

Keynote Address

On Our Terms: How We Redefine Democracy and Reverse Exploitation through Social Justice Global Unionism

**Keynote Speaker and the Alice B. Grant Labor Leader in Residence:
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Good afternoon! It is such an honor to be here, at Cornell, with you today, especially with ILR and the Worker Institute. And it's a thrill to be able to speak with you about the things that I and my colleagues think a lot about: social justice, exploitation in supply chains, democracy in retreat around the world, the power of the grassroots through collective action and the labor movement's role—indeed, imperative—to stand with workers around the world to right these imbalances and inequities.

My name is Shawna Bader-Blau, and I'm the executive director of the Solidarity Center. The organization I lead is the largest U.S.-based, international worker rights organization assisting workers around the world.

As part of the American labor movement and in about 60 countries, the Solidarity Center works with unions and worker organizations whose members face common challenges: poverty wages, lack of legal protections, discrimination, informal or isolated employment. We support organizing and help workers achieve collective bargaining. We stand with workers fighting to change the laws that do not protect them and the policies that exploit them. And we connect workers to each other, across borders, to help support growth of a global labor movement of resistance to these trends. Because the economy is global—and any solution to corporate overreach and government or multilateral complicity in that overreach requires a global response.

I've been with the organization for 15 years, eight years as executive director. I'm very proud that we stood in solidarity with some of the most important social movements for justice, democracy, economic rights and worker empowerment on earth during that time. Like coalitions to rebuild democracy and fairness in Honduras after a coup; the rising up of workers in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain during the Arab Spring; the ongoing and very brave movement for human rights in Zimbabwe, which is led by the country's labor federation. And like the unheralded but absolutely essential drive to advance migrant worker rights around the world, from Burmese refugees enslaved on Thai fishing boats to Central Asian migrants exploited in service-sector jobs in Europe; and

from Mexican agricultural workers trafficked to the United States for starvation-wage jobs to Kenyan women tricked into dehumanizing domestic work in the Middle East.

We also are engaged in the global battle against misogyny and patriarchy in the workplace. The Solidarity Center is working with women and men across 20 countries to fight gender-based violence at work and, with the global labor movement, pushing for a new ILO convention against violence and harassment in the world of work, the first new global standard of the #MeToo era.

We know that collective action is the antidote to injustice. That collective action is the heart and soul of democracy.

Around the world, we see the destructive effects of the concentration of wealth and the consolidation of political power and decision-making in the hands of fewer people. That's as true in the United States as it is in India or Brazil, Cambodia or Jamaica, Mexico or Morocco. And we need to say ENOUGH. And we need to say it loud, proud and TOGETHER. And that's what I want to talk about today.

Let me say it plainly: No government ever woke up one morning and said, "Let's create a more fair economy today," or "Let's expand human rights." Markets and corporations don't magically conjure up shared prosperity, either. It is citizens coming together collectively—into trade unions, worker associations and other collective organizations—that **push** governments and corporations (even universities!) to make changes to the way our economies work and make them more equitable.

The problem is, as our experience around the world shows, it is getting harder and harder to do.

First, there is the global crackdown on human rights.

Just about everywhere, reflecting a real reduction in civil rights, especially the very basic rights to form or join organizations, and to protest.

1. Literally half the world's states have implemented controls that affect tens of thousands of citizen-led organizations, like laws meant to hinder nonprofits from fundraising or doing advocacy.
2. A [record number](#) of rights defenders—321 women and men—were murdered in 2018, with Colombia and Mexico accounting for more than half of the killings.
3. The number of countries that deny or constrain free speech and freedom of assembly increased from 50 in 2017, with Poland and the United States added to that list that year, by the way, to 54 in 2018.

The stakes are particularly high for workers:

Labor rights globally are the most frequently violated category of human rights.

The majority of the world's workers are actively disenfranchised from their rights as workers.

- 65 percent of countries exclude some groups of workers from labor law, like domestic, agricultural and contract workers, up 5 percent from 2017.
- 87 percent of countries have violated the right to strike.
- 81 percent of countries deny some or all workers collective bargaining.
- The number of countries where workers were arrested and detained increased from 44 in 2017 to 59 in 2018.
- Last year, trade unionists were murdered in nine countries: Brazil, China, Colombia, Guatemala, Guinea, Mexico, Niger, Nigeria and Tanzania. And this year we can add Turkey. And Honduras. And others.
- And then there's the extraordinary, criminal injustice that 4 million domestic workers around the world live in forced labor and slavery

Second, this human rights crackdown is taking place in the context of rising inequality

Most people are living in increasingly unequal economies. Seven out of 10 people live in a country that has seen a rise in inequality in the last 30 years.

- Globally, women earn 30 percent of what men make for equal work. If current trends hold, it will take 170 years for women to be paid the same as men. And the pay gap is worse without unions.

Third, these trends have disproportionate impact on marginalized people in our societies.

I want to tell you a story about a young man I met in 2016, a new member of the Kenyan domestic workers' union, Kudeiha. Frank had just returned from two years in Dubai. Frank was the eldest son of a very poor family who relied on him. So, when the daily struggle to find work in Mombasa finally became too much, he learned from a friend that he could work as a driver in Dubai for 90,000 Kenyan schillings (or \$865) a month. But the job cost money. He borrowed most of the 1,250 dollars it cost to get the job from a friend, and Frank cried as he recounted how his father sold two cows to make up the difference—despite the deeper poverty for his family that sale implied. But when he landed in the United Arab Emirates, he learned that he wasn't to be a driver but rather a loader in the airport. And he would not be paid 90,000 schillings a month, he would get only 20,000 (\$192), just barely more than he was making in Kenya to begin with. Deeply in debt, but stuck in Dubai, he had to take the job and, over two years, endured racist comments, wage theft, sexual harassment and intimidation whenever he spoke up.

He was a Kenyan man working as a migrant worker in an airport in Dubai, but he could have come from anywhere. Because the truth is that what happened to Frank when he migrated to work is common for low-wage migrant workers everywhere. Unscrupulous labor brokers all over the world charge fees that entrap workers like Frank in debt bondage. They lie about the job and the pay—and sometimes even the country where the work is located. And when they arrive—whether they are from El Salvador or Bangladesh or wherever—they find employers willing to exploit their tenuous status.

And what if Frank were a woman? Women comprise just under half the global migrant workforce and have since 1960. Already excluded from many legal rights because they are in a new country where they are not citizens, women migrants often just trade one patriarchy for another. A study of female labor migrants in Canada showed that almost one-third migrated to work and to escape an abusive male partner. One study in the United States found that a full 80 percent of female migrant agricultural workers on legal guest-worker programs experienced sexual harassment and violence, but felt they had no access justice.

Around the world, migrant workers are commonly excluded from labor protections and the right to organize, simply because of their citizenship status. Care economy jobs, like domestic work, represent the largest share of jobs women migrate abroad to do and are virtually never covered by the right to organize. And these hard-working migrant domestic workers—cleaning homes, cooking meals and raising other peoples' children—are almost never allowed to bring their own children when they travel on work visas. Why? Is the assumption she will be working too many hours for too little pay to care for her own children? Why does being low wage and migrant have to mean a life separated from your loved ones?

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most tolerated, hidden and underreported violations of workers' human rights in the world. We talk about #MeToo in the United States, but #MeToo is all over the world.

- More than 60 percent of female garment workers in Bangladesh have been intimidated or threatened with violence at work, and our research has found similar numbers in Cambodia.
- 60 percent of women working in the catering industry in Nordic countries have experienced sexual harassment.
- GBV at work suppresses women's voices and intimidates them from joining or forming unions. That's our global experience.

And racial discrimination: The lowest-paid person in America in any industry is a black woman, regardless of skills and achievement. Racial and gender discrimination in pay represents billions of dollars in lost income for working people. Money that is instead lining someone else's pockets.

So, we have global crackdown on human rights, especially labor rights; rising wealth and income inequality, especially for women and historically marginalized people, including people of color and migrants.

These trends are tearing at the fabric of political systems and actually reducing democracy and spreading disenfranchisement.

But there's another issue, and it's the elephant in the room. **This is all taking place in a global economy where the rules are deliberately skewed.** The global marketplace is set up entirely on the belief that the free movement of capital and profit is desirable, even sacrosanct; and that the absence of regulation is necessary to encourage global economic growth.

In fact, the whole post-Cold War global economic architecture—as represented by trade agreements, multilateral lending agencies like the World Bank and IMF, and institutions of economic governance like the WTO—rest on those assumptions. Meanwhile there has been no commensurate systemic expansion of the rights of the working people to go along with the incredible expansion of the rights of business. In fact, the opposite has occurred. As I mentioned earlier, labor rights are the most frequently violated category of human rights.

In our work, one of the most common dynamics we see is the hidden power of global private capital and corporations as they do business through intricately woven supply chains that reach deep into some of the poorest countries on earth. More than 60 percent of global trade is dependent on contracts sourced from different parts of the world, according to the International Trade Union Confederation. That same organization polled workers in 16 countries and found nearly half of them reporting their family income had fallen below the cost of living in the past two years. And 80 percent said the minimum wage was insufficient to provide a decent life. At the same time, just 26 people on Earth held the same wealth as 3.8 BILLION other earthlings, according to Oxfam. We have set up a global economic architecture with unfettered free market principles that is driving inequality on a massive scale.

So let me break this all down with an example.

My colleagues and I recently came back from a country in Africa that has a significant apparel sector exporting to the United States. As is typical in this industry, thousands of workers make garments in large factories for less than \$200 a month. The workers are the only thing “local” about these operations. Investors based in Europe pour money into Chinese-owned and -operated factories, with American companies ordering anything from blue jeans to dresses. Need I say that the European, American and Chinese firms together represent a multibillion-dollar enterprise?

You with me so far?

The thing is, especially in the poorest countries in the world, where most work is informal and scarce, jobs like this are enticing. Most people have to work several jobs or gigs a day to scrape by. And these clothing factory jobs appear stable. They are indoors and with regular hours, and they employ women (who are disproportionately unemployed around the world).

But in meetings we had with these workers in this country over the last six months, a darker picture emerges.

- Women, who comprise the majority of the workforce, are subjected to sexual violence and intimidation. Up to 90 percent of women in one factory said this was happening to them. In a small meeting we had last month, two young women gave an example. They held hands to comfort and support each other as they described to my colleague how they have reduced the incidence of rape in factories by walking in pairs to the bathroom.
- To keep up the pace of production, factory management shouts at and demeans workers—often with racial and racist slurs. And when workers object, they are docked pay, literally FINED for calling out racism.
- Meanwhile, union organizers trying to improve their workplaces are fired, demoted or given the most grueling work as punishment, which is illegal under local, but unenforced, labor laws. Globally, it's an atrocious but not uncommon business practice.

While this is one brutal story from one country, I could have been telling you some version of this story about a factory in Haiti, or a farm in South Africa, or a brick kiln in India.

The truth is: With the global crackdown on human rights and the concentration of wealth comes unfettered corporate power, where investors from the U.S., Europe, China, India, Brazil, Mexico, et cetera, take full advantage of global trade and investment treaties that provide them many rights and freedoms but zero responsibility for what happens to the actual workers in these supply chains. Worse, they fight tooth and nail to be unencumbered by any kind of regulation.

So, back to that factory in Africa I was talking about. It's not an anomaly, it's a business model—one that makes billions of dollars for the Europeans and the Americans and the Chinese and takes zero responsibility for atrocious working conditions.

And let me tell you, as we meet right now, labor movements all over the world are facing choices about how to confront these dynamics. We are all talking about the future of work, right? Robotics, technology, increased productivity.... Well, what I'm talking about here today is how we need to confront the future of work. Do we or do we

not as workers have a say in the future of work? We, the 3.8 billion, not the 26 masters of the universe who own everything. Will we or will we not have a say over whether supervisors get to spit at workers, women have to hold hands to safely go to the bathroom, and union organizers are sacked for speaking up. That model is corrupt, and its unfair and anti-democratic. And it has no place in the future of work.

We have confronted many different kinds of global disparities before. Hell, that is why the labor movement was born in the first place. And yeah, it's pretty tough now. But we were born for this moment. This is why we exist! And we come out of a proud, democratic tradition.

The reason American children don't have to work, and the reason you can refuse unsafe work or have the right to a weekend with your family is because American workers organized. The result was a trade union movement that demanded change and improved the lives of millions. It allowed our kids to go to school and advanced this nation. Freedom of association in America gave us the 8-hour workday and retirement protection. Citizens coming together pushed government to pass those laws. That is what democracy looks like.

Of the dozens of survivors we spoke to immediately after the Rana Plaza factory collapsed in Bangladesh, killing more than 1,100 people, we heard repeatedly that they knew the building was unsafe. But they went in anyway because their boss told them if they didn't, they would lose a month's wages. And no one making \$68 a month can risk losing a month of wages. They couldn't refuse unsafe work because they had no freedom of association and so, no voice. They walked into that building and died that day.

But a year later I met a young woman worker in a garment factory who became a union organizer. She told me that now she can sit across the table and negotiate wages with that same kind of boss. He can no longer threaten her with rape if she asks that her overtime be paid because she now is his equal. Freedom of association in Bangladesh—embattled and under attack though it is—gave that woman dignity and power. That is what democracy looks like.

And right now, union leaders in Zimbabwe—where most people earn less than \$1 a day—are facing treason charges for staging a national, peaceful, stay-at-home strike to protest an extreme rise in fuel prices. The government responded with violence, including indiscriminate beatings and arrests, and these horrendous charges against our brothers, but we in the global labor movement staged protests at Zimbabwe embassies around the world and raised money to bail them out of prison. And while they await trial, they are every day continuing to speak up for worker rights. And that's what democracy looks like, right now.

The truth is that the reason we have civil society is precisely for right now! We were BORN for THIS moment, this is WHY WE EXIST. We don't exist for a perfect democratic equal socialist happy place! We exist to defend human dignity in the face of harshness and inequality. Not to "take a wait and see attitude," or to "give any oligarch or authoritarian ruler a chance." We organize now and plan for a future where work does not dehumanize.

Today more than ever, for all of us, the **restoration of democracy and the building of more just societies needs to be the primary business of all our labor movements.** A social justice unionism that stands up and fights back.

But labor cannot beat back these trends alone. We need allies in a broader movement for justice that we must forge together.

So my organization has been thinking about and learning from the greatest social and labor movement traditions, from countries like Brazil where a labor leader led a movement that pulled that country out of military dictatorship, like South Africa where organized labor helped bring down apartheid, and like Tunisia, where for the role they played in the Arab Spring, unions won the Nobel Peace Prize.

We've assessed our work of the last 20 years, with the more than 400 unions and worker rights organizations we partner with

And we've identified some core new commitments to social justice unionism

The Solidarity Center will, over the next decade, deliberately design and implement programs that do one or more of the following:

1. **Confront** the gender discrimination that suppresses women's voice at work and racism and discrimination in all its forms—for these are deliberate tactics to disenfranchise people. Our unions cannot replicate these oppressive behaviors. We need a radical agenda of inclusion in our labor movement if we are going to win.
2. **Provide** workers—especially the most marginalized, such as domestic workers, workers in non-standard employment like temporary and contract workers, street vendors, agriculture and migrant workers—with the information they need to understand their rights, raise the voices of the grassroots, and lead their own organizations to improve their jobs and ensure a just future of work.
3. **Build** global solidarity that connects people across borders, sharing strategies and providing peer support in a new grassroots internationalism focused on building power.

4. **Advance** legal strategies to strengthen labor laws and human rights laws at the country, regional and global levels.
5. **Pursue** alliances that help build enduring democratic societies, broadly collaborating with allies in the larger social justice movement to become stronger together. There is virtually no country on Earth where labor can go it alone and succeed in any major transformation of any kind. But when come together with allies locally and globally, there is really nothing that can stop us.

The future is a labor movement led by people who know that, collectively, they can rebalance the scales. They understand that the big-picture problems facing the world--the unhealthy concentration of wealth and power and the skewed rules that protect corporate profits over people—can only be resolved by global solidarity. And that a movement that stands for all workers and includes all workers... women, migrants, informal and other marginalized workers... is how we organize to win. Because our vision is more beautiful than the ugliness of the autocrats and the oligarchs. This is the critical business of the labor movement. And is how we build democracy on our own terms.