

Call for Papers

“More Expendable than ‘Essential’:
Black Workers’ Rights and Racial Class Struggles Under the COVID Crisis”

Special Issue of *Labor Studies Journal*
In Conjunction with the 2021
United Association for Labor Education Annual Conference
May 24-27, 2021, University of Illinois at Chicago

It is often said, when the United States catches a cold, Black people get double pneumonia. As COVID-19 devastates populations across the world, the historically rooted, social disparities impacting African American workers have been exacerbated. Black workers disproportionately, and often involuntarily, represent a significant portion of frontline laborers. Although Black workers comprise 11.9 percent of the U.S. population, or one in nine workers overall, they represent one in six workers classified as “essential.” Black workers are disproportionately represented in service industries especially as retail, janitorial, and food service workers, postal service employees, one-fifth of childcare and social service workers, and a third of all bus drivers. Black workers also constitute a disproportionate number of construction workers, home health aides and gig economy service workers.

In Black working-class neighborhoods, residents crowd public transportation to jobs, which lack a living wage and union protections. Thus employees in such positions face multiple threats, greater risk of COVID infection and economic ruin, hostile customers, and an inadequate health system. Additionally, their intersectional oppression limits their capacity to build and maintain social institutions due to political subjugation, economic exploitation, and social humiliation. Thus, the COVID crisis has magnified the ongoing social crisis in Black American of underemployment.

Concurrently, resistance and social movement action amongst African Americans have roared since the pandemic began. Black workers across the country are seizing on these dual crises to advocate for themselves. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a group of mostly black sanitation workers executed a one-day strike demanding protective clothing and hazard pay during the pandemic. After George Floyd’s murder by police, Black dockworkers in the International Longshore Association Local 1422 of Charleston, South Carolina shut down the nation’s fourth busiest port and caused trucks to clog the interstate for miles. In July this year, fourteen Black sanitation workers struck the city of New Orleans to fight privatization and outsourcing of jobs. Under the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Strike mantra of “I Am a Man,” these strikers garnered immense local and national support and raised over \$200,000 in strike funds. After the shooting of African American Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin—a town ravaged by deindustrialization and loss of livable wage jobs—professional basketball players initiated a wildcat strike and refused to play games for three days, costing NBA owners and investors millions of

dollars. Since March 1st, tens of thousands of African American workers have withheld their labor in over 900 strikes and work stoppages across the United States. This labor militancy holds a distinct difference to traditional labor strikes as more non-union Black workers, particularly in the South, are launching wildcat strikes through online or lunch break organizing. As face-to-face organizing declined due to COVID-19 preventative measures, Black workers restructured their organizing through Whatsapp, Instagram, Zoom, TikTok, and viral calls. This organizing not only seeks gains in the working realm, but also provides political education regarding both workers' rights and struggles against police terror in Black working class spaces. Thus, the dialectical relationship between Black political economy, the wave of African American labor militancy, and the impact of intertwining crises holds the potential to radically restructure the framework, ideology, and capacity of the U.S. labor movement.

We are inviting submissions for a special edition on workers' rights and racial class struggles during the COVID crisis for *Labor Studies Journal*. This call for papers seeks research that speaks to the political, economic, social, and cultural implications of African American labor history in understanding the social and labor crises during the COVID pandemic. Case studies from a local, national, and/or global comparative standpoint, are highly encouraged. We encourage submissions from the perspectives of multiple disciplines, including but not limited to, labor studies, history, sociology, gender studies, political science, economics, labor, and law.

The Labor Studies Journal (LSJ) is the official journal of the United Association for Labor Education, whose annual conferences bring together union, community, and university educators working to promote collective bargaining and worker justice. Published quarterly, LSJ is a multi-disciplinary journal covering issues related to work, workers, labor organizations, and labor studies and worker education in the US and internationally. The journal publishes articles which use a wide range of research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, and is a must-read for union, university, and community-based labor educators, labor activists, and scholars from across the social sciences and humanities.

Interested authors should [submit](#) a paper proposal abstract to Special Editor Dr. Augustus Wood at <https://forms.gle/XkRhMQf1YBaeLvfk6>. Proposals should be submitted no later than **FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 20**. Any questions about submissions should be directed to woodiii2@illinois.edu. If invited to present, *full papers for the Labor Studies Journal Special Edition Issue* should be sent to woodiii2@illinois.edu by May 1, 2021.

Abstracts will be reviewed by the editor and those selected will be notified by the editor.

Acceptance of proposals is conditional upon authors presenting their papers at the

UALE Conference in April 2021 in Chicago, Illinois. Only papers accepted for presentation at the 2021 UALE Conference will be eligible to be submitted to a peer reviewed process for possible publication in a special conference issue of the Labor Studies Journal.

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