

EDITORIAL

# Good news for U.S. workers

But Great Recession recovery is uneven

There is some cause for celebration at the Labor Day barbecue this year.

Unemployment is down and those 401(k)s are getting meatier because the stock market is up. The number of private sector jobs on Long Island rose by 1 percent over the year in July — slightly less of a jump than the state and nation at large, but still good news.

Unfortunately, recovery from the Great Recession has been uneven for too many here and nationwide. Wages have been stagnant, and even the hopeful economic numbers mask people who are underemployed, freelancing without benefits, don't have the skills needed in the digital marketplace or just gave up looking for jobs. Big companies are getting bigger through mergers, lessening the leverage of workers to switch jobs for higher pay. Meanwhile, CEO compensation has skyrocketed, increasing the income inequality gap, despite decades of increased worker productivity.

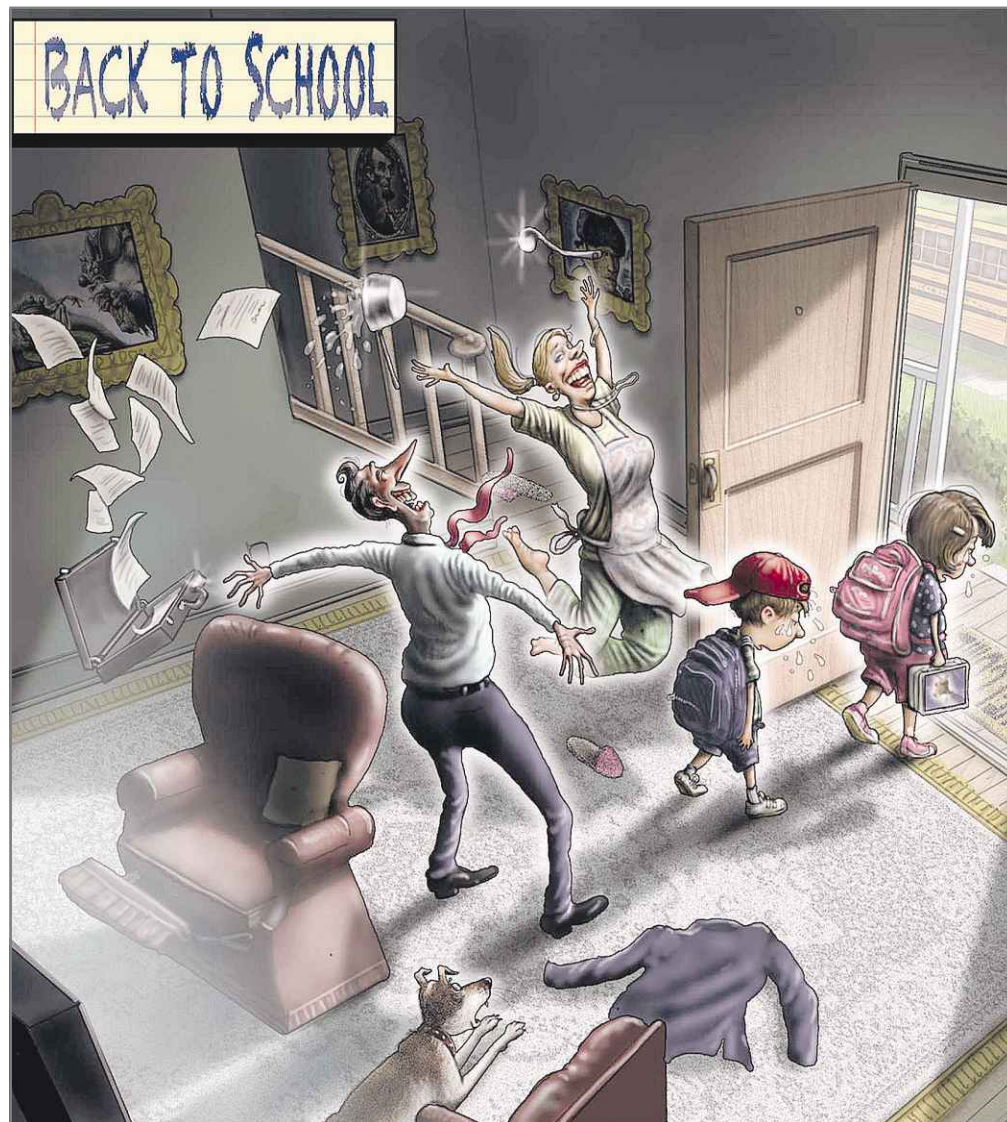
The 2017 tax bill benefits the wealthiest and will ultimately do little for everyone else. One example of how the rich get richer, the so-called carried-interest loophole, still allows hedge-funders to pay lower taxes on their profits. Strong unions have been a key bulwark of worker power in American history, one that has won workplace protections and real bargaining power. But their strength in the private sector has eroded badly and public sector unions are being weakened in the courts. It hasn't helped that a few unions have been shortsighted or distanced from the needs of their rank and file.

Without consistently rising wages, the American dream is being denied to too many. The hope to buy a home, to see children get a better education and a better life, even to retire with security, is slipping away.

The solutions to stagnant paychecks are not easy to realize. Creating opportunities must be a singular focus, and that starts with investing in human capital and formulating policies that support workers.

That would make those late-summer barbecues celebrating workers a lot more celebratory.

— *The editorial board*



■ Matt Davies is off. See his cartoons at [newsday.com/matt](http://newsday.com/matt)

# Unions matter, especially for young workers

BY HECTOR FIGUEROA

Before joining our union a few years ago, Camika Lewis was making just \$7.25 an hour working for a subcontracting company as a customer service representative at Newark International Airport. For more than two decades, she had put in a full 40 hours a week at the airport, but was forced to pursue extra hours at nursing assistant and cosmetology jobs to make ends meet. After paying her student loans and utility bills, she struggled to buy groceries.

It was a sense of despair, and a drive to lift herself out of poverty, that compelled Lewis to

become a leader in our union's effort to raise wages and working conditions at Newark International, Kennedy and LaGuardia airports. She participated in years of strikes, marches into management offices, rallies, civil disobedience and demonstrations at meetings of the Port Authority that runs the airports.

Now, Lewis and 40,000 of her co-workers in security, fueling, baggage handling, customer support and cleaning are on the path to a \$19 minimum wage. On this Labor Day, that is a victory worth celebrating — and one of many recent signs of resurgence in the U.S. labor movement.

For the first time in years, the percentage of union member-

ship held steady in 2017, thanks in part to young people's burgeoning enthusiasm for unions. The number of union members grew by 262,000 last year, and three-quarters of these gains were among workers under 34 years old. The appeal of unions is growing among young workers who are struggling with student loan debt, rising housing costs, lack of benefits, grueling hours, capricious work environments, discrimination, harassment and precarious job security.

In North Carolina, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and Colorado, teachers have pulled off a series of highly successful strikes involving stu-

dents and their parents, filled state capitols, and effectively persuaded elected officials to invest in children's futures.

Another example of unions' renewed militancy and efficacy is the Fight for \$15, which had its first successes advocating for higher pay for fast-food workers. A movement that started with a strike at a New York City McDonald's has spread, and now 17 percent of Americans will live in a city or state with a \$15 minimum wage by 2022, and 22 million workers have seen raises as a result of the campaign.

Unions are still the best vehicle workers have to fight for better wages, benefits and working

conditions. And unions are pushing a bold vision for issues beyond the workplace, including expanded Social Security, progressive taxation, affordable health care, extended sick time and family leave, child care benefits, pre-K for all children, no-cost college and the reduction of student loan debt.

Let's keep our ears closer to the ground: Working Americans are more than ready to join together in union.



Hector Figueroa, president of SEIU 32BJ, wrote this piece for Tribune News Service.