



# ALM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

---

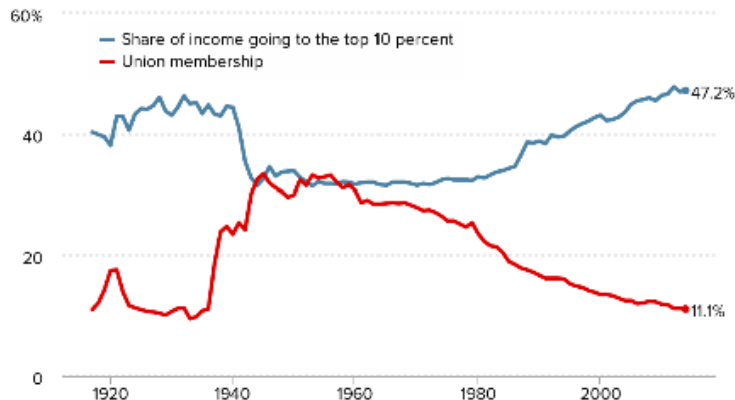
# TOPIC:

## 1946 STRIKE WAVE

In the past few years, the United States has seen a resurgence in labor activity, from strikes in Hollywood to healthcare workers to even graduate student workers at Berkeley and across the UC system. At a time when inequality is at an all-time high in this country, it is incredibly reassuring to see so many workers starting to leverage their power for the first time in decades. As we continue to see unions and working class people find solidarity with each other and strength in numbers, we should look back to history to understand how we got to where we are now. There is one point in US history which really highlights the immense power that working class Americans can wield when they stand together, and the many forces that stood, and still stand, against them. In 1946, America experienced a strike wave that saw over five million workers on strike to fight for better wages and working conditions and against unfair labor practices. After victory in Europe and Japan, over four million soldiers returned home looking to go back to work in a country whose entire economy had been changed by WWII. While organized labor was at an all time high, unions had mostly avoided work stoppages for the duration of the conflict to support the war effort, and had many accumulated issues to fight for against their employers. Additionally, the second Red Scare was at its very beginning. To top it all off, big corporations and elites began to peddle the virtue of “free enterprise” to build protections for themselves against organized labor. With all of these factors at the forefront of American life simultaneously, 1946 served as a major turning point for the American labor movement. In this committee, delegates will be challenged to represent the foremost leaders of organized labor at a time of extreme consequence to write a new path forward for the American working class. It will be up to you to determine if the American labor movement will continue to grow and thrive through solidarity and activism, or wilt to the pressure of the mounting obstructions to working class power as the post-war labor movement did in our history.

### As union membership has fallen, the top 10 percent have been getting a larger share of income

Union membership and share of income going to the top 10%, 1917–2014



Source: Piketty and Saez (2014), Gordon (2013), and Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey public data series

Economic Policy Institute

As the above graph indicates, worker organization is of the utmost importance for fighting income inequality and ensuring a higher standard of living to everyone in our nation. I chose this topic because I think that American labor history is almost never taught in traditional curriculum, but incredibly important to the majority of the American people. With this committee, I hope to teach delegates about the tumultuous history of the American labor movement by challenging you to represent leaders of the working class and to solve problems that faced millions of workers. This will be a crisis committee so that delegates are forced to critically think and adapt on the fly with huge consequences, just like the labor leaders of the 1946 strike wave had to, but also because I hope putting yourself into the shoes of these characters will generate a sense of empathy and solidarity for the working class. I chose this particular event in American labor history because not only does it represent an intense and exciting period of massive labor action, but also because after 1946, union power was never the same. In 1947, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act which cripples union power to this day, the second Red Scare forced out countless innocent and passionate members of the labor movement, and the tenor of the government and general public shifted to favor free enterprise and unregulated business, all to the detriment of every working class American.

As you begin your research and participate in committee, there are many important things to consider about the situation at hand in 1946. One important factor will be how major union organizations should interact with each other. At this time, there were two major union federations and many large-scale unions, so while the labor movement was incredibly active, it did not have a unified direction or cohesion between unions. Another is how the government will involve itself in union affairs going forward. Since FDR's presidency and the New Deal, the government had been quite favorable towards labor and the Wagner act codified many

protections, but labor would take massive hits from a less favorable congress just the next year. Also worth considering will be the effect that a new wave of anti-communist fear will have on a labor movement largely led by members of the left. With businesses pushing the message of “free enterprise” across the nation, it will be essential to also factor in how organized labor can maintain a positive public perception in the midst of frequent disruptive action. Finally, it will be important to see if leaders of the labor movement can effectively reckon with a history of exclusion and bigotry in many unions as working women, African-Americans, and immigrants need a seat at the table to properly represent the whole of American labor.



March 8-10, 2024

72nd Session

[almbmun72@bmun.org](mailto:almbmun72@bmun.org)