

# United States: Unions to strike for Black lives

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**More unions are stepping up to join the anti-racist fight in the Unites States, as the disproportionate impact of coronavirus hits oppressed communities. They are a high percentage of essential workers in the hospital, medical support, retail and food service industries.**

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Tens of thousands of workers and others plan to “Strike for Black Lives” on July 20. Fast food, ride-share, nursing home and airport workers in more than 25 cities are expected to walk off the job for a full-day strike.

Those who can’t strike for a full day will walk out for about nine minutes — the time prosecutors say a white Minneapolis police officer held his knee on George Floyd’s neck — in remembrance of Black men and women who recently died at the hands of police.

## Strike for Black lives

Associated Press reported on July 8 that strike organisers are demanding “sweeping action by corporations and government to confront systemic racism, in an economy that chokes off economic mobility and career opportunities for many Black and Hispanic workers, who make up a disproportionate number of those earning less than a living wage.

“They also stress the need for guaranteed sick pay, affordable healthcare coverage and better safety measures for low-wage workers, who never had the option of working from home during the coronavirus pandemic.”

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) President Mary Kay Henry told AP: “We have to link these fights in a new and deeper way than ever before.” The SEIU represents more than 2 million workers in the US and Canada.

Prior to Floyd’s murder on May 26 and the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, support by unions for essential workers was limited. Many white union members voted for President Donald Trump and still support the police.

One exception was the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) based in San Francisco, which closed the ports in support on Juneteenth (Emancipation Day), June 19.

Rank-and-file union nurses — white, Latin and Black — in New York City and elsewhere took actions

on their own. They demanded the city and state provide personal protective equipment (PPE), including masks and ventilators, as well as hazard pay for all workers, including janitors and food service, in the hospitals. These workers were applauded for their diligence and long shifts.

Some nurses and other essential workers faced disciplinary action, including suspension or termination, if they spoke up. Medical staff seen as “non-essential” had their hours cut.

The rise of the BLM movement gave encouragement to these union activists and to workers’ determination in this dual pandemic of COVID-19 and racism.

### **Call for employers to support BLM**

The July 20 action combines the strength of the anti-racist movement and unity of the unions.

Key demands are that corporations and government declare unequivocally that “Black lives matter”. Elected officials at every level must use executive and legislative power to pass laws that guarantee people of colour can thrive. Employers must raise wages and allow workers to unionise to negotiate better healthcare, sick leave and childcare support.

Unionisation in the US is low. The number of waged and salary workers belonging to unions was 14.6 million last year, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (10.3%, compared with 20.1% in 1983). Union membership in the private sector has fallen to 6.2%, one-fifth that of public sector workers (33.6%).

The SEIU is partnering with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the American Federation of Teachers, United Farm Workers and the Fight for \$15 and a Union — launched in 2012 by American fast food workers to push for a higher minimum wage.

Social and racial justice groups taking part include March On, the Center for Popular Democracy, the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the Movement for Black Lives, a coalition of more than 150 organisations that make up the BLM movement.

Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, a strike organiser with the Movement for Black Lives, told AP that corporate giants that have come out in support of the BLM movement have also profited from racial injustice and inequity.

“They claim to support Black lives, but their business model functions by exploiting Black labour — passing off pennies as ‘living wages’ and pretending to be shocked when COVID-19 sickens those Black people who make up their essential workers.”

The labour movement has been in retreat for years. There have been labour conflicts and strikes, but workers in the public sector have been the most militant and ready to act.

### **Unity and solidarity is key**

The broad unity and solidarity, with the support of important unions and social organisations, shows that the Trump government has not been able to roll back the movement.

Although the leadership of the main labour federation, the AFL-CIO, is not leading the fight, it is also no longer standing in the way.

The role of BLM shows to all working people that only mass struggle and broad unity in action can lead to victories.

Angely Rodriguez Lambert, a 26-year-old McDonald's worker in Oakland, California, and leader in the Fight for \$15 and a Union, told AP: "Our message is that we're all human and we should be treated like humans — we're demanding justice for Black and Latino lives."

Lambert and several co-workers tested positive for COVID-19, after employees were not initially provided with proper PPE. As an immigrant from Honduras, Lambert said she also understands the Black community's urgent fight against police brutality:

"We're taking action because words are no longer bringing the results that we need. Now is the moment to see changes."

**Malik Miah**

California

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**P.S.**

• Green Left Weekly. July 14, 2020, Issue 1273:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/united-states-unions-strike-black-lives>