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7 Amazing Fights for the Rights of Workers

From Houston janitors to Chicago teachers, 2012 will be remembered as the year workers played their most powerful card: the strike.



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From the ports of Los Angeles to the drive-through windows of New York City, hundreds of thousands of workers engaged in direct actions throughout 2012.

While much of the news cycle this year was dominated by the presidential election, a quick look back at worker protests in 2012 reveals a historically significant series of labor struggles. Building off the momentum established by the 2011 Wisconsin teachers' union occupation of the state capitol, 2012 saw a building number of direct actions by workers—particularly in non-unionized, low-wage professions.

As Jane McAlevey, author of the recent book on labor organizing [*Raising Expectations \(And Raising Hell\)*](#) explains, this year workers "return[ed] to the idea of strikes and militant direct action that actually has the power of disruption." Workers, she explained, have been ready for this militancy for years, and now the leaders of the labor movement are finally catching up.

"Nothing is going to replace boots on the ground. And the boots are ready," she said.

Of course, 2012 also saw some blows to the labor movement, perhaps the worst being the passage of the [union-busting bill in Michigan](#), deceptively called the "right-to-work" law. Still, from janitors in Houston to teachers in Chicago, 2012 will be remembered as

the year that both unionized and not-(yet)-unionized workers played their most powerful card: the strike.

1. Walmart Workers

The top award for labor uprising in 2012 has to go to Walmart workers, whose wave of national and international strikes against the company's supply chain facilities and retail outlets heralded a new era of resistance against multinational corporations.

The unrest began in the remote Walmart warehouses of [Elwood, Ill.](#) and [Mira Loma, Calif.](#), where workers had been enduring dangerous working conditions for years, despite filing multiple labor complaints and lawsuits. Dozens of workers at both warehouses—which are run by subcontractors rather than the retail giant itself, part of the overall “domestic outsourcing” of U.S. jobs—went on strike in September. By October, the strikes had spread to [Walmart retail stores in a dozen states](#); by November, retail workers walked out of stores in [more than 100 cities](#) during a national day of action on Black Friday, the notoriously busy shopping day following Thanksgiving.

In December, [international solidarity actions](#), including strikes, occurred at Walmarts in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, South Africa, India and Nicaragua. And while the Walmart strikes didn't cripple the U.S. holiday shopping season, they did shine a light on the plight of workers at the world's largest employer--and, consequently, the entire low-wage hyper globalized economy.

[As Josh Eidelson wrote in a feature for the Nation](#): “Even though Walmart employs just under 1 percent of the American workforce, most of us live in the Walmart economy. Its model has been forced on contractors and suppliers, adopted by competitors and mimicked across industries. That model includes a relentless squeeze on labor costs. In the United States, workers say they often skip lunch to get by on paltry wages. In Bangladesh, where in late November 112 workers died in a factory without outdoor fire escapes, NGOs blame Walmart for pushing deadly shortcuts.”

In the 50-year history of Walmart, no organizing campaign has ever struck a serious blow at this multinational giant—until 2012. And this campaign's success, as Eidelson writes, isn't just about the future of Walmart workers. It's “a necessary task if there's ever to be a robust future for the US labor movement.”

2. Chicago Education Workers

On September 10—just [two days before](#) the California warehouse workers kicked off the international strike against Walmart—nearly 30,000 teachers and educational workers, clad in red T-shirts and waving handwritten signs, flooded the streets of Chicago in the school district's first strike in a quarter century. At the heart of the strike was the direction and future of the U.S. public school system, which has been hotly contested since former President George W. Bush's 2002 No Child Left Behind legislation put standardized tests at the top of school districts' educational priorities and gave privatized charter schools prominence amidst the recent gutting of the public sector. Since 2009 alone, school districts, struggling under austerity measures, have [cut more than 300,000 teachers](#), a decline in public education that one White House report called ["historically unprecedented."](#)

Yet, even beyond the issue of education reform, the Chicago strike represented teachers' first real answer to a decade-long trend of scapegoating them for larger issues of poverty, violence and urban segregation.

As Chicago Teachers' Union president [Karen Lewis wrote](#) in an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* after the seven-day strike ended:

Nearly nine out of 10 students in Chicago Public Schools live in poverty, a shameful fact that so-called reformers too often ignore, yet most schools lack even one full-time nurse or social worker. The district has made cuts where it shouldn't (in art, music, physical education and libraries) but hasn't cut where it should (class sizes and excessive standardized testing and test prep). The tentative agreement reached in Chicago aims to address all these issues.

Chicago's teachers see this as an opportunity to move past the random acts of "reform" that have failed to move the needle and toward actual systemic school improvement.

Despite attempts by Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the city's school district to misrepresent the teachers' strike as little more than squabbling over salaries, public opinion in Chicago largely backed the teachers, allowing the strike to stretch into a second week, with grassroots groups such as [Parents4Teachers mobilizing up to 1,000 parents](#) to picket alongside the striking education workers.

In the end, the education workers were largely victorious, winning a 17.6 percent average raise over the next four years, increased health insurance coverage, funding for much-needed additional educational services, and, most significantly, a decreased focus on standardized test scores.

"Across the board, on every issue, the teachers got a more favorable outcome than the school system," Robert Bruno, a professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and director of its Labor Education Program in Chicago, [told CNN](#).

More than anything, the Chicago strike sounded an alarm for Emanuel and other political leaders that public sector unions, especially teachers, still wield political and social clout in the United States.

3. New York City Fast-Food Workers

On November 29 in Times Square, hundreds of fast-food workers protested during another one of the year's most surprising David-and-Goliath showdowns. Throughout the day, 200 workers at McDonald's, Wendy's, Taco Bell and other chains across the five boroughs walked off their shifts in the nation's first coordinated work stoppage against the notoriously low-wage fast-food industry. Their demand: \$15 dollars an hour and a fast-food workers union.

Like the Walmart strikes, the day-long walkout pitted non-unionized, low-wage workers against some of the largest international corporations, including McDonald's, Wendy's, Taco Bell, Dominos, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Organized by New York Communities for Change, Fast Food Forward, as the organizing campaign is known, has implications for the

future of the entire U.S. economy -- much like the Walmart walkouts that preceded it.

According to [Sarah Jaffe, writing for the Atlantic](#): “The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that seven out of 10 growth occupations over the next decade will be low-wage fields. And these jobs are not being done by teenagers. Across the country, the median age of fast-food workers is over 28, and women -- who make up two-thirds of the industry -- are over 32, according to the BLS.”

Fast-food workers are currently the lowest-paid employees in the United States, earning a median salary of just over [\\$18,000 annually](#)—putting them [below the federal poverty line](#) for a family of three.

The fast-food worker walkout was the most powerful of at least a dozen low-wage organizing campaigns across New York City in 2012, including successful efforts to unionize car washes, grocery stores and an [Upper East Side bakery](#).

4. Houston Janitors

In the middle of July, about 250 janitors responsible for cleaning nine buildings in oil-rich Houston walked off the job, catalyzing a strike that would stretch for five years and snowball to more than 3,000 workers represented by the Service Employees International Union. Heading into the strike, the janitors—who cleaned the offices of some of the world’s largest and most profitable corporations, including ExxonMobil, Chevron, Wells Fargo, Shell Oil and JPMorgan Chase—earned an average hourly wage of \$8.35, which, because of the tendency to keep workers part-time, translated to an average annual income of \$8,684.

One of the leading janitors on the strike, Alice McAfee, said in a [speech just before the first walkout](#): “We think we’ve moved past discrimination but we haven’t... Now it’s low-wage workers who are treated like second-class citizens.... This fight is about putting an end to discrimination once and for all—racism, discrimination against immigrants, and discrimination against the working poor. This is about restoring dignity to all work.”

The strike soon swept across the city with the demand that janitors’ wages increase to \$10 an hour over the next three years. Organizers flew in from around the country to lead the hundreds of janitors and their families in direct actions, which including blocking downtown intersections, slowing traffic on the highways, multiple protests at the buildings and more than 70 civil disobedience arrests.

For many union opponents, the battle of the Houston janitors was considered labor’s last stand in the South. The anti-labor sentiment in the state is fierce: Texas is among the 27 states with laws that make it difficult for unions to organize, and it leads the nation—along with Mississippi—in having the [highest percentage of minimum-wage jobs](#). Yet, by the first week of August, the janitors had a new contract that would increase their wages to \$9.35 an hour over four years. It’s still a paltry sum compared to the billions in profits that these corporations net annually, but it’s far more than they would have earned without the strike.

5. LAX Airport Employees

On the afternoon before Thanksgiving, the busiest travel day of the year, hundreds of workers picketed and protested outside of the iconic gray LAX letters of the Los Angeles International

Airport. The workers, represented by SEIU, walked off the job after their employer, Aviation Safeguard -- which holds a city license to operate inside the Los Angeles airport -- walked [away from the contract](#) negotiations earlier in the year, leaving hundreds of workers without health care or living wages.

Although the outdoor protest was not an official strike, hundreds of workers flooded into the street during various times throughout the day, and more than a dozen blocked a major intersection a little after 1pm, forcing a handful of arrests.

The action was only one of a series of walkouts and protests by LAX union workers throughout 2012, including rallies over the summer and around May 1.

6. NFL Lockout

Monday night football is usually a bastion of apolitical Americana. But when a replacement referee's controversial call in the Green Bay Packers vs. Seattle Seahawks showdown resulted in what many claimed was [one of the worst decisions in NFL history](#) -- effectively handing a victory to the Seahawks -- the league's ongoing labor dispute with its referees became perhaps the most widely recognized workers struggle of the year.

The National Football League locked out its officials in June, after contract negotiations with the referees' union broke down over issues of retirement benefits for current and future workers. (A lockout is the flip side of a strike, but instead of the workers walking off the job to nudge contract negotiations to go their way, management forbids employees to work, in the hopes of yielding concessions.) By the time the season began, the referees were still locked out, forcing the league to hire replacement refs from college-level and non-professional football teams across the country.

As the new refs struggled to assume their responsibilities on live television, a series of controversial and disputed calls threw fans, players and coaches alike into a tizzy—providing one of the clearest and best publicized examples of why trained, unionized workers are, in fact, irreplaceable. Finally, after the Packers/Seahawks call, the league ceded to many of the referees union's demands and the officials were back on the field.

There were also a series of less public but no less important lockouts throughout 2012, including [8,000 Con Edison workers in New York](#) and [1,300 American Crystal Sugar workers](#) in Minnesota, North Dakota and Iowa. Meanwhile, [NHL players are still locked off](#) the ice in the league's second serious labor dispute in the last 10 years.

7. Los Angeles Port Strike

On November 27, 800 clerical workers—fearing that their union jobs would soon become automated or non-unionized—went on strike at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. In response, tens of thousands of port workers, members of the historically radical International Longshore and Warehouse Union, refused to cross the picket line, crippling shipping activity across Southern California. The action, which lasted eight days and [cost the region an estimated \\$8 billion](#), was the strongest port strike in a decade.

Similar to other labor struggles in 2012, salary increases were not the driving issue of the strike, which was the future of the secure, middle-class professions. The 800 clerical workers

were protested that the ports were replacing the retiring union members with non-unionized workers, thereby whittling down the number of well-paying clerical jobs on the West Coast.

After the eight-day strike, the clerical workers won the concession that only 14 positions would be replaced by non-unionized workers over the next three and a half years—an imperfect but hard-fought victory for the future of the middle class.

Of course, the labor movement will need to continue expanding to make a measurable impact on the future of the U.S. economy and the conditions of its workers.

As Jane McAlevey said, “I’m hoping that in 2013 the labor movement will ratchet up—that we’ll see one hundred times what we’ve seen in 2012.”

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