



In Arizona, UA Local 469 isn't just looking out for workers' health on the job; it's also won important benefits to help them protect their families. COURTESY OF UA LOCAL 469

# Labor of love

Unions are keeping essential workers safe during the pandemic so they can help rebuild the economy when it's over

**Matt Alderton** Special to USA TODAY

In the days and weeks after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, more than 10,000 Americans volunteered to assist with cleanup and recovery at Ground Zero in New York City. Never mind the haunting sights they'd see — the gruesome remains of people and the shattered buildings — or the personal risks they'd face: toxic dust, falling debris and smoldering, unstable wreckage. When the logical reaction was to mourn, their gut instinct was to mobilize.

Along with copious amounts of courage, bravery, patriotism and compassion, there's at least one thing that many of these intrepid volunteers had in common: They were union members.

"There were so many workers — unionized workers, in particular — who ran into the breach," says Bob Bussel, director of the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon. "And it wasn't just police and firefighters. It was ironworkers, carpenters, painters and steelworkers, right on down the line. People came from all over the country to help with the aftermath, and you could see the union insignias on their T-shirts, jackets and caps."

Next to the visual incendiarity that is terrorism, contagion feels almost benign. The former is loud and lurid; the

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Community spirit: UA Local 469 organized a socially distanced tribute to World War II veteran — and Local 469 member — Chalmer Shuff. COURTESY OF UA LOCAL 469

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latter, invisible and vague. One slaps you square in the face; the other breathes quietly down your neck. The muted threat, however, can be just as lethal as the thunderous one. Or more so: While approximately 3,000 people died on 9/11, more than 230,000 Americans so far have died of COVID-19. Nevertheless, American workers have run toward the coronavirus in 2020 just as they ran toward the wreckage of the World Trade Center in 2001. Not because they're reckless, but because they're righteous.

"Because of the social roles they play, I've heard workers describe themselves as custodians, or stewards, of the public

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director of the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon

good," Bussel says. "When the nation is threatened, these are the people who step up."

If workers are the ones who step up for the nation, then labor unions are the ones who step up for workers. How they've done so during the COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid illustration of the values that have helped America survive previous crises — and of the principles that will help it rebuild after this one.

#### Safety first

Unions' first responsibility is to their dues-paying members, whose safety has driven the union movement since its inception during the Industrial Revolution.

"Going all the way back to mining accidents in the 19th century, unions have

been instrumental in arguing for things like workers' compensation and workplace regulation," says Bussel, who cites the deadly Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire that killed 146 New York City garment workers in 1911 and spawned a decades-long movement to establish the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which finally succeeded in 1971. "Occupational safety has been totally integral to unions' mission, both then and now."

Although unions' mission is the same as it was back then, their grievances look different thanks to new and different occupational hazards. Instead of overcrowded factories and inadequate fire-safety codes, unions in the COVID era are concerned about the transmission of a

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Chalmer Shuff's Honor Flight to Washington, D.C., was canceled because of COVID-19, so UA Local 469 stepped in to salute his service. COURTESY OF UA LOCAL 469

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communicable disease from customers and co-workers to grocery clerks, bus drivers, restaurant servers, hotel housekeepers, construction workers and other workers deemed essential.

Essential workers like 45-year-old Chad Neanover, a prep cook at Jimmy Buffett's Margaritaville restaurant at the Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel and Casino. "I'm an asthmatic, and my wife, who's a medical assistant, is diabetic. So we're both in the higher-risk categories for COVID, which makes it very hard to want to

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**Aaron Butler**  
UA Local 469 business manager

go out into a work environment without (proper safety) protocols" Neanover says. "It was scary for a while, but then (the hospitality industry in Las Vegas adopted) mandatory temperature checks, masks and regular cleaning of high-touch surfaces, which has given us a little bit of relief."

Neanover's union — the UNITE HERE International Union, which represents more than 300,000 workers in the hotel, gaming, food service and airport industries — was instrumental in securing those protections, which were codified into law by Nevada Senate Bill 4. Passed in August as the first state law requiring comprehensive measures to protect employees and customers against the spread of COVID-19, Senate Bill 4 mandates enhanced cleaning, hand washing,

social distancing, masks and employee training, as well as employer-sponsored testing and contact tracing.

"Unions give workers power and a voice to stand up for what they deserve, whether that's sitting at the bargaining table or walking a picket line. With COVID-19, we've had to do everything we can to ... ensure that our members and their families stay safe and healthy," says UNITE HERE president, D. Taylor. The union has drafted and shared safety standards with hospitality employers not only in Las Vegas, but across the United States and Canada, Taylor says.

The United Food and Commercial Workers International Union represents 1.3 million workers in grocery and retail

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Benefiting the wider community as well: Members of UA Local 469 help distribute groceries at St. Mary's Food Bank in Phoenix. COURTESY OF UA LOCAL 469

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stores, health care and manufacturing facilities, pharmacies, and food processing and packing plants — 340 of whom had died of COVID-19 as of September.

“Our very first concern was that if essential workers in the food supply chain didn’t go to work, whether it was in food processing or retail food stores, our society would break down. Therefore, we had to make sure our members had the highest protections they could possibly have to ensure their safety,” union president Marc Perrone says. His organization helped secure mask mandates, social



Frank Young, a member of UA Local 469, and his wife, Jessica, sew 700 face masks for union plumbers and pipefitters. COURTESY OF UA LOCAL 469

distancing measures and plexiglass barriers in grocery stores, and similar measures — plexiglass dividers, face shields, socially distanced lunch breaks and mandatory temperature checks, not to mention multilingual education, routine testing and contact tracing — at food processing and meatpacking plants. “Given all the things we did, I believe we saved a lot of people from getting this disease. Not only our members, but also out in the community.”

### Help in hard times

Along with workers’ lives, unions have saved workers’ livelihoods.

Because some employees remained anxious — even with safety precautions in place — unions like UA Local 469, the Arizona chapter of the United Associa-

tion of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the United States and Canada (UA), negotiated terms with employers that allowed workers to take voluntary furloughs without losing their jobs.

“That’s something you don’t normally see in the construction industry,” says UA Local 469 business manager Aaron Butler. Those terms were critical not only for distressed workers, but also for workers with immunocompromised family members, Butler says. “I have one member whose wife had a double lung transplant about six months before COVID hit. She was extremely high-risk. If he brought COVID home, she didn’t stand a chance. Because of the contract provisions we secured, this gentleman was

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During the pandemic, the “essential workers” designation includes people like supermarket stocker Kaylee Guerrero in Lansing, Michigan. NICK KING/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

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able to stay home and take care of his family without losing his job.”

UA Local 469 also expanded members’ health benefits to cover 100% of COVID-19 testing and treatment costs, increased weekly disability benefits for members who contracted the virus and made changes to its 401(k) plan to allow members to make increased penalty-free withdrawals of retirement savings due to COVID-related hardships.

IBEW Local 11, the Los Angeles chapter of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, has made similar offerings to its members, including supple-

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IBEW Local 11 business manager

mental unemployment benefits for those who lost their jobs during the pandemic. “We have a Supplemental Unemployment Benefit Fund that’s about five years old. Because that fund is in its infancy, it only provided \$24 a week if you were out of work. Because of the pandemic, we increased that to \$200 a week for apprentices and \$300 a week for journeymen,” says IBEW Local 11 business manager Joel Barton. Workers can access the benefit during the pandemic even if they opt

out of work by choice due to health anxiety or concern, Barton says.

Unions at the national level have made similar moves to protect workers’ financial security. UNITE HERE, for example, has negotiated with employers to extend health coverage to laid-off workers and lobbied hard for the extension of federal unemployment benefits.

“At the beginning of the pandemic ... we supported tens of thousands of members with information on how to apply for unemployment insurance; seek housing and food assistance; organize and run food banks; prevent evictions; and work with utility companies and make arrangement to cover other bills,” Taylor says. “We produced relief guides covering 23 states and four Canadian provinces. And we ran hotlines that handled more than 11,000 calls from members seeking relief and unemployment

help — (because) for most workers, this was their first time navigating state unemployment systems that were, and remain, unhelpful.”

One of the biggest achievements for the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union during the pandemic has been hazard pay for essential workers, many of who have faced increased expenses during the pandemic — for child care, for example, since many schools and daycares were closed.

At the start of the pandemic, it secured bonuses, temporary wage increases or both for essential workers at Albertsons/Safeway, Kroger, Stop & Shop, Cargill, Hormel, JVS Foods, Conagra Brands, Seaboard Triumph Foods, J.M. Smucker, Kraft Heinz and Campbell Soup, among others.

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Some employers have since reduced or eliminated those benefits, which Perrone calls “disappointing.”

“In every economics class I’ve ever been in, it’s been said that those who take the most risk should be paid the most money,” Perrone says. Noting that grocery store sales rose 40% to 45% at the start of the pandemic and remain up by approximately 20%, he says, “In this particular case, shareholders aren’t taking the most risk. Workers are taking the most risk, so they deserve some of that profit.”

Unions’ victories have yielded benefits for non-union workers, too. In order to remain competitive, Perrone points out, non-union employers like Walmart, Target and Amazon/Whole Foods also offered pandemic hazard pay.

Bussel says, “The idea of trying to raise the floor for everybody — the sense that a rising tide lifts all boats — is pretty pervasive in the union movement’s DNA.”

### Caring for community

Unions haven’t just negotiated during the pandemic. They’ve also nurtured. IBEW Local 11, for example, has hosted several grocery giveaways, including one in the spring that provided food to more than 2,500 families in Los Angeles and another over Labor Day weekend that fed approximately 3,500 more. On another occasion, one of its activist members, “Big John” Harriel, purchased and distributed hundreds of board games to parents and children in underserved communities who were quarantined at home, often with little to do.

“We’ve always felt it was our obligation to take care of the community, because we are the community,” Barton says.

The men and women of UA Local 469 feel the same way. Member Frank Young and his wife, Jessica, for example, made 700 masks to distribute to Local 469 workers in the field. Another member, World War II veteran Chalmer Shuff, was supposed to be honored by the nonprofit Honor Flight in March; when his flight to Washington, D.C., was canceled on account of the pandemic, more than 100 fellow union members organized an “Honor Drive” parade, during which they decorated their cars and drove by his home waving and honking in tribute.

The union also secured more than 1,500 N-95 masks that it donated to local



Any job that involves contact with the public potentially puts a worker in harm’s way. Server Tammie Bunker waits on customers at Kewpee’s Restaurant in downtown Lansing, Michigan, in early October. MATTHEW DAE SMITH/LANSING STATE JOURNAL

firefighters; distributed more than 500 emergency food boxes to hungry families during a grocery giveaway; established its own food pantry that collected and distributed thousands of items to members in need; and donated nonperishable food, household items and \$2,500 in gift cards to the hard-hit Navajo Nation, where several of its members reside.

“We all take an oath when we join the union to assist unfortunate and distressed members,” Butler says. “It’s in our blood to take care of each other and to take care of our community.”

And to take care of the economy, too. Unions — many of which have robust apprenticeship and training programs — stand ready to supply the talent America

will need as it pivots from COVID response to COVID recovery. All they ask in return, Perrone says, is appreciation, compassion and consideration.

“I think we as a country finally understand how significant our workers are,” Perrone says. “They really are essential, and they deserve our respect. And, quite frankly, our gratitude.”