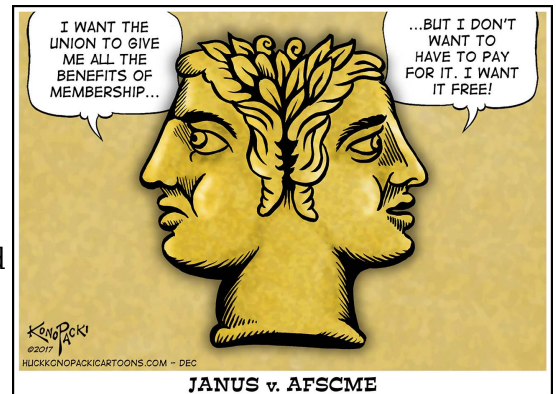


#FreeRider and #Freeloader obscure labor's challenges post-Janus

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The Supreme Court's long-anticipated – and feared by progressives – decision outlawing the collection of fees in public employee unions equivalent to costs of collective bargaining was met with indignant or defiant words, rightly decrying this attack on organized labor. The response, though, has mirrored what has been missing in labor's understanding of how we got to this point and what we need to climb out – and win.



First, there were few demonstrations. Though unions knew this decision was imminent, few were prepared with protests, or had held demonstrations earlier, like this one in Chicago. Janus was an opportunity for political education about the class war being waged against working people. Also emblematic of the problem is use of the term “free rider” and “free loader” to describe members of a bargaining unit who are covered by a collective bargaining agreement but don’t join the union and pay dues. Let’s be clear that workers’ conservative consciousness is a crisis, but it won’t be solved by blaming individual workers who don’t think the union represents their interests and don’t understand why the assumption that individual effort and competition in the workforce aren’t a solution to deteriorating conditions.

As I explain in my forthcoming article in *New Politics* (available to subscribers, shortly), I heard countless times in conversations with teachers in the “red state” walkouts that the unions that ostensibly represented them were “irrelevant” and worse. These teachers weren’t union members and had they been cast as “free loaders” by the activists who organized the walkouts (some of them not union members!) no walkouts could have occurred.

The unions that will be most hurt by Janus v. AFSCME are those that have done the least to educate their members politically about the real challenges we face in the public sector and have done the worst job of fighting hard for those most exploited.

What should we be saying now, post-Janus? It’s not good enough to repeat labor’s traditional mantra “I’m sticking with the union” because many unions, including the ones about which I write most, AFT and NEA, are in need of profound transformation to do what they ought. AFT and NEA too often do the work of Wall Street, as when they applauded ESSA, the new federal education funding law which included “social impact bonds,” giving Wall Street profits when it keeps pre-school children out of special education. These “social impact” bonds are despicable, and even if AFT and NEA officials thought they could get no better from Congress than they did in allowing this new intrusion of privatization, they had to speak truth to members and the public by saying they were reluctantly supporting the legislation. We need unions that will, at the very least, take up and act on the the demand that people come before profits.

I propose we say to public employees and the public “We need good unions now more than ever. Join the union and work with us to make it the democratic, fighting organization we, our kids, and working people need.” #MakeOurUnionsWhatTheyShouldBe

