For Labor Unions, 2023 Was the Year of the Strike—and Big Victories

By Kate Bronfenbrenner
Dec. 4, 2023 10:00 am ET

2023 was a remarkable year for the U.S. labor movement.

The country experienced a surge in strikes unlike anything in recent memory. According to Cornell ILR’s Labor Action Tracker, as of Oct. 31, there were 354 strikes in 2023 involving roughly 492,000 workers—nearly eight times the number of workers involved in strikes for the same period in 2021 and nearly four times the number for the same period 2022.

Not only were there more strikes, they led to historic companywide and industrywide bargaining victories with some of the nation’s largest and most powerful corporations—United Parcel Service, Kaiser Permanente, Hollywood, the big three auto-companies, and hotels and casinos in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Detroit.

For many workers, these were the first contract negotiations since Covid-19, and the first strikes since before the recession of 2008. Spurred on by anger and frustration over the pandemic and lockdowns, skyrocketing corporate profits, deteriorating working conditions, rising prices and decades of concessions and wage stagnation, not only are more workers striking, but more unions are winning, and winning big.

These victories come at a difficult time for labor. Union representation reached a record low of 6% of private employment in 2022.
New leaders

But last year, a new generation of leaders—such as Sean O’Brien (Teamsters), Shawn Fain (United Auto Workers), Ellen Stutzman (Writers Guild of America) and Fran Drescher (Screen Actors Guild)—had a mandate from their members to run smarter and more militant campaigns. By actively engaging the public, the media and public officials, and changing strike strategies, they left employers in unfamiliar and less comfortable territory.

Strike after strike was framed in terms of standing up for all workers against corporate greed. Issues such as ending two-tier wages and recouping pay and benefit concessions struck a chord with the public, ratcheting up public support for unions and for strikes up to 74%, and, for the first time in recorded history, the U.S. president joined a union picket line, scolding employers for not offering more.

The Teamsters at UPS used the threat of a strike and innovative strategies such as practice picketing, where union members picket before the contract expiration to signal their resolve. That strategy allowed them to win a record contract covering 340,000 UPS employees nationwide, without actually striking, making up for more than two decades of concessionary agreements.

When the 175,000 members of Writers Guild and SAG-Aftra struck Hollywood, the studios let bargaining drag on for seven months, convinced the unions would have to settle once members began to struggle to pay their bills. But workers in...
both unions stood united, winning not only across-the-board increases in minimums and streaming bonuses, but also the first enforceable protections against the use of artificial intelligence.

Kaiser Permanente healthcare workers picket in Los Angeles in October. PHOTO: ZAYDEE SANCHEZ FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Teamsters conduct a ‘practice picket’ outside a UPS facility in Doraville, Ga., in July. PHOTO: ERIK S LESSER/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Also in California, in October 75,000 nurses and doctors struck Kaiser Permanente, in the largest healthcare strike in U.S. history, winning a 21% wage increase over four years, as well as improvements in training, professional development and staffing.

Similar victories were registered by Los Angeles hotel workers, Las Vegas culinary workers and Detroit casino workers.
The campaign that most captured media attention and the support of the nation was the UAW strike of the Big Three automakers—Ford Motor, Stellantis and General Motors.

**New rules**

The union played by a new set of rules, bargaining with all companies at once, strategically targeting individual plants with no notice, and calling out the company for its greed. Ultimately the union won an unprecedented agreement, winning on demands thought by many to be a pipe dream, such as 25% wage increases, reinstating COLA, elimination of two-tier wages, the right to bargain over plant closures, and bringing electric vehicle plants under the Big-3 agreement.

For each of these, rank-and-file participation and engagement were essential elements of the victory. If workers hadn’t voted overwhelmingly to strike, showed up every day at the picket line, reached out to community, labor and political allies, and refused to cross the picket line, the strikes would have failed.

It was “labor’s hot summer” and labor showed up. Support came from outside the country as well, with unions in other countries staging international days of action in support of striking workers.
The commitment of union leaders to stand strong was critical to the unions’ success. If the writers’ and actors’ unions hadn’t held out, even after the company’s last, best, final offer, neither union would have won pathbreaking language on artificial intelligence. Nor would the UAW have achieved the last-minute agreements to bring electric vehicle jobs if Shawn Fain had given in to pressure to settle.

Ultimately, though, success depends on unions making the cost to the employer of not settling greater than the cost of settling the contract. As Fain told UAW members, quoting Walter Reuther, “Power is the ability of a labor union like UAW to make the most powerful corporation in the world—General Motors—say yes when it wants to say no.”

As my research has shown, for that to occur the unions need to find ways to leverage the power of workers and community allies through escalating tactics targeting the company’s profit, growth, key relationships and supply chain.

That is why the Writers Guild focused its attention on Netflix and Walt Disney, the largest and most profitable streaming companies, and the UAW targeted first the parts suppliers and then the companies’ cash cows—SUV and trucking plants.
—because those would have the greatest impact. It’s also why the unions expanded their strikes when companies didn’t move on key issues, and stopped the escalation when the company did move.

Not all strikes were large. In fact, according to ILR Labor Action Tracker data, 60% of the strikes in the past year were in units with 100 or fewer workers. This isn’t surprising, given that most employers in the U.S. have fewer than 100 workers. But it does limit bargaining power if unions only represent a limited number of workers in an industry or parent company.

Nor were all strikes this year successful. In March 2023, United Mineworkers returned to work at Warrior Met Coal without a contract after a two-year strike. Union workers at Starbucks, Amazon.com, REI and Trader Joe’s have yet to win first contracts.

Despite immense support from the rank-and-file members and allies, none of these unions could win because they didn’t have enough density in the firm or leverage against the company.

Companies on defense

Still, even taking losses into consideration, the current labor climate isn’t business as usual. For the first time in decades, unions launched offensive strikes with some of the nation’s most powerful employers. Corporations are now on the defensive, explaining to investors why they underestimated the union’s commitment to the fight, and billions of dollars were spent dragging out negotiations that could have been settled months earlier.

Meanwhile, nonunion employers feel pressure to raise wages to stop their workers from organizing, when for years declining union density put downward pressure on wages. The groundswell of public support for unions also has strengthened labors’ hand in local and state labor policy issues.

What remains to be seen is whether the rise in the intensity and success of union strike activity represents a long-term change in the culture and practice of U.S. collective bargaining, or are these strikes dependent on the current favorable economic and political climate. A more-volatile labor market—or a Republican presidency—could stall labor’s resurgence as it just got started.
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Appeared in the December 18, 2023, print edition as ‘For Unions, 2023 Was the Year of The Strike—and Big Victories’.
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