

# A More Perfect Unionism

## Redeeming the Role of Organized Labor in the Push for Affordable Housing

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### ABSTRACT

Wage stagnation and rising housing costs are two central factors contributing to growing economic inequality in the United States. In urban areas, this gap is intensified by significant wage growth for the highest-income households that drives housing costs up across the market, drastically decreasing housing opportunities for urban residents in the lowest income bracket. Because labor unions played a central role in the policy, financing, and production of affordable housing units for low- and middle-income earners in the first half of the 20th century, the decrease in union membership over the second half of the 20th century should be analyzed for its effect on affordable housing production over the same time period. Analyzing both the historical and current role of labor union involvement in affordable housing production provides a helpful lens to explore the intimate relationship between employment and housing in the United States. The shrinking membership and political influence of labor unions nationwide hinders their ability to maintain a significant influence in housing policy and production at a national level; however, the social and financial resources unions retain position them well to effect substantive changes to housing production, policy, and rights at a local level. Labor unions can once again bolster affordable housing production at the local level by leveraging three strategic assets: access to capital for affordable housing finance, a strong tradition of community organizing, and a long-standing expertise in alternative forms of affordable housing production.

## INTRODUCTION

Wage stagnation and a rising cost of living are two central factors contributing to growing economic inequality in the United States. Between 1980-2018, the rise in housing costs outpaced the rise in household incomes by 22 percent.<sup>1</sup> In urban areas, the extreme disparities between income and housing costs are now especially difficult to track. Since household area median income (AMI), a value used to identify housing affordability, is recorded at the county or Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) level, the real median income within city limits is often left unaccounted for in local plans for affordable housing development.

Table 1 illustrates an analysis of annual household incomes across 16 urban areas. Of the 16 areas analyzed, 15 show lower median incomes at the city level when compared to county and MSA measures, with 11 showing gaps of more than \$5,000. Overall, the average disparity between

median incomes is roughly \$6,900 when comparing cities and counties, and \$8,900 when comparing cities and MSAs. These disparities have major implications for housing affordability because new developments with income-restricted units may still remain unaffordable to individuals with incomes far below the official AMI. Although this paper will not address the complex historic and macroeconomic factors that have contributed to the gap in income levels between geographies, it will address how the labor market specifically helped shape regional wealth inequalities across the United States.

General wage stagnation is even more alarming when considering how it is segmented across different income groups. While wages for workers in the bottom 10 percent of the earnings distribution only increased by an inflation-adjusted 4.3 percent between 2000-2018, those in the top 10 percent increased by approximately 15.7 percent over the same time period.<sup>2</sup> This dynamic contributes directly to the housing

Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA)	Median Household Income	County	Median Household Income	Principal City	Median Household Income
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	\$72,998	Los Angeles County	\$68,044	Los Angeles	\$62,142
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, Ill	\$71,770	Cook County	\$64,660	Chicago	\$58,247
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX	\$67,516	Harris County	\$61,705	Houston	\$52,338
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL	\$56,775	Miami-Dade County	\$51,374	Miami	\$39,049
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	\$70,281	Dallas County	\$59,607	Dallas	\$52,580
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	\$65,121	Riverside County	\$67,005	Riverside	\$69,045
Las Vegas-Henderson-Paradise, NV	\$59,340	Clark County	\$59,340	Las Vegas	\$56,354
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	\$86,856	King County	\$94,974	Seattle	\$92,263
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	\$65,121	San Bernardino County	\$63,362	San Bernardino	\$45,834
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	\$70,281	Tarrant County	\$67,700	Fort Worth	\$62,187
San Antonio-New Braunfels, TX	\$60,327	Bexar County	\$57,157	San Antonio	\$52,455
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL	\$56,775	Broward County	\$59,547	Fort Lauderdale	\$59,450
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	\$122,478	Santa Clara County	\$124,055	San Jose	\$109,593
Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI	\$60,984	Wayne County	\$47,301	Detroit	\$30,894
San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley, CA	\$106,025	Alameda County	\$99,406	Oakland	\$73,692
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL	\$56,775	Palm Beach County, FL	\$63,299	West Palm Beach	\$54,334

Source: United States Census Bureau, 2019 ACS 5-Year Estimates

Table 1. Illustrates an analysis of annual household incomes across 16 urban areas. Of the 16 areas analyzed, 15 show lower median incomes at the city-level when compared to county and MSA measures, with 11 showing gaps of more than \$5,000.

affordability issue. Urban areas with high concentrations of residents employed in high-opportunity sectors drive housing prices up to a point that largely excludes low- and moderate-income workers from the housing market. This market exclusion decreases the accessibility of urban housing opportunities for both prospective and current residents, meaning the story of rising housing prices is also a story of displacement.



Figure 1. GEO-AFT Local 3550, a labor union based in Ann Arbor, help organize a protest of Washtenaw County's decision to discontinue sheltering houseless individuals at the local Red Roof Inn in December 2020. Other organizers involved include Washtenaw Camp Outreach, Ann Arbor Tenants' Union, and the Washtenaw General Defense Committee (McBurnett, 2020).

Although the inaccessibility of high-quality housing for the poor and working class has plagued the United States for over a century, new trends emerged due to shifting institutional arrangements in the mid-20th century.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the 1970s, the federal government leveraged an arsenal of robust legal and policy interventions to correct for market failures in affordable housing production. Through partnerships with labor unions, these policies directly linked the increase in affordable housing production to the number of quality employment opportunities nationally. As unions secured federal construction contracts, increases in union membership not only meant a larger

labor force for housing construction, but also greater bargaining power for union workers seeking to maintain prevailing wages. However, after major changes to labor laws, housing subsidies, and production programs in the 1970s-1980s, the federal government's role in addressing these issues receded substantially. In a general sense, the changing legal and political environment that informed this process at the national level led to a dramatic decline in the role of labor unionism in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Although labor unions still exist today, their numbers have dropped drastically, and their once-commanding presence in federal policy and law formulation has also diminished by a comparable magnitude. Since labor unions historically influenced federal interventions for worker compensation and affordable housing issues, the juxtaposition of growing income inequality and housing unaffordability is evidenced by the shifting role of organized labor over the past century.

By identifying the variety of resources that unions can leverage in the current process of affordable housing development, I argue that labor unions still maintain a vital position in the production of affordable housing policies and programs today. In the first section, I provide a historical overview of the role of labor unions in the production of housing to show how substantial union involvement in the past directly affected quality employment opportunities, progressive housing policies, and rates of affordable housing production. In the second section, I discuss how the shifting legal, political, and economic environment over the past half century has changed both the development of affordable housing and the role of labor unions in the housing market. Lastly, I discuss how these changes create new opportunities for labor unions to become involved in both affordable housing production and advocacy around housing rights today at the local level.

## THE HISTORICAL CONNECTION BETWEEN LABOR AND HOUSING

Labor unions, and federations of those unions, played historically formative roles in affordable housing production and policy in the United States. Because of both the diverse set of industries to which unions are individually focused and the broad network of coalitions unions built, unions and union federations engaged with policy and production in the housing market at both the local and federal level. Depending on the union, roles ranged from the direct production of affordable housing for both union members and non-union residents to the creation of legislation concerning housing production programs at the federal level.

An analysis of union labor organizing in New York City offers a case study that exemplifies the degree to which union labor organizing influenced the housing sector at both the local and national level. Starting as early as the 1920s, worker coalitions successfully coordinated both the financing and construction of quality affordable housing units in New York City. This was especially popular with working-class immigrant collectives, where groups like the Yiddish United Workers and the Jewish National Workers Alliance pooled funds to finance affordable cooperatively owned developments through bond sales and small loans contributed by worker families.<sup>5</sup> This grassroots approach was eventually scaled up and officially sponsored by labor unions across New York City throughout the 1940s-1960s. The first of these union-sponsored developments was the Amalgamated House in 1926, a cooperative in the Bronx built by the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). At full occupancy, the Amalgamated Houses contained about 1,500 units and incorporated multiple uses, including a library and a grocery store, that

added to the overall quality and vitality of the cooperatives' residents and the surrounding community.<sup>6</sup>

This cooperative framework eventually spread to other unions in other boroughs. In Queens, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 3 coordinated the construction of Electchester in 1949. Built on 103 acres over three decades, the Electchester development included 38 buildings, 2,500 residential units, an auditorium, a cocktail bar, a shopping center, and many other social and recreational institutions.<sup>7</sup> IBEW, ILGWU, and 17 other unions and community organizations came together to form the United Housing Foundation (UHF) in 1951, which coordinated the development of nearly 50,000 residential units by the late 1960s through a partnership with the union-sponsored general contractor Community Services Incorporated.<sup>8</sup> Classified as limited-dividend nonprofits, these cooperatives partnered with union-owned banks to finance construction using a variety of capital sources such as union pensions, state and city tax abatements, and 'equity shares' pooled between cooperative residents.<sup>9</sup> Although many housing units were reserved for the local unionized workforce,<sup>10</sup> the cooperatives incorporated amenities for the broader community and provided many units open to any prospective resident whose income was below a certain threshold, regardless of union affiliation.<sup>11</sup>

The growing presence and influence of UHF resulted in the organization's ability to secure both public financing and large tracts of land across New York City. Enabled by the state's Mitchell Lama program, the UHF was a strategic partner in the City's broader urban renewal. As part of the state's 1955 Limited Profit Housing Companies Law, the Mitchell Lama program enabled UHF's large-scale production of middle-income, cooperatively owned housing across the city.<sup>12</sup> UHF-affiliated unions also partnered with the

federal government on the construction of public housing as part of the infamous urban renewal program that displaced many of the City's poorest residents.<sup>13</sup> Although UHF focused on building limited-equity cooperatives for residents whose incomes were considered either too high for public housing or too low for the private market, the organization contributed to the construction of around 100,000 public housing projects, limited equity cooperatives, and market-rate luxury apartments that were each tailored to residents of particular racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>14</sup>

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Beyond New York City, the parent federation to many of the UHF-affiliated unions, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), created major inroads for federal housing policy and production programs in the 1930s-1950s that helped spur local affordable housing development. As the nation’s largest federation of labor unions during its time, the AFL helped advance federal policies and programs that would produce both union jobs and affordable housing to very low- and moderate-income residents on a national scale.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the AFL’s most influential moment came during the Labor Housing Conference, a coalition of union members and housing advocates headed by AFL official Catherine Bauer Wurster in the 1930s. Through their annual meetings in 1934-1935, Wurster and the Labor Housing Conference helped draft the 1937 Housing Act that paved the way for the nation’s public housing production

program.<sup>16</sup> Following the passage of this landmark act, the AFL continued to support subsequent legislation and policies related to the federal public housing program principally because it was a major source of jobs for construction trade union members.<sup>17</sup>

Organized labor’s strong support for the public housing program began to change after the AFL officially merged with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1955 to form the AFL-CIO. This merger was pursued primarily to eliminate competition between the union federations, which were both struggling to recruit new members and maintain political power under the conservative Dwight Eisenhower administration.<sup>18</sup> Now with a much broader constituency spanning the political spectrum, the newly branded union federation began to shift its focus toward homeownership for union members while retaining the production of public housing as a secondary goal.<sup>19</sup>

## THE DECLINE OF LABOR UNIONISM AND THE PRODUCTION OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The AFL-CIO’s shift toward homeownership advocacy for union members is indicative of a broader political and economic reorientation starting in the Postwar Era. Politically, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 significantly influenced a shift away from more progressive housing advocacy within labor unionism; the legislation limited legal methods of labor organizing, introduced the first right-to-work laws at the state level, and forced union leadership to dissociate from communism.<sup>20</sup> A growing affinity for market-oriented solutions for housing development also became part of the AFL-CIO’s official housing platform in the 1950s as union members became increasingly suburbanized.<sup>21</sup> Although labor still played a

formative role in the development of housing legislation into the late 1960s, the growing preference for private enterprise over federal housing production began to shift the strategic role of unions in the housing market.

Just as labor's constituency began to shift toward homeownership, so too did federal housing legislation. The nation's public housing program became the subject of major controversy and re-evaluation beginning in the late 1960s, when President Richard Nixon's New Federalist approach began to decentralize the government's housing programs. Although public housing production continued, eventually reaching its apex in 1991, demand-side housing affordability programs and homeownership advocacy began to take center stage.<sup>22</sup> In 1973, Nixon's declaration of a moratorium on federal housing subsidies drew a harsh response from the AFL-CIO through the National Ad Hoc Housing Coalition.<sup>23</sup> However, the wholesale shift of housing production and affordability programs to the private sector marked the beginning of the end for labor's central role in housing production.

Labor's decline in housing policy influence coincided with a broader decline in union membership starting in the second half of the 20th century. For the United Steelworkers Union (USW) alone, membership dropped by roughly 665,000 (51 percent) from 1980-1987.<sup>24</sup>

Although many factors have contributed to this general decline, decreasing membership numbers hindered the once-commanding political and economic influence of labor overall. The decline in union membership coincided with a drastic decrease in federally subsidized housing units. According to a 1995 report by the AFL-CIO, the number of affordable units supplied through government subsidy fell from 250,000 in 1970 to under 50,000 per year starting in the early 1980s.<sup>25</sup> As the federal government's role in housing

production and finance began to decrease substantially, non-profit intermediaries such as the Enterprise Foundation and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) were created by private enterprises to fill the void.<sup>26</sup> As a result, a growing preference for private-market incentives for affordable housing development led to a focus on cutting the costs of production and increasing the financial return on investment. Thus, the prevailing wages demanded by union members in the construction trades came in direct conflict with the financial motives of private-market housing developers.

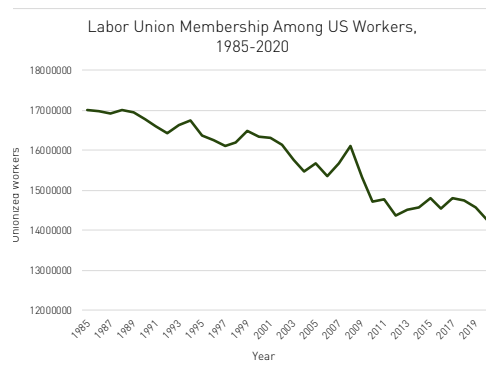


Figure 2. Figure 2 illustrates the decline in labor Union membership for all US workers between 1985-2020.

Indicative of the zeitgeist, the AFL-CIO created a Housing Investment Trust (HIT) in 1981 to retain a role in the housing industry. As a fixed-income investment fund, the HIT was designed to combine union pensions with private investment in the form of mortgage-backed securities to finance both affordable and market-rate developments that committed to using union labor.<sup>27</sup> This fund dramatically shifted the role of union labor in housing development because it focused on producing a financial return for the fund's private investors. Previous to the HIT, unions would directly invest pension funds into individual affordable housing developments.<sup>28</sup> This created both job

contracts and quality affordable units, both of which benefited many union members. With the HIT's focus on private investment, however, market-rate projects became attractive because of their potential financial return. Thus, union labor began to shift away from affordable housing production in the interest of strengthening union pensions and securing union job contracts through market-rate projects.

Given the high level of integration between union labor and affordable housing advocacy during the height of production in the Postwar Era, it should be no surprise that a shift in methods of production would result in dramatic changes for both labor and housing markets. Organized labor's involvement in the production of affordable housing decreased simultaneously with a general decline in union membership. As the housing industry began to favor demand-side affordability programs, affordable housing production dwindled and opportunities for a socially interested role for labor in housing production became substantially more limited.<sup>29</sup>

The increasing popularity of securitized mortgages through the turn of the millennium created an environment where housing in the private market was largely commodified as an investment vehicle for corporate investors. The sale of mortgage-backed securities on the secondary market standardized this practice, as investors began to require a certain increment of profit to rationalize their investment in housing development.<sup>30</sup> Through this financialization process, private-market actors now pursue affordable housing development more for financial incentives than through a commitment to broader social interest. Although tax incentives like the federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program encourage the continued production of affordable housing by making it more financially attractive to private investors, the limits on profitability for affordable housing development constrain a

private investor's motivation to pursue it as an end in itself.

Unions became complicit in this phenomenon through financial vehicles like the AFL-CIO HIT, where the production of housing (affordable or otherwise) is now largely pursued as a vehicle for job production and return on investment. Despite union efforts to maintain a role in the housing market under changing circumstances, there is no clear incentive for developers to use capital from the HIT over conventional capital sources. Corporate banks are now highly motivated to invest capital in socially interested development (especially LIHTC projects) because of requirements of the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) of 1977.<sup>31</sup> To a developer, this capital may be more attractive simply because it comes without prevailing wage requirements. Consequently, these mechanisms limit both the degree to which labor can serve a continued role in the housing industry and the scale to which new affordable housing units can be developed.

## **A PATH FORWARD: LEVERAGING LABOR ORGANIZING IN AFFORDABLE HOUSING PRODUCTION**

The current circumstances of the housing industry provide limited avenues for labor unions to play the role they historically held. With membership decreasing from roughly 20 percent of all salaried and wage workers in 1983 to 10 percent in 2019,<sup>32</sup> unions may now struggle to effect broad change through federal laws and policies. However, organizing at the local level – and beyond the sole interests of union members – may be a substantive path forward. Labor unions maintain a vital interest in affordable housing production and can leverage their power at the local level to create a more

equitable, sustainable, and productive system of affordable housing development that benefits the interests of the broader community.

A major asset labor unions maintain is their ability to build coalitions around social justice issues at the local level. Since organizing is a foundational practice to labor unionism that has become professionalized over time, unions are uniquely equipped with the skills required to engage people on issues of social interest. Although unions traditionally organize around issues directly related to workplace environments and must comply with contract bargaining rules, evidence shows unions have successfully engaged in broader community activism both presently and historically.

#### COMMUNITY BENEFITS AGREEMENTS

Effective community engagement is another strength labor unions can leverage in local housing policy advocacy, especially in the realm of Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs). CBAs are contracts between community coalitions and developers that are intended to make residential and commercial developments maximally beneficial to the surrounding community. This means effective community engagement is vital to a CBA's legitimacy and success.<sup>33</sup> Unions are well-equipped to engage with CBA negotiations because of their capacity to ally with community groups and organizations, as well as the diversity of their membership across multiple sectors.

CBAs with major union involvement have provided a diverse set of benefits to many urban communities. In addition to affordable housing, these benefits have included promises from developers to commit funds to local parks, hire locally, and guarantee a living wage for workers of commercial tenants on-site.<sup>34</sup> However, the power of CBAs is often limited by local politics.<sup>35</sup> The need to improve upon the CBA model provides additional opportunity for labor unions to engage in the local development

process.

A persistent weakness of CBAs is their varying level of popularity and enforceability across different jurisdictions. While CBAs are mandated and enforced by the city government in Detroit, cities like Milwaukee lack the experience and political support required to make CBAs reliably enforceable.<sup>36</sup> One possible avenue for communities to make CBAs more broadly effective – regardless of local politics – is to organize around local legislation that makes CBAs mandatory and government-enforced, like the Community Benefits Ordinance in Detroit. Organized labor could provide strategic support for local legislative advocacy by leveraging the technical expertise of employees in the public sector. Since public-sector employees tend to have the highest rate of labor union membership,<sup>37</sup> union organizing could be particularly advantageous to this cause because public-sector members may have a greater level of experience with local legislation and policy. Through coalition building between union members employed across both public and private sectors – and through partnerships with local community groups – labor unions could potentially build a broad coalition that includes the knowledge, skills, and public interest needed to propose and pass necessary legislation and policy to strengthen the contractual enforceability of the CBA.

Improving the CBA model would undoubtedly provide a systematic avenue for communities to secure quality affordable housing development, but other options should also be pursued. Considering alternative forms of land use and residential development typologies that are not dependent on the market offers another meaningful way for labor unions to help expand access to affordable housing. Drawing on a history of successful cooperatively owned housing development, labor unions stand to be a major asset in popularizing contemporary forms of collective ownership, such as the Community Land Trust (CLT).



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### COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS

According to the Institute for Community Economics, a CLT, in its basic form, is “an organization that owns land and makes it available on a long-term basis for specific community use...[where] ownership of land is separated from ownership of its use or uses.”<sup>38</sup> Because the purpose and organizational structure of a CLT can vary widely depending on the context, the model can be an effective mechanism for both rural and urban communities to provide valuable community resources the market fails to reliably supply, such as affordable housing. Although the CLT model remains largely underutilized in cities across the country, the successful cases that do exist indicate the model remains valuable and relevant to labor unions. Current CLTs like the Dudley Neighbors Incorporated in Boston and the Cooper Square Community Land Trust in Manhattan remain viable due to both their ability to sustain a culture of activism among their members and their ability to work productively with the local municipality.<sup>39</sup> In Cooper Square, the culture of activism that created and still sustains the CLT is linked to the legacy of labor union organizing and activism in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the early 20th century.<sup>40</sup>

As discussed in the first section, labor unions have a long history of successful

affordable housing development through models of cooperative ownership, and many unions still retain resources that could be beneficial to the CLT model. As IRS-registered 501(c)(5) organizations, labor unions are both exempt from federal income tax and eligible for limited grants and donations, which are typical requirements for registered CLT entities.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, labor unions have strong direct and indirect links to individuals in need of affordable housing through both their internal membership and their connections with local community groups. Since union pension funds are popular sources of investment capital, they can potentially provide the financing needed to front the initial land and development costs of CLTs.

New York City already set a precedent for significant affordable housing investment using pension funds – the city’s five retirement systems pledged a combined investment of \$150 million to the AFL-CIO HIT in 2015 to develop and preserve approximately 20,000 affordable units.<sup>42</sup> Since pension funds have a characteristically long lifetime before their payout, they are well-suited for investment in affordable housing development, which tends to produce a lower rate of return than market-rate developments. Because CLTs effectively take land out of the private market by enforcing price ceilings that restrict the sale of shares, or land improvements,<sup>43</sup> union pension funds may prove to be opportune forms of up-front investment due to their longevity. Internally, CLTs can provide permanently affordable housing for low- and moderate-income people because the cost of housing is not affected by trends in the housing market. Although the CLT’s land continues to appreciate because the entities typically pay property tax and are therefore subject to assessment,<sup>44</sup> the cost burden can be distributed across all members and even potentially lowered through the use of grants and charitable donations.

Beyond the financial resources labor unions can potentially provide CLTs, the strong history of activism in labor organizing meshes well with the activist tradition of many successful CLTs still in operation. Organizationally, CLTs are embedded in the local community primarily through their governing boards, which are usually composed of CLT residents, residents of the surrounding community, and public interest representatives.<sup>45</sup> With their robust organizing capacity and network of community connections, labor unions can help recruit board members in each category that are committed to the interests of low- and moderate-income residents across the community.

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#### BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

CBAs and CLTs serve as great focus points for labor unions to redeem their collective role in affordable housing production. However, addressing housing issues beyond production is also vital to confronting housing inequality in the United States. Larger structural forces that create and sustain housing inequality across the country underlie the issue of affordable housing production. Labor unions

can address these structural forces by leveraging their capacity for community engagement around broader issues of social justice.

Labor unions set precedents for participating in deep community engagement in pursuit of broader social equity goals through the increasing popularity of the Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) model. According to labor organizers Stephen Lerner and Christina Livingston, the BCG model is “built around the idea that unions, in partnership with community allies, need to expand collective bargaining demands to include issues that go beyond wages and benefits to confront the structural forces that drive inequality and worker disempowerment.”<sup>46</sup> In Los Angeles, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees’ (AFSCME) Local 3299 used the BCG model to build a broad community coalition with the goals of creating quality community spaces in the inner city, ending the school-to-prison pipeline, and ending predatory lending in disadvantaged communities. Organized labor helped build similar coalitions in Seattle and Chicago to further community goals related explicitly to housing, including the increased production of affordable housing and the enforcement of rent control measures.<sup>47</sup>

By popularizing and expanding upon the BCG model, labor unions can embed themselves in organizing efforts that increase the vitality of their membership and vulnerable members of the community. Recently, labor union membership has become increasingly composed of vulnerable groups. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers identifying as Black or African American have a higher rate of union membership than any other racial group.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, union members in the food service industry retain characteristically low wages that actually dropped between 2018 and 2019, making them highly susceptible to increased

living costs.<sup>49</sup> Low-income residents and communities of color face risks related to housing that extend far beyond affordability to issues resulting from the legal framework around housing rights. By getting involved with organizing work that addresses these underlying issues, labor unions can make substantive progress toward improving the lives of their most vulnerable members and the broader communities those members call home.

## CONCLUSION

The historical role of labor unionism in the development of housing policy, legislation, and production programs cannot be overstated. Through a strong partnership with local, state, and federal government agencies, labor unions increased access to affordable housing for both their membership and the broader community on a massive scale. Although political and economic shifts through the mid-20th century severely limited the degree to which labor unions are now able to engage in federal affordable housing production and policy, there is still ample opportunity for unions to engage with policy, law, and housing production at the local level.

Unions can optimize local engagement by leveraging their traditional strengths of organizing and coalition building through contemporary avenues of housing production, like Community Benefits Agreements and Community Land Trusts. Unions have already demonstrated they can play a meaningful role in the CBA process, but can continue to capitalize on their strategic power by building coalitions around local policies and laws that strengthen the efficacy and enforceability of CBAs beyond the project level. Financially, labor unions can provide a viable path toward alternative forms of affordable housing development by helping redirect

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pension fund investments toward CLTs and local affordable housing trust funds. They can also provide technical assistance by offering their nonprofit legal status to community groups that want to create a CLT, enabling those groups to secure public funding sources. Ultimately, organized labor can move beyond housing production to focus on the deeper structural issues that sustain housing inequality by leveraging new forms of coalition building through the BCG model that produce benefits beyond the workplace, for the common good.

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