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Covid-19 pandemic and the work force

From Invisible to Essential: Worker Struggle in the COVID Pandemic

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This interview is an edited version of an interview of Al Bradbury, Editor of *Labor Notes*, by Bill Resnick of [The Old Mole Variety Hour](#) on KBOO radio, 90.7fm Portland, OR, that's live streamed to the universe. It played immediately after an interview with Travis Watkins, a UAW mechanic and bargaining unit representative in a parts plant, who is fighting his dismissal for alerting plant workers of health and safety violations after discovery of two COVID infected workers. Both audios are available on the KBOO website using the search feature. And if you want to learn more about Labor Notes, see the box below.[*Solidarity*]

Al, today we'll be discussing worker challenges to their employers during the COVID epidemic - about health and safety and pay, and also of worker challenges to what the corporations like to call management prerogatives. In winning the right to collective bargaining, trade unions in the U.S. accepted a limitation, that management had prerogatives - the right to make unilateral decisions about products, investments, Board appointments, advertising, political contributions, the equipment and organization of production. These could not be bargained or be the reason for a strike. Still workers, union and no union, had their own ideas about the company and in daily struggles challenged these so-called prerogatives in one way or another. And over the last several months these worker challenges to management prerogatives came loud and clear, and in some places successful, sometimes under the banner, "from invisible to essential."

First Al, let's get to the bread and butter issues, particularly health and safety. I just interviewed Travis Watkins who I learned about through the Labor Notes website. Travis' story is just one of many now occurring in this country. Give us a sense worker struggles today.

Autoworkers are one of many sectors where one of the first things workers did was organize to demand to close down nonessential work auto plants and many other kinds of plants and workplaces. The employers were slow to close down, wanting to squeeze as much profit out as they could, even as workers discovered that their coworkers or supervisors were getting sick and experienced the reality of not being able to socially distance at work, not having the protective gear they need. Autoworkers had walkouts and demanded to shut their plants down which they did, although the auto companies almost immediately began making rumblings about wanting to reopen those as soon as possible.

There are also less-organized, large-scale sickouts in many sectors. Meat and poultry plant workers, for instance, many of them immigrants, were not going in to work in large numbers and sometimes effectively closing down plants. The Trump administration lashed back, invoking the Defense Production Act to keep the plants open and insulate the companies from liability when workers get sick. These plants were already death traps for workers, and now even more so. To make them safer, a necessary step would be to slow the lines but instead the administration is using the crisis as cover to grant waivers to speed them up even more.

But it's inspiring to see how many of the workers who are considered essential, in all kinds of sectors, are organizing to demand the protective gear they need, or extra compensation for the risks that they're taking, or to rearrange their work to make it safer.

One example that I found really heartening early in the crisis was a wildcat strike by bus drivers in Detroit, who didn't wait for the employer to decide; they shut down the buses and said before we go back to work, we have some demands about how the buses need to operate differently to be safer during this crisis. They won all of their demands. One of them was no collection of bus fares for the duration of the crisis, which certainly makes drivers

safer during the pandemic because they don't have such close contact with people. The enforcement of the fare is also one of the sites of conflict and violence that puts drivers at risk of workplace violence every day. And in this recession, a free commute is a great boon to the public. So, that kind of change, where workers got together and said we see how we could improve the situation at our work and demanded it and won it, that spirit is something I hope we can keep even after the crisis is over.

Another issue with profound implications, service workers are now rallying under the banner from invisible to essential. Those delivery truck drivers and homecare workers and cleaners and grocery workers and health workers, many at the lowest level, cooks and restaurant workers, they're now being seen and seeing themselves as essential, as skilled and necessary, which we on the left always knew and tried to argue. This crisis is an unforgettable wakeup call, for workers and for the society, that fuels demands for respect and a decent wage.

Absolutely. I think there's both the public awareness of the importance of so many workers who are often overlooked, and the workers' own awareness of the power that they have, that society really can't continue without them. It's long overdue that we should celebrate sanitation workers, transit workers, postal and delivery workers, grocery and warehouse workers, healthcare workers. So often their voices are ignored and suppressed, and their concerns are pushed down by management. This is a moment of tremendous opportunity for workers to build connections with the public, because all of us are seeing every day the risks workers are taking, and their centrality to our lives. When the CEOs all work from home or take time off, it doesn't really have any impact on you and me. But all of these regular and often underpaid workers are tremendously important.

So it's a great time to make the point about why we need to support and pay well and sustain our public services why for instance we shouldn't privatize the post office as corporate interests want to do, or allow them to contract out to the lowest bidder things like transit and sanitation. But, it's also a moment when workers can realize the leverage that they have, because a company like Amazon has been forced to admit that as high-tech as it is, all of its work depends on human labor. You've seen protests and walkouts, and Amazon was forced to give a \$2.00-an-hour raise during this period. Amazon has also retaliated; they see that workers are getting a sense of their power, and they want to try to suppress that. They've fired several workers, both tech and warehouse workers. But the crisis shows that there are all of these choke points where labor is essential to producing profits and to keeping the public going. It shows why workers have the power to organize. I think that's part of why we're seeing this real ferment, both in union workplaces, where rank and filers are getting organized and making demands without necessarily waiting for their union leaders to take the lead, and among nonunion workers too. And it's a great time for unions to make connections with nonunion workers and organize them.

And for me, just as significant, is workers making demands on the company to meet employee needs and serve the people of this country in this epidemic emergency

Yes, one more thing that's been inspiring me is to see workers taking this moment to think bigger about what kinds of changes could be made to their work in the public interest. General Electric workers held pickets around the country to demand that their plants, where usually they make jet engines, be converted to make ventilators. And in Oshawa, Canada, there's a GM plant that's in the process of being closed down. A group of auto workers there has been saying for a year, we should convert our plant to green vehicle production. When the crisis came along they said, well, let's also use it to make masks and medical equipment that's immediately needed. And GM agreed to do it. I believe that plant is now making 1 million masks a month.

In a moment of crisis, employers and privatizers will seize on it and try to use it as a chance to accelerate their agenda, but it's also a chance for workers to say, when things come to a halt, let's take the opportunity to come up with our agenda. Let's reopen on our terms, and take this as a moment to pivot towards the needs of workers and the

needs of the community, and reimagine how our jobs could be when we come back to them.

AI Bradbury, really good talking to you. You're an essential worker, from my point of view.

Thanks, Bill.

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Here's AI Bradbury describing Labor Notes to KBOO radio listeners:

Labor Notes has always existed to create a forum for rank-and-file union members as well as non-union workers to connect with one another, to learn from one another, and as you said, to tell their stories, which often go untold. We've published a monthly magazine for more than 40 years, which often carries stories written by workers describing how we organized this strike, how we won this demand, how we're fighting this issue in our workplace, written for other workers to read and learn from.

We also organize conferences. We do a big international conference every two years (although we had to postpone it this year due to the pandemic), and we organize local events: Troublemakers Schools, Secrets of a Successful Organizer trainings. Portland has hosted many of these events where local union and nonunion workplace activists learn from one another and develop strategies to build a more militant, fighting, and winning labor movement.

During the pandemic, we've been doing tons of organizing to support people who are fighting to make their jobs safer, in some cases to shut their workplaces down for safety or to win the rights and protections they need. We've been doing webinars and conference calls and publishing four times as many articles as usual, because there's so much going on, so much workplace activity.

Source [Solidarity](#).

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