



NEWS

## Mainers Join 4500 Union Members & Activists at Labor Notes Conference in Chicago

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29 APR, 2024



More than a dozen union members from Maine joined 4500 labor activists from six continents at the sold-out Labor Notes Conference in Chicago this past weekend. Labor Notes is the largest gathering of “grassroots labor activists, union reformers,

and all-around troublemakers” in the nation. The three day conference featured caucuses, performances, films and 250 workshops on a range of topics, including creative organizing tactics, beating apathy, bargaining over technology, reviving the strike and more.

One of the highlights of the event was when UAW President Shawn Fain and a group of autoworkers took the stage following 4300 Volkswagen workers [historic landslide organizing victory](#) at the VW factory in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

“Hearing Shawn Fain and wrapping it all up with singing ‘Solidarity Forever’ with 4000 people was an amazing way to top off the whole event,” said Maine AFL-CIO President Cynthia Phinney. “It was so awesome when they came up to accept that award that it was so totally not about him. You wouldn’t have known that he was there unless you knew what he looked like and saw him.”

Phinney said it was inspiring to hear from so many workers who are either in the middle of labor struggles, have recently won a fight or are getting ready for a campaign.

“They were talking about their successes and approaches to making things right and making things better, whether it was in their workplace, their union or larger community,” she said. “There were so many people to learn from and loads of ideas for everybody to take back to make their unions stronger.”



*Maine union members Tyler Matz, Phill Joseph and Riley McDonald.*

Garrett Stewart, an MEA member and President of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, said he was moved after listening to a panel of immigrant farmworkers with the Farmworker Organizing Committee's **El Futuro Es Nuestro** (It's Our Future, or EFEN), the South Florida-based worker-led nonprofit **WeCount** and the **National Independent & Democratic Union of Agricultural Day Laborers**. The workers described how they had been lured to America with many promises, but found themselves struggling with low pay, extreme heat, and a lack of access to proper nutrition, toilets and medical attention.

"This is modern day slavery," he said. "The housing is terrible. They have broken down refrigerators. When it rains the roof leaks. It's just horrible and so unfair. They came to America with a dream, but it's all lies just to get them here. We need to come together and help these people."

APRI-Maine and the **Charles A. Scontras Center for Labor & Community Education** will also be holding a panel on farmworker rights, its history and current status on Wednesday, May 22 at Temple Beth El in Portland.



Joey Berube of Brunswick said it was exciting not only to connect with other workers, but also other people from Maine. The former Little Dog coffee shop employee was fired for his union activity in 2022 and has since become an organizer for the **Brunswick Renters Organization (BRO)** and was able to connect with other workers organizing for tenants rights.

He noted that his run-down apartment in Maine is far more expensive than other better apartments in Chicago, but without the amenities. He said BRO has members who work at Bath Iron Works and several other nearby workplaces fighting for fair housing.

"It's a lot easier to organize when you have a roof over your head. When I got fired it was a really scary thing for me," said Berube. "Luckily I had just moved into an apartment, but if I hadn't at that exact moment I would have had no idea what to do."



*Bottom-center: Jessica Czarnecki & Joey Berube*

He said he and his former co-worker and organizer Jessica Czarnecki, who was also at Labor Notes, hope to hold a panel with other tenant rights organizers at the next Labor Notes. In the meantime, BRO will be holding what they described as **Maine's First Renters' Forum** on Sunday, April 28th from 4:30pm - 6:30pm at the Curtis Memorial Library in Brunswick. The goal is to spread the movement for

tenants' rights throughout the midcoast. You can [follow BRO on Instagram](#) for more updates.

Berube and Czarnecki were also able to meet other baristas from Starbucks Workers United and connected on similar issues impacting workers in the industry.

"Some of the workers there had mentioned that there was a lot of pushback from people who said, 'oh you're just little baristas. You're not doing the hard labor,'" said Berube. "Then they got dockworkers on their picket line and it really helped them realize that they're not just 'little baristas.' It felt very similar when the [Local S6 folks joined us on the picket line](#). That still feels touching for me to look back on."

Czarnecki said they were especially inspired by an anti-war protest they took part in outside the convention with [Labor for Palestine](#) as well as panels about disability advocacy in the labor movement and how to preemptively negotiate protections for workers with disabilities in contracts. They also were able to attend a panel of workers from the Global South and met union members from Ghana, Kenya and Honduras.

"I feel revitalized," said Czarnecki. "I feel like I have a whole new tool box that I can reach into.... I'm in this for the long run and I want to be an actual union member again and not be on the side lines because this is where I belong and I'm really glad I got to do this."

The biggest takeaway from the conference for Berube is that labor isn't on the defense anymore.

"We're on the offense and that's what gets you wins," he said. "If you have each others' back you're f---ing bulletproof."

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