

Opinion - US News

United States - Is America experiencing an unofficial general strike?

Thursday 14 October 2021, by [REICH Robert](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2021).

Last Friday's jobs report from the US Department of Labor elicited a barrage of gloomy headlines. The New York Times emphasized "[weak](#)" job growth and fretted that "hiring challenges that have bedeviled employers all year won't be quickly resolved," and "rising wages could add to concerns about inflation." For CNN, it was "[another disappointment](#)". For [Bloomberg](#) the "September jobs report misses big for a second straight month".

The media failed to report the big story, which is actually a very good one: American workers are now flexing their muscles for the first time in decades.

You might say workers have declared a national general strike until they get better pay and improved working conditions.

No one calls it a general strike. But in its own disorganized way it's related to the organized strikes breaking out across the land - Hollywood TV and film crews, John Deere workers, Alabama coal miners, Nabisco workers, Kellogg workers, nurses in California, healthcare workers in Buffalo.

Disorganized or organized, American workers now have bargaining leverage to do better. After a year and a half of the pandemic, consumers have pent-up demand for all sorts of goods and services.

But employers are finding it hard to fill positions.

Last Friday's jobs report showed the number of job openings at a record high. The share of people working or actively looking for work (the labor force participation rate) has dropped to 61.6%. Participation for people in their prime working years, defined as 25 to 54 years old, is also down.

Over the past year, job openings have increased 62%. Yet overall hiring has actually declined.

What gives?

Another clue: Americans are also quitting their jobs at the highest rate on record. The Department of Labor reported on Tuesday that some 4.3 million people quit their jobs in August. That comes to about 2.9% of the workforce - up from the previous record [set in April](#), of about 4 million people quitting.

All told, about 4 million American workers have been leaving their jobs every month since the spring.

These numbers have nothing to do with the Republican bogeyman of extra unemployment benefits supposedly discouraging people from working. Reminder: the extra benefits ran out on Labor Day.

Renewed fears of the Delta variant of Covid may play some role. But it can't be the largest factor.

With most adults now vaccinated, rates of hospitalizations and deaths are way down.

My take: workers are reluctant to return to or remain in their old jobs mostly because they're burned out.

Some have retired early. Others have found ways to make ends meet other than remain in jobs they abhor. Many just don't want to return to backbreaking or mind-numbing low-wage shit jobs.

The media and most economists measure the economy's success by the number of jobs it creates, while ignoring the *quality* of those jobs. That's a huge oversight.

Years ago, when I was secretary of labor, I kept meeting working people all over the country who had full-time work but complained that their jobs paid too little and had few benefits, or were unsafe, or required lengthy or unpredictable hours. Many said their employers treated them badly, harassed them, and did not respect them.

Since then, these complaints have only grown louder, according to [polls](#). For many, the pandemic was the last straw. Workers are fed up, wiped out, done-in, and run down. In the wake of so much hardship, illness and death during the past year, they're not going to take it anymore.

In order to lure workers back, employers are raising wages and offering other inducements. Average earnings rose 19 cents an hour in September and are up more than \$1 an hour - or 4.6% - over the last year.

Clearly, that's not enough.

Corporate America wants to frame this as a "labor shortage." Wrong. What's really going on is more accurately described as a living-wage shortage, a hazard pay shortage, a childcare shortage, a paid sick leave shortage, and a healthcare shortage.

Unless *these* shortages are rectified, many Americans won't return to work anytime soon. I say it's about time.

Robert Reich

P.S.

- The Guardian. Wed 13 Oct 2021 11.16 BST:
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/13/american-workers-general-strike-robert-reich?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

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