

Labor's Organizing Challenge: Rising Inequality and the Politics of Division in America Today

International Association of Bridge, Structural,
Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers

Convention / August 24, 2016

Jeff Grabelsky / The Worker Institute at Cornell

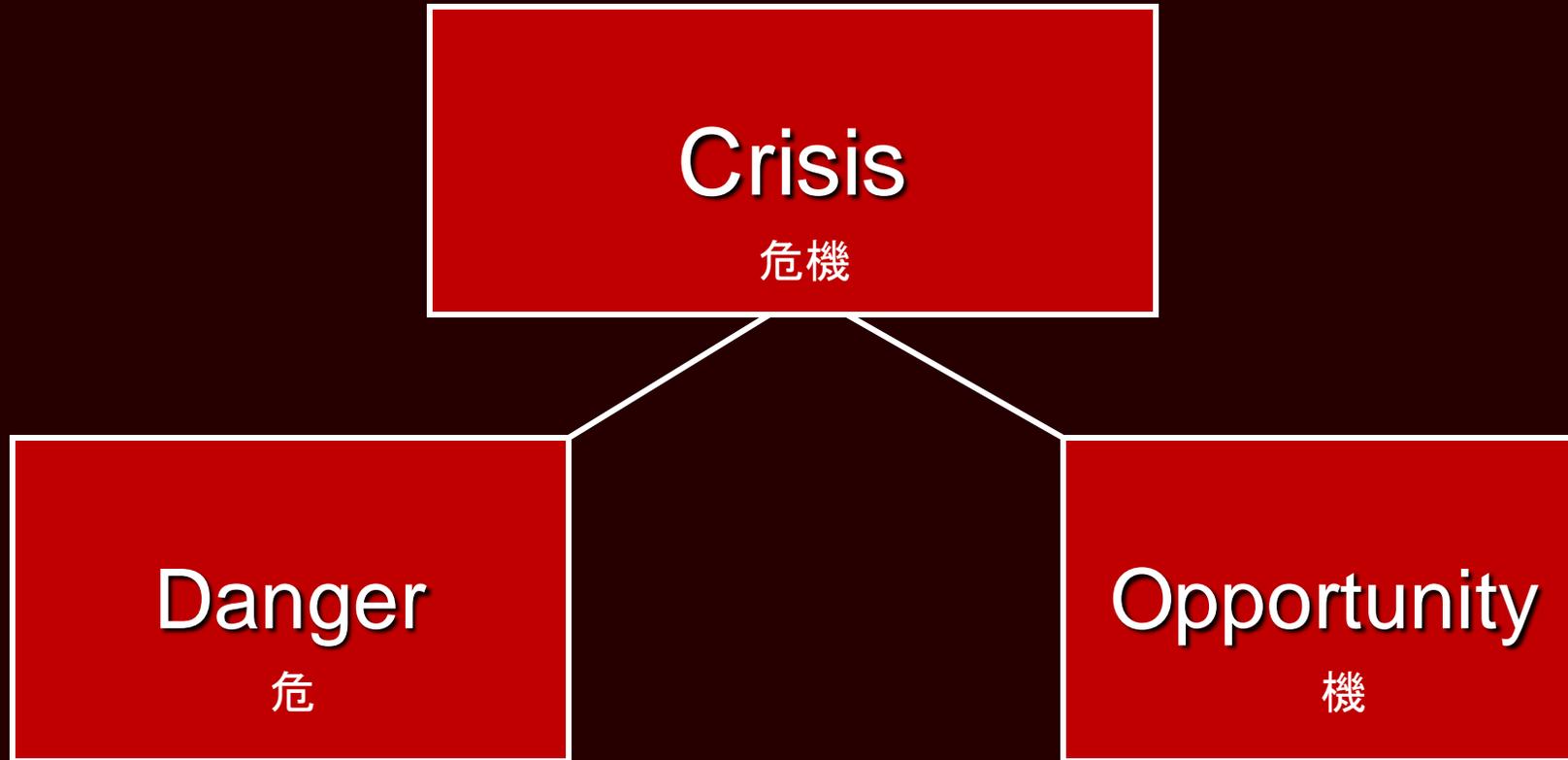
Labor's Challenge: Reverse Inequality

1. Rising inequality is a problem that contributes to a politics of division.
2. The labor movement has been and can be a force to reverse rising inequality.
3. Labor should restore and redefine the American Dream as a unifying vision.

We are Facing a Serious Crisis!

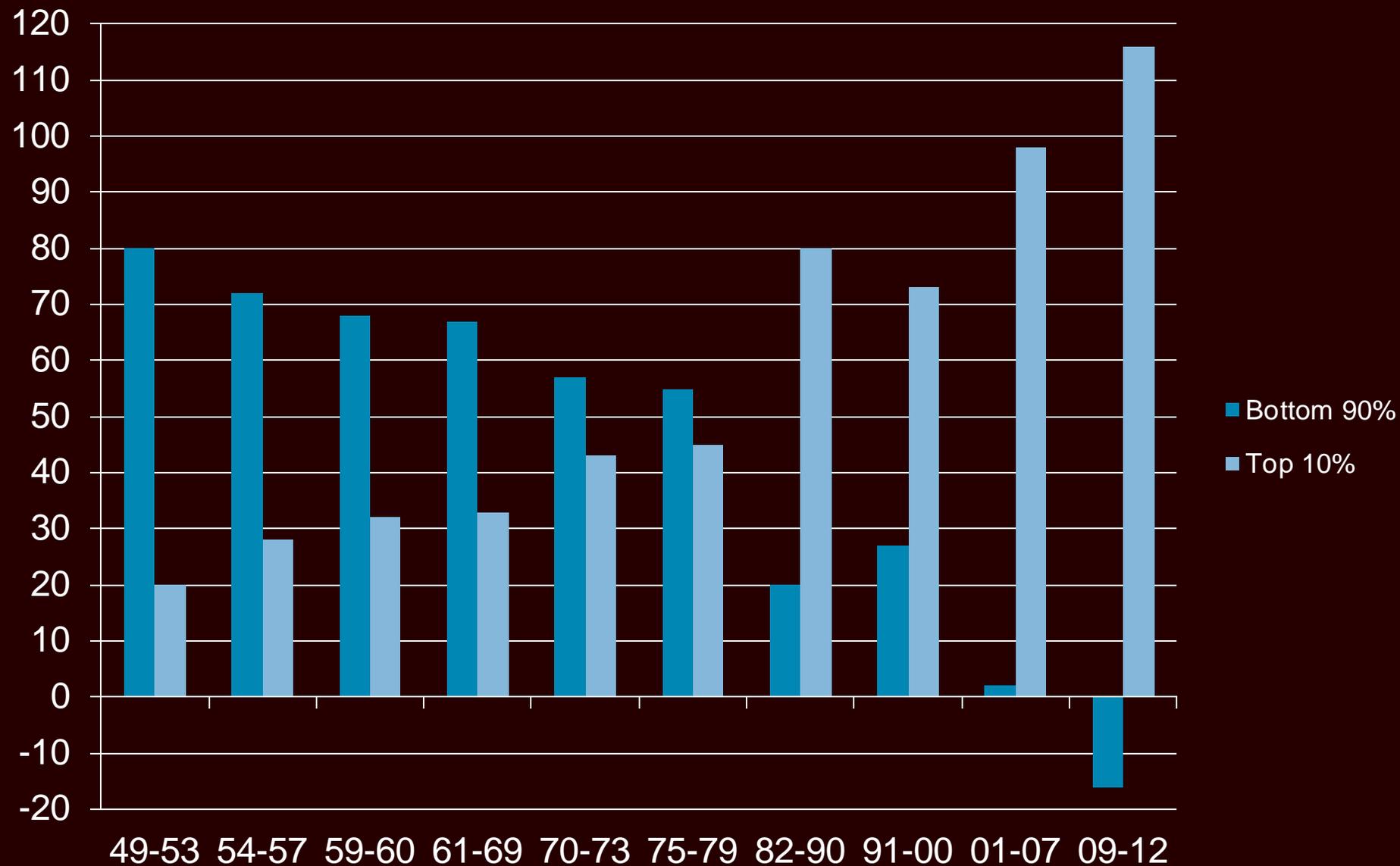
- A crisis is a difficult or dangerous situation that demands serious attention.
- A crisis is a challenging time when tough decisions must be made that will determine the course of future events.
- This is a watershed moment when we stand at crossroads.

How should we respond to crisis?



The Problem of Rising Income Inequality

Percent share of income growth received by the top 10 percent and bottom 90 percent of earners during expansions



Source: Pavlina R. Tcherneva (NYTimes), based on data from Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez and N.B.E.R.

Equality and the American Dream

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

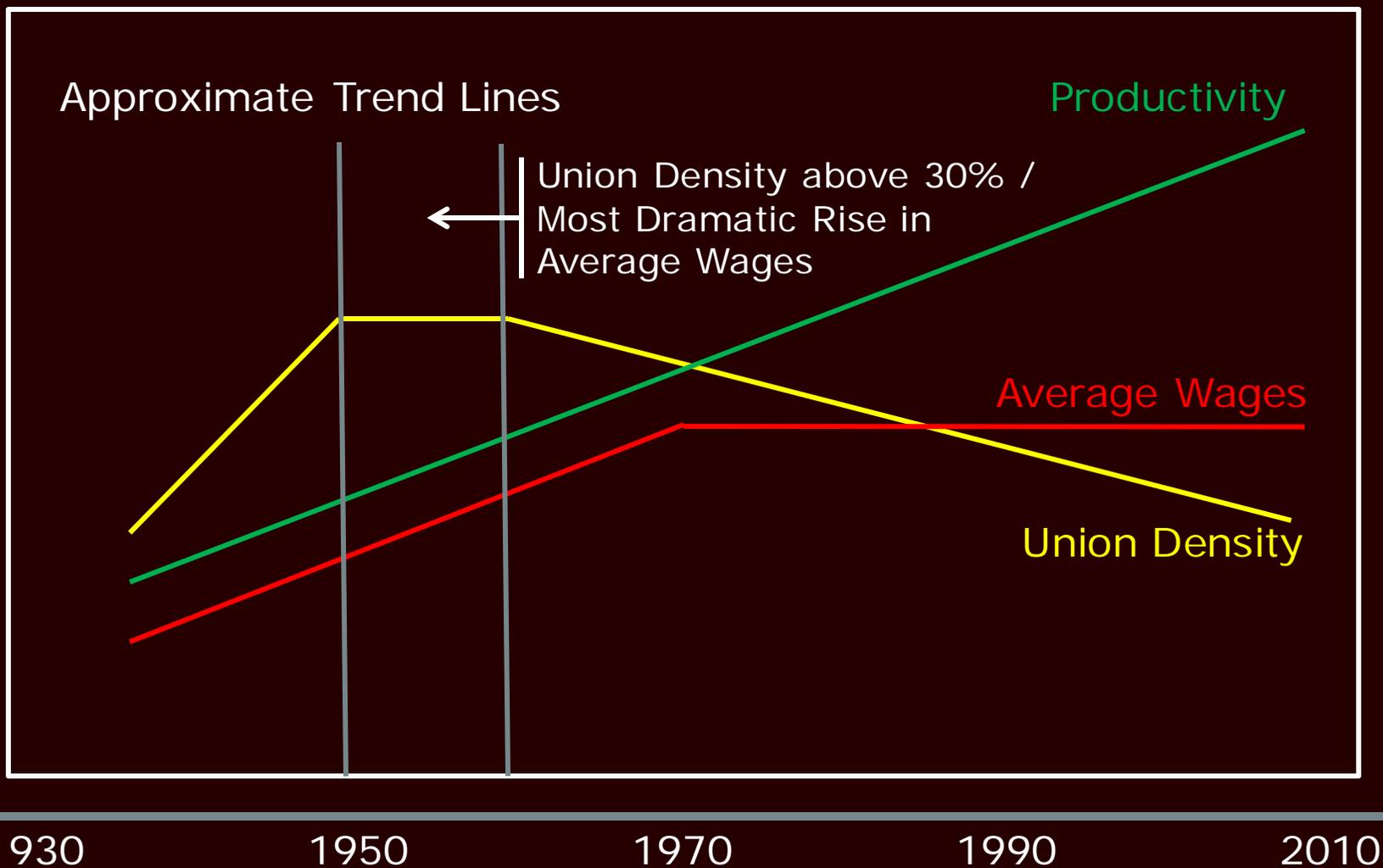
--Declaration of Independence

What Is the American Dream?

Two dreams, inextricably bound together:

- The dream of wealth and prosperity
- The dream of freedom and democracy

The Dream of Wealth and Prosperity



The Dream of Freedom and Democracy

We educate members, encourage them to register and vote, and promote political activism.



For the 1%:

The Dream of Wealth and Prosperity Is Very Real!

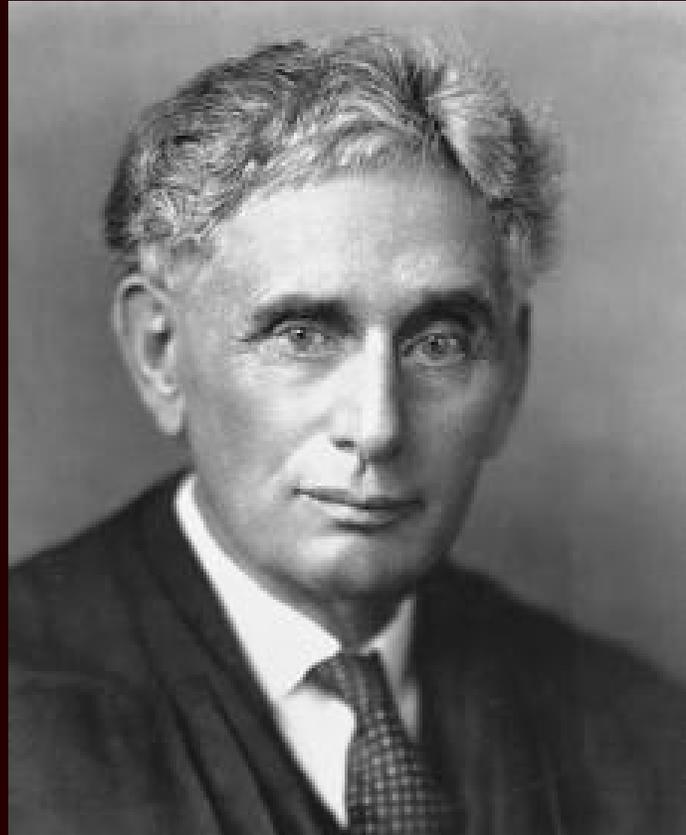
- CEOs captured \$135 billion in total compensation.
- Average CEO compensation was \$10.8 million.
- Top 1% increased its income by 275% since 1979.
- 400 wealthiest Americans “earned” \$97,000 an hour.
- 95% of all economic gains since the recovery began have gone to top 1%.
- Income gap between 1% and 99% has tripled.
- **This reality reinforces the view that the system is rigged.**

For the 99%:

The Dream of Wealth and Prosperity is Slipping Away

- 90% have lost real income since 1973.
- Middle class lost 38% of its wealth since 2008.
- \$10 trillion in personal wealth was lost by 99%.
- Student debt is over \$1 trillion.
- 46 million Americans (1 in 7) live in poverty.
- Inequality of wealth and opportunity has never been greater.
- These trends heighten the righteous anger and anxiety of the American working class.

The Dream of Freedom and Democracy is Under Assault



“We may have
democracy, or we
may have wealth
concentrated in the
hands of a few, but
we can't have
both.”

--Louis Brandeis

Trumpism and the Politics of Division

Trumpism and the Politics of Division

A viral and vulgar right-wing populism that threatens the labor movement and the working class.



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