



OPEIU Convention Las Vegas, Nevada

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Good morning! It is such an honor to be here. Thank you to President Richard Lanigan and Secretary-Treasurer Mary Mahoney for the invitation. I also want to recognize a friend and hero of mine, former OPEIU Secretary-Treasurer Nancy Wohlforth. Nancy, thank you for your leadership!

And let me say right off the bat—as a former member of OPEIU Local 2, it's a thrill to be able to speak with you about the things that I and my colleagues at the Solidarity Center, who are also OPEIU members and members of TNG/CWA, think a lot about: the power of the grassroots through collective action, and the labor movement's role—indeed, imperative—to stand with workers so that, together, we can right imbalances and bust inequities.

My name is Shawna Bader-Blau, and I'm the Executive Director of the Solidarity Center. The organization I lead, part of the AFL-CIO family of organizations, is the largest U.S.-based, international worker rights organization assisting workers around the world.

And we get up every day thinking about ways to bring workers together across borders because the economy is global—and any solution to anti-worker corporate overreach and government or multilateral complicity in that overreach requires a global response.

The motto for this Convention, “A New Model for A New Union,” is an inspiring challenge. Because these are indeed new times and we need new models.

So, I'm going to get right into it. If there is one thing we have learned working around the world and observing labor movements in dozens of

countries over decades, it is that collective action is the antidote to injustice. That collective action is the heart and soul of democracy.

And right now, democracy needs a little of our union movement's ability to drive collective action—a little heart and soul, sisters and brothers!

Around the world, we see the corrosive 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 South Africa or England, Cambodia or Jamaica, Mexico or Morocco. And we need to say ENOUGH. And we need to say it loud, proud and TOGETHER.

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 and other collective worker organizations—who **push** governments and corporations to **make** changes to the way our economies work and make them more equitable. *We do that through our collective action.* Because the labor movement, sisters and brothers, *has* brought about economic justice through collective action. But here is the secret: We have never made progress on that ideal without realizing that we are a part of something bigger, and that our vision and our drive for dignity is only as strong as we are unified and willing and ready to fight.

The problem is, it is getting harder and harder to do that for workers, all over the world.

First, there is the global crackdown on human rights—part of a larger, resurgent authoritarianism that is threatening the very democracy we need to grow and thrive as a labor movement. Some indicators:

- 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.
- 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.

- Once leading democracies are now run by right-wing populist and authoritarian leaders and seeing a steep decline in civil liberties, in places like Brazil, Hungary, India, the Philippines and Turkey, and beyond.
- Indeed, since the U.S. presidential election in 2016, 35 states have considered more than 100 laws to curtail the right to peaceful assembly, meaning bills introduced or passed that make it harder to get permits to protest, or that criminalize protest, or make them fineable events
- And in an annual global survey taken of citizens in the biggest, most influential countries on Earth, there are some really unnerving trends. In what people consider the established democracies in the United States and Europe, belief in basic tenets of democratic systems and institutions like parliaments and the courts have been steadily declining—sometimes replaced by authoritarian alternatives. Like whether it would be “good” or “very good” for the “army to rule.” In 1995, 1 in 16 Americans believed that; two years ago, it was 1 in 6 Americans. And the United States isn’t unique. A longer-term, systemic “loss of faith in the system” is now common to Western-style democracies. Right-wing populism grows in populations with deep distrust of institutions.

This era of creeping global authoritarianism and crackdown on human rights has been playing out especially poorly for workers.

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

The majority of the world’s workers are being **actively disenfranchised** from their rights as workers.

- 65 percent of countries exclude some groups of workers from labor law, like domestic, agricultural, temp/gig and contract workers.
- 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.
- And the wealth gap is running twice as high in the United States as in the rest of the world.
- Globally, women earn 70 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 a disproportionate impact on the most disenfranchised people in our societies.

I want to tell you a story about a young man I met in 2016, in Kenya. Frank had just returned from two years in the United Arab Emirates when I met him. He was the eldest son of a very poor family who relied on him. So, when the daily struggle to find work in his hometown outside Mombasa finally became too much, he learned from a friend that he could work as a driver in the United Arab Emirates for 90,000 Kenyan schillings (or about \$865) a month. But the job cost money. He borrowed most of the \$1,250 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 UAE, but he could have come from anywhere. Because the truth is that what happened to Frank when he migrated to

work happens to migrants all over the world, including here in the United States, where migrants are increasingly vilified.

And what if Frank were a woman? 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—women who migrated to Canada to work—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 voice, no access to justice.

And racial discrimination: The poorest regions housing the industries most prone to labor rights abuse in Colombia are also where there are the most Colombians of African descent. 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 worldwide. 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.

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 incredibly skewed.**

In fact, the whole post-Cold War global economic architecture—all these FREE trade agreements, multilateral lending agencies like the World Bank and IMF, and institutions of economic governance like the WTO—rests on the assumption that “the freer” and “less regulated” the market for global investment, the better. FINE! 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.

*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. They do business

through outsourcing and supply chains that reach deep into some of the poorest countries on Earth, and in the United States, take advantage of the parts of our own country where workers are most susceptible to exploitation, like our “**right to work for less**” states with governors who brag about keeping their states union and regulation free.

Actually more than 60 percent of global trade is dependent on contracts sourced from different parts of the world. In this construct, nearly half of all workers polled in 16 countries said 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 planet held the same wealth as 3.8 BILLION other earthlings**, according to important research by an organization called Oxfam. We have set up a global economic architecture with free-market principles for business, but highly constrained rights for workers, and it is driving inequality on a massive scale.

But, as we meet right now, labor movements all over the world are facing choices about how to confront these dynamics of rising authoritarianism, and growing wealth and income inequality.

And you know what, sisters and brothers? 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 in April 2013, killing more than 1,100 people and becoming one of the most significant industrial disasters in modern history, we heard repeatedly that those workers 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 union 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 in Bangladesh 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. The union movement 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 earn less than one dollar 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 they are still standing and speaking up and out every single day. That's what democracy looks like, right now.

The truth is that the reason we have unions is precisely for right now! This time, this moment when a new generation of robber barons and billionaires and autocrats are taking over and colluding with governments to disenfranchise us from our rights. Our voting rights, our labor rights, our rights as women workers and our dignity as immigrants and black workers and gay workers, and our union rights.

BUT sisters and brothers, we were BORN for THIS moment, this is WHY WE EXIST. We don't exist as labor unions for some perfect democratic equal ideal circumstance, 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."

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. From London to Almaty, Chicago to San Pedro Sula, we fought and struggled—and some died—to build our labor movements for justice, not to collect dues and buy big buildings! We were born to right wrongs.

So let's learn from the greatest social and labor movement traditions, from countries like Brazil where a labor leader once 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 bringing pluralistic democracy to that country during the Arab Spring, unions there won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Together, let's recognize our democracies are at risk and it's time for some hard core collective action for justice:

- **Let's confront** the gender discrimination that suppresses women's voice at work and racism and discrimination in all its forms—they are the tools of the authoritarians and our unions cannot replicate these oppressive tools. We need a radical agenda of inclusion in our labor movement if we are going to win.
- **Let's get out there and organize** workers—especially the most marginalized, such as domestic workers, workers in non-standard employment like temporary and contract and adjunct workers, agriculture and immigrant workers—because their historic exclusion is what we need to confront in the Future of Work. Do we or do we not as workers have a say in the future that will shape our work? We, the 3.8 billion, not the 26 masters of the universe who own everything. That model is corrupt, and it's unfair and anti-democratic and has no place in the future of work.
- Let's **build** global solidarity that connects people across borders, sharing strategies and providing peer support in a new grassroots internationalism focused on building power.
- Let's **pursue** alliances that help build enduring democratic societies, 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 we 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, we CAN rebalance the scales. Because our vision is more beautiful than the ugliness of the autocrats and the oligarchs. This is the critical business of the labor movement.

There is no time like the present. It's time to stand up. A new model for a new union -This is what democracy looks like!

Thank you OPEIU!