The Biden Administration more than once has declared that it fully intends to be the most union- and worker-friendly executive branch in history. Its latest action toward achieving that objective came Feb. 7 when the White House released a report prepared by its Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment.

A 47-page document, the report is the result of a series of task force meetings that were conducted to gather information and ideas for possible executive actions and statements. The group is chaired by Vice President Kamala Harris and vice-chaired by Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, a longtime trade union member and leader.

The task force was created in April 2021 when President Biden – operating under the conviction that increasing worker organizing and empowerment is critical to growing the middle class, building an economy that puts workers first, and strengthening our democracy – issued Executive Order 14025. Its focus is to “assess the available tools and determine how to employ them to remove barriers to worker organizing and collective bargaining.”

The report offers “recommendations that would position the federal government as a model actor; use the federal government’s authority to support worker empowerment by providing information, improving transparency, and making sure existing pro-worker services are delivered in a timely and helpful manner; [and] use longstanding authority to leverage the federal government’s purchasing and spending power to support workers who are organizing and pro-worker employers.”

The report said, “The recommendations were developed in collaboration with the over 20 executive agencies, departments and White House offices that are a part of the task force. This work has been guided, too, by workers’ voices, many of whom the Vice President and Secretary of Labor met in their travels across the country.”

According to the report, the recommendations that could impact maritime unions are the elimination of barriers to organizing, may talk with federal employees and private-sector workers of federal contractors on federal property about the benefits of joining a union. It also listed recommendations pertaining to four federal agencies, including the Defense Department, which would help ensure federal contract dollars are spent on anti-union campaigns and that anti-union activities be publicly disclosed.

In addition, the Military Maritime program for men and women who are leaving the armed services to become merchant mariners would benefit from a stated recommendation to “work with the Union Veterans Council to help service members, military spouses, and veterans transition into good union jobs.”

The Biden-Harris Administration delivered another victory for working people today with the release of the first report,” stated AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler. “This unprecedented report recognizes the critical role that unions play in creating a fair economy. By taking steps to give more workers the right to organize and bargain collectively, the administration is once again demonstrating that it is committed to using its power to support unions.”

The AFL-CIO noted the report calls for:

- Ensuring workers know organizing and bargaining rights;
- Establishing a resource center on unions and collective bargaining;
- Protecting workers who organize from illegal retaliation;
- Exposing employers’ use of anti-union consultants;
- Addressing equity across underserved communities; and
- Sharing the positive impact unions have on all workers and the U.S. economy.

The report said the AFL-CIO is “committed to working with the administration to implement these recommendations.”

The report also notes that the report, which reminds readers that unions have fought for and helped win many aspects of American’s work lives perhaps taken for granted today, like the 40-hour work week and the weekend, as well as landmark programs like Medicare.

According to the report, unions continue their fight for higher wages, greater job security, safety and health protections, health insurance and retirement plans, and protections from discrimination and harassment for all workers. Researchers have found that today’s union households earn up to 20% more than non-union households, with an even greater union advantage for workers with less formal education and workers of color.

Research has also shown that growing economic inequality, growing pay gaps for women and workers of color, and declining voice in our democracy for working class Americans are all caused, in part, by the declining percentage of workers represented by unions.

The National Labor Relations Act, enacted in 1935, noted that it is the policy of the United States to encourage the practice and procedure of collective bargaining, and to protect the exercise; by workers, of their full freedom of association. Unfortunately, according to the task force report, the federal government has not always done its part to turn this policy into action. In fact, in some cases government has actively undermined worker organizing, unions, and collective bargaining.

While some past administrations have taken individual actions to empower workers and strengthen their rights, the report stated that the Biden-Harris administration will be the first to take a comprehensive approach to doing so with the existing authority of the executive branch. The administration’s goal is not just to facilitate worker power through executive action; it is to model practices that can be followed by state and local governments, private sector employers and others.

Biden has directed the task force to continue its work, provide an update on actions taken, and offer further recommendations in six months.
President’s Column

Fourth Arm of Defense

At press time, much of the world seemed on edge due to a potential invasion of Ukraine by Russia. While it goes without saying that the hope here is for a diplomatic solution, our job in the SIU is to always be ready to support our military. The current situation involving Russia is a reminder of one of the most important reasons why we need a U.S. Merchant Marine and why the SIU constantly advocates for the laws and programs that help maintain American crews and American seafarers.

If and when the balloon goes up (not just in this current circumstance), it’s always a moment of truth for American maritime’s centuries-old role as our fourth arm of defense. In those centuries-old roles, the merchant mariners have answered the call not just during wartime, but also in peacetime. The merchant-mariner role is not a new phenomenon, but one that dates back to our country’s founding.

Asst. Vice President Government Services

Joe Vincenzo

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was clear that the pandemic would have a profound impact on the global economy and particularly on the maritime industry. The pandemic caused massive job loss for both union and nonunion workers. However, unionization rates – the number of union workers declined substantially as the pandemic caused job loss.

The EPI concluded, “In 2021, that dynamic happened in reverse as jobs were added in the recovery. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released in its annual report, the unemployment rate for union members was 3.8% in 2021, which is up substantially from about one-third (32-33%) of nonunion, non-managed workers asked in other surveys in 1997 and 1995.”

According to the BLS report, in 2021, the union membership rate was 11.9% (a 0.1% increase from 2020). The rate is down from 10.8 percent in 2020. In addition, nonunion workers had median weekly earnings that were $585 less than their nonunion peers. According to a 2021 Gallup poll, union approval is at its highest level in over 50 years, with 66% of Americans supporting organized labor, including 77% of young people. An MIT study found that 60 million Americans would join a union if they could, underscoring the need for changes to labor laws.

How to Become an SIU Member

Contact Information

Vice President Government Services

Nicholas Celona

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Email: ncelona@seafarers.org

Joining the SIU is easy and an important step in protecting your workplace rights. The union’s website – www.seafarers.org – includes downloadable PDF versions of forms that mariners may use to request and authorize payroll deductions for labor organization dues. The forms are posted at https://www.seafarers.org/news/labor-mari-

Two Iranian fishermen signal for assistance Nov. 27 after their boat had been adrift for eight days in the Gulf of Oman. (U.S. Navy photo)

BLS Releases Annual Report on U.S. Union Membership

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has released its annual report on union membership, but the findings may not tell the whole story, according to some who reviewed it. Overall membership dropped in 2021 by approximately 241,000, meaning that around 14 million people believe they’re union members. The report found that union members, on average, earn $10,000 more per year than their unrepresented counterparts.

The BLS annual report on union membership makes it clear that American labor laws are unquestionably broken,” the federation said in a written statement. “While the report indicates a 0.5% drop in union membership from 2020-2021, the data is not representative of the greater union trends taking place across the country. These statistics highlight the urgent need for the passage of the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act.”

“In 2021, workers forcefully rejected low-wage, thankless jobs after a year of being called essential,” said AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler. “In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clearer now than ever that our labor laws are designed to make joining a union as difficult as possible. Across this country, workers are organizing for a voice on the job and millions of Americans are standing in solidarity with union members. If everyone who wanted to join a union was able to do so, membership would skyrocket. Organizations like the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act are how we get there.”

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank created in 1986 to include the needs of low- and middle-income workers in economic policy discussions, also released their analysis of the data. The organization noted, “To understand what happened to unionization in 2021, it is crucial to recall what happened in 2020. In 2020, the number of union workers declined substantially as the pandemic caused massive job loss for both union and nonunion workers. However, unionization rates – the share of the workforce that is unionized – increased substantially because union workers lost fewer jobs during the first year of the pandemic than nonunion workers did. The lower job loss among the unionized workforce was due in no small part to a ‘pandemic composition’ effect – the fact that the industries that got hit hardest by the pandemic (such as leisure and hospitality) were less likely to be unionized than industries that were more sheltered from the pandemic, and this change in the composition of the workforce raised unionization rates mechanically. Put another way, jobs in less unionized industries were lost at a higher rate than the overall rate.”

The EPI continued, “In 2021, that dynamic changed in reverse as jobs were added in the recovery. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released in its annual report, the unemployment rate for union members was 3.8% in 2021, which is up substantially from about one-third (32-33%) of nonunion, non-managed workers asked in other surveys in 1997 and 1995.”

According to the BLS report, in 2021, the union membership rate was 11.9% (a 0.1% increase from 2020). The rate is down from 10.8 percent in 2020. In addition, nonunion workers had median weekly earnings that were $585 less than their nonunion peers. Depending on which data is used, the number of union workers declined substantially as the pandemic caused massive job loss for both union and nonunion workers. However, unionization rates – the share of the workforce that is unionized – increased substantially because union workers lost fewer jobs during the first year of the pandemic than nonunion workers did. The lower job loss among the unionized workforce was due in no small part to a ‘pandemic composition’ effect – the fact that the industries that
Oakland Thanksgiving Event Resumes

Locally Renowned Gathering Features Congressional Remarks

Some of the details were different, for precautionary reasons – but the enthusiastic fellowship and great food were familiar to those attending the annual pre-Thanksgiving feast at the hiring hall in Oakland, California.

The popular gathering skipped 2020 for safety reasons, but returned on Nov. 23, 2021 (in its usual slot, which is the Tuesday of Thanksgiving week).

Guest speakers included U.S. Reps. Barbara Lee, John Garamendi, Jerry McNerney and Jim Panetta (all California Democrats). Other guests included military personnel; maritime union members, pensioners and officials; numerous building-trades union personnel; shipping company executives and staff; and others.

SIU Vice President Government Services Nicholas Celona, long the driving force behind the decades-old yearly event, said the mood was upbeat for the 2021 feast.

“We took many precautions, including serving the meals in individual containers instead of going with the usual buffet-style arrangement," Celona said. “We made sure plenty of hand sanitizer was available and we asked that everyone bring their vaccination cards. We also spaced out the tables more than usual. People said they were glad to be back.”

With 120 people in attendance, the congressional representatives gave brief remarks mainly focusing on the holiday season, the infrastructure bill, and the importance of creating and maintaining good jobs in the U.S. They also emphasized the country’s ongoing need for American mariners and U.S.-flag ships.

With CIVMARS Aboard

CIVMARS Aboard

While it’s not necessary to show support for the Federal Mariner in order to have one’s photo published, such actions cannot hurt. This snapshot, taken by shipboard delegate Sharon Hill aboard the USNS Guadalupe on the West Coast, includes three fellow CIVMARS and SIU Government Services Division Representative Jesse Ruth (second from left). (A complete archive of the newsletter is available online at seafarers.org, in the NEWS section.)

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SIU’s Heindel Honored with AOTOS Award

On a night when much of the spotlight focused on him, SIU Secretary-Treasurer David Heindel mainly wanted to talk about others.

Heindel on Dec. 3 received the Admiral of the Ocean Sea (AOTOS) Award in New York, a prestigious honor presented each year by the United Seamen’s Service (USS). This year’s honoree also included Bill Woodhour, president and CEO of Maersk Line, Limited (MLL); Kathy Metcalf, president and CEO of the Chamber of Shipping of America; and longtime labor relations icon Tony Naccarato, who garnered what is dubbed a Special AOTOS Award.

Three Seafarers-crewed vessels also were recognized with USS Mariners’ Plaques: the USS Panay, American Pride, and Horizon Reliance. The plaques, bestowed for various acts of heroism at sea, were presented by Rear Adm. Michael Wettlaufer, USN, commander of the U.S. Military Sealift Command.

Prior to those presentations, Gen. Jacqueline D. Van Ovost, USAF, commander of the U.S. Transportation Command, addressed the audience of more than 600, including SIU President Michael Sacco, Executive Vice President Augie Tellez and others (see front page).

Heindel called his award “the honor of a lifetime,” and he thanked many people for supporting his work throughout the years, including his family, Sacco, other SIU officials, and colleagues from the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), several of whom travelled to the awards dinner from overseas. (Heindel chairs the ITF Seafarers’ Section.)

He emphasized that throughout his decades as a union official, following several years as a rank-and-file mariner, his aim remained constant.

“Whether we’re talking about the crew-change crisis that has consumed our many hours on Zoom or the latest issue with the supply chain, shipboard automation, alternative fuels, training requirements or almost any other maritime-related topic, my focus ultimately is on making the lives of mariners better,” Heindel said.

“Another way we’ve helped our rank-and-file members is by keeping up with the times regarding recordkeeping, getting them easy access to their individual shipping and registration information, and being able to communicate quickly using multiple outlets, regardless of whether they’re at sea or ashore,” he continued. “That’s been a main focus throughout my tenure as the SIU’s secretary-treasurer, and while I’ve always believed in the union is that we don’t stand still. We constantly strive to make improvements, and the results speak for themselves. Today, our members have free access to world-class vocational training at our affiliated school in Piney Point, Maryland. They’re part of a top-of-the-line, fully-funded pension plan that gives them security when they look ahead to retirement. They’re covered by excellent medical benefits, and they’re protected by great contracts – which means their families are protected, too.”

SIU Secretary-Treasurer David Heindel, speaking at the AOTOS event, reiterates his commitment to the wellbeing of mariners.

SIU VP Nicholas Celona (left) and Bosun James Terry from the USNS Patuxent are pictured in New York.

He also credited the USS and ITF and cited examples of their recent accomplishments.

Metcalfe and Naccarato both applauded the industry for its collectively cooperative nature, while also sharing insights about their respective backgrounds.

Woodhour, unable to attend because of a medical procedure, delivered his remarks via recorded video. He stressed the critical importance of the U.S. maritime industry and listed potential steps to expand it.

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Woodhour, unable to attend because of a medical procedure, delivered his remarks via recorded video. He stressed the critical importance of the U.S. maritime industry and listed potential steps to expand it.
The COVID-19 pandemic surely has enhanced the SIU’s generosity in the course of time, with the highest degree of quality, efficiency, and safety. It has been a way to brighten their day. It’s a way of showing appreciation for their parents’ service,” he said. “It feels good to do something for kids at Christmas. Also, showing appreciation for their parents’ service.”

Vargo said. “Our shelves were empty. It had been a long time since we’ve had to help more than 2,000 families, and that took our inventory from 100 percent to five. This process wasn’t as bad as we thought, and with the Seafarers and others, they really helped us so much, get our stock restocked. By the grace of God, it all came together, like a package deal, and if donations rebounded in part because “everyone made up for the year they couldn’t give. It’s amazing how the community came together and it was great to see the SIU for the lunch. We missed having it last year.”

“It’s a thank you to the SIU so much for always taking care of us,” she explained. “It’s a thank you to the SIU so much for always taking care of us.”

Annual Outreach Benefits U.S. Military Families

Union officials applauded President Joe Biden’s Feb. 7 executive order mandating that federally funded construction projects worth at least $35 million must be built by workers using project labor agreements (PLA). “Just remember, it ain’t labor – it’s unions” that built the country and will do so again, Biden declared to a union crowd.

Biden said his order will “help ensure we build a better America, we build it right, and we build it on time…. The executive order is making sure federal construction projects get completed on time and under budget, saving taxpayers money, clearing construction zones quickly, and ensuring everything the federal government signs to contract to build is built to last.”

“In return for higher wages and guaranteed due process on the job, workers and contractors get stability and quality work that lasts, the president said at the ceremony.”

“I tell you who built America: the middle class,” he explained. “And the people that built the middle class are organized labor; unions. Unions did it. That’s not hyperbole. That’s a fact. That’s a straight fact.”

Biden’s order has some limited exceptions, but even when agencies want to substitute other measures, the AFL-CIO said, “We’re always grateful and humble by the level of participation and generosity that Seafarers show year after year without fail, pandemic or no. I like to think that this is our way of pushing back with all due precaution and reasserting ourselves after almost two very challenging years.”

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