

The New York Labor Movement and Occupy

Opportunities for Growth

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New York City Unions

- Highest union density of any city in US: 22%
- Over 700,000 million union members
- Majority are public sector
- Largest unions are in Teachers, Health Care and Municipal Workers

Unions Losing Power

- Despite relatively high density New York unions were clearly losing power
- Anti-union Mayors for many years
- Most recent, Michael Bloomberg, refused to settle contracts with public sector unions
- By early 2014, none of the 150+ public sector unions had a new contract, so no raises for past 3 to 5 years
- In addition some private sector unions had been under attack, with employers aggressively trying to cut wages or benefits

Occupy Wall Street (OWS)

- Emerges in September 2011
- Builds on prior protests elsewhere earlier that year
- For example: Arab Spring, Wisconsin
- But also week of protests against Wall Street in May 2011 and the “Bloombergville” encampment in June 2011

Unions and OWS

- Unions were not involved in the planning or formation of Occupy Wall Street
- However, in the first week a few unions and many union members came out to support the protestors
- This includes the Professional Staff Congress (university professors and staff), and the Transport Workers Union
- Over the next several months many unions offered forms of support, including food and supplies, money, allowing OWS groups to use their meeting space
- The NYC Labor Council and NY State Federation called on union members to show up early in the morning one day when police were planning to evict the campers

Collaboration

- One of the first working groups formed at OWS was the labor working group
- This group coordinated OWS participants to support labor struggles in the city, such as the Teamsters strike at Sotheby's auction house
- Another group of rank-and-file union members formed to try to get more union members involved in OWS
- Another group formed called Occupy your Workplace, which attempted to help workers form unions in their own workplace
- Some successes in NYC: Sotheby's campaign; Hot and Crusty bakery workers



Teamsters and Occupy Join Forces



OWS Joins Picket Line

Lessons Learned

- The relationship was mostly positive though did not accomplish a lot in those few months
- Unions realized that OWS could help the labor movement by raising awareness of inequality and worker rights
- OWS was mostly supportive of unions as a vehicle to fight the 1%
- OWS could do many things unions cannot do, due to the strict restrictions on unions from US labor law
- OWS could take risks
- But unions had concerns as well: unions are democratic organizations, unions have lasting structures, unions have to think long term

Aftermath

- Some OWS activists got involved in new labor struggles, in New York and elsewhere
- For example, some worked at Walmart warehouses and engaged in strikes
- Other activists and unions were inspired by OWS spirit and pushed labor activity further
- Most notably: fast food workers in New York, then elsewhere one day strikes for \$15 wage and right to form a union

Fast Food Strikes

- Began November 2012 – one year after OWS was evicted
- First strikes at McDonald's in Manhattan
- It spread over several months to more NYC, then to Chicago, then Detroit, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Washington DC and Seattle
- August 2013: strikes in about 60 cities
- December 2013: strikes in about 100 cities
- December 2014: 158 U.S. cities PLUS strikes or solidarity actions in 93 international cities in 36 countries
- The union SEIU was a major influence, but not the only organization involved



Fast Food Strikes

LOW-WAGE PROTESTS ARE SPREADING...

APRIL 4, 2013

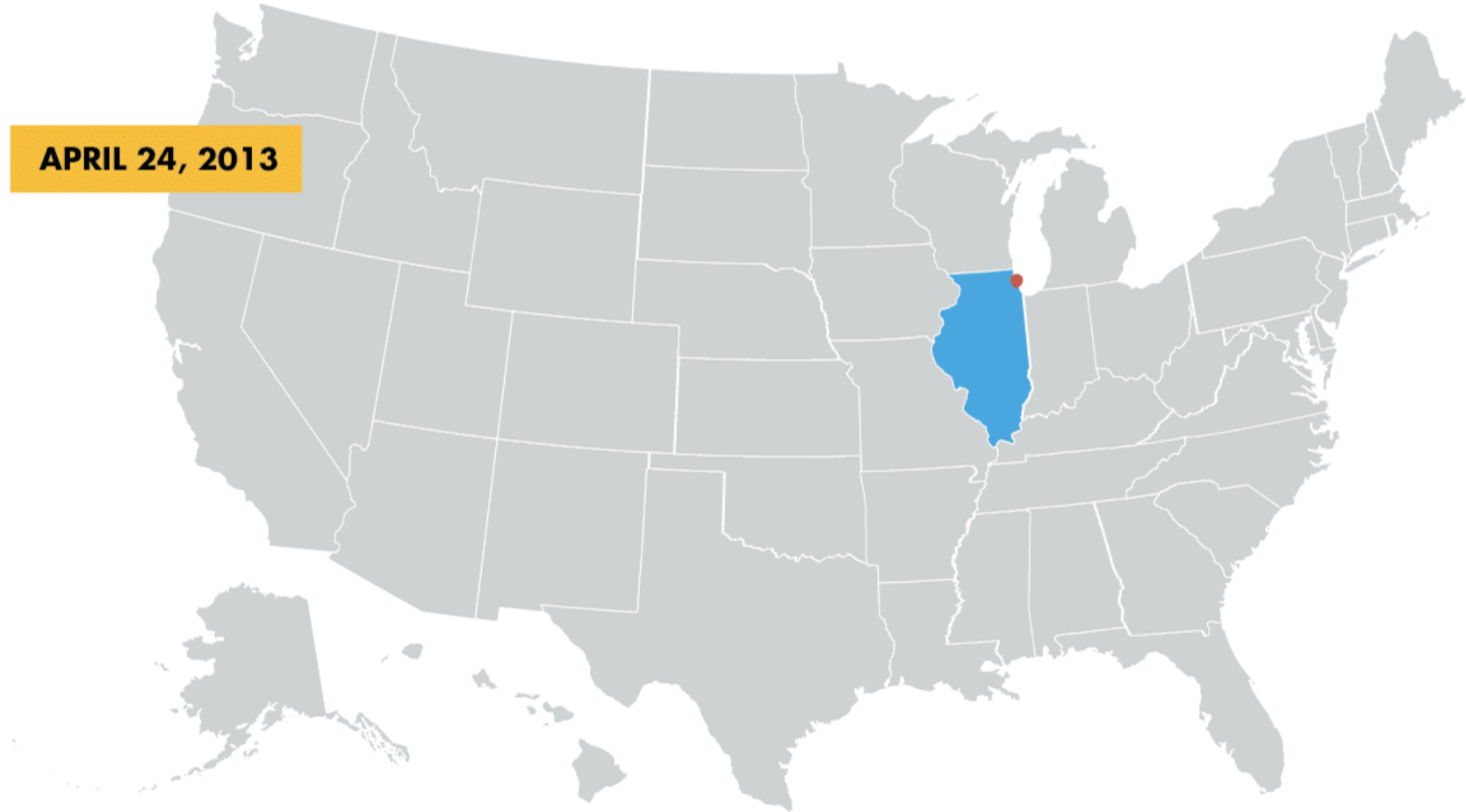


**THINK
PROGRESS**

Strikes begin in New York City

LOW-WAGE PROTESTS ARE SPREADING...

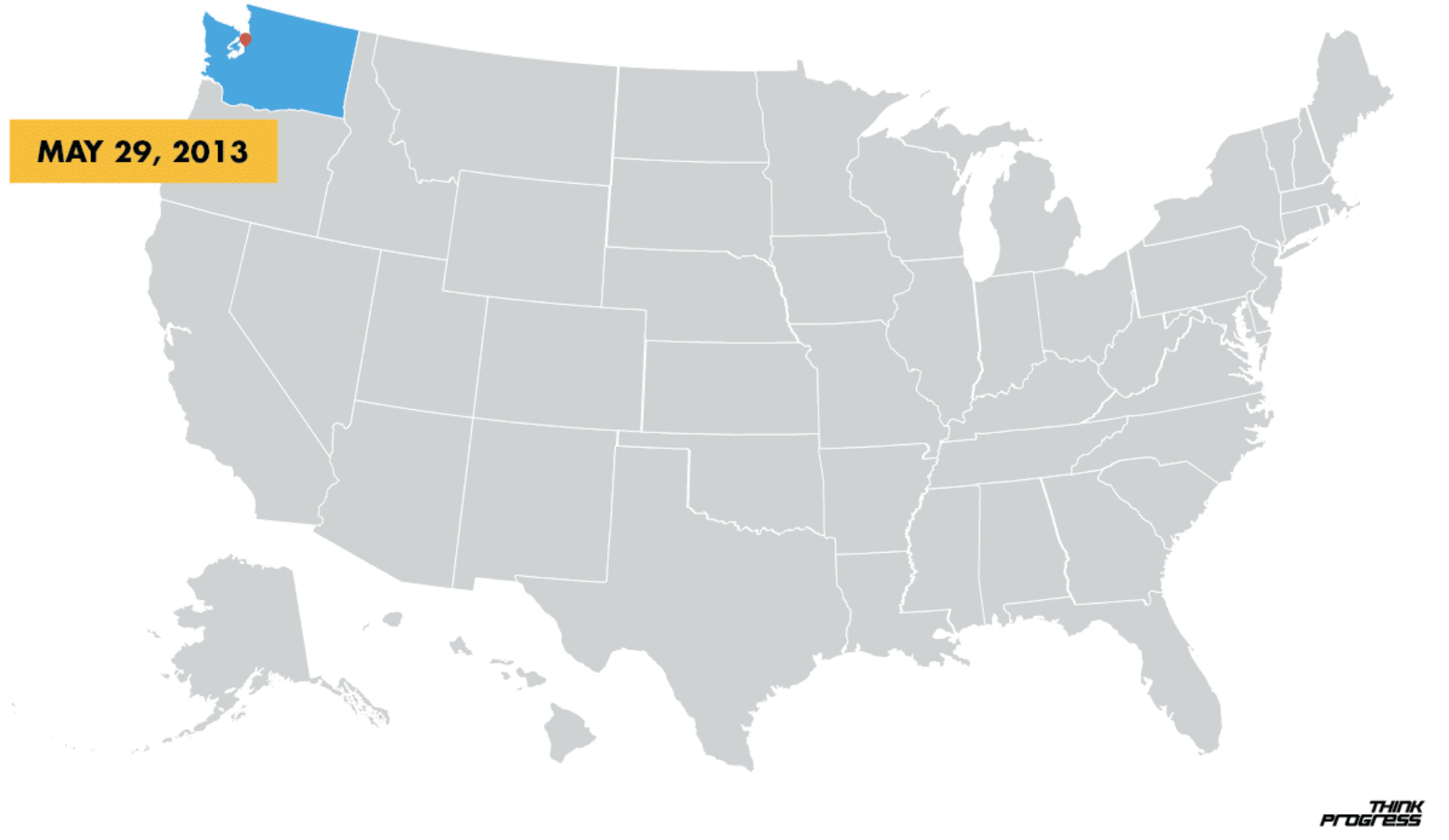
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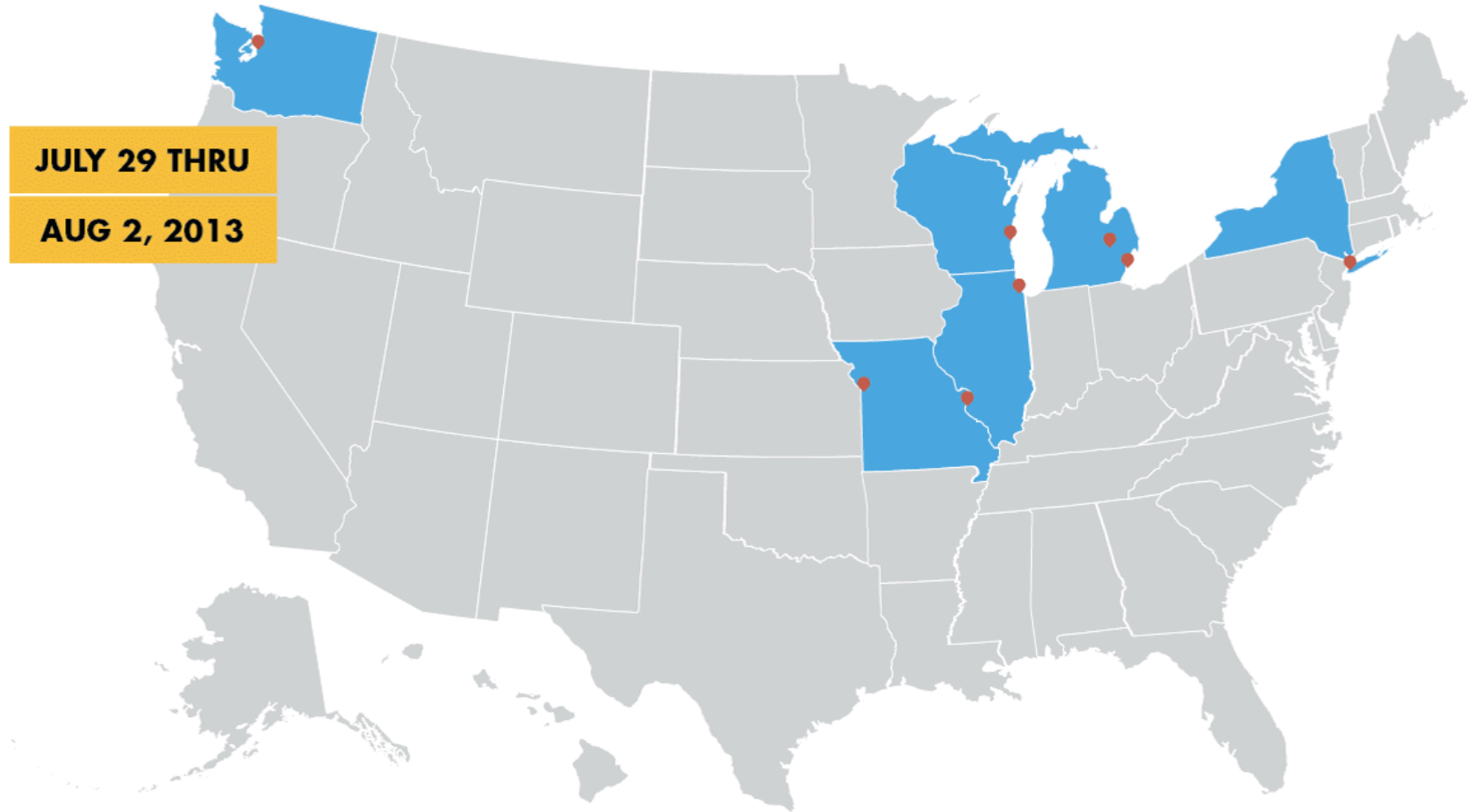
Spread to Chicago

LOW-WAGE PROTESTS ARE SPREADING...



... to Seattle

LOW-WAGE PROTESTS ARE SPREADING...



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Around the Country

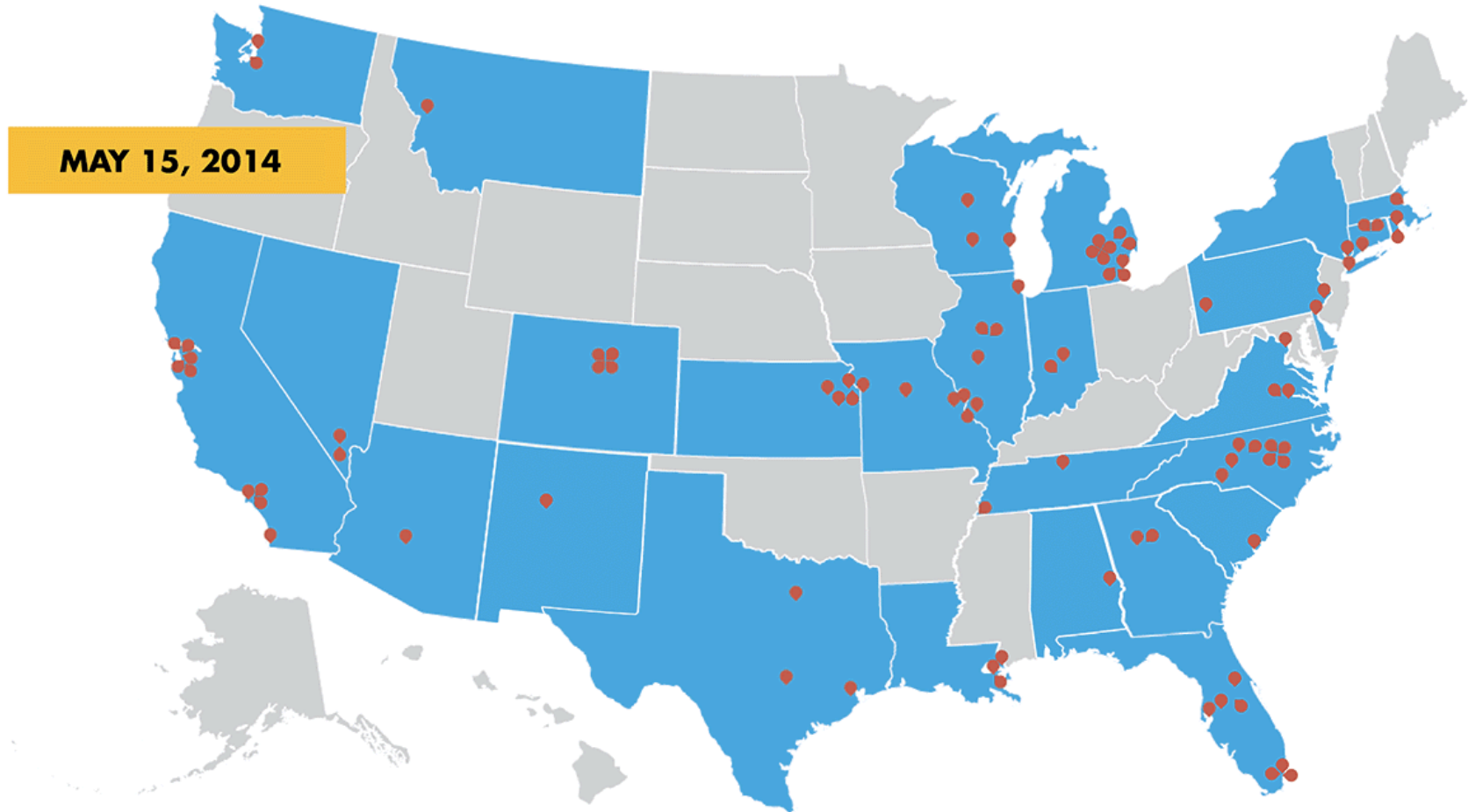
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AUGUST 29, 2013

**THINK
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More Cities

LOW-WAGE PROTESTS ARE SPREADING...



WHERE PROTESTS WERE EXPECTED

*THINK
PROGRESS*

Over 100 cities by May 2014

Walmart Protests

- Strikes and labor actions at Walmart warehouses in 2012 and 2013
- Retail workers begin strikes at Walmart stores in 2013 and 2014
- June 2014: National Strike Day and Action on Inequality; Walmart workers strike in 20 cities plus Walmart headquarters
- Demand \$25,000 annual pay; no retaliation for worker organizing; support for Bangladeshi workers and safer factories
- “Walmart moms” demanded better treatment of women, including pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers

Gaining Momentum

- As of now, this activity has not yet resulted in unionization
- However, it has had impact on raising wages through city and state minimum wage campaigns
- \$15 wage demand then taken up elsewhere, in the small town of SeaTac, Washington – then in Seattle
- Major increase in number of cities and states raising wages, and raising wages to higher levels than expected
- 10 Cities plus Washington, DC now have higher city minimum wage; another 8 are considering increases
- 10 states have raised their state minimum wage this year
- Major increase in attention to inequality and working poverty
- A few employers have also made concessions, such as GAP and IKEA raising their wages

What to Expect?

- The increased attention to raising wages and addressing inequality is promising
- Even a handful of major corporations announced that they will raise their internal minimum wage rate
- The increase in labor activity, including fast food workers and Walmart workers, is also promising
- However, a few notes of concern:
- It is much easier and cheaper for companies to have their minimum wage increased than accept a union. Without a union, workers may still have too few hours and little job security

- continued

- It is much easier for politicians to pass minimum wage increases than other kinds of legislation, as minimum wage costs the public treasury nothing and the issue is very popular with voters from both parties
- We have yet to see a major change in labor union activity as a result of the strikes

New York labor

- The attention to inequality helped elect a new mayor for NYC in 2013: Bill de Blasio
- de Blasio was the most progressive candidate and made many promises to address inequality
- Since coming to office, he has worked to settle contracts with the public sector unions
- He has hired a number of labor-friendly staff into his administration
- HOWEVER: the contracts were not strong, and labor appears to be weak still

What Can we Learn?

- New York unions are greatly constrained by labor law: public sector unions cannot strike; private sector unions also have great restrictions on striking
- Most likely, unions will only see real gains by taking risks outside of the law
- Elected leaders may not be best suited to take those risks, and ideally it would come from members and community allies
- New York unions may elect progressive leaders, but they still must organize internally and revitalize their membership to have any power