

United States: 2022 “Labor Notes” Conference

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THE JUNE 17-19 Labor Notes conference in Chicago confirmed a new spirit of confrontation at the workplace. Will this develop into a broad challenge to the last 40 years of concessions? Will it be able to launch a successful attack against the corporations and the politicians who back them?

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It's too early to tell but certainly the level of enthusiasm, militancy and youth exhibited at this 4000-strong conference gives a sign that the pandemic taught many workers how they are in fact “essential” to a healthy economy, then piled work on them while generally refusing to provide essential safety protocols.

Founded in 1979 as a monthly newsletter to “put the movement back in the labor movement,” Labor Notes has been holding biennial conferences since 1980. Because of the pandemic, however, it had been four years since the last in-person gathering.

Between conferences *Labor Notes* has reported on union campaigns, strikes and organizing drives on their web page, in their weekly newsletter and monthly magazine, held workshops and meetings online and hosted some day-long, in-person “Troublemaker Schools.”

Unlike conferences organized by many unions, participants not only meet those in their particular industry or union, but also mix and learn from the spectrum of workers who have built union caucuses and workers centers. Labor Notes conferences also host workshops around themes to provide participants with new skills and examples to follow. This year there were 250 over the three days.

Some tracks concentrate on skill building: bargaining campaigns and contracts, education and steward issues, health and safety on the job, new organizing and worker centers. Another track focused on democracy as a key element to building power at the workplace and in the union. Still other tracks discussed political issues that affect both union members and the community, from climate to LGBTQ+ workshops.

The conference ended on Juneteenth with a featured track was a series of workshops that explored the history of labor struggles and the Black liberation movement. Black workers are more likely today to be union members than any other group, and have often pushed forward workplace militancy.

There has also been a tradition that interest groups or organizations might host their meeting before the Labor Notes conference officially opened. This year Latino labor activists organized sessions while the Great Labor Arts Exchange convened. For the first time, the exchange spilled over to the conference itself, building its own track, organizing a song, poem and hip-hop contest as well as a concert. Railroad Workers United, an inter-union, cross-craft caucus of rail workers and supporters, held their convention leading into the conference.

Unlike many other labor conferences, there aren't decision-making plenary sessions but rather a cornucopia of militant ideas on how to strengthen the labor movement emerge from various sessions.

As someone who has attended these conferences since the early 1980s, I saw conference attendees this time as younger, bolder and more eager to learn new skills that they could put to use when they went back to their cities.

Another difference was a much wider lean toward socialism in hearing words like "comrade" and "class struggle" frequently. To be more non-binary there were stickers to take for one's preferred pronouns and a call to "siblings" rather than "brothers and sisters."

One thing I did miss was the usual picket Labor Notes attendees go to during a quick break. There is always some strike going on in the city! Once, long ago, I even helped organize a car pool and bus to my plant when we were on strike; when some of the international guests introduced themselves to strikers, the strikers were overwhelmed that workers from other countries would join them.

But I realized transporting even a portion of the conference was beyond the capacity of the few Labor Notes organizers. What they could manage was to pull off the program and trust to the innovation of attendees.

For some at the conference that unique experience was the Juneteenth celebration when storyteller Helen Sims from the Mississippi Freedom Day Society wove a tapestry of moments in U.S. history when Black people fought for their liberation.

Setting the Tone

The opening plenary, with five of the speakers having led recent strikes, set the tone for the weekend: Stacy Davis Gates, newly elected president of the Chicago Teachers Union; Michelle Eisen, Starbucks Workers United; Dilson Hernandez, musician and hip hop artist; Sean O'Brien, newly elected president of the Teamsters; Marie Ritacco, St. Vincent striker and vice president of the Massachusetts Nurses; U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders; Chris Smalls, president of Amazon Labor Union; and Nolan Tabb, John Deere striker representing Unite All Workers for Democracy, which won the referendum to institute one member, one vote for electing top UAW officers.



Starbucks panel (from left): Bill Whitmire, Phoenix; Will Westlake, Buffalo; Jaz Brisack, Buffalo; Michelle Hejduk, Mesa; Laila Dalton, Phoenix; Alydia Claypool, Kansas City; Kylah Clay, Boston; and Mason Boykin, Jacksonville. jimwestphoto.com

The speakers, representing a spectrum of the U.S. working class, were willing to challenge the lean production model that has brought corporations increased profitability and an even a more precarious, debt-ridden world for the working class.

By spending the weekend analyzing and strategizing on the basis of concrete experiences, participants seemed committed to building an effective team in the workplace. This would give them the power to take on the corporations. Those from Amazon Labor Union advocated building an independent, worker-run union, but given the daunting task of organizing at Amazon, indicated that they would be supported by larger, more traditional unions like the Teamsters.

Starbucks workers have a different model for a worker-run union — Starbucks' Workers United is affiliated to SEIU, which supports their work financially and provides legal backup.

Most unions, however, were formed in an earlier era — with industrial unions coming out of the 1930s, and most public sector unions developing during the 1960s and '70s. In many of these unions, caucuses have sprung up to contest entrenched, undemocratic and sometimes corrupt leaderships.

The example of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a caucus that has existed since the 1970s, demonstrates how it is possible to wage successful campaigns and even replace top Teamster officers.

A second aspect of a member-run union is an understanding of diversity within the membership. This necessitates an understanding of a democratic culture. It also requires awareness of internal and external attacks on any member for their race, sex, gender or immigrant status — not only is such an attack harmful to the targeted individual, but it undermines group solidarity.

Internationalism and Moving Forward

A distinctive feature of Labor Notes conferences has always been a wide variety of workshops and meetings that provide the space for workers to compare experiences. In a globalized world, participants also seek to hear from international guests who often work for the same company.

A highlight for roughly six dozen U.S. Starbucks workers was meeting up with Antonio Paez from Sindicato Starbucks Chile and hearing about the decade-long struggle to win their rights. Today one-third of Chilean Starbucks baristas are unionized.

U.S. Amazon workers were also able to meet and strategize with their counterparts from Canada, Ireland, France, German and Poland. The same was true for autoworkers, who heard updates from Brazilian metalworkers facing the repression unleashed by the Bolsonaro government and supported Israel Cervantes, a fired worker, who recounted the successful drive at Mexico's GM-Silao plant to build an independent union. He still is fighting to win his job back.

After ousting the employer-friendly CTM union, the National Independent Union for Workers in the Automobile Industry (SINTTIA) ratified its first contract. It now plans to challenge the charro union (corrupt & tied to the bosses) by expanding the independent unions at other auto plants. These stories were celebrated by conference participants who saw that these victories can build on one another, launching what must be a much larger, more sustained upsurge.

Other international workshops included reports on the Chinese regime's suppression of the Hong Kong union movement that sprang up during their democratic upsurge and updates about attacks on workers' rights in Brazil and Palestine under Israeli occupation.

This brief summary only scratches the surface of the conference sessions and workshops' diversity and depth.

In discussions about moving forward, no one underestimates the power of the corporations, many of which have made enormous profits during the pandemic. Outwitting the corporations' brutal regime of understaffing and surveillance means creating a culture of solidarity and a willingness to take risks.

Workshops outlined how to turn an issue into a campaign, how to use social media to organize, how to carry out collective action by slowing down the flow of production, marching with group grievances to management's office and walkouts over safety issues. Conference goers flocked to workshops advocating class struggle unionism, strike action (even when technically illegal) and other creative actions.

One session was set aside for meet ups for workers in the same industry, union or caucus: the building trades, federal workers, health care workers, teamsters, teachers, librarians, postal and longshore workers, telecom, media, transit, and telecom workers. Sprinkled throughout the weekend were workshops featuring workers centers and discussions on climate change.

A new project represented at the conference was the Emergency Workplace Organizing Committee (EWOC), a joint campaign of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the United Electrical Workers (UE). It responds to non-union workers' requests, matching those requesting help with mentors.

Starbucks, Amazon, Teamsters

In the face of a unionization drive, Starbucks has retaliated by firing a couple dozen baristas, often on phony charges, and shut down almost 20 stores. In the case of Amazon, Apple, Starbucks and many other workplaces hostile to unions, even when the union has won an election, no contracts have been signed.

People like Chris Smalls trained new hires as they came to Amazon. As he taught them how to do their jobs safely, the mutual trust and respect that developed could be tapped when they decided they needed a union. The same thing is true of the Starbucks baristas who have learned their skills (generally underappreciated by casual customers!) from the same people who are now organizing the union. Workers are organizing themselves in situations where the nature of their work and the chronic understaffing forces them to rely on each other in order to get through the day.

How long will this opportunity to spread workers self-organization last? That of course is unknowable.

In less than eight months, Starbucks Workers United has successfully won union elections in 220 stores over 32 states. They announced a million-dollar strike fund and project organizing 1000 stores by Labor Day. That projection may have hit a bump now that management is offering higher wages only to workers at their non-unionized stores.

Meanwhile TDU, the rank-and-file caucus in the Teamsters, is outlining a year-long strategy to mobilize UPS workers around their 2023 contract. A section of their website, UPS Teamsters United, contains a wealth of resources including comments from members on the issues they find most important: ending two-tier wages, more full-time jobs, eliminating surveillance and forced overtime.

An independent formation, UPS Teamsters United, is prepared to work with the new and more militant Teamster officials.

In early July, TDU publicized the International Union's August 1-5 kickoff of the UPS contract campaign. Unleashing an aggressive campaign involving members and leadership to win a strong contract — the largest private sector contract in the country — would have a huge impact on working-class organizing in the coming year. Stay tuned!

Dianne Feeley

P.S.

- Against the Current, No. 220, September/October 2022:
<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc220/2022-labor-notes-conference/>