Democratic Abundance: An Abundance that Works for Workers

Kate Andrias & Alexander Hertel-Fernandez

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Kate Andrias & Alexander Hertel-Fernandez[1]

This paper embraces the core goal of the abundance agenda: 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. We argue, however, that abundance's theory of how to achieve that goal falls short, in part because abundance proponents largely neglect the role of workers and organized labor. As critics have argued, abundance, in its most deregulatory version, is insufficiently attentive to questions of power and distribution; undervalues democratic participation; and discounts the importance of protecting labor standards and the environment. Centering the role of organized labor helps respond to all three of these flaws, ensuring that abundance is truly a democratic project rather than one that contributes to greater inequality or the erosion of democracy at a time of authoritarian backsliding. As we argue, organized labor—both 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 help abundance succeed on its own terms by providing a steady stream of labor for new infrastructure projects; helping abundance programs overcome political obstacles; and increasing abundance programs' legitimacy and efficacy. In turn, abundance, properly designed, can help labor—indeed, all working people—by increasing the supply of good jobs; providing infrastructure desperately needed by workers; and helping to facilitate greater 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

[1] [change to star note]. [Add bios]. For helpful conversation and feedback, we are grateful to: [ADD readers and Roosevelt, Suzanne Kahn, Patrick Oakford] Thanks also to Murad Bhatti, Ezra Coopersmith, Charlotte Waldman, and Sabrina You for excellent research assistance

from commentators on the left, including those within the labor movement.[2] While abundance is by now a broad banner claimed by many different factions with different objectives, at its core, "abundance" means massive increases in the supply of essential goods, like housing, transportation, and energy infrastructure, in order to make them more affordable and accessible. Advanced most prominently by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, abundance aims to ask "what it is that people really need and then organize[] government to make sure there is enough of it."[3]

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. Notably, Klein and Thompson focus on innovation as well as infrastructure. In this report, we focus only on infrastructure, but scientific and technological innovation also raise a host of important questions regarding the role of labor and are worthy of 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 in and out of government, including restrictive zoning rules, burdensome regulations and preferences, and the availability of legal challenge—all of which allow well-organized communities to block change or hold up development projects as leverage for additional concessions. In their view, these veto points stop projects from being built, contrary to the broader public interest. In particular, they argue that Democrats 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,[4] and Marc Dunkelman's *Why Nothing Works,* which argues that progressives' resistance

[2] See, e.g., Dylan Gyauch-Lewis, "'Abundance' Against Organized Labor," *Jacobin*, July 22, 2025, https://jacobin.com/2025/07/abundance-movement-organized-labor-unions.
[3] Ezra Klein, "There is a Liberal Answer to the Trump-Musk Wrecking Ball," *New York Times,* March 9, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/09/opinion/musk-trump-doge-abundance-agenda.html.
[4] 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://www.niskanencenter.org/the-procedure-fetish/. For a collection of abundance writing, see "Abundance: A Primer," *Inclusive Abundance*, October 6, 2025, https://www.inclusiveabundance.org/abundance-in-action/published-work/abundance-a-primer.

to centralized power helped proliferate excessive checks on government action.[5] The abundance movement also builds on a related movement of academics and practitioners focused on state capacity and the need for reform of internal government processes and structures to unlock more innovation and more efficient service delivery, including scholars such as Steve Teles and civic tech reformer Jennifer Pahlka.[6]

Though Klein and Thompson don't themselves urge wholesale deregulation, their argument has significant deregulatory implications.[7] After all, if the problem preventing us 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-—especially unions—exploit veto points to slow down decisionmaking or extract "rents" that raise the costs of building, then the obvious solution is to eliminate mechanisms that allow for community input.[8] Likewise, if the public sector is slow and inefficient, privatization would be the best route to expansion of 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 like those ones described above.[9] To be sure,

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[5] Marc Dunkelman, *Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress–and How to Bring It Back* (PublicAffairs, 2025).

[6] See e.g., Jennifer Pahlka and Andrew Greenway, "A State Capacity Agenda for 2025," *Niskanen Center*, December 20, 2024, https://www.niskanencenter.org/the-how-we-need-now-a-capacity-agenda-for-2025.

[7] 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.

[8] 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://www.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").

[9] See, e.g., 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, *The New York Review of Books*, September 25, 2025, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2025/09/25/how-to-blow-up-a-planet-abundance-klein-thompson; Sandeep Vaheesan, "The Real Path to Abundance," review of *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Boston Review*, May 22, 2025, https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-real-path-to-abundance; Elizabeth Wilkins, "On Abundance: Where We Agree, Where We Disagree, and How to Move

excessive process and regulation can indeed be obstacles to action. Indeed, as two scholars who have spent time in government, we can attest to how the accretion of procedure can delay or even stall altogether implementation of important policies—from the implementation of infrastructure investments to standing up 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.[10] 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.[11]

Moreover, while abundance proponents are right that labor unions have sometimes blocked or slowed down development efforts, they generally do so with laudable aims: to ensure higher-wage work or guarantees of labor standards on projects. Abundance proponents, we argue, 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, we think 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 also threatens the broader health of our democracy.

The distribution of economic and political power matters for determining what policies are feasible or not to pursue in the first place. For example, we can't make meaningful investments in a clean energy transition if concentrated fossil fuel interests retain outsized political clout. Unions can play an important role in building a political coalition supportive of investments in clean energy–just as they did for the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) under the Biden Administration.[12] Power also matters on the back end too: will policies and investments simply reinforce asymmetries of economic and political power, or will they help build

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Forward," review of *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Roosevelt Institute*, March 26, 2025, https://rooseveltinstitute.org/blog/on-abundance-and-how-to-move-forward.

[10] 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; see also Kevin DeGood, "Infrastructure Investment Decisions Are Political, Not Technical," *Center for American Progress*, April 14, 2020, https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/InfrastructureInvestment-brief1.pdf.

[11]See for example: Elizabeth Wilkins, "On Abundance: Where We Agree, Where We Disagree, and How to Move Forward," review of *Abundance*, by Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Roosevelt Institute*, March 26, 2025, https://rooseveltinstitute.org/blog/on-abundance-and-how-to-move-forward.

[12] Ben Beachy, "Blueprint for a Popular Climate Agenda," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 2025, no. 78 (2025), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/78/blueprint-for-a-popular-climate-agenda.

countervailing power among workers and other groups that have historically lacked such power? As such, some deregulation envisioned by abundance might be a positive development—certainly to the extent it eliminates unnecessary red tape—but it won't solve the main obstacles to providing abundant goods. And in many cases, wholesale deregulation and privatization would be counterproductive, further empowering concentrated economic interests, weakening labor, and threatening the health of our democracy.

Another problem is that the standard abundance account tends to underweight the value of democratic participation in governmental decisions. In its most deregulatory interpretation, abundance treats citizen participation and engagement with government as a chokepoint and seeks to minimize it, rather than to rethink and improve mechanisms of democratic engagement. We think this too is counterproductive on several levels. In many cases the pathologies of participation that abundance points to are the product of *insufficient* and *unrepresentative* participation. For example, 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 ways to bring those currently excluded from participating in the process in a streamlined and timely manner may be more productive than simply eliminating participation altogether. Participation from the public can surface important information about the design of policies that improve 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. Unions, in particular, provide a promising vehicle for realizing the potential of citizen engagement, as internally democratic organizations that can aggregate the preferences of their members and engage with private sector developers or providers as well as government.

Finally, the most deregulatory approaches to abundance seem willing to sacrifice such values as the environment 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 will do so in a way that benefits wealthy consumers and powerful producers, not the public good—and could generate backlash against further efforts to expand supply. As we argue, ensuring that new infrastructure construction supports worker power and organizing is not just beneficial for abundance itself, but can support rebalancing economic and political power in ways that

produce 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 abundance. That is, we need not reject the aim of 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 eliminates unnecessary regulation, shortens delays, and eliminates veto points but without sacrificing critical 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 as “liberal abundance.” A more apt term that captures the commonalities among these approaches might be “democratic abundance.”

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 excessive regulation and lengthy procedure must be eliminated, an equally significant 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 tradeoffs to be made; but those should be made in the public interest and not dominated by concentrated economic interests. For reasons 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.

Before turning to those arguments, however, it is worth noting that at some earlier periods in history, democratic abundance has prevailed—and labor has played an important role in pushing for greater supply of infrastructure. Consider the example of housing, one of the foremost issues for abundance proponents. During the mid-twentieth century, labor was instrumental in bringing about production of housing through private cooperative methods and

[13] Id.; Waleed Shahid, “The Abundance Debate Is Broken. Here’s How to Fix It.,” *The Nation*, June 11, 2025, https://www.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.

through lobbying for more state investment in housing development.[14] 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.[15] In the 1940s, labor unions brought their focus on the supply of housing to the federal government, playing a central role in passing the federal Housing Act of 1949, which channeled substantial federal investment into new housing.[16] 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. In the 1990s, a coalition of unions led a fight for new affordable housing, as well as preservation of existing public housing in Fairfield County Connecticut, one of the wealthiest counties in the country with one of the scarcest housing markets.[17] And as we discuss below, unions have helped facilitate construction of new housing in several jurisdictions in the past few years. Since the 1970s, however, at the federal level, unions have played only a limited role in housing policy, particularly in advocating greater production.[18] And while abundance proponents focus on labor standards and preferences for unionized labor in particular as driving up the costs of building new housing, numerous studies find that unaffordable housing in the coastal cities so often featured in abundance work cannot be attributed to excessive labor regulation or high labor costs.[19] With abundance gaining support across the political spectrum, labor now has the opportunity to engage again–and to help ensure that democratic abundance prevails.

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[14] 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.
[15] Sarah Rodriguez, "Penn South: 50 of Affordable Housing," *Cornell University: The Kheel Center ILGWU Collection*, accessed October 17, 2025, https://ilgwu.ilr.cornell.edu/announcements/16.html.
[16] 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.
[17] Danny Hosang, "All the Issues in Workers' Lives," *Shelterforce*, May 1, 2000, https://shelterforce.org/2000/05/01/all-the-issues-in-workers-lives/.
[18] Dreir, "Labor's Love Lost?," 368.
[19] Schuyler Louie, John A. Mondragon, and Johannes Wieland, "Supply Constraints Do Not Explain House Price and Quantity Growth Across U.S. Cities, National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 33576, revised August 2025, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w33576/w33576.pdf; Brian Potter and Chad Syverson, "Building Costs and House Prices," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 39, no. 3 (2025): 67–86, https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.20241432 (concluding that building costs have limited explanatory power over US housing prices).

Our argument unfurls as follows: First, we identify the central arguments made by abundance proponents against organized labor and we explain why these critiques are misguided while also highlighting 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 help 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 decisionmaking. Third, we argue that labor should not give up on abundance. To the contrary, we argue that labor would benefit from a more fulsome engagement with abundance, and we explain how 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 costs of projects and slowing down production. Second, they argue that unions function as a special interest that distorts policy outcomes rather than representing 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. We also show that 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 of housing and infrastructure– by using their bargaining power to rent-seek in negotiations with construction firms and government.[20] Yet the actual record of unions and construction costs refutes this simplistic narrative. Research suggests that despite the fact that construction costs–especially

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

labor costs–represent a large proportion of the expense of new building, construction costs do not strongly predict housing prices, especially in recent years and for the most expensive cities.[21] Accordingly, labor costs cannot explain the rising costs of residential construction, especially in the cities with the highest costs. Turning to major public infrastructure projects, a careful analysis of the cost of constructing interstate highways finds that construction labor costs have generally remained steady since the 1970s while interstate spending costs have ballooned.[22] This suggests, as the authors put it, that "increasing labor…prices are likely insufficient to explain much of the observed increase in spending per mile."[23] 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.

These findings are consistent with the broader research on union labor and negotiations over public infrastructure construction, which finds that policies that encourage collective bargaining and representation on construction projects can ensure faster completion of quality projects by ensuring a steady labor supply of skilled workers without necessarily increasing costs. One example comes from the experience of 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 NLRA explicitly permits pre-hire collective bargaining agreements for the construction industry.) Recent Democratic presidential administrations have encouraged federal agencies to use PLAs when funding new construction projects.[24] 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 projects"[25] while there are often benefits to PLAs in the form of ensuring steady supplies of workers—a key issue given longstanding shortages in

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

[22] Leah Brooks and Zachary Liscow, "Infrastructure Costs," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 15, no. 2 (April 2023), https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/app.20200398.

[23] Id. at 19.

[24] Congressional Research Service, *Project Labor Agreements*, Report R41310, June 28, 2012, https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20120628_R41310_731846eb1c5bc373a7ea40ebd566f72ded8a8771.pdf.

[25] Federal Acquisition Regulation: Use of Project Labor Agreements for Federal Construction Projects, 88 Fed. Reg. 88708, December 22, 2023, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/12/22/2023-27736/federal-acquisition-regulation-use-of-project-labor-agreements-for-federal-construction-projects.

skilled construction labor that in turn are often a major source of delay in completing projects on time.[26] PLAs can do so by attracting higher-skilled workers 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, overall, the aggregate presence or strength of labor unions explains high and rising 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.[27] 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.[28] In New York as in other American cities, labor costs account for a substantially larger share of project costs than in other countries (accounting for 40-60% of public transit costs, compared to 9-30% in comparable peer countries).[29] Yet many of these other countries have much stronger labor movements than does 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 versus other

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[26] 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.

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

[28] Id.

[29] Goldwyn et al., *Transit Costs Project*, 15.

countries—processes that involve substantial interagency regulatory review, including consultants and lawyers, as well as overstaffing of white-collar labor supervising construction work. 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. While unionized workers in other countries working on construction products receive relatively high pay-–such as in Sweden-–that high pay is offset by high worker productivity and more flexible union work rules. 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, "[t]rade unions…have secured deals requiring underground construction work to be staffed by as many as four times more laborers than elsewhere in the world."[30]

The comparison thus suggests that unions should not be eliminated from abundance projects, but rather that governments should insist on collective bargaining agreements that allow for high-productivity as well as high-pay. This can be achieved through smart bargaining by jurisdictions. More fundamentally, however, labor law reforms could help encourage this approach to bargaining.

Union membership has been declining for decades in the United States, not because workers don't want unions—a strong majority does—but rather because of pervasive problems with labor law, including weak penalties and underenforcement.[31] In addition, because of the structure of labor law in the United States, unions typically bargain on a local basis—with individual projects or employers. As a result of both of these dynamics, unions have a strong incentive to maximize the gains they can obtain for any one given project, and to focus on retaining particular jobs, even if there are negative externalities from those settlements on a sector or region as a whole. 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

[30] Brian M. Rosenthal, "The Most Expensive Mile of Subway Track on Earth," *New York Times*, December 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/28/nyregion/new-york-subway-construction-costs.html.
[31] 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://www.jstor.org/stable/1340809; Kate Andrias and Brishen Rogers, *Rebuilding Worker Voice in Today's Economy* (New York: Roosevelt Institute, August 2018), https://rooseveltinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/RI-Rebuilding-Worker-Voice-201808.pdf; Block and Sachs, *Clean Slate for Worker Power*.

workers;[32] in such circumstances, they also have a stronger incentive to consider the broader costs (and benefits) they may be creating on the economy as a whole.[33] For this reason, we think proposals to enable sector-wide, regional, or even national organizing and bargaining are not just good for workers—but could also help to 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.[34] On this account, union leaders may not 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: In fact, they increase the representativeness and democratic legitimacy of the policy process, as we will argue in more detail in Part III. Moreover, to the extent there is merit to either of the representativeness critiques levied against unions, 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 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and public sector labor laws, unions are established only when a majority of workers at a given workplace determines that they want to form a union. Once formed, the union is mandated to follow democratic procedures, specified by the Labor-

[32] Kate Andrias, "The New Labor Law," *Yale Law Journal* 126 (2016): 2–100, https://yalelawjournal.org/article/the-new-labor-law.
[33]See Mancur Olson, "The Implications," in *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (Yale University Press, 2022), 36–74; Michael Wallerstein, "Centralized Bargaining and Wage Restraint," *American Journal of Political Science 34*, no. 4 (November 1990): 982–1004, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2111468; and Torben Iversen, *Contested Economic Institutions: The Politics of The Politics of Macroeconomics and Wage Bargaining in Advanced Democracies* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[34] See Josh Barro, "In Blue Cities, Abundance Will Require Fighting Labor Unions," *Very Serious*, June 5, 2025, https://www.joshbarro.com/p/in-blue-cities-abundance-will-require ("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 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.

Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959.[35] Among other requirements, union representatives owe a duty of fair representation to all employees covered by a collective bargaining agreement.[36] The law also gives union members rights to nominate candidates for union office, vote in union elections, and participate in union meetings, and imposes a host of transparency requirements on unions so that members can hold their organizations accountable (such as financial disclosures and relevant constitutions and by-laws).[37] Few other organizations are required by law to be as internally democratic as unions, including publically-held companies.

That is not to say 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.[38] Yet we do not think that the appropriate response is to jettison the democratic potential of unions. Instead, we think the answer is to work towards 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. These kinds of internal union practices tend to produce more energetic and effective organizations.[39] 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.[40]

Efforts to dismiss unions as oppositional to the broader public interest are similarly misplaced. It is true that there are many workers who are not members of unions and therefore are not directly represented when unions are brought into the governing process. But here again, 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

[35] Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959, Pub. L. 86-257, 73 Stat. 519 (1959).
[36] See, e.g., *Steele v. Louisville & Nashville Railway Co.*, 323 U.S. 192 (1944); *Vaca v. Sipes*, 386 U.S. 171 (1967).
[37] Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959 § 101, 29 U.S.C. § 411.
[38] For an analysis, see 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.
[39] Id.
[40] 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); Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

constituencies to which unions are accountable.[41] 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 new tripartite approaches to governance at the local, state and/or federal level. That is, by engaging unions, business, and the public in decisionmaking 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 decisionmaking.

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. They argue that the success of these states suggests that housing abundance need not require strong unions. 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.[42] We do not see this as a sustainable approach for the rest of the country to follow. Not only do we think that these working conditions represent a policy failure for affected workers, but we also think that over the longer run, abundance approaches that ignore the

[41] Kate Andrias, "The New Labor Law," Yale Law Journal 126 (2016) https://yalelawjournal.org/article/the-new-labor-law; see also Kate Andrias and Brishen Rogers, *Rebuilding Worker Voice in Today's Economy* (Roosevelt Institute, 2018), https://rooseveltinstitute.org/publications/rebuilding-worker-voice-in-todays-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; 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.

[42] 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.

quality of the jobs being created run the risk of political backlash, which we will 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 lack strong labor unions, casting further doubt on the role of labor costs and unions in particular as drivers of the red-state slow-down in construction (as opposed to other barriers to construction).[43]

III. How organized labor can help achieve abundance goals

Not only are the abundance critiques of unions largely misplaced, but, as this Part shows, 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. We highlight three ways in which organized labor is critical to achieving these goals: (1) by providing adequate skilled labor for completing infrastructure projects at scale and on 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.

A. *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% of all employment, according to Brookings Institution estimates.[44] 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,

[43] https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w33876/w33876.pdf.
[44] Joseph Kane, "Seizing the U.S. Infrastructure Opportunity: Investing in Current and Future Workers," *Brookings Metro*, December 2022, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/InfraJobsUpdate_final.pdf.

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 very recent months the job opening rate for construction work has declined, indicating a potential slowdown).[45] The immigration restrictions pursued by the Trump Administration are likely to exacerbate these shortages in construction, as immigrants make up around a quarter of all construction workers in recent years–and even more in some states, such as Texas and California.[46] Reflecting on these challenges recruiting a sufficiently large skilled workforce, construction industry associations express worries about project delays and opportunities to take on new projects.[47] The lack of a sufficiently large skilled workforce in skilled trades, especially construction and electricity, threatens a number of important policy goals, including those often prioritized by abundance proponents. Labor shortages in construction, for instance, are one factor threatening the viability of a U.S. clean energy transition over the long run. 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 U.S. efforts to move to decarbonize the economy.[48] Labor shortages also threaten new sectors of the digital economy. For example, Microsoft President Brad Smith recently explained that the biggest obstacle his data center teams faced was a skilled trades worker shortage, 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

[45] Associated General Contractors and Sage, "A Construction Market in Transition: The 2024 Construction Hiring and Business Outlook," 2024, https://www.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, Oct. 2025, https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/JTS2300JOR. On long-run forecasts in the construction occupations, see: https://www.bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction/.

[46] 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.

[47] "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/.

[48] Brinn McDowell, Jeremy Stefek, Elena Smith, Bailey Pons, 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.

of the shortage of electricians, Microsoft had been employing some workers who were even temporarily relocating from other states.

Unions can play a critical role in helping to train skilled construction and other infrastructure workers to meet unmetdemand–and also ensure that these jobs are good-paying for workers, further making these jobs attractive to new entrants to the industry. Important reasons for why more workers do not enter infrastructure, and especially 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).[49] Unions can help address each of these concerns, given 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.

Equally important is the role that unions can play in training workers for skilled trades.[50] Out of the 547,922 apprentices training in fiscal year 2021, slightly under 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, which often spans 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 incentivize workers to invest in new skills and training and also give employers a material stake in those workers' training. Once they finish their training, union apprentices graduate into a job in their industry and become part of their trade's union. Research suggests that apprenticeship programs that

[49] 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.

[50] 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-lead 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://www.urban.org/research/publication/how-labor-unions-and-industry-associations-can-accelerate-youth-apprenticeship.

are jointly run between unions and employers tend to have more rigorous curricula and better completion rates than programs run exclusively by employers.[51]

Together, unions' roles in collective bargaining for better job conditions and in facilitating joint employer-labor apprenticeship programs can help explain why unionized construction contractors are better at meeting workforce needs than non-unionized contractors. Analysis of a 2021 survey of contractors found that unionized contractors reported much less difficulty filling some or all of their skilled craft trades positions and much lower delays due to labor shortages.[52] Those results from 2021 mirrored earlier surveys dating back before the COVID-19 pandemic. Unionized contractors are also less likely 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 as well as the deeply segregated occupations in the skilled trades, unionized contractors are also more likely to report greater workforce diversity, including higher employment of women and Black workers, than are non-union contractors.[53] While not all building trade unions are committed to diversifying their ranks, there are a growing number of unions recruiting more women and workers of color into apprenticeships and construction trades jobs. For example, Portland, Oregon-based joint labor-management programs have helped to diversify participation in apprenticeships in their communities and completion rates for women and workers of color are higher for union-led apprenticeship programs in the area as compared to employer-only apprenticeships.[54] Chicago Women in Trades provides another example, using 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.[55] Other unions, like the Laborers' International Union of Northern America (LiUNA), have

[51] 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, 2022): 3, https://lep.illinois.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/ILEPI-PMCR-Construction-Labor-Shortage-AGC-Report-FINAL18.pdf

[52] Id. at 6.

[53] Id. at 8.

[54] 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.

[55] "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.

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.[56]

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 tradesworkers, pose a significant obstacle. Meeting the increased demand envisioned by an abundance agenda will require growing the ranks of skilled tradesworkers, 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 can 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 and support the growth of these partnerships, for example by offering public support for wrap-around services like child care or transportation that could help workers complete apprenticeships and invest in pre-apprenticeships programs that can prepare workers, especially from under-represented backgrounds, for apprenticeship entry requirements.[57] This could include scaling up successful federal grant programs, such as the Department of Labor's Women's Bureau Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations Grant program, which funds efforts to increase women's participation in apprenticeship programs.[58] It could also include creating new funding programs to support more workers to prepare to enter the skilled trades in occupations needed for an abundance agenda.

B. Building political coalitions in support of new investments in infrastructure and housing

Beyond training the skilled workers needed for abundance investments, unions can help marshal the support necessary for enacting policies that support infrastructure and housing

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

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

[58] US Department of Labor, "Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations (WANTO) Grant Program," *Women's Bureau*, https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/grants/wanto.

investments that abundance proponents seek. A core argument of the abundance movement is that Americans lack the physical investments in infrastructure and housing we need because of failures in the political system, especially too many veto points and not enough organized political support for the diffuse benefits and concentrated costs that many infrastructure and housing projects offer.[59]

For its diagnosis of the failures to provide sufficient affordable housing in particular, abundance draws from a large and growing literature in political science that documents numerous obstacles to more 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 its opponents, making it easier to drag out the process of approving new construction until it is no longer worth the effort for developers.[60] (There are other important barriers worth noting too, including the lack of sustained public investment in housing, especially for families who struggle the most to afford rent or mortgages, which as we have discussed labor helped to support in earlier decades when unions had more organized clout.[61])

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 more

[59] See Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance* (Simon & Schuster, 2025).
[60] 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://www.politicsofhousing.com/research/who_participates_in_local_government.pdf.
[61] Will Fischer and Barbara Sard, "Federal Housing Spending Is Poorly Matched to Need," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, March 8, 2017, https://www.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://www.cbpp.org/research/chart-book-cuts-in-federal-assistance-have-exacerbated-families-struggles-to-afford-housing.

infrastructure spending and pro-infrastructure reforms. Unions can form an important part of that supportive alliance.

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 their communities where they work (or would like to work), many union members struggle with issues of housing affordability. A recent survey conducted by one of us with collaborators found that *union members suffer from housing insecurity at about the same rates as non-union members*.[62] In an early 2025 survey of working American adults, 46% of union members said that they worried about affording their rent or mortgage (including 23% of respondents who worried a lot); the share for non-unionized workers was virtually identical at 44% (including 22% of respondents who worried a lot). Housing affordability is an issue that cuts across the American population, including union members and non-members alike.

Within the labor movement, housing affordability is an issue that also cuts across very different occupations and sectors. As the National Education Association (NEA) 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, Mexico interviewed by the NEA explained that despite holding a master's degree and being promoted to the highest-paid category of 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."[63] Those same concerns are shared by much lower-paid hotel workers, and 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."[64] 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,

[62] For more information on the survey, see 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 & A Just Economy*, https://clje.law.harvard.edu/app/uploads/2025/05/The-Varied-Voice-of-Labor_Final.pdf.
[63] Tim Walker, "Educators Struggle to Find Affordable Housing," *NEA Today*, April 1, 2024, https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/teachers-struggle-find-affordable-housing.
[64] Steven Greenhouse, "US Union Target the Housing Affordability Crisis as Their 'Biggest Issue,'" *The Guardian*, February 16, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/16/unions-affordable-housing.

requiring her to take a two-hour commute each way, which ate into spending time with her family.[65]

In addition to union members experiencing the scarcity of housing firsthand, unions involved in the building trades have another direct interest in supporting more infrastructure and housing since heir economic livelihood depends on new construction. As one example, the members of North America's Building Trades Union (NABTU), the national alliance of building and construction trades unions, were an important lobbying force behind the passage of the bipartisan infrastructure law enacted by President Biden in 2021.[66] NABTU's members also push for expanded federal support for apprenticeships, seeing them as an important vehicle through which its members can train more skilled tradesworkers and grow their ranks.[67] Building trades unions are also active at the local and state levels to support greater development that would expand job opportunities for their members.[68]

In several states that have passed recent reforms to encourage the construction of more housing, including affordable housing, we 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 multi-unit 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 multi-unit construction in many neighborhoods across the state.[69] 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

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[65] Id.
[66] "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.
[67] "NABTU Issues Directive for Apprenticeship Week," *Cleveland Building & Construction Trades Council*, October 15, 2019, https://www.cbctc.org/blog/nabtu-issues-directive-for-apprenticeship-week.
[68] 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://nycclc.org/news/local-3-ibew-building-trades-unions-lobby-metropolitan.
[69] H.B. 1110, 2023–24 Reg. Sess. (Wash. 2023), https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1110&Year=2023.

SEIU.[70] Labor's interest in Washington spanned both its construction unions, invested in building more units, as well as 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."[71]

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, permits higher density housing in and near the city center, permits more multifamily housing on public transit routes, and permits more options for multi-family houses in different neighborhoods. Reflecting on these reforms, Minneapolis Mayor Frey has credited unions, especially the building trades, with helping to support more density in the city.[72] And, as in Washington state, housing reforms received strong support from SEIU representing 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.[73] Members mentioned to Varco that they couldn't afford to live in Minneapolis, near their jobs, and would take "two and one half hour bus rides to get to work." Housing is just an enormous cost for [union members]," so the union realized "it was important for us to do and say something about it," he said.

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 for 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. As one news outlet put it, the 2025 reforms mean that "one of the biggest

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[70] Joseph O'Sullivan, WA Looks to Address Housing Shortage With Density, Zoning Changes, *Cascade PBS*, March 17, 2023, https://www.cascadepbs.org/politics/2023/03/wa-looks-address-housing-shortage-density-zoning-changes.
[71] Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO, 2023 Legislature Report, 2023: 12, https://www.wslc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/WSLC-Leg-Report-2023_web.pdf.
[72] City of Minneapolis, "June 25, 2024 Minneapolis 2040 – Moving Forward Press Conference," streamed live June 25, 2024, YouTube, 5:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaPJuiXR_rA.
[73] 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

obstacles to building new CA housing has now vanished."[74] Labor unions, especially the building trades unions, were key players in 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.[75] Most of the building trades labor movement wanted lawmakers to use a prevailing wage standard for these projects: a standard wage paid on public works projects calculated based on the wage rates paid to unionized construction tradesworkers. Prevailing wage standards are an important tool that ensure that new publicly-funded projects are not bid down by low labor costs and below-market wages, which in turn would undercut union labor and degrade labor conditions in communities. Instead of a prevailing wage standard, however, lawmakers had 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 the compromise. 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."[76] 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. On the other hand the rest of the building trades unions–who were not consulted before the compromise went public–were staunchly opposed, arguing that the bill would undercut wages for unionized construction workers and was therefore a nonstarter.

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[74] 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.
[75] 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.
[76] Christopher, "Newsom and Legislature tangle with construction unions over minimum wage."

Cracks in the building trades' coalition had emerged years before, with the carpenters previously breaking away from the rest of the building trades by supporting other compromises on labor standards to raise the floor for non-union construction workers, even if those standards were not to the level of unionized building tradesworkers.[77] Ultimately, the carpenters' strong support for reform—seeing new construction as an unprecedented "organizing opportunity"—-helped the bill over the finish line, as did an additional compromise applying prevailing wage standards to larger projects.[78]

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 than no reform at all. For abundance advocates, the compromise meant 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, non-union 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."[79] 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.We think that California's carpenter compromise may be productive as a model for abundance efforts going forward.

As this section has shown, we believe labor can be an important political partner in pushing elected officials to invest in the projects envisioned by abundance proponents, especially when their members have clear interests as both workers and consumers—of

[77] 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.
[78] 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.
[79] Kuang and Christopher, "Why one union became one of the most pro-housing voices in California."

housing, child care, transportation, or energy—and when policymakers create opportunities for win-win policy designs, for instance, helping labor have a role in training workers involved in these projects, or creating opportunities for organizing workers who will be employed in these projects.

Where labor unions lack a seat at the table in negotiating over labor standards, unions will lack incentives to support political reforms that could unlock more construction. New York City offers a cautionary tale: in the recent 2025 election, major unions opposed ballot measures that would speed up review of subsidized affordable housing projects.[80] According to the Carpenter's 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 them [developers] to the negotiating table." One could have imagined 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 the Mayor-elect supports both high labor standards and speedy production of affordable housing.[81]

C. 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 decisionmaking.A central and powerful objection to abundance is that it enables the government to fasttrack 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 does not only help build political coalitions; it 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

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

[81] 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://www.thecity.nyc/2025/10/28/zohran-mamdani-union-labor-affordable-housing-charter-proposals.

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 (and unions have incentives and the organizational structure to do so). Workers' participation also means that on-the-ground knowledge is incorporated into the process.

What makes unions especially important vehicles for building participation into government decisions is their internally democratic structure, as we 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.[82] That is not to say that all unions are perfectly democratic; many have uncontested elections for leadership, members in many unions may be disengaged, and some unions have struggled with problems of corruption, both historically and in the present day. 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 organizations in our organizational landscape.[83] 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 ones that have internal structures of elections or democracy.[84]

Not only are unions internally democratic, but they 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

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[82] Margaret Weir & Marshall Ganz, "Reconnecting People and Politics," in *The New Majority* (Stanley B. Greenberg & Theda Skocpol eds.) (Yale University Press, 2008).

[83] 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://www.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://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/25/business/uaw-autoworkers-union-election.html.

[84] Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003); 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://www.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-agora.

process.[85] At their best, unions aggregate and represent the views of millions of workers. In this way, union involvement in the policy process avoids the problem that abundance proponents highlight of unrepresentative individual citizens or professional advocacy groups capturing and stymieing government decisions.[86]

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.[87] In the post-war 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.[88]

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

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[85] Jan E. Leighley and Jonathan Nagler, "Unions, Voter Turnout, and Class Bias in the U.S. Electorate, 1964–2004," *The 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 No. 24259 (January 2018; revised February 2019). Nicholas Carnes, *The Cash Ceiling: Why Only the Rich Run for Office—and What We Can Do about It*, (Princeton University Press, 2018). John S. Ahlquist, "Labor Unions, Political Representation, and Economic Inequality," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 409–432, https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051215-023225. 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).

[86] Steven Teles, "Minoritarianism is Everywhere," National Affairs (Spring 2025), https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/minoritarianism-is-everywhere.

[87] 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).

[88] 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: Oxford University Press, 1965), 231.

retraining workers to wield the skills necessary for a changing economy.[89] 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, help achieve consensus on labor standards and weaken the ability of "groups [including labor] to act as veto points."[90] As a result, even though there is a "right to sue" to stop infrastructure construction projects in Sweden, "in particular, lawsuits are rare" given the effort to achieve consensus on the the front-end of a project with affected workers and broader communities affected by projects.[91] And even with unionized labor and relatively high wages and benefits, Nordic countries' overall construction costs remain below other rich democracies.[92] Notably, 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.[93]

The tradition of tripartism in the United States is weaker than Europe and other rich democracies. But where we have tried tripartism in this country, it has often enabled significant increases in production and resulted in 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.[94] The deals struck between the actors ensured continuous wartime production around the clock with access to skilled labor, and enabled more labor peace than would have been present without the deals. They also buoyed union membership, which in turn helped increase the wages, benefits, and

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[89] Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization*, 71–74, 105–10 (on skill formation); 113–21 (on labor market policy).
[90] 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 (New York: Routledge, 2021), 183–204, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429431135-9-9/sustaining-high-road-employment-relations-swedish-danish-construction-industries-jens-arnholtz-christian-lyhne-ibsen.
[91] Levy et al., *The Sweden Case Study Report*, 21.
[92] 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.
[93] Thelen, *Varieties of Liberalization*, 204–06.
[94] Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2003).

collective voice of workers, strengthening the economy and democracy during the postwar period.[95]

Union participation in policymaking through tripartite structures can also contribute to faster and more effective decisionmaking—two other core aims of abundance. That is, abundance advocates bemoan the delays inherent in most governmental decisionmaking 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 were able to bring their expertise to speed up implementation of health IT investments such as electronic health records relative to nonunion nurses.[96] The expertise advantage is further enhanced through tripartite arrangements, which bring the knowledge of both labor and business to the table.

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 problems in particular industries. In total, since 2018, six states and three localities have enacted new tripartite structures, creating twelve new worker standards boards.[97] The strongest of these is the Minnesota Nursing Home Workforce Standards Board, established in 2023, and 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; and 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.[98] 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 the workers and owners into productive dialogue with one another.[99]

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[95] Id.
[96] 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.
[97] Aurelia Glass and David Madland, "Momentum for Worker Standards Boards Continues To Grow," *Center for American Progress*, September 7, 2023, https://www.americanprogress.org/article/momentum-for-worker-standards-boards-continues-to-grow/.
[98] 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://www.americanprogress.org/article/industry-standards-boards-are-delivering-results-for-workers-employers-and-their-communities/; Kate Andrias, "Constitutional and Administrative Innovation Through State Labor Law," *Wisconsin Law Review* (2024): 1469, 1491–96.
[99] Id.

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 be used to 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. New tripartite boards could have as their mandate to set labor standards throughout relevant industries in ways that facilitate both high productivity and high wages, and to establish new training programs. They could also be designed to 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.[100] 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 we have discussed in more detail above, broken labor law and low union density have tended to narrow the scope of unions' focus in bargaining and politics. Tripartite bargaining and policymaking structures that broaden unions' and employers' focus—as in other Western European democracies—can help address these pervasive features of American labor law.

Not only can tripartite arrangements advance the legitimacy and effectiveness of abundance projects, 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.[101] For employers as well, the boards bring benefits. They level the playing field in the industry, since all competitors must meet the same standards, ensuring that high-road employers are no longer placed at a disadvantage.[102] They also can advance labor peace.

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

[100] See Zachary Liscow, "Reforming Permitting to Build Infrastructure," *Brookings*, Sept. 2025: 8.
[101] Kate Andrias, "An American Approach to Social Democracy: The Forgotten Promise of the Fair Labor Standards Act," *Yale Law Journal* 128 (2019): 616–702.
[102] Glass and Madland, "Momentum for Worker Standards."

local community interests and meet certain standards for democratic accountability. In particular, Raj Nayak urges a system under which cities and states would pass laws that streamline construction requirements for major projects only after developers enter into Community Benefits Agreements, which are enforceable contracts between community organizations and developers.[103] In these agreements, community organizations ensure the democratic legitimacy of the abundance projects: They negotiate for their priorities, whether that includes affordable housing, community spaces, training, local hiring targets, or others. 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. This would build 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.[104]

IV. Why labor should support democratic abundance

The preceding section demonstrated that abundance can benefit from unions. This section argues that unions can, in turn, benefit from abundance—if it is properly designed. With union engagement, infrastructure projects can be designed to facilitate new worker organizing, to expand job opportunities, and to improve living conditions for union members and all working people. In short, by engaging the abundance effort, labor can help shape abundance so that it truly works for workers.

At a time when the national union membership is less than 10% (and lower among private-sector workers), it is essential to scale up new organizing of workers. The abundance

[103] Raj Nayak, "Empowering Communities to Advance More Progressive Abundance," *Democracy Journal*, forthcoming 2026.
[104] 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://www.utilitydive.com/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.

agenda of creating new work, including among previously non-union workers, should be seen as an opportunity, not a threat. The key will be for infrastructure projects to include levers that can provide unions with stepping stones and hooks to organizing and eventually representing and bargaining on behalf of those workers. The California compromise represents one potential strategy: raise wages and working conditions for non-union workers to help reduce their competition with unionized labor, and then create organizing hooks through oversight of those labor standards through union-led enforcement strategies.[105] It is too soon to tell if that approach can yield new members, but given the dire state of union membership we believe it is imperative that unions continue to experiment with new approaches unlocked by abundance proponents.

Infrastructure projects can also directly build union membership. Existing law allows for 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 prehire 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.[106] Labor Peace Agreements in other industries often contain terms under which an employer agrees to remain neutral as to its employees' decision whether they 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.[107] 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

[105] 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.
[106] Sameera Fazili, Pronita Gupta, and Doug Bloch, "How Community Benefits Agreements Can Reduce Project Delivery Risk," *Utility Dive*, October 15, 2025, https://www.utilitydive.com/news/community-benefits-agreements-cba-ramp-up/802808/.
[107] See, e.g., *Building & Construction Trades Council v. Associated Builders & Contractors of Massachusetts/Rhode Island, Inc.* (*Boston Harbor*), 507 U.S. 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).

efficiency" in contracting.[108] Though businesses have long challenged these labor peace provisions, courts, with a few exceptions, have upheld them.[109] Notably, the Trump Administration continues to defend the Biden Project Labor Agreement Executive Order against legal challenge, indicating bipartisan support for such efforts.[110] Even more could be done with new federal legislation. That is, federal legislation funding future abundance projects could make explicit the legality of broad labor peace agreements, including prehire agreements beyond the construction industry.

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.[111] Nonetheless, power and resources that are amassed in blue states can be exported to red states for future organizing, and eventually can be deployed at the federal level.[112] In addition, community benefit agreements, which generally involve privately negotiated agreements, are harder to preempt through state law.[113]

There is one additional way in which democratic abundance can help unions: By becoming a champion for more affordable housing and infrastructure projects that benefit all

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[108] 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).

[109] Juan Ramon Riojas, "Labor-Peace Agreements in Emerging Industries," *Columbia Law Review* 125, no. 2 (2025), https://www.columbialawreview.org/content/labor-peace-agreements-in-emerging-industries/.

[110] 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").

[111] 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://www.epi.org/blog/updated-epi-preemption-tracker; Christopher B. Goodman and Megan E. Hatch, "Why States Preempt City 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

[112] 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. 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.

[113] Benjamin I. Sachs, "Despite Preemption: Making Labor Law in Cities and States," Harvard Law Review 124 (2011): 1222.

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.[114] 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, 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 workplace bread-and-butter 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.[115]

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 current Administration is weaponizing the federal government to suppress dissent in civil society among law firms, universities, media outlets, and non-profits; ignoring laws, court rulings, and constitutional norms; using federal law enforcement machinery to punish and harass perceived political opponents; deploying the military to discourage protest and pressure states and localities that resist the Administration's agenda; dismantling and politicizing the independent federal civil service and previously independent regulatory agencies; and leveraging the government to support the personal enrichment of the President's family and close allies, among many other distressing developments.[116] According to several prominent political

[114] 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.
[115] Joseph A. McCartin, "Bargaining for the Common Good," *Dissent Magazine*, Spring 2016, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/bargaining-common-good-community-union-alignment/
[116] Cameron Peters and Zack Beauchamp, "The very specific way America could become authoritarian," *Vox Media*, September 23, 2025, https://www.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-

scientists, "the United States has descended into competitive authoritarianism."[117] And beyond the immediate threats, the U.S. 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.[118]

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 help 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 one of the essential civil society organizations in both fighting democratic backsliding and pushing for democratization.[119] 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.

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norms-in-trumps-america. New York Times Editorial Board, "Are We Losing Our Democracy?" *New York Times*, October 31, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/10/31/opinion/trump-autocracy-democracy-report.html.

[117] Steven Levitzky, Lucan A. Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, The Price of American Authoritarianism, Foreign Affairs, January/February 2026.

[118] 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), https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/D/bo58174159.html; Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Let them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (Liveright, 2021), https://wwnorton.com/books/9781631496844; Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 2020), https://academic.oup.com/book/36918.

[119] For a collection of these roles, see Angela B. Cornell and Mark Barenberg, *The Cambridge Handbook of Labor and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/books/329.

Unions are well-positioned to serve as bulwarks of democracies for several reasons.[120] Unions often are one of the few coordinated civil society organizations in countries with nation-spanning reach that include local chapters or affiliates working with one another and thus have capacity for large-scale coordinated action; they have independent sources of revenue (from worker dues) that are not dependent on government money (and thus less susceptible to authoritarian weaponization of government funding flows); they 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 often 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 country.[121]

Accordingly, we think 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 seek to remove or weaken unions is not just misguided in terms of achieving the abundance movement's own goals, as we have argued above. We think such a posture risks the health of American democracy by weakening a key pillar of civil society. Seen in this way, 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 help 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 seeks to sideline or weaken labor standards for workers and mechanisms for participatory input in government decisions: doing so risks inviting even more of a right-wing populist backlash to democracy. As abundance advocates argue, government's

[120] For exploration of the relationship between unions and democracy and a review of the literature see Kate Andrias, "Labor and Democracy," in *Oxford Handbook of the Law of Work*, edited by Guy Davidov, Brian Langille, and Gillian Lester (2024).
[121] US Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Union Members—2024," January 28, 2025, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf.

failure to deliver infrastructure and other needed goods helps explain the growing dissatisfaction with democracy. At the same time, we know from a mounting body of research from the United States and Western Europe that 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.[122] 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.[123] As a result, the maximally deregulatory abundance movement—by creating jobs at any cost, regardless of the quality of those jobs and by eliminating opportunities for democratic engagement and representation—risks creating further backlash to democracy contrary to its stated mission, precisely at a moment where democracy is under threat. Democratic abundance is needed not only for workers, but for all of us.

[122] 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.

[123] 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), https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo22879533.html; Suzanne Mettler and Trevor E. Brown, *Rural Versus Urban: The Growing Divide That Threatens Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2025), https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691264387/rural-versus-urban?srsltid=AfmBOop7cUXzHz_UwkK9Y13SXgWcTchrMzd8UUxzHh4ktIfkkujlleUh.