

An opportunity not taken...yet: U.S. labor and the current economic crisis

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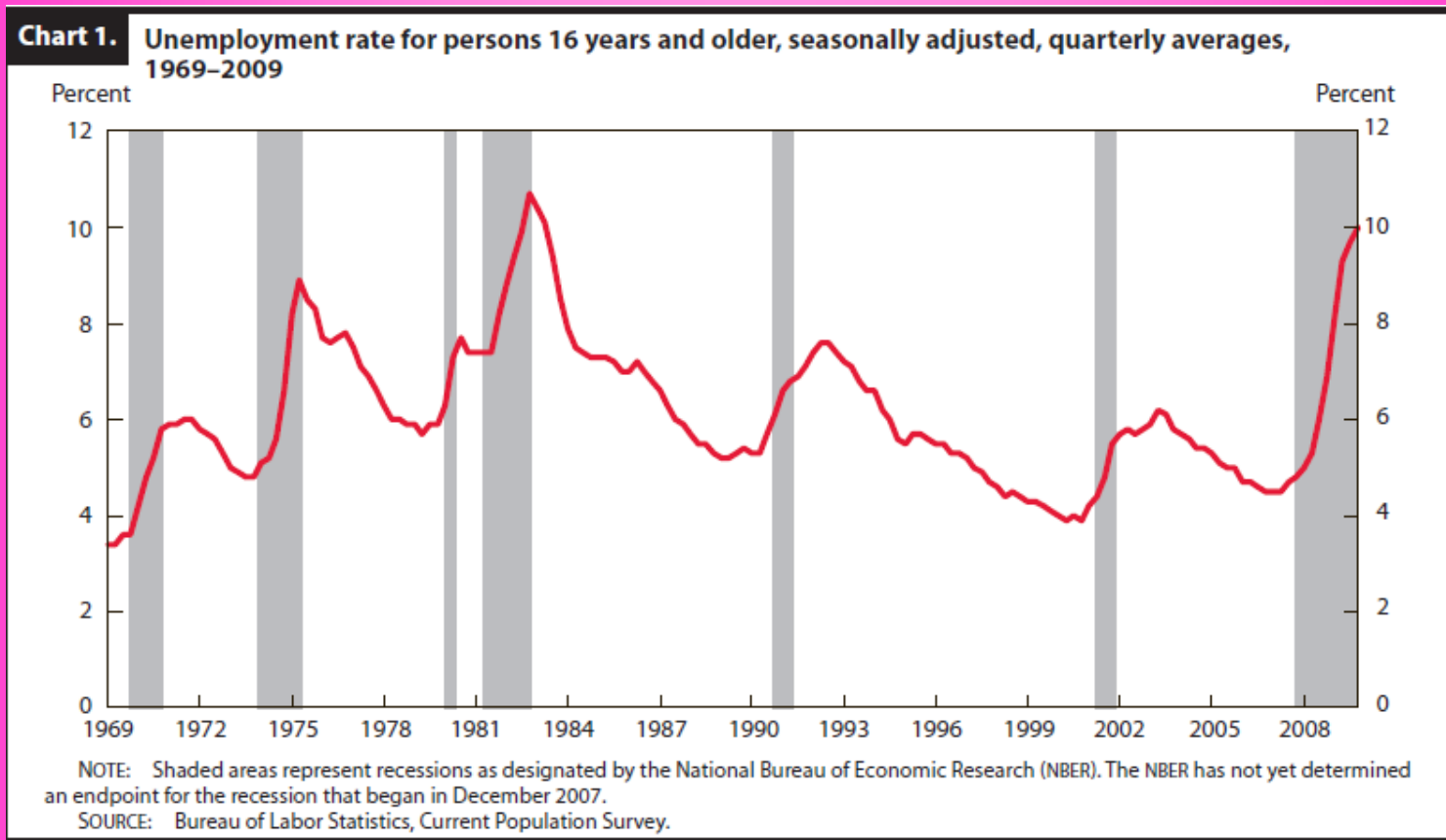
**Institute for Research on Labor and Employment
University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)**

Global Labour University Conference
Berlin
14-16 October, 2010

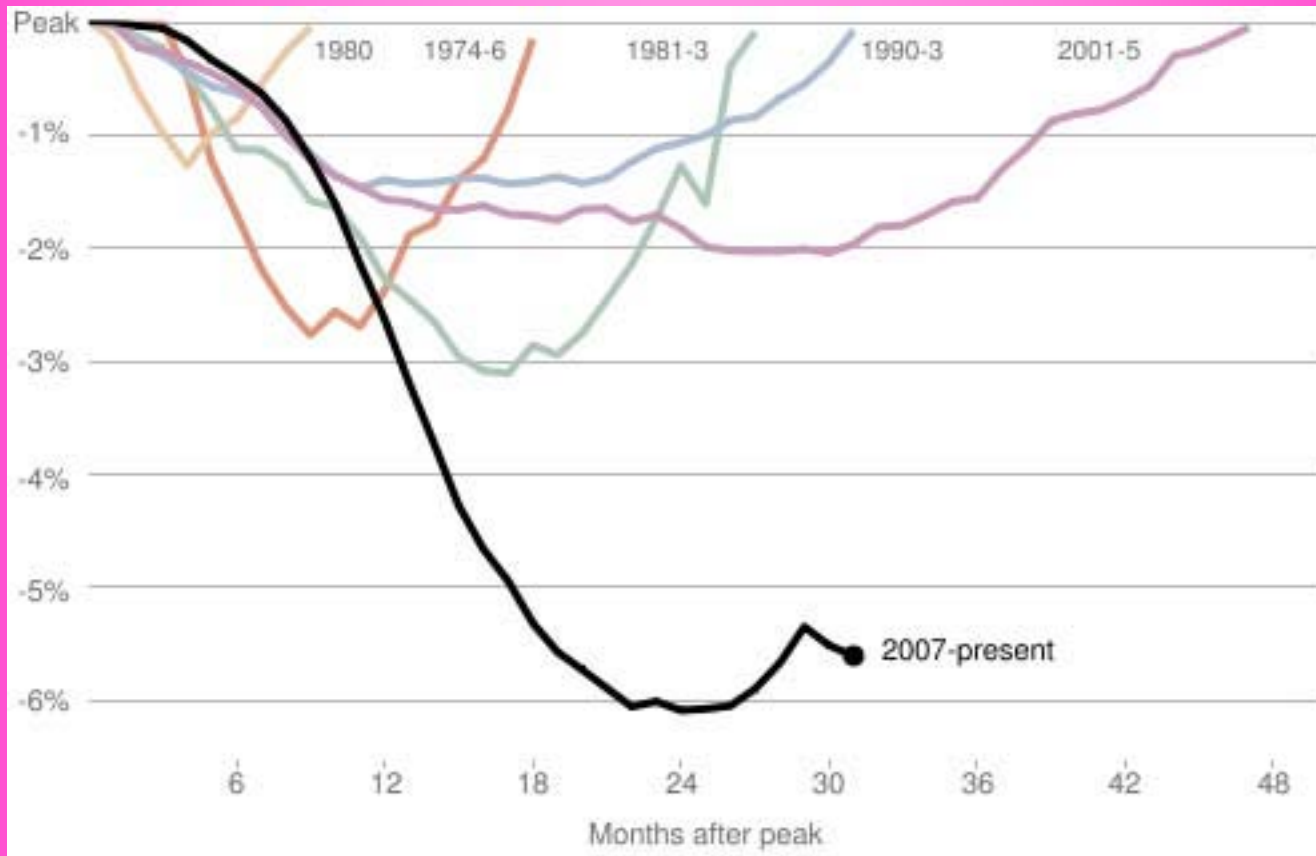
Outline of the talk

- The recession's impact on workers
- Labor's (limited) response
- Long-term and short-term reasons for a limited response
- Alternative paths

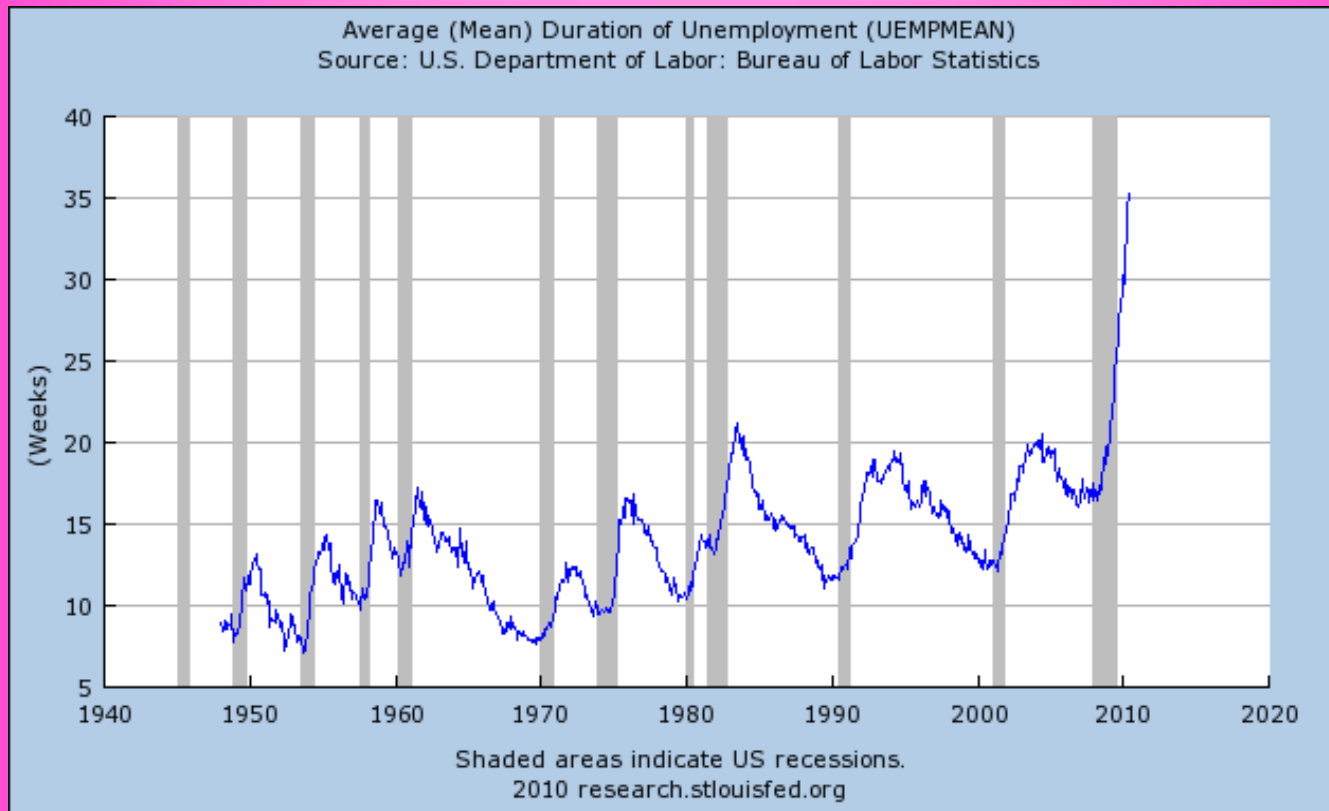
The impact of the “Great Recession” in the USA: Unemployment



Job loss



Unemployment duration



US labor reaction in the Great Depression (1930s)

- Unemployed organizing
- Greatest burst of union organizing in US history (CIO)
- Sitdown strikes

US labor reaction today: Program

AFL-CIO	Change to Win
“A Call to Action on Jobs,” March 2, 2010	“Statement of Priorities to Revive the American Economy,” September 26, 2008
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take care of families hard-hit by the downturn [social assistance including extended unemployment benefits]• Rebuild America [infrastructure]• Help state and local governments meet pressing needs• Put people back to work doing work that needs to be done [public service employment]• Ease the credit crunch for small- and medium-sized businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relief for struggling homeowners• Quality affordable healthcare for all• Retirement security• Energy independence and green job creation• Investment in American infrastructure• A fair tax system that rewards work• An economy that works for everyone [calling for the Employee Free Choice Act, a reform of labor laws]• Affordable education [funding for early childhood education and higher education]

US labor reaction today: Strategy?

AFL-CIO “5-POINT PLAN FOR MOBILIZING”

1. We will act as one as a labor movement....
2. Our goal will be to restore good jobs for all Americans—and we seek to join with all those inside and outside the union movement who share that goal.
3. ***We seek bold action from Washington, from state capitols and from local government, and we will hold our elected officials accountable for what they do or don't do.***
4. We will hold the private sector accountable...and we will stand with anyone in the business community that is working to create good jobs.
5. We will be in the street wherever the fight for jobs is being fought.

Search: “Strategy” AND (“Recession” OR “Crisis”)

- AFL-CIO 144 hits; Change to Win 0 (→ reviewed all press statements 2008+)
- Electoral and legislative strategies
- Speeches and statements
- Occasional small demonstrations (several thousand)
- AFL-CIO strategy resolutions, 2005 & 2009
- 2nd October 2010?

Press search

- “Unlike their European counterparts, American workers have largely stayed off the streets, even as unemployment soars and companies cut wages and benefits.” (Greenhouse, New York Times, 2009)
- Main exception: general strike in Puerto Rico, October 2009 (march of 150,000)

IN SUMMARY: LITTLE STRATEGIC RESPONSE

Why so limited?

Long-term factors

- “American exceptionalism”
 - ◆ Lack of labor party
 - ◆ Weak unions
- 30 year ascendance of neoliberalism

Short-term factors

- Divisions and jurisdictional disputes
- Close ties to Democratic Party
 - ◆ Investment in 2008 elections
 - Key goal: Employee Free Choice Act
 - Disarmed unions in a number of ways
- The recession itself

Positive prospects?

- Funds
- Political mobilization capacity
- Majority support (though reduced)
- Alliance with immigrant workers
 - ◆ Latino share of union membership: 1983 = 5.8%, 2008 = 12.2%
- Resolution of key internal dispute
- A Republican House majority?

US unions' expanded strategic repertoire

- Comprehensive/corporate campaigns
- Community unionism
- Urban/regional coalitions
- Deterrence
- Demands to benefit consumers/
communities
 - ◆ Green jobs

Closing notes: History and economics

- History: How US unions were viewed in the early 1930s
- Economics: Perhaps more “opportunities” to come