



NEWS & VIEWS

LEHIGH VALLEY LABOR COUNCIL, AFL-CIO
“UNIONS JOINING TOGETHER AS ONE”



February 2026

www.lehighvalleyclc.org



Ben Shahn, an American artist best known for his labor and liberal views, produced the above poster for the newly-established Congress of Industrial Organizations, Political Action Committee, in 1946. Shahn understood the power of graphic arts to advance the crusade of working people, and he directed a team of like-minded artists in developing posters on behalf of the CIO to support the cause of labor. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Erasing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy

Six ways the Trump administration tried to erase the civil rights leader's legacy in 2025

by Ismael Cid-Martinez and Valerie Wilson
Economic Policy Institute

More than 60 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement helped generate the moral impetus and political will for U.S. lawmakers to pass sweeping legislation to combat the oppressive legacies of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the many expressions of racial discrimination in the United States. Through landmark legislation, the U.S. outlawed racial segregation, prohibited employment and housing discrimination, and dismantled legal barriers to voter registration—challenging a centuries-long denial of basic human and civil rights for people of color.



While acknowledging that these legislative achievements led to “some very wonderful things,” President Trump recently mischaracterized this historic period as one in which white people “were very badly treated” amid “reverse discrimination.” The president’s unfounded remarks explain why this administration has directly attacked more than half a century of progress toward racial and economic justice.

Here are six ways the Trump-Vance administration worked to undermine Dr. King’s legacy and curtail economic justice for people of color in 2025:

1) Making it easier for employers to discriminate by undermining the effectiveness of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 for historically marginalized workers, and by gutting the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs.

2) Hindering equal access to education by dismantling the Department of Education and pushing policies that could limit diversity in higher education, a critical pathway to economic mobility.

3) Effectively eliminating the Minority Business Development Agency, the only economic development agency created to help minority-owned businesses overcome social, economic, and legal discrimination.

4) Cutting spending on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) amid persistently high rates of poverty for children of color and rising food insecurity.

5) Slashing funding for Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), programs that disproportionately help families and children of color access health care.

6) Undermining health equity through massive cuts to the country’s public health infrastructure, setting the stage for the next health crisis.

The emboldened assertion of white supremacy in our political economy demands a renewed commitment to Dr. King’s legacy of racial and economic justice. In a 1996 essay, Dr. King described economic justice and security as rightful aims in the transition from equality to opportunity. Contrary to Trump’s unsubstantiated claims of pervasive discrimination

against white people, both equality and opportunity continue to elude people of color at far greater rates as evidenced by disparate and suboptimal outcomes in employment, earnings, wealth, and even health. Moreover, none of those indicators suggest that white people have been disadvantaged by civil rights enforcement. The immortal words of Coretta Scott King capture the true spirit and impact of the civil rights era and expose Trump’s error and hypocrisy: “Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. I don’t believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others.”



Lehigh Valley Labor Council

AFL-CIO

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Mark your calendar

Lehigh Valley Labor Council's 2026 events

February 17: First day to circulate and file nomination petitions for the May 19 primary election

February 18: Labor Council monthly meeting, 3614 Lehigh St., Whitehall

February 21: United Auto Workers #677 Grievance Training, 2101 Mack Blvd., Allentown

February 24: Special Election for State House districts #22 and #42

March 10: Last day to circulate and file nomination petitions

March 18: Labor Council monthly meeting

March 22: Allentown St. Patrick's Day Parade

March 29: Big Brothers/Big Sisters Bowl for Kid's Sake

March 31-April 2: Pennsylvania AFL-CIO 47th Constitutional Convention, Philadelphia

April 15: Labor Council monthly meeting

April 18: Labor Council Annual Awards Dinner, Northampton Community Center, Northampton

April 24-25: Pennsylvania Labor History Society Conference, Philadelphia

April 26: Lehigh Valley Workers Memorial, Bethlehem Rose Gardens, Bethlehem

May 4: Last day to Register to vote in the Municipal primary election

May 9: National Association of Letter Carriers Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive. Visit for more information: <https://www.nalc.org/community-service/food-drive>

May 12: Last day to apply for a mail-in or civilian absentee ballot.

May 19: Last day for County Boards of Elections to receive voted mail-in and civilian absentee ballots (must be received by 8 p.m.)

May 19: Municipal Election. Polls open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

May 20: Labor Council monthly meeting

June 16: Pennsylvania Building Trades Convention

June 17: Labor Council monthly meeting

July 15: Labor Council monthly meeting

August 19: Labor Council monthly meeting

September 6: Labor Council Labor Day Pete DePietro Picnic, American Club, Coplay

September 7: Labor Day

September 16: Labor Council monthly meeting

September 19: Labor Council Annual Golf Tournament, Shepherd Hills, Wescosville

October 19: Last day to Register to vote in the November election

October 21: Labor Council monthly meeting

October 27: Last day to apply for a mail-in or civilian absentee ballot.

November 3: Last day for County Boards of Elections to receive voted mail-in and civilian absentee ballots (must be received by 8 p.m.)

November 3: Municipal Election. Polls open 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

November 18: Labor Council monthly meeting

December 16: Labor Council Holiday Party, Shepherd Hills, Wescosville

December 18: Labor Council Toy Drive at Roosevelt Elementary School, Allentown (tentative)



VOTE
HERE
TODAY

ICE actions put working people in danger

AFL-CIO press release, January 9, 2026

by Liz Shuler, President
AFL-CIO

The Trump administration's reckless Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) operations are trampling on working people's fundamental rights and freedoms: to work with dignity and raise our families without the threat of violence from our government, and to safely return home to our loved ones at the end of the day.

The horrifying acts of this administration's militarized immigration enforcement in Minneapolis, Portland, Chicago, and cities across this country are not about safety. They are about power, and they are putting innocent working people in danger.

One in five workers in our country wasn't born here. One in four kids has an immigrant parent. Immigrants are America's workers, vital to the fabric of our communities, our economy and our labor movement. When the Trump administration deports immigrants to inhumane prisons abroad, tries to strip people of their citizenship or other work permits, conducts raids at our worksites, and shoots innocent people who are exercising their constitutionally protected right to peacefully protest, they are targeting workers—many of whom are union members. An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.

These harmful, violent federal government actions must end. We demand that ICE immediately stop these dangerous operations and leave our communities and workplaces before even more innocent people are hurt or killed.

The labor movement's guiding principle is solidarity. We'll never be divided by this administration's strategy of fear.



**SOLIDARITY
WORKS**



Save the Date!
Pennsylvania AFL-CIO
47th Constitutional Convention
March 31—April 2
Sheraton Philadelphia Downtown
201 North 17th Street
Philadelphia
For more info, visit: www.paaflcio.org

Misguided entrepreneurial enthusiasm

The 1860 Alfred Thomas steamboat disaster and artificial intelligence

by Ron Ennis, Editor
Lehigh Valley Labor Council

On March 6, 1860, the steamboat Alfred Thomas welcomed nearly three dozen passengers aboard its wooden decks for its inaugural run. The March morning “was clear, calm and delightful,” *The Easton Free Press* wrote. And when the “gaily” decorated vessel turned her bow against the swift Delaware River current, the crowds lining the shores “resounded with huzzas.” (Fig. #1)

Unknown to all, another passenger had stealthily boarded the steamer when it departed at about 11 a.m. from its Easton, Pennsylvania pier. “No one dreamed that Death,” added *The Free Press*, “was sitting on the tiller and surveying that buoyant crowd and selecting his victims.” Before the steamer reached its New Jersey destination, its boiler exploded killing twelve men in what *The Allentown Morning Call* would later describe as “one of the worst pre-Civil War disasters in eastern Pennsylvania.”

In hindsight, the boiler explosion on the Alfred Thomas should have surprised no one. The federal government had launched a study of steamer disasters a decade earlier as travel aboard the vessels had grown. British novelist Charles Dickens noted after an 1842 tour of the United States that “western steamboats usually blow up one or two a week in the season.” Historian Daniel J. Boorstin wrote in 1965 that a voyage on a Mississippi River steamer “was far more dangerous than passage across the ocean.” Even the builder of the Alfred Thomas refused to board the steamer.

But to financiers, boat builders and inventors, the steamboat represented a revolution in transportation and a potentially profitable venture that solved the age-old problem of traveling on water regardless of the current’s direction. John Fitch, a pioneer in its development, went further in describing the steamboat as “noble,” elevating ordinary eighteenth-century Americans from their lowly status in society. It “was one of those crucial inventions that changed the whole cultural climate of the human race,” wrote historian James Thomas Flexner.

Many of today’s top CEOs, bankers and hedge-fund managers have made predictions about artificial intelligence (AI) that have a similar ring of promise and prosperity. AI “will be the most powerful technology humanity has yet invented,” Sam Altman, OpenAI CEO declared in December 2023. “It’s the world that sci-fi has promised us for a long time.” Corporate advertisements promote an appealing narrative of AI’s arrival in the workplace. “Preparing today’s workers for tomorrow’s AI-supported economy,” declared Google in full-page ads featured in *The Wall Street Journal*. “Google is supporting new training programs to bring AI skills to more American workers.”

Wall Street Journal columnists have also promoted AI, while ignoring inconvenient historical lessons. Phil Gramm, a regular contributor to the *Journal’s* Opinion pages and former Texas Republican senator, wrote a November 3, 2025 column describing America’s productivity growth from 1870 to 1900 having “biblical proportions” during the nation’s Industrial Revolution. The “real gross domestic product tripled” and “output in manufacturing grew sixfold” during the period. Nowhere in his commentary did he mention the thousands of lives lost to workplace tragedies, steamboat disasters or railroad derailments.

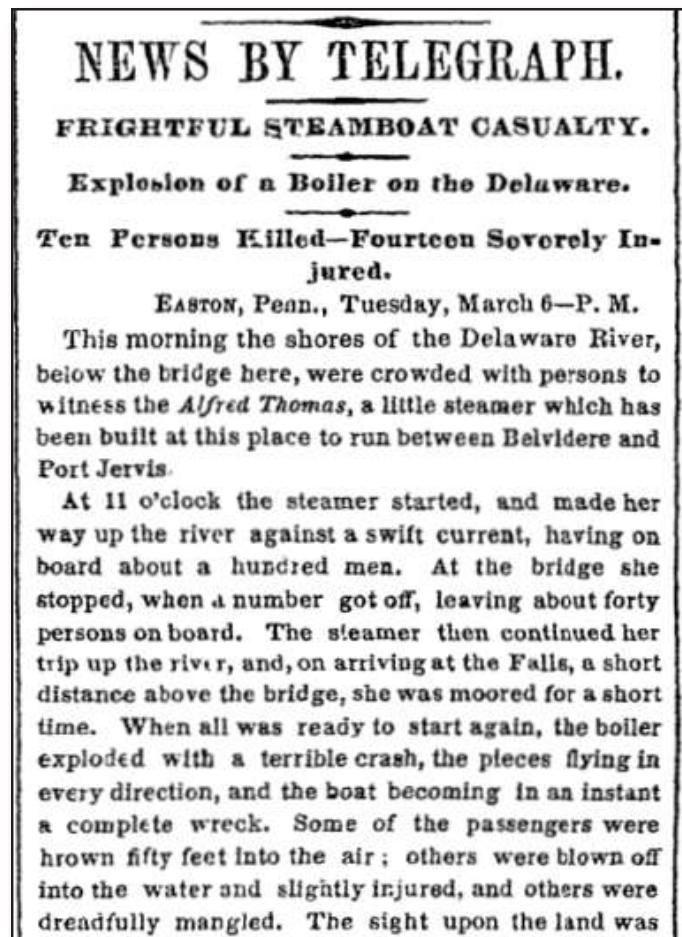


Fig. 1: Ten passengers and two workmen died in the Alfred Thomas Steamboat disaster, March 6, 1860. “All onboard were as merry and blithesome as the day was clear, calm and delightful,” the *Easton Free Press* wrote two days later. “No one dreamed that Death . . . was sitting on the tiller and surveying that buoyant crowd and selecting his victims.” (Credit: New York Times, March 7, 1860.)

The story of the Alfred Thomas, therefore, offers a cautionary lesson to the corporate and business press promoters of AI. No one would deny the critical role steam power played in sparking the Industrial Revolution, but its consequences extended beyond boosting manufacturing output or productivity growth. Local historian Frank Whelan described the steamboat tragedy as “a mixture of wishful thinking,” and what National Canal Museum historian Lance Metz called “misguided entrepreneurial enthusiasm.” Although the steamboat marked one of the first grand inventions of the American Industrial Revolution, not all steam companies proved successful. And while a foundational step to more modern modes of transportation, steamboats shared one big problem: they all had boilers, making them susceptible to explosions and fires. Owners and financiers of the crafts often had little knowledge of the inherent dangers and opposed safety regulations that they deemed costly. Introducing new technologies and processes into society may present rewards, but at what cost? The Alfred Thomas disaster suggests that today’s corporate promoters may neither recognize nor appreciate risks inherent to the introduction of AI. (Fig. #2)

Indeed, AI poses serious risks. *Forbes* magazine contributor Bernard Marr highlighted over a dozen AI dangers from job displacement to security and privacy concerns. Marr wrote in June 2023 that “AI systems can inadvertently perpetuate or amplify societal biases” and can “collect and analyze large amounts of personal data, raising issues related to data privacy and security.” AI also presents dangers to workers. It “could exacerbate inequality and limit diversity,” Marr wrote, because its development is “dominated by a small number of large corporations and governments.” Moreover, as “AI-driven automation has the potential to lead to job losses across various industries,” what will happen to workers displaced by the new technology?

Historians credit John Fitch, a poor, erratic but inventive silversmith, for the steamboat’s seminal development in America. According to Ric N. Caric in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (2002), Fitch had moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania in 1785. While walking with a friend, they came upon a couple with an elegant horse-driven carriage. Caric quoted Fitch writing in his diary that “it would be a noble thing if I could have such a carriage without the expense of keeping a horse.” Caric believed that Fitch viewed walking as “a sign of social inconsequence” after suffering humiliation working with men whom he considered his inferior but had the wealth to own horses. To Fitch, a steam vehicle could elevate the status of ordinary workmen. He poured his energy into building a commercially successful ship.

Fitch wrote a letter in 1786 to Thomas Mifflin, president of the Pennsylvania Assembly, seeking support for his project. He claimed his invention would travel the vast expanses of the new nation, providing “an inconceivable fund” for the US Treasury and punishing the “Piratical cruisers” who sailed from North Africa’s Barbary Coast. Like corporate promoters of AI two centuries later, Fitch exaggerated his invention’s promise and rewards, while seeking governmental favors.



Fig. 2: The Alfred Thomas steamboat exploded on March 6, 1860 near Gettysburg’s Island on its maiden voyage up the Delaware River. Twelve people died, including two workmen. The owner of the vessel, Alfred Thomas, survived. Speculating in a potentially lucrative trade route on the river above Easton, businessmen financed the steamboat to travel between Belvidere, New Jersey and Port Jervis, New York. “The explosion of the Alfred Thomas, blamed on a faulty boiler, put an end to these dreams of an era of steam,” states a plaque at Easton’s Sigal Museum, where the vessel’s wheel is displayed. (Credit: Sigal Museum, Easton, Pennsylvania.)

Steamboat Accidents.—The enormous amount of property destroyed on the Western waters seems to have little effect upon the classes interested in them. Accidents continue to be frequent. The following is a summary of the losses within two months past, amounting to an average of more than four thousand dollars a day:
• Amazon, 20 miles above the mouth

Fig. 3: Steamboat disasters occurred regularly in antebellum America, but vessel owners fought regulations that might interfere with their business. (Credit: Northampton County Journal, May 31, 1843)

Fitch’s steamboat *Perseverance* made its maiden voyage on the Delaware River near Philadelphia in 1787 and proved mechanically successful. But when his financial resources failed to break even, he went bankrupt and another twenty years lapsed before businessman Robert Fulton made money from the idea. The fatalities from boiler explosions began piling up almost immediately afterward, but Congress hesitated alienating the steamboat company owners with regulations that might interfere with their business. After a series of disasters prodded lawmakers to launch a study, federal commissioner Edmund Burke investigated over 1,800 fatalities from boiler explosions occurring between 1816 and 1848. His report to Congress, entitled *The Report of the Commissioner of Patents: On the Subject of Steam Boiler Explosions* (1848), included testimony from custom and river port officials facing fierce opposition to regulations from vessel owners. “Are these objections well founded?” one government inspector rhetorically wrote to the commissioner. “We think it will be easy to show they are not.” Burke laid the blame for many of the disasters upon operators “entirely destitute of scientific knowledge.” Congress passed the Steamboat Act on August 30, 1852 and, although a tepid first step, began regulating the industry. (Fig. #3)

Moving goods, such as coal and lumber, from Pennsylvania’s eastern counties to New York and New Jersey ports had always entertained the minds of businessmen. Some believed a canal project, like the Lehigh or Morris, offered the most profitable solution. Others turned their money-making ideas to constructing railroads, like the Lehigh Valley or Jersey Central. The builders of the Alfred Thomas represented the last in a line of financiers who imaged steamboat navigation on the upper reaches of the Delaware River. Previous attempts had failed, wrote Whelan, because the river was not well-suited for paddle wheel steamers. “But the dream of steamboat travel on the upper Delaware was too strong to let a little thing like reality get in the way.”

Belvidere, New Jersey businessmen formed the Kittatinny Improvement Company in 1859 and began working on their steamboat project even before the Pennsylvania Legislature granted their charter request. The men they hired for their project, however, grew to mistrust one another. Thomas Bishop, who would build the boat, disliked the engine and boiler designed by William Wells. The company’s choice for engineer, Samuel Schaeff, had a contentious relationship with Bishop.

The Kittatinny Improvement Company’s steamboat hardly matched the Mississippi River’s grand triple-decked queens. It stretched a mere eighty-five feet long by fifteen and a half feet wide. Two fifteen-horsepower engines drove the stern-mounted paddle wheel. The company named the boat after one of its chief investors, Alfred Thomas. The owners made adjustments to their vessel after a test run on January 16, 1860 deemed the engines underpowered.

(continued next page)

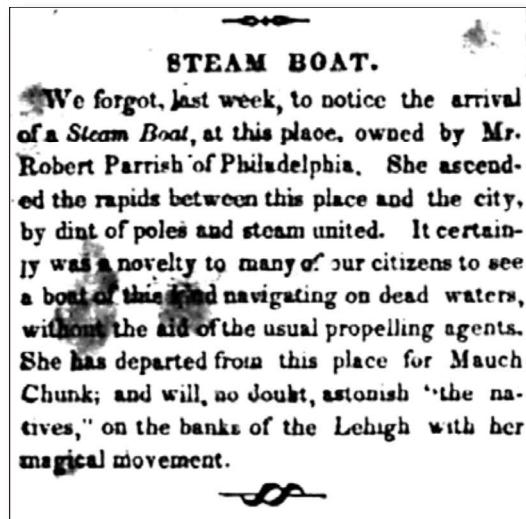


Fig. 4: The first steamboat from Philadelphia to reach Easton may have arrived in October 1827. The journey required the use of poles to assist the vessel as it ascended the rapids between the two cities. Other steamboats arrived at Easton from Philadelphia in June 1840 and March 1852. The Alfred Thomas attempted to travel north of Easton on its maiden voyage, but its boiler exploded before it reached Belvidere, New Jersey. Two workmen, Samuel Schaeff and his son George Schaeff, died in the explosion along with ten passengers. (Credit: Easton Semi-Weekly Argus, October 12, 1827)

The owners scheduled the steamer's maiden voyage for the anniversary of Northampton County's creation in 1752. If the steamboat company proved commercially viable, Easton could boast of its importance as a major Pennsylvania transportation hub. The city served as a junction for three major canals, a distinction that no other city in America could claim. It had stations for several major railways and could point to having the Lehigh Valley Railroad's locomotive factory. The Kittatinny Improvement Company's steamboat port only added to the city's prominent transportation network.

About one hundred men and boys clambered aboard the newly-built vessel at Thomas Bishop's Lehigh River boatyard. Hundreds more gathered on the surrounding shores in anticipation of the steamer's journey under a cloudless March morning. But Bishop refused to board the vessel he had built. The engineer's handling of the engines and boilers "mortified" him and he expressed his objections to the owners, who replied with assurances that they would fix the problems once the boat was underway. Unsatisfied with the assurances, Bishop forbade his workmen from boarding the Alfred Thomas, and news accounts listed no women as passengers. He walked away with disgust as the steamer slipped onto the Lehigh River and headed toward the Delaware River.

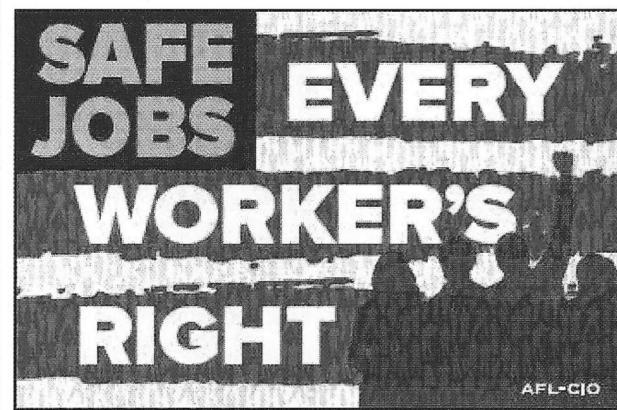
The Alfred Thomas made its first stop at the pier at the foot of Northampton Street in Easton to drop off passengers. All but thirty-four disembarked before the boat resumed its journey and headed across the river toward Belvidere, New Jersey amid cheering crowds. The steamboat never made it.

Survivors offered differing accounts as to what happened next as the vessel approached Gettier's Island en route to Belvidere. Some claimed the boat ran aground while others argued it was moored on the island. A passenger went below and heard one of the crew exclaim "My God! There is 125 pounds of steam on." The boiler was designed for a maximum of ninety pounds.

Passengers suddenly felt a concussion after the twin engines restarted and spun the paddlewheel several revolutions. Then a thunderous explosion tore open the vessel, shredding wood, metal and human flesh in all directions. "No one dreamed that Death," *The Easton Free Press* wrote two days later, "was sitting on the tiller." According to the March 6, 1923 *Easton Express*, six died in the blast's immediate aftermath, including two workmen. Six others died later, including Steward Beatty. Authorities had presumed he died in the blast, but his body was not found until June 17, badly decomposed in the Delaware River. "The last body of the missing ones has been recovered," the *Easton Free Press* reported several days later. The disaster is "a mournful tale. . . . Some of the wounded have been in their beds ever since, and are not yet able to walk the streets of Easton."

Authorities began an inquest the next day and later arrived at two conclusions. They faulted Engineer Samuel Schaeff, who had died in the disaster, for allowing the boiler's water level to drop to a dangerous level and for improperly installing the boiler. Others were more critical. A writer for *Scientific American* expressed shock at Schaeff's level of neglect and lack of judgment. "There is no mystery to the cause of this explosion," concluded the magazine, "the boiler was managed as with an intent to commit suicide." The steamboat catastrophe ended all serious attempts to navigate the upper Delaware River.

The Alfred Thomas tragedy offers a cautionary lesson to the business press and corporate promoters of AI: innovation may bring mixed consequences. The steamboat revolutionized travel, but misguided entrepreneurial enthusiasm failed to appreciate, and sometimes ignored, its inherent dangers. It took disasters to prod lawmakers to address safety issues and businessmen to reconsider their decisions. AI's future may rest on our understanding of tragedies like the Alfred Thomas.



In 2025, at least 5,283 workers died on the job according to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). These tragedies are reminders of a painful truth; we cannot rely on OSHA or CEOs to enforce safety rules and regulations. Enforcement is inconsistent, investigations take time, and hazards do not wait for OSHA to act.

We all must be willing to stand up for safe jobs. Workplace safety cannot be passive. It requires every one of us, every day, to look out for hazards and refuse to ignore conditions that place us in harm's way. If we want safer workplaces, we must take action ourselves.





Reach out, don't wait

Union organizing is not passive

by Ron Ennis, Editor
Lehigh Valley Labor Council



Workers across Pennsylvania deserve the right to a voice at work. Unions are a way for working people to unite on the job to improve their lives and communities.

One thing that really stands out when you look at locals across our region, is the gap between locals that have invested in member organizing, and those that have let it slide over the years.

Many reasons can explain the disparity in organizing strength; the geography of a local, its history, the industry it operates in, and other factors can play a role. But we can control *how* to respond to these challenges. We also control *when* to respond to these challenges. In the face of a rapidly changing workplace amid an unnecessarily chaotic and disruptive economy, there is no better time than now.

If you are sitting around waiting for the inactive member or non-union worker to come to you, you are not organizing; you are hoping. Hoping that the inactive member comes to his first union meeting. Hoping that the non-union member sees the light and joins the union. Hope has its place, but not when it comes to building a strong labor movement to face today's challenges.

Skilled organizers know that there is no perfect moment to organize the non-union worker because he or she is unlikely to take the first step and come to them. Organizers also know there will be setbacks. In an open shop setting, some coworkers will refuse to join no matter how many times they are approached. But that doesn't mean you stop asking.

Skilled organizers also recognize that it takes courage to have hard conversations about unions. They know that it requires confidence to take the first step and have that initial conversation about joining the union, but the foundation of a strong local requires talking to workers and building relationships, both of which involves perseverance and commitment.

Regardless of whether the worker is non-union or an inactive member of the local, organizing is taking action to build worker power. It requires consistency, effort and long-term commitments, but it is the only solution for workers to endure the whirlwind of a changing workplace and a changing economy.



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*“For the past 50 years in this country, the religious right, a political movement, convinced a lot of Christians in America that the two most important issues were abortion and homosexuality, two issues that aren't really discussed in Scripture. Abortion is never mentioned. Consensual same-sex relationships are never mentioned. And so it's remarkable to me that you have an entire political movement using Christianity to prioritize two issues that Jesus never talked about. And so I'm not saying they're not important. I actually think both of those issues are very important. But to focus on those two things, instead of feeding the hungry and healing the sick and welcoming the stranger, three things we're told to do *ad nauseam* in Scripture, to me, is mind blowing. . . .”*

“Concern for the poor, concern for the oppressed is everywhere (in the Bible). I mean, economic justice is mentioned 3,000 times in our Scriptures, both the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures. And so this is such a core part of our tradition, and it's nowhere to be seen in Christian nationalism or on the religious right. And the Bible is all over the place when it comes to marriage. Paul tells us not to get married. And you see, certainly, many different kinds of marriages throughout Scripture. And the same with gender. Paul says that in Christ, there is neither male nor female. Which is pretty woke for the first century. And so, yeah, again, it's because religion is being used to control people and accumulate power and wealth for those at the top. This is a tale as old as time, and it is not unique to Christianity. Powerful people will always see religion as a tool to make more money and be able to keep people in line.”

James Talarico, Texas state representative and Senate candidate studying to be a Christian minister, in an interview with Ezra Klein, in the *New York Times*, on January 13, 2026.



Has the official plaque honoring the police who defended democracy on January 6, 2021 gone missing? “It's not on display at the Capitol, as is required by law,” wrote Lisa Mascaro, Associated Press correspondent on January 5, 2026.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, who joined GOP members in challenging the 2020 election results, has yet to formally unveil the plaque. Roughly 1,500 people were charged in the Capitol attack, but Trump pardoned all of them hours after taking his second oath of office.

The plaque features an engraving of the Capitol and an inscription that praises “the extraordinary individuals who bravely protected and defended this symbol of democracy.” (Credit: Kevin M. Levin, Substack, January 19, 2025.)



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WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2026
Executive Board @ 7:00 PM – Delegate meeting @ 7:30 PM
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