

Levers of Power – Future Coercive Extraction of Concessions After Labor

Declining Labor Power and the Erosion of Democratic Leverage

Labor unions have historically been a bedrock of democratic power, but their influence has drastically waned in recent decades[1][2]. In the mid-20th century, roughly one in three American workers was unionized, helping win gains like the 40-hour workweek and fair wages[3]. Today, that figure is barely 10%, after **decades of corporate attacks, weakening of labor laws, globalization, and automation** steadily eroded union membership[1]. This decline in labor's bargaining power has had profound socio-political consequences: stagnating wages, rising inequality, and a shift in who holds power in society[2]. Crucially, researchers warn that **the collapse of organized labor also undermines democracy itself**[2][4]. When workers can no longer collectively bargain or strike effectively, one of the public's key "leverage points" against concentrated economic power is lost, leaving democratic institutions more vulnerable to capture by wealthy interests[5][6].

Empirical evidence links **labor's decline with democratic erosion**. As union density fell from the 1970s onward, income gaps widened and politics skewed toward corporate interests[2]. Union decline explains a significant share of rising wage inequality in the U.S.[7] and correlates with lower voter turnout and civic engagement[8][9]. Conversely, where unions remain strong, they boost political participation and act as a counterweight to the power of the wealthy[8][10]. A recent analysis found that just a one-point increase in union density at the county level is associated with nearly 10% more ballot drop boxes in elections – suggesting union presence directly expands access to voting[11]. Likewise, cross-country studies show nations with higher union membership and collective bargaining coverage tend to score better on democracy indices[12][13]. The International Trade Union Confederation's data reveal that **erosion of workers' rights goes hand in hand with political instability** and declining democratic norms[12]. As one 2022 study concluded, participation in trade unions "fosters pluralistic democratic values," and denying workers this voice fuels distrust in institutions and democracy itself[14].

In short, the collapse of labor's traditional power has weakened the democratic fabric. Unions not only secured higher wages and safer workplaces; they cultivated civic skills, solidarity, and a check on elite dominance. With labor strikes and collective bargaining in retreat, the balance of power tilts further toward corporations and oligarchs who face fewer constraints. The result is a vicious cycle: **concentrated economic power converts into outsized political power**, through lobbying, campaign donations, and propaganda[15][16]. The capture of government by private wealth – termed "*corporate capture*" – is now a crisis, with corporate lobbies actively shaping laws to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the public[15][17]. Americans overwhelmingly feel that big

money and corporations have too much sway, drowning out the voices of average citizens[18]. This dynamic is exacerbated by union decline, since organized labor has historically been one of the only mass membership forces capable of countervailing corporate influence in politics[8][5].

To revitalize democracy, we must restore some form of broad-based leverage that ordinary people can wield over the powerful. In the 20th century, labor strikes were a premier example of such leverage: the ability of millions of workers to “shut down” production forced business and government to grant concessions – from New Deal rights to civil rights legislation. As labor’s ability to strike wanes (due to anti-union policies, offshoring, gig work, and automation replacing jobs), so does the public’s leverage to extract democratic concessions. This calls for **new “levers of power” that can operate in a post-industrial, globally networked economy.** We need innovative forms of collective action that do not depend on high union density or traditional employment relationships, yet still allow the public to **coercively extract concessions from elites** – much as strikes once compelled employers to negotiate. In other words, if the classic labor strike is becoming obsolete as a tool, **what will replace it as the engine of democratic pressure?**

New Mechanisms of Collective Leverage in a Post-Labor Era

If labor strikes were the quintessential coercive lever of the industrial age, the coming era demands **novel mechanisms for coordinated, “permissionless” collective action.** By *permissionless*, we mean tactics that ordinary people can participate in spontaneously – without needing formal approval from authorities or gatekeepers – and which **directly impose costs on powerful actors until they yield concessions.** The following are emerging or envisioned forms of leverage that could fill the void left by declining labor power:

- **Digital Organizing and Data Leverage:** The internet enables people to coordinate mass actions outside of traditional unions or parties. One potent new tactic is the **“data strike”**, wherein users en masse withhold or corrupt the data that tech corporations rely on[19]. For example, if thousands of Amazon customers simultaneously stopped searching and reviewing products – or fed nonsense inputs – Amazon’s algorithms would lose critical consumer data, crippling its recommendation engine and sales targeting[20][21]. Unlike a labor strike (employees stopping work), a data strike is a *user* strike: people collectively stop providing the free behavioral data that Big Tech exploits. Researchers note that because modern algorithms depend heavily on user data, large-scale data strikes can make those algorithms “less accurate and targeted” – in other words, **gumming up the digital machinery that drives profits**[21]. Similarly, **data poisoning** – flooding platforms with false or mischievous data (fake reviews, bogus clicks, misleading tags) – is another form of digital sabotage that undermines the integrity of Big Tech’s products[20]. These tactics leverage the fact that in an information economy, **the public’s collective data is a form of labor/input.** By “striking” with

their data, users can coerce tech firms to heed demands (e.g. on privacy or moderation policies) without a traditional workplace strike[22][19].

- **Consumer Boycotts and “Buycotts”:** Consumer activism is not new, but in the networked age it can be turbocharged. Social media coordination allows rapid, large-scale **boycotts** – mass refusals to buy a company’s products – that hit corporations’ revenue and reputation. Roughly **one-quarter of high-profile boycotts lead to concessions** from the targeted company[23]. These concessions may include policy changes, public apologies, or negotiations with activists. The threat of viral bad publicity and reputational damage puts **pressure on brands (“social license”) as a point of leverage**. Conversely, targeted “buycotts” can reward companies that comply with demands (steering purchases toward ethical alternatives). Compared to labor strikes, consumer boycotts are **permissionless** – any group of customers can launch one via online calls to action, without needing a formal union. They are coercive to the extent that they threaten profits and market share. In the 21st century, a trending hashtag or influencer-led campaign can mobilize millions of consumers almost overnight, a scale and speed of coordination unimaginable in earlier eras. While boycotts alone often only dent a fraction of sales, their true power lies in **creating public “buzz” and a media narrative** that a company’s practices are illegitimate[23][24]. This reputational blackmail can drive corporate leaders to negotiate to avoid long-term brand damage. Successful examples range from environmental campaigns (e.g. against Shell or Nestlé) to civil rights-era boycotts (like the Montgomery Bus Boycott) that forced policy changes. Modern communications amplify these tactics globally.
- **Swarming the Financial Markets:** Another emerging lever is the ability of loosely organized crowds to **disrupt financial operations and capital flows**, akin to a “strike” in capital markets. A vivid example was the 2021 GameStop short squeeze, in which an online army of small investors (coordinating via Reddit) **attacked a hedge fund’s short position**, driving up GameStop’s stock price nearly 2000% and inflicting billions in losses on the fund[25][26]. This event was framed as a “populist revolt against Wall Street” – a proof of concept that retail investors, acting collectively and **permissionlessly**, could punish financial giants[25][26]. While the GameStop saga was motivated by profit and internet culture as much as activism, it revealed a potential lever: **crowd-driven market manipulation** as a form of protest or revenge on exploitative financiers. In principle, activist groups could organize coordinated buying or selling campaigns to create pressure – for instance, a mass sell-off of a company’s stock or bonds to raise its capital costs, or a coordinated withdrawal of funds from a bank accused of unethical behavior (a modern bank run as protest). These tactics weaponize the mechanisms of financial speculation and liquidity against their usual masters. They remain risky and complex to execute, and can backfire on participants, but they demonstrate that **in the network era, even capital markets can be “struck” by collective action** initiated on message boards or apps. As another example, campaigns encouraging people to move their money

from big banks to credit unions (“bank transfer day”) sought to economically punish banks for greed. If widely executed, such moves disrupt the flow of capital to targeted institutions – a “**capital strike**” by the public.

- **Critical Infrastructure Blockades:** A direct descendant of the labor strike – which traditionally stopped production by idling workers – is the **blockade**, which stops production by physically impeding the flows of materials, goods, or energy. **Blockades are a long-standing protest tool** used to interrupt supply chains and logistics, creating choke points that pressure those in power[27]. Unlike a strike, blockades can be carried out by **small groups of activists or community members, not just the workers themselves**. For example, climate and social justice activists have blocked rail lines, highways, ports, and pipelines to halt business as usual. These actions “**gum up**” the **economy’s circulatory system**, preventing the transport of commodities and thereby coercing stakeholders to respond. One salient case: in 2020 and 2021, indigenous and environmental activists in the U.S. and Canada blockaded railroads and construction sites to protest pipeline projects, successfully causing costly delays and garnering negotiations. Historically, **supply-chain sabotage and worker/community blockades have created strategic chokepoints in flows of material, capital, and people that sustain unjust regimes**[28]. During the anti-apartheid struggle, activists targeted oil shipments to South Africa – **workers refused to unload cargo, protesters blockaded fuel depots, and consumers boycotted Shell – creating a fuel crisis that pressured the apartheid government**[29][30]. Similarly, Oakland’s port has seen coalitions of activists and dockworkers refuse to handle cargo from companies complicit in oppression (e.g. blockading an Israeli-owned ship in solidarity with Palestinians)[31]. These examples show how **a few hundred people at a chokepoint can leverage billions in economic value**. With globalization, supply chains are both vast and fragile; a single blocked port or canal can cause worldwide ripple effects (as seen when the Suez Canal was accidentally blocked in 2021). Activists recognize this fragility as an opportunity: identify critical nodes – a major port, fuel pipeline, data server farm, etc. – and **nonviolently obstruct it to force concessions**. Modern movements like Extinction Rebellion have explicitly adopted disruption of infrastructure (through sit-ins on roads, gluing themselves in busy intersections, even drone flyovers at airports) to compel governments to act on climate change. Such “**permissionless**” **disruption doesn’t require being an employee or having large numbers**; a small group acting boldly can initiate it, and if the cause resonates, others join in.
- **Algorithmic and Software “Strikes”:** In an economy increasingly run by algorithms and AI, new points of leverage emerge in the digital realm. One concept is the **algorithmic strike**, where participants seek to confuse, overload, or deprive an AI system of its inputs such that its owner must respond. We’ve discussed data strikes (withholding data), but consider also deliberate **crowd actions to disrupt algorithms’ outputs**. For instance, gig workers and users have sometimes banded

together to hack algorithmic systems – e.g. ride-share drivers simultaneously turning off their apps in a city to trick Uber’s algorithm into triggering surge pricing, then logging back in at the higher rates. This was a real tactic used by drivers to **collectively “strike” for higher pay without formal approval**. Another scenario: content creators might organize a **YouTube upload strike** – for a period, no independent creators upload new videos – to demand better revenue shares. Or ordinary users could **spam a platform with certain content or queries** to influence trending topics or search results, forcing a company like Google or Twitter to meet with them or face a polluted platform. These methods essentially treat algorithms as the new factories – and seek to **jam the factory gears**. Even more futuristic is the idea of *hacking the robots*: if workplaces become highly automated, sabotage may shift from workers sabotaging their assembly line (as early 20th-century strikers sometimes did) to sympathizers sabotaging the robots or code. **Cyber-sabotage as activism** has indeed been seen – for example, Anonymous hacktivists launching coordinated DDoS attacks (distributed denial-of-service) on government or corporate websites to protest policies. While illegal and controversial, such “digital sit-ins” temporarily shut down an organization’s online operations, analogous to a picket line preventing entry to a factory. Importantly, they do not require large numbers – a handful of skilled hackers or even widely distributed volunteer participants with a simple tool can execute a DDoS. The coercive element is direct: **if your website or database is down, you incur economic and reputational costs until you address our grievances**. As society becomes ever more reliant on digital systems, **cyber disruption and algorithmic interference become potent levers for activists** willing to cross certain lines. The challenge is that unlike labor strikes (which have legal protections in some jurisdictions), these tactics often conflict with law and can invite crackdowns. Nevertheless, they illustrate how **coercive leverage is evolving beyond the factory floor**.

- **Decentralized Autonomous Organizing (DAO) and Crowdfunding Leverage:** The advent of blockchain and decentralized networks suggests new ways to fund and coordinate protest movements that are harder for authorities to shut down. Imagine a **“strike fund” raised via cryptocurrency** that automatically pays participants for contributing to a protest or boycott, incentivizing sustained action without a central union treasurer. Communities online can form decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) to pool resources and vote on collective actions (for example, buying shares in a company to gain shareholder rights and disrupt its governance from within, or funding legal support for activists engaged in disruptive tactics). Blockchain enthusiast Rhys Lindmark has argued that crypto enables *“antifragile”* protest by linking online mobilization to financial capacity in a permissionless way[32][33]. One could envision a **DAO that “shorts” a corrupt company’s stock and uses the profit to fuel on-the-ground protests** against that company – effectively turning the market into a source of movement funding. Or a DAO that coordinates an international boycott by issuing tokens as rewards for those who verifiably avoid buying from a targeted firm. These innovations remain experimental,

but they point to mechanisms whereby **movements can sustain themselves financially and organizationally without formal institutions**, making them harder to suppress. By leveraging encryption and decentralized ledgers, activists can coordinate globally, vote anonymously on tactics, and even automate certain coercive actions (like releasing damaging information if demands aren't met – a kind of *smart contract ultimatum*). The key is **to remove the need for permission from banks, governments, or existing unions to mount pressure**. If labor strikes once needed union halls and strike funds controlled by leaders, future “strikes” might be crowdfunded and directed by members voting on a blockchain, open to anyone who shares the cause.

- **General Social Strikes and Solidarity Actions:** Finally, even as formal labor strikes decline, the concept of a “**general strike**” is being re-imagined for broader segments of society. This could mean large portions of the population engaging in a day of refusal that goes beyond workplaces – e.g. **a general consumer strike (no spending for a period), a “sick-out” where people across sectors simultaneously take leave, or a strike of social cooperation** (refusing to participate in expected civic duties). Such ideas have circulated in calls for protest against authoritarian moves – for example, proposals that if democracy is under dire threat, millions of people simply do not go to work, do not shop, do not pay bills for a set time, effectively freezing the economy to demand political change. These broad strikes require extraordinary coordination but digital platforms and cross-movement coalitions (labor, civil rights, climate, etc.) make them more conceivable. **Plan 2028**, for instance, is a strategy floated by labor and social movement organizers to build toward a nationwide series of strikes and protests by the year 2028 – not just by union workers, but by students, renters, and communities – as a show of force against rising authoritarianism[34][35]. The idea is to synchronize multiple pressure points (work stoppages, boycotts, street protests, and electoral action) into one concerted push. While ambitious, it underscores that **future leverage may lie in cross-sector alliances** deploying multiple tactics at once. A “general strike” in this sense might not mean everyone literally walking off jobs (since many can't or won't), but enough simultaneous disruption in **schools, transportation, shopping, online activity, and work** to grind the system to a halt. Importantly, such actions are **permissionless at scale** – they rely on self-organization and the voluntary participation of large numbers, rather than any single authority calling the shots. Technology (mass messaging, encrypted chat, social media) can facilitate the spontaneity and decentralized leadership needed for such mass coordination, as seen in recent global protests (from the Arab Spring to Hong Kong's leaderless protests). The risk, as Zeynep Tufekci noted, is that digital-age movements can mobilize quickly but sometimes **lack the “capacity” and organization to negotiate concrete wins once momentum peaks**[36][37]. Thus, pairing disruptive power with strategy and clear demands is crucial – a point we address in the final section on what to demand.

In summary, **the mechanisms of future coercive leverage are diverse**: they range from hacking the intangible (data, algorithms, finances) to physically obstructing the tangible (ships, roads, pipelines), and from local direct actions (sit-ins, sabotage) to globally coordinated campaigns (online boycotts, crowdfunding). What unites these is their goal of **extracting concessions without needing the traditional lever of mass industrial labor**. They strive to be “permissionless” – harnessing whatever collective power people *do* have (as consumers, as data-providers, as community members, as investors or borrowers, etc.) and using it to impose costs on the powerful until demands are met. Each tactic has its own challenges and ethical questions, but together they form a new repertoire of contention for an era when the old repertoire (big factory strikes, centralized union bargaining) is no longer sufficient. Having explored the “**how**” of future leverage, we now turn to the “**who/what**” – the strategic targets where these new tactics could yield the greatest concessions.

Strategic Targets: Where to Apply Pressure for Maximum Concessions

Not all pressure points are equal. Just as strikes were most effective when targeting critical industries or moments (e.g. autoworkers striking at a time of peak production, or longshoremen halting a port through which a nation’s trade flows), **future coercive tactics must be aimed at choke points in the modern political economy**. To extract meaningful concessions, activists should identify **who or what is most vulnerable to disruption and most vital to “business as usual” for elites**. Below are key categories of targets that offer high leverage:

- **Monopoly Corporations and “Too-Big-to-Fail” Firms:** In today’s economy, many sectors are dominated by a handful of giant corporations (Big Tech, Big Pharma, Big Banks, etc.). These monopolistic or oligopolistic firms are lucrative targets for leverage because they concentrate enormous value and often *lack redundancy*. For example, Amazon isn’t just an e-commerce retailer; it is the backbone of online retail infrastructure and cloud computing (via AWS). A concerted campaign that disrupts Amazon’s distribution centers, servers, or consumer trust can send shockwaves through the economy and force a response. **When few companies control essential services, targeting them yields outsized pressure**. Monopolies also tend to be politically powerful; coercing them into concessions (such as accepting regulations or labor standards) can have cascading positive effects on society. Activists may target these firms through **consumer boycotts, worker walkouts (where possible), or by disrupting their supply chains and data flows**. For instance, a data strike or boycott against Google or Facebook – even if small – can generate public scrutiny and threaten their advertising revenue model, pressing them on issues like privacy or misinformation. The key is to exploit the fact that **monopolies have centralized points of failure**: one port clogged, one server farm offline, one viral PR disaster can seriously hurt them. Historically, **corporate giants have been forced to the table when confronted with united public pressure** – e.g. Shell Oil altering policies after global boycotts and divestment campaigns in the 1990s, or McDonald’s changing its supply chain standards due to animal rights

campaigns. Today's giants like Apple or Walmart could similarly be pressured by targeting their vulnerabilities (Apple's iPhone supply chain, Walmart's just-in-time logistics or public image in communities).

- **Global Supply Chain Choke Points:** Modern production is a just-in-time global chain – highly efficient but also **fragile and node-dependent**. This means small groups can punch above their weight by hitting these nodes. **Strategic “gumming up” of production is best achieved at bottlenecks where flows of goods or resources concentrate.** Examples include major ports, shipping canals, rail junctions, highways feeding logistics hubs, energy pipelines, and central warehouses. A relatively small protest or obstruction at such a node can stall thousands of downstream firms. We saw how a single wayward ship (the Ever Given) blocked the Suez Canal and cost the global economy billions in a week – activists can aim to simulate such disruptions (nonviolently). **Strikes in transportation and logistics, or solidarity blockades by communities, can leverage this interdependence.** Indeed, a **2024 analysis notes that supply-chain sabotage and blockades have historically created “strategic chokepoints in the flow of material, capital and people” sustaining unjust systems**[\[28\]](#). By interrupting these flows, movements compel those in power to negotiate. Targets in this realm might include: major trucking corridors (e.g. organizing truck drivers to have a “slow roll” protest causing massive traffic jams), key border crossings or customs facilities, large e-commerce fulfillment centers (slowing deliveries nationwide), or critical **energy infrastructure** like refineries and pipelines. Energy is particularly potent: **fossil fuel supply lines are lifelines of economies and militaries**, so blockading fuel (as anti-war and climate activists have done) puts immediate pressure[\[28\]](#)[\[30\]](#). For example, peaceful flotillas or sit-ins could block oil export terminals, leveraging the urgency to move perishable commodities. **Choke point activism** requires research and precision – knowing exactly which “valve” to turn off for maximum effect. It often benefits from insider cooperation: e.g. port workers or truckers sympathetic to the cause can amplify the blockade by not crossing picket lines. In sum, the motto is *“find the Achilles’ heel in the supply network and seize it.”*
- **Financial System Nodes:** Another high-impact target is the network of finance – banks, payment systems, stock exchanges – that constitutes the circulatory system of capital. While abstract, these can be pressured by collective action. For instance, a well-organized **debt strike** can target lenders and governments: if thousands refuse to pay student loans or medical debt, it can force policy concessions (indeed, debt strikes by for-profit college students led to debt cancellation for many). Similarly, coordinating **mass withdrawals or account closures** at a particular bank can threaten liquidity and get the bank's attention (this tactic was floated by activists as “BankExit” campaigns). Payment infrastructure like PayPal, Visa, or SWIFT could also be pressured – for example, activists convincing thousands of users to boycott a payment platform until it stops

serving a controversial client (as seen in campaigns to get PayPal to drop hate groups, etc.). **Wall Street itself can be a site of protest:** Occupy Wall Street, though largely symbolic, demonstrated that targeting the physical and symbolic heart of finance can shift public discourse. More concretely, activists might coordinate to short certain stocks or cryptocurrencies as a statement, creating volatility that investors abhor. The key is **using collective economic decisions as leverage** – treating one’s money, however little, as a vote or as a means to inflict a small cost that multiplied by thousands becomes big. One famous historical parallel is the **Montgomery bus boycott** (1955–56), essentially an economic “strike” by Black residents who refused to pay into the segregated bus system, costing the city transit authority significant revenue until segregation policies were lifted. In the future, one could imagine analogous **“algorithmic boycotts”** – e.g. people collectively boycotting the use of credit cards on Black Friday to protest income inequality, sending a shock through retail and payments sectors. If these actions are well-publicized, the anticipation of disruption can itself force concessions or at least invitations to dialogue.

- **Government and Public Services:** Traditionally, general strikes and public sector strikes have been used to influence government policy (e.g. teachers’ strikes winning education funding, or nationwide strikes forcing out dictators as in some countries). In a scenario of democratic backsliding, **targeting government operations might be necessary to defend democracy**. For example, coordinating mass sick-outs or stoppages by civil servants, transit workers, and other public employees can pressure a government without a single union declaring a strike (especially where public sector strikes are illegal). Additionally, activists can target **government legitimacy and capacity** by disrupting major events (e.g. blockading a presidential inauguration or G20 summit with sheer people power, as seen in the 1999 WTO Seattle protests which shut down trade talks). Another approach is **tax refusal or “Irish strike”** – refusing to cooperate with authorities, from mundane bureaucracy to widespread nonpayment of certain taxes, effectively a strike of citizens. These are high-risk and require broad buy-in, but they strike at the state’s ability to function. The goal is to **extract democratic concessions (fair elections, anti-corruption measures, policy changes) by making governance difficult or public outrage palpable**. One historical example: in 1989, the pro-democracy movement in China (centered on Tiananmen Square) spread to include worker strikes and transport paralysis in Beijing – a factor that alarmed the regime. While that ended tragically, in other cases (e.g. some Eastern European countries in 1989, or Sudan in 2019), mass strikes and civil disobedience by citizens and officials have toppled authoritarian regimes. In stable democracies, less extreme versions – such as a nationwide day of action where nobody shops or works – can send a political message that forces legislators to respond. Essentially, **the public can target the normal functioning of society itself** (in a controlled way) to demand political change. This is a broad and diffuse target, but it leverages the idea that **a democracy cannot function if the majority actively withdraws consent and**

participation. It's a nuclear option of people power, and the credible threat of it can itself be leverage.

- **Key Individuals and Corporate Oligarchs:** While structural targets yield broad concessions, sometimes focusing on **specific powerful individuals or entities** can be effective. This includes tactics like **naming and shaming billionaires or CEOs**, disrupting their public appearances, protesting at their residences or offices, or leveraging legal action and leaks against them. The rationale is that **power today is highly personalized in some cases** – e.g. the political influence of oligarchs or the outsized role of certain tech CEOs. Activist campaigns that personally target an executive's reputation or comfort can yield concessions from their company to relieve pressure. For instance, protests at the homes of politicians or CEOs have, on occasion, pushed faster responses (though they can also provoke backlash). Another example is **shareholder activism**: coordinated efforts by small shareholders to introduce resolutions or flood annual meetings with questions, making life difficult for executives until they agree to certain changes (like disclosing political spending or adopting ESG measures). While one might not think of a few persistent shareholders as “coercive,” when backed by public campaigns, they can embarrass leadership and gain media attention, which in turn pressures the company. **Whistleblowers** who expose personal wrongdoing of leaders also create leverage, essentially threatening elites with loss of public trust unless reforms are made. Targeting individuals walks a fine line – it must avoid veering into harassment or violence (which is both unethical and counterproductive) – but **focused accountability for those at the top can crack open rigid power structures**. For example, the #MeToo movement's outing of powerful sexual harassers forced not just individual resignations but industry-wide changes in policy, as leadership realized the cost of tolerating such behavior. In economic terms, getting a single key decision-maker on the side of reform (or removed from power) can unlock concessions that broad pressure could not. Thus, strategic campaigns sometimes concentrate on a symbolic “villain” figure (a notorious union-busting CEO, a corrupt official, etc.) as a lever to change the whole institution behind them.
- **Ideological and Cultural Hegemony Points:** Another nontraditional “target” is the **public narrative and cultural consent that underpin power relations**. If activists can disrupt the stories and symbols that elites rely on, they can indirectly coerce change. This involves targeting media and advertising (for instance, organizing social media to counter corporate PR, or boycotting media channels that spread oligarch-friendly propaganda, thereby pressuring advertisers). It also involves **hijacking public events or imagery** – for example, climate activists have crashed elite events (splashing paint on corporate-sponsored art or interrupting high-profile speeches) to draw attention and make complacency uncomfortable. By targeting the **image and legitimacy of the powerful**, movements create leverage: elites may concede policy changes just to restore their reputations or quell the constant disruptions tarnishing their prestige. Consider how apartheid South Africa faced

cultural and sports boycotts – being excluded from international sports and arts events was a blow to its elite’s pride and prompted internal pressure for reform. Today, campaigns that threaten a country’s or corporation’s global image (like calls to relocate major tournaments or conferences due to human rights concerns) often succeed in forcing at least cosmetic concessions. While softer than economic levers, **cultural pressure can achieve what pure argumentation often cannot: it makes the status quo personally costly for those in power** by isolating or shaming them. In summary, the battlefield of narrative and legitimacy is a target in itself – **win there, and formal concessions will follow** as power-holders scramble to regain control of the story.

In practice, successful campaigns combine multiple targets and tactics. For example, a movement might simultaneously encourage a consumer boycott (hitting revenue), stage blockades at distribution centers (hitting logistics), flood social media with criticism (hitting reputation), and leak documents about the CEO’s malfeasance (hitting the individual). This **multi-pronged approach** increases leverage, as each pressure point reinforces the other. Activist scholars have noted that movements win when they put pressure on “as many institutional levers as possible” – legal, economic, political, cultural – creating a crisis that can only be resolved by granting concessions[38][39]. The civil rights movement, for instance, didn’t just protest; it boycotted businesses, filed lawsuits, got media on its side, and disrupted city operations all at once. At the height of the Birmingham campaign in 1963, **protesters boycotted downtown stores, staged daily marches and sit-ins, and even filled the jails, effectively paralyzing the city until its leaders were forced to negotiate**[40]. That case perfectly illustrates strategic targeting: they hit the city’s commerce, its public order, its moral image on the world stage – leaving officials no choice but to relent.

Going forward, movements must be similarly shrewd in picking their targets. The decline of labor means activists can’t just target factory owners by stopping work. Instead, they must ask: *where is power concentrated now, and how can we disrupt it?* The answer might be an Amazon warehouse, a server farm, a key piece of legislation, a billionaire’s supply of social legitimacy, or the smooth running of a metropolis. By focusing on these critical nodes, even relatively small groups can **extract outsized concessions** – forcing negotiations, policy changes, or institutional reforms that benefit the wider democracy.

Beyond Wages: Demands to Rebalance Power and Revitalize Democracy

Securing leverage is only half the battle; the other half is **using that leverage to win substantive concessions that reshape the power balance**. In the labor era, strikers often demanded higher pay or better conditions – important gains, but usually confined to the workplace. The question now is: once new movements **have the attention of the powerful**, what should they demand to truly *strengthen democracy and rebalance power* for the long term? The opportunity – and necessity – is to push for **structural changes** that go beyond narrow economic benefits and instead correct the democratic deficits that have

accumulated. Below are key categories of transformative concessions that future movements could extract:

- **Expanding Political Democracy and Curbing Money Power:** A top priority is to **demand reforms that break the grip of concentrated wealth on governance**. This includes robust campaign finance reform – e.g. public financing of elections, strict limits or bans on corporate political spending, and overturning decisions like *Citizens United*. The goal is to “**change the rules to limit the power of money over government and empower people as a countervailing force**” [5]. Movements might demand, for instance, a Democracy Amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing the right to vote and allowing regulation of campaign funds, or a binding policy of universal voter registration and accessible voting (so politicians are accountable to *all* citizens, not just donors). Strengthening voting rights – through automatic registration, expanded mail voting, statehood for disenfranchised territories like DC, etc. – is crucial for rebalancing political power to the majority. Additionally, **anti-corruption measures** such as bans on legislators becoming lobbyists, full transparency of lobbying activities, and strict conflict-of-interest laws can be demanded to reduce corporate capture. In essence, activists should use their leverage to force a **reset of democratic guardrails** that have eroded. For example, a nationwide general strike could insist on passage of a comprehensive democracy package (like a new Voting Rights Act and anti-gerrymandering law) as a condition to return to normalcy. Since broad public support exists for curbing corporate influence (over 80% of Americans worry that large donations sway policy[17]), these demands, if won, **institutionalize a more equitable democracy** beyond the protest itself. The **measure of success** would be laws or constitutional changes that permanently tilt power back toward ordinary voters – reducing the outsized sway of billionaires and corporations in elections and policy.
- **Economic Democracy and Shared Prosperity:** To truly rebalance power, **economic arrangements themselves must be democratized**. Movements can demand concessions that give workers and communities a greater say and share in economic decisions. This could take the form of pushing for **co-determination laws** (mandating worker representatives on corporate boards, as is done in Germany for large firms), **employee ownership programs** (incentivizing or requiring firms to grant shares to employees, or supporting cooperatives), and robust collective bargaining rights across all sectors (including gig and contract workers). These demands move beyond a pay raise; they seek to embed **democratic voice in the economy’s governance**. For instance, rather than just fighting to save jobs, a coalition might demand that a closing factory be sold to the workers or community to run as a cooperative – thus transforming a leverage action into a new model of ownership. Similarly, movements can demand **sectoral bargaining** (industry-wide labor agreements that cover all workers, union or not) to eliminate the race to the bottom and ensure a baseline of dignity. Another structural concession is the **right**

to form a union freely, enforced by serious penalties on union-busting – essentially strengthening the ability of workers to organize (card check recognition, speedy elections, etc.). Given the link between unionization and civic health[41][14], making it easier to organize is a democratic demand in itself. Beyond workplace democracy, activists should demand **policies that deconcentrate corporate power**: stronger antitrust enforcement to break up monopolies and prevent “one company to rule them all” scenarios[42][43]. Breaking up Big Tech or Big Banks, for example, would reduce the stranglehold of a few and create space for more competition and local control. Movements like Occupy raised awareness of the 1% vs 99% wealth gap; the next step is to force concrete commitments to **wealth redistribution** – e.g. a wealth tax on billionaires, higher corporate taxes, or a financial transactions tax. These reduce the resource disparity that converts to political clout. By demanding economic changes that **institutionalize fairness and inclusion (living wages, universal healthcare, affordable education, etc.)**, activists address the material conditions that currently allow oligarchs to dominate while many struggle. The guiding principle is to shift from an economy run exclusively for shareholders to one accountable to stakeholders (workers, consumers, communities). Each concession in this realm – say, a law requiring profit-sharing or a community veto power over big development projects – is a piece of **structural power rebalancing**.

- **Workplace Democracy and Worker Power Beyond Traditional Labor Law:** In addition to broad economic reforms, more specific **workplace democratization** measures can be demanded. For example: **guaranteed worker seats on corporate boards**, giving employees real decision-making power and insight into company practices; **works councils** or workplace committees with negotiation rights even in non-union workplaces; and **a voice in automation decisions** (e.g. requiring companies to negotiate the implementation of AI/automation with workers, including provisions like retraining or reduced hours with the same pay if machines increase productivity). As automation threatens jobs, activists could demand a **“robot tax”** or automation gains tax, wherein companies that automate out jobs must pay a levy that funds social programs or UBI – effectively ensuring technological progress benefits society broadly, not just owners. They can also push for a **shorter workweek (e.g. 4-day week)** without loss of pay, framing it as sharing the productivity gains of technology with workers (a democratic redistribution of time). Another powerful concession is **just-cause employment laws** (ending at-will firing, so workers can only be fired for just cause) – this greatly shifts power to workers in the workplace, enabling them to speak up without fear. **Sectoral or public bargaining for gig workers** (like creating a sector-wide council for ride-share drivers to set minimum standards) can bring democracy to precarious jobs. These demands all serve to **empower working people in their daily economic life**, which translates to greater confidence and participation in civic life. They also limit the authority of bosses and shareholders, distributing it toward employees and communities – a direct rebalance of who holds power. Historically,

when labor movements were strong, they fought for things like union recognition and closed shops; future movements should expand the horizon to “*every worker a voice*”, whether through unions or other institutional innovations.

- **Social Infrastructure and Security for All (Freedom from Want):** Strengthening democracy is not only about formal rights – it’s also about **creating the social conditions in which people are free to participate as equals**. Thus, movements should demand concessions that provide universal economic security and reduce life insecurity. This includes **universal healthcare**, so no one is tied to a job or fearful of medical bankruptcy (a freedom that allows people to engage in society more fully and even take the risk of protesting or organizing). It includes **tuition-free education** and student debt cancellation, to remove the debt bondage that young people face – enabling them to focus on civic life and entrepreneurship rather than servitude to lenders. **Housing as a right** is another big demand: rent control, social housing programs, or community land trusts to ensure affordable homes. When people aren’t crushed by survival concerns, they have more capacity to assert their political rights; thus these demands, while economic, have democratic implications. Another demand is **Universal Basic Income (UBI)** or a guaranteed basic income floor – giving every citizen a baseline livelihood. A UBI, even if modest, greatly increases individual leverage: one can refuse exploitative work or find time to volunteer, knowing one won’t starve. It effectively raises the floor of freedom. Pushing for UBI as a concession from tech companies that automate jobs (making them fund it via taxes) or from governments is a bold but increasingly discussed idea. Similarly, **expanded public goods** like free public transit and internet access promote equal participation (imagine a democracy where everyone has mobility and information access). These social demands rebalance power by **liberating individuals from dependency on both employers and unpredictable markets**. Franklin D. Roosevelt talked of a Second Bill of Rights (economic rights to shelter, healthcare, etc.) – modern movements can resurrect that vision and demand its fulfillment as the price of social peace. In essence, “*No justice, no peace*” can translate into “*Provide for the people or face continued disruption.*” By winning concrete guarantees of security, movements would be strengthening the democratic commons – empowering citizens materially to exercise their rights and challenge tyranny.
- **Community Control and Decentralization of Power:** Another category of demands centers on **shifting decision-making closer to the people affected by it**. This can include calls for **community control of policing** (e.g. civilian review boards with real power, or community-elected sheriffs accountable to residents), **participatory budgeting** at city and state levels (letting citizens directly decide how a portion of public funds are spent), and **devolving certain powers to local assemblies**. The idea is to democratize beyond the ballot box by building structures of direct or deliberative democracy. For instance, a movement that successfully pressures a city to implement participatory budgeting has won a lasting democratic

lever for citizens. In the economic realm, **community benefit agreements** can be demanded whenever a corporation wants to set up in a locality – ensuring locals have a say in jobs, environmental impact, etc., effectively a form of local veto or consent. Movements can also demand the creation of **public or cooperative alternatives** to private monopolies: e.g. a publicly-owned broadband network to compete with telecom giants (giving communities control over an essential service), or public banks that serve community needs rather than shareholder profit. These demands, if met, **redistribute power away from distant boardrooms and back to neighborhoods**. A salient example is energy democracy: activists may compel a concession that a city transitions to a community-owned renewable energy utility rather than a for-profit utility – giving residents control over rates and investments and aligning with climate goals. Each such win – be it a cooperative formed, a public option introduced, or a local oversight mechanism established – chips away at hierarchical control and replaces it with democratic control.

- **Regulating Big Tech and Information Commons:** Given the power of tech platforms over information and discourse, activists should demand **concessions that democratize digital spaces**. This includes **algorithmic transparency laws** (so the public knows how content is being promoted or suppressed), **data privacy and ownership rights** (perhaps treating personal data as the property of the individual, or at least tightly regulating its use), and **platform accountability** measures (holding companies liable for certain harms, requiring options for chronological feeds instead of opaque algorithms, etc.). Movements might also push for the breakup of Big Tech monopolies as noted, or even the creation of **public social media platforms** as alternatives (imagine a cooperatively-owned “PublicBook” to rival Facebook). Ensuring the information ecosystem is not manipulating people or amplifying extremism is vital for democracy; thus, concessions in this realm could be, for example, a tech firm agreeing to an independent audit of its algorithm by civil society representatives, or legislation that establishes digital rights for users (like the right to appeal content moderation decisions to an external ombudsman). The recent unionization efforts among tech workers show an appetite for more ethical tech – movements can align with those workers to demand tech be designed and governed in the public interest. For instance, a data strike against Facebook could demand the company institute democratic governance of its content policies (e.g. a user assembly or jury to set rules) in exchange for users re-engaging with the platform. Or pressure on Google could insist it divest from surveillance advertising models as a concession. These might seem ambitious, but as tech becomes as integral as any public utility, **the demand that it serves democracy rather than undermines it will grow louder**.
- **Climate Justice and Sustainability Measures:** Many current movements are climate-focused, and for good reason – climate change intersects with democracy and justice. Demands here can strengthen democracy by reducing the power of fossil fuel lobbies and safeguarding the future for all. Activists can extract

concessions such as **banning fossil fuel money in politics**, ending subsidies to oil companies, or establishing citizens' assemblies to oversee a just transition to renewable energy (thus injecting democratic oversight into climate policy). They can demand large polluters fund climate adaptation in frontline communities, effectively transferring resources from corporate coffers to public goods (a power rebalance). Every pipeline blocked or coal plant canceled due to protest is a concession that keeps power (energy) literally in the hands of people – for example, pushing for community-owned solar grids. Moreover, by framing climate action as a demand in strikes or boycotts, movements link environmental survival with democratic survival: e.g. a general strike might demand that governments implement green new deal legislation that was popular but stalled by corporate influence. Winning such measures not only curtails corporate power (fossil fuel companies lose), but also creates **new public sector jobs and infrastructure that benefit society broadly** – again enhancing equitable power distribution. Climate justice demands often include **indigenous rights and local consent** for projects; achieving that means shifting power to historically marginalized groups in decision-making. Thus, while climate demands address an existential issue, they also directly challenge oligarchic structures (since the same forces destroying the climate are those capturing states). For example, if activists force a government to break up an oil oligopoly or nationalize it for public good, that's a huge power shift.

- **Institutional Reforms for Accountability:** Finally, movements can demand changes to democratic institutions themselves to lock in long-term accountability. This could be **judicial reforms** (e.g. term limits for Supreme Court justices, or adding ethics rules to limit corporate influence on courts), **electoral reforms** (proportional representation, ranked-choice voting, independent redistricting to eliminate gerrymandering), or even **constitutional changes** (such as amending to declare healthcare a right, or to guarantee environmental rights). While these might be beyond the immediate scope of a single protest, they should be on the table when leverage is high. History shows that mass leverage moments can lead to sweeping reforms – the Great Depression labor unrest led to the Wagner Act and Social Security; 1960s civil unrest led to Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. Future crises of legitimacy could open the door to a “*Democracy New Deal*” of reforms. Activists should be ready with concrete asks: for example, if a national uprising occurs against authoritarian tendencies, the demands could include **statehood for disenfranchised territories, enlargement of the House of Representatives for better representation, strict term limits for Congress to break ossified power, and public referenda on key issues**. These fundamentally alter who has influence.

In making demands, it's crucial that movements **aim high and target the root of power imbalances**. Rather than settling for a company's token CSR program or a politician's vague promise, the leverage gained through disruptive action must be spent on *structural* concessions. **The guiding question should be: Will this concession make it easier for people to wield power in the future without having to resort to disruption?** If yes, it's

likely a worthy demand. For instance, winning a law that protects the right to organize or vote means next time, it might not require a strike to have voice – the system will be fairer by default.

Moreover, demands that **increase the organized power of the public** create a virtuous cycle. A movement might demand, for example, that a city fund and establish dozens of neighborhood councils with real decision power. Once created, those councils become permanent infrastructure for democracy, enabling citizens to assert themselves regularly, not just in crisis. Similarly, if a concession is to have a **permanent worker representation committee in every workplace**, those committees can continue pushing for improvements long after the initial conflict. In contrast, a one-off wage increase, while good, doesn't change the power equation; it can be eroded over time. That's why the focus is on **levers that shift power relations**: from bosses to workers, from corporations to communities, from elites to the populace, from profit to planet.

It's also strategic to demand things that **unify broad coalitions**. Higher wages often benefit only the specific workers on strike, whereas demanding, say, universal childcare or free college tuition can rally students, parents, and low-wage workers together. Broad, democracy-strengthening demands forge alliances across society (labor, racial justice, climate, etc.), increasing the movement's strength and legitimacy. These demands also resonate with public notions of fairness – most people support policies like taxing the rich, healthcare for all, clean water, and honest government. By tying immediate disruptive leverage to these popular systemic goals, movements gain moral high ground and can split the elite opposition (e.g. some businesses might concede that campaign finance reform is needed if public pressure is overwhelming).

In conclusion, the waning of traditional labor power is a double-edged sword: it presents grave dangers to democracy, but also compels movements to innovate and broaden their scope. **New levers of coercion – digital strikes, blockades, boycotts, and beyond – can empower the public in unprecedented ways**, but only if harnessed effectively. By choosing targets wisely and making bold, structural demands, future movements can extract concessions that do more than temporarily alleviate grievances; they can **institutionalize greater equality and participation**. The endgame is to *shore up democratic leverage itself*: to win reforms that ensure the people's voice is stronger, wealth is checked by the common good, and no narrow interest can easily dominate. Each concession won – whether it's a law, a new institution, or a norm change – should tilt the balance toward a more democratic society where power is accountable to the many, not monopolized by the few.

The stakes are high. As labor scholars have noted, *“with voting rights under attack, it is hard not to see the decline of labor unions as an enabling factor in the erosion of democratic institutions”*^[4]. Rebalancing power is not a luxury but a necessity to preserve democracy. If strikes of the past gave us the weekend and the middle class, the “strikes” of the future – in whatever form they take – must give us **a reinvigorated democracy and an economy accountable to the public**. And unlike in the past, we may not have a single

class (industrial workers) as the linchpin – it will require a **coalition of citizens, wielding new tools of disruption, to collectively demand a new social contract**. Such a contract would enshrine that *economic power cannot be allowed to subvert political power*, that *human and ecological well-being are paramount*, and that *democracy means people’s active control over the decisions that affect their lives*.

We have outlined the context, the tactics, the targets, and the transformative demands. The path forward will be contentious, but history shows that **power concedes nothing without a demand – and those demands need force behind them**. In the 21st century, that force will come not from shutting down coal mines or auto plants alone, but from creative disruptions of the **new centers of power** – from server farms to stock markets to city streets. By **leveraging these new pressure points and insisting on deep changes**, the public can once again extract concessions that bend the arc of history toward justice. The levers of power may change form, but the principle remains: **when the people find ways to halt the machinery of the status quo, they can compel the mighty to negotiate a better deal for all**.

Sources:

- Economic Policy Institute – *Decline of labor unions weakens American democracy*^{[2][4]}
- World Economic Forum (Luc Triangle, ITUC) – *Workers’ rights vital to revitalizing democracy*^{[12][14]}
- Center for American Progress – *4 Ways Unions Make Our Democracy Stronger*^{[1][8]}
- Northwestern Magazine – *How Do People Make Change?* (on data strikes, boycotts success, Birmingham civil rights campaign)^{[20][40][23]}
- MERIP – *Supply chain sabotage and blockades as chokepoints*^{[28][30]}
- Rhys Lindmark (Medium) – *Crypto as Networked Protest* (on permissionless blockchain-enabled capacity)^{[32][33]}
- Center for American Progress – *Corporate Capture Threatens Democratic Government*^{[5][17]}
- Demos – *Economic Democracy Explained: Deconcentrating Corporate Power*^{[6][43]}
- Plan 2028 (The Forge) – *Bringing Labor and Social Movements Together*^{[34][35]}.

^{[1] [3] [7] [8] [9] [10]} 4 Ways Unions Make Our Economy and Democracy Stronger - Center for American Progress

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/4-ways-unions-make-our-economy-and-democracy-stronger/>

^{[2] [4] [11]} Decline of labor unions weakens American democracy | Economic Policy Institute

<https://www.epi.org/blog/decline-of-labor-unions-weakens-american-democracy/>

[5] [15] [16] [17] [18] Corporate Capture Threatens Democratic Government - Center for American Progress

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/corporate-capture-threatens-democratic-government/>

[6] [42] [43] Economic Democracy Explained: Deconcentrating Corporate Power | Demos

<https://www.demos.org/policy-briefs/deconcentrating-corporate-power>

[12] [13] [14] [41] Why workers' rights are vital to revitalizing democracy | World Economic Forum

<https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/01/priorities-democracy-workers-rights-2024/>

[19] [20] [21] [22] [23] [24] [38] [39] [40] Northwestern Magazine: How Do People Make Change?

<https://magazine.northwestern.edu/features/how-do-people-make-change>

[25] [26] GameStop Short Squeeze: Why the Media is 100% Wrong (The truth from the data)

<https://mergersandinquisitions.com/gamestop-short-squeeze/>

[27] Beyond the Chokepoint: Blockades as Social Struggles - ADS

<https://ui.adsabs.harvard.edu/abs/2023Antip..55.1301C/abstract>

[28] [29] [30] [31] Routes to Disruption—Supply Chain Sabotage and Israel's War on Gaza - MERIP

<https://merip.org/2024/07/routes-to-disruption-supply-chain-sabotage-and-israels-war-on-gaza/>

[32] [33] [36] [37] Crypto is Networked Nonviolent Protest | by Rhys Lindmark | Medium

<https://rhyslindmark.medium.com/crypto-is-networked-nonviolent-protest-f857260fb8d6>

[34] [35] Plan 2028: Bringing Labor and Social Movements Together | The Forge

<https://forgeorganizing.org/article/plan-2028-bringing-labor-and-social-movements-together/>