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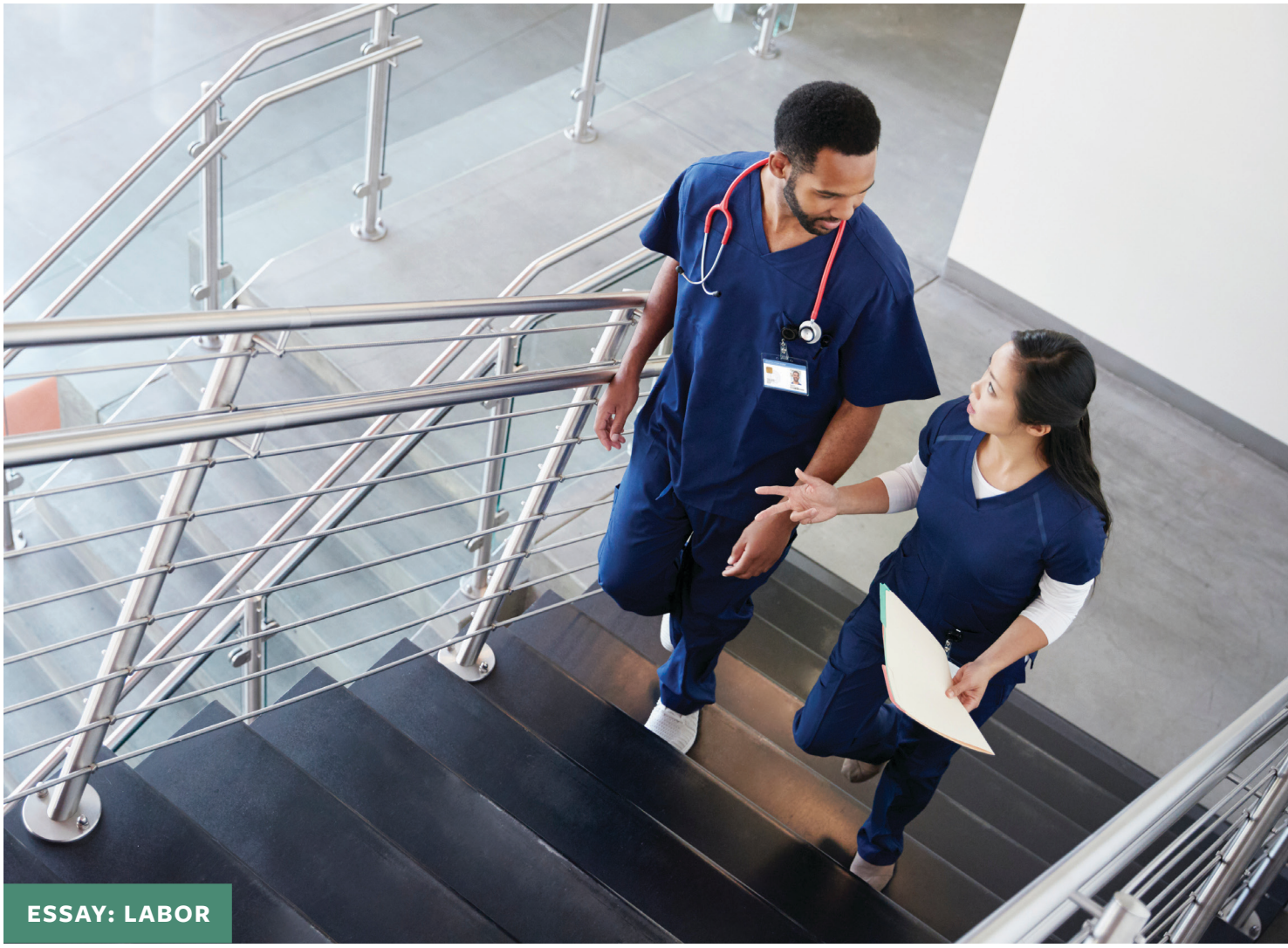

ESSAY: LABOR

The political implications of bad jobs and the decline of unions

By Adam Dean and Jamie McCallum **May 2025**

Overview

Bad jobs have become a distinctive feature of the U.S. economy over the past few decades. Globally, a lack of adequate demand, or what economists call "secular stagnation," has meant there are too few jobs for too many people, leading to wage suppression and jobless recoveries.[1] Poor job quality—where workers earn low wages, work unstable hours, and receive declining benefits—means that in addition to reduced earnings, workers also derive less social standing from their jobs.

This joint crisis of economic and social backsliding has contributed to increasing working-class support for far-right populism both in the United States and around the world. The combined effects of material deprivation and social marginalization has fueled a politics of resentment and right-wing resurgence among this group of workers who were, historically, reliable Democratic voters.[2] The perceived status anxiety of many low-wage workers, including those who anticipate that their wages and status could decline soon, are strong predictors of right-wing beliefs.[3]

But job quality does not have to continue its decline in the United States, and right-wing populism does not need to continue to ascend. Indeed, both can be reversed. In fact, studies show that labor unions increase working-class support for democracy by ensuring that democracy delivers good jobs for workers.[4] Unions are therefore essential to defend against authoritarian politics.

In this essay, we will review the effects and implications of declining job quality both for workers and for democracy in the United States. We then turn to how unions bolster workers' well-being and why unions can counteract the rightward trend among working-class voters. We detail findings of our own research on the effects of unions in the health care industry on workplace conditions before offering closing thoughts on the importance of unions in combatting right-wing populism.

The consequences of declining job quality

The U.S. labor market has undergone a profound transformation over the past several decades, with high-quality, well-paying jobs becoming increasingly scarce, especially for less-educated workers.[5] Between 1973 and 2015, the real wages of working-age men with only a high school diploma declined by almost 20 percent, and their labor market participation rate plummeted. Meanwhile, the earnings of their college-educated peers increased substantially.[6]

The 2008–2009 economic crisis exacerbated this trend, giving rise to an even more polarized "hourglass economy" that expanded the number of high- and low-skill jobs relative to middle-income occupations.[7] The emphasis, however, has been on the creation of low-paying jobs. Indeed, the U.S. Private Sector Job Quality Index shows that since 1990, 63 percent of newly created jobs in the United States have been classified as low quality.[8]

Over the past four decades, this essentially has meant that most U.S. workers receive lower wages and fewer benefits and experience greater instability—even when accounting for an "unexpected compression" in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the wages of non-college-educated workers increased more rapidly and significantly than in recent decades.[9] As a result of these changes to the labor market, working-class Americans—who, in previous decades, derived a decent standard of living and higher social status from their jobs—have been marginalized.[10]

The deterioration in U.S. job quality stems from a variety of factors, including the decline of labor unions, the erosion of workplace protections, the rise of precarious employment, deindustrialization, and shifts in employer strategies designed to place more economic risk onto workers. While U.S. workers today work more hours than they have in decades, with more volatile schedules, employer strategies to suppress wages ensure that their earnings don't keep pace with the rising cost of living.[11]

By contrast, European workers generally enjoy shorter working hours, stronger labor protections, and greater union representation than their U.S. counterparts—though the ground is shifting there too, as economic instability contributes to broad conservative shifts among working-class voters across Europe.[12]

Another driver of poor job quality is the managerial and hiring practices that U.S. employers increasingly utilize. So-called fissuring of the workplace, a term coined by Brown University economist David Weil, occurs when major employers outsource key services, such as janitorial work, food services, and delivery, to third-party contractors. By doing so, companies absolve themselves of responsibility for these workers' wages, benefits, and working conditions, allowing large corporations to evade labor laws and forcing employees into lower-paid, less stable jobs.

Fissuring not only affects outsourced workers, but it also drags down labor standards across entire industries. When some employers cut wages and benefits, competitors feel pressured to do the same to remain profitable, creating a race to the bottom. Workers across various sectors then end up with lower pay and fewer actionable rights.[13]

Like wages, workplace benefits have also increasingly come under attack. Unlike workers in all other peer nations, most U.S. workers get their health insurance and retirement benefits through their jobs rather than from the government. But the proportion of Americans covered by employer-sponsored health insurance has steadily declined in recent decades, with low-income workers experiencing the steepest drop.[14]

At the same time, health care costs have skyrocketed in the United States. Between 2008 and 2018, premiums for employer-sponsored health plans increased by 55 percent, while wages grew at less than half that rate.[15] Employers have responded to these price increases by shifting the costs onto workers. Today, nearly half of working-age adults are underinsured, meaning they technically have health coverage but still cannot afford essential medical care.[16]

The combined effects of low wages, routine schedule instability,[17] and weak social infrastructure have made life increasingly precarious for U.S. workers. Yet declining economic conditions alone cannot account for rising right-wing sentiment among so many workers. Indeed, hard times for workers in the past gave rise to broad public support for the New Deal.[18]

Today, however, workers often compare themselves to a time when many were doing better, not worse.[19] The current right-wing surge therefore seems to be a reaction to a sense of nostalgia for better economic times that also provided for more stable social positions. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild at the University of California, Berkeley describes many disaffected right-wing working-class voters as "strangers in their own land,"[20] adrift from their former lives as high-earning, high-status individuals and feeling betrayed by a social system that lifted up the fortunes of immigrants, people of color, and the unemployed before their own. Other research shows this general trend playing out in Europe and parts of the global South, too.[21]

Low-paid and precarious jobs are a direct threat to democracy because they can undermine both elite and popular support for democracy. For economic elites, the problem is that the proliferation of bad jobs threatens to increase demands for redistribution.[22] Rather than watch as democracy delivers higher taxes, the wealthy respond to high levels of income inequality by welcoming nondemocratic alternatives.[23] And for those with precarious employment, the problem is that bad working conditions convince people that the political status quo is unfair and decreases support for democracy.[24] Unsurprisingly, recent research finds that economic precariousness has been a main driver of working-class support for radical, anti-democratic parties in Europe.[25]

The role of unions in improving job quality and bolstering democracy

Improving job quality would seem to benefit both workers and the democratic system in general. Labor unions play a crucial role. On average, unionized workers earn 11.2 percent more than their nonunion counterparts in the same industry. Black and Hispanic workers see even greater wage gains, with Black union members earning 13.7 percent more and Hispanic union members earning 20.1 percent more than their nonunionized peers.[26] In addition to closing the racial wage gap, labor unions tend to decrease the politics of white racial resentment outside the workplace.[27]

Unions also secure better benefits.[28] While only 68 percent of nonunion workers have access to employer-sponsored health insurance, 94 percent of union workers do. Union employers also contribute more to health premiums, ensuring that employees pay less out of pocket for their health care costs. In terms of retirement security, union workers are 22 percent more likely to have employer-sponsored pension plans, and those pensions provide 28 percent more in benefits, compared to nonunion plans. Additionally, union members receive more paid sick leave, vacation days, and job protections.

Perhaps most crucially, unions offer workers a voice to express their collective and individual grievances on the job. One concrete effect of this is that unionized workplaces tend to be safer than nonunion workplaces in the same industry. This is because unionized workers are more likely to report workplace hazards and injuries because they are protected from retaliation. Strong union representation has been linked to lower injury rates, better enforcement of safety regulations, and improved overall working conditions.[29]

Unions therefore play a dual role. They directly increase workers' economic standing by improving working conditions, including wages and benefits. Such positive changes could help pull workers away from the populist appeal of right-wing politics and toward a progressive alternative that fosters unions and democracy. At the same time, unions are more than mere avenues to higher economic status. They are large political organizations that embed workers' lives in a collective social fabric, which can buffer trends toward social alienation and the disappearance of social capital. In so doing, unions increase workers' social status and guard against the social divisiveness that is at the heart of right-wing populism.

Unions' effect on the health care industry: Lessons from our research

Our research specifically shows how labor unions improve working conditions for U.S. health care workers.[30] Making these jobs better is crucial for four reasons. First, health care workers are essential for society. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted their sacrifices and broader contributions to caring for the sick and elderly, and this work will remain crucial even as the pandemic recedes into the past. Second, low-wage health care workers are disproportionately women of color. Improving working conditions for health care workers therefore increases racial and gender equity.

Third, health care workers' working conditions also are our care conditions. Improving jobs for health care workers increases the quality of care that patients receive. And fourth, the health care workforce is expected to grow faster than any other part of the U.S. economy in the coming decades. If decreasing workers' economic precariousness can buttress U.S. democracy, then improving the quality of health care jobs will only become more important for the sustainability of our democratic system and institutions.

The economic benefits of unionization in this industry are clear. As with to the benefits of unions more broadly, unionized health care workers have higher weekly earnings and are more likely to have retirement benefits and employer-sponsored, full-premium-covered health insurance.[31] Unionized health care workers also report greater job satisfaction, and unionized workplaces see greater worker retention and less staff turnover.[32]

Our research shows that unionization also improves workplace safety for health care workers by compelling employers to comply with basic labor laws. One of our recent studies reveals that while all U.S. nursing homes are required to report workplace injury and illness data to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (the federal agency tasked with regulating workplace safety), compliance is low, with only 40 percent of nursing homes meeting this requirement between 2016 and 2021.

Such low compliance is a major problem, as the tracking of injuries is a vital part of safety management, and injury-prevention programs need to be based on reliable, complete data. We found that unionization increases compliance by 78 percent, suggesting that higher unionization rates would improve workplace safety in a sector with one of the highest injury rates in the United States.[33]

The benefits of unionization were especially stark during the COVID-19 pandemic. In another study, we found that during the first year and a half of the pandemic, unionized nursing homes throughout the continental United States had 7 percent lower COVID-19 infection rates among workers.[34] This union "safety premium" was especially large for Black workers, who are often exposed to the most dangerous workplace hazards, in nursing homes and writ large in U.S. workplaces. In nursing homes with higher percentages of Black workers, unions were associated with 14 percent lower COVID-19 infection rates for workers.[35]

We also found that the lower infection rates for workers meant lower mortality rates for nursing home residents. In unionized nursing homes, the COVID-19 mortality rate for residents was 11 percent lower than in nonunion nursing homes. As many health care workers succinctly explained, "If we get sick, you get sick."[36] Our research suggests that industry-wide unionization would have avoided 8,000 nursing home resident deaths in the United States from June 2020 through March 2021.

In short, increased unionization in health care could help to transform hazardous, low-wage jobs into safer jobs, and those workplace improvements would also boost the quality of care for millions of patients. Beyond workplace safety, unionization would increase wages for a vast and rapidly growing workforce of roughly 22 million workers. A recent study found that unionized health care workers earn an additional $123 per week.[37] With only 7 percent of U.S. health care workers unionized, industry-wide unionization could transfer $130 billion a year to health care workers and significantly decrease the country's run-away income inequality.

Moreover, as a way to elevate the social status of these workers, health care labor unions routinely frame workers as "caregivers" who work for the "greater good." This is a purposeful critique of the commonly held designation of nursing, for example, as "women's' work," which is deemed less socially valued. This conscious effort to improve the perception of these jobs is another way that unions can work to combat the trend toward right-wing populism, as they address both economic and social backsliding among lower-wage workers.

Conclusion

Changes in the U.S. health care workforce both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate the complex relationships between economic well-being, social status, and union strength. During the pandemic, nurses and other health care workers enjoyed a surge in social standing as they were declared essential workers and national heroes. At the same time, health care workers' economic standing improved as the pandemic labor shortage drove up wages throughout the country.

What did not happen, however, was an increase in health care union density that could have translated these positive developments into lasting gains. When the pandemic ended, so did the labor shortages and public appreciation that had driven up health care workers' economic and social standing. Hospitals and nursing homes then quickly reduced the wages and benefits—and nonunionized workers were helpless to stop them.

There is a vital need for more research on how these dynamics influenced health care workers' political views. These workers' economic and social gains during the pandemic may have increased support for the political status quo and decreased their support for right-wing populism. Alternatively, the erosion of these gains after the pandemic may have created the kind of political resentment that fueled President Donald Trump's 2024 re-election. To the extent that unions helped health care workers defend their pandemic-era gains, union membership has likely reduced such right-ward political shifts.

As unions have come under attack and unionization rates have declined, conservative institutions—gun clubs, for example—have tended to replace them, promoting a particular brand of social conservatism.[38] In 2024, we witnessed a majority of working-class voters throw their support behind President Trump and his right-wing populist message; exit polls show that Vice President Kamala Harris won only 47 percent of voters who earn less than $100,000 a year. Yet a closer look suggests that unions still help to inoculate workers from the appeals of right-wing populism: Vice President Harris won 57 percent of union members, a group of voters with a median annual income of $70,000.[39]

If union membership shifted support away from President Trump by anything close to 10 percentage points, then increased unionization would radically reshape future elections. Doubling overall U.S. union density from its current level of roughly 10 percent to 20 percent (the level of U.S. union density in 1983) would have shifted roughly 1.5 million votes from President Trump to Vice President Harris in 2024—likely enough for the vice president to have won the election.

The future of American democracy depends crucially on a growing labor movement to improve job quality, increase the social status of average workers, and regain unions' standing as a progressive force for the broad public interest—a real alternative to right-wing populism.

About the authors

Adam Dean is an associate professor of political science at George Washington University. His research focuses on international trade and labor politics, as well as the socioeconomic determinants of public health. His second book, *Opening Up by Cracking Down*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2022.

Jamie McCallum is a professor of sociology at Middlebury College. His research focuses on work and labor issues in the United States and the global South. His third book, *Essential: How the Pandemic Transformed the Long Fight for Worker Justice*, was published by Basic Books in November 2022.

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