

# **Sarita Gupta**

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## **“Workers, Equality, and Democracy: How Labor and Its Partners Should Think About the Future”**

### **The 2019 Jerry Wurf Memorial Lecture**



The Labor and Worklife Program  
Harvard Law School

JERRY WURF MEMORIAL FUND (1982)  
Harvard Trade Union Program, Labor and Worklife  
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The Jerry Wurf Memorial Fund was established in memory of Jerry Wurf, the late president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). Its income is used to initiate programs and activities that “reflect Jerry Wurf’s belief in the dignity of work, and his commitment to improving the quality of lives of working people, to free open thought and debate about public policy issues, to informed political action...and to reflect his interests in the quality of management in public service, especially as it assures the ability of workers to do their jobs with maximum effect and efficiency in environments sensitive to their needs and activities.”

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January 16, 2019

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## INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Sharon Block for inviting me to speak - and for your leadership here, at the Labor and Worklife Program, and for the many contributions you have made to the labor movement over the years.

It was such an honor to get to know you and work with you while you served in the Obama Administration. It is so important for someone like you with an expansive vision of the labor movement to be directing this program.

What a great room! I see many old friends in the room... my MA JWJ family of activists, leaders, scholars, and academics.

And of course, the many labor leaders in the room. I jumped at the opportunity to come tonight – to be able to meet and talk with key leaders like yourselves.

This program is a trailblazer in the field of labor education and leadership development to prepare union members, elected officers, and staff to lead the labor movement into the future and become more effective, inspired, and informed

champions within and outside their institutions. I am grateful for the many graduates of the Harvard Trade Union Program with whom I have had an opportunity to work together.

For those who are not familiar with us, along with our network of community-labor coalitions, Jobs With Justice brings together a range of unions of working people, community organizations, worker centers, faith leaders, students, and individual activists who want to improve the lives, the communities, and workplaces of all people.

We organize at the local, state, and national level on a broad range of campaigns, and we are centered around a mission to expand collective bargaining rights.

I hope to impart some relevant lessons and reflections from my 20 years of organizing, campaigning, and leading community labor coalitions. To share what is needed in this moment and how we can pave pathways forward for working people to survive and thrive.

I am honored to deliver the Wurf Memorial Lecture.

I'm going to go a little meta today, because I want to talk to you about what is really at stake, when thinking about our future.

I'm also a big-picture leader, so we're going to go macro and discuss the overarching context and conditions that led to where we are and where we must go.

And I'm also a big-hearted leader, so I hope to instill in you some inspiration and compassion for the challenges ahead.

What I'm not planning on doing is lecturing. Many of us have been scolded by teachers, parents, bosses - and often that angry talk comes from a place of fear. There's no learning in that. I really look forward to the conversation that we will have together through this event.

Sharon suggested I build upon on an essay I wrote with two other colleagues: **Stephen Lerner**, a veteran organizer and campaigner who was the architect of Justice for Janitors; and **Joseph A. McCartin**, the executive director of Georgetown University's Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor. Stephen, Joe, and I challenge the flawed assumptions inherent in the

conversations/discourse about the future of work.

If you're not familiar with these debates - the focus tends to center on how we grapple with fundamental technological advancements in the workplace which some argue, and argue incorrectly, will lead to robots and automation - causing a rapid extinction of large swaths of the workforce.

How many of you have heard some version of "Robots are taking over our jobs"??

So, you know what I am talking about.

We argue that computerization or artificial intelligence do not represent the gravest threat to our future. **It is the concentration of wealth and power by those who do not want a future where working people - Black, Brown, and White - have power and agency, and where government and democracy also thrive.**

Therefore, what we really need to talk about is the future of working people—whose future is inextricably linked to our ability to promote and preserve equality

and democracy. This must be our most urgent concern.

Now, I want to build on this assertion.

1. It's about the future of working people.
2. We must understand that our democracy is in crisis
3. Re-define that democracy is more than about the ability to vote
4. Bargaining rights is an essential component of democracy
5. Our role as leaders in this moment

### **Future of workers: Kim's story**

When I think about the future of workers, I think about my Kimberly. Kimberly works at Macy's in DC. She is a union member. Recently, Macy's adopted new technology to set schedules for workers, which meant that Kimberly was suddenly experiencing unpredictable schedules. This had impacts on her budgets, her ability to attend her daughter's after school events, parent-teacher meetings, etc. She is lucky to have a union, and together with her co-workers they have been working to address these issues through bargaining. She truly gets the power of bargaining and being able to have agency over her work schedule and hours of work.



Kimberly is also a mom, with a daughter in the DC Public Schools. She is very concerned about the classroom sizes and conditions of her daughter's school. As a parent, she has been trying to find ways to address the needs of her local school and organize with other parents to make change.

Kimberly was also a caregiver. An unpaid caregiver to her grandmother who was ill with cancer. For a number of years, Kimberly struggled with how best to care for her grandmother, while working full-time. She has been a huge advocate for a broad range of care issues like affordable and accessible care options, and more supports for caregivers like herself such as paid medical leave (policies she is organizing and supporting in DC).

If all that you hear in this description of Kimberly is that she is a retail worker with bargaining rights, you are not seeing her as a whole person. You are missing the fact that Kimberly desires to be able to have agency and govern over all aspects of her life.

She wants to shape the DC public schools as a parent. She wants to have a say in

shaping the supports that unpaid family caregivers like herself need. This is an important thing to understand as leaders, activists, and people who believe in the dignity of work and working people. Working women and men want to have the ability to govern over all aspects of their lives.

Our core belief is that people should be able to govern over their lives. And we know that the most effective way that working people can achieve this ability is by banding together with their co-workers, their neighbors, and other people to win a set of demands from entities that have power over their lives.

This belief that people should be able to have agency in shaping their futures and should be able to do so through collective means is precisely what is at risk right now in our culture, our politics as a nation, and in our democracy as a whole.

If we deeply ground ourselves back in this core belief, then we can understand our role in strengthening our democracy.

**Our democracy is in crisis.**

And the crisis is not that we have the President who we have in office, but

rather that there are broader threats to our democracy.

Our nation's forefathers declared the primacy of democracy when they enshrined into law that our country would be ruled of the people, for the people, and by the people. And over the next two centuries, democracy flourished as our early citizens figured out how to work together to create policies, establish towns, and create a functioning society.

And yet since the federalist forefathers laid out these principles, there have been elite, ruling classes who have been chipping away at the bedrocks of democracy ever since. From strategizing to pursue states' rights to get around federal mandates – to wealthy landowners devising laws to suppress voting rights of Black Americans -- which continues to this day.

As historian Nancy MacLean has so powerfully and gravely laid out in *Democracy in Chains*, the laws and strategies that have suppressed democracy, entrenched white supremacy, and eroded support of the government are all part of a playbook by the wealthiest and most powerful.

In MacLean's account, James C. Calhoun, the former U.S. Vice President and South Carolina Senator, "believed that Madison's Constitution was flawed by its failure to fully hamstring the people's ability to act 'collectively.'"<sup>1</sup> You and I see collectivism as an essential function of a healthy democracy, but the wealthy and powerful few have long viewed that it's an expendable function. And they've rigged the rules to sow distrust and disempowerment among the majority in our democratic principles.

According to Maclean, Calhoun inverted how most people would construe who had power over whom. A man whose wealth came from slavery was somehow

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017), p. 4. Note how elements of the U.S. right created a vast literature in the twentieth century claiming that collectivism is the ideology of totalitarianism and at odds with the American way. One of the early exemplars was the American journalist William Henry Chamberlin, *A False Utopia: Collectivism in Theory and Practice* (London: Duckworth, 1937), a selection of the Right Book Club. Chamberlin regarded collectivism as the hallmark of the Bolshevik Revolution, and his themes were regularly echoed in the crusading McCarthyism of the 1950s.

a victim of government tax collectors, and it was actually poorer voters who were the exploiters to watch out for. Yet back then, just like today, the net gainers of tax funds were the ruling class of the exploited, and the net losers of tax funds were the ruled or the exploited.

Simply put, the right-wing's makers and takers mantra goes way, way back. As does the hypocrisy of the ruling class using its influence to make government uphold the status quo for them, while squelching the power of others and simultaneously criticizing government at the same time. They don't want to share political and economic power. They want to reign supreme.

Calhoun's intellectual successor is the Nobel Prize-winning political economist James McGill Buchanan, who birthed the modern radical right movement. Buchanan's ideas and plans were hatched to preserve elite white power in the wake of the Supreme Court's landmark decision to desegregate schools in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. With the backing of billionaires like the Koch Brothers, this movement altered every branch of government in the last 60 years to enact an agenda they couldn't get most Americans to support on their own.

So this capitalist radical right has been working not simply to change who rules, but to fundamentally transform *the* rules of democratic governance, and sow distrust in the system all together.

And they're succeeding with record levels of cynicism and public trust in the government, the court systems, the press, public schools and so on remains near historic lows. Only 18 percent of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right "just about always" (3 percent) or "most of the time" (15 percent).

They have so masterfully undermined the concept that people can have a say and shape our future. We have to be the force to counter this demise of democracy - in our workplaces, government, communities, even in our families – and show that coming together is a normal, and not a radical nor an historical way to solving problems.

Democracy is more than the ability to vote. It is also about the core belief that people should be able to govern over aspects of their lives.

**Which brings me to the importance of bargaining in a democracy.**

I believe that we must begin with revolutionizing the tool that has been bequeathed to us by more than a century and a half of workers' struggles—organizing through collective action and negotiating with those who control the economy and our future through collective bargaining.

The form of workplace-centered organizing and bargaining that evolved over the course of the 20th century, however, is not up to the challenge that workers and citizens face in this century – in a changed economy.

We need to forge new ways of organizing and bargaining appropriate to a world in which power is concentrating in the hands of fewer economic actors.

Progress requires innovation and creativity beyond the frameworks of the past century. But it also requires some old basics as well—organizing like there's nothing to lose.

And in all of this, movement leaders must reach far beyond their existing memberships to the overwhelming majority of workers who are yet protected by a collective bargaining agreement—way beyond the narrow reaches of a traditional bargaining unit and a bargaining agreement—to meet the modern-day worker and in the economy she or he functions in.

Jobs With Justice is one of a number of organizations representing working people who are not waiting for—nor are we necessarily aiming for—union recognition to bring together working people to negotiate with those who have control over their shared conditions.

Speaking of not waiting for the law to change or catch up... let's talk about Educator Spring and the incredible strike of the West Virginia educators and school service personnel. Tens of thousands walked off the job in this “right-to-work state” almost a year ago. They had no legal right to strike, and no collective bargaining rights. But they were buoyed with the support they marshalled together of the leaders of their unions, students, parents, community, labor and legislative allies. They refused to return to work until all state workers had received a pay increase equal to theirs.



The West Virginia educators knew that if they won raises only for themselves, they would become targets in the future, just as teachers had in Wisconsin under Scott Walker, so they rejected an initial deal that would have provided raises only for the educators.

So by holding the line and getting all the school districts to close, they took back their power after years of being neglected and disrespected, earning their first raise in 13 years, a raise for state workers, an end to anti-union proposals in the legislature, and improvements to schools.

Their walkout ignited walkouts and protests by hundreds of thousands of fired up educators in five states demanding, and in many instances winning, increases in pay and school budgets.

In Oklahoma, teachers protested the state's failure to fairly tax wealthy oil and gas interests. In Arizona, teachers demanded that the state enact no further tax cuts until the state's per-pupil spending on education reached the national average.

Since the vast majority of strikers were not union members, these walkouts were

both massive organizing campaigns and democracy campaigns as well, since they posed such explicit political demands as raising taxes to fund public schools more adequately. These were not your traditional self-interested bread and butter contract fights. These were campaigns with mandates to improve education and fight for fairer taxation for students, parents, and economically distressed residents and communities.

By risking their own economic security to improve conditions not just for themselves, these educators infused hope into the hearts and minds of millions of people---expanding our understanding of what is possible, what's worth fighting for, and what you can achieve when you band together.

In regions where you could go your entire life without knowing anyone in a union, the significance of working people joining together to stand up for themselves and their communities and win cannot be understated.

Educator Spring not only won the support of the public, but also has been an effective bulwark in internal organizing for NEA and AFT affiliates in the wake of Janus. And these unions have crafted

new blueprints to prepare and help ignite more strikes in the coming years.

In a world where jobs long considered safe career paths are contracted and sub-contracted out, we must bargain differently. If we're going to make real progress, we need to re-define who bargains and what we bargain over. The definition of collective bargaining, in our minds and in our hearts, must be expanded to meet the context of the modern-day worker and the economy she functions in— way beyond the conscripted, narrow reaches of a bargaining unit and a bargaining agreement. Regardless of what the law says. This is the moment to ramp up ideas and strategies for working people to negotiate with employers, banks, regulators, and others who directly impact their lives locally, nationally, across industry and sector.

Our north star at Jobs With Justice is to expand the ability for men and women to negotiate collectively. I didn't say defend. I didn't say protect. Our charge is to expand.

So we craft strategies, draft policies, create mechanisms, and catalyze experiments, and we organize for a

bottom-line goal of expanding bargaining. Whether for people who've never had a union, or for the people who labor law ignored, and who corporations want us to keep ignoring in modern day workplaces. This was something no one conceptualized 80 years ago.

We believe that we have to expand our definition of bargaining to be about creating pathways for working people to come together collectively to negotiate with any entity that has power over their lives - employers, landlords, financiers, and more.

### **Practice of democracy**

One major takeaway from West Virginia – and now from LA – is that we must nurture and catalyze a demand for not just unions -- but for all forms of democracy and collectivism in our culture. We must build a political movement that embodies the values of agency and collectivity.

Essayist Yoni Applebaum has argued that to stop the rot afflicting American government, Americans are going to have to get back in the habit of democracy. To me this goes part and parcel with advancing collectivism as an acquired habit.

It's not just that people aren't joining unions - they aren't joining PTAs, church associations, Rotaries, and other volunteer groups with democratically-elected positions within their communities. And civic participation's demise also models political participation's demise.

Studies have found that voting is habit forming and self-reinforcing. Our movement does a fantastic job of encouraging our members to vote. But how do we take what we've learned through sophisticated GOTV [Get Out The Vote] work to push forth more ways in which our members can participate in democratically-run groups - and to bring these practices into their private lives, modeling with their kids, encouraging their relatives and friends to get involved in groups with them locally to make a difference and to see their efficacy?

It is a common lament that our politicians are so out of touch, but truth be told most Americans are out of touch with what it means to come together and solve problems with people outside of their immediate friends and family.

We need to remind Americans of their collective, and untapped power -- and the pride that comes from coming together to demand an end to segregation, polluted air and water, unregulated drugs, child labor. To create parks and public education, roads, highways, Social Security.

And thankfully there are storytellers and real-life examples of people banding together to make a positive change that we can take cues from and which demonstrate that people are open to, and even desiring collective models.

There are the activists in Flint coming together to demand clean water for their families, the students in Parkland High School who ignited a new youth movement and political will to enact common sense gun laws, the fast food workers rising and winning a higher minimum wage, schoolkids coming together to ban unnecessary use of Styrofoam and plastic straws.

We even can point to and can encourage more collectivist stories in movies, TV and comic books like Marvel superheroes uniting against villains, community members in a Hallmark Channel movie rallying to save a beloved small-town

business, and educational children's programming on Sesame Street that reinforces why it takes all of us to right wrongs and do good. We need to consistently lift up examples, however small and big of how people can be more powerful together than alone.

Our movement must tend to the fundamental work of revitalizing democracy because working people cannot improve their lives without gaining an effectual collective voice in shaping their world, on and off the job.

To take back our democracy and ramp up collectivism we must be able to engage, excite, and even work on behalf of broad swaths of people outside of our institutions. In doing so we can build the social power that we need to win change that is aligned with our purpose.

### **What does this mean for today's leaders?**

As leaders of unions, this means seeing your role as more than representing your members when negotiating with employers. Your role must also be to facilitate how and when your members gain the daily habit of democracy within the union.

This is critical – not just in electing leadership of the union, but in having the space to debate issues, grapple and work through differences, and identifying the issues that matter to them.

The Chicago Teachers Union strike did not just happen in 2012. The union organized potlucks, discussions, study groups, and other such activities to engage members in talking about the full breadth of concerns they wanted to address. Teacher pay, classroom size, support personnel – policing in the schools and the community.

**Hard work, but where we build the habit of democracy.**

Progressive Era reformers predicted that democracy would die in a world dominated by what were then the new corporate behemoths—unless workers secured industrial democracy. And fast forward to today, billionaires, special interests and the politicians they bankroll have undercut collective bargaining rights, economic rights, immigrant rights, voting rights, women’s rights, campaign finance laws, and environmental protections.



They've ceded power to unaccountable courts that rollback and upend our progress in making workplaces and communities safer, voting more equitable, and our air cleaner.

For too long, they have rigged our economy and political system to silence working people – whether by amplifying their distrust of democratic institutions, stoking their cynicism and apathy over what can be done, or by pushing them in the direction of angry false prophets and false populists who despite their rhetoric have no interest in handing back power to the people.

Unless we can revive democracy amid the increasingly inhospitable conditions that it faces in the 21st century, workers will not be able to improve the quality of their lives.

**The resurgence of democracy is a core part of our work.**

I am reminded of what Angela Davis says, people do not live in issue silos. Improving workers' lives on the job cannot be separated from improving their lives off work.

As advocates and leaders our vision must extend beyond the workplace. We have to

break out of our issue silos as leaders and talk about the intersections of work, health, housing, care, transportation, and much more.

What happens to workers on the job is intimately connected to what happens in their communities, in their schools, and in their lived environments. It is also intimately connected to their gender, racial, ethnic, and citizenship status.

## **CONCLUSION**

Working people are struggling. They are calling upon us, as leaders, activists, and people who share their values to create the pathways by which they can have agency over all aspects of their lives.

We need to validate their suffering.

We need to clarify who our real opponents are - those who do not believe in a democracy of, for, and by the people. Those who do not believe in collective power.

We need to understand and embrace that we must center the fight against white supremacy and white nationalism – and all other forms of systemic oppression that threaten to divide the working class.

And we need to stay focused and invent solutions that speak to their pressing hardships and their universal needs across race, class, gender and generation.

We must stop our natural inclination of a defensive posture. The result is that our movement's field of vision is battered down and narrowed down so that only the players who can harm us are within view.

Survival mode is isolating. So many in the union movement have faced attacks for so long that triage is the tried and true playbook for survival.

We are so often in fight mode, not flight mode.

We can't lead if we're only defending what our brothers and sisters won for us years ago.

So I invite you to help your institutions shift their posture, set their sights on opening up to an expansive horizon, where possibilities for new collaborations and new ideas can take flight.

The times call upon us to set up new tools and routes for people to collectively negotiate with the employers, financiers, landowners, and others whose practices directly impact them.

I compel you to go on offense with big and innovative organizing and bargaining campaigns that tackle the intertwined issues of advancing collectivism in all forms, restoring democracy, combating inequality, creating race and gender equity, and winning a better future for working people.

It is up to us to shape the future of our movement and build a political mandate to advance the vision of the world we want for generations to come.

Are you with me?

## *Sarita Gupta*

At the time of the Jerry Wurf Memorial lecture in January 2019, Sarita Gupta was the executive director of Jobs With



Justice and the co-director of Caring Across Generations. She is a nationally recognized expert on economic, labor and political issues affecting working people, particularly women and those employed in low-wage sectors.

Sarita has appeared on MSNBC, Al Jazeera America, PBS, CNBC and Fox News, has been featured in *Politico*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Bloomberg*, and has been published in *The Huffington Post*, *The Hill*, and *BillMoyers.com*, and regularly speaks at conferences, panels, and events, including the White House Conference on Aging, the White House Summit on Worker Voice, and the United State of Women Summit.

Later in 2019, the Ford Foundation announced the appointment of Gupta as the new director of The Future of Work(ers) program located in New York City.