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Democratic Abundance

An Abundance That
Works for Workers

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Executive Summary

The “abundance agenda” identifies a worthy goal: to ask what people really need and to organize government to make sure there is enough of it, including by eliminating unnecessary delays and veto points. However, abundance’s theory of why government fails to provide the goods people need and how to change that reality falls short. As critics have argued, abundance is insufficiently attentive to questions of political power and distribution, undervalues democratic participation, and sidelines discussions about trade-offs, including around the importance of protecting labor standards and the environment. Centering the role of workers and organized labor helps respond to all three of these flaws, ensuring that abundance is truly democratic, rather than exacerbating inequality or democratic erosion at a time of authoritarian backsliding. Organized labor—in its existing form and even more so with key reforms—can play an essential role in delivering a democratic version of abundance. Unions can provide a steady stream of labor for new infrastructure projects, help abundance programs overcome political obstacles, and increase the legitimacy and efficacy of abundance programs—though success will ultimately require changes to some unions’ practices and to public policies. In turn, the abundance agenda, properly designed, can help labor—indeed, all working people—by increasing the supply of good jobs, providing desperately needed infrastructure for workers, and facilitating labor organizing.

I. The Abundance Debate and the Need for Democratic Abundance

In recent months, the abundance agenda has captured a great deal of attention, gaining momentum across the political landscape. It has also prompted sharp criticism, chiefly from commentators on the Left, including those within the labor movement.¹

“Abundance” is now a broad banner claimed by many different factions with different objectives, but, at its core, it means massive increases in the supply of essential goods such as housing, transportation, and clean energy infrastructure, in order to make them more affordable and accessible. Advanced most prominently by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, the abundance agenda “asks what it is that people really need and then organizes government to make sure there is enough of it.”²

What’s not to like about that? No one objects to the government achieving the things people really need. Rather, the controversy lies in the abundance movement’s diagnosis of why we lack such investment now, and how we should provide for it in the future.

¹ See, e.g., Dylan Gyauch-Lewis, “‘Abundance’ Against Organized Labor,” *Jacobin*, July 22, 2025, <https://jacobin.com/2025/07/abundance-movement-organized-labor-unions>.

² Ezra Klein, “There Is a Liberal Answer to the Trump-Musk Wrecking Ball,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2025, <https://nytimes.com/2025/03/09/opinion/musk-trump-doge-abundance-agenda.html>.



Klein and Thompson focus on innovation as well as infrastructure. This report focuses only on infrastructure, but scientific and technological innovation also raises a host of important questions regarding the role of labor and merits separate exploration.

Klein and Thompson argue that the core obstacle to the supply of goods like housing, transportation, and public works is excessive administrative burden—including restrictive zoning rules, burdensome regulations and preferences, and the availability of legal challenge—which allows well-organized communities to block change or hold up development projects as leverage for additional concessions. In Klein and Thompson’s view, these veto points stop projects from being built, to the detriment of the broader public interest. They argue that Democrats in particular across the country have allowed process and regulation to squelch production, resulting in “blue” cities having some of the most expensive and scarcest housing markets and the worst track records on infrastructure. In their view, “liberalism has become obsessed with procedure rather than with outcomes.” Klein and Thompson’s work builds on earlier scholarship and commentary such as Nicholas Bagley’s *The Procedure Fetish*, which argues that administrative procedures result in a government that has difficulty accomplishing important tasks,³ and Marc Dunkelman’s *Why Nothing Works*, which argues that progressives’ resistance to centralized power helped proliferate excessive checks on government action.⁴ The abundance movement also builds on a related movement by academics and practitioners including Steve Teles and civic tech reformer Jennifer Pahlka, who are focused on state capacity and the need for reform of internal government processes and structures to unlock more innovation and more efficient service delivery.⁵

Organized labor—in its existing form and even more so with key reforms—can play an essential role in delivering a democratic version of abundance.

Though Klein and Thompson don’t themselves urge wholesale deregulation, their argument has significant deregulatory implications.⁶ After all, if the problem preventing developers from building the housing that society needs is excess regulation, the answer is to deregulate—to eliminate not only restrictive zoning rules but all regulation that slows down building, from labor standards to environmental rules. And if the problem is that certain organized constituencies, including unions, exploit veto points

³ Nicholas Bagley, “The Procedure Fetish,” *Michigan Law Review* 118, no. 3 (2019): 346; see also Nicholas Bagley, “The Procedure Fetish,” Niskanen Center, December 7, 2021, <https://niskanencenter.org/the-procedure-fetish>. For a collection of abundance writing, see “Abundance: A Primer,” Inclusive Abundance, October 6, 2025, <https://inclusiveabundance.org/abundance-in-action/published-work/abundance-a-primer>.

⁴ Marc Dunkelman, *Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress—and How to Bring It Back* (PublicAffairs, 2025).

⁵ See e.g., Jennifer Pahlka and Andrew Greenway, “A State Capacity Agenda for 2025,” Niskanen Center, December 20, 2024, <https://niskanencenter.org/the-how-we-need-now-a-capacity-agenda-for-2025>.

⁶ On the ambiguity in Klein and Thompson’s proposals, see Zephyr Teachout, “An Abundance of Ambiguity,” review of *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Washington Monthly*, March 23, 2025, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2025/03/23/an-abundance-of-ambiguity>.



to slow down decision-making or extract “rents” that raise the costs of building, including through labor standards, then the obvious solution is to eliminate community input mechanisms.⁷ Likewise, if the public sector is slow and inefficient, privatization would be the best route to expanding housing. One camp of abundance supporters embraces and runs with these arguments.

We, along with other critics of abundance, argue that, while the abundance goal should be embraced, its analysis of what causes the scarcity crisis is partial at best and therefore lends itself to overly generalized interpretations and wrongheaded prescriptions.⁸ To be sure, excessive process and regulation can indeed be obstacles to action. As two scholars who have spent time in government, we can attest to how the accretion of procedure can delay or even kill important policies—from infrastructure investments to new social programs.

Yet just as significant, if not more so, are the ways that concentrated economic and political power shapes public- and private-sector decisions, including what gets built and what doesn't.⁹ As numerous critics have argued, the abundance analysis fails to center these questions of power and distribution, declining to grapple with the outsized role that concentrated wealth and organized business interests play in the governing process.¹⁰

Moreover, while abundance proponents are right that labor unions have sometimes blocked or slowed down development efforts, they generally do so with laudable aims:

⁷ See Jonathan Chait, “The Coming Democratic Civil War: A Seemingly Wonky Debate About the ‘Abundance Agenda’ Is Really About Power,” *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2025, <https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/05/abundance-democrats-political-power/682929> (“Progressives are not wrong to see the abundance agenda as a broader attack on their movement. Their theory of American politics depends on empowering the very groups the abundance agenda identifies as the architects of failure and barriers to progress.”).

⁸ See, e.g., Kate Andrias and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, “Abundance That Works for Workers—and American Democracy,” Roosevelt Institute, March 31, 2025, <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/blog/abundance-that-works-for-workers>; Kevin DeGood, “Infrastructure Investment Decisions Are Political, Not Technical,” Center for American Progress, April 14, 2020, <https://americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/InfrastructureInvestment-brief1.pdf>. See also Dylan Gyauch-Lewis, “The Abundance Agenda: Neoliberalism’s Rebrand,” *The American Prospect*, November 26, 2024, <https://prospect.org/economy/2024-11-26-abundance-agenda-neoliberalisms-rebrand>; Trevor Jackson, “How to Blow up a Planet,” review of *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, and *Overshoot: How the World Surrendered to Climate Breakdown*, by Andreas Malm and Wim Carton, *New York Review of Books*, September 25, 2025, <https://nybooks.com/articles/2025/09/25/how-to-blow-up-a-planet-abundance-klein-thompson>. For more critiques of the Klein and Thompson book, see Sandeep Vaheesan, “The Real Path to Abundance,” review of *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Boston Review*, May 22, 2025, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/the-real-path-to-abundance>.

⁹ Andrias and Hertel-Fernandez, “Abundance That Works for Workers—and American Democracy.”

¹⁰ See, e.g., Elizabeth Wilkins, “On Abundance: Where We Agree, Where We Disagree, and How to Move Forward,” Roosevelt Institute, March 26, 2025, <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/blog/on-abundance-and-how-to-move-forward>. See also Vaheesan, “The Real Path to Abundance”; Gyauch-Lewis, “The Abundance Agenda.”



to ensure higher-wage work or guarantees of labor standards. Abundance proponents largely fail to consider how the aim of good jobs could be integrated into abundance proposals without causing delays; they also neglect labor’s potential to serve as a countervailing force to organized business, as well as its ability to make abundance projects more effective and more responsive to communities’ needs. Above all, ignoring the constructive economic and political role that organized labor can play weakens the ability of abundance to deliver supply on its own terms—and threatens the broader health of our democracy.

The distribution of economic and political power matters for determining what policies are feasible to pursue in the first place and for deciding which projects should be prioritized. For example, we can’t make meaningful investments in a clean energy transition if concentrated fossil fuel interests retain outsized political clout. Unions play an important role in building political coalitions supportive of investments in clean energy—as they did for the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) under the Biden administration.¹¹ The strength of union coalitions can, in turn, determine the long-run durability of public investments; had the IRA been in place long enough to generate the union jobs it promoted, it would likely have been more challenging for the Trump administration to repeal so many of its provisions. Similarly, meaningful investment in public goods is difficult to achieve if wealthy interests block efforts to increase their tax burden and promote privatization from which they stand to gain. Unions can and have supported coalitions to raise more tax revenue for public projects, in the face of opposition from wealthy individuals and businesses.¹² Power also matters on the back end: Without attention to problems of political power, abundance policies and investments risk reinforcing existing asymmetries of economic and political power. However, if designed with redistribution in mind, abundance policies can help build countervailing power among workers and other historically marginalized groups and can check the risks of crony capitalism and corruption too prevalent in our economy.

In short, some of the deregulation envisioned by abundance proponents—including reforms to reduce the power of Not-in-My-Backyard (NIMBY) objectors—might be a positive development. But deregulation alone will not address the most significant obstacles to providing abundant goods. Nor will it ensure that abundance-oriented projects serve the public interest rather than private gain. Indeed, in many cases, wholesale deregulation would be counterproductive, further empowering concentrated economic interests.

¹¹ Ben Beachy, “Blueprint for a Popular Climate Agenda,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 78 (2025), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/78/blueprint-for-a-popular-climate-agenda>.

¹² For example, Massachusetts voters approved the Fair Share amendment in 2022, which leveled a 4 percent surtax on annual income above \$1 million and constitutionally dedicated the revenue to public education and transportation infrastructure. See Article XLIV, Massachusetts Constitution; “Massachusetts Question 1, Tax on Income Above \$1 Million for Education and Transportation Amendment (2022),” Ballotpedia, [https://ballotpedia.org/Massachusetts_Question_1,_Tax_on_Income_Above_\\$1_Million_for_Education_and_Transportation_Amendment_\(2022\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Massachusetts_Question_1,_Tax_on_Income_Above_$1_Million_for_Education_and_Transportation_Amendment_(2022)).



Another problem is that the standard abundance account tends to understate the value of democratic participation in governmental decisions. Abundance advocates frequently treat citizen participation with government as a chokepoint and seek to minimize it rather than rethink or attempt to improve mechanisms of democratic engagement. This is counterproductive on several levels. In many cases, the pathologies of participation that abundance points to are the product of insufficient and unrepresentative participation. In one of the most common examples abundance proponents cite—local zoning meetings that permit NIMBY interests to hold up development—the issue is that the individuals with time and motivation to attend local zoning meetings are unrepresentative of the broader set of potential constituents, and zoning boards fail to hear from proponents of new housing. Finding streamlined and timely ways to bring in those currently excluded from participating may be more productive than simply eliminating participation altogether. Public participation can surface important information that improves timely implementation of new programs and projects. And most importantly, participation can build legitimacy for the decisions that are ultimately made by elected officials and government administrators, preventing or minimizing backlash that restricts the ability to make further investments.

Ignoring the constructive economic and political role that organized labor can play weakens the ability of abundance to deliver supply on its own terms—and threatens the broader health of our democracy.

Unions are particularly promising vehicles for realizing the potential of citizen engagement, given their role as internally democratic organizations that can aggregate the preferences of their members and engage with private-sector developers as well as government. As we discuss below, unions could be especially promising vehicles for “thick” representation if they broadened their representation of workers from

individual occupations to sectors or regions, focused more on organizing new workers, and represented their members’ interests both as producers and as consumers—for instance, by considering their members’ interests as renters, energy consumers, parents, and caregivers. Given that union membership rates are far lower than what workers would prefer, policy reforms need to both increase union density and encourage the kind of unions structured along the lines we describe.

Finally, some abundance advocates seem willing to sacrifice such values as environmental protection and fair labor standards in the pursuit of rapid growth and production. Ultimately, the worry is that the abundance movement will produce more supply, but in a way that benefits wealthy consumers and powerful producers, not the public good—which could, in turn, generate backlash against further efforts to expand supply. For example, consider the possibility of an unchecked proliferation of data centers that do not supply good jobs and are extractive on the communities in which they are sited, consuming vast amounts of local natural resources and thereby fueling



backlash. Ensuring that new infrastructure construction supports worker power and organizing not only benefits abundance itself but can also rebalance economic and political power in favor of a more responsive democracy, especially at a moment of authoritarian threat in the United States.

Considered together, these flaws in the dominant abundance analysis are significant. In particular, the version of abundance that embraces blanket deregulation, unrestricted growth, and the exclusion of affected communities from the processes of government is deeply troubling.

But the response need not be a rejection of the aim of abundance: providing the goods that society requires in abundant quantities and on a quick timeline. Rather, the goal should be an abundance policy that is mindful of power, democracy, distribution, and environmental salvation—a policy that promotes an effective and informed government reflecting critical public values.¹³ In a recent taxonomy of abundance, Steve Teles describes such an approach as “red plenty abundance” (labor) or “cascadian abundance” (environmental), and, to some extent, “liberal abundance.”¹⁴ A more apt term that captures the commonalities among these approaches might be “democratic abundance.”¹⁵

Democratic abundance shares with other variations of abundance a commitment to providing what people really need and then organizing government to make sure there is enough of it. But it recognizes that, while procedure can be an impediment, an equal or greater obstacle to providing critical social goods is concentrated economic and political power. As such, the abundance agenda must be designed in ways that are both redistributive and democratic. Inevitably, there are trade-offs to be made, but those trade-offs should be made in the public interest and not dominated by concentrated economic interests. As we describe at length below, labor has a central role to play in democratic abundance: It can both facilitate abundance's success and benefit from its achievements.

Democratic abundance has prevailed at earlier periods in history, with the government investing heavily in infrastructure to achieve broad-based prosperity, with significant

¹³ “Massachusetts Question 1”; Waleed Shahid, “The Abundance Debate Is Broken. Here’s How to Fix It.,” *The Nation*, June 11, 2025, <https://thenation.com/article/politics/abundance-populism-debate>; see also Diana Boesch et al., “Principles for Worker-Centered Benefits Programs,” *Center for Labor and a Just Economy*, February 2025, <http://clje.law.harvard.edu/app/uploads/2025/02/Principles-for-Worker-Centered-Benefits.pdf>.

¹⁴ Steven Teles, “Varieties of Abundance,” Niskanen Center, August 28, 2025, <https://niskanencenter.org/abundance-varieties>.

¹⁵ For other aligned perspectives, see Brian Callaci and Sandeep Vaheesan, “Rethinking State Capacity,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 79 (2026), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine79/rethinking-state-capacity>; Raj Nayak, “A More Progressive Abundance,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, January 27, 2026, <https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/a-more-progressive-abundance>.



input from democratic organizations, including unions.¹⁶ Although some unions have tended to focus primarily on their existing members' interests, other unions—often the more industrially organized ones—have taken a broader perspective. Such unions played an important role in pushing for greater supply of infrastructure, recognizing that workers are consumers of such infrastructure as well as producers of it and that unions' role should be to advance the needs of working people broadly.

Consider the example of housing, one of the foremost issues for abundance proponents. During the mid-20th century, labor was instrumental in increasing housing production through private cooperative methods and through lobbying for more state investment.¹⁷ In the 1920s, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America helped create the first housing cooperative in New York City, a cooperative that still stands today.¹⁸ In the 1940s, labor unions brought their focus on the supply of housing to the federal government, playing a central role in the passing of the federal Housing Act of 1949, which channeled substantial federal investment into new housing.¹⁹ Unions then took advantage of this program, with, for example, the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) building housing for its members using federal subsidies. The Amalgamated also became a model for the much larger, state-sponsored housing co-ops built in New York City during the post-World War II period through the 1970s.

At the local level, there are many more recent examples of unions helping increase the supply of housing, including unions representing both the building trades who benefit from new construction work and other workers who benefit as prospective renters and purchasers of more affordable housing. In the 1990s, a coalition of unions led a fight for new affordable housing and the preservation of existing public housing in Fairfield County, Connecticut, one of the wealthiest counties in the country with one of the scarcest housing markets.²⁰ And as we discuss below, unions have facilitated construction of new housing in several jurisdictions in the past few years. But at the federal level, unions, with the exception of the Building Trades, have played only a limited role in housing policy and advocating for greater production since the 1970s.²¹

With abundance gaining support across the political spectrum, labor now has the opportunity to engage again. As in earlier historical periods, the focus should be not

¹⁶ Sandeep Vaheesan, "Project Syndicate – Getting Abundance Right," Open Markets Institute, March 28, 2025, <https://openmarketsinstitute.org/publications/project-syndicate-getting-abundance-right>.

¹⁷ Zoe Tucker, "Why Labor Unions Should Join the Housing Fight," LPE Project, December 12, 2023, <https://lpeproject.org/blog/why-unions-should-join-the-housing-fight>.

¹⁸ Sarah Rodriguez, "Penn South: 50 Years of Affordable Housing," Cornell University: The Kheel Center ILGWU Collection, accessed October 17, 2025, <https://ilgwu.ilr.cornell.edu/announcements/16.html>.

¹⁹ Peter Dreier, "Labor's Love Lost? Rebuilding Unions' Involvement in Federal Housing Policy," *Housing Policy Debate* 11, no. 2 (2000): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2000.9521371>.

²⁰ Danny Hosang, "All the Issues in Workers' Lives," *Shelterforce*, May 1, 2000, <https://shelterforce.org/2000/05/01/all-the-issues-in-workers-lives>.

²¹ Dreier, "Labor's Love Lost?," 368.



only on protecting existing members but also on organizing new workers, raising standards in low-wage industries, and increasing the supply of housing and other infrastructure that working people need. In short, labor can help ensure that democratic abundance prevails. And the arguments against involving labor in abundance simply do not hold up.

Our argument unfurls as follows: First, we identify the central arguments made by abundance proponents against organized labor and explain why these critiques are misguided. We also highlight the failures of abundance efforts to date that have occurred without labor. Second, we describe how labor is central to a vision of democratic abundance, laying out the evidence for (a) how labor can provide skilled labor necessary for many of the infrastructure investments envisioned by abundance proponents, (b) how engagement with labor can build political support for the investments and reforms necessary for achieving abundance's goals, and (c) how labor's involvement can build greater political and democratic legitimacy for infrastructure investments and improve the efficacy of government decision-making. Third, we argue that labor should not give up on abundance. To the contrary, labor would benefit from a more fulsome engagement with abundance, and abundance can be designed to create not only an abundant supply of goods but also *an abundant supply of good jobs*. Finally, we explain why democratic abundance is so important in this particular moment of rising authoritarianism. As noted above, we focus on infrastructure, including housing, but similar arguments apply to other important services like the care economy, as well as to technological innovation—labor is no less important to these areas.

II. Responding to Labor's Critics

Abundance proponents who critique labor's role in the policy process make two key arguments. First, they contend that unions undermine abundance goals by increasing the cost of projects and slowing down production. Second, they argue that unions function as a special interest that distorts policy outcomes rather than represents broader public interests. We argue that both of these critiques are overstated, but, to the extent that they do have merit, they can be addressed through reforms that enhance both pro-labor and pro-abundance goals. The alternative—sacrificing labor and worker interests altogether—has deleterious effects on communities overall.

Critique 1: Unions, Costs, and Rent-Seeking: Abundance proponents who are critics of unions often point to unions driving up the cost of new construction—especially housing and infrastructure—by using their bargaining power to rent-seek, or extract extra costs without contributing anything of value in return, in negotiations with construction firms and government.²² Yet the actual record of unions and the evidence

²² See, for instance, Josh Barro, "In Blue Cities, Abundance Will Require Fighting Labor Unions," *Very Serious*, Substack, June 6, 2025, <https://joshbarro.com/p/in-blue-cities-abundance-will-require>.



on construction costs refutes this simplistic narrative. Research suggests that, despite the fact that construction costs—especially labor costs—represent a large proportion of the expense of new building, construction costs do not strongly predict housing prices, particularly in recent years and for the most expensive cities.²³ Accordingly, labor costs cannot explain the rising costs of residential construction, particularly in the cities with the highest costs. Turning to major public infrastructure projects, a careful analysis of the cost of constructing interstate highways found that construction labor costs have generally remained steady since the 1970s, while interstate spending costs have ballooned. This suggests, as the study’s authors put it, that “increasing labor . . . prices are likely insufficient to explain much of the observed increase in spending per mile.”²⁴ Just as importantly, the authors find that the strength of labor across states—as measured by the presence of state right-to-work and prevailing wage laws—does not explain much variation in interstate construction spending across states. And recent research suggests that high costs in the construction industry may be attributable in part to outsized employer power, not labor power.²⁵ Construction businesses can raise prices and lower wages relative to a more competitive industry.

These findings are consistent with the broader research on union labor and public infrastructure construction, which finds that policies that encourage collective bargaining on construction projects lead to faster completion of quality projects by ensuring a steady labor supply of skilled workers without necessarily increasing costs. One example comes from Project Labor Agreements (PLAs), which are collective bargaining agreements that apply to a specific construction project and are negotiated before workers are hired onto the project. (As we discuss in Part III, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) explicitly permits pre-hire collective bargaining agreements for the construction industry.) The Obama and Biden administrations encouraged federal agencies to use PLAs when funding new construction projects, with moves that the second Trump administration has continued.²⁶ As the Biden administration explained in its rulemaking requiring PLAs on large projects, “there is no definitive and compelling evidence to support the assertion that PLAs increase costs on Federal construction

²³ Brian Potter and Chad Syverson, *Building Costs and House Prices*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 33958, June 2025, https://nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w33958/w33958.pdf.

²⁴ Leah Brooks and Zachary Liscow, “Infrastructure Costs,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 15, no. 2 (April 2023): 19, <https://aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.20200398>.

²⁵ Kory Kroft, Yao Luo, Magne Mogstad, and Bradley Setzler, “Imperfect Competition and Rents in Labor and Product Markets: The Case of the Construction Industry,” *American Economic Review* 115, no. 9 (Sep 2025): 2929–30, <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/aer.20220577>.

²⁶ Congressional Research Service, *Project Labor Agreements*, Report R41310, June 28, 2012, https://everycrsreport.com/files/20120628_R41310_731846eb1c5bc373a7ea40ebd566f72ded8a8771.pdf. See also Russell T. Vought, *Memorandum to the Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies: Use of Project Labor Agreements on Federal Construction Projects—Amendments to OMB Memorandum M-24-06* (Office of Management and Budget, June 12, 2025): M-25-29, <https://whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/M-25-29-Use-of-Project-Labor-Agreements-on-Federal-Construction-Projects-Amendments-to-OMB-Memorandum-M-24-06.pdf>.



projects.”²⁷ On the contrary, PLAs often bring benefits in the form of a steady supply of workers—a key issue given long-standing shortages in skilled construction labor that are often a major source of delay in completing projects on time.²⁸ PLAs attract higher-skilled workers and ensure a steady worker supply by providing higher pay for more skilled openings, using union-run hiring halls to maintain a large network of skilled labor available for a project, reducing turnover and absenteeism through better working conditions and worker voice through unions, and encouraging safer workplaces through union monitoring of safety standards.

In short, the evidence refutes the claim that the aggregate presence or strength of labor unions explains high housing and infrastructure costs. Nevertheless, it may still be the case that unions impose outsized costs on specific projects. In particular, critics frequently point to the high labor costs associated with transit projects in the United States; indeed, transit scholars have found that the cost of building new public transit in the United States exceeds other peer rich economies. In a striking example, the costs of the new Second Avenue Subway in New York City were 8–12 times higher than a baseline case informed by the experiences of other European countries.²⁹ In New York, as in other American cities, labor costs account for a substantially larger share of project costs than in other countries (40–60 percent of public transit costs, compared to 9–30 percent in peer countries).³⁰ Yet many of these other countries have much stronger labor movements than the United States, including in construction. Given the *weakness* of the American labor movement, it cannot be the case that labor’s strength alone directly determines the costs of public transit. Accordingly, it is instructive to consider more specifically why unions may have contributed to higher construction costs, and how changes to labor law could encourage more productive, efficient construction without undermining labor.

A closer look at the oft-cited transit example reveals that, in part, the higher labor costs in the United States reflect the costly procurement processes in the United States—

²⁷ “Federal Acquisition Regulation: Use of Project Labor Agreements for Federal Construction Projects,” 88 Federal Register 88708, December 22, 2023, <https://federalregister.gov/documents/2023/12/22/2023-27736/federal-acquisition-regulation-use-of-project-labor-agreements-for-federal-construction-projects>.

²⁸ Frank Manzo IV, Larissa Petrucci, and Robert Bruno, *The Union Advantage During the Construction Labor Shortage: Evidence from Surveys of Associated General Contractors of America Member Firms* (Illinois Economic Policy Institute and Project for Middle Class Renewal, 2022), <https://lep.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ILEPI-PMCR-Construction-Labor-Shortage-AGC-Report-FINAL18.pdf>; Interactive Elements Corporation and Hill International, *Implementation of Project Labor Agreements in Federal Construction Projects* (US Department of Labor, 2011), <https://thetruthaboutplas.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Interactive-Elements-Hill-International-Report-for-DOL-on-PLA-Implementation-022511.pdf>.

²⁹ Eric Goldwyn et al., *Understanding Transit Infrastructure Costs in American Cities* (NYU Marron Institute of Urban Management: Transit Costs Project, 2023): 13, https://transitcosts.com/wp-content/uploads/TCP_Final_Report.pdf.

³⁰ Goldwyn et al., *Understanding Transit Infrastructure Costs*, 15.



processes that involve substantial interagency regulatory review, including consultants and lawyers, as well as overstaffing of white-collar labor supervising construction work.³¹ That said, some of the high costs in the United States (especially in the Northeast) do appear to be driven by a pernicious high-pay, low-productivity equilibrium among unionized, blue-collar construction workers.³² While unionized construction workers in other countries such as Sweden receive relatively high pay, that high pay is offset by high worker productivity and more flexible union work rules.³³ By comparison, critics emphasize that US transit union-bargained staffing and work rules often drive down productivity. As the *New York Times* reported in 2017, “trade unions . . . have secured deals requiring underground construction work to be staffed by as many as four times more laborers than elsewhere in the world.”³⁴ Facing the prospect of little future infrastructure construction, US construction unions rationally bargain for the most favorable terms for their existing members on the projects that are underway—even as those terms have negative externalities for the public as a whole in terms of less transit investment. One could imagine an alternative equilibrium in which a stronger guarantee of future infrastructure construction projects with good jobs—negotiated by unions, governments, and construction firms—could make it easier for unions to agree to more productive arrangements (such as lower staffing requirements) in exchange.

The comparison between Sweden and the United States and the counterfactual we present thus suggests that unions should not be eliminated from abundance projects; rather, governments should insist on collective bargaining agreements that allow for more investment, high productivity standards, and high pay for workers. This can be achieved through smart bargaining by transit authorities and other governmental entities. More fundamentally, however, labor law reforms should encourage this approach to bargaining by creating the right incentives for both unions and employers.

Union membership has been declining for decades in the United States, not because workers don't want unions—a strong majority does—but because of aggressive corporate resistance enabled by pervasive problems with labor law, including weak penalties on corporate violators and underenforcement.³⁵ In addition, because of the

Unions should not be eliminated from abundance projects; rather, governments should insist on collective bargaining agreements that allow for more investment, high productivity standards, and high pay for workers.

³¹ Goldwyn et al., *Understanding Transit Infrastructure Costs*, 15.

³² Goldwyn et al., *Understanding Transit Infrastructure Costs*, 357.

³³ Goldwyn et al., *Understanding Transit Infrastructure Costs*, 311.

³⁴ Brian M. Rosenthal, “The Most Expensive Mile of Subway Track on Earth,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2017, <https://nytimes.com/2017/12/28/nyregion/new-york-subway-construction-costs.html>.

³⁵ Megan Brenan, “Labor Union Approval Relatively Steady at 68% in U.S.,” *Gallup*, August 28, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/694472/labor-union-approval-relatively-steady.aspx>; Paul Weiler, “Promises to Keep: Securing Workers’ Rights to Self-Organization under the NLRA,” *Harvard Law Review* 96, no. 8 (June 1983): 1769–1828, <https://jstor.org/stable/1340809>; Kate Andrias and Brishen Rogers,



structure of labor law in the United States, unions typically organize and bargain on a highly local basis—with individual projects or employers. As a result of both of these dynamics, unions have strong incentives to maximize the gains they can obtain for any one project and to focus on retaining particular jobs, even if those settlements have negative externalities for a sector or region as a whole, as with the example of the Second Avenue Subway project in New York City. As labor scholars (including one of us) have long argued, when unions represent a greater share of the economy and bargain across regions and sectors, not only do they do a better job at reducing economic inequality and ensuring labor rights for all workers,³⁶ but they also have a stronger incentive to consider the broader costs (and benefits) they may be creating for the economy as a whole.³⁷ As political economist Mancur Olson recognized decades ago, such encompassing unions internalize more of the effects their bargains have on the public.³⁸ More encompassing and centralized organizing and bargaining structures could also help unions better represent their members not just as producers but also as consumers—shifting away from narrower local and occupational representation. For this reason, proposals to enable sector-wide, regional, or even national organizing and bargaining are not just good for workers but could also align unions’ incentives with those of abundance advocates.

Critique 2: Unions, Democratic Representation, and a Perceived Failure to Represent the Public Interest: A second critique advanced by abundance proponents is that union leaders represent only their own interests—or that of privileged workers—in ways that undermine the public interest.³⁹ According to this account, union leaders may not

Rebuilding Worker Voice in Today’s Economy (Roosevelt Institute, 2018), <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/publications/rebuilding-worker-voice-in-todays-economy>; Sharon Block and Benjamin I. Sachs, *Clean Slate for Worker Power: Building a Just Economy and Democracy* (Center for Labor and a Just Economy, Harvard Law School, January 2020), <https://clje.law.harvard.edu/app/uploads/2020/01/Clean-Slate-for-Worker-Power.pdf>. See also Aaron Sojourner and Adam Reich, “Americans Favor Labor Unions Over Big Business Now More Than Ever,” *Working Economics* (blog), Economic Policy Institute, May 20, 2025, <https://epi.org/blog/americans-favor-labor-unions-over-big-business-now-more-than-ever>; Thomas A. Kochan et al., “Worker Voice in America: Is There a Gap between What Workers Expect and What They Experience?,” *ILR Review* 72, no. 1 (2018): 3–38, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793918806250>; Celine McNicholas et al., *U.S. Employers Are Charged With Violating Federal Law in 41.5% of All Union Election Campaigns* (Economic Policy Institute, 2019), <https://files.epi.org/pdf/179315.pdf>; Anna Stansbury, “Do US Firms Have an Incentive to Comply With the FLSA and the NLRA?,” Working Paper 21-9 (PIIE, June 2021), <https://piie.com/publications/working-papers/2021/do-us-firms-have-incentive-comply-flsa-and-nlra>.

³⁶ Kate Andrias, “The New Labor Law,” *Yale Law Journal* 126 (2016): 2–100, <https://yalelawjournal.org/article/the-new-labor-law>.

³⁷ See Michael Wallerstein, “Centralized Bargaining and Wage Restraint,” *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 4 (November 1990): 982–1004, <https://jstor.org/stable/2111468>; Torben Iversen, *Contested Economic Institutions: The Politics of Macroeconomics and Wage Bargaining in Advanced Democracies* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Mancur Olson, “The Implications,” in *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (Yale University Press, 2022), 36–74.

³⁹ See Barro, “In Blue Cities, Abundance Will Require Fighting Labor Unions” (“When I look at policies in New York that stand in the way of abundance, very often if you look under the hood, you eventually find a



sufficiently represent their members' interests given a lack of internal union member participation, or labor unions may not represent the interests of broader communities given a low overall unionization rate. Yet labor unions, more often than not, do the opposite of what abundance critics allege: Unions increase the representativeness and democratic legitimacy of the policy process, as we argue in more detail in Part III. Moreover, to the extent that either of the representativeness critiques levied against unions have merit, the answer should be more democracy and representation, not less.

Those who critique union leadership for failing to represent the interests of union members often ignore the extent to which unions are necessarily structured as democratic organizations—more so than most other civil society organizations. Under both the NLRA and public-sector labor laws, unions are established when a majority of workers at a given workplace decide to form a union.⁴⁰ Once formed, the union is mandated to follow democratic procedures, as specified by the Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959.⁴¹ Among other requirements, union representatives owe a duty of fair representation to all employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement.⁴² The law also gives union members the rights to nominate candidates for union office, vote in union elections, ratify contracts, and participate in union meetings, and it imposes a host of transparency and financial disclosure requirements on unions so that members can hold their organizations accountable.⁴³ Few other organizations, including publicly held companies, are required by law to be as internally democratic as unions. On a broader level, unions can also serve as “schools of democracy”; at their best, they give members opportunities to develop civic skills relevant for participation in society.⁴⁴

That is not to say that all unions are perfectly democratic. Many unions have uncontested elections for their local leadership, and many international and national union associations do not have direct elections of their top leaders. Yet the appropriate

labor union at the end that's the driver.”). For an analysis of anti-union sentiment within the abundance movement, see Dylan Gyauch-Lewis, “The Anti-Labor Forces Pushing the Abundance Movement,” *In These Times*, July 8, 2025, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/labor-unions-abundance-klein-thompson-cato>.

⁴⁰ However, the NLRA permits “pre-hire” agreements in construction, where the employer agrees to recognize a union before workers are hired (and thus before majority support is established). But once formed, these unions are subject to the same internal requirements for democratic representation as other unions. See 29 U.S.C. § 158(f).

⁴¹ Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959, Pub. L. 86-257, 73 Stat. 519 (1959).

⁴² See, e.g., *Steele v. Louisville & Nashville Railway Co.*, 323 US 192 (1944); *Vaca v. Sipes*, 386 US 171 (1967).

⁴³ Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 § 101, 29 U.S.C. § 411.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); Aaron J. Sojourner, “Do Unions Promote Members’ Electoral Office Holding? Evidence from Correlates of State Legislatures’ Occupational Shares,” *ILR Review* 66, no. 2 (2013): 467–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001979391306600207>; Nicholas Carnes, *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office—and What We Can Do About It* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, *Power and Politics in the U.S. Workplace* (Economic Policy Institute, 2020), <https://files.epi.org/uploads/215890.pdf>.



response is not to jettison the democratic potential of unions. Instead, the answer is to work toward greater participation of members in their unions. Some unions, for example, hold mass membership meetings to discuss policy issues; others hold direct elections for national leadership. Many unions regularly survey and engage their members to understand their needs and priorities, including around workplace and community issues, and set their bargaining and political agendas based on deep listening and consultation with members. These kinds of internal union practices tend to produce more energetic and effective organizations.⁴⁵ But the bottom line is that unions are far more representative than nearly all organizations that participate in policymaking, most of which represent elite and corporate interests.⁴⁶

Efforts to dismiss unions as oppositional to the broader public interest are similarly misplaced. It is true that many workers are not members of unions and therefore are not directly represented when unions are brought into the governing process. But here, too, the answer is not to jettison unions' representative function. Rather, the solution is to expand unionization's reach. We have both argued elsewhere that it is essential to pursue the kind of labor reforms that can expand union membership, thereby broadening the constituencies to which unions are accountable.⁴⁷ In particular, we support reforms that would make it easier for *all* workers, including those currently excluded from labor law, to organize democratic, worksite-based organizations, while also extending the benefits of union representation on a sectoral basis. To truly achieve such change, federal labor law reform is needed. But even without federal statutory change, much can be achieved through tripartite approaches to governance at the local, state, and/or federal level, as we describe below. That is, by engaging unions, business, and the public in decision-making about abundance projects through tripartite administrative structures, abundance projects can achieve greater representation of workers and other affected constituencies, while also benefiting from greater on-the-ground expertise in decision-making.

The “Red” State Mirage—When Abundance Lacks Labor: In addition to offering the above critiques of labor, abundance proponents often tout the success of “red” states and cities with minimal regulation and weak labor unions—such as Arizona, Texas, or Wyoming—at building large volumes of new housing. (Though when *incomes* are considered, many of these Southwestern red states also see very high levels of housing

⁴⁵ Chris Bohner, “Direct Elections for Labor Leaders Make for More Militant Unions,” *Labor Notes*, January 5, 2024, <https://labornotes.org/2024/01/direct-elections-labor-leaders-make-more-militant-unions>.

⁴⁶ See Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Henry E. Brady, *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*.

⁴⁷ Andrias, “The New Labor Law”; see also Andrias and Rogers, *Rebuilding Worker Voice in Today's Economy*; Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, William Kimball, and Thomas Kochan, “What Forms of Representation Do American Workers Want? Implications for Theory, Policy, and Practice,” *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 75, no. 2 (2022), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0019793920959049>; Block and Sachs, *Clean Slate for Worker Power*.



unaffordability.⁴⁸) Abundance proponents argue that the success of these states in building large supplies of new housing suggests that housing abundance need not require strong unions or labor standards. But these red state housing “miracles” are often built on a shaky, unsustainable foundation that threatens vulnerable workers.

In the most prominent example, the Texas residential construction boom has been built on poor wages and working conditions, as well as outright violations of labor, health, and safety standards. Without unions or labor standards, many of the construction workers employed on new residential housing projects face significant financial hardships, wage theft, illegal misclassification and evasion of labor protections and standards, and outsized rates of injuries and fatalities.⁴⁹ This is not a sustainable approach for the rest of the country to follow. Poor working conditions represent a policy failure for affected workers and a failure for abundance on its own terms—that is, this approach fails to consider the ways that citizens are both consumers and workers. Over the longer run, abundance approaches that ignore the quality of the jobs being created also run the risk of political backlash, which we discuss in more detail below. Additionally, new research suggests that the red states and cities that once excelled at building residential construction are now also struggling to build more stock even as these cities and states continue to lack strong labor unions, casting further doubt on the role of labor costs and unions as drivers of the slowdown in construction (as opposed to other barriers to construction).⁵⁰

III. How Organized Labor Can Help Achieve Abundance Goals

Not only are the abundance critiques of unions largely misplaced, but organized labor in the United States—both in its present form and supported by additional reforms—can affirmatively contribute to the abundance movement’s objectives of increasing the construction of physical infrastructure such as transportation, clean energy, and housing. Organized labor is critical to achieving these goals in three ways: (1) by providing adequate skilled labor for completing infrastructure projects at scale and on

⁴⁸ Home prices have grown rapidly since 2020, and household incomes have failed to keep up. Eight of the top ten states with the highest price-to-income ratios are in the West. See Jonathan Jones, “Cities With the Highest Home Price-to-Income Ratios,” *Construction Coverage*, October 23, 2025, <https://constructioncoverage.com/research/cities-with-highest-home-price-to-income-ratios>; Natalia Siniavskaia, “Where Renters and Owners Face the Highest Cost Burdens,” *Eye on Housing*, National Association of Home Builders, November 24, 2025, <https://eyeonhousing.org/2025/11/where-renters-and-owners-face-the-highest-cost-burdens>.

⁴⁹ Workers Defense Project, *Behind the Texas Miracle: The Unstable Foundation of the Texas Construction Industry* (2025), <https://workersdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Final-Behind-The-Texas-Miracle.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Edward L. Glaeser and Joseph Gyourko, “America’s Housing Supply Problem: The Closing of the Suburban Frontier?” NBER Working Paper 33876, May 2025, <https://nber.org/papers/w33876>.



time; (2) by lending political heft to policy debates and building or joining political coalitions that can unlock more government support for infrastructure construction, including public spending on infrastructure and reforms to support the process of new infrastructure construction, while also protecting workers' rights and ensuring adequate labor standards; and (3) by improving the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of infrastructure projects, especially through tripartite structures that involve representatives of government, employers, and community members.

Providing Skilled Labor to Large-Scale Infrastructure Projects

In recent years, around 17 million workers were employed in infrastructure-related jobs, accounting for some 12 percent of all employment, according to Brookings Institution estimates.⁵¹ These occupations included construction, transportation, electricity transmission, and plumbing. These jobs often pay well, especially compared to other occupations available to workers with lower levels of formal education. Yet despite the promise of good-paying work and multiple career pathways in many regions of the country, many infrastructure projects face labor shortages. Moreover, projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggest a growing mismatch in the coming years: While demand for infrastructure-related work is likely to increase, absent further interventions the infrastructure workforce is likely to face significant attrition from aging and retirements.

The shortages may be especially acute in construction, and recent surveys of contractors suggest that shortages of skilled workers remain one of their top business concerns in the coming years (though in the early months of 2026 the job opening rate for construction work has declined, indicating a potential slowdown).⁵² The immigration restrictions pursued by the Trump administration are likely to exacerbate these shortages in construction, since immigrants make up around a quarter of all construction workers—and even more in states such as Texas and California.⁵³ Given these challenges recruiting a sufficiently large skilled workforce, construction industry

⁵¹ Joseph Kane, “Seizing the U.S. Infrastructure Opportunity: Investing in Current and Future Workers,” *Brookings Metro*, December 2022, https://brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/InfraJobsUpdate_final.pdf.

⁵² Associated General Contractors and Sage, “A Construction Market in Transition: The 2024 Construction Hiring and Business Outlook,” 2024, https://agc.org/sites/default/files/users/user21902/2024%20Construction%20Hiring%20and%20Business%20Outlook%20Report_V2.pdf. On the construction job opening rate, see Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, FRED, “Job Openings: Construction,” March 2026, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/JTS2300JOR>. On long-run forecasts in the construction occupations, see: Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Construction and Extraction Occupations,” last modified August 28, 2025, <https://bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction>.

⁵³ Yelena Maleyev, “Construction in the Crosshairs: Downside Risks via Shifts in Trade and Immigration Policy,” KPMG, April 15, 2025, <https://kpmg.com/us/en/articles/2025/april-2025-construction-deep-dive.html>. See also Troup Howard et al., “Cracking Down, Pricing Up: Housing Supply in the Wake of Mass Deportation,” *Journal of Finance*, last revised November 10, 2025, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4729511&s=09.



associations express worries about project delays and limited opportunities to take on new projects.⁵⁴

The lack of a sufficiently large workforce in skilled trades, especially construction and electricity, threatens a number of important policy goals, including those often prioritized by abundance proponents. For instance, labor shortages in construction are one factor threatening the viability of a long-term US clean energy transition. The National Renewable Energy Laboratory has predicted shortfalls of skilled construction and utility workers involved in constructing and maintaining wind energy installations and cited these shortfalls as an important obstacle to US efforts to decarbonize the economy.⁵⁵ Labor shortages also threaten new sectors of the digital economy. Microsoft President Brad Smith recently explained that the biggest obstacle his data center teams faced was a shortage of skilled trades workers, especially electricians. Each data center Microsoft constructs requires a large number of highly skilled electricians to work on the “massively complex” array of electrical panels and systems that power those centers. Because of the shortage of electricians, Microsoft had even been temporarily relocating workers from other states.⁵⁶

Unions can play a critical role in training skilled construction and other infrastructure workers to meet unmet demand—and in ensuring that these jobs are well-paid for workers, attracting new entrants to the industry. Important reasons why more workers do not enter infrastructure and construction jobs include concerns about safety and working conditions, poor compensation and opportunities for continued training and advancement, and harassment and discrimination on the basis of race and gender (given the heavily segregated nature of many infrastructure jobs, especially in the trades).⁵⁷ Unions can address each of these concerns through the role that they play in negotiating collective bargaining agreements that guarantee higher wages and benefits, well-defined opportunities for advancement (with associated raises), on-the-job training, stronger worker safety and health standards, and protections against discrimination and harassment.

⁵⁴ “Skilled Labor Shortage in Construction: How to Close the Gap,” American Institute of Constructors, May 12, 2025, <https://aic-builds.org/skilled-labor-shortage-construction>.

⁵⁵ Brinn McDowell, Jeremy Stefek, Elena Smith, Bailey Pons, and Quaran Ahmad, “National Wind Energy Workforce Assessment: Challenges, Opportunities, and Future Needs,” National Renewable Energy Laboratory, revised March 2024, <https://docs.nrel.gov/docs/fy24osti/87670.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Brad Smith, “The Country Needs More Electricity—and More Electricians,” *FOXBusiness*, March 26, 2025, <https://foxbusiness.com/economy/country-needs-more-electricity-more-electricians>.

⁵⁷ Tamima Elbashbishy and Islam H. El-adaway, “Skilled Worker Shortage across Key Labor-Intensive Construction Trades in Union versus Nonunion Environments,” *Journal of Management in Engineering* 40, no. 1 (2023): <https://ascelibrary.org/doi/10.1061/JMENEA.MEENG-5649>. See also Stanley W. Gilbert, *Characterization of the U.S. Construction Labor Supply* (National Institute of Standards and Technology, December 2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.6028/NIST.SP.1135>; Russell Ormiston et al., “Rebuilding Residential Construction,” in *Creating Good Jobs*, ed. Paul Osterman (MIT Press, 2020).



Equally important is the role that unions play in training workers for skilled trades.⁵⁸ Out of the over 500,000 apprentices training in fiscal year 2021, around half were participating in joint union and management apprenticeship programs. (The remaining apprentices were participating in programs led exclusively by employers.) Through these union-based apprenticeship programs, workers train for some set period of time, often spanning multiple years, in a structure that combines on-the-job learning, classroom instruction, and mentorship. A critical distinction between apprenticeships and other forms of training is that apprentices receive wages during their training, which increase as they gain more skills and experience. The progressive and competitive compensation that apprentices receive incentivizes workers to invest in new skills and also gives employers a material stake in those workers' training. Once they finish their training, union apprentices graduate into a job in their industry as part of their trade's union. Research suggests that apprenticeship programs that are jointly run between unions and employers tend to have more rigorous curricula and better completion rates than programs run exclusively by employers. More generally, union-employer training partnerships produce better outcomes for workers and the economy for two reasons: First, unions and employers both have an interest in accurate forecasting of labor demand, since they both have skin in the game from their funding of the programs; second, such programs ensure that workers have portable, recognized skills they can take to different employers.⁵⁹ When training programs do not have strong labor participation, employers often customize curricula to narrowly benefit their own needs without providing workers skills that have external value or portability.

Together, unions' roles in collective bargaining for better job conditions and in facilitating joint employer-labor apprenticeship programs help explain why unionized construction contractors are better at meeting workforce needs than nonunionized contractors. In a 2021 survey, unionized contractors reported much less difficulty filling some or all of their skilled craft trades positions and much fewer delays due to labor shortages than nonunionized contractors.⁶⁰ Those results from 2021 mirrored surveys dating back before the COVID-19 pandemic. Unionized contractors are also less likely

⁵⁸ For an overview of apprenticeships, see Dale Belman, "Registered Apprenticeship in Construction: Built to Last," Institute for Construction Economic Research, June 2022, <https://iceres.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Registered-Apprenticeship-in-Construction-Built-to-Last.pdf>. For an overview of union-led apprenticeships, especially for young workers, see Zach Boren and Andrew Campbell, "How Labor Unions and Industry Associations Can Accelerate Youth Apprenticeship," Urban Institute, June 24, 2024, <https://urban.org/research/publication/how-labor-unions-and-industry-associations-can-accelerate-youth-apprenticeship>.

⁵⁹ Kathleen Thelen, *How Institutions Evolve* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Suresh Naidu and Aaron Sojourner, *Employer Power and Employee Skills: Understanding Workforce Training Programs in the Context of Labor Market Power* (Roosevelt Institute, 2020), 17, <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/publications/employer-power-employee-skills-workforce-training-programs-labor-market-power>.

⁶⁰ "New Study: Union Construction Industry Is Superior at Meeting U.S. Workforce Needs," West Virginia Building & Construction Trades, July 1, 2022, <https://wvtrades.org/industry/new-study-union-construction-industry-is-superior-at-meeting-u-s-workforce-needs>.



to report forward-looking issues with pipelines for well-trained craft workers in their local communities.

Importantly, given both the shortages reported by many construction contractors and the deeply segregated occupations in the skilled trades, unionized contractors also report greater workforce diversity than nonunion contractors, including higher employment of women and Black workers.⁶¹ While not all building trade unions are committed to diversifying their ranks, a growing number of unions are recruiting more women and workers of color into apprenticeships and construction trades jobs. In Portland, Oregon, for example, joint labor–management programs have diversified participation in apprenticeships, and completion rates for women and workers of color are higher for union-led apprenticeship programs than employer-only apprenticeships.⁶² Chicago Women in Trades uses grants from the Department of Labor’s Women’s Bureau to increase women’s participation in construction and manufacturing through local pre-apprenticeship training to help more women to enter the trades.⁶³ Other unions, like the Laborers’ International Union of Northern America (LiUNA), have partnered with community-based organizations to create job training programs in which local residents with criminal records receive on-the-job training in apprenticeships building local affordable housing units.⁶⁴

As abundance proponents contemplate massive new investments in infrastructure—including clean energy and public transit projects—it is hard to see how such projects could be completed with the current infrastructure workforce. Current labor shortages, especially among trades workers, pose a significant obstacle. Meeting the increased demand envisioned by an abundance agenda will require growing the ranks of skilled trades workers, and the current evidence suggests that apprenticeships, especially union-led apprenticeships, are the most reliable lever to do so—and to do so in ways that expand the diversity of those workers. For unions to realize this role, policymakers should ensure that new projects encourage or require the use of union-trained apprentices. Policymakers should also encourage these partnerships by offering public support for wraparound services such as childcare or transportation that help workers complete apprenticeships, and by investing in pre-apprenticeship programs that prepare workers, especially from underrepresented backgrounds, for apprenticeship

⁶¹ “Union Construction Industry Is Superior at Meeting U.S. Workforce Needs,” 8.

⁶² Larissa Petrucci, “Constructing a Diverse Workforce: Examining Union and Non-Union Construction Apprenticeship Programs and their Outcomes,” University of Oregon, Labor Education and Research Center: 27, https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.uoregon.edu/dist/a/13513/files/2021/11/Constructing_A_Diverse_Workforce.pdf.

⁶³ “Statement in Response to Trump Administration’s Elimination of WANTO Grants and Women’s Bureau Programs,” Chicago Women in Trades, May 15, 2025, <https://cwit.org/statement-in-response-to-trump-administrations-elimination-of-wanto-grants-and-womens-bureau-programs>.

⁶⁴ “Reentry and Employment for the Formerly Incarcerated and the Role of American Trades Unions,” National Employment Law Project, April 6, 2016, https://nelp.org/insights-research/reentry-and-employment-for-the-formerly-incarcerated-and-the-role-of-american-trades-unions/#_edn30.



entry requirements.⁶⁵ This could include scaling up successful federal grant programs, such as the Department of Labor’s Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) grant program, which funds efforts to increase women’s participation in apprenticeship programs.⁶⁶ It could also include creating new funding programs to support more workers entering the skilled trades in occupations needed for an abundance agenda.

Building Political Coalitions in Support of New Investments in Infrastructure and Housing

Beyond training the skilled workers needed for abundance investments, unions can marshal the support necessary for enacting infrastructure and housing investments. A core argument of the abundance movement is that Americans lack necessary physical investments in infrastructure and housing because of failures in the political system—namely, too many veto points and not enough organized political support for the diffuse benefits and concentrated costs that many infrastructure and housing projects offer.⁶⁷

For its diagnosis of the failures to provide sufficient affordable housing, the abundance theory draws from a large and growing literature in political science that documents numerous obstacles to construction, including how: (1) decentralized control over zoning decisions empowers local opponents of new construction to stop projects while failing to adequately consider or represent the externalities of their decisions, (2) many local participatory mechanisms for “citizen voice” are captured by opponents of new construction, and (3) the burden of proof and effort has, until recently, been on proponents of new construction rather than on its opponents, which makes it easy to drag out the process of approving new construction until it is no longer worth the effort for developers.⁶⁸ That said, other important barriers are worth noting too, such as the lack of sustained public investment in housing for families who struggle to afford

⁶⁵ See e.g., US Department of Labor, “Creating more Equitable Pathways to Good Jobs,” Office of Public Affairs, January 19, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20250101220217/https://blog.dol.gov/2023/01/19/creating-more-equitable-pathways-to-good-jobs>; see also New School, “Wraparound Supports,” Budget Equity Project, September 24, 2024, <https://budgetequity.racepowerpolicy.org/case-studies-policy-briefs/wraparound-supports>.

⁶⁶ US Department of Labor, “Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) Grant Program,” Women’s Bureau, <https://dol.gov/agencies/wb/grants/wanto>.

⁶⁷ See Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance* (Simon & Schuster, 2025).

⁶⁸ See Jess Coleman, “How a Housing Skirmish in NYC Revealed a Secret Truth About NIMBYism,” *New Republic*, September 23, 2025, <https://newrepublic.com/article/200753/housing-skirmish-secret-truth-nimbyism>; see also Katherine Levine Einstein, Maxwell Palmer, and David Glick, “Who Participates in Local Government? Evidence from Meeting Minutes,” Housing Politics Lab, June 29, 2018, https://politicsofhousing.com/research/who_participates_in_local_government.pdf.



rent or mortgages, which labor supported in earlier decades when unions had more organized clout, as discussed above.⁶⁹

Despite their weakened state and declining membership, unions are still powerful political actors in the states where they retain density. They are particularly powerful at the local and state levels, where many important infrastructure decisions are made in the federated governance structure of the United States. If abundance proponents are correct that vested interests currently block sufficient infrastructure investment, then it will be essential to mobilize new political coalitions that can overcome institutional and organizational barriers to infrastructure spending and pro-infrastructure reforms. Unions are an important part of that supportive alliance.

By engaging unions, business, and the public in decision-making about abundance projects through tripartite administrative structures, abundance projects can achieve greater representation of workers and other affected constituencies, while also benefiting from greater on-the-ground expertise in decision-making.

Labor’s interest in infrastructure comes from its members as both consumers and producers of new infrastructure. First and foremost, workers are undeniably all consumers of housing. As residents in the communities where they work (or would like to work), many union members struggle with housing affordability. In an early 2025 survey of working American adults, we found that union members suffer from housing insecurity at about the same rates as nonunion members.⁷⁰ In that same survey, 46 percent of union members said that they worried about affording their rent or mortgage (including 23 percent of respondents who worried a lot); the share for

nonunionized workers was virtually identical at 44 percent (including 22 percent of respondents who worried a lot). Housing affordability is an issue that cuts across the American population, for union members and nonmembers alike.

Within the labor movement, housing affordability also cuts across very different occupations and sectors. As the National Education Association has documented, many unionized K-12 teachers—including senior teachers—struggle to afford to live close to their schools. One elementary school teacher in Santa Fe, New Mexico, explained that despite holding a master’s degree and being promoted to the highest-paid category of

⁶⁹ Will Fischer and Barbara Sard, “Federal Housing Spending Is Poorly Matched to Need,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, March 8, 2017, <https://cbpp.org/research/chart-book-federal-housing-spending-is-poorly-matched-to-need>; Douglas Rice, “Cuts in Federal Assistance Have Exacerbated Families’ Struggles to Afford Housing,” Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, April 12, 2016, <https://cbpp.org/research/chart-book-cuts-in-federal-assistance-have-exacerbated-families-struggles-to-afford-housing>.

⁷⁰ Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Max Kiefel, and Alan Yan, “The Varied Voice of Labor: Unpacking the Political Engagement of Labor in the 2024 Election,” Harvard Law School Center for Labor and a Just Economy and Columbia University Labor Lab, May 2025, https://clje.law.harvard.edu/app/uploads/2025/05/The-Varied-Voice-of-Labor_Final.pdf.



public school teachers in her state, she was still scrambling to afford housing costs. “Santa Fe is a beautiful place and I love teaching,” she says. “Can I live here on my salary? Yes, but it has been very difficult.” She added that while she was making a rental unit work on her salary, owning her own home was “off the table.”⁷¹ Those same concerns are shared by many lower-paid hotel workers. As the president of the UNITE-HERE union in San Francisco explained about the costs in California, “Our members can’t absorb the sudden rent increases they’ve seen. They’re evicted from their homes. They’re pushed further and further down the housing ladder.” One housekeeper who is a member of that union shared that she had to move to a town 45 miles away from her job at the Hilton San Francisco Union Square, requiring her to commute two hours each way, which ate into spending time with her family.⁷²

In addition to union members experiencing the scarcity of housing firsthand, unions involved in the building trades have a direct interest in supporting more infrastructure and housing, since their economic livelihood depends on new construction. The members of North America’s Building Trades Union (NABTU) were an important lobbying force behind the passage of the bipartisan infrastructure law enacted by President Joe Biden in 2021.⁷³ NABTU’s members also push for expanded federal support for apprenticeships, seeing them as an important vehicle through which its members train more skilled trades workers and grow their ranks.⁷⁴ Building trades unions are also active at the local and state levels to support greater development that would expand job opportunities for their members.⁷⁵ Similarly, in 2026, the Laborers’ Union testified in Congress about the importance of permitting reform that would expedite the construction of vital infrastructure, noting the material consequences of a lack of investment in construction on their members’ livelihood:

[Stalled construction projects] mean another day without a paycheck. Another day without earning healthcare eligibility. Another day without a pension credit. Construction workers are paid by the hour, and so are their benefits. Our members build careers by moving from project to project. When those projects are delayed or halted, livelihoods are put on hold. This is not abstract. This is real.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Tim Walker, “Educators Struggle to Find Affordable Housing,” *NEA Today*, April 1, 2024, <https://nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/teachers-struggle-find-affordable-housing>.

⁷² Steven Greenhouse, “US Unions Target the Housing Affordability Crisis as Their ‘Biggest Issue,’” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2024, <https://theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/16/unions-affordable-housing>.

⁷³ “NABTU Says ‘The Time is Now’ For Infrastructure Investment,” North America’s Building Trades Unions, June 7, 2021, https://nabtu.org/press_releases/2021-legislative-conference.

⁷⁴ “NABTU Issues Directive for Apprenticeship Week,” Cleveland Building & Construction Trades Council, October 15, 2019, <https://cbctc.org/blog/nabtu-issues-directive-for-apprenticeship-week>.

⁷⁵ For one recent example in New York politics, see “Local 3 IBEW & Building Trades Unions Lobby for Metropolitan Park Construction Project Next to Citi Field,” New York City Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO, May 16, 2025, <https://nyccclc.org/news/local-3-ibew-building-trades-unions-lobby-metropolitan>.

⁷⁶ *Hearing to Examine the Federal Environmental Review and Permitting Processes, Part II, Before the US Senate Comm. on Environment and Public Works, 119th Cong. (2026)* (testimony of Brent Booker, General



Unions have also invested directly in infrastructure construction themselves. As noted above, unions have used their financial assets to invest in the construction of affordable housing throughout the 20th century. The AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust continues this tradition, seeking to create more union construction jobs while also creating and preserving affordable workforce housing for union members.⁷⁷ In recent decades, the trust has financed the construction of over 100,000 housing units, mostly for affordable and workforce housing.⁷⁸

Several states that have passed recent reforms to encourage the construction of more housing, including affordable housing, have also seen significant involvement from labor unions. These states show that labor need not be an obstacle to an abundance agenda—and indeed can be part of the supportive coalitions pushing for more investment and reform to increase construction.

Washington state has been at the forefront of recent state-level reforms to zoning policies, with the aim of increasing multiunit construction in areas of the state historically dominated by single-family, detached housing units. One of Washington’s signature pieces of housing reform, enacted in 2023, authorized multiunit construction in many neighborhoods across the state.⁷⁹ HB 1110, like several other landmark housing bills in the state, benefited from strong union support as part of a broad “strange bedfellows” coalition that included the state’s main building trades employers, housing policy groups, major employers such as Microsoft and Amazon, the statewide labor federation, and three large local unions affiliated with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU).⁸⁰ Labor’s interest in Washington spanned both its construction unions, which were invested in building more middle housing units (such as duplexes or triplexes) in areas traditionally dominated by single-family detached housing, and other unions representing workers pressured by high housing costs. As Washington’s top labor lobbying group put it, “This lack of housing availability is driving up costs and is driving people further and further from where they work, bringing their cost of living up as they commute longer distances.”⁸¹

President of the Laborers’ International Union of North America), https://epw.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/a/9/a99fa191-51ec-433e-b7b1-ebec3409471a/BAB28A9720FCB677BECB159BF0F8F3D61C2E42BFE3B856E1EBC17A754B2464FE.01-28-2026-booker-testimony.pdf.

⁷⁷ “Investing In Communities The Union Way,” AFL-CIO HIT, accessed February 12, 2026, <https://aflcio-hit.com/about>.

⁷⁸ Mark Fogarty, *Pension Funds: The Sleeping Giants of Affordable Housing* (Tax Credit Advisor, March 2018), 19, https://katten.com/files/332857_scan_2018-03-05_08.40.25a.pdf.

⁷⁹ H.B. 1110, 2023–24 Reg. Sess. (Washington State Legislature 2023), <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1110&Year=2023>.

⁸⁰ Joseph O’Sullivan, “WA Looks to Address Housing Shortage With Density, Zoning Changes,” *Cascade PBS*, March 17, 2023, <https://cascadepbs.org/politics/2023/03/wa-looks-address-housing-shortage-density-zoning-changes>.

⁸¹ Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, 2023 Legislature Report, 2023: 12, https://wslc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/WSLC-Leg-Report-2023_web.pdf.



Minnesota is another leading state in housing reform, especially recent actions taken by the city of Minneapolis to increase housing supply through a new 2040 Comprehensive City Plan. The plan permits more housing to be built in more parts of the city, higher-density housing in and near the city center, more multifamily housing on public transit routes, and more options for multifamily houses in different neighborhoods. Reflecting on these reforms, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey has credited unions, especially the building trades, with supporting more density in the city.⁸² And, as in Washington state, housing reforms received strong support from SEIU representing

Not only are the abundance critiques of unions largely misplaced, but organized labor in the United States can affirmatively contribute to the abundance movement’s objectives of increasing the construction of physical infrastructure such as transportation, clean energy, and housing.

health-care workers, especially low-paid health-care workers, recognizing the pressure those workers faced from rising housing costs. Rick Varco, political director of SEIU Healthcare Minnesota, said that his members convinced him that local housing issues were of critical concern.⁸³ Members mentioned to Varco that they couldn’t afford to live in Minneapolis near their jobs and would take 2.5-hour bus rides to get to work. “Housing is just an enormous cost for [union members],” so “it was important for us to do and say something about it,” Varco explained.⁸⁴

Our last example comes from California. California has stood out for its outsized struggles with housing costs and looms large in the narratives of abundance proponents. More recently, California has made news with its sweeping statewide reforms to expedite the process of constructing new housing, especially 2025 reforms to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) that had previously been used as a veto point to challenge new housing developments.⁸⁵ As one news outlet put it, the 2025 reforms mean that “one of the biggest obstacles to building new CA housing has now vanished.”⁸⁶ Labor unions, especially the building trades unions, were key players in

⁸² City of Minneapolis, “June 25, 2024 Minneapolis 2040 – Moving Forward Press Conference,” streamed live June 25, 2024, YouTube, 5:16, https://youtube.com/watch?v=YaPJuiXR_rA.

⁸³ Minneapolis 2040 Comprehensive Plan Public Comments, October 2018, <https://lims.minneapolismn.gov/Download/FileV2/20140/Online-Comments-on-Revised-Draft-Plan-Pt-3-Oct-29-Nov-1-2018.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Richard D. Kahlenberg, “How Minneapolis Ended Single-Family Zoning,” Century Foundation, October 24, 2019, <https://tcf.org/content/report/minneapolis-ended-single-family-zoning>.

⁸⁵ Unions were not generally responsible for CEQA lawsuits frequently blamed by abundance proponents; an analysis of all CEQA lawsuits from 1973 through 2025 found that unions accounted for only 2 percent of all lawsuits compared to 54 percent for homeowner associations or NIMBY groups, 20 percent for businesses, 13 percent for local governments, and 8 percent for environmental groups. Adam Bonica, “How Regulation by Litigation Strangled American Abundance,” *On Data and Democracy*, Substack, December 20, 2025, <https://data4democracy.substack.com/p/how-regulation-by-litigation-strangled>.

⁸⁶ Jeanne Kuang and Ben Christopher, “Why One Union Became One of the Most Pro-housing Voices in California,” *CalMatters*, July 10, 2025, <https://calmatters.org/politics/2025/07/california-construction-unions-housing>.



the negotiations over the 2025 reforms to CEQA given their political and economic clout in the state.

The battles over CEQA reform reveal several important features of the current construction trades labor movement that are relevant for thinking about unions' role in a housing abundance agenda. One especially contentious issue involved the labor standards that legislators would apply to newly exempted projects.⁸⁷ Most of the building trades labor movement wanted lawmakers to use a prevailing wage standard for these projects: a standard wage on public works projects calculated based on the rates paid to unionized construction trades workers. Prevailing wage standards ensure that new publicly funded projects are not bid down by low labor costs and below-market wages, which in turn undercut union labor and degrade labor conditions in communities. Instead of a prevailing wage standard, however, lawmakers proposed a compromise: enacting significantly lower wage rates to encourage more housing development, pointing out that most of these projects were small-scale residential projects that were currently not subject to prevailing wage requirements and noting that the new wage would still be above what many residential construction workers were previously earning.

A cleavage emerged within building trades unions, with the carpenters' union breaking from the rest of the trades to support a compromise that would not guarantee the prevailing wage but would raise wages in the industry while creating tools for enforcing against wage theft. As the head of the California Conference of Carpenters argued, residential construction in California was at the time of the bill's negotiations "a virtually non-union industry."⁸⁸ The carpenters saw the compromise as a way to give these workers a "modest, but substantial and important" raise, even if it was not to the full prevailing wage standard supported by the rest of the building trades. By contrast, the rest of the building trades unions were staunchly opposed, arguing that the bill would undercut wages for unionized construction workers and was therefore a nonstarter.

Cracks in the building trades' coalition had emerged years before, with the carpenters previously breaking from the rest of the building trades by supporting other compromises on labor standards to raise the floor for nonunion construction workers—specifically standards that did not require workers to have completed an

⁸⁷ Ben Christopher, "Newsom and Legislature Tangle with Construction Unions over Minimum Wage," *CalMatters*, June 25, 2025, <https://calmatters.org/housing/2025/06/prevailing-wage-construction-california-ab130>.

⁸⁸ Christopher, "Newsom and Legislature Tangle with Construction Unions."



apprenticeship.⁸⁹ Ultimately, the carpenters’ strong support for reform—seeing new construction as an unprecedented “organizing opportunity” and with the hope of improving standards in an otherwise very low-wage industry—helped the bill over the finish line, as did an additional compromise applying prevailing wage standards to larger projects.⁹⁰ Notably, nonconstruction unions like SEIU representing low-paid workers concerned about housing costs, while not major players in the debate, supported the goal of more housing supply and did not oppose the compromise.

California’s successful reform negotiations with the labor movement point to one potential path forward for both labor and abundance advocates in housing and other infrastructure investment efforts. The California reforms required compromises from both labor and abundance advocates but may ultimately result in better outcomes for both. For abundance advocates, the compromise meant potentially increasing the cost of some previously low-wage construction jobs to ensure that the workers employed by those projects would have living wages and potential opportunities to join a union (including opportunities for engaging with unions on compliance with labor standards). And for labor advocates, the compromise involved a shift in perspective, from a focus on protecting existing union members employed in the building trades to a focus on raising wages for, and ultimately organizing more of, the nonunion construction trades workers that would grow in ranks as the reforms encouraged more construction. As one article put it, the approach favored by the carpenters’ union was built on the theory “that by improving workers’ conditions and visiting job sites to enforce the new rules, the union could one day organize them.”⁹¹ The compromise also had the advantage of promising to produce substantially more housing—and more affordable housing—for working people in California, helping union members as consumers.

It is too soon to know what the material impact of this compromise will be on opportunities for new housing construction, working conditions for the residential construction workers affected by the new standards, and new organizing opportunities for the carpenters. But if it shows positive effects on these outcomes, California’s compromise could become an example of labor and abundance proponents working together on a model that prioritizes streamlining new construction, ensuring higher labor standards for unorganized workers and a commitment from unions to organizing the workers employed by new projects.

⁸⁹ Manuela Tobias, “Anti-worker or Pro-worker? Why Labor Unions Are Fighting over a Housing Bill,” *CalMatters*, May 9, 2022, <https://calmatters.org/housing/2022/05/california-housing-crisis-unions>; Ben Christopher, “Cracks in California Labor Coalition Raise Hopes for YIMBY Breakthrough on Housing Bill,” *CalMatters*, April 24, 2023, <https://calmatters.org/housing/2023/04/california-housing-law-union-dispute-2>.

⁹⁰ Alexei Koseff, “A ‘Poison Pill’ in California’s Budget Deal Ties State Spending to Construction,” *CalMatters*, June 27, 2025, <https://calmatters.org/politics/2025/06/california-budget-housing-deal>.

⁹¹ Kuang and Christopher, “Why One Union Became One of the Most Pro-housing Voices in California.”



As this section has shown, labor can be an important political partner in pushing elected officials to invest in the projects envisioned by abundance proponents. This is especially true when unions' members have clear interests as both workers and consumers—of housing, childcare, transportation, or energy—and when policymakers create opportunities for win-win policy designs, such as giving labor a role in training as well as organizing the workers who will be employed in these projects.

When labor unions lack a seat at the table in negotiating labor standards, unions lack incentives to support political reforms that could unlock more construction. New York City offers a cautionary tale: In the 2025 election, major unions opposed ballot measures that would speed up review of subsidized affordable housing projects.⁹² According to the carpenters' union, without a mechanism to ensure that construction projects would support strong labor standards, they were reluctant to “unilaterally disarm,” preferring to keep City Council review as a way to “force [developers] to the negotiating table.” One could imagine a different process by which the ballot measures might have received stronger union support by ensuring that unions would have an opportunity to represent workers employed on new affordable housing projects. Such an approach would preserve the goal of ramped-up production, while also ensuring better jobs for New Yorkers. Notably, future experimentation to that end is likely in New York, as Mayor Zohran Mamdani supports both high labor standards and speedy production of affordable housing.⁹³

Improving Democratic Legitimacy and Effectiveness

Another related way in which labor can advance an abundance agenda is by enhancing the democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of governmental decision-making. A central and powerful objection to abundance is that it enables the government to fast-track decisions without sufficient regard for their impact on affected communities, and without surfacing ground-level knowledge that might improve the design and implementation of new infrastructure projects. Engaging labor at the outset not only helps build political coalitions but also helps solve these intertwined problems of diminished legitimacy and minimal on-the-ground knowledge. When union representatives are at the table, the policy outputs of abundance campaigns are more likely to serve the needs of working people and to have political buy-in of diverse communities, particularly if the unions engaged represent a diverse range of workers

⁹² Marina Samuel, Lauren Hartley, and Claudia Irizarry Aponte, “Unions Join Council Leadership in Opposition to Mayoral Ballot Measures,” *The City*, October 7, 2025, <https://thecity.nyc/2025/10/07/council-ballot-affordable-housing-zoning-unions>.

⁹³ Luis Feliz Leon, “Zohran Mamdani: New York’s Working Class Elects a Movement Mayor,” *Labor Notes*, November 4, 2025, <https://labornotes.org/2025/11/zohran-mamdani-new-yorks-working-class-elects-movement-mayor>; Greg David, “Can Mamdani Make Union-Built Affordable Housing Add Up?” *The City*, October 28, 2025, <https://thecity.nyc/2025/10/28/zohran-mamdani-union-labor-affordable-housing-charter-proposals>.



(and have incentives and the organizational structure to do so). Workers' participation also means that on-the-ground knowledge is incorporated into the process. And the countervailing power from organized labor could check the power of businesses, helping avoid capture of government processes or corruption.

What makes unions especially important vehicles for building participation into government decisions is their internally democratic structure, as explained above. Unlike other civic groups that may be “bodiless heads”—professional staffs with no mass constituency to hold them accountable—unions, by definition and by law, are democratically run membership organizations.⁹⁴ That is not to say that all unions are perfectly democratic, as we explored above. But even with these limitations—which can be addressed through prosecutions to redress corruption and internal democracy reforms—unions overall remain among the most democratic and transparent organizations in our landscape.⁹⁵ After decades of civil society decline, few other broad-based membership organizations exist, particularly ones able to engage on a federated basis at every level of government and that have internal structures of elections or democracy.⁹⁶

Unions are also effective at engaging and representing workers in the political process. Numerous studies demonstrate that unions increase participation of working people at all levels of government and in the electoral process.⁹⁷ At their best, unions aggregate and represent the views of millions of workers. In this way, union involvement in the

⁹⁴ Margaret Weir and Marshall Ganz, “Reconnecting People and Politics,” in *The New Majority*, ed. Stanley B. Greenberg and Theda Skocpol (Yale University Press, 2008).

⁹⁵ The recent developments with the UAW provide a good example. After a broad federal investigation ousted over a dozen senior UAW officials for corruption, the UAW switched to a direct-election system and elected insurgent Shawn Fain in a contested election. Neal E. Boudette, “United Auto Workers Seek to Shed a Legacy of Corruption,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2022, <https://nytimes.com/2022/07/31/business/uaw-autoworkers-union-corruption.html>; Neal E. Boudette, “President Is Ousted in United Auto Workers Election,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2023, <https://nytimes.com/2023/03/25/business/uaw-autoworkers-union-election.html>.

⁹⁶ Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*; Alison D. Morantz, “What Unions Do for Regulation,” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 13 (2017): 515–34, https://web.stanford.edu/group/amorantz/papers/unions_regulation.pdf; John S. Ahlquist, “Labor Unions, Political Representation, and Economic Inequality,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 409–432, <https://annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-023225>. SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins University, “Mapping the Modern Agora,” <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/our-work/research-projects/mapping-the-modern-agera>.

⁹⁷ Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, “Unions, Voter Turnout, and Class Bias in the U.S. Electorate, 1964–2004,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 2 (May 2007): 430–41; Patrick Flavin and Benjamin Radcliff, “Labor Union Membership and Voting across Nations,” *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 4 (December 2011): 633–41; James Feigenbaum, Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, and Vanessa Williamson, *From the Bargaining Table to the Ballot Box: Political Effects of Right to Work Laws*, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 24259 (January 2018; revised February 2019). Carnes, *The Cash Ceiling*; Ahlquist, “Labor Unions, Political Representation, and Economic Inequality”; Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (Simon & Schuster, 2010); Sojourner, “Do Unions Promote Members’ Electoral Office Holding?”



policy process avoids the problem that abundance proponents highlight of unrepresentative individual citizens or professional advocacy groups capturing and stymieing government decisions.⁹⁸

One way to ensure that unions have a seat at the table is through “tripartite” administrative structures that bring representatives of workers, employers, and the public together on councils or committees that help set policy and then implement it. This approach has long been common in Europe, especially in northern Europe.⁹⁹ In the postwar period, European countries developed complex forms of interest representation that engaged unions, employer associations, and the public in making important decisions about economic policy and social welfare benefits. The goal was to bring major interest groups together to “conclude a series of bargains about their future behavior” with “the effect of moving economic events along the desired path” and improving macroeconomic performance.¹⁰⁰

Although tripartite governance arrangements—also known as “social partnerships”—are less common than they used to be, even in the Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Austria where they were most dominant, they continue to play an important role in European policymaking. In particular, they have been important in setting labor market policy and in retraining workers to wield the skills necessary for a changing economy.¹⁰¹ Case studies of public transit construction in Sweden and other Nordic countries, for example, highlight that tripartite negotiations between the government, union leaders, and business representatives achieve consensus on labor standards and weaken the ability of “groups [including labor] to act as veto points.”¹⁰² As a result, even though Sweden has a “right to sue” to stop infrastructure construction projects, “lawsuits are rare,” given the effort to achieve consensus on the front end of a project with affected

⁹⁸ Steven Teles, “Minoritarianism is Everywhere,” *National Affairs* (Spring 2025), <https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/minoritarianism-is-everywhere>.

⁹⁹ See Kathleen Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization and the New Politics of Social Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jonas Pontusson, *Inequality and Prosperity: Social Europe v. Liberal America* (Cornell University Press, 2005); Daron Acemoglu, James A. Robinson, and Thierry Verdier, *Can't We All Be More Like Scandinavians? Asymmetric Growth and Institutions in an Interdependent World*, MIT Department of Economics Working Paper No. 12-22 (August 2012); Peter Hall and David Soskice, eds., *Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰⁰ Oscar Molina and Martin Rhodes, “Corporatism: The Past, Present, and Future of a Concept,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (2002): 307, quoting Andrew Schonfield, *Modern Capitalism: The Changing Balance of Public and Private Power* (Oxford University Press, 1965), 231.

¹⁰¹ Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization*, 71–74, 105–10 (on skill formation); 113–21 (on labor market policy).

¹⁰² Alon Levy, Eric Goldwyn, and Elif Ensari, *The Sweden Case Study Report: How Stockholm Builds Infrastructure Cheaply, and Why It's Becoming More Expensive?* (Transit Costs Project, March 2023), 21, https://transitcosts.com/wp-content/uploads/Sweden_Case_Study.pdf. For a broader discussion of the institutional foundations of the Danish and Swedish high-road construction models, see Jens Arnholtz and Christian Lyhne Ibsen, “Sustaining ‘High-Road’ Employment Relations in the Swedish and Danish Construction Industries,” in *Work and Labor Relations in the Construction Industry: An International Perspective*, ed. Dale Belman, Janet Druker, and Geoffrey White (Routledge, 2021), 183–204.



workers and broader communities.¹⁰³ And even with unionized labor and relatively high wages and benefits, Nordic countries' overall construction costs remain below those of other rich democracies.¹⁰⁴ Scholars have emphasized that the success of tripartite arrangements depends in part on high levels of organization among both labor and employers, as well as state support, including through complementary institutions such as unemployment insurance and investment in vocational education and training systems.¹⁰⁵

The tradition of tripartism in the United States is weaker than Europe and other rich democracies, as is the underlying strength of the labor movement.¹⁰⁶ But when the United States has tried tripartism coupled with strong and coordinated unions and employers, it has often enabled significant increases in production and better outcomes for all. During World War II, for example, the United States engaged in wartime tripartite bargaining between unions, wartime supply manufacturers, and government through the National War Labor Board. The deals struck ensured continuous wartime production around the clock with access to skilled labor, and they reduced the incidence of labor protests and strikes compared to what would have been expected without the deals. They also buoyed union membership, which in turn increased the wages, benefits, and collective voice of workers, strengthening the economy and democracy during the postwar period.¹⁰⁷

Union participation in policymaking through tripartite structures can also contribute to faster and more effective decision-making—two other core aims of abundance. That is, abundance advocates bemoan the delays inherent in most governmental decision-making and worry that decisions are not always made with sufficient technical and industrial expertise. When labor is involved in policymaking, it can contribute shop floor expertise that makes production of goods and services more efficient and effective. In one powerful example, unionized nurses brought their expertise to speed up, relative to nonunion nurses, the implementation of health IT investments such as electronic health records.¹⁰⁸ The expertise advantage is further enhanced through tripartite arrangements, which bring the knowledge of both labor and business to the table and expedite internal decision-making.

In recent years, a number of states and localities have begun to experiment anew with tripartite structures, bringing workers, business, and the public together to address

¹⁰³ Levy et al., *The Sweden Case Study Report*, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Though it is important to note that Nordic countries, especially Sweden, report tensions with efforts to undercut unionized labor and growing migration from Eastern Europe. Levy et al., *The Sweden Case Study Report*, 41.

¹⁰⁵ Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization*, 204–06.

¹⁰⁶ Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization*, 204–06.

¹⁰⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Temple University Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁸ Adam Seth Litwin, "Collective Bargaining and Technological Investment: The Case of Nurses' Unions and the Transition from Paper-Based to Electronic Health Records," *BJIR*, July 5, 2017.



problems in particular industries. In total, since 2018, six states and three localities have enacted new tripartite structures, creating 12 new worker standards boards.¹⁰⁹ The strongest of these is the Minnesota Nursing Home Workforce Standards Board, established in 2023, which is made up of representatives from the nursing home union, the industry, and public officials. Since its founding, the board has moved quickly to recommend rules raising the minimum wage and overtime for workers; it is now developing new standards for the training of nursing home workers, drawing on the deep knowledge the board's representatives have of the industry.¹¹⁰ Another example is California's tripartite Fast Food Council, established in 2022 to set standards for wages, working hours, and conditions in the fast food industry—and to bring workers and owners into productive dialogue with one another.¹¹¹

The boards in Minnesota and California, as well as most other new boards across the country, are focused on labor standards in service industries, but the same structures could facilitate production, including infrastructure development and housing. Such boards might include not only the building trades unions—as the primary producers of infrastructure—but also unions representing a diverse array of workers in the community—as consumers of infrastructure, as well as representatives from the emerging tenant union movement.¹¹² New tripartite boards should have as their mandate to set labor standards throughout relevant industries in ways that facilitate both high productivity and high wages, and to establish training programs or build on successful sectoral training programs. They could also engage in broader policymaking, for example determining which particular abundance projects to prioritize and deciding other permitting and production questions. Such a system would be akin to the European “corporatist” model, in which the government designates particular interest groups that negotiate binding agreements with government agencies, not limited to labor standards.¹¹³ Including a wide array of worker representatives, not just those immediately involved in production, could ensure that these boards adopt a sufficiently broad perspective on their work. As discussed above, broken labor law and low union density have narrowed the scope of unions' focus in bargaining and politics.

¹⁰⁹ Aurelia Glass and David Madland, “Momentum for Worker Standards Boards Continues to Grow,” Center for American Progress, September 7, 2023, <https://americanprogress.org/article/momentum-for-worker-standards-boards-continues-to-grow>.

¹¹⁰ Minnesota Statutes § 181.212(1)(a) (2023). See David Madland and Sachin Shiva, “Industry Standards Boards Are Delivering Results for Workers, Employers, and Their Communities,” Center for American Progress, November 21, 2024, <https://americanprogress.org/article/industry-standards-boards-are-delivering-results-for-workers-employers-and-their-communities>.

¹¹¹ Kate Andrias, “Constitutional and Administrative Innovation Through State Labor Law,” *Wisconsin Law Review* (2024): 1469, 1491–96.

¹¹² See, e.g., Jamila Michener and Mallory SoRelle, “Politics, Power, and Precarity: How Tenant Organizations Transform Local Political Life,” in *Interest Groups in U.S. Local Politics*, ed. Sarah Anzia, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-37626-9_3. See also Kate Andrias and Benjamin I. Sachs, “The Chicken-and-Egg of Law and Organizing: Enacting Policy for Power Building,” *Columbia Law Review* 124, no. 3 (April 2024): 828–29.

¹¹³ See Zachary Liscow, “Reforming Permitting to Build Infrastructure,” Brookings, September 2025: 8.



Tripartite bargaining and policymaking structures that broaden unions' and employers' focus—as in other European democracies—can address these pervasive features of American labor law.

Tripartite arrangements also offer the possibility of membership growth for unions. Historically, unions used tripartite boards as a basis to launch new organizing drives. As they engaged workers in the administrative process, they also exposed them to the virtues of collective organization and made contacts that launched organizing campaigns.¹¹⁴ The boards bring benefits for employers as well. They level the playing field in the industry, since all competitors must meet the same standards, ensuring that high-road employers are no longer at a disadvantage.¹¹⁵ They also can advance labor peace, reducing pickets and strikes.

To be sure, unions are not the only broad-based membership organizations that can be brought into the governing process to ensure that abundance projects are democratically legitimate, informed by on-the-ground expertise, and efficient. Community groups can be engaged in the process as well if they are able to document that they are also representative of local community interests and meet certain standards for democratic accountability. In particular, former Department of Labor senior official Raj Nayak urges a system under which cities and states streamline construction requirements for major projects only after developers enter into Community Benefits Agreements, which are enforceable contracts between community organizations and developers.¹¹⁶ In these agreements, community organizations ensure the democratic legitimacy of the abundance projects: They negotiate for their priorities, such as affordable housing, community spaces, training, or local hiring targets. Likewise, labor unions can embed key terms from Project Labor Agreements, which are pre-hire collective bargaining agreements that ensure good wages and benefits for everyone working on the development. Often the strongest and most effective Community Benefits Agreements include coalitions of both community and labor groups working together, covering hiring, labor standards, and other community impacts.¹¹⁷ This system builds on current practices in some localities, where developers negotiate agreements to speed up processes, and unions in turn support fast-track permitting or testify before public utility commission meetings.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Kate Andrias, “An American Approach to Social Democracy: The Forgotten Promise of the Fair Labor Standards Act,” *Yale Law Journal* 128 (2019): 616–702.

¹¹⁵ Glass and Madland, “Momentum for Worker Standards.”

¹¹⁶ Nayak, “A More Progressive Abundance.”

¹¹⁷ See e.g., “How Community Benefits Agreements Build Thriving Communities and Authentic Democracy,” PowerSwitch Action, November 1, 2024, <https://powerswitchaction.org/updates/how-community-benefits-agreements-build-thriving-communities-and-authentic-democracy>.

¹¹⁸ See Frank Manzo IV and Robert Bruno, *The Impacts of Project Labor Agreements on Costs, Competition, and Contractors in Illinois: Evidence from Capital Development Board Projects* (Illinois Economic Policy Institute, March 6, 2025), <https://illinoisepi.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/ilepi-pmcr-impacts-of-plas-in-illinois-final.pdf>; Sameera Fazili, Pronita Gupta, and Doug Bloch, “How Community Benefits Agreements Can Reduce Project Delivery Risk,” *Utility Dive*, October 15, 2025, <https://utilitydive>



IV. Why Labor Should Support Democratic Abundance

Section III demonstrated that abundance can benefit from unions. This section argues that unions can, in turn, benefit from abundance—if it is properly designed. Importantly, however, unions must orient themselves not only toward protecting existing union members but also toward organizing new workers, improving conditions for all workers, and representing workers as both consumers and producers of infrastructure. With that orientation, infrastructure projects can be designed to facilitate new worker organizing, expand job opportunities, and improve living conditions for union members and all working people. In short, by engaging the abundance effort, labor can shape abundance so that it truly works for workers.

At a time when the national union membership hovers around 10 percent (or less, among private-sector workers), it is essential to scale up new organizing of workers. The abundance agenda of creating new work, including among previously nonunion workers, should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. The key will be for infrastructure projects to include levers that provide unions with stepping stones and hooks to organizing and eventually representing and bargaining on behalf of those new workers. The California compromise represents one potential strategy: Raise wages and working conditions for nonunion workers to reduce their competition with unionized labor, and then create organizing hooks through oversight of those labor standards through union-led enforcement strategies.¹¹⁹ It is too soon to tell if that approach will yield new members, but given the dire state of union membership, it is imperative that unions experiment with new approaches unlocked by abundance proponents.

Infrastructure projects can also directly build union membership. Existing law allows local, state, and federal governments to adopt Labor Peace Agreements, including Project Labor Agreements (PLAs), when they contract out work. These PLAs, which are permissible under § 8(f) of the NLRA, facilitate unionization by allowing construction employers to reach pre-hire collective bargaining agreements that apply to workers subsequently hired for the job. These terms reap efficiency benefits in turn by minimizing labor disruption and ensuring timely completion of infrastructure projects.¹²⁰ Labor Peace Agreements in other industries often contain terms under which an employer agrees to remain neutral as to its employees' decision whether they

[.com/news/community-benefits-agreements-cba-ramp-up/802808](https://www.localinfrastructure.org/news/community-benefits-agreements-cba-ramp-up/802808); Haley Kadish and Lisette Partelow, "Making Infrastructure More Equitable and Inclusive: How and Why Community Benefits Agreements Can Be Incorporated Into Infrastructure Projects," *Local Infrastructure Hub*, March 27, 2024, <https://localinfrastructure.org/news/making-infrastructure-more-equitable-and-inclusive-how-and-why-community-benefits-agreements-can-be-incorporated-into-infrastructure-projects>.

¹¹⁹ Janice Fine and Jennifer Gordon, "Strengthening Labor Standards Enforcement through Partnerships with Workers' Organizations," *Politics & Society* 38 (2010): 552–585, https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/faculty_scholarship/1154.

¹²⁰ Fazili, Gupta, and Bloch, "How Community Benefits Agreements Can Reduce Project Delivery Risk."



want to unionize, to accept union authorization cards as evidence of majority status, or to pay a prevailing wage. As long as the government entity is acting in its market capacity—e.g., procuring services, goods, or infrastructure—and not as a regulator, it can impose such terms, consistent with the NLRA.¹²¹ Moreover, the president and federal agencies can impose such terms through executive order and regulation under the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, which allows the executive to pursue “economy and efficiency” in contracting.¹²² Though businesses have long challenged these labor peace provisions, courts, with a few exceptions, have

Unions must orient themselves not only toward protecting existing union members but also toward organizing new workers, improving conditions for all workers, and representing workers as both consumers and producers of infrastructure.

upheld them.¹²³ Notably, the Trump administration continues to defend the Biden Project Labor Agreement Executive Order against legal challenge, indicating bipartisan support for such efforts.¹²⁴ Even more should be done with new federal legislation. That is, federal legislation funding future abundance projects should make explicit the legality of broad labor peace agreements, including pre-hire agreements beyond the construction industry, and require joint employer-union training programs (especially registered apprenticeships).

To be sure, given current political alignments, pro-labor provisions in abundance spending programs are much more likely to occur in “blue” worker-friendly states. And blue cities within red states face the risk of state preemption or new limits on their home rule power if they pursue programs that are affirmatively pro-worker and pro-labor.¹²⁵ Nonetheless, power and resources that are amassed in blue states can be

¹²¹ See, e.g., *Building & Construction Trades Council v. Associated Builders & Contractors of Massachusetts/Rhode Island, Inc.* (Boston Harbor), 507 US 218 (1993); *Northern Illinois Chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors, Inc. v. Lavin*, 431 F.3d 1004 (7th Cir. 2005); *Airline Service Providers Association v. Los Angeles World Airports*, 873 F.3d 1074, 1077, 1085–86 (9th Cir. 2017); *Johnson v. Rancho Santiago Community College District*, 623 F.3d 1011, 1016 (9th Cir. 2010); *Hotel Employees & Restaurant Employees Union, Local 57 v. Sage Hospitality Resources, LLC*, 390 F.3d 206, 217–18 (3d Cir. 2004); *Building & Construction Trades Department v. Allbaugh*, 295 F.3d 28 (D.C. Cir. 2002).

¹²² Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 107-217, 116 Stat. 1062, 1080 (2002); see, e.g., *UAW-Labor Employment & Training Corp. v. Chao*, 325 F.3d 360 (D.C. Cir. 2003); *American Federation of Labor & Congress of Industrial Organizations v. Kahn*, 618 F.2d 784 (D.C. Cir. 1979) (en banc); *Contractors Association of Eastern Pennsylvania v. Secretary of Labor*, 442 F.2d 159, 170 (3d Cir. 1971).

¹²³ Juan Ramon Riojas, “Labor-Peace Agreements in Emerging Industries,” *Columbia Law Review* 125, no. 2 (2025), <https://columbialawreview.org/content/labor-peace-agreements-in-emerging-industries>.

¹²⁴ Rebecca Rainey, “Eleventh Cir. to Weigh Trump Defense of Biden Project Labor Rule,” *Bloomberg Law*, September 11, 2025, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/eleventh-cir-to-weigh-trump-defense-of-biden-project-labor-rule> (noting that the “Trump administration will mount a rare defense of a Biden-era policy”).

¹²⁵ Jennifer Sherer, Emma Cohn, and Ruby Ahdoot, “Updated EPI Tracker Shows More States Obstructing Progress on Workers’ Rights,” *Economic Policy Institute*, March 6, 2025, <https://epi.org/blog/updated-epi-preemption-tracker>; Christopher B. Goodman and Megan E. Hatch, “Why States Preempt City



exported to red states for future organizing and eventually can be deployed at the federal level.¹²⁶ In addition, Community Benefit Agreements, which are generally privately negotiated, are harder to preempt through state law.¹²⁷

There is one additional way in which democratic abundance can help unions: By championing more affordable housing and infrastructure projects that benefit all workers, unions can extend their reach beyond their membership, garnering greater support and advancing their ultimate goal of building a more just society for working people.¹²⁸ This approach is epitomized by the “Bargaining for the Common Good” movement, which has won significant gains in recent years in such locations as Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and California, as well as in the Red4Ed Teacher strikes in 2018–19 that sought to build community support for stronger investment in education in red states suffering from decades of underfunding. Under this approach, unions join with community groups to mobilize and bargain collectively on issues that go beyond bread-and-butter workplace concerns, making demands about issues ranging from housing to school spending to the relationship of city financing to Wall Street. Ultimately, unions and community groups align “their demands in service of the common good,” in order to build long-term worker and citizen empowerment.¹²⁹

V. Our Deepening Crisis of Democracy Makes Democratic Abundance All the More Important

With each passing day, the threats posed to American democracy mount. The Trump administration is weaponizing the federal government to suppress dissent in civil society, including among law firms, universities, media outlets, and nonprofits; ignoring laws, court rulings, and constitutional norms; using federal law enforcement machinery

Ordinances: The Case of Workers’ Rights Laws,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 54, no. 1 (2024): 121–145, <https://academic.oup.com/publius/article/54/1/121/7191231>.

¹²⁶ Andrias and Sachs, “The Chicken-and-Egg of Law and Organizing.” See also Jessica Bulman-Pozen, “Partisan Federalism,” *Harvard Law Review* 127 (2014): 1080; Jessica Bulman-Pozen, “From Sovereignty and Process to Administration and Politics: The Afterlife of American Federalism,” *Yale Law Journal* 123 (2014): 1948–49.

¹²⁷ Benjamin I. Sachs, “Despite Preemption: Making Labor Law in Cities and States,” *Harvard Law Review* 124 (2011): 1222. Though note that conservative activists are seeking to do so now under state law. Tennessee, for example, recently prohibited employers who enter into a community benefits agreement from seeking economic development incentives from the state. S.B. 1074, 114th Gen. Assemb. (Tenn. 2025), <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default?BillNumber=SB1074&GA=114>.

¹²⁸ For evidence of this in the context of teacher strikes, see Melissa Arnold Lyon and Matthew A. Kraft, “Teacher Strikes as Public Signals: Impacts on Political Campaigns and Public Education Funding,” *Journal of Human Resources* 60, no. 5 (2025), <https://jhr.uwpress.org/content/early/2024/04/01/jhr.0722-12437r2.abstract>; Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, Suresh Naidu, and Adam Reich, *Schooled by Strikes? The Effects of Large-Scale Labor Unrest on Mass Attitudes toward the Labor Movement* (working paper, Columbia University, 2020), https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/ahertel/files/teacherstrikes_pop.pdf.

¹²⁹ Joseph A. McCartin, “Bargaining for the Common Good,” *Dissent Magazine*, Spring 2016, <https://dissentmagazine.org/article/bargaining-common-good-community-union-alignment>.



to punish and harass perceived political opponents; deploying the military to discourage protest and pressure states and localities that resist the administration's agenda; detaining and deporting immigrants without due process; dismantling and politicizing the independent federal civil service and previously independent regulatory agencies; and leveraging the government to personally enrich the president's family and close allies, among many other distressing developments.¹³⁰ According to several prominent political scientists, "the United States has descended into competitive authoritarianism."¹³¹ Beyond the immediate threats, the US political system has long suffered from democratic deficiencies, including unrepresentative, counter-majoritarian political institutions; policymaking tilted to advantaged economic interests; exclusion of racial minorities from equal participation in voting; and concerted efforts to suppress political participation, including protest and voting.¹³²

Against this background, it is all the more essential that policymakers consider how their decisions will bolster the health of American democracy. Abundance advocates share this concern. Indeed, they argue that the failure of the government to deliver the goods people need helps explain the turn toward authoritarianism—and, conversely, that abundance policy can bolster democracy. This is a critical point. But what is largely occluded in the standard abundance account is that, for the reasons detailed above, unions can help ensure a government that delivers. Moreover, unions simultaneously constitute an independent, powerful set of civil society institutions that can resist authoritarian attacks and push back against democratic backsliding.

Extensive comparative and historical evidence documents that labor unions are essential civil society organizations in both fighting democratic backsliding and pushing for democratization.¹³³ Across countries in Latin America, eastern Europe, and the Middle East, labor unions have often been at the forefront of efforts to overthrow authoritarian leaders and resist authoritarian efforts to take over established democracies.

¹³⁰ Cameron Peters and Zack Beauchamp, "The Very Specific Way America Could Become Authoritarian," *Vox Media*, September 23, 2025, <https://vox.com/today-explained-newsletter/462285/trump-competitive-authoritarianism-kirk-kimmel>; Bright Line Watch, "Violence, Redistricting, and Democratic Norms in Trump's America," (2024), <https://brightlinewatch.org/violence-redistricting-and-democratic-norms-in-trumps-america>; Editorial Board, "Are We Losing Our Democracy?" *New York Times*, October 31, 2025, <https://nytimes.com/interactive/2025/10/31/opinion/trump-autocracy-democracy-report.html>.

¹³¹ Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Price of American Authoritarianism," *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2026).

¹³² Benjamin I. Page and Martin Gilens, *Democracy in America? What Has Gone Wrong and What We Can Do About It* (University of Chicago Press, 2020); Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Let them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (Liveright, 2021); Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹³³ For a collection of these roles, see Angela B. Cornell and Mark Barenberg, *The Cambridge Handbook of Labor and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).



Unions are well-positioned to serve as bulwarks of democracy for several reasons.¹³⁴ Unions often are one of the few coordinated civil society organizations with nation-spanning reach that include local chapters or affiliates working with one another and thus have capacity for large-scale coordinated action. Unions also have independent sources of revenue (from worker dues) that are not dependent on government money, which makes unions less susceptible to authoritarian weaponization of government funding flows. Unions have the capacity for large-scale disruption through protests and strikes that can halt economic activity, capture public attention, and demand government responses. They can build coalitions with other political actors and civil society groups, they have widespread legitimacy by virtue of their representation of workers, and they can train worker-leaders for organizing. Not all unions possess all of these attributes, but many do, and this makes them an indispensable pillar of resistance to repression, including in the United States. Even in their weakened state, unions still count 14.2 million workers as members, making the labor movement one of the single largest independent social movements left in the United States.¹³⁵ It is no coincidence that labor unions led recent mass mobilization against violent immigration enforcement surges in Minnesota, including a general strike and boycott that counted some 75,000 people who marched in subzero temperatures.¹³⁶

By engaging the abundance effort, labor can shape abundance so that it truly works for workers.

Accordingly, it is imperative that policymakers consider the “democratic externalities” of their economic policies involving abundance. Choosing to prioritize versions of abundance that deregulate labor standards and remove or weaken unions is not just misguided in terms of achieving the abundance movement’s own goals but also risks the health of American democracy by weakening a key pillar of civil society. Policymakers should see abundance policies (as with other economic policies) as an important opportunity to build stronger and more representative civil society institutions, including labor unions. For the same reasons, labor should see abundance as an opportunity to build union strength, in turn strengthening its ability to serve as a bulwark for democracy.

There is a final, related reason why it would be a mistake for labor to give up on forging a democratic version of abundance, or for abundance advocates to pursue a deregulatory abundance agenda that sidelines labor standards and participatory input

¹³⁴ For exploration of the relationship between unions and democracy and a review of the literature see Kate Andrias, “Labor and Democracy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Law of Work*, ed. Guy Davidov, Brian Langille, and Gillian Lester (Oxford University Press, 2024).

¹³⁵ US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members—2024,” January 28, 2025, <https://bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.

¹³⁶ Schuyler Mitchell, “Six Vital Lessons From Minnesota’s General Strike,” *Mother Jones*, February 5, 2026, <https://motherjones.com/politics/2026/02/minneapolis-minnesotas-general-strike-ice-border-patrol-trump>.



in government decisions: Doing so risks inviting even more of a right-wing populist backlash to democracy. As abundance advocates argue, government's failure to deliver infrastructure and other needed goods helps explain the growing dissatisfaction with democracy. At the same time, a mounting body of research from the United States and Europe shows workers who feel displaced into poorer-quality work by economic dislocation have gravitated to right-wing populist movements and candidates who in turn threaten democracy.¹³⁷ Similarly, research suggests that a feeling that the government does not listen to or incorporate one's community in the policymaking process has also led to growing disenchantment with democracy and support for right-wing, authoritarian populism.¹³⁸ As a result, the maximally deregulatory abundance movement—creating jobs at any cost, regardless of the quality of those jobs, and eliminating opportunities for democratic engagement and representation—risks creating further backlash to democracy, precisely at a moment where democracy is under threat. Democratic abundance is needed not only for workers but for all Americans.

¹³⁷ For a review of this literature, see Alexander Hertel-Fernandez and Shayna Strom, *Designing Economic Policy That Strengthens U.S. Democracy and Incorporates People's Lived Experiences* (Washington Center for Equitable Growth, April 30, 2025), <https://equitablegrowth.org/designing-economic-policy-that-strengthens-u-s-democracy-and-incorporates-peoples-lived-experiences>.

¹³⁸ For examples in the United States of rural communities, see Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Suzanne Mettler and Trevor E. Brown, *Rural Versus Urban: The Growing Divide That Threatens Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2025).





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