

# Salting Wouldn't Be Necessary If Employers Didn't Union Bust

BY

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The US workplace is a private dictatorship where bosses exercise extraordinary power and systematically union bust. “Salting,” or getting a job with the intent to organize a workplace, is a completely justifiable response to this workplace despotism.

Today’s revival of union “salting” could not be more welcome or more urgently needed.

A tactic as old as the labor movement itself, salting describes going to work in an unorganized workplace where there may be a chance to help initiate new union organizing.

It’s also a label for taking jobs at already unionized employers, hoping to play a positive role. But here I will deal with the former: taking jobs to help spur new organizing.

## Labor’s Crisis

Whatever amount of salting is underway today — it’s impossible to precisely measure — it cannot come soon enough. The US labor movement is mired in a crisis that threatens its very existence.

A bare fringe of the working class, 10 percent, belongs to a union. The rate of unionization has been cut in half in the past forty years.

Virtually all employers are ferociously anti-union, and they've been able to construct enormous legal and illegal obstacles to unionization efforts.

The unorganized workplace is a de facto dictatorship of ever-lower wages and living standards, where blue-collar, white-collar, and even professional workers are in the employer's grip.

With an army of unorganized workers arrayed against the dwindling union garrison, it is unlikely that any further forward progress for the existing unions or the working class as a whole will be possible without a revival of union organizing on a larger scale.

Widespread salting can and must be a component of these urgently needed organizing campaigns.

## **Crisis by the Numbers**

Union-organizing efforts today are at best incidental and sporadic. Occasional large or name-brand campaigns achieve some media attention and provide an illusion of union vitality.

Several recent sizeable graduate student wins, the Starbucks movement, Amazon, and activity in the nonprofit sector are all welcome — but are still collectively too small to reverse the overall decline.

Organizing efforts in the public sector are largely stalled, with union recognition still banned in many states and localities. In the private sector, the number of National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)–supervised union authorization elections now hovers at historically low levels.

I joined the labor movement in 1979; that year 7,266 NLRB elections were held, with a union win rate of almost 45 percent.

In 2021, the number of union elections fell below one thousand, with a win rate not much more than 50 percent. The 2022 numbers show some improvement, but nothing approaching what's needed.

The size of the units organizing today has also shrunk significantly, translating into far fewer workers organized.

While the US union movement is the most financially wealthy union movement on planet Earth, allocations of resources to tackle the organizing crisis are minuscule and often short-lived.

The 2022 AFL-CIO Convention's much-publicized "transformational" organizing initiative remains invisible. Some individual unions have increased the resources they are dedicating to new organizing, but the sheer size of the task demands far more. Salting is one way that activists can dive in to initiate organizing and pull the institution along.

## Salting Controversial?

Employers decry salting as illegitimate. In fact, they routinely allege that workers who help lead any union-organizing campaign in the workplace are "union plants."

Bosses allege this even when it's an absurdity — the sincerity and authenticity of everyone who challenges their total control must be discredited.

Anti-labor politicians occasionally team up with employers to denounce salting in an attempt to somehow scandalize it. Bogus congressional hearings have been held from time to time to denounce salting.

The current salting efforts at several name-brand corporations may catch the attention of these extremist anti-union elements in the current Congress. So be it. Their clumsy efforts in the past, given to shrill hyperbole and wild exaggeration, have always fallen flat.

The defense of labor's salting projects must take an aboveboard, straight-on approach: salting is often the required form of resistance to the employer's workplace dictatorship.

When organizing is a de facto illegal act — when workers are fired and victimized by the tens of thousands for exercising their paper right to unionize — salting is the completely justified response.

It acts as a catalyst for the workers already on the job who are frequently supportive of unions but nearly purged of hope and terrified of organizing, for fear of retaliation. When the workplace has been reduced to this situation, those who confront it as salts are doing truly commendable work.

Ultimately, all of us are salts. We have no means to earn a living other than finding a boss to hire us — and why shouldn't we desire to start a union, or strengthen an existing union, while we're there?

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