

Meeting in a fraught and eventful work year



by Mike Lillich

The pandemic exposed the plight of essential workers and opportunities for transformation.

After a pandemic year full of media discussions of essential workers, a struggling economy, worker safety concerns, and a national election unlike any other, LERA members arrived, 604 strong, ready to talk and listen, albeit virtually, about the COVID year that was, the future of work, and the changes that the pandemic put into motion.

Outgoing LERA president **Adrienne Eaton** welcomed the virtual attendees and recognized the efforts of 73rd Annual Meeting program chair and incoming LERA president **Wilma Liebman**. Program co-chairs were **Aaron Sojourner** (Minnesota), **Lynn Rhinehart** (Economic Policy Institute), and **Robert Chiaravalli** (Strategic Labor and Human Resources).

Eaton said that next year, if all goes well, the Annual Meeting will be in person in Detroit, June 2–5, 2022. She said of the virtual meetings: “There are some elements we may want to keep.” [However, the Delta variant has now moved our 2022 meeting to a virtual format.]

U.S. Labor Secretary **Marty Walsh** was the headliner. The opening plenary session was dubbed “Labor and Employment Policy in the New Administration.” It took the form of incoming LERA president **Wilma Liebman** interviewing Marty about his union bona fides, goals, and Biden administration plans. During the meeting, news broke that **David Weil** had been nominated for the Department of Labor’s Wage and Hour Administrator, a position he held from 2014 to 2017 in the Obama administration. The U.S. Senate held a hearing to discuss his nomination on July 21, 2021.

Secretary Walsh is the son of Irish immigrants. His father arrived in 1956 and joined a Boston building trades union. Marty was a building trades worker and was later president of that union. He was subsequently elected Boston mayor before being named Secretary of Labor in the Biden Administration. (See the Q&A of Walsh by Liebman available on YouTube, <https://bit.ly/39kElg3>.)

“There are some elements (of the virtual meetings) we may want to keep.”

—Adrienne Eaton



Eaton



Walsh



Weil



Liebman



Sojourner



Rhinehart



Chiaravalli



LERA National Policy Forum Plenary: The COVID-19 Crisis Shaping the Future of Work, Sponsored by Kaiser Permanente

Moderator: Dennis L. Dabney, Kaiser Permanente (ret.)

Featured Speakers: David Autor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Kimberly A. Lawrence, CVS Health Corporation; and Rebecca Dixon, National Employment Law Project

“The Equal Opportunity Commission said that companies can require employees to be vaccinated to return to the workplace.”

— Kimberly Lawrence, CVS



Lawrence

Kimberly Lawrence is vice president of Labor and Employment Counsel at CVS Health. She discussed the legal implications for employers as workers return to the workplace post COVID. “The Equal Opportunity Commission said that companies can require employees to be vaccinated to return to the workplace.” But vaccination is not one size fits all. She described the challenge of vaccine management by companies as “complex” and “novel.”

Some employers, she said, will use a good-faith honor system and set up vaccination stations at the workplaces. Employers must also consider “the moral, ethical, medical, and political employee reservations” about vaccines. It may also require negotiations with unions. And state laws require different things of companies. Montana prohibits employers from asking about employees’ vaccination status or making it a condition of employment, she said.

She went on to say that employers needed to hold “an interactive dialogue with workers on issues” such as working from home. Privacy and record-keeping regulations by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission require employers secure confi-

dential files to be maintained outside employees’ regular files.

David Autor is co-director of the MIT Task Force on Work of the Future. He said a permanent shift toward greater societal telepresence is underway — from remote work to distance medicine and remote learning. Employer acceptance of work from home, he said, was much greater for high-wage, highly educated workers.

“There will be less commuting, less expenditure downtown in dense urban spaces.” There will be fewer office cleaners, service personnel, and less business travel. “This will affect not just hotels and airlines. There will be fewer airline workers, restaurant workers, and Uber drivers.”

There will be a decline in middle-pay jobs – production, admin-office, sales. Many jobs in hospitality are not coming back. There will be fewer low-paid jobs, more high-skill, high-pay jobs. Disruptions will fall mainly on low-paid workers in personal services. “The recession is already over for middle- and high-pay workers but not for personal services,” he said. “There’s a lot to recommend about a hot labor market, and the Biden administration gets this.”



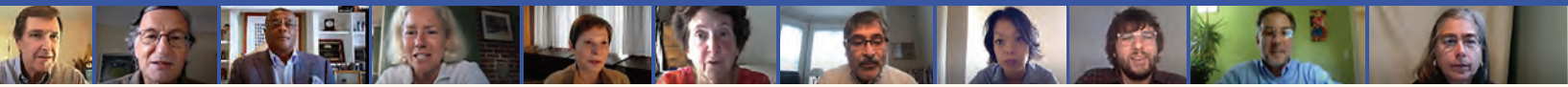
Dabney



Dixon

Rebecca Dixon is the executive director of the National Employment Law Project and works the intersection of race, class, and gender. “An equitable workplace won’t come just through the labor market,” she said. Also needed are institutions, government, and NGOs. Moving up to higher pay and higher skilled jobs is not that easy when in United States. Forty percent of jobs pay poverty wages. That’s 50 million people in the United States. Female care work is among the lowest-paying jobs.

COVID restrictions brought uneven job losses, Dixon said. There was



a “she-cession,” as the recession hit women disproportionately harder than men, especially in the leisure and hospitality industry. Unemployment insurance — a federal–state hybrid — varies from state to state. The maximum weekly benefit is \$1,200 in Massachusetts and \$260 in Mississippi. The federal government expanded benefits to an extra \$600 and then \$300 per week. In spring and early summer, 25 state governments cut back the supplemental benefits, saying they were a disincentive for workers returning to work.

“Essential workers have been treated as disposable, with little legal protection” Dixon said. Black, Latinx, and illegal workers were especially hard hit. OSHA was MIA. “COVID exposed health and safety shortcomings and the lack of paid sick leave. Workers are organizing around health and safety; there has been a bubbling up of worker demands. My hope is that we take this opportunity to fix these inequities.”

A session attendee asked if we were entering a period of transformative change in work and employment.

Dixon: “We could have transformative change in five years as opposed to everything happening in one year.

Autor: “There is an opportunity for transformation. It depends on whether we seize it. We had an opportunity after the Great Recession. We didn’t seize it.”



Autor

“There will be less commuting, less expenditure downtown in dense urban spaces. There

will be fewer office cleaners, service personnel, and less business travel. There will be fewer airline workers, restaurant workers, and Uber drivers.”

—David Autor, MIT



“The UAW and Ford came together to solve the complex set of issues.”

—Bill Dirksen, Ford Motor Co. (ret.)

Jointly Managing through a Pandemic: How to Run a People-Intensive Manufacturing Operation during a Pandemic (Panel)

How the UAW and Ford came together in the battle against the coronavirus; from the shut-down of operations to answering the call for much-needed safety equipment. UAW and Ford leadership discuss the challenges they faced to build cars, keep employees safe, and save lives.

Moderator: Bill Dirksen, Ford Motor Company (ret.)

Panelists: Jenny Torony and Wendy Burkett, Ford Motor Company; Steve Zimmerla and Brandon Keatts, United Auto Workers

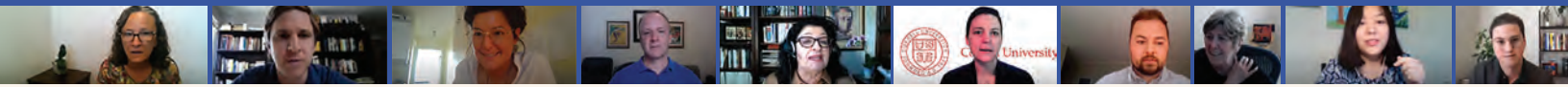
Bill Dirksen, retired Ford VP for labor relations, was surely understating the task at the beginning of the pandemic when he described it as “a complex set of issues.” Plants have 1,000 to 2,000 workers under one roof. There was stress and uncertainty. The question was

how to restart operations and keep the workers safe. “The UAW and Ford came together to solve the complex set of issues,” Dirksen said.

The UAW’s **Steve Zimmerla** said they established the UAW–Ford COVID-19 Leadership Forum early on. Ford suspended production March 18, 2020. By May 1, Ford and the UAW had a return-to-work playbook, and operations started up on May 18, 2020, before most industries.

Brandon Keatts said the Big 3 Detroit automakers began meeting at early stage of the pandemic. They promoted safety outside of the workplace. Ford and the UAW emphasized community cooperation, communication, and planning. They communicated what workers could expect upon returning to work.

Keatts said that there was a spirit of collaboration but also some “hard conversations; some started with disagreement.” One hard conversa-



“A huge number of people worked together on this. It will make us stronger going forward.” –Steve Zimmerla, UAW

tion was about expanded utilization of temporary replacement workers. “This goes against the UAW grain,” Keatts said. But the UAW ultimately agreed to exceptions in a collective bargaining agreement so the company could resume operations, and workers with COVID could stay home. Ford continued health care coverage to those absent from work. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way. It was a successful partnership.”

Ford’s **Wendy Burkett** said the return-to-work playbook for workers covered:

- What happened while you were away.
- What will happen when you get back.
- What we need to do.

The playbook was a public document and was widely distributed.

Ford’s **Jenny Torony** discussed the Hero at Home program, counseling for workers and parents, and childcare. They sent holiday reminders for safe behaviors outside of work, such as safe driving.

Ford made a big manufacturing pivot and started producing face masks, shields, ventilators, and isolation gowns. They had

the know-how basics on the parts they produce for automobiles. They donated the equipment to at-risk, low-PPE communities. “Nobody said no, nobody asked why. We said go,” Torony said. With UAW volunteers, it took a matter of weeks.

Zimmerla said Ford and the UAW had laid solid groundwork for dealing with the COVID crisis: “We’ve been doing ‘working together’ for years. Do we agree on everything? No. But can we work together on the task at hand? Yes.” Some companies wherein the relationship with unions is not the best had a tougher time during the pandemic. “We work together every day. We’re okay talking about disagreements and working through them. It made us a really strong team. “A huge number of people worked together on this. It will make us stronger going forward.”

Finally, there were the politics of COVID. Keatts said, “Everything was politicized in the pandemic. Face masks were politicized from jump to today. We tried to stay above that and were successful.” Masks were mandated in Ford facilities in several

states where there were different rules and policies that complicated the effort.

Torony: “When do we peel away protocols to keep workers and the community safe?” She said they “worked with the governor’s office, locals, and feds, sharing protocols and our playbook for restart.”

Q&A

Javier Ramirez (Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service): “This is really impressive work. It has been a tremendous collaborative working relationship for years. How do other organizations collaborate better?”

Zimmerla: “This is a transformative time in the auto industry,” referring to electrification next decade. “We can work through it. What do we do with transmission plants, engine plants?” He said he has confidence in the new UAW leadership. “We have to do what’s best for membership. Ford has to do well, too.”

Torony: “We’re really proud of this work. We’re still in a state of flux. But we’ve made it this far, and we are going to get there.”

LERA Plenary: Meeting the Challenge of Racial Equity and Justice in the Workplace, Sponsored by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Moderators: Fred Alvarez (Coblentz Patch Duffy & Bass and former EEOC commissioner) and Jenny R. Yang (U.S. Department of Labor)

Featured Speakers: Darrick Hamilton (applied microeconomist, The New School); Fred Redmond (United Steelworkers); and Johnna Torsone (Pitney Bowes)



Hamilton

Darrick Hamilton said that during the COVID recession “Blacks were the first fired and last hired.” The biggest precondition for how one navigated the pandemic was wealth. Many, especially people of color, lost their health insurance; others had to deal with lower wages and benefits.

Halting the degradation of Black lives is a long-overdue reckoning on race, Hamilton said. He posed bold solutions — new labor and trade policy, economic rights that are both antiracist and antisexist, federally guaranteed jobs and wages, and baby bonds. “We need to go beyond antipoverty to move more Blacks into the middle class. The capitalist class profits from racial



Zimmerla



Keatts



Burkett



Torony



Torsone

The workforce needs to become “a more heterogeneous group with the right managers. People need to come to the workplace feeling safe about who they are.” — Johnna Torsone

status. Government needs to provide the counterbalance to economic inequality.”

Fred Alvarez said there was no playbook to deal with all that COVID threw at the workplace and workers, particularly workers of color, who were disproportionately affected. At the same time, the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd’s murder was forcing a reckoning on racial justice.

Alvarez noted that Dr. Martin Luther King addressed the AFL-CIO in 1961. In the second half of the 20th century, “Unions and the civil rights movement were the two great forces for social and racial justice,” Alvarez said. But too many union members “voted against liberal policies, and



Redmond

the labor movement was too silent for too long on social and racial justice matters.” There are encouraging changes in the union movement, including the AFL-CIO forming a Task Force on Racial Justice in July 2020, chaired by United Steelworkers international vice president and AFL-CIO Civil and Human Rights Committee vice chair **Fred Redmond**.

In announcing the formation of the task force, AFL president **Richard Trumka** said, “The labor movement is committed to being the tip of the spear in the fight to bring long overdue racial justice to our country. These dedicated

leaders will take on one of the most complex challenges our movement has ever faced. I am confident each of them has the experience, dedication, and tenacity to lead this important initiative.”

Johnna Torsone said she viewed the pandemic year through different lenses — personal, human resources, and as a vice chair of a community foundation. She described her attitude as “optimistic — and fearful. The system presents barriers, and we need to be more vocal.” We need, she said, “real systemic responses from CEOs.”

Torsone said there needs to be a “sustained effort by top management to put diversity into the workers’ whole life cycle.” Business needs to grow into a more inclusive culture. The workforce needs to become “a more heterogeneous group with the right managers. People need to come to the workplace feeling safe about who they are.” Understanding is better but not perfect, she said. And deeper understanding still needs to grow. “This is a critical time for both business and society. We need to do what we need to do to get the best out of every employee.” And for every employee.

“The labor movement is committed to being the tip of the spear in the fight to bring long overdue racial justice to our country.”

—Richard Trumka, AFL-CIO (dec.)



Katz

State of LERA

LERA president Adrienne Eaton chaired the LERA General Membership meeting. Members heard from LERA’s committee chairs about the state of LERA.

Development Committee update

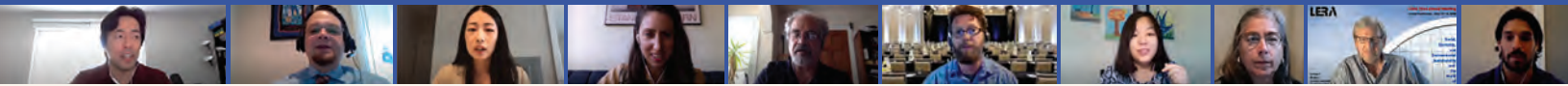
Harry Katz and **Jim Pruitt** reported that LERA weathered the challenging pandemic year active and in the black. “The basic fact is that we’ve done well,” Katz said. The annual fund was solid — \$36,000. Over the past several years, the annual fund total has risen annually. There are two sustaining sponsors — Kaiser Permanente and the Ford Motor Company, but LERA could benefit greatly from one or two more. LERA has begun to create an endowment after a leadership gift by **Gladys Gruenberg**. We are reminding members about endowment gifts and estate planning.

Organizational memberships are up, and Katz said there was discussion with the Executive Board about extending the effort so LERA can involve more organizations and universities. The concept is that a department, school, or organization would fund a number of memberships for its people. Bernadette Tiemann reported on expanded efforts in recruiting more two-, six-, and 12-member organizational memberships.



Pruitt

Individual memberships are on the rise, too. There was also very good attendance at a series of lively webinars on



COVID and employment- and work-related topics in the spring and summer of 2020, mostly organized by members of LERA's industry councils and interest sections.

The Development Committee has its first student representative — **Jen Harmer** of the University of Texas. She will help craft fundraising messages to appeal to our younger LERA members.



Harmer

National Chapter Advisory Council

Bill Canak reported that LERA's local chapters were hale and healthy. The Northern California LERA chapter has re-formed fully and held programs. This is the third year of operation of the virtual LERA chapter (VLERA), based at The Pennsylvania State University. There is one student chapter at Rutgers and another potentially forming in Oregon.


Canak proposed that chapters and individuals sponsor a reception at the next in-person Annual Meeting. "This event will make a festive time even more festive," he said.

Canak said LERA continues its efforts to strengthen the partnership between local chapter members being encouraged to join the national LERA and for national members to join local chapters.

The LERA national office has developed a chapter website, which is a membership-management system, and training for chapter officers. The national office also promotes local chapter events in the biweekly eBulletin and on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook.

Next year, **the LERA Annual Meeting will take place virtually, June 2–5, 2022.** Visit <https://LERAweb.org/LERA-74th-AM> for registration and program information. ■

LERA's 73 RD ANNUAL MEETING BY THE NUMBERS	
146 ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS	38 UNIONS
38 COMPANIES	331 PARTICIPANTS
604 ATTENDEES	
42 ORGANIZATIONS	19 COUNTRIES
41 ARBITRATOR/MEDIATORS	
12 FEATURED SPEAKERS	89 PANELISTS
129 PRESENTERS	40 SYMPOSIA
23 GOVERNMENT AGENCIES	
12 SPONSORS	92 STUDENTS
8 POSTERS	
47 WORKSHOPS	77 CHAIRS
24 DISCUSSANTS	15 MEETINGS

INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPANTS	
	AUSTRIA — 3
	BELGIUM — 2
	BRAZIL — 3
	CANADA — 31
	CHILE — 1
	CHINA — 3
	DENMARK — 2
	FRANCE — 1
	GERMANY — 4
	IRELAND — 1
	JAPAN — 7
	KOREA, REPUBLIC OF — 1
	SOUTH AFRICA — 2
	SPAIN — 1
	SWEDEN — 1
	SWITZERLAND — 6
	TAIWAN — 1
	UNITED KINGDOM — 13
	ZAMBIA — 1