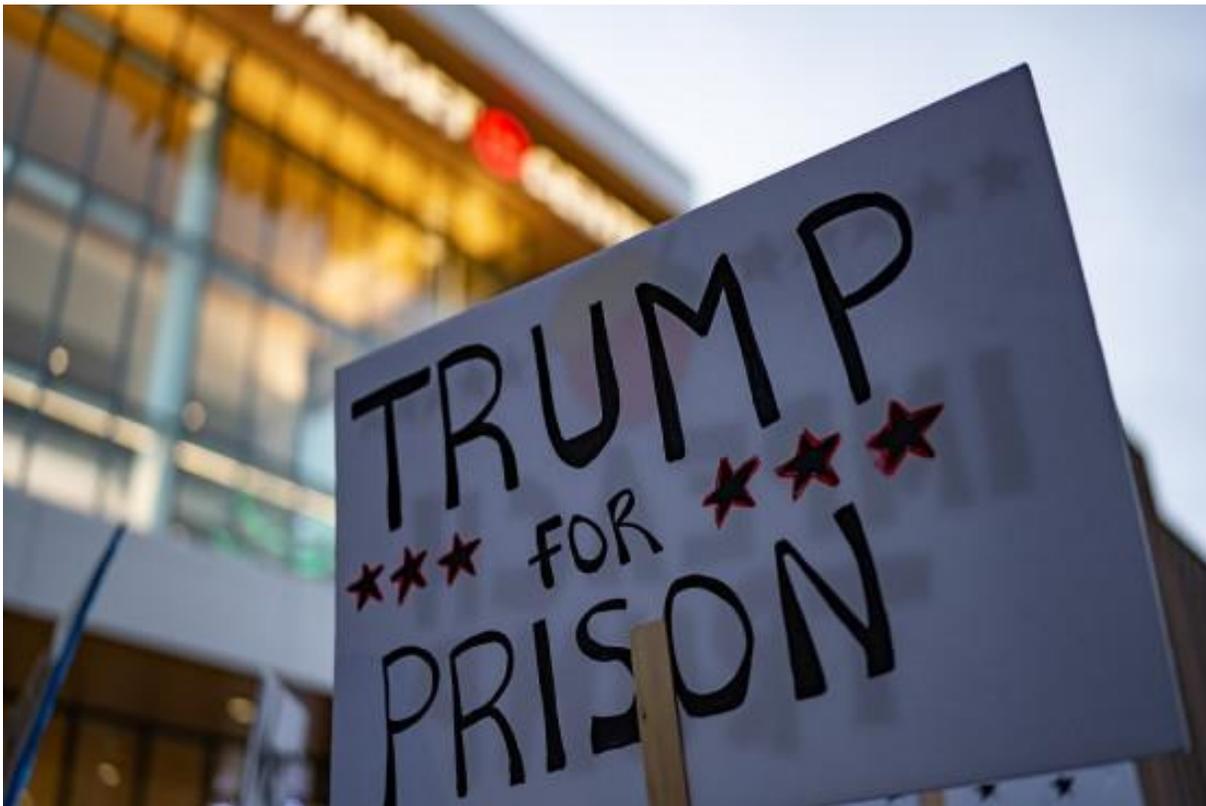


How Workers Can Help Defeat a Trump Coup

by Jeremy Brecher, LNS Research and Policy Director

Donald Trump, desperately behind in the polls, appears to be laying the groundwork for illegally attempting to remain in office if he loses the election. A previous commentary, [“Social Self-Defense Against the Impending Trump Coup”](#) laid out a strategy for popular resistance to such a usurpation of democratic government. This commentary focuses in on the role of workers – union and nonunion – in resisting a Trump Coup.



***Above:** Protesters gathered outside of the Target Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where President Donald J. Trump held a campaign rally on October 10, 2019. Photo credit: [Tony Webster](#), Wikimedia*

In a fiery October 10 speech, Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's 2016 campaign CEO, said that at 10 or 11 o'clock November 3 Trump is going to walk into the Oval Office "having won Ohio, and being up in Pennsylvania and Florida," and he's going to say, "Hey, game's over."^[1] If President Trump loses the November election but refuses to concede defeat and leave office, whatever words are used to justify his action the result will be a coup d'etat—an illegal, unconstitutional takeover of government power. Here's how workers—whatever their degree and kind of previous organization—can play a crucial role in resisting usurpation and restoring democracy.

How coups are defeated

While the US doesn't have a tradition of popular mobilization to overcome coups, around the world popular resistance has repeatedly helped defeat attempts to overthrow democratic governments. Two studies, *The Anti-Coup* by Gene Sharp and Bruce Jenkins and *Civil Resistance Against Coups* by Steven Zunes, examine civilian resistance to 15 coups.^[2]

In 13 cases the resistance succeeded in overcoming the coups, primarily through nonviolent mass action.

The key lessons of these past anti-coup movements are summarized by Zunes:

- Civil resistance movements generate "bottom-up legitimacy."
- The "physical control of government facilities" is not the same as the "political control of the state."
- Those who take part in a coup are "ultimately dependent" on the willingness of "local governments, independent social institutions, and the general population" to "recognize their authority and cooperate with them."
- The key to resisting or reversing a coup is "nonrecognition and noncooperation" by society.
- The coups that were defeated were those in which "citizens successfully denied legitimacy" to the usurpers and resisted their attempt to rule with "noncooperation and defiance."
- All successful cases of coup reversals included "large public demonstrations and noncooperation."
- Pro-democracy elements must "mobilize quickly" and engage in what may be "unplanned and largely spontaneous acts of resistance."^[3]

Sharp and Jenkins offer guidelines for resisting a coup:

- Repudiate the usurpers as “illegitimate” with “no rightful claim to become the government”;
- Make society “unrulable” by the usurpers and their supporters;
- Block the “imposition of a viable government” by the usurpers;
- “Maintain control and self-direction” of society;
- Make the institutions of the society into “omnipresent resistance organizations” against continued illegal rule;
- Deny the usurpers “any additional objectives”;
- Make the “costs of the coup and the attempted domination unacceptable”;
- “Subvert the reliability and loyalty” of the usurpers’ “troops and functionaries” and “induce them to desert” those who back the coup;
- Encourage “dissension and opposition” among the usurper’s supporters.^[4]

A resistance scenario

How do we apply these principles to the specific situation of a Trump coup and the specific role of workers in defeating it?

The strategy of a Trump coup is based not on a military seizure of power, but on executive usurpation of authority under cover of a stolen election. Trump and his supporters are already trying to prevent people from voting through legal and illegal means. Their strategies for disrupting a democratic election include preventing votes from being counted; insisting that votes are illegal; and creating chaos and disruption that will make the entire election process appear illegitimate.

Our electoral process offers an enormous range of opportunities for disruption, from armed gangs menacing voters at the polls, to shutting the polls before everyone has voted, to replacing members of the electoral college who have won the popular vote with others appointed by state legislatures. This summer the Transition Integrity Project, composed of more than 100 current and former senior government and campaign leaders and other experts, held a series of “war games” that concluded “with a high degree of likelihood” that the election will be marked by a “chaotic legal and political landscape.” President Trump is likely to contest the result by “both legal and extra-legal means.” He may be willing to go to “extreme lengths” to stay in office.^[5]

Preparations to respond are already under way. A manual titled *Hold the Line* lays out how to form local “election protection” committees and start organizing for coup resistance.^[6] Numerous organizations and coalitions are actively preparing for responding if Trump and his supporters disrupt the election and attempt to nullify its results. They include [Choose Democracy](#), [National Council On Election Integrity](#), [Keep Our Republic](#), [Stand Up America](#), and [People’s Strike!](#). Others are keeping a low public profile unless and until open resistance is necessary. [Protect the Results](#), a joint project of [Indivisible](#) and [Stand Up America](#), has already organized actions in 233 locations for 5:00 p.m. local time on November 4.



A leading role is likely to be played by organized young people. A youth coalition called We Count on Us is already organizing and mobilizing to resist such a coup. It includes the Sunrise Movement, March For Our Lives, Dream Defenders and United We Stand—groups that have played a leading role in mass youth mobilizations for climate protection, gun control, immigrant rights, and Black Lives. An on-line training by the Sunrise movement laid out principles for youth mobilization and nonviolent resistance in what may be a long fight. People can start right now to gather a few friends to work with. Even before election day officials – for example, governors, attorneys-general, secretaries of state, legislative leaders, and congresspeople—can be called on to commit to

counting every vote.^[7] Election day efforts will include getting out the vote and ensuring that every vote is counted. Masses of young people will stay at polling places—for multiple days if necessary — until everyone has voted and every vote has been counted. If the votes are not counted or the results of the election not respected, there will be a call for a mass youth strike from school and work. As the “We Count on Us” webpage puts it, “If Trump tries to steal the election, we need to be ready to lead a mass strike to make sure every vote is counted. We make this country run and if we all refuse to go to work or school, there’s no way for Trump to govern.”^[8] Such a strike will involve not only withdrawal from school and work but active interventions ranging from tweet storms and demonstrations targeting decisionmakers to socially-distanced and virtual rallies.^[9]

What can workers do?



Above: Anti-Trump protestors, Fountain Hills, AZ, March 19, 2016. [Chris Vena](#). Wikimedia.

Around the world workers and labor organizations have been crucial for popular movements to resist coups. According to Zunes, “general strikes played an important role” in Bolivia, Burkina Faso, France, Argentina, Mali, Sudan, and Egypt and in resisting the 1920 Kapp Putsch in Germany.^[10] But there is no tradition of using general strikes for political purposes in the US.^[11]

Ten percent of US workers are organized in unions—that’s about 14 million people. Many millions more are organized in professional associations of one kind or another. Most of the rest are in frequent contact with co-workers and are often organized in informal networks that share information and cooperate in other ways. However organized, workers are an essential part of every social institution; they are positioned to organize themselves and make the institutions they work in “omnipresent resistance organizations” against illegal Trump rule. Resistance to a Trump usurpation needs participation of both unionized and non-unionized workers. This section examines what all workers can do; the next section addresses what unionized workers in particular can do.

Talk with co-workers: All workers can start by talking with the people they work with and the people they know through various networks to discuss the danger and what to do about it. A starting question might simply be, what do you think people should do if Trump loses but refuses to leave the White House? Those who think action is necessary can simply form their own informal or formal “election protection” group.

There are several steps workers can take before election day. They can get in touch with youth and other groups in their community and offer support and cooperation with what they are planning. They can participate in voter education and anti-voter-suppression activities.

On election day: Besides voting yourself, you can participate in get-out-the-vote efforts with your co-workers, neighbors, and the wider public. Youth will be showing up to help protect voters against misinformation, denied access, intimidation, and violence. They need workers and the entire population to show up and support their efforts to preserve democracy for all of us. These efforts need to continue for as many days as necessary until all the votes are counted and valid results announced.

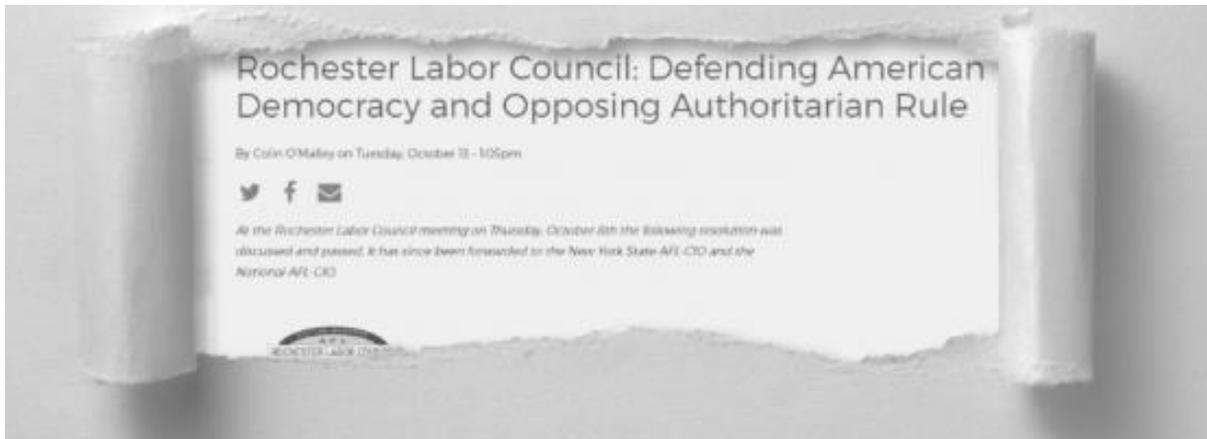
Join the strike: If vote counting is interrupted or interfered with or Trump loses but refuses to concede, major youth organizations have

already pledged a youth strike in schools and workplaces. There are likely to be significant efforts to break their strike, ranging from school and employer retaliation to arrests to vigilante violence. Supporting and protecting youth strikers will be necessary for preserving democracy against brutal authoritarianism. That means joining the strike, getting out in the streets, and participating in active interventions that show the people reject the coup. The thousands of strikes by Fight For Fifteen workers and the 900 wildcat strikes for COVID-19 protection since March show that—to paraphrase Mother Jones—you don't need a union to raise hell. Even though they don't have jobs to strike from, the millions of workers who are currently unemployed due to the COVID-19 Depression can participate in demonstrations and other public actions and can help put pressure on political decisionmakers.

Workers can organize in schools, hospitals, businesses, government offices, and every other venue to show that the entire society refuses to recognize or to cooperate with the usurpation of democracy. They can organize with others in their institutions to pass resolutions and impose policies of non-recognition and non-cooperation. For example, teachers and other education workers can demand that PTAs and school boards work with them to close schools and make them available as a base for anti-coup activists. Lawyers and their organizations can solicit cooperation from everyone in the legal system from judges to janitors to close the courts and issue statements rejecting the coup and stating that resistance to it is obedience to law. Municipal and state government workers can shut down normal operations and organize to continue socially necessary emergency operations under the authority of the local community and its representatives, making explicit that they are not operating under the authority of the usurpers of lawful government.

Certain workers are in locations that provide them special power. It was when airline workers stopped showing up for work and the Association of Flight Attendants called for mass mobilization at airports and a general strike that President Trump and his Senate supporters abandoned their shutdown of the federal government.^[12] Amazon, UPS, airline, and fossil fuel delivery workers among others could bring normal social life to a screeching halt.

What can unions do?



On September 25 AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka released this statement about the post-election transition:

The AFL-CIO categorically rejects all threats to the peaceful transition of power. The labor movement simply will not allow any breach of the U.S. Constitution or other effort to deny the will of the people. Union members across the political spectrum are united in our fundamental belief that the votes of the American people must always determine the presidency. America's workers will continue to be steadfast in defense of our democracy in the face of President Trump's antics, and we stand ready to do our part to ensure his defeat in this election is followed by his removal from office.^[13]

Discussions are under way within organized labor about how to make such a "removal from office" real. A number of unions—some of them in critical industries—are discussing strikes and other actions against a Trump coup internally and with each other. The Service Employees International Union and the Communication Workers of America are participating in Protect the Results, which has organized post-election meetings in nearly 200 locations to "activate their members and take coordinated action" if "Donald Trump loses the election and refuses to concede."^[14]

At the local level unions are already organizing. The Rochester Labor Council, AFL-CIO, passed a resolution October 8 that calls on "the National AFL-CIO, all of its affiliate unions, and all other labor organizations in the United States of America to prepare for and enact a general strike of all working people, if necessary, to ensure a Constitutionally mandated peaceful transition of power as a result of the 2020 Presidential Elections." The Seattle Education Association passed a resolution calling for post-election meetings for members to consider "work actions" in the event of interference with the elections. The

American Postal Workers Union in Detroit called on its members to pledge that:

- We will vote.
- We will refuse to accept election results until all the votes are counted.
- We will nonviolently take to the streets if a coup is attempted.
- If we need to, we will shut down this country to protect the integrity of the democratic process.^[15]

If Trump loses but refuses to concede, labor organizations at every level can pass resolutions of nonrecognition and non-cooperation. Local unions can call on their central labor councils and higher bodies in their own unions to do so. Where official labor organizations are slow to respond, local labor activists can create “coalitions of the willing” to work around centers of inertia and resistance. Working with other stakeholders unions can pressure institutions whose workers they represent—like hospitals, schools, local governments, and civic institutions—to establish policies of non-recognition and non-cooperation with the Trump regime and take concrete acts to implement those policies. They can demand that their employers support electoral integrity, refuse to recognize and cooperate with an illegal Trump regime, and not retaliate against workers who join strikes for democracy. Unions can support and join the youth strikes and direct actions and help protect them against violent attack.

Guidelines for resistance

The US 2020 anti-coup movement, like those elsewhere in the past, will have to depend on “unplanned and largely spontaneous acts of resistance.” Its strategy and tactics will often have to be improvised on the spot. Here are some guidelines that may help with that process.

Organizing the resistance: Successful resistance will depend on millions of people organizing themselves in their own localities and institutions. There are already multiple centers organizing coup resistance. No one organization is preordained or likely to be in a position to claim legitimate leadership for the movement as a whole. Leadership will need to actively coordinate across organizations and seek alignment on goals and strategies. Constituents can support and demand such cooperation.

Defining the frame: The anti-coup movement does not represent Joe Biden or the Democratic Party. It represents the right of the American people to govern themselves through representatives of their own

choosing. It asserts that the people determine our government, not a usurping tyrant.

Unifying demands: A small set of very similar demands has been articulated by a wide range of anti-coup efforts. The nearly universal demand is *Count Every Vote*. Various groups have proposed supplementary “red lines” that are essentially means to the same end, such as “impartially investigate and remedy all irregularities” and “respect election results regardless of who wins.” Whatever their other disagreements, all anti-coup groups should strive to create agreement around a small set of such core demands.

Using nonviolence: The core strategy of the anti-coup movement is to organize society to generate “bottom-up legitimacy.”^[16] The key to doing so is to demonstrate organized action by millions of people expressing their refusal to recognize and cooperate with the coup. As the recent Sunrise training pointed out, Trump is “waging a narrative battle” to “paint our actions as violent and fringe.” The movement can best win that battle by painting an alternative picture of the people peacefully rising to dethrone an aspiring tyrant. Participants can ask each other to agree to and abide by pledges of nonviolence. If those who oppose this peaceful uprising choose to paint a picture of themselves as a violent mob menacing safety and democracy, that is their choice.

While fantasies of violent resistance to the forces of violence may satisfy some psychological needs, violence by democracy defenders will play right into the hands of Trump and his supporters. It will confirm to the general public their claims about the threat of “violent leftists.” And it will give both armed terrorists and police and other security forces the perfect excuse to wreak violence against peaceful demonstrators. The main effect of lefties brandishing guns will be to get a lot of peaceful demonstrators killed.

Disabling Trump’s support: While pre-election polls indicate that Trump’s support is declining to a modest minority, a third or more of the population still supports him. Trump has urged his supporters to go to the polls to prevent the election from being stolen—one can only imagine by what means. Trump supporters have already shot demonstrators dead—and been celebrated by the president for doing so. Nonviolent democracy defenders will sometimes be confronted by rightwing, white supremacist Trump supporters, some armed, some part of organized terrorist “militias.” They will be encouraged by the rightwing media echo chamber which will feed them with lies, fears, and incitements. In some cases they will be supported by a segment of police and other security forces.

Nonviolent movements have developed a host of techniques for dealing with threats of violence and de-escalating conflict, like linking arms to protect demonstrators and create a barrier against attacks. On-line training is available on how to use them; groups going into nonviolent action should watch them and role-play their techniques.^[17] Of course, no techniques will always immediately cool out angry violent attackers, and a threatened democracy cannot be defended without risk. But history shows that in most instances the perpetrators of violence against peaceful people seeking to protect the public good undermine their own support and increase support for those they attack. The best way to counter violence is to render it self-defeating for those who would use it.

Neutralizing and winning over the security forces: Unlike a classic military coup, the role of the military and other security forces in the event of a Trump executive usurpation is far from predetermined. The *New York Times* recently reported that several Pentagon officials said there could be resignations among many of Trump's senior generals, starting at the top with chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley, should troops be ordered into the streets at the time of the election.^[18] The intelligence apparatus is similarly sending signals of dealignment with Trump's machinations. In a video message, William Evanina, director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, with the agreement of the directors of the FBI, National Security Agency, and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, said the "election system remains resilient." In sharp contrast to Trump's contentions that the elections will be "rigged," "corrupt, and "illegal," Evanina stated "it would be very difficult for adversaries to interfere with, or manipulate, voting results at scale."^[19]

The role of various sectors and levels of the security forces in the event of a Trump coup will no doubt be contested. Some police and military forces support democracy and legitimate government and will refuse to take orders from a usurper. Some will strive to present themselves as neutral or "non-political." Some sympathize or even ally themselves with white nationalist, rightwing, Trumpist movements and organizations. What is most likely to win their support or at least neutralize opposition from the security forces is to paint a portrait of the people peacefully rising to defend democracy against the attempt to establish a tyranny.

Endgames: While many social movement campaigns end with negotiations, the movement against a Trump coup may not. Rather, it may result in a collapse of the coup and the restoration of constitutionally mandated democratic procedures and principles. If the demands of the movement are clear and unambiguous, everyone should be able to tell

whether they have been met and there will be no opportunity for leadership sellout. Democracy is not negotiable.

Resisting a Trump coup and protecting democracy will undoubtedly involve sacrifice and suffering. It may well be easier and safer to simply defer to illegitimate authority. But as the abolitionist former slave Frederick Douglass noted long ago, “There is no disguising the fact that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, and if we maintain our high estate in this republic, we must be something more than driftwood in a stream.”^[20]

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'Strike!' Citations

[1] Steve Bannon, [“The Plot to Steal 2020.”](#)

[2] Gene Sharp & Bruce Jenkins, [TheAnti-Coup](#) (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution) Steven Zunes, *Civil Resistance Against Coups: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* ([ICNC Monograph Series](#))

[3] Zunes, [Ibid](#), pp. 9-11.

[4] Sharp and Jenkins, [Ibid](#), p. 21.

[5] [“Preventing a Disrupted Presidential Election and Transition.”](#) Transition Integrity Project, August 3, 2020.

[6] Hardy Merriman, Ankur Asthana, Marium Navid, Kifah Shah. [Hold the Line: A Guide to Defending Democracy](#). version 1.2. 2020.

[7] The Voter Protection Program aims to ensure that all votes are counted with “a specific focus on the unique tools available to state attorneys general, as they work in partnership with governors, secretaries of state and other state officials.” [Itswebsite](#) describes steps state attorneys general have taken and can take.

[8] [We Count on Us](#).

[9] 350.org, “Count Our Votes” Training, October 12, 2020.

[10] Zunes, [Ibid](#), p.90.

[11] For background on general strikes see Jeremy Brecher, [“Occupy May Day: Not Your Usual General Strike”](#) *Common Dreams*, March 26, 2020.

[12] Jeremy Brecher, [Strike!: 50th Anniversary Edition](#) (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020. “General Strike: The Fierce Urgency of Now,” 476-481.

[13] Richard Trumka, [“We Will Not Tolerate Any Constitutional Breach.”](#) AFL-CIO, September 25, 2020.

[14] [“Protect the Results.”](#)

[15] For overviews of recent coup resistance preparations by organized labor see Barbara Madeloni, [“Unions Are Beginning to Talk About Staving Off a Possible Coup.”](#) *Labor Notes*, October 15, 2020, and Dan La Botz, [“Unions Are Starting Discussions of How to Resist a Trump Coup.”](#) *Jacobin*, October 18, 2020.

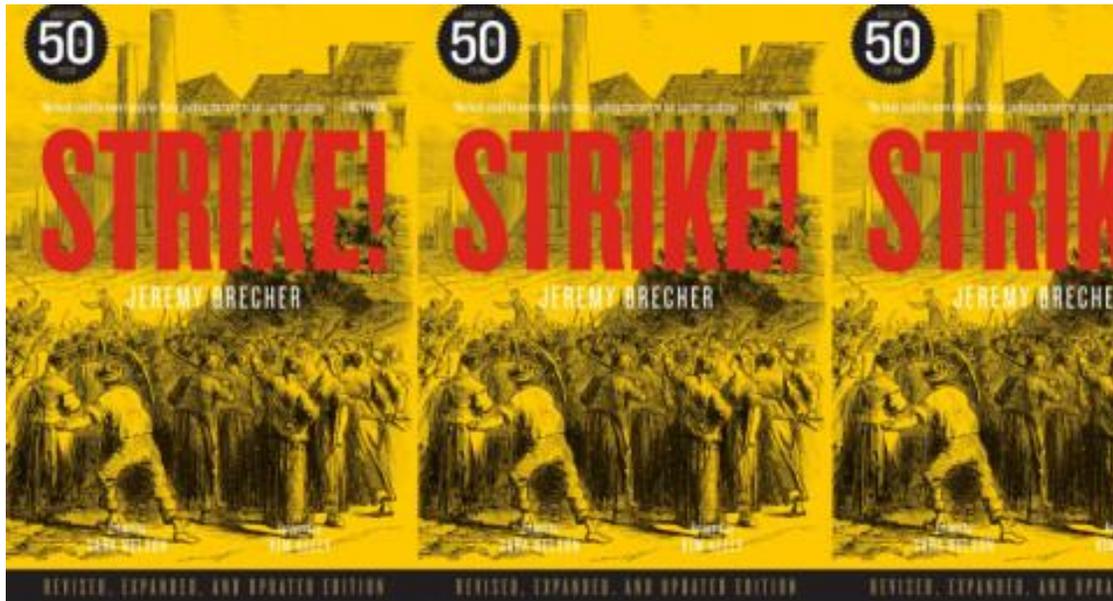
[16] Zunes, [Ibid](#), pp. 9-11.

[17] For on-line trainings and links visit [Choose Democracy](#).

[18] Jennifer Steinhauer and Helene Cooper, [“At Pentagon, Fears Grow That Trump Will Pull Military into Election Unrest.”](#) *New York Times*, September 25, 2020.

[19] Kevin Johnson and Kristine Phillips, [“Elections: Foiled kidnapping of Michigan governor highlights preparations for election-related conflict.”](#) *USA Today*, October 9, 2020.

[20] Buccola, Nicholas, [The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty](#), 2012.



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