

United States: The Economy Key as Midterm Elections Approach

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Midterm elections that will decide who controls Congress will take place on November 8, and many voters are already casting early or absentee ballots. Democrats are arguing that President Joe Biden’s administration has passed bills and spent billions to alleviate student debt, to protect the climate, and to improve transportation, public utilities, manufacturing and construction. Republicans are spending millions on advertising, blaming Biden for rising prices and crime. And so far, they are gaining. According to the most recent New York Times/Siena College poll, 49 percent of voters plan to vote Republican and 45 percent Democrat, with Republicans gaining among women and Latinos. The Democrat’s principal problem is the economy.

In some ways, the U.S. economy is strong, with the unemployment rate of 3.5 percent near historic lows and employers continuing to hire. Though it is also true that a couple of million workers, mostly men, have not returned to the workforce since COVID declined. While employment has been strong, the inflation rate of 8.2 has undermined workers’ purchasing power. Rising food, fuel, and housing costs are affecting both the middle and working classes. In response, workers are organizing.

The latest Gallup poll says that today 68 percent of Americans approve of labor unions, the highest figure since 1965, giving unions a new buoyancy. Union have won more representation elections than at any time in the last twenty years, bringing more than 40,000 workers into the unions, though in 2021 total union membership still continued to decline. The two most visible organizing campaigns—Starbucks and Amazon—continue. Over 6,500 workers at 250 corporate-owned Starbucks stores have voted to unionize, an impressive achievement, though there are altogether 15,444 Starbucks stores with about 350,000 workers. The Amazon campaign, however, suffered a stunning defeat this month at a plant in Albany, New York that employs 950 workers, losing by two-to-one.

Union organizing has been accompanied by an uptick in strikes among fast food workers, Starbucks employees, nurses and other health workers, school teachers, university teaching assistants, and many others. Among office workers in the private and public sectors, while there are not many strikes, there are tussles between bosses and workers over returning to work in the office. After more than two years of working at home via Zoom, many workers are resisting returning to the workplace, demanding hybrid arrangements—a couple of days in the office and a few at home each week—or simply working from home.

COVID has had lasting effects on the working class. Sixteen million people of working age in the U.S. suffer with long COVID and between 2 and 4 million of them are unemployed. Nationally COVID cases are not rising at the moment, though 350 people still die each day, but public health officials

are concerned that only 14.8 million Americans have gotten the latest booster, leaving the rest vulnerable. Then too, there are new variants that are causing concern about a possible COVID surge this winter. Many federal programs to help those with COVID have ended.

As the country has recovered from the last waves of COVID, the social movements have not been very active, with the exception of the women's movement. Over the past spring and summer, little was heard from Black and Latino movements despite or perhaps because of the increasingly difficult economic situation. The Supreme Courts Dobbs decision that overturned Roe and ended federally protected abortion rights drawn a new generation of women of all races into activism to protect reproductive rights. Much of that energy has been directed toward the mid-term congressional elections to prevent the Republican Party from outlawing abortion nationwide.

Unfortunately, the uptick in labor activism and the new fight over abortion are not big enough yet to affect politics.

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