

by Adrienne Eaton

Facing multiple crises

A quote, two other presidential addresses, and two books

Editor's note: LERA president Adrienne Eaton delivered her presidential address at the virtual LERA 73rd Annual Meeting on June 7, 2021.

I've been thinking about this talk for a long time and struggling with what to say in this moment and given the last year. I had originally been thinking I would focus this talk on democracy, and I spent some time reading the work of various political scientists and philosophers on the linkages between political and economic democracy, something I've long been interested in. But as I shifted my reading into some new areas and thought more about all the events of the past year, I headed in a different direction.

Starting with the idea that we, as members of the LERA community, as professionals in the field of employment relations, and as human beings, are facing numerous crises, I was inspired in



Adrienne Eaton, immediate-past LERA president, is dean of the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations.

part to think about multiple crises by the introduction to the *2021 LERA Research Volume, Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future*, written by my Rutgers colleagues Toby Schulze-Cleven and Todd Vachon.

Foremost in our minds — the thing that continues to keep us apart for this conference — is the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has upended work, the institution of central concern

that LERA revolves around. With the shutdowns in March 2020, the pandemic crisis quickly became an employment and work crisis. As I said to a student newspaper reporter around that time, people were working from home (something many had never done before), working unsafely, or not working.

And many of those who were not working and maybe are still not working were (or still are) wondering about where their next meal was going to come from. I think here especially of the undocumented among us who have little or no access to the social safety net. Here are some quotes from undocumented workers in New York City, most from spring 2020.

“Well, in the case of my family, we are very scared, because we had the loss of my brother who died from the coronavirus. And everyone is scared by this pandemic that we have had to live in isolation, without work, without money and with great fear.”¹

“It is impacting us financially, emotionally — there is sadness, worry, fear, and anguish among my children because of the fact that we, their parents, could die. We as parents are concerned about financial insecurity and not knowing when we will return to work.”

“I’m worried because my dad lost his job and my mom is the only one working. She’s working at a laundromat. She’s risking her health to work, and I’m scared my parents will get sick because they also are undocumented.”

“There were days I couldn’t sleep. To be honest with you, we had nothing”²

Returning now to my own voice, under the former administration, OSHA refused to do anything about workplace safety, though some states did, including my own. The federal government expanded the definition of eligibility for unemployment

Personally, I am very drawn to the argument that we actually cannot and should not separate race and class.

“There are no jobs
on a dead planet.”
—Judy Bonds

insurance and increased the payments; many states, either purposefully or as a result of poor IT systems or both, had enormous troubles implementing it. Health care workers improvised protective equipment and new clinical spaces; many worked unsafely, and some died — 3,600 in the United States alone, according to estimates by *Kaiser Health News* and *The Guardian*.

All these topics and more have provided challenges and lessons in the world of practice — and a rich world to study, however ghoulish that might sound. And research is already emerging from those with the time and energy to do it. Perhaps this entire talk should be dedicated to work and the pandemic, but I thought we might all be a bit tired of it, honestly.

Then there is climate change, an existential threat to us all and one that, as demonstrated in last year’s conference theme around sustainability, touches many areas in which we work — from green jobs to just transitions, to immigration and immigrant workers. It’s a hard topic to center in the day-to-day work that many of us do, yet it looms over everything.

As an aside, I want to mention my favorite quote that links climate change and the word of labor and employment relations. I first heard it from Sharan Burrow, the general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation. But in googling around, I learned that someone named Judy Bonds is often credited with saying it first. She was a coal miner’s daughter and an environmental activist in West Virginia, which can help you imagine the context for that quote. She died of cancer in 2011.

The quote is, “There are no jobs on a dead planet.” And by the way, I’ve also seen the quote adapted to “There is no business on a dead planet.” And I suppose we could say there are no publications and no tenure on a dead planet either. Our field needs to grow in its engagement with this crisis, no matter the particular work we each do.

Then there are the interrelated crises of inequality, racism, and democracy. The impact of both the pandemic and climate change has been and will continue to be felt unequally and has exacerbated inequalities of multiple kinds, both within the United States and globally, as we can now see with the vaccine rollout. I believe our field has been centrally concerned with some kinds of inequality since its founding, the inequality of power between workers and capital or managers, if you prefer — what we might call class inequality.

I think we’ve been less focused on racial inequality, and we’ve been called to task for that by my colleague Tami Lee and her co-author Maite Tapia, among others of course. I strongly urge you to read their paper, “Confronting Race and Other Social Identity Erasures: The Case for Critical Industrial Relations Theory” in the May 2021 special issue on theory in *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*. It may raise more questions for you than give answers, but that’s a good thing, especially for the field. I’m not sure I agree with everything that Tami and Maite say in their paper, and I don’t think I completely understand it, but I know we need to absorb the argument, sit with it, think about what it means for our own work, whether that work is research and teaching or practice

in the field. I am proud that the 2022 LERA research volume is being edited by Tapia and Lee along with two other Rutgers faculty members, Naomi Williams and Sheri Davis.

Personally, I am very drawn to the argument that we actually cannot and should not separate race and class. I've been very interested in the work of Ian Haney López in this regard and have been trying to find time to read his latest book, *Merge Left*. Haney López is a law professor at UC-Berkeley, where he studies and writes on politics. He's the author of a book on racial "dog whistles" (*Dog Whistle Politics*). I'm going to assume you know what those are. The subtitle of his newer book is *Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*. I highly recommend the book, which — of interest to this audience — starts with the story of a visit he paid to an annual retreat of a national union's leadership in Florida.

He argues that racism is fundamentally a class weapon, one used by moneyed interests to misdirect White working-class people about who or what is to blame for the rampant inequality they experience along with working class people of color. In a way, this message isn't terribly new but — and I confess here I'm not that deep into the book — in this case, it's rooted in a lot of polling and survey research, and Haney López is all about using his findings to produce better political and organizing messaging.

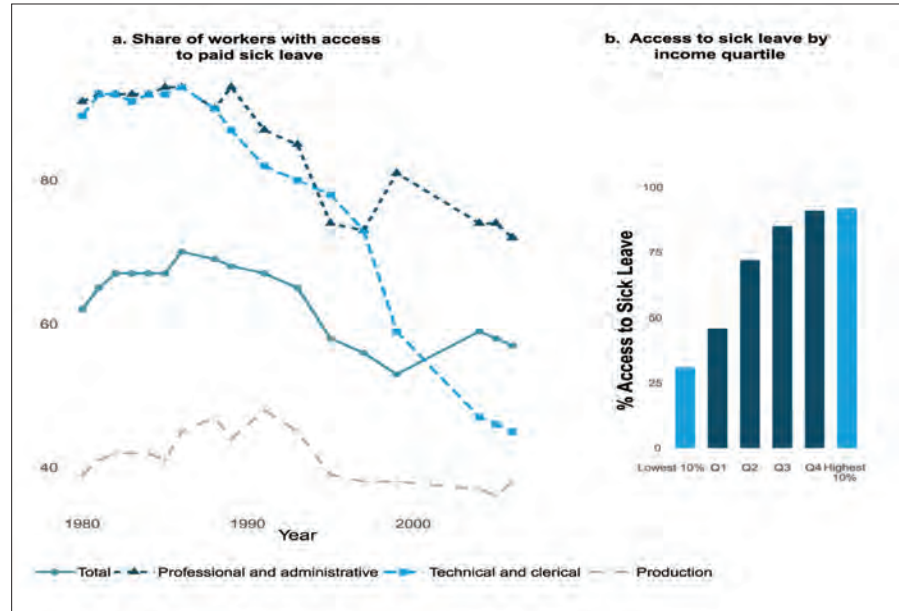
The issues facing women workers are pervasive in higher education, creating inequities that are frankly without good answers or at least ones most of our institutions can easily afford.

Turning to inequality and its relationship to threats to democracy, I was also inspired by reading Kathy Thelen's presidential address to the American Political Science Association, titled "The American Precariat: U.S. Capitalism in Comparative."³ It is quite interesting, though not surprising for those of you who know Professor Thelen's

work, that her talk is really centered on topics that we focus on at LERA — what she labels "atypical employment" and some of us would prefer to call "informal employment" or "precarious employment."

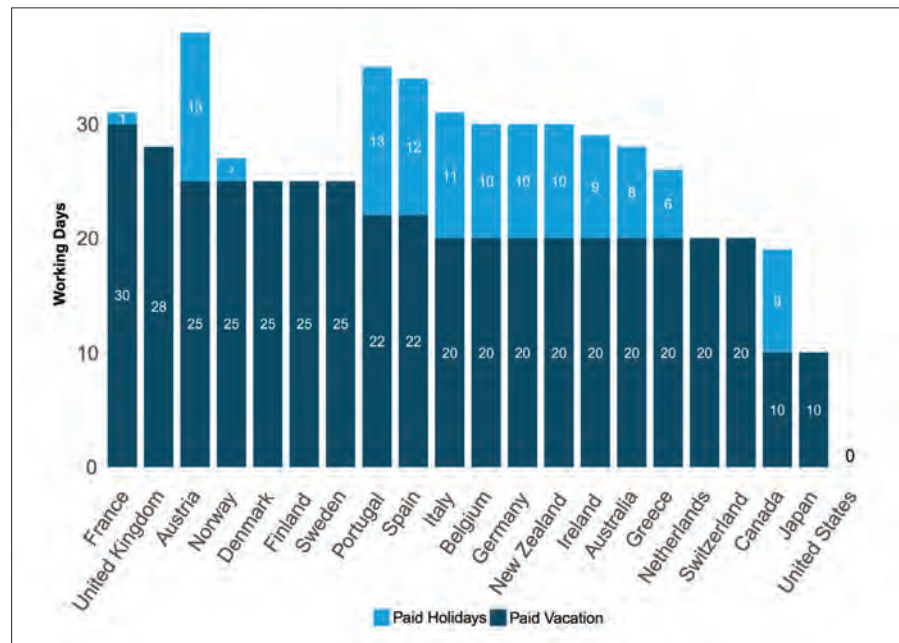
She presents a series of graphs. Some of her graphs are focused just within the United States, showing the nature of

Figure 1. Access to paid sick leave.



Source: BLS National Compensation Survey 1980-2017

Figure 2. Paid vacation, holidays in OECD nations in working days (by law).



Source: CEPR 2013

We need to expand the range of voices we hear, including those of the workers we study.

class inequality. Figure 1 is one example: it shows access to paid sick leave, and I picked it in part because this became such a huge issue during the pandemic. The left-hand side shows the decline over time by different occupational groups with the lowest access always for production workers and the steep decline among technical and clerical workers. The chart on the right is access by income quartile, which is pretty self-explanatory.

The other set of charts in the piece (Figure 2) shows a series of comparisons between Europe and the United States, mostly relying on Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data. Let me show you a couple of those, although again, I'm sure these will not be shocking to many of you. I can say that these kinds of comparisons are often shocking to Rutgers students. The first shows statutory paid time off, for both vacations and holidays. The United States is on the

right with zero. The second is not from Thelen's talk. I found this in a February 2016 article, "How U.S. Employee Benefits Compare to Europe's," in the magazine *Fast Company* (Figure 3). Yeah, we're over there on the right again — mostly red, meaning least-generous unemployment insurance, parental entitlements, annual leave/holidays, sick pay. Again, these benefits rose in importance during the pandemic and continue to be so. For instance, in a recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll on vaccine hesitancy, 21 percent of unvaccinated workers said they'd be more likely to get the vaccine if their employer provided paid time off to both get the vaccine and recover from any side effects.⁴

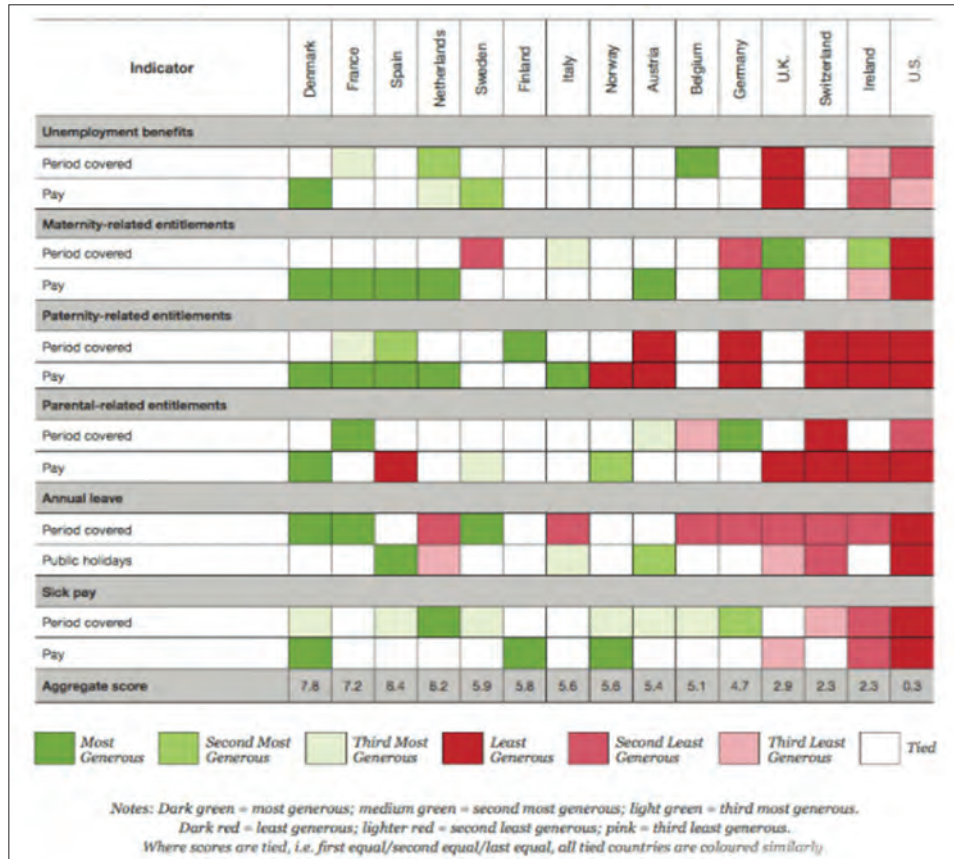
I also want to mention here a recent NBER study summarized in a May 28 article in *The New York Times*.⁵ This study shows how women's labor force participation fell compared to men's in 18 out of 28 countries in North America and Europe, with the greatest gaps in the United States and Canada. These gaps were a function of school closures (which were longest in the United States and Canada), lack of robust childcare systems, and also gaps in other labor market policies, such as the use of furloughs versus unemployment, and the differential impact of telecommuting on women's and men's work at home.

I am not going to speak to gender again in this talk, but I want to highlight here how important a gendered lens can be to our research as demonstrated in this paper, which contrasts what the authors call the pandemic-induced "she-cession" versus earlier "man-cessions" and the different policy implications of these events. I want to note also that the issues facing women workers discussed in Thelen's paper are pervasive in higher education, creating inequities that are frankly without good answers or at least ones most of our institutions can easily afford.

The fourth chart is again from Thelen's paper (Figure 4, next page). It presents union density and coverage, a perennial favorite for us. The data are a little old, but I don't think anything has changed fundamentally — the United States is close to the edge again, although this time it's the left edge, only close because our union density is higher than France's. Union coverage, of course, tells a different story.

Thelen sums up: "[A]ll the rich democracies are experiencing a shared problem of growing contingency and precarity. However, it seems fair to say

Figure 3. European paid leave and unemployment benefits.



Source: Llewellyn Consulting

that the problem of precarity presents itself with special intensity in the United States.” She also links political democracy to economic democracy and the need for political science as a discipline to study macro political economy and not just voting behavior and individual attitudes.

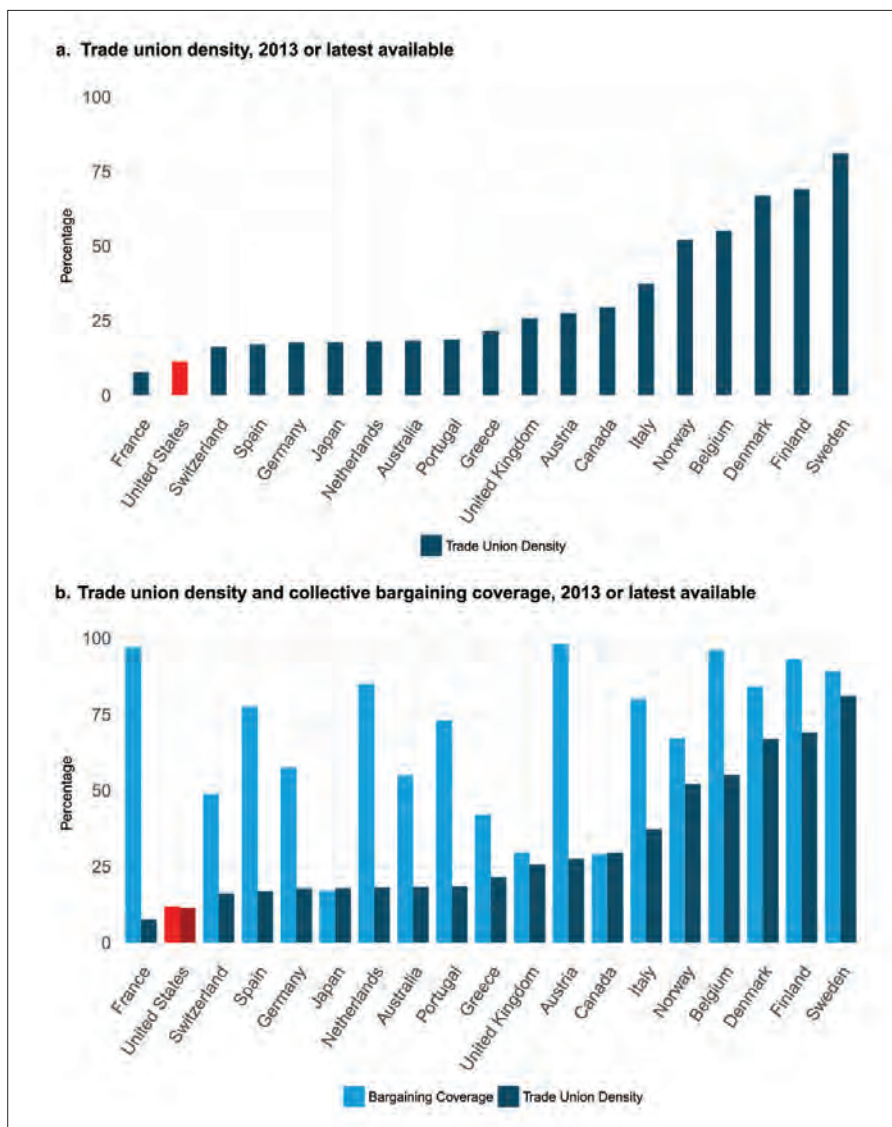
Thelen’s concern with democracy brings me to another LERA presidential address, Paula Voos’s to LERA — well actually, to IRRA — in 2003. Paula’s address was on democracy and industrial relations. Her first sentence reads: “Political democracy is thriving in the world.” Hmm. Things have changed. To be fair, she goes on to say that “democracy may be doing well in the world, but it is not doing well in the United States,” citing low rates of voting and particularly lower rates for those with lower incomes.

Both Voos and Thelen argue that income and wealth inequality constitute threats to democracy, with Voos emphasizing the ways unions can strengthen democracy not just by encouraging voting but also through reducing inequality. Schulze-Cleven and Vachon also discuss the links between precarity and status anxiety and openness to right-wing populism in their *LERA Research Volume* introduction, as does Guy Standing in the very title of his well-known book, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. My point here is that the concerns of our field, focused on employment, have important implications for the crisis of democracy. As Thelen calls for political science to consider macro political economy and the institutions of employment, perhaps our field needs to spend more time considering the implications of work and employment on political institutions and politics.

Returning to Thelen’s address, she also argues cause and effect, saying that “unions have been the key protagonists in expanding social protections and

Where do I even start with *The Sum of Us*, this searing and necessary book by Heather McGhee?

Figure 4. Union density and coverage.



Source: ILO Labor Relations and Collective Bargaining, ICTWSS Database on Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions

reducing inequality.” Further, “[O]ne of the most robust findings in the literature on comparative political economy is that the strength of the organized labor movement is associated with lower inequality (especially low-end inequality) and more generous social protections.” Voos points to lower voting rates among those with lower incomes as another explanation for our poor social safety net and labor laws. But I wonder whether there isn’t a different cause of poor social protections in the United States and low unionization rates.

And this brings me back to our racial reckoning and to the second book I want to talk about.

This book is *The Sum of Us*, by Heather McGhee, who just happens to be an Ian Haney López student. Where do I even start with this searing and necessary book? McGhee’s central argument is that we are all harmed by White racism and especially by the related zero-sum notion held by many White people that if people of color, especially Black people, have more of something, that means they [White people] have less.

According to McGhee, “The zero sum is a story sold by wealthy interests for their own profit, and its persistence

requires people desperate enough to buy it.” Further, she argues, “The narrative that White people should see the well-being of people of color as a threat to their own is one of the most powerful subterranean stories in America. Until we destroy the idea, opponents of progress can always unearth it and use it to block any collective action that benefits us all.”

The book walks us through the history of the zero-sum lie (I’m going to call it a lie in the spirit of the book). Starting with a look at the period of the 1680s and early 1700s, which McGhee calls a deliberate effort to legislate a new hierarchy between poor whites and “un-white Native and African laborers.” McGhee points out — as does Thelen — differences between the United States and Europe: “When it comes to per capita government spending, the United States is near the bottom of the list of industrial countries, below Latvia and Estonia. ... With the exception of about 40 years from the New Deal to the 1970s, the United States has had a weaker commitment to public goods, and to the public good, than every country that possesses anywhere near our wealth.”

She discusses how the public goods of that so-called Golden Age in the United States — starting with the New Deal itself (including unions and the NLRA), moving through the implementation

It seems high time for someone to write a new piece, “American Exceptionalism Re-Revisited: “The Importance of Race.”

of the G.I. Bill (if not its design) to the investment in highways that made suburbs possible — were all predicated on segregated access to these goods.

She tells the story of public swimming pools (and this story told on a radio broadcast or podcast was my original introduction to this book). She starts with the “glory” years of pool building starting in the 1920s, leading eventually to the fight to desegregate public pools. But with desegregation many public pools were privatized or, heartbreakingly, filled in. And the point of the pool story is that now NO one who needed a public pool, including poor and working-class Whites, got to have a pool anymore.

The idea that race is at the core of why the United States has fewer public goods, less of a social safety net, fewer protective labor laws, and a lower rate of collective bargaining is not new to me, but McGhee has done an important job in systematically documenting it. It is something our field needs to

grapple with, whether through a Critical Race Theory lens, as Lee and Tapia have argued, or some other theoretical perspective. I have long been a big fan of the Sandy Jacoby book chapter, in his 1991 edited volume *Masters to Managers*. The chapter is titled “American Exceptionalism Revisited: The Importance of Management.” It seems high time for someone to write a new piece with the title “American Exceptionalism Re-Revisited: The Importance of Race.”

I have meandered long enough. I will simply conclude by repeating that our world is facing multiple interrelated crises. Our field can be at the center of responding to these multiple crises through our research, teaching, service, and practice. Indeed, it must be if our field is to survive and prosper. More important, these crises must be faced if we are to survive and prosper as human beings. But we need to be intentional about it, and we need to expand the range of voices we hear, including those of the workers we study, advocate for, and manage, including those who are most marginalized, like the workers I quote at the beginning of this address. ■

Notes

1. See <https://bit.ly/3xK74VN>.
2. See <https://nyti.ms/3xL6Ygx>.
3. *Perspectives on Politics* 17, no. 1 (March 2019).
4. See <https://bit.ly/2SjV0LO>.
5. See <https://bit.ly/3wSH3ng>.

LERA EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS 2021-22

PRESIDENT

Wilma Liebman, Former Chair, NLRB

PRESIDENT-ELECT

Paul F. Clark, Pennsylvania State University

PAST PRESIDENT

Adrienne Eaton, Rutgers University

SECRETARY-TREASURER

Andrew Weaver, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

J. Ryan Lamare, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

NATIONAL CHAPTER ADVISORY COUNCIL CHAIR

William Canak, Middle Tennessee State University (ret.)

LEGAL COUNSEL

Steven B. Rynecki

EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBERS

Daniel Altchek, Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr LLP

Peter Berg, Michigan State University

Robert Chiaravalli, Strategic Labor and HR LLC

Julie Farb, AFL-CIO

Janet Gillman, Oregon Employment Relations Board

Shannon Gleeson, Cornell University

Kati Griffith, Cornell University
Beverly Harrison, Arbitrator/
Mediator

Quinton Herbert, City of Baltimore

Erin Johansson, Jobs With Justice

Tamara Lee, Rutgers University

Kevin Legel, Ford Motor Company

Deborah Mueller, CSEA Local 1000, AFSCME

Jim Pruitt, Kaiser Permanente

Javier Ramirez, Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service

Christine Riordan, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Jake Rosenfeld, Washington University in St. Louis

Marc Weinstein, Florida International University