at-large council members! Visit citizensproject.org/contact-elected-officials/ to find your district and contact info for your representative!

OUR WRITERS

Jack E. Othon (she/her/ella) graduated from UCCS with a Bachelor's in English in 2012.

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Derek Sawyer (he/him) is a working-class stiff who likes guillotines and tabletop RPGs.

Appreciate our work? Please consider donating to keep it going! Scan the QR code below for a direct link to our PayPal.



PEOPLE'S GROCERY

People's Grocery is a free grocery distribution that runs every Sunday from 12-2 at the Chinook Center. The program is supported by donations and community collaboration! We have recently launched a delivery as well for those with limited transportation. Check out chinookcenter.org for more info.



The Working Class Issue is written and published by Colorado Springs DSA, an official chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. From our national website: "Democratic socialists believe that both the economy and society should be run democratically—to meet public needs, not to make profits for a few. To achieve a more just society, many structures of our government and economy must be radically transformed through greater economic and social democracy so that ordinary Americans can participate in the many decisions that affect our lives."

If you'd like to get involved, visit act.dsusa.org to become a member!