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No One Size Fits All:
Worker Organization, Policy, and
Movement in a New Economic Age

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Introduction

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Workers and their organizations are facing enormous obstacles today. Corporations wield immense power, not only in the marketplace but also in politics, which has, for many years, effectively blocked the updating of antiquated laws governing labor relations. Instead, unions have been subjected to a steady onslaught of attacks at the state level and growing hostility from the US Supreme Court. They have all but lost basic protections that the legal system once provided—making organizing, bargaining, and striking increasingly difficult. Black workers continue to face a decades-long job crisis characterized by disproportionate unemployment (compared with White workers) and poor job quality. Immigrant workers of all statuses feel the threat of exclusionary immigration policies and heightened xenophobic rhetoric coming from the top echelons of the US government.

Similar to worker organizing in the United States before the New Deal contract, organizations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been scrambling to find leverage within an increasingly hostile economic, political, and legal environment. Despite formidable obstacles, this volume shows that vibrant, creative experimentation has never ceased. In lieu of new federal regulation, public and private sector national unions and local affiliates have been actively trying out new approaches that pair organizing with mechanisms that support bargaining. They have doubled down on electoral politics and creative policy fights to raise standards and facilitate organizing, with an unprecedented focus on low-wage workers. They have forged closer, more equal partnerships with community organizations than ever before. Still much more work needs to be done.

New organizational models are also emergent. These experiments, which include worker centers and what some refer to as “alt labor” groups, diverge from traditional labor unions in a number of ways. They aim to represent workers and their workplace interests but do not typically work within the New Deal collective bargaining construct regulated by the government.
Janice Fine’s groundbreaking 2006 book, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream*, revealed worker centers to be community organizations that use a variety of strategies (including organizing, policy advocacy, and service provision) in their quest to improve the working lives of low-wage workers. Since the publication of Fine’s book, organizations have continued to experiment with new ways to change working conditions, even when they cannot effectively influence private sector actors directly. These strategies, as we elaborate on below, include leveraging the government to improve labor standards enforcement, raising minimum wages, and organizing coalitions that can put economic and moral pressure on companies that are at the top of labor and product supply chains.

Given the strength of the forces arrayed against improving working conditions and building worker power, worker organizations cannot simply follow the organizing and collective bargaining trajectories of the past. They must innovate, and they have been doing so, sometimes achieving significant, albeit limited, victories.

This volume brings together a panoply of examples of efforts that are being made to improve working conditions across the country, while acknowledging the structural dynamics that challenge and condition them in 21st-century America. The title of this volume, *No One Size Fits All*, is intended both to capture the diverse strategic repertoire we found and to stand as a corrective to the idea that there is a single organizational model or strategy. There is no magical model that, like Dumbo’s magic feather, would allow workers to soar above employers’ rejection of the post-war social compact, virulent union busting, generations’ worth of anti-union legal developments, dramatic shifts in firm and industry structures and employment relations, globalization, and technological change. No magical model can overcome the country’s reliance on the exploitation of workers who are marked by their racial, gender, and citizenship status. Our view is that the future for workers’ organizations is plural rather than singular—containing a multiplicity of organizational forms and strategies.

Several chapters in the volume address macro-level challenges to the movement of worker organizations. They set forth critical information about the labor market and demographic trends underlying the experimentation that has been taking place. Jacobs, Smiley, and Theodore all invoke the decline of the vertically integrated firm and the rise of global supply chains. Poo and Shah describe the aging of the population and concomitant spike in demand for care work, along with the promise and perils of the new on-demand economy platforms. Rhomberg cites the fast food industry as the quintessential example of the precarious and low-paid work that characterizes fissured employment relations. Pitts provides an overview of the dimensions of the Black jobs crisis and the main causal factors underlying it. Fine,
Narro, and Barnes as well as Bada, Gleeson, and de Graauw present immigration demographics and a troubling immigration/labor policy history. McCartin reviews the political and juridical assault on unions of the past half century along with the deregulation and financialization that further weakened them. Taken together, these chapters provide an overview of the key external variables that have shaped the rough terrain on which worker organizations are taking action.

Another set of chapters delves into some of the internal organizational characteristics and dynamics that are shaping the strategic choices unions and worker centers are making. McAlevey explores the reasons for the decline of the strike as a central power-building strategy on the part of most unions. She illuminates the fundamental organizing techniques that have enabled certain unions in strategic sectors of the economy, such as health care and education, to strike and win through the construction and consolidation of powerful workplace committees involved in actions that test the strategic capacity of leaders and depth of member commitment. Fine, Han, Sparks, and Yu present the results of a large survey of job satisfaction and occupational challenges among professional union organizers. Their chapter suggests that while organizers have cited similar difficulties and challenges for many years, unions have not fundamentally altered the model. Gates, Griffith, Kim, Mokhiber, Bazler, and Case find that worker centers’ funding strategies look more like those of nonprofit organizations than of unions: overwhelmingly dependent on external funding streams (foundation grants, government grants, and individual donations) rather than those internally generated (membership dues). They also find that a few “giants” skew the average revenue of worker centers, as the vast majority of centers take in less than $100,000 a year. Fine, Narro, and Barnes conclude that the formation of national worker center networks and the expansion of large centers can help explain the main growth spurts in the movement over time. They argue that the 501(c)(3) nonprofit structure, which enabled foundation and government funding, has facilitated the organization of low-wage workers. Nonetheless, this funding model, they contend, also means that centers have less incentive to build a base of dues-paying members. They predict that centers, based on this structure, will continue to limit themselves to public policy campaigns that can be won without the economic power required for strikes and other economic actions.

The chapters, considered together, paint a picture of the variety of change strategies organizations are engaging in. McCartin provides an overview and typology of the strategic repertoire of unions, worker centers, and economic justice coalitions over the past generation, including efforts to organize and bargain beyond the individual employer, to align organizing and bargaining with broader community interests, to use investment strategies
to advance organizing and bargaining, to seek alternative union recognition strategies, to engage in creative militancy to revive and redefine strikes and related work actions, and to develop alternative worker organizations. Rhomberg recounts the historical development of the Fight for $15 movement and the central role of the Service Employees International Union in providing financing, organizing, and communications capacity.

Several chapters focus on how unions and community organizations are redefining the meaning of “bargaining” and striking. Smiley posits bargaining as the central conceptual framework for modern worker movements, arguing that non-union workers are building a vibrant movement that is shaping the future of bargaining in ways that could engage large numbers through broadening the scope of traditional bargaining, bargaining with what she calls the “ultimate profiteer” and engaging in community-driven bargaining. In a similar vein, Sneiderman and McCartin propose “Bargaining for the Common Good” as a new model that unites labor and community organizations across issue areas in the struggle against a common target.

Four chapters describe the tremendous accomplishments as well as the limits of organizing for policy change at the state and local levels. Burnham and Mercado compare the two campaigns that led to passage of a Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in New York and in California, highlighting key contextual and tactical differences and acknowledging the indispensable role of unions and state labor federations to both successes. Bada, Gleeson, and de Graauw’s chapter highlights the importance of political context and strong labor/immigrant advocacy coalitions to advance pro-immigrant local legislation. Jacobs presents a broad range of creative and successful state and local policy campaigns, such as fair scheduling and paid sick days legislation as well as the promise of sectoral wage setting and efforts to broaden the definition of employee. He warns, however, that there are “major challenges” to enforcing these laws and to turning policy wins into “sustainable worker organization” over time, as well as the counterattack by business that has resulted in legislation preempting cities from adopting higher minimum wages and other employment protections in 25 states. Rhomberg lifts up the extraordinary accomplishments of the Fight for $15 but cautions that policy successes alone cannot offset the power low-wage workers still need to gain through institutional forms of workers’ associational power.

Two chapters delve into efforts that have succeeded in holding the corporation that has the most economic power in a given supply chain accountable for the wages and working conditions of workers on the ground. Theodore argues that the shifting geographies of labor organizing require a global response, profiling the Asia Floor Wage campaign to compel major brands to remove wage differentials as a competitive strategy in the garment industry among countries in Asia, and the C.J.’s Seafood campaign, mount-
ed by the National Guestworker Alliance, which highlighted the egregious violations of workplace laws that were endemic to the Walmart seafood supply chain and held Walmart accountable for them. Asbed, Albisa, and Sellers describe the failure of corporate social responsibility and multi-stakeholder initiatives to address the human rights crisis in global supply chains, arguing for worker-driven social responsibility that places workers at the center of developing and enforcing solutions to the problem. The chapter profiles the remarkably effective Fair Food Program of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and Fair Food Standards Council, which enforces a binding legal agreement between farmworkers at the bottom of a supply chain and retail brands at the top to condition the brands’ purchases from the workers’ employers on human rights compliance in the workplace, as well as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which was developed by the Worker Rights Consortium and several labor federations and requires signatory companies to compel their supplier factories to undergo fire, building, and electrical inspections and carry out the renovations and repairs necessary to make their factories safe. The signatories also required them to terminate business with any factory that fails to comply with the terms of the agreement.

Pitts’ chapter provides the history of Black worker centers and the development of the National Black Worker Center Project and recounts the ways the centers are mounting policy campaigns that leverage public contracts to confront structural racism in the labor market and address what he calls the “power-building imperative.” Narro and Fine provide an assessment of the state of union/worker center collaborations based on surveys of the 30 worker centers that have been issued certificates of affiliation with local central labor councils.

Finally, two chapters elucidate the promise and the pitfalls of online employment platforms, efforts to build alliances with “high road” businesses, and those that turn workers into owners through union-cooperatives alliances. Poo and Shah explore the ways in which online platforms have radically disrupted work processes and obscured employment relationships. They ask, “Who are we working for when work is assigned by an algorithm for a customer we don’t have a direct relationship with, and who is responsible for the safety and well-being of workers when there is no manager or even a phone number to call when workers need assistance?” They recount the efforts of the National Domestic Workers Alliance innovation hub to intervene in the tech-based care and cleaning marketplace through the promulgation of a good work code that they could negotiate with online companies to adopt, along with a fair care pledge for individual employers. Ji finds inspiring examples across the United States but concludes that the economic scale and impact of unionized worker cooperatives remains quite small.
While there is a great deal of experimentation we have not covered, we hope that what is documented in these pages demonstrates the breadth and depth of the creative search for leverage that has been taking place across space and time. We hope that this volume does justice to the continual crafting, testing, and recrafting of strategy and tactics that is being enacted by unions, worker centers, economic justice coalitions, community organizing groups, and partner research, legal advocacy, policy organizations, and allied elected officials.

Our fondest hope is that *No One Size Fits All* will stand as a corrective to those who have been blithely insisting that the labor movement and worker organizers ran out of ideas and died 40 years ago. As the pages that follow will reveal, they’re wrong.
Section One: Building Organization
Chapter 1

Understanding Worker Center Trajectories

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents findings based on an updated data set of worker centers. We seek to specify the trajectory of worker center growth over time and account for growth spurts; to explain the geographic distribution of centers and why most are modest in size; and to understand the choices, norms, and practices of the groups themselves and the role of the state and philanthropic foundations in conditioning organizational forms.

We begin by providing a brief introduction to worker centers and the context in which they have emerged, which include, among other things, increased immigration, stalled immigration policy reform, low rates of private sector unionism among low-wage workers, and high rates of exploitation on the job. We then turn to the growth of new centers, finding largely incremental growth in the 1980s and 1990s and then an exceptional spurt between 2000 and 2014. We find that many of the new centers were tied to the emergence of national federations, as well as to expansion by a few individual centers.

Next, we look at the reasons that the model of a nonprofit engaging in service, advocacy, and organizing took hold across the worker center domain rather than, for example, a union or community organizing model. In doing so, we argue that worker centers were drawing on earlier hybrid models that emerged during the 1960s among feminist, civil rights, and Chicano activists, which fused identity-based service provision with organizing (Minkoff 2002). While many theorists of community organizing view service provision as problematic—placing emphasis on the individual and rendering constituents as clients—worker centers saw service as a means of prefiguring social change. In fact, the largest worker centers in politically supportive states have been able to use services to grow and to support their work.
In charting the evolution of worker centers as a field, we find that centers exhibit a common set of structural features in conformity with normative and regulative requirements of the larger organizational field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). But we argue that focusing on structure alone elides significant differences between centers along industry, strategy, programmatic, and cultural lines.

While characteristics of the low-wage labor market—such as exclusion from National Labor Relations Act or Fair Labor Standards Act coverage, or high proportions of undocumented workers—have limited the structural power of worker center constituents and made construction of mass membership-based worker organizations difficult, worker centers have compensated for this lack of structural and associational power by focusing on public policy change and government administrative action (Fine 2005, 2006, 2011; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Rhomberg 2012; Wright 2000). Despite their lack of direct economic action, worker centers have been instrumental in state and local policy campaigns, including raising the minimum wage, enacting wage theft laws, adopting paid sick and safe time laws (Jacobs, this volume), and passing the domestic workers’ bills of rights (Burnham and Mercado, this volume).

BACKGROUND
Worker centers are hybrid organizations that combine the service provision of traditional voluntary organizations with political advocacy focused on labor and immigrant rights and often focus on gender, race, and broad critiques of neoliberalism (Fine 2006; Jayaraman and Ness 2005; Louie 2001; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Milkman and Ott 2014). The cornerstone of centers is the organization of a strong base of workers at the local level, who often play a key role in organizational decision making. Some have increasingly focused on mobilizing consumers and high-road employers to support their efforts.

The organizational repertoire of worker centers builds on a form that emerged in the 1960s, combining the traditional service provision that had long been carried out by voluntary organizations, particularly among women, immigrants, and African Americans, with an emphasis on political advocacy for civil and social rights (Minkoff 2002). These organizations borrowed from both traditional as well as newly emergent social movement organizational forms. Minkoff argues that in establishing these hybrids, movement groups imported models of organization that were already culturally legitimate—but not previously recognized as political.

Currently, there are 226 worker centers in operation. Some of the larger cities, such as Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, have multiple centers based in specific neighborhoods and sectors, but in many other cities and suburban areas there are just one or two centers, often based in an
ethnic enclave, that tend to address the needs of workers in multiple sectors with large immigrant workforces. Over 90 centers focus their work on a particular sector: construction, domestic and home health care, taxi driving, restaurants, food processing, warehousing, and car washes, among others. Several others hold a particular focus on two or three sectors; the rest support workers across a broad range of sectors.

Although there is a strong focus on worker issues, worker centers are not unions (Naduris-Weissman 2009). They do not organize workplaces for ongoing representation. Although they engage in collective action, they do not negotiate collective bargaining agreements. By and large, workers are not required to become dues-paying members in order to receive services or to participate in other ways.

The emergence of new actors in US industrial relations who are not enmeshed in collective bargaining structures has paralleled the decline of traditional unions, the decentering of firm and industry structures, and the dramatic increase in immigration during the final decades of the 20th century. During the late 1970s and 1980s, the decline of unions sharply reduced the quality of jobs in manufacturing and service industries, leading to an exodus of native workers and an influx of immigrants to fill vacancies in the lowest-paying occupations with the worst working conditions (Milkman 2006). Unionization among low-wage workers had always been low, and during the 1980s, unionization among the bottom quintile of wage earners flatlined at about 6% in the private sector and remained there.¹ At the same time, heightened imperatives to cut costs and limit liability contributed to more widespread “fissuring” of employment relationships (Weil 2014) through subcontracting, franchising, and increased use of fixed-term contracts, temporary staffing agencies, and independent contracting arrangements, normalizing “low-road” employment practices across industries.

A ground-breaking study of low-wage occupations in three metropolitan cities found that almost 26% of workers in the bottom 15% of the labor market failed to receive the legally required minimum wage; 70% did not receive legally required documentation of earnings; and of those eligible for overtime, a whopping 75% did not receive the pay they were entitled to (Bernhardt, Spiller, and Theodore 2013: 817–818). Many of the industries most prone to violations such as wage theft and unpaid overtime are also industries that are most heavily populated by immigrant workers (Bobo 2011; Capps, Fortuny, and Fix 2007; Waldinger 1996).

Immigration policy and politics are also instrumental to the story of worker centers. The total foreign-born population in the United States more than tripled from 14.1 million in 1980 to 43.7 million in 2016 (Figure 1). By 2009, foreign-born workers accounted for 15.7% of the civilian labor force; eight million of them were undocumented immigrants accounting
for over 5% of the labor force (Kochhar, Espinoza, and Hinze-Pifer 2010). While there had been a sharp decline in the size of the undocumented population from 12.2 million in 2007 to 11.3 million in 2009, presumably caused by the Great Recession, the number of undocumented residents by 2012 had risen to 11.7 million (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013).

The number of worker centers founded since 1980 has grown alongside the foreign-born population. The number of active worker centers by state is significantly correlated, at 0.699, with the percentage of the state’s population that is foreign born. The correlation between the undocumented immigrant share of the labor force and worker centers by state is also significant, at 0.496.

Several waves of immigration are particularly relevant to the rise of worker centers. The growth of the Mexican-born population—especially those who are undocumented—has catalyzed the worker center movement in California, Illinois, New York, and Texas (Alba and Nee 2005). Proportionally one of the least skilled and lowest-paid foreign-born populations (Alba and Nee 2005), Mexican immigrants entered the United States in large numbers for “3-D” work (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) until 2007 (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera et al. 2012).

Similarly, Salvadoran immigration during the 1980s and early 1990s shaped the growth of worker centers in Los Angeles, New York City, and Long Island (Alba and Nee 2005). Increases in Chinese and Filipino immigrants from 1980 to 2000 also played an important role in catalyzing the worker center movement (Asis 2017; Zong and Batalova 2017).
Over the close to five decades since the first worker centers emerged we have been able to identify a total of 286 that have been operational at some point. Despite extensive research, we have been unable to find information for 29 centers and have concluded that 31 are no longer in operation. By our estimates, at least 226 are currently operational. When compared with the number of union locals (still over 40,000) that sounds rather small. But if we think of them as more akin to settlement houses—community-based organizations that connect immigrant workers to services while advocating strongly for factory reforms and supporting worker-organizing efforts—another picture emerges. In 1913, at the height of their prominence, The Handbook of Settlements listed 413 settlement houses in 32 states. Like worker centers, settlement houses were in part a response to rising immigration levels and largely held a dual focus on social service and social reform (Koerin 2003). Despite their comparatively modest numbers, these organizations have had an outsized influence on industrial relations and labor regulation in their cities and states as well as nationally.

ORIGINS AND GROWTH TRENDS

Economist Richard Freeman has found that unionism has generally grown in discontinuous upticks or spurts rather than through gradual accretion. He defines a spurt as a concentrated episode of union growth that occurs under a specific set of conditions and when there is an appropriate vehicle through which workers can organize. In the case of US unions, Freeman finds that the uptick that occurred in the 1930s and 1940s was undergirded by high rates of employer–employee conflict over organization and the existence of industrial unions through which large numbers of factory workers could come together across traditional dividing lines of jurisdiction, skill, or occupation (Freeman 1997).

At a much smaller scale, we find a similar spurt in the growth trajectory of worker centers. As can be seen in Figure 2, although worker centers were being founded throughout the 1980s and 1990s, growth was modest until the year 2000. Since then, there were significant upticks between the years 2000 and 2002, 2006 and 2009, and 2012 and 2014. During these periods, an average of 10.8 worker centers was founded each year, compared to an overall average of 4.7 centers per year.

During the 1980s, in response to the massive flow of political refugees fleeing the wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, the Reagan administration instituted a process of expedited deportation proceedings, which sparked organizing efforts and advocacy campaigns in the United States. These efforts were furthered by a coalition of church-based organizations such as the Unitarian church and the Quaker-led Sanctuary Movement, solidarity groups such as the Committee In Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), and
networks created by immigrants themselves such as the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), El Rescate, Centro Presente, and CASA de Maryland.

Within this wave of migration from Central America were labor and community organizers who fled political persecution, particularly from El Salvador and Guatemala. They would later transform the immigrant worker movements across the country—especially in Los Angeles, by participating in campaigns such as Justice for Janitors (Waldinger et al. 1996). The uptick of migration during the 1980s led to a sharp increase in day laborers looking for work. The increase in day laborers at street corners led to a concerted effort among municipalities to limit their rights to look for work in public areas. Law enforcement agencies began to selectively target them for overzealous enforcement, while businesses and residents’ groups led local efforts to rid their communities of day laborers through a process of attrition.

These types of repressive responses resulted in the first effort by advocacy groups to organize day laborers. Efforts to educate these workers about their rights transformed into organizing efforts to include the recovery of unpaid wages, prevention of labor rights abuses, and advocacy on behalf of day laborers with police and other key community stakeholders. The effort to fight back the local attacks of day laborers through political and legal strategies allowed these organizers the opportunity to formulate organizing strategies to empower day laborers based on popular education methodologies. Popular education is a method most widely attributed to Paulo Freire, a Brazilian teacher and activist. The California city of Agoura Hills, for example, has a

FIGURE 2
Number of Worker Centers Founded by Year
long history of day laborer organizing, led by refugees from Guatemala who fled persecution for their community activism work (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014).

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 created the need to implement outreach programs to ensure that undocumented immigrants who qualified for the legalization program would apply within the short amnesty time period, as well as provided government funding for community organizations to assist immigrants in filling out applications and educate them about the anti-discrimination provisions of the act. CARECEN and El Rescate shifted focus to assisting with the amnesty applications. Advocates in Los Angeles also came together to create a project—affiliated with the United Way until 1995—called the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), which used its federal grant to create the Workers’ Rights Project.

After the IRCA application process period ended, CHIRLA became an education and outreach project. As CHIRLA began reaching out to the day laborers and domestic workers—employment categories that were not eligible for the amnesty under IRCA—they returned with cases of police harassment and abuses by employers. Consequently, in 1989, CHIRLA created the Day Laborer Project and Domestic Workers Project. During the same period in Pasadena, the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (Instituto de Educacion Popular del Sur de California, IDEPSCA) began to receive request for assistance from many of the students from its ESL classes who were day laborers and domestic workers, which led to creation of the Pasadena Day Laborer Association and the Mujeres en Movimiento project.

From 1997 through 2001, CHIRLA and IDEPSCA created an innovative strategy to use City of Los Angeles funding to open up new day labor worker centers throughout the city. CHIRLA also began to organize corners and create designated areas in parts of Los Angeles where they developed strong leadership among the workers. With legal support from the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Day Laborer Association filed a lawsuit in 1998 against Los Angeles County, challenging its anti-day laborer solicitation ordinance. This case resulted in a major federal court victory when the judge struck down the ordinance as unconstitutional in violation of the First Amendment rights of day laborers (Narro 2010; Patler 2010).

From 1998 through 2000, CHIRLA and IDEPSCA began to connect with groups around the country that were organizing day laborers and dealing with stakeholders who were trying to remove day laborers from their communities. This process of sharing information and experiences became a key motivation for the founding of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) in 2001.

Other centers had faith-based beginnings in churches and shelters and evolved from being strictly service providers to advocacy and organizing. Many
were connected to Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ), including the Chicago Interfaith Worker Rights Center (now called ARISE), Workers Defense Project in Texas, Voces de la Frontera in Wisconsin, Northwest Arkansas Worker Center, and Western North Carolina Worker Center. As IWJ set about creating and strengthening labor–faith coalitions, it began to encounter nascent immigrant worker rights projects and helped transform them into established worker centers.

IWJ became a central resource for newly emergent worker centers in cities and towns in the US Midwest, Northeast, and South. IWJ tried to pioneer a model of matching the workers who came into centers with unions, but this met with mixed results (Fine 2006, 2007). Over the years, IWJ has had a dedicated organizer who focuses on the worker center network, helping with fund-raising and organizing trainings and conferences specific to their interests and needs, in particular pioneering work on wage theft (Bobo 2011).

A number of the worker centers that emerged in this period had connections to the labor movement. After years of supporting employer sanctions, in 2000 the AFL-CIO reversed course and called for repeal of the employer sanctions provision that it had strongly supported as part of IRCA. The AFL-CIO had come to the conclusion that employer sanctions were a failed strategy that was empowering employers to retaliate against workers involved in organizing drives. The same Executive Council resolution that foreswore opposition to employer sanctions also called for expanding the organizing rights of immigrant workers, a broad amnesty for the undocumented, and immigrant admissions based on family reunification.

The comprehensiveness of this approach represented the culmination of a shift in the AFL-CIO’s outlook and strategy, which had begun in the 1970s when it provided strong support for farmworker organizing and later in that decade came out in support of a broad amnesty program. It also reflected efforts by important international unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and UNITE HERE throughout the 1990s to organize the undocumented workers while disavowing employer sanctions. It was a gradual but ultimately decisive shift from viewing unskilled foreign-born Latino and largely undocumented workers as “unorganizable” and pursuing policies to exclude them to seeing these workers as instrumental to building the membership of the labor movement and pursuing policies to extend them legal status (Fine and Tichenor 2009).

NDLON was established in 2001 by day labor organizers in Los Angeles, who were connected to CHIRLA and IDEPSCA. The creation of NDLON gave national attention to the rise of worker centers in major cities throughout the country.

During the mid-2000s, 45 new worker centers were founded. In the winter of 2005, HB 4437 narrowly passed the Republican-controlled House of
Representatives. It proposed, for the first time, to make illegal presence in the United States a felony and a crime for any people or organizations to lend support to undocumented immigrants. For three months—between March 10 and May 1, 2006—five million immigrants (most of whom were Latino) and their supporters demonstrated in over 100 cities throughout the United States. On March 25 in Los Angeles, close to one million immigrants responded on their own to announcements on Spanish-language television and radio and in newspapers, without the guidance of community leaders, labor, or community groups and participated in one of the largest mobilizations in history. This mobilization was a major wake-up call for the immigrant rights and labor movements. More specifically, the immigrant rights and labor movements “missed the boat” with the March 25 march.

Soon thereafter, labor and immigrant rights groups joined grassroots, immigrant-based organizations throughout the country to launch a series of mobilizations and protests that culminated in the largest International Workers’ Day demonstration in US history. The irony is that this historic May 1 mobilization was not led by the US labor movement but by immigrant workers themselves. For many of the marchers throughout the three months, it was their first time participating in public demonstrations in this country. NDLON members and many other worker centers were in the center of much of the organized resistance to HB 4437 (Voss and Bloemraad 2011).

During this period, the failure to pass comprehensive immigration reform in Congress culminated in immigration enforcement policies that had significant impact on the members of many worker centers, especially those working with day laborers. Day laborers became the front line of the immigration reform debate and were the focus of attacks by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a national organization that seeks to reduce immigration; the Minutemen Project, a group that was recruiting armed volunteers to patrol the border; and other right-wing forces. Additionally, day laborers became major targets of cities and states that were enacting their own anti-immigrant policies. Sheriff Joe Arpaio in Maricopa County, Arizona, became the most visible leader of this effort with his local policies of rounding up immigrants and turning them over to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for processing or placing them in tent cities.

In 2007, NDLON abandoned the comprehensive immigration reform strategy framework that was, by then, considered by many immigrant rights advocates to be a failure because of the stalemate in Congress. Immediately thereafter, NDLON and other worker center networks joined to create the Turning the Tides movement. This new movement sought to establish a progressive parallel to the right-wing strategy of taking the immigrant rights fight to the local level. It would become the groundswell that would push back against and cause the Obama administration to end its Secure Communities...
Program (S-Comm), the federal program that emerged in 2008 and led to the deportation of close to three million undocumented immigrants during his two terms as US president. In jurisdictions where S-Comm was activated, any time an individual was arrested and booked into a local jail for any reason, his or her fingerprints were electronically run through ICE’s immigration database, allowing ICE to identify noncitizens and potentially initiate deportation proceedings against them.

During this period, six centers, including Fe y Justicia in Houston and Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en La Lucha (CTUL) in Minneapolis, were initially connected to faith-based organizations and IWJ; and five, including two day laborer centers in Florida and two in Arizona, were connected to NDLON. Four new centers were the product of an expansion by an existing worker center—CASA de Maryland—opening offices in new locations in that state. Seven centers were connected in some way to unions, central labor councils, or individual labor activists, including Warehouse Workers for Justice in Chicago, Warehouse Worker Resource Center in California, Lynn Worker Center in Massachusetts, MassCOSH Immigrant Worker Center in Boston, and Brandworkers in New York City. Three were domestic worker organizations.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2006 marches, the AFL-CIO became a major supporter of worker centers and initiated partnerships with the national federations. NDLON and the AFL-CIO announced a national partnership agreement in August 2006. In a formal resolution passed by the AFL-CIO Executive Council, the federation explicitly recognized the role of worker centers:

Many of these centers are important to the immigrant community and play an essential role in helping immigrant workers understand and enforce their workplace rights. In doing so, they also play a critical role for all workers—immigrant and US-born alike—by fighting unscrupulous employers who try to use the immigrant workforce to lower wage and other benefit standards that protect the entire workforce. (AFL-CIO 2006)

The AFL-CIO has been committed to working with NDLON to defeat anti-day laborer center bills in Congress and to support immigration reforms that include legalization and a pathway to citizenship. Institutionally, the AFL-CIO president was authorized to issue certificates of affiliation to worker centers interested in joining state federations and central labor councils (Narro and Fine, this volume). In 2007, the AFL-CIO announced a similar partnership with IWJ and its network of 18 interfaith worker centers and Enlace, a network of worker centers and unions organizing low-wage workers in the United States and Mexico.
Over this period, two additional federations emerged. First, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) was formed in 2007 at the US Social Forum in Detroit. Thirteen organizations, including CHIRLA, Andolan, Unity Housecleaners Cooperative of the Workplace Project, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, CASA de Maryland, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, and Domestic Workers United, convened to establish a national organization of domestic workers. It was the first national organization of domestic workers to be attempted in 30 years (Boris and Nadasen 2008).

Second, the Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC-United) was formed in Chicago by the leaders of ROC-New York. ROC-United was formed with a goal of establishing affiliates in the top ten restaurant markets in the United States and pursuing new state and federal tipped minimum-wage and paid sick-time policies. ROC-United has a three-pronged strategy for local affiliates: a worker-led approach to organizing for workplace justice, labor-management partnerships to promote a high-road approach that includes training programs, along with research and policy work, to highlight problems in the industry and set forth solutions. Today, ROC is leading One Fair Wage, a national campaign to eliminate the federal tipped minimum wage for restaurant workers. ROC has also become a leading voice for restaurant workers in the #MeToo movement through its efforts to bring public attention to the rampant sexual harassment and gender discrimination taking place every day in the restaurant industry.

In 2010, with the strong support of the UC Berkeley and UCLA labor centers, the Los Angeles Black Worker Center (LABWC) was created to address the three-dimensional jobs crisis of unemployment, underemployment, and low-wage work. LABWC’s work with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s five-year master project labor agreement led to a major victory for black workers in Los Angeles. More recently, LABWC has been at the forefront in pushing for state and local policies to combat discrimination against black workers in many industries. LABWC became the impetus for the creation of new black worker centers throughout the country (Fine 2017a, 2017b; Pitts, this volume).

In 2012 through 2014, 30 more worker centers were established. Twelve were connected to worker center networks:

- Domésticas Unidas in San Antonio and MISMA in Austin were connected to NDWA.
- The Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa, Indianapolis Justice Center, Greater Minnesota Worker Center, and Micah Worker Center in Grand Rapids, Michigan, were connected to IWJ.
- Trabajadoras Unidos in Washington, D.C., and Adelante Alabama Worker Center were connected to NDLON.
• ROC-Houston was established by ROC.
• Two taxi worker–organizing projects, in San Francisco and Montgomery County, Maryland, were affiliated with the National Taxi Workers Alliance.
• Six centers were founded by unions, central labor councils, or individual labor activists, and four were connected to community organizing groups and social justice organizations.

Three more national networks were formed during this period: the National Taxi Workers Alliance in 2011 and the Center for Popular Democracy in 2012 joined forces with the network of local and state organizations that had formerly been affiliates of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). In 2011, the AFL-CIO announced partnership agreements—similar to the ones it had with NDLO and IWJ—with NDWA and the National Guestworker Alliance (NGA), the national organization that had emerged in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through the organizing efforts of the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice. The National Black Worker Center Project was founded in 2014.

In 2012, the “Gang of Eight,” a bipartisan group in the Senate, began working on the development of a comprehensive immigration reform proposal that could move through Congress. The Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act (S.744) passed the Senate in summer 2013, but the House of Representatives refused to consider any other form of immigration reform. In the following Congress, the only pieces of immigration legislation debated were enforcement-only bills. With this federal impasse, the fight for immigrant rights moved away from Washington, D.C., to the local and state levels.

In Arizona, Governor Jan Brewer signed into law SB 1070, the most sweeping and restrictive immigration bill in the nation. The bill gave police the power to detain anyone suspected of being in the country illegally and made failure to carry immigration documents a crime rather than a civil offense. NDLO and local worker centers led efforts to fight back against SB 1070 and other similar measures at the state level.

THE ROLE OF FEDERATIONS, FEDERATION FUNDING, AND LARGE WORKER CENTER EXPANSION

As explained above, a set of national federations—many operating in specific sectors—has been instrumental to worker center growth. Each of these federations engages in its own significant program development and advocacy at the national level, leading policy campaigns and forming alliances with other national advocacy organizations. Isomorphic with individual centers, they are also structured as 501(c)(3) organizations and funded by foundations. While
all of the federations provide organizational support to their affiliates, the form and extent of that support vary.

In research on worker centers between 1998 and 2006, Fine found that worker centers were under-networked at every level, preventing them from aggregating their power to bring pressure to bear on employers and industries and achieve more legislatively as well as inhibiting their access to higher levels of foundation support and recognition from the labor movement (Fine 2006). At the national level at that time, there were three promising but under-financed networks bringing together collections of worker centers: NDLON, National Interfaith Justice (NIF), and Enlace. In 2006, 64% of worker centers were unaffiliated with any national network, but by 2018, only 26% are now unaffiliated with any networks (Figure 3).

Federations and large worker center expansions have been facilitated, in large part, through foundation funding. In the 1990s, this funding was linked to a small group of national social justice funders (e.g., New World, Discount, Solidago, Veatch, Jewish Funds for Justice) and city- or regionally based funders (e.g., New York Foundation, Liberty Hill Foundation in Los Angeles).

In the early 2000s, searching for a way to have impact on the labor market conditions of an increasing population of low-wage workers, a set of funders affiliated with the Labor and Community Working Group—now called Funders for a Just Economy—of the Neighborhood Funders Group supported research on the rising numbers of day laborers and on worker centers as a phenomenon. These foundations focused on worker centers as a promising strategy and followed recommendations regarding the important role that national federations could play in building capacity and strengthening impact (Fine 2006). As the national networks emerged over the next few years, foundations including Ford, Rockefeller, Kellogg, Surdna, Nathan Cummings,
Public Welfare, and Marguerite Casey began providing major financial support to their initiatives. By aggregating local affiliated organizations, the national networks facilitated funding from these large national foundations that typically eschew becoming involved with funding at the local level.

Between the years 2013 and 2016, NDWA received approximately $14.4 million from foundations. During this same period, ROC-United received approximately $9.6 million from foundations, and NDLO received about $3.4 million (Manheim 2017). A few large centers that were expanding to other cities or states also received significant foundation funding during this time, including CASA de Maryland, the Workers Defense Project in Texas, and Make the Road New York.

**UNDERSTANDING THE EXPANSION OF THE WORKER CENTER MODEL**

Because worker centers receive the vast majority of their funds from philanthropic foundations, they developed great expertise in writing grants, tailoring their programmatic work to foundation priorities, engaging and cultivating foundation program officers, and satisfying ongoing reporting requirements. Additionally, they have incorporated themselves as 501(c)(3) charitable organizations. The widespread adoption of this structure supports Meyer and Rowan’s argument that, as modern administrative states expanded their dominance over social life, organizational structures increasingly came to reflect the rules institutionalized and legitimated by the state (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

What explains the pattern of worker center growth? We find that it is consistent with DiMaggio and Powell’s theory that organizations tend to model themselves after similar organizations that they perceive to be successful and that reliance on established procedures enhances organizational legitimacy and chances of survival. That so many organizations used the same model also supports their finding that the fewer the number of visible alternative organizational models, the faster the rate of isomorphism in the field (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Our findings also point to the importance of an organizational accelerant—in this case, that centers formed federations, which could then help new centers get off the ground and implement program, as well as the rise of entrepreneurial centers that have spun off new affiliates.

Worker center strategy and structure has been influenced by these organizational conditions. The majority of worker centers do not hold formal elections to choose their leaders; they have to couch what they do in terms of “education” and limit their lobbying activities—and most have shied away from forming 501(c)(5) organizations (i.e., unions) because they fear doing so will limit the tactics they can employ and impose onerous reporting requirements. To avoid alienating foundations with rhetoric that is too anti-business,
worker centers have learned to walk a careful line when they talk about their work. All of this comports with McCarthy and his co-authors’ notion of “institutional channeling”—that the consequence of the normative adoption of the 501(c)(3) structure for social movement organizations is the narrowing of “the range of structures, tactics and substantive goals of organizations which choose to become legitimate organizations in the eyes of the state,” but only to a degree (McCarthy, Britt, and Wolfson 1991: 48). In the view of many centers with whom we have spoken, foundation funding has not directly conditioned the goals, strategies or educational programs of worker centers. Rhetoric aside, it has not, for example, prevented them from campaigning for major immigration and labor policy reforms or mounting aggressive campaigns against specific corporate targets.

Both Meyer and Rowan and DiMaggio and Powell conclude that reliance on similar sources of financial support lead to the homogenization of organizational models (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). We find strong supporting evidence for this in the case of how worker center reliance on foundations and, secondarily, government funding, has shaped the field. DiMaggio and Powell further argue that, once an organizational field becomes well established, there is an inexorable push toward homogenization because the adoption of common structural features makes organizations recognizable and legitimate as part of the common norms and culture of that field. Certainly, common structural features have been important as a signal to funders that a particular center is within the bounds of the worker center model and organizational field they are already supporting.

Nevertheless, there is significant variation between centers in terms of their scope and programmatic focus. There are worker centers that organize in specific neighborhoods in a city (e.g., Korean Immigrant Worker Advocates in Koreatown in Los Angeles), some that are citywide (e.g., CTUL in Minneapolis, and Workers Defense Project organizations in Austin, Dallas, and Houston), others that are countywide, and some that are functionally statewide (e.g., Voces de la Frontera in Wisconsin and Make the Road New Jersey). Some concentrate their work on one industry, such as the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, the day laborer centers that are part of NDLOn, the ROC affiliates, and domestic worker organizations such as Damayan and Adhikaar in New York. Others operate in more than one sector. For example, many of the day laborer centers also have domestic worker projects.

Many worker centers have taken root from within specific ethnic, racial, or country of origin communities such as the Chinese Staff and Workers’ Association in New York, the Chinese Progressive Association worker centers in Boston and San Francisco, and the Pilipino Workers Center in Los Angeles, and sister organizations in San Francisco and Chicago. Some organizations, such as ROC, OUR Walmart, CTUL, NGA, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers have targeted specific companies and employer associations, while
other organizations, such as NDWA, IWJ, and NDLON, have focused more on supporting or opposing passage of specific public policies.

As discussed previously, while some of the earliest worker centers engaged solely in advocacy and organizing, most saw the need for service provision from the very beginning in order to help workers recover unpaid wages and, in the case of day laborer centers, facilitate fair pay (Fine 2006; Theodore, Valenzuela and Meléndez 2006). Thus, the 501(c)(3) structure has facilitated service provision but was not the main reason that centers first began to engage in that activity.

In embracing service provision along with organizing, worker centers were tapping into a hybrid model that had already been in the repertoire of social movements. Hybrid models that fused identity-based service provision with organizing were forged during the 1960s by feminist and black power groups. Hybridity is a common element of the worker center model; however, the ratio of service to organizing or organizing to advocacy still varies significantly across centers. In an extensive study of the survival rates of organizations that were established in the 1960s, Minkoff found that hybrid organizations, by combining service and organizing, were able to “ride free” on the resources and legitimacy available to their parent forms and were thus able to hedge their bets against environmental shocks by establishing “multiple competences” and avenues for bringing in funding (Minkoff 2002: 384). This seems to be the case with worker centers as well: those that are able to diversify their funding base have been most likely to survive. However, it is important to distinguish between diversification of external funding sources and internal sources that come from the base.

The research of Gates et al. (this volume) into the funding trends of 104 worker centers confirms that more than 80% of worker center funding comes from external sources, with membership dues playing a very small role in the funding portfolios of these groups. Based on their research on worker organizations and civic organizations, respectively, both Stinchcombe (1965) and Clemens (1993) reached similar conclusions that organizations founded at particular moments construct their models with the resources that are available to them. We would qualify this claim: organizations construct their models with the resources they perceive to be available for their use.

In the case of worker centers, the resources they perceive to be available are derived from philanthropic foundations, government agencies, and individual donors. Diversification has involved seeking out additional foundations but not radically altering the mode of organizational funding. This can be attributed to three factors: the difficulty of collecting dues outside of the workplace, long-term trends in civil society, and the organizational culture of worker centers.
Fundamentally, most worker centers have limited structural power because of the weak labor market power of the workforces with which they engage. Union organizational models are tied to labor market structures, but worker center constituents are often distributed across many small workplaces, work for contractors and subcontractors or as temporary workers, and are frequently misclassified as independent contractors. While they may have connections to large companies, these workers are most likely to be found marooned at the bottom of supply chains. Most are employed in industries that have had low levels of unionization where government enforcement of labor standards has been weak, including retail, restaurant, hospitality, and other service sectors. While garment workers were once able to build significant structural power despite their position at the bottom of multilevel labor and product supply chains, we have few contemporary models of widespread successful unionization among unskilled private sector workers beyond construction laborers, janitors and security guards. Among low-wage public sector workers such as homecare, recent advances in unionism were made possible through public policy campaigns advanced by powerful unions.

In our view, the ability to access foundation funding is a major factor that has kept worker centers from having to do the very difficult work of locking in a dues-paying membership base outside of the workplace, and this has had implications for power building. The lack of a financial incentive to place recruitment at the heart of the organizing and leadership models has limited the size of the base of workers and consequently has limited the power they have been able to exercise.

While the lack of structural power of many of the workers who are constituents of centers, in conjunction with the logistical difficulty of collecting dues outside of the workplace, drives worker center leaders’ belief that collecting dues at a scale large enough to make a difference is just too hard, it is worth noting that these organizations also emerged during a period in which the very idea of membership had been withering away. Traditional membership associations of the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries required recruitment of “civic entrepreneurs” across many states and towns to lead local chapters and recruit members. Members developed strong organizational identity, participating in meetings and club events, running for chapter office, representing the organization in meetings with local elected officials, and the like. The national organizations relied on local leaders to keep chapters vibrant and on local members paying dues to support them, much like community organizing groups of the 1970s such as ACORN, Citizen Action, and National People’s Action. The decline of these organizations shifted the focus away from a dues-paying membership model; the “new” model of professionally managed associations that emerged was based on foundation grants, direct-mail
techniques, and getting their message out through the mass media (Skocpol 2003: 210).

Of particular importance in this shift were changes in electoral regulations in the late 1980s. Many organizations decided that the safest way to stay within the law was to consider anyone who signed a petition a member because the law at that time allowed political communication only between organizations and their members (Kendall, personal communication, 2015). With the advent of Internet-based organizations beginning with MoveOn in 1998, this trend became more pronounced. As Karpf writes in the MoveOn Effect, “Membership in MoveOn is the singular most disruptive feature of the group’s model. Much as the direct-mail pioneers redefined organizational membership from ‘participant’ to ‘small donor,’ MoveOn redefines membership from ‘small donor’ to ‘message recipient.’… As a result, many of the organization’s members remain unaware that they merit such classification” (Karpf 2012: 31).

Worker center notions of membership have been formed in this context. Like MoveOn, most centers and national federations do not distinguish between “members” and “dues-paying members.”

A final contributing factor for their decisions regarding dues relates to organizational culture. Many directors and organizers express concerns that workers are either too poor or suspicious of organizations that ask for money. Most are resistant to making dues a requirement, and even when some say that they are not resistant, implementation of the culture changes and procedures required in order to regularly collect dues from members has not been a priority. We also find evidence that, for some centers, service provision—and the requirement on the part of government funders that services be available to all—likely reinforces an essential discomfort with asking for dues.

There are a few low-wage worker organizations that, despite the lack of structural power, have implemented models of member-based funding. The United Farm Workers famously required its very-low-income members to pay dues even before achieving collective bargaining rights that locked in a membership-based income stream (Chavez 1971), and Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN), the farmworker organization in Oregon, also has insisted on membership dues (Kleinman 2011; Stephen 2012). Members of SEIU’s 32BJ building services local are overwhelmingly immigrants, people of color, low-income, and working for subcontractors at the bottom of supply chains, yet they have figured out how to lock in associational power in this setting, repeatedly voting in favor of significant dues increases.

Likewise, a few centers have focused on dues, including New Labor in New Jersey, the Pilipino Worker Center in Los Angeles, and the New York Taxi Workers Alliance. Make the Road and CASA de Maryland have very large numbers of workers contributing nominal dues to their organizations, and CASA has been experimenting with ESL classes as a potential mass
membership draw and income generating program. NDWA has set a goal of 200,000 members, and its Fair Care Labs has been systematically testing the appeal of various services, benefits, and training to their constituents.

Ultimately, the question is whether the 501(c)(3) form of organization, despite the absence of collective bargaining and the ability to collect dues in the workplace, is a sufficiently effective mechanism to be able to maintain an activist cadre and implement and safeguard policy victories over time.

**PLACING WORKER CENTER FUNDING IN CONTEXT**

While the worker center model is not state specific, the concentration of centers in certain cities and states does follow certain patterns. Most are small. Gates et al. (this volume) find most worker center revenues tend to be low, with a quarter of all centers in their sample claiming yearly revenue of less than $179,163. Of the 22 worker centers in the modal revenue range of $100,000 to $200,000, 12 had revenue below $150,000. Furthermore, the median revenue level for their sample was only $410,010 (Figure 4).

Many worker centers have small budgets because their local political opportunity structures—the combination of political institutions and traditions, as well as public policy, political discourse, and elite alignment including

**FIGURE 4**

Worker Center Revenues, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>StdDev</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Q1</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Q3</th>
<th>Max</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>104</td>
<td>747,431</td>
<td>1,186,875</td>
<td>10,808</td>
<td>179,163</td>
<td>410,010</td>
<td>779,036</td>
<td>8,366,068</td>
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Source: Gates et al. (this volume).
philanthropic support—are limited (Gamson and Meyer 1996; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Tarrow 1993; Tilly 1978). They have limited access to local foundation and government money and are not located in states that are viewed as strategically important to national funders. In addition, while mutual-aid societies were able to generate income to their organizations through the provision of life insurance (Beito 2000; Murray 2013), worker centers have not yet succeeded in delivering a benefit or service that is as essential to their constituencies. Two projects that seem to have the greatest promise of generating revenue for worker centers and networks are Better Builders, a worksite monitoring program incubated at the Workers Defense Project, and OUR Walmart’s WorkIT app, a peer-to-peer digital tool that enables workers to access critical information about their company’s HR policies.

Nevertheless, there are some small worker centers that are located in major cities and Democratic states where there is access to foundation and government funding and where there are worker centers that are much larger. In many of these cases, we suspect that smallness may be a consequence of choice. Certain organization theorists have argued that structural change attends growth and that an organization cannot grow indefinitely and maintain its original character and form (Boulding 1953; Haire 1959). For organizations that pride themselves on the depth of relationships that exist between and among staff, leaders, and members, there is real concern that growth in the number of members could reduce their ability to carry on face-to-face interactions. In other cases, smallness may be a consequence of limited strategic capacity or an inability to inspire the confidence of area government officials or foundations to invest in their work (Ganz 2000).

A minority of worker centers have made a conscious choice not to engage in service delivery in order to focus their work exclusively on organizing and advocacy. Community and union organizing philosophies have long discouraged organizers from getting caught up in service provision. Service delivery is extremely labor intensive, can end up monopolizing an organizations’ staff time, places the emphasis on individual versus collective solutions to problems, and often leads organizations to see their base as clients rather than members and leaders.

Interestingly, the decision to focus purely on organizing may actually be leading those organizations to have fewer resources with which to do so. The hybridity of organizations like Make the Road and CASA de Maryland generates an income stream from services that allows them to build a larger infrastructure and therefore to funnel greater financial resources into organizing.

Our research on worker centers over many years leads us to conclude that the scale of centers, measured through the size of their budgets, depends on both internal strategic choices and political opportunity structures. Greater amounts of foundation and government funding for worker centers are available in the more highly Democratic cities and states (Table 1). The seven states
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>79.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>S</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>R</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>65</td>
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D = Democrat  
R = Republican  
S = Split
with the largest concentrations of worker centers—California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, Illinois, Florida, and Maryland, with the exception of Florida and Texas—have had primarily Democratic-controlled legislatures since 1980 (although some now have Republican governors), and several of them also have a strong set of locally based foundations that support the work. In Florida and Texas, it is likely that the higher number of centers there is due to strong support from national funders, who perceive them to be strategically important to national social change efforts and elections as well as local funders in more cosmopolitan regions of the state.

The research by Gates et al. (this volume) confirms that California, Florida, Maryland, and New York are states where total worker center revenue is the highest. According to their findings, these four states were in the top five of total worker center revenue by state each year between 2008 and 2014.

Make the Road New York and CASA de Maryland are the two largest individual centers. Make the Road New York, which actually comprises five centers in New York City and Long Island, has a total 2017 budget of $13.35 million; CASA de Maryland, which also comprises multiple centers, has a total 2017 budget of $9.37 million. They are located in strongly Democratic cities and states where political systems are permeable, there is foundation and government funding available to support the work, and staff and leaders have the strategic capacity to leverage foundation and government funding. Additionally, size begets support: funders looking to have an impact in an area are likely to favor scale and gravitate toward organizations that are larger and well established rather than having to do the research required to identify and evaluate multiple smaller organizations.

Both CASA de Maryland and Make the Road New York are raising high percentages of their total budgets from government grants to provide services and support. CASA received very large grants from Montgomery and Prince Georges Counties to operate welcome centers. Make the Road received government grants in 2017 for the provision of a range of services, including over $4 million for legal and support services, $1.1 million for adult literacy programs, and $547,000 for school-based programs. Providing a range of services opens a broad array of potential resource streams, potentially increasing an organization’s chance of survival in an unstable environment (Hannan and Freeman 1977; Minkoff 2002).

Despite their similarities today, Make the Road and CASA had disparate organizational trajectories. CASA started out solely as a service providing organization. In 1985, some US citizens and a group of immigrants who had been activists in their home countries came together to create CASA in the basement of the Presbyterian Church in Tacoma Park, in order to provide basic services for immigrants fleeing the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. It was not until six years later, in 1991, when the organization made
a decision to become involved in defending the rights of day laborers, that it began to engage in organizing those workers and advocating for their rights. Worker centers grew out of that effort and became central to CASA's identity.

In 2000, the organization made another set of momentous decisions—first, to move away from identifying solely as a Central American organization and to open its doors to all immigrants and refugees and, relatedly, to recreate and rebrand their worker centers as welcome centers. According to Gustavo Torres, CASA’s executive director,

> We wanted to make sure people saw CASA’s centers not as a day laborer center but as a community center where people are welcome and can organize. A lot of our members are not just day laborers and domestics, but also people fighting for drivers' licenses, minimum wage increases, and immigration reform. Others just came for services. That is how we grew our membership: people fighting for justice and people coming for services. (Torres, personal communication)

In 2010, CASA created a 501(c)(4) organization, CASA in Action, to endorse candidates and engage in voter education and get out the vote activities. It also decided to expand into Pennsylvania and Maryland. CASA now has 180 different sources of funding including private foundations, individuals, the federal government, and state, local, and county governments. It also claims the largest dues-paying membership base in the worker center world: about 100,000 members who are paying $40 per year.

In contrast, Make the Road New York was formed out of a merger of two organizations in 2007 that had, from the outset, combined legal services with education and multi-issue community organizing. The Latin American Immigration Center (LAIC) was founded in 1992 in Jackson Heights, Queens, by a group of Colombians forced to emigrate by the political violence of the 1980s and 1990s. Like many worker centers where highly educated people found themselves on the bottom rungs of the labor market after they emigrated, LAIC was founded by a human rights attorney in Colombia who worked as a housecleaner in the United States. The organization advocated for the rights of Latino immigrants and encouraged their civic participation in New York City.

Make the Road was founded in 1997 in Bushwick, Brooklyn, by two Georgetown University Law School students looking to support immigrant welfare recipients subjected to illegal disruptions in their public benefits in the wake of 1995 federal welfare reform. It won equal access to public services for all New York City residents. The organization always integrated education, organizing, and leadership development with legal aid and other support services.
Post-merger, Make the Road grew into a major force for immigrant rights in New York City, looked to by government agencies as a prime vehicle for providing services to vulnerable, hard-to-reach immigrant workers. Government funding grew enormously and is now 65% of the organization’s overall budget (Figure 5). CASA’s revised budget for fiscal year 2017 is shown in Figure 6.

Neither CASA nor Make the Road sees itself as solely a worker center. While the organizations carry out the functions of worker centers, they consider themselves multi-purpose immigrant organizations that deal with multiple issues and organize multiple constituencies.

CONCLUSION
In this chapter, we have brought data and theory to bear on several key questions: What has been the trajectory of worker center growth and what accounts for growth spurts? What explains the geographic distribution of centers? Why are most of modest size? What accounts for the outliers? We also analyze the choices, norms, and practices of the groups themselves in the context of legal requirements and political opportunity structures in conditioning organizational forms.

We find that organizers turned to the worker center model as immigration was surging, pathways to legalization were contracting, employment was becoming more precarious, and unionization in the bottom quintile of wage earners had been flat for some time. Growth spurts are connected to the emergence of national federations as well as the expansion of large centers. There are higher concentrations of centers in Democratic cities and states where there are favorable political opportunity structures such as greater funding opportunities through foundations and government. We argue that while worker centers share a common legal structure and funding base, they are not homogeneous—they differ widely in terms of constituency and programmatic focus.

We also argue that while service provision has traditionally been viewed by labor and community organizers as a distraction (a view shared by some worker centers), the largest worker centers have been able to use services to grow and subsidize the overall work, including organizing. In taking this approach to service and organizing, we argue that worker centers were adopting a hybrid model that had its contemporary expression during the 1960s among feminists and black power activists (Minkoff 2002), and even earlier in the century by Settlement House pioneers and mutual aid–society leaders (Addams 1990; Koerin 2003).

As long-time observers of the worker center phenomenon, we have found that most worker center founders have never had a union model in their heads and (whether they have articulated it this way or not) have not seen themselves or their constituents as capable of building and exercising significant structural power or associational power in the workplace. This
FIGURE 5
Make the Road 2017 Revenue (Committed Only)

FIGURE 6
CASA de Maryland Revised FY2017 Budget
perception has had important implications for the organizing campaigns and strategies centers have pursued. The vast majority of organizations have focused on ensuring that employers actually obey existing laws and workers are able to recover wages owed when they do not. Most successful worker center campaigns for improvements have focused on winning policy change rather than pressuring companies directly through strikes or consumer boycotts. This focus on policy campaigns has enabled them to succeed through the exercise of symbolic power (Chun 2009; Clemens 1993; Rozado Marzán 2017) rather than associational or structural power (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013; Rhomberg 2012; Wright 2000), which would have required the action of a mass base in a workplace or industry rather than a smaller base of activists (Fine 2005; McAlevey 2016). Reliance on foundation funding and civil society or state-based solutions is conditioning worker centers’ associational power, but it has its roots in the limited structural power they wield within firms, supply chains, industries, and labor markets.

In the end, it is our view that the 501(c)(3) structure, which has enabled foundation and government funding, has facilitated the organization of low-wage workers rather than preventing more-powerful, large-scale organizations from emerging. But it is also likely that, as long as worker centers are able to rely on foundation funding, they will not be compelled to build mass bases of dues-paying members and, as long as this is the case, they are likely to limit themselves to public policy campaigns and corporate shaming strategies that can be won without the associational and structural power required for strikes and other economic actions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Deborah Axt of Make the Road New York and Gustavo Torres of CASA de Maryland for generously sharing their expertise and budget information, Heidi Shierholz and John Schmitt of the Economic Policy Institute for providing the data on unionization rates in the bottom quintile, Chris Rhomberg and Ruth Milkman for providing extensive and invaluable feedback on the draft, and Kati Griffith and her colleagues (see Gates et al., this volume) for sharing their data, serving as important thought partners, and providing feedback on the draft.

ENDNOTES

1 John Schmitt, Economic Policy Institute data.

2 Two million marched through the streets of Los Angeles between the March 25 and May 1 mobilizations, close to half a million in Chicago on March 10 and May 1, and 350,000 in New York on May 1. Other cities throughout the country held the largest demonstrations in their city’s history—10,000 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; 25,000 in Madison, Wisconsin; 5,000 in Charlotte, North Carolina; and 6,000 in Des Moines, Iowa, to name a few.
There are limits, however, to what can be done with this funding. It often comes with restrictions on its use, including that organizations cannot require clients to join in order to receive services, and the funding is strongly impacted by shifts in political direction. The election of Donald Trump has resulted in less federal money, for example, for navigator services connected to the Affordable Care Act and for citizenship services.

REFERENCES


Chapter 2


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INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Janice Fine’s path-breaking book, Worker Centers: Communities at the Edge of the Dream in 2006, scholars and commentators on the left and the right of the political spectrum have grappled with how to characterize these emergent worker organizations on the US labor relations scene. This chapter deepens our understanding of the nature of worker centers by examining the funding trends that underlay the wide range of experimental organizing and advocacy strategies highlighted in other chapters of this volume. Undoubtedly, to emerge and survive, these organizations need money (Bobo and Pabellón 2016). But how financially stable are worker centers? How big are they? Where does the funding come from? How do they compare to labor unions? To address some of these questions, we compiled a large collection of available data to complete the first systematic empirical analysis of worker center funding across multiple years (2008 through 2014).

Our analysis includes the amounts and sources of revenue for more than 100 worker centers over a seven-year period (2008 through 2014). We drew from three main sources of available information to construct funding profiles for each worker center in our sample. First, we incorporated the nonprofit organizations’ required annual filings to the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS)—a filing required of any organization that has nonprofit
Most worker centers have nonprofit status, which enables them to access foundation, individual donor, and government funding to support their initiatives to improve the living and working conditions of low-wage workers (Fine 2011). Second, we used labor organizations’ required annual filings to the US Department of Labor. Third, we gathered data from the Foundation Directory Online’s compilation of foundation donations.

Our “size up” of worker center income from 2008 through 2014 complicates the dominant portrayal of worker centers as small and unstable. Most worker centers are indeed organizations with little revenue. Nevertheless, there is a wide range of revenue size among worker centers. There are even a few “giants,” with revenue so high that they were statistical outliers. Worker center budgets are somewhat unstable: the past growth of a worker center’s revenue typically has no bearing on its future growth. There also seemed to be no advantage for large-revenue organizations. Worker centers with large budgets were typically just as unstable as centers operating on a shoestring budget and were more susceptible to shrinking in times of economic downturn.

Our inquiry into the streams of funding that worker centers receive tells a “no one size fits all” story of diversity. Unlike labor unions, whose revenue relies almost exclusively on dues from members, worker centers craft diverse funding portfolios and get almost no funding from membership dues. Much like those of other nonprofit organizations, worker centers’ revenue streams are diverse. The most common funding streams of worker centers are monies from providing program services, charitable foundation grants, and government funding. In terms of reliance, worker centers overwhelmingly depend on funding streams that are external to the organization (foundation grants, government grants, and individual donations) rather than funding streams that are internally generated, such as membership dues. Despite increased strategic collaborations between some labor unions and worker centers reported elsewhere in this volume, we find that funding from labor unions serves as a minuscule portion of worker center revenue overall.

**OUR SAMPLE OF WORKER CENTERS**

We derive the population of worker centers in our sample from Fine and Theodore’s infographic of worker centers from 2012 (Fine and Theodore 2013). We sought to collect data on each of these worker centers from the forms they are required to submit annually to the IRS, specifically the IRS 990 form (hereafter referred to as IRS 990). We did this for each worker center in every year from 2008 through 2014. Thus, the IRS 990 is both the primary source of data and the primary delimiter of our sample. The IRS 990 offers a trove of data. It includes an organization’s address, the
names of officers/leaders, and other demographic information, as well as a breakdown of revenue and expenses. While there are limitations to the IRS 990 (Gronbjerg 2002), it is used widely as an adequate source of data on nonprofit revenue and sources of income (Froelich, Knoepfle, and Pollak 2000; Powell and Steinberg 2006).

Table 1 illustrates that for 2012, we obtained IRS 990s for 60% (104) of the 172 worker centers on the 2012 list. Our analysis of those worker centers for which we could not obtain IRS 990s, and therefore could not include in our sample, leads us to conclude that our sample likely over-represents larger and more stable worker centers. First, a substantial portion of worker centers, 15% of the total in 2012, were not stand-alone organizations. Instead, they were “parented” by another larger organization. Because they are a program or part of a larger nonprofit that deals with issues beyond workplace justice, we could not isolate the size and funding sources of the worker centers within the parents’ overall budgets.

Second, we confirmed that another roughly 5% of all worker centers were not required to file an IRS 990 because their revenue was so small. Organizations with 501(c)(3) status who have revenue of $50,000 or below are not required to report financial information to the IRS. Third, we know that relying on IRS 990s as a source of data “carries an important undercount bias” more generally (Culleton Colwell 1997; Gleeson and Bloemraad 2012; Gronbjerg 1993). Gleeson and Bloemraad (2012) have shown that some groups may not have enough resources to even register for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in the first place, while others may simply not file the 990 even though they are obligated to do so. Thus, relying on

<table>
<thead>
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<td>Percentage of Worker Centers by Rationale for Availability of Data</td>
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<tr>
<th>2008</th>
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<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
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<td>61</td>
<td>59</td>
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<td>% not in sample (known rationale)</td>
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<td>% parented</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% religious or other exempt</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% don’t know why not in sample</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of worker centers</td>
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<td>162</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IRS 990s carries a bias toward under-representing resource-poor organizations.

Finally, because our data collection strategy focused on a list of worker centers created in 2012, our sample of worker centers in earlier years (2008 through 2011) likely missed some worker centers that existed in these years but did not survive until 2012. For those years, our sample over-represents organizations with stable-enough funding sources to survive until 2012. For 2013 and 2014, we collected data on worker centers that existed in 2012. Therefore, our sample does not include organizations that emerged in those two later years. To minimize these effects, we report analyses based on the 2012 data, even though parallel analyses of other years confirm the trends reported for 2012.

**FINDINGS ON THE SIZE AND STABILITY OF WORKER CENTER REVENUE**

Some scholars and commentators suggest that worker centers are powerful players on the labor relations scene (Manheim 2013; US Chamber of Commerce 2014; Wong 2015). Cordero-Guzmán, Izvănariu, and Narro (2013) highlight some centers have formed sector-based networks that serve as labor market intermediaries. Others question whether most worker centers are even large enough to have a demonstrable impact beyond the individual level (Compa 2015; Eidelson 2013; Fine 2006; Rosenfeld 2006).

Here we consider just how big and stable worker center revenue is. Our data does not allow us to look at all aspects of worker center size, which would entail a more holistic consideration of factors such as membership size, numbers of individuals served, and other measures of organizational impact. Nevertheless, revenue size can undoubtedly help us understand the scope of a worker center’s reach. The literature on nonprofit organizations, for instance, suggests that larger revenue can lead to increased political visibility, which increases the likelihood of evoking positive responses from policy makers (de Graauw 2016).

**Revenue Size?**

Figure 1’s histogram shows that worker center revenue tend to be low. This is true even though our sample of worker centers is likely to over-represent larger worker centers. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the modal worker center (the one with the greatest frequency) has a revenue of between $100,000 and $200,000. Of the worker centers in this modal range, more than half of them (12 of the 22) had revenue below $150,000. The concentration of worker centers in this lower revenue range is further affirmed when we consider that a quarter of all worker centers in our sample had yearly revenue of less than $179,163. Furthermore, the median revenue level for our
sample was only $410,010. These observations about the revenue streams of worker centers are consistent with Fine’s 2005 study, which showed that more than half of worker centers were small organizations with annual revenue of $250,000 or less (Fine 2006). Low revenue is a trait worker centers share with other nonprofits, which have been characterized as “small and cash-poor” (Grønbjerg 1993: 53).

A brief comparison with revenue among more traditional labor organizations further highlights the relatively small revenue levels of the worker centers in our sample. In 2012, for instance, UNITE HERE’s Chicago Local 1 had a revenue of $9 million, and UNITE HERE’s San Francisco Local 2 reported a revenue of $6.4 million. A smaller UNITE HERE local in Washington, D.C., Local 25, reported approximately $4 million in revenue for 2012 (DOL LM-2 filings for Local 1, Local 2, and Local 25; US DOL 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). If we look beyond local unions to international unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the small revenue sizes of worker centers are put into even more stark relief. In 2012, SEIU’s reported revenue was $307 million (US DOL 2012d). In contrast, the combined total revenue of all 104 worker centers in our 2012 sample was equal to just under $78 million.
And yet Figure 1 also reveals how widely worker center revenue ranges. A quarter of worker centers in our sample (26) had revenue greater than $779,036. In this largest quartile, six worker centers had revenue of less than $1 million per year, 12 had revenue between $1 and $2 million per year, and eight had revenue larger than $2 million. These eight worker centers had impressive revenue levels: two of them had revenue of just over $3 million, one had revenue just over $7 million, and one’s revenue exceeded $8 million. It is these eight high-revenue cases that pull up the average revenue of worker centers in our sample to $747,431, way above the median or mode. The identification of eight outliers is consistent with Fine’s analysis, elsewhere in this volume, that some worker centers have grown into giants that still have some work that fits the definition of a “worker center” but also do organizing and advocacy work that goes well beyond service provision, organizing, and advocacy at the local level.

Revenue Stability?
Worker centers’ funding strategies are often characterized as unstable and unsustainable (Compa 2015; Fine 2011; Fisk 2016). Indeed, worker centers are often described as surviving on “shoestring” budgets (Estlund 2015; Greenhouse 2014; Griffith 2015), with highly unstable levels of funding year to year (Cordero-Guzmán 2015). Our multi-year panel data offers a rare opportunity to assess the stability of individual worker center revenue over time, albeit with data that over-represents those worker centers stable enough to have existed before and after 2012. We assess the stability of revenue by measuring each worker center’s annual rate of change in total revenue, as other studies of nonprofits have done (Grønbjerg 1993). Worker centers with stable revenue would be those with zero to positive rates of growth from one year to the next. Furthermore, we can assess the relative stability in worker center funding by examining how well a worker center’s annual revenue growth in one year predicts that of subsequent years. Table 2 presents a series of multivariate analyses that assess whether the prior year’s rate of growth, adjusted for inflation, predicts the subsequent year’s rate of growth, controlling for the worker center’s total revenue.

The results presented in Table 2 affirm the idea that worker center revenue is unstable. In three of the five years (from 2012 through 2014, represented in columns 3, 4, and 5), the annual rates of growth do not predict the subsequent year’s rates of growth. It would seem that worker centers rarely repeat fund-raising success from one year to the next. Additionally, the results for 2010 and 2011 suggest that even when there is a significant relationship between a worker center’s rate of growth in a prior year and that of the following year, the effect is not in the direction of stability. For example, column 1 portrays that for every 1% increase in
TABLE 2
The Effects of Worker Center Prior Growth on Subsequent Year’s Growth (Adjusted for Inflation), 2010–2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
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<th>(4)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>in Real</td>
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<td>Revenue</td>
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<td>(4.68e-06)</td>
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<td>(4.44e-06)</td>
<td>(4.47e-06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011 real rate of growth</td>
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<td>–0.0622</td>
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<td>(0.116)</td>
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<td>2011 revenue (adjusted to 2008)</td>
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<td>–6.48e-06*</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3.52e-06)</td>
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<td>(3.52e-06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012 real rate of growth</td>
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<td>–0.0622</td>
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<td>(0.116)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012 revenue (adjusted to 2008)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>–6.48e-06*</td>
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<td>2013 real rate of growth</td>
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<td>12.53*</td>
<td>15.32***</td>
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<td>0.051</td>
<td>0.044</td>
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</table>

Standard errors in parentheses.
***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1

worker center revenue from 2008 to 2009, there was a 0.25% decrease in worker center growth from 2009 to 2010, regardless of a worker center’s size; that is, it is precisely those that experienced revenue growth in a prior year that tended to experience less growth in subsequent years. It would seem that no good deed—in this case, that of successful fund-raising—goes unpunished at worker centers.
The results for 2010 and 2011 also raise questions about how worker center stability may relate to political or economic shocks, such as the economic recession. An economic crisis unfolded over the course of 18 months that stretched from December 2007 through June 2009 (National Bureau of Economic Research 2010). We know that the crisis affected both government and charitable foundations’ ability to support nonprofit agencies like worker centers. Thus, we might anticipate an across-the-board loss of revenue for worker centers. What these results suggest, however, is that this effect was not equally felt. In fact, the recession exacted its toll on precisely those worker centers that had been flourishing at the time the recession hit. The results also raise the question of sustainability of grants. It may be that these organizations benefited from nonrenewable government or foundation grants, or that they were affected by other shocks, such as a loss of political will.

**Relationship Between Revenue Size and Stability?**

We find little support for the idea that worker centers with smaller revenue were more vulnerable to shrinking than larger-revenue worker centers. Figure 2 characterizes the relationship between a group’s size of revenue (in 2012) and its revenue stability in the two successive years (2013 and 2014).

**FIGURE 2**

Average Annual Growth Rate (2012–2014) by Total Revenue

Note: Annual growth rate is calculated after adjusting total revenue for inflation.
2014). Here, we follow prior studies of nonprofit finances (Grønbjerg 1993: 83) in avoiding “unwarranted conclusions about the magnitude and direction of changes” by looking instead at the “average revenues from two adjacent years.” Each spike on Figure 2 represents the average percentage change in revenue of a given worker center from 2012 to 2014, arrayed according to total revenue in 2012. Bars that spike up represent worker centers that tended to grow (positive average rate of growth between 2012 and 2014); bars that spike down represent worker centers that tended to contract (negative two-year average rate of growth).

Figure 2 demonstrates that plenty of smaller worker centers experienced significant average growth. Some of the worker centers with the smallest revenue—ones with revenue of less than a quarter of a million dollars—experienced the most dramatic average growth, represented by the cluster of tall spikes close to the vertical axis. All of the organizations that, on average, doubled in size had revenue of less than a million dollars. At the same time, there were groups that had revenue of more than $1 million—double the median size of worker centers—that shrank by more than half. Furthermore, three of the large outliers shrank—ones with revenue well over $2 million for which we could also calculate a two-year average annual rate of change. One even shrank, on average, by a quarter.

We further confirmed the substantive findings illustrated by Figure 2 in our analyses presented in Table 2. In all but one of the years (2012), a worker center’s total revenue, adjusted for inflation, did not predict its subsequent annual rate of growth. Moreover, the analysis predicting growth in 2012 (column 3) suggests a counter-intuitive effect of the economic recession on the stability of larger worker centers. We might expect that worker centers that survive on shoestring budgets are the most vulnerable in times of economic downturn. And yet, in 2012, it was larger worker centers that tended to shrink. We can interpret the coefficient in Table 2 as indicating that for every dollar more in a worker center’s total revenue, its total revenue decreased by 6%. While there are reasons to be cautious about reading too much into this effect, it is intriguing that larger- rather than smaller-revenue worker centers appear to be the most vulnerable when the economic tides turn against fund-raisers. Once again, it would seem that no good deed—in the case the ability of an organization to exceed the revenue of other worker centers—goes unpunished. Future research could help us unpack what explains this unexpected finding.

DATA STRATEGY FOR BREAKING DOWN WORKER CENTER FUNDING STREAMS

Table 3 illustrates that we were able to identify the funding streams equal to about 60% of the total revenue reported. We cannot disaggregate the
remaining 40% of worker center income by stream. Nevertheless, we know this funding comes from sources external to the organizations because it constitutes the income the worker centers placed in the catch-all “all other contributions” portion of the IRS 990.

Table 3 shows that we were able to identify the sources of about 40% of worker centers’ overall revenue using the IRS 990s. These forms allowed us to report the specific funding streams of income from program services, membership dues, and government grants with considerable confidence. Nonetheless, the IRS 990 did not indicate how much of “all other contributions” came from two sources that some have alleged are significant: labor unions and charitable foundations. We were able to account for nearly another 20% of a worker center’s average funding streams by examining two non-IRS sources.

We sought to uncover union funding to worker centers from the US Department of Labor’s Office of Labor Management and Standards (DOL OLMS). Unions must file yearly spending reports with the DOL OLMS that include the receiving organization’s name, the date of payment, and the purpose of payment. Unfortunately, there were no unique identifiers for each worker center in the DOL OLMS data. This made the data vulnerable to entries that were spelled differently or incorrectly, and as such may undercount levels of union funding. Nevertheless, we are confident that our efforts yielded a robust list of union contributions to worker centers.

To identify funding to worker centers from charitable foundations, we consulted the Foundation Directory Online, which is self-described as a research tool for nonprofits to find funders. A significant limitation of this source is the coverage of the Foundation Directory itself. It is likely to have

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified sources</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>Overall Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>IRS</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-IRS</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified sources</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total percentage</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of worker centers | 94 | 99 | 98 | 102 | 104 | 101 | 105 |

TABLE 3
Percentage of Revenue Identified by Type of Source
missing data because it may pull from different sources year to year. Indeed, its website states that it is “not designed for statistical or aggregate research.” Moreover, the Foundation Directory reports grants in the year they are allocated, regardless of whether the grant was actually dispersed over multiple years. Thus, our data collection method is vulnerable to undercounting as well as overcounting foundation funding in a particular year.

Given the work of Fine (2006) and Frantz and Fernandes (2016) and the limitations of the non-IRS data sources on union and foundation revenue streams, we generally consider our estimates on these two streams to be minimum amounts. It is likely that a portion of the roughly 40% of worker center “all other contributions” revenue that remains unidentified may in fact come from foundations and unions, but a substantial portion of it certainly comes from individual donors as well. Thus, the following analysis focuses mainly on what we can say about the varied streams of funding using the strengths of our data set.

**FINDINGS ON WORKER CENTER FUNDING STREAMS**

As scholars of nonprofit funding have noted (Grønbjerg 1993), it is useful to look at the whole group of worker centers because macrolevel patterns affect the field the individual organizations operate within, and they can influence how groups compete and collaborate with one another. Figure 3 gives us a bird’s-eye view of the relative size of various funding streams.

![FIGURE 3](image-url)

Worker Center Funding Streams, 2012

Note: Other internal sources include fund-raising events, investments, and federated campaigns.
Sources: Calculated based on IRS 990s, Foundation Directory Online, and US DOL.
in the total pie of income that worker centers collect. It reveals that worker centers rely on a diverse set of funding streams. As we might expect for any nonprofit, we found that worker centers rely to a significant degree on external, as opposed to internal, sources of funding. Internal revenue streams include membership dues, as well as less significant sources such as fund-raising events and investments. All told, the external sources add up to more than 80% of the overall pool of worker center funding for 2012. This percentage is even higher given that some “program services” income comes from government contracts rather than fees from participants. The relative insignificance of internal sources of funding underscores the degree to which worker centers look beyond their immediate community to make ends meet. This reliance on external funding sources brings to mind important questions about the extent to which reliance on external funders affects worker centers’ programmatic priorities, questions we take up below in our Directions for Future Research section.

Our analysis also suggested trends about the relative importance of various funding streams to worker center income. Here we drew on Grønbjerg’s definition of importance (1993) as an assessment of both how commonly a particular source is used (funding stream prevalence) and how dependent an organization was on a particular source (funding stream dependence).

**Member Dues**

Our research confirms the predominant wisdom that worker centers find it challenging to receive member dues from their low-wage constituencies (Fine 2006; Gordon 2005). As Figure 3 illustrates, worker centers as a whole obtained merely 1.8% of their total revenue from membership dues in 2012. The dearth of resources obtained from membership dues is even more apparent if we consider the relative prevalence of dues—how this total pot of membership dues is distributed across worker centers. As the “Dues” column of Table 4 shows, the vast majority (68%) of worker centers did not receive any funds from dues. Furthermore, worker centers that did obtain money from dues were not dependent on them. Of the 34 worker centers that reported receiving any money from dues, the vast majority obtained less than 5% of their revenue from membership dues. Only seven worker centers obtained more than 5% of their revenue from dues.

Furthermore, higher-revenue worker centers were not more likely than their smaller counterparts to raise money from dues. Figure 4 gives us a visual snapshot of how dependence on dues relates to revenue size. It confirms that the percentage of revenue that worker centers received from dues was consistently low across each of these sizes. The first bar of Figure 4 represents the smallest quartile of worker centers. The last two groups,
## TABLE 4
Frequency Distribution of the Revenue Percent by Funding Stream, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Dues</th>
<th>Union</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.1–0.99</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–29</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–74</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–100</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|          | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

## FIGURE 4
Mean Percentage of Revenue by Source and Size
represented in the last two bars, split the largest quartile of worker centers between outliers (those that report revenue in excess of $2 million) and those that fall within the normal distribution.\textsuperscript{12}

**Program Services**

Overall, worker centers benefited much more from income for program services than from the receipt of membership dues. As Figure 3 represents, program services accounted for 12.4\% of the total pie of funding received by worker centers in 2012. This finding is not that surprising given that worker centers’ nonprofit status is reliant to some extent on their provision of services (although this does not require them to charge fees). The IRS 990 defines “program services” as monies received for activities that accomplish the organization’s “exempt purposes” of providing relief to the “poor,” “distressed,” and “underprivileged.”

Program service income was a prevalent source of funding among worker centers. Table 4 shows just 41\% of worker centers reported no revenue from program services in 2012. This makes income from program services the second most common stream of revenue for worker centers, second only to foundations. Nonetheless, worker centers’ relative dependence on program services varies widely. Table 4 illustrates that nearly 30\% of worker centers received less than 5\% of their revenue from program services (13\% receiving less than 1\%, and 15\% receiving between 1\% and 4.9\% of their revenue). However, on average, worker centers received 11\% of their revenue from program services, with six worker centers receiving more than half of their funding from program services. There were even two groups that received 99\% of their overall funding from program services they provide, such as legal services and trainings.

We might expect that larger worker centers would receive a greater portion of their revenue from program services because they have more organizational capacity to provide larger-scale services. Some authors suggest that direct services can be more difficult for small worker centers (Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010: 11). However, it does not seem that size was a predictor of reliance on program services for our sample.\textsuperscript{13} Figure 4’s stacked bar chart illustrates that program services were an important source of funding across all size groupings. The top quarter (excluding the biggest eight) did receive the highest average percentage from program services (15.6\%), and the percentage of revenue received from program services descends in each of the next smaller sub-groupings. Nevertheless, the smallest quarter and the largest eight worker centers received a similar average amount from program services (about 7\%). The evidence points to an across-the-board, albeit widely ranging, reliance on program services.\textsuperscript{14}
GOVERNMENT GRANTS

Unlike labor unions, which are not eligible for many government grants because they are not 501(c)(3) organizations, worker centers receive government grants to engage in a wide range of activities. These activities include tax preparation assistance, citizenship education and training, homelessness alleviation efforts, worker rights education, and efforts to combat labor trafficking. Similar to funding streams of other nonprofits (Grønbjerg 1993), government grants are a relatively common funding stream for worker centers. As Figure 3 represents, we could confirm that more than 16% of worker center revenue in 2012 came from government grants. This is largely consistent with Fine's study (2006), which found that 21% of worker center income came from government sources.

Owing to limitations in the IRS data, the actual percentage of revenue from government grants in our sample is also likely to be higher. The monies worker centers report under the “government contributions” portion of the IRS 990 cannot include those government grants designated for program services that primarily benefit a governmental unit, as opposed to the public as a whole. Worker centers must report such government grants under “program services” rather than “government contributions.” This limitation notwithstanding, 44% of the 80 worker centers that had to report whether they received government contributions obtained some type of government grant.

The “Government” column of Table 4 illustrates how difficult it is to characterize the typical degree to which worker centers depend on government grants. The average percentage of revenue that worker centers obtained from government contributions was 13.2%, but the percentage for any given worker center ranged from 2% to 89%. Worker centers that did receive government contributions, though, tended to be more dependent on them than they were on dues or program services. Only 6% of these worker centers obtained less than 5% of their revenue from government contributions. Meanwhile, 12% of the 80 reporting worker centers (nine worker centers) received more than half of their funding from government contributions.

Worker center dependence on this funding stream varies widely regardless of size. Even though they may have more institutional resources, higher-revenue worker centers were not more likely than smaller groups to receive government grants. Figure 4 gives us a visual representation of how the percentage of revenue worker centers obtained from government grants varied across differently sized worker centers. The three bars representing the three largest groupings obtained a roughly similar percentage of their revenue from government, ranging from 14% for the middle group and
peaking in the next highest group at 18%. Those worker centers with revenue from $175,000 to $400,000 tended to receive just under 8% of their revenue from government grants, a difference that was, nonetheless, not significant from the overall average of 15.6% for the remaining groups. Indeed, it is a relatively small worker center in this group, with revenue of just under $250,000, that received the highest proportion of its revenue from government grants. Thus, while government grants are an important source of funding for worker centers, the prevalence and the relative dependence of worker centers on such government grants varies tremendously.

**Foundations**

Our limited evidence on foundation funding confirms what others have claimed: worker centers would not be able to exist, let alone flourish, were it not for grants from charitable foundations (Fine 2006; Greenhouse 2014). As Figure 3 indicates, foundation grants listed in the Foundation Directory equaled roughly a fifth (21%) of the pooled revenue for all worker centers in 2012. The true percentage is likely to be much higher given Fine’s finding (2006) that 61% of worker center funding came from charitable foundations.

Furthermore, as the first column of Table 4 shows, foundation grants were the most prevalent stream of funding for worker centers. A minority of worker centers (just 38%) received no funding from foundations. Given that we suspect there were foundation grants that we could not track, we believe that deriving funding from foundations is even more common than we can show here. We would not want to read too much into the figures we have on the relative dependence of worker centers on foundation funding because we know foundations may report a multi-year grant in a single year and that the fiscal years of foundations may differ from those of worker centers. Nevertheless, a glance down the last column of Table 4 suggests that the degree to which worker centers rely on foundation grants varies just as much as their reliance on government grants.

**Unions**

Several chapters in this volume illustrate ways that worker centers and labor unions have partnered in recent years to advance such things as minimum-wage legislation, paid sick leave, and campaigns against large retailers. The US Chamber of Commerce and other worker center critics have alleged that some worker centers rely so heavily on union funding that they are essentially “union fronts” (Manheim 2013). Nonetheless, our research suggests that worker centers are generally not financially dependent on labor unions.

Our research shows that the vast majority of worker centers do not receive significant funding from labor unions. Figure 3, based on DOL
OLMS data, confirmed just a tiny fraction (1%) of the overall pool of worker center funds came from unions. Table 4 confirms how rare receiving funds from unions really is: the vast majority of worker centers (85%) receive no funds from unions. Those that do are not very dependent on union funds. In 2012, just seven worker centers received 5% or more of their funding from unions, with the highest being 20%. Furthermore, between 2008 and 2014, there were just six worker centers that received more than 20% of their revenue from unions in any given year.23 Neither did it seem that a worker center’s size affected its likelihood of obtaining funds from unions.24 Indeed, as Figure 4 shows, the worker centers that received funds from unions were spread across each of our five subgroupings. In short, union funding was neither common, nor that significant, for the worker centers in our sample.

**DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ON FUNDING STREAMS**

What can funding streams tell us about worker centers? We know that sources of funding and an organization’s tax-exempt status can affect an organization’s programming choices (de Graauw 2015). Indeed, there are ongoing debates about how different sources of funding might directly affect the programmatic focus and social-change strategies of worker centers in particular. Finding out more about the relationship between funding and programming can tell us more about the nature of this emerging subset of nonprofit organizations, whose diverse funding portfolios are in stark contrast to labor unions’ overwhelming reliance on member dues. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address all of these issues here, our findings and review of the relevant debates regarding worker center funding strategies to date suggest several fruitful avenues for future empirical inquiry in this area.

**More Research on External Funders’ Effects on Worker Center Programming**

Our finding that 80% of worker center income comes from external sources raises several questions for future research. First, future research could consider the extent to which reliance on external funders takes energy away from organizing and other organization building, given the time it takes to please and report to external funders. External funders range widely in the requirements they impose on their grantees (Grønbjerg 1993). Fine (2006) and others argue that these requirements can tax worker center staff and can encourage the organization to build organizational capacity around fund-raising. This dynamic, Fine argues, can take the organization away from the project of building a dues-paying and fund-raising
membership base. Similarly, Grønbjerg (1993: 53) contends that nonprof-
it reliance on external funders sets up “demanding exchange relationships
that restrict organizational choice.” These concerns notwithstanding, it is
possible that some external grants foster the creation of new program ser-
vices, which in turn can become somewhat self-sustaining internal sourc-
es of funding after the external grant runs out.

Second, future research could consider how external funders may
influence organizational priorities more directly (Estey 2006; Fisk 2016).
Grønbjerg’s study of nonprofits (1993: 53) characterizes many nonprofits
as having “limited ability to resist efforts by funders to exert influence”
because of low revenue. Others note that some external entities are not
interested in nonprofits’ efforts to achieve deeper, systemwide change
through organizing and agitation (Eidelson 2013). In a similar vein, Franz
and Fernandes (2016) argue that some foundations place restraints on
larger national worker centers that alter their ability to challenge neoliberal
rationalities. They contend that, instead, these grants encourage worker
centers to promote program services that foster employer alliances, workforce
skills training, and business ventures. In this way, these authors portray
some program services as moving organizations away from the more
controversial organizing efforts designed to challenge policies and structures
that hurt low-wage workers (Eidelson 2013; Franz and Fernandes 2016).

However, disagreement between nonprofit scholars on the question of
how government funding affects political advocacy (de Graauw 2016)
highlights the need for future research into the extent to which external
funders inhibit worker centers from economic agitation and policy advocacy.
In contrast to critics of external funding sources, some nonprofit scholars
see reliance on government funding as boosting many organizations’ ability
to engage in political advocacy effectively. For these authors, because
government-dependent nonprofits need to advocate for continued
government support of their efforts, they constantly build organizational
resources around political advocacy that they can capitalize on (Chaves,
Stephens, and Galaskiewicz 2004).

In light of the ongoing debates about worker centers’ ability to foster
structural changes in the low-wage labor market, and the role of bottom-
up worker voices in these organizations, future research should continue
to unpack the relationship between reliance on external funding and worker
centers’ financial sustainability and programmatic choices.

More Research on the Nature of Government Grants
Given our finding that government grants provide an important source of
funding for many (although certainly not all) worker centers, future re-
search should endeavor to unpack what kinds of activities federal, state,
and local government entities fund. Further research, for example, could
identify the types of state and local government funding worker centers receive because these state and local sources provide the majority of government funding (Umel 2006). Moreover, prior research shows that local government officials play a key and varied role in filtering money to nonprofits (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013).  

New research could also examine how government funding interacts with the social-change strategies of worker centers. Scholars, for instance, could continue to tease out how government grants relate to public–private efforts to improve the enforcement of labor standards in low-wage labor markets. The executive agencies in charge of enforcing these laws, including the US DOL, cannot ensure full enforcement of the laws on the books (Bernhardt et al. 2009; Weil 2016). Moreover, they often do not have access to the communities that are most at risk of suffering violations (Fine 2017; Gleeson 2009). There is a growing body of literature that considers the role of community groups in labor and employment law “co-enforcement” (Amengual and Fine 2016; Demers and Sylvester 2016; Elmore 2018; Fine 2017; Fine and Gordon 2010; Gleeson 2009; Lesniewski and Canon 2016). Luce’s work, for instance, describes the ways that community organizations improved the implementation of city-level living-wage ordinances (2004). In this way, worker centers help keep government agencies accountable to the process of “making rights real” by facilitating their implementation (de Graauw 2016). Co-enforcement, of course, does not require a resource transfer between the government and a nonprofit, but, undoubtedly, funding helps facilitate these collaborations.

Scholars have identified worker center–facilitated connections between government enforcers and workers in such contexts as health and safety initiatives (Fine 2015) and the National Labor Relations Board (Lesniewski and Canon 2016). While we do not know the exact purpose of the majority of government funding, our data confirms that some worker centers obtained federal money to improve the enforcement of worker rights during the period of our study (2008 through 2014). Of the three federal grants that would enable worker centers to assist in the enforcement of worker rights (and which we could confirm on USAspending.gov), the largest was the Susan Harwood Training Grant from the US DOL’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Susan Harwood grants are intended to provide training and education for employers and workers in an effort to reduce health and safety hazards in the workplace. Other workers’ rights enforcement grants from federal sources include the Environmental Justice Small Grant and the Services for Trafficking Victims Program Grant. Future research should comprehensively document, as some have already started to do (Amengual and Fine 2016), the nature and effects of these public–private efforts to patrol the low-wage labor market.
More Research on the Nature of Program Services

Our research revealed that revenue from program services is the most common funding stream for worker centers, but it did little to elaborate on the nature of the services offered to low-wage workers who participate in worker centers. What kinds of services are provided and which are the most common? Future research could deepen our understanding of the variety and nature of program services provided. Here, we propose one area of future inquiry, but there are many more.

Because member dues in the traditional labor union context are seen as a way to connect workers to the organization’s decision making and accountability structure, one question our findings raise is the extent to which program services may be an alternative way to give workers a voice in their organizations. Do the worker centers’ program service offerings result from participant requests? Do they encourage ongoing participation, or membership, in the day-to-day activities of the organization? More specifically, to what extent do program services hold the organization accountable to the community it serves? A cursory review of select worker center websites suggests that the sorts of program services range from legal help to trainings and professional development—from education about individual rights to community organizing. It is certainly feasible to imagine that some of these classes could result in strong, membership-like connections between workers and worker centers. Moreover, some income from program services comes directly from fees, which are internally generated sources of funding that could help to insulate the organization from the interference and influence of external funding sources.

Relatedly, some recent scholarship contends that worker centers should tie member dues to the program services provided. Fisk’s recent work on worker centers (2016) is one example. She argues that worker centers should move toward a dues model, at least in part to increase the organization’s accountability to its members rather than to external funders such as charitable foundations and government agencies. In developing her argument for the increased use of member dues by worker centers, she proposes that worker centers tie the amount of dues to the approximate value of program services the worker center is providing to the participant.

Future research, perhaps through the development of in-depth case studies, could consider the ways that worker centers’ program services may, in fact, already enhance a worker center’s accountability to the communities it serves, or act as a means of encouraging membership.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we “sized” up worker center income and found that, literally, no one size fits all worker centers. While most worker centers did
indeed have little revenue, worker centers ranged widely in their revenue sizes. Indeed, our sample included a handful of giant worker centers that towered over the pack. Unfortunately, instability in their revenue size is a characteristic that fits all worker centers, big and small. Worker centers with bigger revenue seemed just as unstable as their poorer counterparts. They were also more susceptible to shrinking in times of economic downturn.

With revenue streams, we again found that worker centers cannot be characterized by one story or funding profile. Rather, our picture of diverse funding streams aligns with others who have characterized worker centers as exhibiting organizational “hybridity” (Cordero-Guzmán et al. 2013; Fine 2006). We find worker centers’ funding strategies to be as diverse as their organizing strategies discussed elsewhere in this volume. Unlike traditional labor unions, worker centers do not typically use or rely very much on membership dues. Rather, our research confirms that the lion’s share of worker center revenue comes from external sources, especially from government and foundation grants. These findings raise important questions about the relationship between funding strategies and programmatic choices at worker centers. Learning more about funding and its effects can tell us about the nature of these emergent organizations on the labor relations scene. Future research should continue to examine the evolving nature of these diverse organizations that seek justice and dignity for workers in the low-wage labor market.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research benefited enormously from the able assistance of Aliqae Geraci from Cornell’s Catherwood Library and would not have been possible without the financial support of the Worker Institute at Cornell, the ILR Dean’s office, and the Rawlings Cornell Presidential Research Scholarship program. It would also not have been possible without Janice Fine and Nik Theodore’s foundational work mapping worker centers and Janice Fine’s continued feedback and generous provision of relevant resources over the past three years. The authors appreciate the invaluable contributions of Caro Achar, Ben Hollander, and Nick Rasch and the students in the Worker Institute’s Seminar on Precarious Work during the spring of 2015 who participated in this research as undergraduates at Cornell’s ILR School. The authors also benefited from feedback from Hector Cordero-Guzmán, Els de Graauw, Samuel Estreicher, Janice Fine, Courtney Frantz, Shannon Gleeson, and Wilma Liebman, as well as from presentations sponsored by the Worker Institute at Cornell, the New York University School of Law’s Center for Labor and Employment Law, the NYU Review of Law & Social Change, the Rawlings Senior Expo at Cornell, Harvard’s Engaged Scholarship
and Undergraduate Research Conference, and the State University of New York’s Undergraduate Research Conference. All errors or omissions are the sole responsibility of the authors.

ENDNOTES

1 Our sample of worker centers includes every worker center from the Fine/Theodore 2012 list for which we could obtain an IRS 990 for at least one year between 2008 and 2014. The IRS 990 categorized revenue streams differently before 2008, so we were not able to collect data for 2007 or earlier. Our data set ends in 2014 because it is the most recent year for which reliable data was available.

2 Examples of nonprofits that parented worker centers include Catholic Charities, the Empire Justice Center, Community Partners, the Human Services Council, and the American Friends Service Committee.

3 A worker center with less than $50,000 annual revenue, for instance, needs to file only an “ePostcard.”

4 These eight cases are defined as outliers by the Tukey method of using the interquartile range to determine mild outliers. They are all above the cutoff for mild outliers—equal to the upper 75 percentile + 1.5 × the interquartile range of 1,678,846. Furthermore, four of these cases would constitute what Tukey called “severe outliers”—those that are larger than the upper 75 percentile + 3 × the interquartile range of $2,578,655.

5 We confirm this finding with a series of bivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses. In all but one of the five years (2011), a worker center’s size could not predict the subsequent year’s growth.

6 If we remove the five largest worker centers (those with revenue larger than $3 million) from the 2012 analysis in column 3, the relationship is no longer significant. It is these largest organizations, all but one of which shrank or experienced slower growth in 2012, that appear to be driving the effects.

7 These reports are publicly available either via the DOL OLMS website’s “Payer/Payee” search portal or via a direct download of all union spending records for a given year. The DOL OLMS data was only available through downloading the entire yearly database. This made it extremely onerous to sift through manually, so we ran a search query using Microsoft Access.


9 There is no significant correlation between revenue in 2012 and the percentage of revenue derived from dues.

10 There was no statistical difference in the mean percentage of revenue from dues between any single size subgroup of worker centers compared with the overall mean of the remainder of worker centers.

11 The size groupings are roughly equivalent to the 2012 quartiles as represented in Figure 1 and the inner Tukey fence for identifying outliers.

12 While the percentages are small, two of the outlier organizations, with revenue above $2 million per year, collect a half million dollars in member dues each year.

13 There is no significant correlation between revenue in 2012 and the percentage of revenue a worker center received from program services.
14 We tested for whether the mean proportion of revenue received from program services in each of the subgroups differed significantly from the mean percentage of revenue coming from program services for the remainder of worker centers. None of these t-tests for significant difference in means were significant.

15 To take a very preliminary look at the nature of the federal government grants worker centers receive, we used the USAspending.gov database. Mandated by the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006, USAspending.gov is a searchable website “to give the American public access to information on how their tax dollars are spent” (http://bit.ly/2rdZiUs). We identified nine types of federal-level government grants to worker centers for service and education initiatives to address the myriad needs of low-income communities. These were the Susan Harwood Training Grant; Environmental Justice Small Grant; Culturally and Linguistically Specific Services Program Grant; Services for Trafficking Victims Program Grant; Fund for the Improvement of Education Grant; Low Income Taxpayer Clinics Project Grant; Citizenship Education and Training Project Grant; Supportive Housing Project Grant; and Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Matching Grant. USAspending.gov is, however, a limited data source and does not have any information on state and local government grants.

16 Out of our total 104 worker centers for which we could obtain the IRS 990s in 2012, only 80 met the revenue threshold that required they report how much they received from government grants. Organizations with revenue above $50,000, but below $200,000, are required to file only an IRS EZ form, which does not separate the government contributions. Some critique the IRS 990s as having potential inputting errors related to government grants (Froelich, Knoepfle, and Pollak 2000).

17 These worker centers constitute outliers falling above the inner Tukey fence (here = 44%) for determining outliers from what should be the normal distribution.

18 The first bar reports no government grants because this grouping includes all those too small to have to report government sources to the IRS.

19 There was no significant difference in the mean of each of these three subgroups compared with the mean of the remaining worker centers.

20 The t-test for significant difference revealed that the mean of 7.8% for this subgroup was significantly lower (t = 1.4185, with a p value > 0.10) than the mean received by all other larger revenue worker centers. There was also no significant correlation between total revenue in 2012 and a worker center’s relative dependence on government grants. The Pearson’s correlation coefficient is 0.1160, which, with 80 observations, does not meet the threshold of significance. This makes sense intuitively when we consider that some of the largest worker centers, those with revenue over $2 million, did not necessarily receive the highest proportion of their revenue from government grants. The largest, for instance, received just over a quarter of their resources from government grants. There were even some in this group that received no government grants.

21 Similarly, we do not feel confident about coming to any conclusions on whether a worker center’s size has much to do with its ability to secure foundation grants. Our research does reveal that the largest eight worker centers obtained a significantly higher percentage of their revenue from foundations (32%), and the smallest worker centers relied much less on foundations (7%). However, the group with the second highest average percentage of revenue that came from foundations, at 23%, was the group of small-to-medium-sized worker...
centers (with revenue from $175,000 to $400,000). Furthermore, the correlation between revenue in 2012 and the percentage of a center’s revenue reported from foundations was also not significant.

22 Similarly, Worker Center Watch “aims to expose the direct operational linkages and funding between unions and worker centers by highlighting their tactics” (http://bit.ly/2tBGT4n).

23 Most of these received around 30% from unions, but there was one small worker center (with a revenue that ranged from roughly $70,000 to $150,000 during the period) that received 65% of its revenue from unions in a single year.

24 There is no significant correlation between the 2012 revenue and the percentage of revenue obtained from unions.

25 These are sometimes Community Development Block Grants (CDBG), which are federally funded but locally decided (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013). de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad also show that location, and local officials, matter. Their research compares how local officials managed CDBG grant allocations in three different cities. They expose how immigrant organizations are incorporated differently depending on whether they are in a traditional immigrant gateway, a 21st-century gateway, or a new suburban destination.

26 There are, for example, only about 1,000 US DOL investigators to enforce federal wage and hour law in the more than seven million establishments covered by such laws across the country (Weil 2016).

27 Susan Harwood Training Grants are OSHA grants “to provide training and education programs for employers and workers on the recognition, avoidance, and prevention of safety and health hazards in their workplaces and to inform workers of their rights and employers of their responsibilities” (http://bit.ly/2rga9NF). For 2012, the Susan Harwood grant accounted for 10 out of 18 grants, which constitute more than half of the total federal government grant money that we were able to confirm on USAspending.gov.

28 The Environmental Justice Small Grant program (http://bit.ly/2rfL8lw) “supports and empowers communities working on solutions to local environmental and public health issues. The program is designed to help communities understand and address exposure to multiple environmental harms and risks.”

29 Services for Trafficking Victims Program Grant: State and Local Law Enforcement Assistance (http://bit.ly/2yzeb9X): “The primary goal of this solicitation is to provide timely, high-quality services to victims of human trafficking. … Funding also will support efforts to increase the capacity of communities to respond to victims through the development of interagency partnerships and professional training, public outreach, and awareness campaigns.”

30 While funding for worker centers to enforce worker rights is not without controversy, Gleeson (2009) shows that nonprofits play key roles in helping individuals learn about and mobilize their rights in the workplace. They can provide education in vulnerable communities and provide accessible space, which builds a relationship of trust with labor standards enforcement officials (Fine 2017; Gleeson 2009; Gordon 2005; Weil and Pyles 2005). They can also play a key information-gathering role that can help government agency personnel make decisions about their outreach efforts and enforcement targets (Bernhardt et al. 2009; Delp and Riley 2015; Fine and Gordon 2010).
REFERENCES


INTRODUCTION

During the 1980s, deindustrialization and the decline of unions led to a sharp reduction in the quality of jobs in manufacturing and service industries—and a subsequent exodus of native workers. As a consequence of these shifts, employers increasingly turned to immigrants to fill vacancies in the lowest-paying occupations with the worst working conditions. The employer sanction sections of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) (Chishti 2004; Passel 2005: 27) added to an environment of exploitation of undocumented workers in many low-wage industries because they feared employers had been given the tools not only to fire workers for taking a stand but also to have them deported. Despite these perils, some took action. Many immigrant workers were no strangers to collective action, having participated in organizations and political movements in their home countries. There were many instances in which they engaged in workplace actions and community organizing, and when unions or worker centers reached out to them, they often responded favorably (Bloom, Milkman, and Narro 2010: 4–5; Erickson et al. 2002; Fine 2006, 2007; Milkman and Ott 2014; Milkman 2006; Ness 2005).

The demographic transformation of key industries by immigrant workers, their willingness to organize, labor’s need for new recruits, and pressure from key national unions led by UNITE HERE, which represents workers in the hotel, gaming, food service, airport, textile, manufacturing, distribution, laundry, and transportation industries; and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), resulted in major shifts in policy within the AFL-CIO. In February 2000, the federation made a historic policy announcement to champion a new legalization program and increased labor protections for immigrant workers and also to withdraw its long-standing support for employer sanctions (Fine 2007; Fine and Tichenor 2009).
Six years later, the federation took another major step in the direction of support for immigrant worker organizing, when it entered into a series of partnerships with national worker center networks. In August 2006, the AFL-CIO’s Executive Council unanimously passed a resolution, creating the AFL-CIO Worker Center Partnership, which called on organized labor at all levels to build and strengthen ties with worker centers in their communities. The resolution acknowledged worker centers as a vibrant and important part of today’s labor movement.

Many low-wage immigrant workers in the United States today function within industries in which there have been few or no unions through which they can speak and act to effect improvements. Worker centers emerged in response to the increasing exploitation of low-wage immigrant workers, persistent racism, and xenophobia in labor markets and society in general; the narrowing of channels for legalization of immigration status; and the decline of the labor movement. While varying in organizational structure, the centers mainly serve low-wage workers in efforts to improve workplace conditions through direct action, policy advocacy, research, and legal strategies. They engage in policy campaigns to improve the laws and policies that impact these workers, many of whom are excluded from basic legal protections, including those in the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

While they often target particular employers as well as industries within local labor markets, worker centers are not worksite based. Unlike the traditional American union, most do not focus on organizing for majority representation in individual worksites or on negotiating collective bargaining agreements for individual groups of workers. Worker centers are hybrids that combine elements of different types of organizations from political parties, settlement houses, immigrant civic organizations, community organizing, and social movement groups to unions, feminist consciousness-raising organizations and producer cooperatives. In many centers, ethnicity and language, rather than occupation or industry, are the primary identities through which workers come to participate in the organizations, and ethnic identity and the experience of prejudice are central analytical lenses through which experiences in and the organization of the labor market as a whole are understood. They are largely community-based organizations, most often with an Internal Revenue Service 501(c)(3) tax status that makes them tax exempt and allows them to take in charitable contributions that are deductible for the donors. Most have relatively small budgets (well under $1 million) and a very informal membership structure. Typically, over 80% of their resources come from private foundations. The rest comes from government funding, membership fees, and other donations (Fine 2006; Gates et al., this volume).

The number of worker centers in the United States has been growing steadily. In 1992, there were five centers nationwide; by 2005, there were
142 organizations; by 2012, there were 214 centers; and today there are an estimated 266 of them. As of 2013, 33 states had worker centers—California (36) and New York (43) have the most, followed by Texas (20), Massachusetts (12), Florida (11), Illinois (10), New Jersey (9) Michigan (5), Pennsylvania (5) and Virginia (5). All other states have four or fewer (Fine, Narro, and Barnes, this volume; Fine and Theodore 2013).

This chapter focuses on recent efforts by the AFL-CIO to relate to the growing movement of worker centers and to establish alliances with them. The first places worker centers in historical context. The second provides a narrative of events that led to the creation of the AFL-CIO Worker Center Partnership. The third provides an analysis of the components of the partnership and their implementation. The last section evaluates the partnerships, and our conclusion discusses considerations and opportunities for continued collaboration and next steps.

WORKER CENTERS, UNIONS, AND THE LOW-WAGE ECONOMY

A discussion of how partnerships have played out on the ground must be placed within the larger conceptual framework of these two radically different organizations. While unions and worker centers have a common mission of worker uplift, there is a sharp divergence in structure, culture, and ideology. Unionization in the United States has been built on achieving exclusive bargaining rights, controlling access to skilled labor, and taking wages out of competition across labor markets of various types. With this model, unions institutionalized themselves, evolving into complex organizations with highly established internal structures and methods of operation. They are labor market institutions mapped to craft and industrial work via firms, industries, and the state in stable and predictable ways; structure, culture, and ideology are based on narrow but robust worker identities revolving around the production of goods and services as commodities in the economy. While at the federal level, national federations have been central to the enactment of broader wage and hour, occupational health and safety, and social insurance legislation, individual national unions and their local affiliates often operate from a narrower perspective.

Worker centers are the inverse of prototypical American unions. While they play an important role in teaching low-wage immigrant workers about their rights under federal and state labor and employment laws and working to enforce them, they have mostly not sought to formalize their roles as labor market actors, even though they are defending workers’ rights, filing wage claims, intervening on behalf of workers with employers, and, in the case of day laborer centers, operating quasi-hiring halls. They are
social movement organizations bent on raising labor standards community-wide largely through policy rather than economic action. They are nonbureaucratic, grassroots organizations with small budgets, loose membership structures, improvisational cultures, and strategies that are funded by foundation grants rather than member dues. Worker centers are “local movement centers” that focus on issues of work because employment is such a central area of exploitation for immigrants and native-born workers of color. Rather than focus on the narrow relations of production, centers concern themselves with the much broader issues of social reproduction and economic and political incorporation. Most have viewed organizing a union not as an end in itself but as a means to improving labor standards and establishing a societal social wage while building a grassroots social movement that can transform society. Their structure, culture, and ideology are reflective of this larger agenda.

Worker centers advocate for workers’ rights generally through policy campaigns, research, communication, and community organizing. They have been at the forefront of campaigns for increases in the minimum wage, creation of policies to combat wage theft and reductions of the tip credit, provision of paid sick days, labor standards for domestic workers, and other policies that improve conditions for low-wage workers. The centers also work with federal and state government agencies to improve labor standards enforcement. Increasingly, worker centers are directly engaging employers or groups of employers to effectuate change in the wages, hours, and terms and conditions of employment for their members, sometimes in partnership with unions.

Even though they don’t engage in unionization and collective bargaining, worker centers are able to engage in organizing strategies where they are not forced into the “straitjacket” of the NLRA. The legal framework under the NLRA, originally intended to support unionization efforts and promote collective bargaining, is now used by many employers to limit union growth and worker power. For example, there are no restrictions on worker centers engaging in secondary boycotts and similar actions against employers as there are with unions under the NLRA. This is particularly important in the context of widespread subcontracting, where the real power to change conditions lies not with the immediate employer but with corporations at the top of the supply chain that are setting prices that contractors must accept. Moreover, worker centers do not have to accommodate to the extensive regulations that cover union organizations.

There is little doubt that workers in low-wage industries benefit substantially from unionization. An empirical analysis of 15 low-wage occupations found that unionized workers in low-wage industries earn 16% or more than their non-union counterparts and are significantly more likely to receive additional benefits (Schmitt, Walker, Fremstad, and Zipperer 2008). Unions have
historically played a central role in setting and defending labor standards, but private sector union coverage is at 7.3% (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017). Likewise, there is nothing inherent in these jobs that requires them to be low paid. In a comprehensive empirical analysis of low-wage work in the United States and Europe, Gautié and Schmitt (2010) find vast differences in labor market conditions across countries. Likewise, Mason and Salverda (2010: 39) find that in the United States, 25% of workers are engaged in low-wage work (defined as earning two thirds of the national median wage), whereas in France the percentage is 11.1%, and in Denmark it is even lower at 8.5%. Furthermore, greater numbers of immigrants do not result in larger proportions of low-wage workers.

Today, the AFL-CIO’s highest concentration of union members is in “professionalized” jobs requiring professional certification and/or training, though most job growth in the United States is in low-wage industries. A recent report by the National Employment Law Project showed that nearly 60% of job gains since the recession have been in low-wage sectors, even though low-wage jobs represented only roughly 20% of recession job losses—an acceleration of a long-term trend in the US job market (National Employment Law Project 2014).

Many workers in low-wage industries find themselves in contracting arrangements that make it impossible to exercise many of the workplace protections that are afforded to them under the law. Likewise, this restructuring of the low-wage economy has hampered unions’ ability to make inroads into organizing workers. Worker centers, on the other hand, because they don’t engage in traditional union organizing, are able to target the companies that are setting conditions at the bottom of their supply chains. Their organizing approaches provide flexibility to adapt to changes in the restructuring of employment dynamics, such as subcontracting.

Affiliating with sectoral worker center networks became a key growth strategy as worker centers continued to develop tools to build their low-wage worker movement; share organizing and advocacy strategies; support their social service, workforce, and labor market programs; and increase opportunities for funding and organizational development. Worker centers came together to form organizational networks around certain sectors and segments of the low-wage labor market where workers were concentrated. The key national worker center networks that have developed over the past 15 years include the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) in the construction, landscaping, demolition and laborer sectors; the Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) with workers in the large restaurant industry; the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) with domestic and some childcare workers; the National Taxi Workers Alliance (NTWA) with workers in the taxi industry; the National Black Worker Center Project focusing on Black workers across different industries; and the National...
Guestworker Alliance (NGA) with guestworkers and other temporary workers from various industry sectors. Interfaith Worker Justice, the only faith-based national network, also has a thriving alliance of worker centers (Interfaith Worker Justice 2018). Today, close to half of all worker centers are affiliated with one or more of the national worker center networks. Organizations in the other half are not as sectorally specific, and some tend to be ethnic based—providing services to a particular ethnic community within a geographic area.

**HISTORY LEADING UP TO THE AFL-CIO/WORKER CENTER PARTNERSHIP**

The creation of NDLON in August 2001 gave national attention to the rise of worker centers in major cities throughout the country. NDLON’s founding convention in 2001 created a platform for NDLON member groups to identify areas of work it wanted the national organization to focus on. The two chief priorities that came out of this platform were (1) the right under the First Amendment of day laborers to seek work in public places, and (2) a new legalization program that would include day laborers. “Looking for Work Is Not a Crime” and “Somos Un Pueblo Sin Fronteras” became the major themes of NDLON’s work for the future. NDLON became one of the main avenues through which the AFL-CIO expressed its support for immigrant workers and worker centers. NDLON also became a major stakeholder in the immigrant rights debate in Washington, D.C., asserting a different perspective and sometimes adopting opposing positions from the more mainstream immigrant rights groups such as the National Immigration Forum and UnidosUS (formerly known as the National Council of La Raza). NDLON’s on-the-ground experience and legal expertise and its willingness to make frequent forays to the District of Columbia to represent its point of view resulted in day laborers having a seat at the table when discussing proposals and legislation relating to comprehensive immigration reform (CIR).

The tragic events of 9/11 took place the month after the founding of NDLON. The post-9/11 national security hysteria promoted by the right wing led to wholesale roundups and deportations of Muslim immigrants and to the passage in 2005 of House Bill 4437, proposed by Congress member James Sensenbrenner. Among the bill’s many draconian provisions was one that would, for the first time in American history, make it a felony for a noncitizen to be in the United States without proper documents or for an individual or organization to knowingly provide services or assistance to such a person in any way (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014; Narro, Shadduck-Hernández, and Wong 2007). The threat of this new law propelled millions of immigrants into the streets in 2006. The notion of being labeled
a criminal for contributing to the economy was an insult to immigrant communities. With the passage in the House of Representatives of HR 4437, NDLON began to respond to the attacks on day laborers by the by the right wing and their allies (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014).

Public comments depicting immigrants as criminals and stereotyping them as “un-American” created a hostile environment in many parts of the country, and there was a need for advocates to respond. This became most notable among day laborers and their advocates because of their high visibility in local communities and the ongoing crusades of anti-immigrant groups such as the Minutemen to target them. The political climate brought out hundreds of thousands who had never marched before. They found a new sense of dignity and pride through their activism (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014). NDLON made unique contributions to the growing groundswell of activism that led to major mobilizations during the spring of 2006, when over four million immigrants took to the streets to denounce HR 4437, beginning with a huge march in Los Angeles on March 26 in which over half a million immigrant families participated. The march was the largest ever in Los Angeles and one of the largest in the history of the immigrant and civil rights movements (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014).

Following the 2006 marches, however, right-wing anti-immigrant right groups commenced a war of attrition on immigrant communities (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014). Their strategy was to promote policies—such as the anti-immigrant legislation SB 1070 in Arizona—in states and cities throughout the country, calculating that the quality of life for immigrants would deteriorate to the level that many undocumented immigrants would “self-deport.” As discussed below, this right-wing strategy caused NDLON and other groups to shift away from comprehensive immigration reform efforts and instead focus on fighting back at the state and local levels (Narro and Shadduck-Hernández 2014).

Secure Communities (S-Comm) emerged in 2008 under the Obama administration as the mechanism from which to implement a policy that led to the deportation of close to three million undocumented immigrants during Obama’s two terms as U.S. president. S-Comm was a federal immigration enforcement program that was implemented by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2009. In jurisdictions where S-Comm was activated, any time an individual was arrested and booked into a local jail for any reason, his or her fingerprints are electronically run through ICE’s immigration database. This allowed ICE to identify people who may be noncitizens—including lawful immigrants and permanent residents—and potentially to initiate deportation proceedings against them.

Because it targeted people at the time of arrest, not conviction, S-Comm captured people who will never be charged with a state crime—including
crime victims (such as victims of domestic violence), witnesses, and individuals who were wrongly arrested. S-Comm also caused the unlawful detention of U.S. citizens. NDLON and other immigrant advocates took on the Obama administration in an effort to eliminate S-Comm. They argued that the program eroded immigrants’ trust in police and resulted in the deportations of people who had committed no crime or only minor infractions. At the same time, hundreds of local and state governments, including in California, enacted policies to limit law enforcement from cooperating with the program. NDLON was a leader in the effort for the passage of the TRUST Act, which placed restrictions on the S-Comm program in California. These challenges appeared to pay off when Obama announced he was ending Secure Communities as part of his larger immigration strategy in November 2014.

Day laborers became the human face and the frontline of the immigration reform debate. They became the poster children for attacks by the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a national organization that seeks to reduce immigration; the Minutemen Project, a group that was recruiting armed volunteers to patrol the border; and other right-wing forces. Additionally, day laborers became major targets of cities and states that were enacting their own anti-immigrant policies. In 2007, NDLON left the CIR strategy framework, which was by then considered by many immigrant rights advocates to be a failure as a result of the polarized stalemate in Congress to pass a comprehensive immigration reform legislation. Immediately thereafter, NDLON and other worker center networks joined together to create the Turning the Tides movement. This new movement was intended to establish a progressive parallel front to the right-wing strategy of taking the immigrant rights fight to the local level. Since then, NDLON and local worker centers have led efforts to fight back against SB 1070 and other similar measures at the state level. They have adopted a model of local community organizing to fight back against these measures and others like S-Comm in order to turn the tide in the fight for immigrant rights. They have increasingly become the model for a new strategy for pursuing immigrant rights because it has become increasingly clear that CIR is no longer a realistic goal in Congress.

During this same period, a 2005 national study on day laborers by Abel Valenzuela, Nik Theodore, Edwin Meléndez, and Ana Luz Gonzalez (2006) lent credence to NDLON’s efforts to fight back against the growing attacks on day laborers. It placed national attention on day laborers as a viable, growing, and legitimate part of the low-wage economy. The report captured the attention of key stakeholders such as the AFL-CIO and policy makers. The following year, Janice Fine’s book (2006) on worker centers and accompanying map was also a significant development; it helped to educate the AFL-CIO, foundations, and other key stakeholders about the important
role that worker centers were playing in reaching out to and organizing immigrant workers in sectors where the traditional labor organizing model was not successful.

At the same time, union density continued its steep decline. Close observers of the labor movement noted that even if every campaign presently undertaken were successful, the number of new workers organized would still fall far short of the mark in terms of what would be required for a gain in union density or even to maintain current levels. Some suggested that until local communities identified more directly with the labor movement, and perceived unions as organizations of their own and not just (at best) external allies, labor organizing at significant scale would be impossible. In 2005, seven AFL-CIO member unions—SEIU, UNITE HERE, Laborers’ Union (LIUNA), Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), United Farm Workers (UFW), and United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC)—formed the Change to Win Coalition to push for new strategies that would focus on membership development and a return to large-scale worker organizing. Change to Win proposed to commit significantly more funding to union organizing efforts and encourage each union to focus its organizing efforts on a particular economic sector (Fine 2006).

Understanding the depth of the crisis within the labor movement, Jon Hiatt, then general counsel of the AFL-CIO; Ana Avendaño, then its director of immigration policy; and Stewart Acuff, then its organizing director, moved forward with an initiative in 2006 to forge new partnerships with worker centers. They used the day laborer national report and Janice Fine’s book on worker centers to educate and persuade the AFL-CIO Executive Council and national union affiliates to garner sufficient support to launch the initiative.

In August 2006, the AFL-CIO’s Executive Council unanimously passed a resolution, Creating a National Worker Center Partnership, that called on organized labor at all levels to build and strengthen ties with worker centers in their communities. The resolution acknowledged worker centers as “a vibrant and important part of today’s labor movement” (AFL-CIO 2006). Soon after the Executive Council meeting, Hiatt and Avendaño reached out to Pablo Alvarado, executive director of NDLON, inviting NDLON to become the first major partnership initiative. They organized a leadership delegation from the AFL-CIO to come to Los Angeles to meet with NDLON and went together to the Agoura Hills day-labor site, where union officials watched the day laborers deliberating about whether to increase the minimum wage at the corner from $12 to $15. When 85 out of 100 day laborers raised their hands to increase the minimum, the AFL-CIO officials said, “That’s how the unions began!”
AFL-CIO officials were moved by a desire to build support among immigrant workers. They were interested in connecting organized labor to the growing worker center movement. NDLON was motivated by a desire to create a strong political alliance that would strengthen their efforts to protect the rights of day laborers, who at that time were main targets of anti-immigrant groups. NDLON initiated a process of discussion and analysis among its affiliates about the proposed partnership. Many NDLON groups had negative experiences with construction unions in the past and needed to deliberate before moving forward with the partnership. For example, the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California (IDEPSCA), an NDLON member based in Los Angeles, attempted to open up a day laborer worker center in Pasadena during the early 1990s only to be blocked by a construction trades local through a court-ordered injunction (Fine 2006, 2007; Fine, Grabelsky, and Narro 2008).

Through a series of conference calls and face-to-face meetings, NDLON members selected a core group to begin the process of dialogue with the AFL-CIO. They knew that the AFL-CIO could become a formidable political ally in their efforts to influence the immigration reform debate so that day laborers would not be left out of reform policies or singled out for attacks. Furthermore, they believed that, over time, the relationship with the AFL-CIO could be deepened and that local unions might open their organizations to day laborers and accept them into construction apprenticeship programs and local membership. Moved by their observations of day laborer organizing, the AFL-CIO decided that a national partnership agreement with NDLON would be the best starting point to launch the new initiative that came to be known as the AFL-CIO National Worker Center Partnership (AFL-CIO 2018). Regarding this collaboration, John Sweeney, president of AFL-CIO stated:

Day laborers in the United States often face the harshest forms of workplace problems and this exploitation hurts us all because when standards are dragged down for some workers, they are dragged down for all workers. The work being done by worker centers and NDLON in particular is some of the most important work in the labor movement today, and it's time to bring our organizations closer together. Through this watershed partnership, we will strengthen our ability to promote and enforce the workplace rights for all workers—union and non-union, immigrant and non-immigrant alike. (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015)

Also in 2006, the AFL-CIO announced partnership agreements with other worker center networks, including Interfaith Worker Justice and ENLACE (a network of worker centers organizing low-wage workers in
the United States and Mexico), and launched similar partnership agreements with the National Domestic Workers Alliance and the National Guestworkers Alliance in 2011.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AFL-CIO/WORKER CENTER PARTNERSHIP

For the most part, the partnership agreements have been aspirational and reflective of a commitment to work on issues of mutual benefit—specifically, immigration reform and legislation to combat wage theft, improve workplace health and safety, and other issues affecting low-wage workers. The partnership, however, has benefited AFL-CIO unions and local labor bodies by establishing channels to connect formally with local worker centers that expose abuses in various industries and help to project the moral authority of unions as vehicles for worker voice and protections.

Under the partnerships, worker centers are given the opportunity to apply to affiliate with state labor federations, local labor councils, and Working America—the community affiliate of the AFL-CIO. The partnerships authorize the AFL-CIO to issue certificates of affiliation to individual worker centers, or worker center networks, at the request of a state federation or central labor council (CLC), where the entities have decided on a voluntary basis to form a mutually beneficial partnership. When issued, the certificates authorize worker center affiliations with state federations and local central labor councils in order “to build ties between these organizations and enable them to work cooperatively on issues of mutual concerns,” giving them a seat at the table where key labor strategies are discussed and developed (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

The AFL-CIO developed procedures that require a CLC or state federation to submit an application for a worker center to the national AFL-CIO, certifying that the affiliation is in the mutual interest of the worker center and the CLC/state federation. CLCs and state federations are permitted to set the fees for such affiliations. The AFL-CIO president is required to consult with the national Executive Council before issuing a certificate of affiliation. The certificates can be revoked when the partnership is no longer mutually beneficial (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015). Table 1, on the next page, shows the list of affiliations as of July 2014 (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

In the years since the Executive Council authorized worker center affiliations, the AFL-CIO has issued over 30 certificates of affiliation, and there have been no requests for revocation. Affiliations have taken place in 24 cities and 12 states. Most recently, the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA) and the Carwash Worker Center of the CLEAN Carwash Campaign (discussed below) entered into an affiliation process with the
Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, the largest central labor council in the country.

The affiliation processes of worker centers to central labor councils differ from one another, depending on a variety of factors relating to the working relationships that existed prior to affiliation as well as the local political landscape. For relationships where both parties shared common issues and where their interests converged, seeking a partnership was a logical next step. For example, the issue of wage theft is common to both worker centers...
Union/worker center relationships—especially those unions that are organizing low-wage workers. They both have a vested interest in combating wage theft, and a partnership to engage in policy and organizing campaigns toward that goal can be a strategic next step (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

The Los Angeles Black Worker Center created the Black Labor Construction Council (BLCC), an organization of Black union members in the building trades, as a strategic way to build a relationship with the leadership of five local construction unions and establish joint efforts to improve conditions for Black construction workers. The collaboration stemmed from a powerful call initiated by Steven Pitts at the UC Berkeley Labor Center to address the national Black jobs crisis, and it has led to stronger partnerships with organized labor.

Worker centers and central labor councils have reported that, in many cases, significant coalition work and solidarity support for organizing and policy campaigns had already existed prior to affiliation. From these experiences, worker centers and unions concluded that affiliations were a natural progression from informal joint activities and alliances. They have found that formal affiliation has provided an opportunity to deepen and strengthen these efforts. The majority of worker centers and central labor councils currently work together on one to two campaigns a year. Moreover, the majority of these joint efforts have led to successful outcomes (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

By working together, central labor councils and worker centers have been able to transcend conservative political climates to succeed in passing pro-worker legislation. In Austin, the Building Trades and the Workers Defense Project have successfully advocated for pro-worker legislation in a “real, red, Republican-dominated state.” Campaigns have included fighting against wage theft and for a higher local minimum wage, as well as a getting a commitment from the local district attorney for more aggressive prosecution of wage theft. In Vermont, the state American Federation of Teachers (AFT) affiliate collaborated with the Vermont Worker Center to pass single-payer health care on the state level, putting forward the message that “health care is a human right” (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

**CLEAN Carwash Campaign**

Another outcome of the AFL-CIO/worker center partnerships has been the CLEAN Carwash Campaign (CLEAN Carwash Campaign 2016). As a result of the increasing levels of collaboration and trust that the partnership had developed between a number of Los Angeles area worker centers and local unions, community groups approached the AFL-CIO and asked whether, together with a union affiliate, it would partner with the community to improve conditions in the carwash industry. The United Steelworkers stepped up, with USW President Leo Gerard committing to
reach out to immigrant workers in an industry that had never been organ-
ized into a union.

Today, there are over 30 carwashes with union contracts in Los Angeles,
and union organizing campaigns have spread to New York City and Chicago. Worker centers are key partners in four carwash organizing
campaigns taking place in Chicago (Arise Chicago and USW), New York
(Make the Road New York and the Retail, Wholesale and Department
Store Union [RWDSU]), Los Angeles (various worker centers and USW),
and Santa Fe (Somos un Pueblo Unido). All four campaigns employ an
array of advocacy tools including litigation, heightened enforcement of
health and safety and wage and hour laws with state and local government
agencies, boycotts, and community pressure. The New York campaign has
won four National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections and three
collective bargaining agreements.

In addition to the strong labor–community partnership to unionize
carwashes, in 2016 the CLEAN Campaign incubated and launched a
Carwash Worker Center. This new worker center was the evolution of
leadership programs for carwash workers, a strong and active Carwash
Worker Organizing Committee, and the participation of carwash worker
leaders in citywide campaigns led by worker centers. The Carwash Worker
Center has become the central space for leadership development of carwash
workers who have yet to unionize. Additionally, the worker center is working
closely with United Steelworkers to provide services and programs to their
union carwash members.

**AFL-CIO National Convention 2013**

On September 8, 2013, the AFL-CIO kicked off its national convention
in Los Angeles. The last time it was held in Los Angeles was in 1999, when
the AFL-CIO announced its historic declaration in support of a legaliza-
tion program for all undocumented immigrants, increased workplace pro-
tection for immigrant workers, and an end to support for employer san-
tion laws, which it had supported back in 1986 as part of the Immigration
Reform and Control Act (IRCA). The 2013 AFL-CIO national convention
in Los Angeles marked a historic opening by the AFL-CIO and signaled
a commitment to diversity, partnership, and new ideas to transform a labor
movement that had been in a steady decline for the past 30 years. However,
events leading up to the convention spotlighted a dramatic disjuncture in
the level of collaboration between the national federation and national
unions, and the national worker center federations and many of their local
counterparts. Despite close collaborations between some local worker cen-
ters and unions, major challenges remained in many parts of the country.
Unions and worker centers in many communities had profound cultural
differences, and they lacked a shared analysis about the situation of low-
wage workers and a common understanding of each other’s history and strategic approaches.

At the same time, however, the necessity for collaboration on campaigns for immigrant rights and workplace justice was only growing. For example, a major challenge that worker centers raised is the issue of immigration. Most worker centers organize undocumented workers, which makes it necessary for central labor councils to recognize how their stance on immigration can affect relationships with worker centers. A few worker centers reported tensions or pushback because the issue of immigration came up. For example, if the affiliation process involved a day laborer worker center, then there might be vocal opposition from or tension with the local building and trades union leadership. Another example was the issue of inclusion. The majority of worker centers currently organize women and undocumented workers. Some of them noticed a lack of diversity right away when first going to the central labor council meetings. They realized that it would be important to take steps toward making a space that tends to be more White and predominantly male more inclusive (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

Preceding the convention, working committees developed resolutions that would chart a new course for the AFL-CIO. The Committee on Growth, Innovation and Political Action created resolutions that called for central labor councils around the country to find ways to create opportunities for the affiliation process for worker centers; new organizing strategies, including a focus on the South and engaging young workers; labor law reform; and immigration reform with a pathway to citizenship. One of the resolutions specifically called on the AFL-CIO to expand its partnerships with worker centers, strengthen its Worker Center Advisory Council, and invest more in its work with foundations to seed union/worker center collaboration. It also called for the AFL-CIO in cooperation with worker centers and national associations of worker centers to expand and update existing research describing in detail the operation of worker centers and documenting examples of union/worker center collaboration (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

Beginning with the first pre-convention diversity conference, where worker center, community, and labor activists came together to address the future of worker representation, the convention brought a number of nontraditional partners together to chart a new course for the AFL-CIO. For example, the election of Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the National Taxi Workers Alliance (NTWA), to the AFL-CIO Executive Council was the first time a representative from a worker center became a member of the federation’s governing body. During his keynote address, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka was joined on the stage by day laborers, domestic workers, taxi workers, carwash workers, and other groups
of workers who had historically been excluded from the protections of labor laws. The AFL-CIO leadership moved further toward inclusion by honoring the International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN) in recognition of the rights of domestic workers everywhere. On June 16, 2011, government, employer, and labor delegates to the International Labour Conference (ILC) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) voted nearly unanimously to adopt Convention 189, Decent Work for Domestic Workers. This first international set of standards on paid household labor marks a tangible victory for both the labor movement and the global women’s movement. The AFL-CIO worked on this initiative, and they invited the NDWA and its members to participate in the conference and provide testimonies (Fish 2017).

**AFL-CIO Worker Center Advisory Council**

In January 2012, the AFL-CIO established the Worker Center Advisory Council to help bridge these gaps and build on opportunities. The council consists of worker center leaders, state federation/CLC leaders, union leaders, and academic/research advisors. The advisory council met for the first time in January 2012. Four main themes emerged from the two-day meeting. First was the need for sustainable models for worker centers. Most worker centers relied on philanthropic dollars for the majority of their resources to function. Because of dwindling amounts from foundation grant awards, some worker centers had begun experimenting with alternative models to generate resources.

Second was the need for more research, documentation, and education. Participants felt that there was too little research on union/worker center collaboration, almost no documentation of existing collaborations, and a continuing need for education among worker centers and unions about each other’s functions and strategies. Many worker centers and unions did not understand one another’s role in the labor market. Third was a need for more avenues for collaborations between worker centers and unions. Although the number of unions that interacted in a nontransactional way with worker centers had increased over the past few years, many unions still had not yet explored what such collaborations could mean for them. At the same time, many worker centers did not have the opportunity to highlight their work or build relationships with unions outside of those they already knew. There remained a great need for additional experimentation with collaborative projects.

Finally, the organizations identified a need for deeper strategic thinking about synergies. They felt that there needed to be more discussion on the advantages for worker centers and unions for engaging in partnerships. In addition, they felt that dialogue was necessary to address the challenges posed by the partnerships. For example, worker centers are not labor
organizations subject to the restrictions on secondary activity created by the Taft–Hartley Act or the reporting, disclosure, and elections requirements of the Landrum–Griffin Act. Some worker centers feared that a closer collaboration with unions would cause them to be subject to these constraints and requirements. The organizations realized that a deeper thought process was necessary in order to develop strategies for collaboration between particular affiliates and particular worker centers that could create synergies.

Since the first historic meeting, the advisory committee has met periodically and become an important vehicle for sharing best practices, developing strategies, and responding to urgent issues such as the attacks on worker centers by conservative groups.

**LIFT Fund to Support Union/Worker Center Collaborations**

In 2012, the AFL-CIO partnered with philanthropic institutions to establish the Labor Innovations for the 21st Century (LIFT) Fund to support “collaborative and innovative cross-sector learning between communities, the labor movement, and organizations working for a fair economy.” The fund works to support collaborative work between unions and worker centers, document and disseminate new strategies, and promote advocacy within labor, philanthropy, and other sectors working to build worker power. The LIFT Fund has provided grant support to major organizing campaigns led by worker centers including the CLEAN Carwash Campaign, National Day Laborer Organizing Network and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. The union partners benefiting from these initiatives included the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA), the United Steelworkers, the American Federation of Teachers, and the United Food and Commercial Workers as well as central labor councils and state labor federations from various states and cities.

Examples of LIFT Fund–supported collaborations include the following:

- In Austin, Texas, the Workers Defense Project and its allies in the building trades are working together across the state to create a wage floor in the construction industry.
- In New Mexico, Somos un Pueblo Unido and the Santa Fe Central Labor Council are collaborating to build local workplace and sectoral committees of low-wage immigrant workers.
- LIUNA and NDLON worked with day laborer organizations in New York and New Jersey to build an associate membership program to bring workers into the union and conduct safety trainings for workers engaged in rebuilding after Hurricane Sandy devastated communities in both states.
- The National Taxi Workers Alliance has chartered its first new local in Austin and is building an ambitious membership drive to increase its density and dues payment in New York and Philadelphia.
• Centro de los Derechos Del Migrante and American Federation of Teachers together launched Authentic Voices, a cross-sector worker committee for international labor recruitment reform to bring worker voices to advocacy activities related to international labor recruitment.

• In Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Black Worker Center (LABWC) and the Los Angeles County Labor Federation are working to ensure an effective and timely implementation of the new anti-wage theft ordinance, with robust enforcement mechanisms in the city, including advocacy, worker outreach, trainings, and more in a multi-sector, multi-industry, and multi-ethnic collaboration.

• In Los Angeles, LABWC, the Sheet Metal Workers International Association (SMART) Local 105, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 11 worked together to increase access to quality jobs.

• Voces de la Frontera and the American Federation of Teachers are working together to build and share capacity to establish a strong neighborhood network of working-family committees in Milwaukee to demand the protection of public education and a strong pro-immigrant rights agenda in the schools.

• In New Orleans, the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice is working with the Southeast Laborers’ District Council Laborers International Union, connecting to union training programs African Americans who are former union members and guestworkers on short-term contracts.

EVALUATING THE PARTNERSHIPS

In 2014, the LIFT Fund and AFL-CIO commissioned the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (UCLA Labor Center) to conduct a survey and assessment report of the 16 worker center affiliations into AFL-CIO state federations of labor and local central labor councils throughout the country. The report, entitled “Building a Movement Together: Worker Centers and Labor Union Affiliations,” analyzed in-depth surveys of the worker centers and central labor council or state federation of labor involved with an affiliation process and created recommendations on how to strengthen this partnership model (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

The study found that national worker center networks are playing a key role in local-level implementation of affiliations and recommended that the AFL-CIO explore ways to continue to strengthen its relationship with them through revising partnership agreements and developing tools to help members of the networks strengthen their local partnerships with central labor councils. However, the study also found that there were many
important worker centers that were not connected to national organizations, and they called for specific strategies to develop affiliations with “stand-alone” worker centers and local networks of worker centers and connect them with central labor councils, especially in regions where the labor movement lacks political strength.

The study also found that the affiliation process itself had become a focal point of transformative action by creating spaces for dialogue, reflection, and the development of strategy as well as a mechanism for the sharing of best practice models and creating solidarity support for organizing and policy campaigns. The report’s authors noted that affiliation had already produced positive outcomes that have allowed partners to augment each other’s work, collaborate on campaigns, and develop joint strategies. Throughout the survey and in-depth interviews, respondents repeatedly expressed a need for information about affiliations taking place in other parts of the country and showed a serious interest in the best practices and lessons learned elsewhere, and they recommended that the AFL-CIO create and distribute materials such as toolkits and guides on how to facilitate the affiliation process and best practices of successful affiliation models.

Another finding of the study was that many worker centers were struggling with financial, staffing, and capacity issues, and the lack of resources to address staffing and capacity had become a major crisis. While the affiliation process offered them opportunities for key alliance building and solidarity support for their campaigns, most worker centers were also looking to the partnerships with central labor councils as potential fundraising opportunities. The report authors recommended that the AFL-CIO build on the success of the LIFT Fund to create more opportunities to generate funding for worker centers involved in the affiliation process.

Despite the partnerships, the surveys and interviews revealed that, for some unions, discussions about immigration and worker centers were still quite fraught and had been marked by misconceptions and misunderstandings. Strikingly, the study found that many worker centers lacked a clear understanding of unions, the AFL-CIO, and the history of the labor movement. Worker centers and their members often carried serious misconceptions about unions when they entered into an affiliation process. When one partner lacked a working knowledge of how the other’s institution operated, miscommunication often followed. The authors argued that both parties needed to better understand how each other’s structures work, and put a clear system of accountability in place.

The authors called on the AFL-CIO to create materials for central labor councils on issues relating to immigration and low-wage immigrant workers and to produce workshops dedicated to overcoming stereotypes and undoing misconceptions relating to undocumented workers as well as worker centers
and their history. Likewise, the report called for unions to show greater sensitivity to issues relating to inclusivity and diversity and recommended partnering with groups that are experienced in these areas to produce workshops for worker centers and unions that are about to engage in a process of relationship building.

The authors also recommended that the AFL-CIO produce educational materials and a workshop curriculum that focused on the structure and culture of unions, as well as the history of the labor movement and the AFL-CIO (Narro, Poyaoan, and Waheed 2015).

**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

By linking with the AFL-CIO and its affiliates, worker centers have the potential to win substantial gains for low-wage workers. No other movement has been as successful as organized labor in driving systemic, long-term shifts in the redistribution of wealth. Even today, in its weakened state, labor is still the best-resourced and largest membership-based institution on the left in the United States.

There are important potential benefits to joining forces with worker centers. The most deeply ingrained theme of anti-union propaganda, despite voluminous evidence to the contrary (Lafer 2017), is that unions care only about their individual dues-paying members and do not represent the needs of all working people. Incorporating worker centers (at this point, nondues-paying members) into the AFL-CIO reinforces labor’s moral authority. They are an enduring demonstration of the federation’s commitment to representing the needs of all working people in the United States—especially those at the bottom—and enables it to reach immigrant and African American workers in the fastest-growing employment category in our economy: low-wage jobs.

Partnerships with worker centers position unions for low-wage worker organizing in several ways. They show that strong bases of solidarity can be constructed when occupational and industrial identities are united with those of ethnicity, race, immigration status, gender, and gender identity. As community-based institutions, they lend themselves to labor market-wide strategies necessary to organizing in overwhelmingly non-union environments. By going after end user companies at the top of industrial supply chains rather than individual employers who are often small, mobile, and whose brand names are unknown to the broader public, they shed light on how to raise standards across an entire industry in which subcontracting is rampant. For the increasing number of workers who are not in long-term relationships with a single employer, they offer access to education, training, legal representation, advocacy, and flexible agreements that allow for the raising of standards without collective bargaining.
Labor law in the United States is in need of dramatic reform in order to be utilized more effectively to organize workers. As a consequence of years of laws being weakened through Congress and the courts, employers are able to intimidate workers who wish to join unions, stall after union elections have been won, and refuse to bargain a first contract—in some cases, for years—until a new vote can be taken to decertify the union. As discussed above, as non-union entities, worker centers are not permitted to collectively bargain for workers, but they are not restrained by provisions of the Taft–Hartley Act that prohibit secondary boycotts. Recent attacks by the Chamber of Commerce and others are falsely claiming that worker centers are really unions by another name in order to narrow their strategic arsenal. Formal membership or partnerships with the AFL-CIO will certainly be cited as evidence of worker centers’ union affiliations.

The labor movement needs organizing strategies outside of the National Labor Relations Act given the changes to how labor in the United States is structured, weakened protections under current labor law, and the trend toward right-to-work in many states around the country. Worker centers originated to meet the needs of low-wage workers in unorganized industries and are employing innovative strategies to win better protections for thousands of workers.

While labor unions remain the best-resourced progressive institutions in the United States, the rapid decline of dues-paying members threatens their longevity. Worker centers today are fledgling institutions highly dependent on government and foundation grants. Most worker centers currently lack the internal infrastructure needed to make them self-sufficient institutions. While better-resourced unions should commit financial resources to support worker centers, there is a broad concern among centers that they will be junior partners in the labor movement if they do not become more self-sufficient. Worker centers will have to develop self-sufficient organizational models, but this change will not occur overnight, and any partnership will have to recognize this fact. Moreover, the organizing experiments being conducted in worker centers, while promising for the labor movement as a whole, will need to focus more on income generation, first and foremost through membership dues, in order to be able to engage in the kind of experimentation and testing of new strategies necessary to the development of new models. Many worker centers argue that, given the income levels of their constituents, they could not generate enough revenue through dues, but unions have not had this experience. Members of SEIU’s building services locals are overwhelmingly immigrants, people of color, and low income, yet they have repeatedly voted in favor of significant dues increases. Full-time workers pay an average of $65 and part-time workers $33 per month.
Many worker centers understand organized labor’s long history of fighting for workers and have often sought guidance and resources from unions and central labor councils. After all, many worker centers believe unions are powerful with access to resources and strong political connections. Worker centers believe that organized labor brings a more established understanding of how workers can gain power in the workplace, what an organized shop looks like, and what steps are necessary to win a campaign. Some worker centers view themselves as a precursor for workers seeking union representation. Central labor councils admire worker centers for their creativity, their commitment to worker justice, and their ability to connect worker struggles with community issues to fight for victories beyond the workplace. They also recognize how worker centers are able to lead major policy campaigns for workers with few resources and accomplish major victories.

These combined efforts of unions and worker centers to organize immigrant and low-wage workers throughout the country have led to innovative partnerships, new models of organizing campaigns, and efforts to expand the base of the labor movement. These efforts laid the foundation for the innovations that took place during the 2013 AFL-CIO convention that focused on diversity, inclusion, and new organizing models and partnerships that will help to transform the labor movement.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite the gains from this partnership, which are felt mostly at the local or regional level, worker centers need the infrastructure and stability offered by the AFL-CIO to remain viable in the long term. Low-wage work is a growing sector of the economy, and coordination between established labor unions and worker centers is necessary to meet the growing need to organize new workforces and gain ground in industries that were once union dense but have suffered declining union membership. Both worker centers and unions have the opportunity to benefit significantly from working jointly to achieve important victories. For collaboration to be effective, however, worker centers need significant investments from unions to help them become self-sufficient institutions.

With the continuing attacks and looming threats against the labor movement, and the recent upsurge in workers mobilizing and taking to the streets, forging strong community–labor alliances is playing a major role in many of our victories. These alliances are not recent developments in the labor movement. Many are the outcomes of years of efforts and investment in relationship building and creating strategic partnerships. The AFL-CIO Worker Center Partnership is an example of labor–community alliance building that has led to major accomplishments and
victories. The mutual benefit, respect, and synergy between worker centers and the labor movement are clear. Over time, many union and worker center activists have come to realize the labor movement’s future depends not only on organizing prospective members but also on engaging all workers—union and non-union, immigrant and non-immigrant. Local partnerships have led to significant outcomes in local policy campaigns against wage theft and other forms of exploitation against workers, strong solidarity support for worker organizing efforts to win a union or address exploitation in the workplace, and ongoing local joint initiatives that combine collaboration and innovation. It is in local campaigns where the work leads to cross-sector relationships that the connection between these two types of organizations will reach greater numbers of union and worker center members and continue to mature.

REFERENCES


INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the ways immigrant workers are transforming the American labor movement and the role of unions in advocating for immigrant rights. The intersection of immigrant and labor rights is perhaps inevitable now that immigrants comprise nearly 17% of the US labor force, nearly half of them identifying as Latino and a quarter as Asian (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017). Also, worker issues have been central to recent political debates among policy makers and union leaders alike. Examples include the creation of employer sanctions in 1986 (which unions then supported but now oppose), recent proposals to expand guest worker programs (which unions are divided over), and legal challenges to undocumented immigrants’ access to collective bargaining and other workplace rights (which implicate unions and other types of worker organizations).

While the growing immigrant workforce is bifurcated, labor issues are common to different types of immigrants. Many high-skilled immigrants work in the technology and health care fields where precarious conditions often leave them far from parity with their native-born counterparts (Ontiveros 2016). Low-skilled workers, especially those who are undocumented, are especially vulnerable owing to the much higher number of wage and hour violations and more hazardous work conditions in the jobs they tend to fill (Hall and Greenman 2014; Milkman, González, and Ikeler 2012). These latter workers often also confront language barriers, racial discrimination, and challenges resulting from their immigration status. Organized labor has taken a particular interest in the needs of low-wage immigrant workers, begrudgingly at first, but more proactively since the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) formally declared support for immigrant rights in 2000 (Burgoon, Fine, Jacoby, and Tichenor 2010).
Labor's increased support for immigrant rights has manifested itself through high-profile protests, more advocacy on behalf of immigrant rights, a growing number of immigrants in union leadership positions, and other ways discussed in this chapter.

Unions' increased engagement with immigrants has not been easy. Unions and other worker advocates are confronting a paradoxical legal context that affects how unions strategize and engage with immigrant communities. On the one hand, labor standards enforcement agencies—including the US Department of Labor, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), and state and local agencies—seek to uphold the rights of all immigrant workers. Yet immigration law often prevents undocumented immigrants from accessing full remedies, especially in the collective bargaining context. Furthermore, federal immigration enforcement agencies—most notably US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—have increasingly singled out undocumented immigrants and focused on the workplace as a site for enforcement actions. In this paradoxical legal setting, with tensions between integrative and exclusionary policies and practices, the AFL-CIO has sought to influence national debates around visa allocations, enforcement processes and priorities, and legalization. Labor unions have also responded in other ways, by including innovative wording in collective bargaining contracts, influencing state and local policies that increase immigrant protections, and joining coalitions to provide immigrant members and their families with access to a range of critical social and legal services.

This chapter broadens the discussion of unions' engagement with immigrant workers by contextualizing unions within the broader field of immigrant rights advocacy. Unions rely on community partners to support their worker rights campaigns, but they have also played an important role in supporting immigrant rights campaigns. We draw on research in three traditional immigrant destinations with different state and local contexts for worker organizing—Chicago, San Francisco, and Houston—to highlight that unions have increased their activism on immigrants and their labor issues, though in locally distinct ways. We argue that key factors driving this variation include the amount of power unions enjoy locally, the political context in which unions operate, and the form and function of the local field of civil society organizations in which unions are embedded.

In what follows, we first provide a brief overview of the maze of US immigration laws and labor and employment laws, focusing on the challenges for both individual immigrant workers and the organizations that advocate on their behalf. Then, based on the typology first developed by Fine (2006), we discuss three ways in which organized labor—both unions and worker centers—have responded to these challenges, including through collective organizing, public policy advocacy, and the provision of legal and other services.
To do so, we draw on examples from union activism in three traditional immigrant-receiving cities, and we discuss (1) innovative labor organizing campaigns in Chicago, (2) successful campaigns to create living and minimum wages in San Francisco, and (3) key immigrant worker organizing efforts and evolving responses to the 2012 and 2014 DACA/DAPA federal executive initiatives in Houston. Our main findings illustrate the challenges of diversifying union leadership positions, the opportunities strong coalitions provide to advance pro-immigrant local legislation, and the effective ways to frame immigrant labor issues to build support across the aisle in anti-immigrant state environments. We conclude with a discussion of both best practices and challenges of union engagement with immigrant issues as illustrated by these three city case studies.

LEGAL CHALLENGES FOR IMMIGRANT WORKER RIGHTS

In the United States, laws on the books mostly offer foreign-born workers the same labor rights as native-born workers. However, undocumented workers in particular face workplace vulnerabilities as a result of their immigration status. They represent only 5% of the US workforce (Passel and Cohn 2016), but their precarious position in the labor market renders them the proverbial canary in the coal mine in the race to the bottom in workplace rights. This is because of closing opportunities for legal migration for low-wage workers, but also because of the increasing reliance of certain industries—most notably agriculture, residential construction, and the service sector—on undocumented laborers.

Immigration Law Challenges

The labor challenges of low-wage immigrant workers stem from the fact that many work in industries and workplaces with higher risks of workplace violations, including wage theft, occupational hazards, and workplace injuries (Bernhardt, Spiller, and Polson 2013; Hall and Greenman 2014). The rights afforded to low-wage immigrant workers without legal status are the most precarious in this regard. On the one hand, federal immigration authorities have routinely used the workplace to find, detain, and then deport undocumented immigrants. On the other, major federal labor standards enforcement agencies have been concerned with reaching out to these workers in order to promote compliance with labor laws among employers, who might otherwise exploit undocumented workers with impunity in efforts to lower labor costs. These tensions between federal immigration and labor laws were very notable under the Bush and Obama administrations, both of which used the workplace for enforcement through mechanisms such as Social Security No-Match Letters, E-Verify compliance, and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) audits of employer records (National Immigration Law Center 2012).
The situation has become more tenuous under the Trump administration, which has emphasized immigration enforcement priorities that affect many more undocumented immigrants and even legal immigrants. At the same time that the administration has pulled back on recently strengthened worker protections, it has also advocated a return to high-profile workplace raids and a willingness to conduct ICE arrests and removals at previously safe spaces such as courthouses, schools, churches, and hospitals. Earlier, various federal labor standards enforcement agencies had drawn up memoranda of understanding that preclude ICE from interfering in their investigations (Griffith 2011). However, the Trump administration has effectively ignored these goodwill and common-sense measures, even promoting immigration enforcement at worker dispute hearings. In this context, union leaders and other immigrant rights advocates remain concerned about both information sharing between employers and immigration officials and the willingness of federal authorities to respect sensitive locations as off-limits to ICE officials.

To be sure, immigration laws form the primary obstacle for undocumented workers to receiving fair, just, and equitable treatment in the workplace. One of the most important immigration policies shaping immigrant employment was codified in 1986 as the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). This federal law had both inclusive and punitive elements, creating a one-time large-scale legalization program benefiting more than 2.7 million undocumented immigrants and instituting employer sanctions that are still in effect. The latter policy, which unions championed at the time, mandated the use of the now-ubiquitous I-9 form that requires employers to verify the work eligibility of their employees. This, in theory, left employers vulnerable to hefty fines if they knowingly hired undocumented workers. Yet, in practice, worker advocates now point to the low levels of actual employer enforcement and the added power that status verification mechanisms give employers to retaliate against workers who speak out against or challenge workplace abuses, especially in an at-will employment environment.

Following IRCA, labor advocates litigated the right of undocumented immigrants to assert their workplace rights. Of biggest consequence here was the 2002 US Supreme Court decision in Hoffman Plastic Compounds, Inc. v. National Labor Relations Board. The decision in this case precluded undocumented workers from accessing key remedies, including receiving back pay, after being fired for participating in a union organizing campaign. The case, while limited in its application, has had ripple effects across other areas of case law. Since then, some states (e.g., California) have strengthened protections for undocumented workers, while other states (e.g., Arizona) have instead enacted more punitive measures, thereby widening the gulf in undocumented worker rights protections across states (Bohn, Lofstrom, and Raphael 2013; National Employment Law Project 2013).
Labor and Employment Law Challenges

Looking beyond immigration law, both undocumented and documented immigrants face a variety of workplace challenges in large part as a result of the precarious nature of the work they do in agriculture, construction, and the hotel and restaurant industries. Federal law provides a framework for upholding basic worker rights across the country for all workers, but labor policies and their enforcement can vary widely across levels of government in the US federal system. Distinguishing between different enforcement regimes can be difficult for immigrant workers experiencing problems, and there is little coordination between labor enforcement agencies at the federal, state, and local levels. Workers may also quickly find that they are ineligible for protections. Especially in the informal economy and the growing gig economy, so-called independent contractors abound, and the courts are struggling to settle what obligations companies such as Uber and Manpower have to their just-in-time employees. Such coverage, furthermore, can vary substantially by state and industry.

Worker advocates play an important role in educating workers of their rights in this confusing federated landscape of labor laws and practices. For example, many worker centers challenge the misclassification of day laborers as independent contractors to help them recover lost wages and access health and safety benefits (Nicholson, Bunn, and Costich 2008; Quinlan and Mayhew 1999). Many low-wage workers also struggle to navigate complicated management hierarchies, especially in industries such as agriculture and construction where subcontracting and sub-subcontracting are common. Here, worker advocates had recently been able to strengthen joint employer responsibility, but these efforts too have been rescinded by the Trump administration.

The ability of low-wage immigrant workers to access formal labor and employment protections often hinges on access to legal counsel or other advocates who can guide and assist them in the claims process. Having a lawyer at one’s side can lead to more generous settlements and can bridge language gaps for immigrant workers who struggle with English. Yet even access to low-cost attorneys can be difficult, especially when lawyers rely on funding that restricts their ability to serve undocumented immigrants. With union membership levels at historic lows, new forms of worker advocacy have emerged to address the needs of these particularly disadvantaged immigrant workers. This in turn has prompted questions about the rights of non-union organizations to represent workers (Griffith 2015). Furthermore, these organizations must navigate IRS regulations that restrict the amount and type of political activities of not-for-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organizations. While these regulations do not stop advocates, they do shape the strategies and tactics they use to make rights real for their immigrant clients and members (de Graauw 2016).
ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO IMMIGRANT WORKER RIGHTS

The intersection of immigration and labor and employment laws has created many challenges for immigrant workers, but it has also produced a unique issue space in which different organizations are active. Most notably, these include labor unions, worker centers, and other nonprofit organizations; faith-based institutions; local government agencies; and foreign consulates. They all have an interest in advancing the rights of immigrant workers, though to varying degrees and with immigration-related issues differently articulated across organizations. These organizations also have different missions, core constituencies, access to resources, and abilities to engage in organizing and policy advocacy, making concerted action on immigrant worker rights challenging. At times, they have secured victories for immigrant workers when collaborating under the right circumstances. At other times, tensions and conflicts between organizations have resulted in missed opportunities for economic and policy change and setbacks for immigrant workers and their families.

Historically, relations between labor unions and immigrants, who were once seen as economic threats, were strained and at times openly hostile (Burgoon, Fine, Jacoby, and Tichenor 2010; Fine and Tichenor 2012). But in 2000, after years of grassroots organizing within the AFL-CIO and as the immigrant workforce continued to grow while unions suffered steep membership declines, organized labor formally embraced immigrants, including the undocumented, as legitimate members and an essential new source of organized labor’s power (Greenhouse 2000; Hamlin 2008). Since then, the largest labor federation and its affiliates have stepped up to strengthen their commitment to immigrant workers by devoting more resources to mobilizing and organizing these workers and by exerting political and policy influence over immigration issues and worker legislation.

Labor’s formal support for immigrants since 2000 has also meant that unions have built more partnerships with other organizations that promote immigrant rights and advocate for immigration reform. Notable collaborators include the National Partnership for New Americans (a coalition created in 2010 of 37 regional immigrant and refugee rights organizations spanning 31 states that work to influence immigrant rights policies at the local, state, and federal levels) and Working America (the community affiliate of the AFL-CIO that has championed a range of immigration issues). Unions continue to work with worker center coalitions, many of them immigrant led and immigrant focused, such as the National Day Laborer Organizing Network, and many central labor councils and regional federations have signed solidarity charters with them. Local unions and central labor councils, especially following the announcements of Obama’s executive immigration actions in 2012
and 2014, have worked more closely with immigration lawyers to make union-centered legal aid more readily available. In some cases, local labor councils have created new immigrant service centers, including the We Rise San Francisco Labor Center for Immigrant Justice that provides “one stop legal and wrap-around services to immigrant union members and their families” (San Francisco Labor Council 2017).

Besides unions, other member-based groups such as worker centers, immigrant advocacy organizations, and faith-based institutions have long been working with immigrants. These organizations, often located in the communities where immigrants live, help unions gain access to immigrant workers ripe for organizing. Many immigrants tend to work in industries that are difficult to unionize because of the small size of the workplace, the decentralized nature of the industry, or the isolated nature of work. In this context, worker centers, other nonprofits, and faith-based institutions provide safe havens for immigrant workers to address a variety of issues, and they can help unify disparate workers within a community and bolster support for grassroots union organizing campaigns (Cordero-Guzmán, Izvănariu, and Narro 2013; Martin 2012). Nonprofits also help rally support for unions among immigrants by expanding the union agenda to include broader concerns, such as poverty reduction, affordable housing, immigration reform, and a clean environment (Botein 2007; Wells 2000). Furthermore, nonprofits can help unions win recognition outside the traditional NLRB elections process, for example, by pressuring employers to recognize neutrality agreements (Sherman and Voss 2000). Finally, nonprofits legitimize union power in local policy making and community relations. While unions are still associated with strong-arm tactics to further their goals, nonprofits and faith-based institutions wield moral capital as a result of their association with charitable causes and social justice and faith initiatives (de Graauw 2016; Gleeson 2009).

Government entities, including local governments and foreign consulates, have also worked to advance immigrant worker rights. Between 1994 and 2006, with pressure from diverse coalitions of labor unions, community organizations, and churches, more than 140 municipalities around the country adopted living wage laws requiring employers with government contracts to pay their workers decent, living wages (Dean and Reynolds 2009). Some local governments have done more, enacting their own minimum wage laws (applying to all workers, including undocumented workers), wage theft prevention laws (to further protect immigrants and other vulnerable low-wage workers from unscrupulous employers who steal their wages), and other laws (such as paid sick leave, health care legislation, and municipal ID cards) that have benefited immigrants and other low-wage workers alike. Foreign consulates, most notably the Mexican
consulate, have also increased efforts to protect immigrant workers (Bada and Gleeson 2014; Délano 2011). Since 2007, the Mexican consulate has organized the annual Labor Rights Week, a bilateral initiative that coordinates efforts among local consular offices, federal and state labor standards enforcement agencies, labor unions, and immigrant-serving nonprofits to enforce the labor rights of Mexican immigrant workers in the United States.

UNIONS AND IMMIGRANT LABOR RIGHTS ACTIVISM IN CHICAGO, SAN FRANCISCO, AND HOUSTON

Unions’ engagement with immigrant workers varies from place to place, often depending on local union power, local political dynamics, and the characteristics of local civil society organizations. Here, we highlight notable developments in Chicago, San Francisco, and Houston to demonstrate the different ways in which unions in recent years have increased their activism on immigrants and their labor issues.

Building Coalitions for Collective Representation in Chicago

Chicago, the country’s third largest city with about 2.7 million residents, has a long history of immigration and supporting immigrant and worker rights. Large numbers of European immigrants as well as Arab, Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean immigrants have called Chicago home for over two centuries. In 2015, 21% of city residents were born abroad, with the majority coming from Latin America (55%), followed by Asia (22%) and Europe (17%). Fifty-eight percent of them had not acquired US citizenship in 2015, and the city has an estimated 183,000 undocumented immigrants who make up 23% of the foreign-born population (Paral and Associates 2011). Chicago is a Democratic stronghold, and more than three-quarters of the city’s voters supported Democratic presidential candidates in recent elections. Chicago’s first sanctuary city ordinance dates from 1985, and in recent decades, city officials have enacted various immigrant-friendly policies, including a Welcoming City Ordinance (2011), Minimum Wage Ordinance (2014), Anti-Wage Theft Ordinance (2015), Food Truck Ordinance (2015), Language Access Ordinance (2015), Paid Sick Leave Ordinance (2016), Municipal ID Ordinance (2017), and publicly funded legal services for immigrants facing deportation (2017). Most recently, the Chicago filed a federal lawsuit against recent efforts by the Trump administration to withhold federal funding from sanctuary cities. Finally, Chicago has an immigrant affairs office, called the Office of New Americans, which has promoted immigrant integration initiatives since 2011.

While the city’s original packinghouse unions of the early 20th century included mainly Irish and German workers, today’s meatpacking-related and service sector industries have many more Latino immigrants in the
ranks of large and vocal locals such as United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 881 and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1. Yet, over the past two decades, immigrant workers in Chicago have faced a steady decline in union density. Union-busting practices by private sector employers have contributed to this, also deterring long organizing campaigns and making long-term victories difficult to sustain. These challenges notwithstanding, traditional labor unions in Chicago still enjoy considerable power and visibility, and they remain major players in immigrant rights campaigns. Some of the leading immigrant unions include UNITE HERE! Local 1, UFCW Local 1546, SEIU Local 1, and Teamsters Local 743. As was the case across the country, the historic 2006 immigrant rights marches fell on the heels of previous mass mobilizations, including the 2003 Immigrant Freedom Ride, which drew support from the year-long UNITE HERE! campaign at the Congress Plaza Hotel on Michigan Avenue. This largely immigrant union workforce ultimately joined an even larger coalition of local hometown associations, faith-based groups, and other grassroots organizations in support of the ride. Several labor unions, including SEIU Local 1, also participated as part of a delegation from the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, Illinois’ largest immigrant rights coalition.

In Chicago and elsewhere, organizing low-wage immigrant workers remains very challenging, and the barriers to win an entire sector with large numbers of immigrant workers requires long-term union investments and unwavering support also from national union leadership. In the past decade, some Chicago metro-area unions serving immigrant workers have adopted innovative strategies to improve coalition building with local, national, and international actors with the goal of attracting wider public support for their organizing campaigns. These efforts, while showing Chicago unions’ growing engagement with immigrant workers and their issues, have had only modest results and various degrees of sustainability, as our review of five paradigmatic cases of union coalition building shows.

The first case involves a sectorwide union campaign in 2012 by the United Steelworkers to organize car washers in Chicago, a largely male and immigrant workforce (Bruno, Quesada, and Manzo 2012). While local union organizers were fully committed to the campaign, their organizing drive ultimately failed in part because it lacked full support from the national leadership. Investing union resources in an industry with high worker turnover proved untenable. Learning from the experience of this failed car-wash campaign, other Chicago unions have since worked to strengthen their relationships with worker centers to build trust and buy-in before launching their organizing campaigns.

The second case involves workers in an egg processing plant in Lansing (Illinois) collaborating with the Chicago worker center ARISE in an effort to
win an organizing campaign in 2016. It started out with a largely Latino immigrant workforce seeking to address labor disputes with the help of ARISE, which subsequently connected them with UFCW Local 881 (ARISE Chicago 2016; Trotter 2016). After a relatively short campaign, workers voted to have union representation in November 2016. The employer then retaliated and contacted the NLRB to challenge workers’ eligibility to vote. After the union threatened to sue the employer for unlawful dismissal, the employer briefly desisted. During the organizing campaign, UFCW organizers elevated immigrant labor issues, and with worker center organizers, collectively decided that the best approach was to use the media to build public support. This collaborative approach aided the successful union vote and helped the majority of the dismissed workers to get certified for visas set aside for victims of crime. The early outreach to and empowerment of these otherwise isolated workers was a major win, and eventually the employer and union reached a favorable settlement with all dismissed workers.

The third case involves workers at Fox Valley, a metal factory in the Chicago suburb of Aurora. Here, workers collaborated closely with a local hometown association to build worker trust and ultimately win a unionization campaign via the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers Local 1600 in 2009. The workers were largely Mexican immigrants from Michoacán, many struggling with language barriers that prevented them from fully understanding their workplace rights. The social network of the hometown association became a key mechanism to support their organizing campaign, but the workers also enjoyed the backing of a local alderwoman, the AFL-CIO Solidarity Office in Mexico City, and Sisamex and Dana (two Mexican companies that boycotted Fox Valley exports during the long negotiation process). Immediately following the union election victory, union contracts were translated into Spanish. However, after two years of drawn-out negotiations, the employer ultimately decided to move most of the operations to the more business-friendly states of Ohio and Wisconsin. Despite the bad outcome for the workers involved in this campaign, this case illustrates the power of transnational civil society as well as the importance of unions to make basic language-access accommodations for their immigrant members.

The fourth case involves a union rallying support from unions in other countries to build international solidarity for an organizing campaign. In 2008, the Republic Windows and Doors factory abruptly closed its operations on Goose Island (an industrial hub in Chicago) and fired its entire workforce, 75% of whom were Mexican immigrants. Seeing an organizing opportunity, the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America (UE) Local 1110 stepped in to lead a historic strike, even attracting the attention of President Obama. The strike garnered support from many local immigrant right organizations and a few European and Latin American labor groups (Lydersen
A California-based company next acquired the factory, pledging to retain all the workers. Yet, by 2012, the factory closed again, prompting another worker strike and occupation. Shifting gears altogether, after the closure, the UE ultimately led the workers to form a successful, but smaller worker-run cooperative that continues today as the New Era Windows Cooperative. They did so with the key support of The Working World, a nonprofit organization that promotes a just and sustainable economy for low-income communities.

The final case involves a now institutionalized partnership between Chicago unions, foreign consulates, and other local organizations aimed at fighting wage theft. Traditionally, consulates provide legal services and basic documents such as birth certificates and passports. Collaboration with unions first started around 2006 when some union representatives began calling on consular officials in Chicago to help locate immigrant members in a detention center following workplace raids. Following the 2006 marches in Chicago, Teamsters Local 743, SEIU, UFCW, Jobs with Justice, and Workers United also started working with the Mexican consulate and the US Department of Labor (DOL) to organize the pilot Labor Rights Week (LRW) in 2007 to address wage theft and other labor complaints. The pilot would eventually be replicated in Los Angeles and across 15 other consulates in 2008. Today, the LRW is organized at all Mexican consulates in the United States and Canada, and 12 consulates from Latin America and the Philippines have also joined (Bada and Gleeson 2015). While the LRW is federally managed by DOL and the embassies in Washington, D.C., the implementation happens locally, and its success depends on the ongoing commitment from all governmental and nongovernmental partners, with a strong leading role for unions.

In sum, Chicago labor unions have enjoyed a rich history of organizing for worker power, which has allowed them to work creatively with non-union organizations, including worker centers, hometown associations, and even foreign consulates. Despite their coordination and framing challenges, these collaborations have strengthened various labor campaigns that have also benefited the rights of immigrant workers.

**Exerting Policy Influence in San Francisco**

San Francisco, the 14th largest city in the United States with about 840,000 residents, has a long and continuous history of immigration. In 2015, 35% of city residents were born abroad. The majority of immigrants come from Asia (65%), followed by Latin America (19%) and Europe (13%). Thirty-nine percent of them had not acquired US citizenship in 2015, and the city has an estimated 30,000 to 45,000 undocumented immigrants (Hill and Johnson 2011; Migration Policy Institute 2014). San Francisco is deep blue politically, and more than 80% of the city’s voters have supported Democratic candidates in recent presidential elections. In recent decades, San Francisco
officials have enacted various immigrant-friendly policies, including a Sanctuary Ordinance (1989), Equal Access to Services Ordinance (2001), Municipal ID Ordinance (2007), Due Process for All Ordinance (2013), and noncitizen voting in local school board elections (Proposition N, 2017). San Francisco has a strong union movement, and the greater Bay Area boasts higher than national average union membership rates in the private and public sectors (Hirsch and Macpherson 2017). Additionally, San Francisco is located in a state that offers labor protections that surpass federal standards and limits cooperation with federal immigration enforcement officials.

In 2000, San Francisco created its own Office of Labor Standards Enforcement (OLSE) to enforce all wage and labor laws adopted by local legislators and San Francisco voters. Finally, San Francisco has two municipal agencies with specific immigrant-related mandates: the Immigrant Rights Commission, established by ordinance in 1997; and the Office of Civic Engagement and Immigrant Affairs, which in 2009 consolidated a handful of city administrative positions and offices responsible for immigrant integration programs.

Since 2000, San Francisco voters and policy makers have adopted several ordinances that have expanded the rights of immigrant and other low-wage workers. After a bruising and protracted campaign, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors enacted the Minimum Compensation Ordinance (popularly known as the Living Wage Ordinance) in 2000, raising the wages of an estimated 22,000 low-wage workers employed in businesses with city service contracts (Reynolds and Kern 2004). A broad Living Wage Coalition of more than 20 labor unions and worker centers, 28 religious leaders, 45 community organizations, and 10 immigrant rights organizations proposed and campaigned for a living wage of $14.50, at a time when the federal minimum wage was $5.15 and the California minimum wage was $5.75 (de Graauw 2016). The business community—especially the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce and the Golden Gate Restaurant Association—strongly opposed the $14.50 wage proposal and expended great resources in lobbying local policy makers to oppose it. In an attempt to find middle ground, Supervisor Tom Ammiano—at the time the board’s foremost advocate for economic and social justice—introduced an $11 living wage proposal, for which there was no majority support on the board. The policy proposal nearly died in May 2000, but living wage advocates’ threat to put the issue on the ballot forced all parties back to the negotiating table. As a result, in July 2000, a final compromise ordinance was enacted, calling for a $9 hourly wage (with provisions for paid and unpaid time off) for for-profit and nonprofit businesses with city service contracts.²

The Living Wage Coalition subsequently regrouped as the Minimum Wage Coalition and continued to campaign for a Minimum Wage Ordinance in 2003. This ordinance mandated that all low-wage workers in the city be paid
$8.50, an hourly wage higher than the federal and state minimums. This time, the advocates decided to put the issue on the ballot, allowing them to maintain control over the content of the ordinance at a time when the San Francisco economy was in a downturn and the business community opposed another wage increase. With an empowering electoral strategy targeting lower turnout neighborhoods of working-class people, immigrants, and people of color who would benefit most from the Minimum Wage Ordinance (including the Chinatown, Mission, and Bayview neighborhoods), 60% of San Francisco voters approved Proposition L, the Minimum Wage Ordinance. This made San Francisco one of the first of a growing number of cities with its own minimum wages. At the time that the ordinance was enacted, it was estimated that it would result in direct and indirect pay raises for more than 54,000 workers, or 12% of San Francisco’s private and nonprofit sector labor force. It was also estimated that the city’s minimum wage would disproportionately benefit immigrants, native-born minorities, and workers under the age of 25 (Reich and Laitinen 2003).

The city’s minimum wage is adjusted annually based on the previous year’s Consumer Price Index for urban wage earners in the San Francisco Bay Area. In early 2017, the San Francisco minimum wage was $13, compared with $10 at the state level and $7.25 at the federal level. The Minimum Wage Ordinance has an administrative enforcement mechanism through OLSE. The ordinance also provides for a private right of action for aggrieved workers and a representative cause of action, allowing unions and community organizations to file wage claims on behalf of duped workers. The ordinance also requires every workplace to post official bulletins announcing the current San Francisco minimum wage in English, Spanish, Chinese, and any additional language spoken by more than 5% of the workforce. Finally, the ordinance contains strong anti-retaliation language and prohibits employers from discriminating against workers who exercise their rights under the ordinance. Compared with the Minimum Compensation Ordinance, the Minimum Wage Ordinance contains more provisions aimed at protecting the rights of vulnerable immigrant workers who—owing to unfamiliarity with government agencies, undocumented status, or limited English proficiency—are less likely to contest labor law violations and speak up against unscrupulous employers (Gleeson 2012).

Labor and community organizations that campaigned for the Minimum Compensation and Minimum Wage Ordinances have since collaborated on several other policies that have further restructured the low-wage labor market in San Francisco. In 2001, the Board of Supervisors adopted the Health Care Accountability Ordinance, which requires city contractors and certain tenants on city property to offer health plan benefits to their employees or make payments to the city for use by the Department of Public Health.
In 2006, the Board of Supervisors adopted the Health Care Security Ordinance to provide comprehensive health care for the city’s 73,000 uninsured adult residents, who include many immigrants (Katz 2008). The Paid Sick Leave Ordinance, legislated via initiative in 2006, requires all employers to provide paid sick leave to all employees, including temporary and part-time ones, who perform work in San Francisco. Also in 2006, the city’s legislators adopted the Minimum Wage Implementation and Enforcement Ordinance to strengthen the enforcement of the Minimum Wage Ordinance against noncompliant private sector employers. The Board of Supervisors adopted the Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance in 2011, which further enhances the enforcement powers of OLSE and doubles the fines for employers who retaliate against workers exercising their rights under San Francisco labor laws. Finally, 77% of San Francisco voters adopted Proposition J in 2014, raising the city’s minimum wage to $15 by 2018.

Although these ordinances did not directly benefit most union members, who already enjoyed relatively generous wage and benefit packages, San Francisco unions were very active in the coalitions behind the different campaigns. Unions, however, often were not the frontrunner advocates. Given the dense and well-developed infrastructure of immigrant worker advocacy groups in San Francisco, organizations such as the Chinese Progressive Association and La Raza Centro Legal (the Community’s Legal Center) were able to play central leadership roles while working in partnership with unions sympathetic to immigrant labor rights.

High-Profile Organizing Campaigns and Legal Services in Houston

Houston, the fourth largest city in the country with about 2.2 million residents, is also very diverse. The sprawling city has experienced impressive growth in its immigrant population since World War II, and in 2015, 29% of Houstonians were foreign born, with the largest share hailing from Latin America (70%), followed by Asia (20%) and Africa (5%). Seventy-two percent of immigrants were not US citizens in 2015, and about 400,000 individuals in the larger metro area are estimated to be undocumented (Capps, Fix, and Nwosu 2015). Houston is located in a right-to-work state with weak labor and employment laws, and the city is marked by low union membership and unions that have relatively little sway over local politics. The countywide central labor council in Houston recently reinvented itself as the new Texas Gulf Coast Area Labor Federation, as part of a new “southern strategy” aimed at consolidating regional power (Miller 2016). While Houston is politically divided between Democrats and Republicans, it is flanked by staunchly conservative suburbs and rural areas. Houston has an Office of New Americans and Immigrant Communities that seeks to promote immigrants’ civic, economic, and cultural integration, though it has been restructured twice since its creation in
2001 as a result of legislative opposition and mayoral leadership changes. Compared with the politically more progressive Chicago and San Francisco, Houston provides a more challenging context for worker and immigrant rights advocacy.

Some of the leading anti-immigrant voices in federal politics come from the Houston area, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott recently signed into law an anti-immigrant bill (SB 4) resembling Arizona’s controversial “show me your papers” legislation from 2010. The American Civil Liberties Union issued a travel alert to Texas following the law’s enactment (McLaughlin 2017), and while Harris County (which encompasses most of Houston) has not taken action against this state legislation, Houston recently joined the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and four other Texas cities to challenge SB 4 in court (Associated Press 2017). Mayor Sylvester Turner has also declared Houston a “welcoming city” (short of calling it a sanctuary city, as advocates have been demanding), and the city’s police chief has sharply criticized the racial profiling impacts that SB 4 will likely have. Houston is also home to some of the staunchest immigrant advocacy through a small but active group of organizations such as the Fe y Justicia (Faith and Justice) worker center, Familias Inmigrantes y Estudiantes en la Lucha (FIEL, Immigrant Families and Students in the Struggle), and the local United We Dream affiliate. Although the newly constituted regional labor council has chosen not to take up local immigration battles, including the campaign to rescind Harris County’s 287(g) agreement with ICE, it passed a resolution in early 2017 calling on government agencies at all levels of government to protect immigrant families. The local business community, perhaps surprisingly, has played an active and vocal role in promoting immigrant integration and advocating for “sensible” federal immigration reform (de Graauw and Gleeson 2017).

While there have not been many labor organizing campaigns in Houston, some of the more high-profile ones have included organizing the Hilton Americas (Houston’s largest convention center hotel) and SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign. The latter resulted in first contracts for 5,000 janitors, in large part thanks to civil disobedience that resulted in $20 million in bail for those arrested during the campaign (Lerner and Shaffer 2015). In a massive 2012 janitor strike, even then moderate Mayor Annise Parker was persuaded to urge contractors to return to the bargaining table to consider the union’s “good faith offers” on behalf of its mostly female workers of color (Casares 2012). Beyond winning that initial contract, advocates also succeeded in securing key immigrant protections and prohibiting employment reverification and translations of key union documents and communications. In each campaign, as in the other cities profiled here, unions relied on a wide range of community allies to support their organizing in immigrant-heavy workplaces.
Beyond these organizing campaigns, Houston has become an unlikely leader in local worker policy, and the advocacy efforts of local worker centers and immigrant rights groups have a lot to do with that. In 2001, for example, local advocates had formed the Justice and Equality in the Workplace Partnership with the Mexican consulate with the goal of better coordinating access to workplace protections for immigrants. At one time, the city also funded a series of day labor centers with federal community development block grants. These worker centers, however, were controversial, and they eventually closed under pressure from nativist anti-immigrant groups (Gleeson 2012). Yet, in 2013, the Houston city council unanimously passed an anti-wage theft ordinance, the result of a campaign spearheaded by a broad coalition of immigrant and worker advocates who sought to tie employers’ outstanding wage violations and fines to their ability to renew their city business licenses (Morris 2013). This move that angered many employers, but others were supportive, arguing that such measures leveled the playing field for compliant employers who competed against noncompliant ones (de Graauw and Gleeson 2017).

In Houston, certain union and non-union advocates have also played important roles in connecting immigrants to legal services as federal immigration policies have changed in recent years. For example, key immigrant unions such as UFCW and SEIU have assisted immigrants through the naturalization process and introduced them to get-out-the-vote campaigns. Furthermore, in the wake of Obama’s 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and the proposed (and ultimately failed) 2014 Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA) and expanded DACA programs, union and non-union advocates have collaborated in connecting immigrants and their children to services that allow them to take advantage of these federal programs.

Local union leaders have viewed Obama’s executive immigration actions of vital importance for workers, because they provide work authorization to undocumented immigrants and protection from deportation to many working-class families. Though the expanded DACA and DAPA programs were stalled in the courts, and the Trump administration has now formally blocked their implementation, in the aftermath of their original announcement there was a flutter of activity to educate and prepare the many eligible applicants for the programs. Houston nonprofits in particular have guided immigrants through the DACA process, through a series of public workshops and private consultations. In the wake of the attempted rescission of the 2012 DACA program, these advocates have also been vocal in demanding a federal legislative fix and helping eligible DACA beneficiaries renew their protected status. However, the city’s relatively underdeveloped civil society sector has meant that private attorneys and sometimes unscrupulous notarios have had a large market share of would-be applicants (de Graauw and Gleeson 2016).
Houston’s Office of New Americans and Immigrant Communities has provided some technical support to local community organizations, but neither the city nor Harris County have funded any of the DACA or citizenship outreach or services, unlike in other cities. This reflects the strength of conservative anti-immigrant constituencies in the city and larger metro area and an overall small-government and pro-market ethos. The financial support for recent immigrant-focused legal services has instead come from local foundations, most notably the Houston Endowment and the Simmons Foundation. These foundations have funded the staffing and operations of the Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative (HILSC), which emerged out of a 2013 meeting of the Greater Houston Grantmakers’ Forum led by the United Way. Initially, HILSC focused on coordinating and streamlining local providers that offered legal services for undocumented immigrants who wanted to apply for the 2012 DACA program. With the shifting federal policy terrain, they now focus on serving a larger group of low-income immigrants who seek legal services while navigating the increasingly complex US immigration system. Unions have played only a minor role in HILSC, and legal service providers and other types of civil society organizations—including BakerRipley, the University of Houston Law Center Immigration Clinic, Catholic Charities, the YMCA International Services, and Boat People SOS—are at the heart of the collaborative.

In sum, the more hostile climate for immigrants and low-wage workers in Houston has led to a few, but powerful, high-profile union organizing campaigns and an eclectic collaborative of advocates who have worked together to influence local policy and provide social and legal services to immigrant workers and their families.

BEST PRACTICES
The city cases we discussed make clear that labor unions have come a long way, compared with several decades ago, in how they engage with immigrants and their issues. In cities with large immigrant populations, we see a range of creative and innovative responses that better position unions and their allies to represent the interests of immigrant workers. We see this in the new organizing strategies that unions have used in Chicago, the range of policy issues they have advocated for in San Francisco, and the greater number of services they have been providing to their immigrant members in Houston.

As we see in Chicago and San Francisco, two metropolises with large immigrant populations and historically strong labor movements, unions have attempted to increase their membership by using innovative organizing and advocacy campaigns. Collaborating with new allies—including worker centers, hometown associations, Mexican businesses, the Mexican consulate, and
international social justice and labor solidarity groups—has been central to these efforts. Notwithstanding their modest results, Chicago’s organizing campaigns in the past decade illustrate the diverse strategies unions are willing to explore to win the community’s trust and increase their visibility among low-wage immigrant workers. In San Francisco, the labor movement has been actively involved in multiple advocacy campaigns to win cumulative policy victories for immigrant workers, including higher and stronger minimum wages and other immigrant-friendly policies. In these two cases, unions operate in labor-friendly states and enjoy the political advantage of heavily Democratic city constituents, who are more willing to support pro-immigrant and progressive labor laws.

Houston is perhaps more counterintuitive, as it is a city with a moderately progressive shine in a right-to-work state that is also among the most conservative and anti-immigrant states in the country. Unions in Houston, which has the largest undocumented population among the three cities we studied, have nonetheless been able to win a few significant organizing campaigns. Thanks to innovative partnerships with immigrant rights organizations, the Mexican consulate, business groups, and faith-based organizations, local unions have also provided essential outreach to immigrant members and drawn immigrants into get-out-the-vote campaigns to increase their political engagement. Despite Houston’s more challenging political climate, its city council has become an unlikely leader in local worker and immigrant rights policies.

In sum, in order to evaluate how today’s unions are engaging with immigrant communities, it is important to look at a wide range of their activities beyond traditional organizing campaigns. We need to consider also unions’ public policy advocacy, service provision activities, and coalition building at the local level. And we also need to look at their losses and setbacks to understand how unions are adapting to a rapidly changing political landscape and a growing and diversifying immigrant workforce. Finally, it is essential, as we have demonstrated, to consider the work of non-union organizations, including worker centers and immigrant-serving nonprofits, in evaluating what strides are being made in immigrant worker rights.

**CHALLENGES AHEAD**

Unions cannot lead and have not led immigrant worker rights advocacy on their own, and how they go about their work and the effect they have depends also on the context in which they operate. Key considerations include how much power unions have in a particular place, what local political dynamics are like, and what kinds of partners in government and the nonprofit sector are available and willing to work with them. Also, while local unions need to count on support from national union leaders, national and local priorities do
not always align, even within a particular industry. Besides long-standing immigrant unions such as SEIU, UNITE HERE!, and UFCW, it is important for other unions to proactively invest in immigrant workers as well. The former three unions have large numbers of immigrant members, and they are visible immigrant rights leaders in the three cities we studied. Yet it is clear that we need more unions that address the needs of immigrant workers. The recent bold actions of national leaders from the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are instructive examples of unions whose members are not primarily immigrants but that nonetheless have institutionalized immigrant rights into their organizational platforms.

For unions to remain relevant, they have to engage with a range of issues that affect immigrant workers. In addition to traditional labor issues, they also have to heed issues such as language access, housing, policing, voter registration, legal services, and identification documents. This can be challenging for union leaders, who might not want to engage with immigrant worker issues unless they feel they can make a strong case to their membership that this investment is a priority and matters for all members.

The willingness of SEIU, UNITE HERE!, and UFCW to appoint first- and second-generation immigrants to key leadership positions has been critical in elevating a range of issues within their organizations. As such, local unions elsewhere may benefit from diversifying their leadership as well. Unions that lack diversity and that have been disengaged from immigrant worker issues can start addressing a broader range of issues by establishing partnerships with worker centers and unions that are doing this already.

Finally, for labor unions to be able to engage with immigrant worker issues more effectively, federal and state labor standards enforcement mechanisms need to work for immigrant workers, regardless of their citizenship and immigration status. In this regard, both the turn toward enforcement-only immigration policies and the recent federal retrenchment of worker rights are major concerns. The government officials of states such as California, which has vocally opposed the interference in worker rights enforcement by federal immigration officials, will remain critical for immigrant worker rights. Civil society actors—including unions, worker centers, and immigrant rights organizations—will need to work together to keep state and federal officials accountable to immigrant workers.

ENDNOTES

1 Unless otherwise noted, all 2015 demographic data are from the American Community Survey, 2011–15 estimates, detailed table B05002 (US Census Bureau 2015).

2 Exempted from the Minimum Compensation Ordinance in 2000 were contracts for goods, contractors with 20 or fewer employees, for-profit businesses with service
contracts of less than $25,000, nonprofit service providers with contracts less than $50,000, and nonprofit contractors that could prove that compliance with the ordinance would cause them economic hardship. These provisions continue to hold, but as of January 2017 the hourly wage is $13.64 for new and amended contracts with for-profits, and $13 in the case of nonprofits (Office of Labor Standards Enforcement 2017).

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 2015, the Bay Area Black Worker Center (BABWC) set up a table at the job fair hosted by the Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California. The staff prepared to distribute flyers and conduct brief surveys with the expectation that the vast majority of attendees would be jobless. However, the majority of attendees had jobs; they were there to find a good job. The tremendous need for jobs that paid well and provided benefits illustrates an overlooked dimension of the Black job crisis. While the dominant narrative about Black employment issues focuses on unemployment, the reality of Black employment issues is that even though a large number of Black workers are employed, the quality of those jobs is poor.

As BABWC continued its organizing and explored the employment challenges faced by its members, it found that the incarceration history of many individuals constrained their employment options. Some had been on jobs for a long time, but when the employer learned they were formerly incarcerated, they were terminated. Others were deterred by the employment application’s question about any history of incarceration. Still others found that California’s impressive legislation reducing some felony convictions to misdemeanor offenses did not benefit them because their felony convictions were not on the list of felonies to be reclassified. This led BABWC to form a coalition demanding that the Alameda County Board of Supervisors directly hire formerly incarcerated individuals into county government jobs. This successful campaign reflected another element of the Black job crisis: solutions to the crisis must go beyond efforts at individual uplift and structurally transform employers’ (public and private) hiring decisions.
The root cause of the Black job crisis lies in the lack of collective power held by Black workers. This lack of power results in the durability of racial gaps in labor-market outcomes despite changing political–economic structures. For example, in 1973—before recessions wrecked the Rust Belt, the ratio of Black-to-White unemployment rates (using a three-month average to smooth out any monthly volatility) was 2.17. In 1986, after the back-to-back recessions of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the ratio was 2.43. In 2007, prior to the Great Recession, the ratio was 2.02. In 2017, the ratio was 1.96. This durability reflects the reality that Black workers don’t have the collective power to engage a changing economy in ways that reduce racialized outcomes. Therefore, addressing the Black job crisis requires building the capacity to overcome the structural obstacles facing Black workers. This is the power-building imperative.¹

Equally important, the need to build power must include recognition that structural racism is fundamentally intertwined with the existing political economy: race shapes the development of the political economy, and the political economy shapes the development of race. In his study of Blacks in Norfolk, Virginia, Earl Lewis said Black workers in the shipyard had a “racialized class consciousness”: the occupational structure reflected class relationships needed by the elites to run the shipyard; at the same time, that structure was forged given the racial hierarchy of the times. Blacks had the worst jobs and Whites had the better-quality jobs.² This interweaving of race and political economy always exists. Unfortunately, dominant narratives about structural racism tend to sever its connection to political economy, resulting in sterile debates about “race” versus “class” and political organizing that fails to recognize class differences within the Black community. Equally important, the uncoupling of race and political economy results in the failure to understand the need to simultaneously fight for racial democracy and fight to transform the relationship between labor and capital.

The National Black Worker Center Project (NBWCP), a national network of which BABWC is an affiliate, is an effort to fulfill the power-building imperative. It aims to build power for Black workers and, implicitly, challenge the weaknesses of past approaches to achieve Black economic justice. This chapter highlights the efforts of NBWCP and its affiliates to address the Black job crisis. More than a chronicling of events, activities, and campaigns, this chapter uses the experiences of the network to elucidate the challenges of dealing with the imperative of power building. The crucial issues facing Black workers—unemployment, low-wage work, and discriminatory treatment on the job—result from the confluence of several structural forces. These labor-market outcomes will not change until Black workers amass sufficient power to transform these structures.
Next, the chapter presents an overview of the Black job crisis, which contains some data on the labor-market status of Black workers. It then provides a broader historical context of civil society and Black worker organizing that has taken place outside of NBWCP. After chronicling the efforts of NBWCP and its affiliates, I discuss key challenges and opportunities facing Black worker organizing in the immediate period going forward.

THE BLACK JOB CRISIS: AN OVERVIEW

The challenges facing Black communities in the United States are fundamentally challenges facing the Black working class. This statement is not to deny the very real issues of structural racism that affect Blacks regardless of class: Blacks who drive municipal buses experience racial discrimination as do Blacks who control financial portfolios. However, the vast majority of Blacks are workers who have very little control over their working conditions; this differs from the experience of members of the Black professional or managerial classes and certain Black businesspeople.

In addition, the specific challenges facing Black men and Black women are rooted in specific political economies. The challenges facing Black men in old industrial cities such as Gary, Indiana, are different compared with the challenges they might face in an economically thriving region such as the Bay Area. The challenges facing Black women in a city with rapidly changing racial demographics such as Los Angeles are different from the challenges they confront in a city severely impacted by climate change, such as Houston.

The notion that the Black job crisis is rooted in specific political economies means the current position and historical trajectory of the Black working class is qualitatively different from that of other working-class communities including (somewhat obviously) the White working class but also (not as obvious to many) other working-class communities of color. With respect to the latter, there are tendencies to assume that, because workers of color face racism, there should be an automatic sense of solidarity. In addition, there are tendencies to compare the political struggles of Black workers with those of immigrant workers as if the strategies used by immigrant workers are the yardstick against which all worker struggles should be measured. Both tendencies fail to be rooted in the concrete experiences of the communities in question and impede the development of the requisite power needed to transform the quality of life faced by workers.

Today’s economic expansion is just the latest phase of the Age of Inequality—the period since the mid-1970s that has been marked by rising inequality and flat wages for most workers. These outcomes have been shaped by the changing nature of technology that has radically lowered
transportation and informational costs of production, the changing relationship between finance and production, and the changing power dynamic between labor and capital. In this context, the Black job crisis can be characterized as a two-dimensional crisis of unemployment and low-quality work. This framework is important because the dominant framework is a near-exclusive focus on unemployment. Flowing from this narrow approach, strategies involving policy advocacy, organizing, and resource allocation target Black joblessness instead of addressing the real issue of low-wage work.

Some Data on Black Workers
This section first focuses on the unemployment picture by examining the basic unemployment rate and the employment–population ratio. Then, the focus shifts to the Black employment picture, presenting data on the industrial distribution of employment for Black workers, a portrait of Black low-wage work, and Blacks in unions. The section concludes by exploring issues of work, Black immigrants, and Black intra-racial inequality.

Before looking at the data, it is important to understand the limitations of data with respect to the power-building imperative. First, the data describing the various positions of Black workers in the labor market are the outcome of a variety of political and economy processes. Far too often, data are presented and analyzed as if the data exist outside of specific political economies. But just seeing racial disparities in unemployment or wages does not help the observer understand the precise ways race and political economy combine to produce those disparities. Similarly, just seeing the distribution of wages across industries or the wage premium earned by union workers relative to their non-union counterparts does not allow the observer to understand how power shapes the determination of wages. The pursuit of data cannot be undertaken outside of the social context that produces that data. Second, power building (and power wielding) is a function of relationships among groups and the strategic use of those relationships to impact a specific target. While data may paint a picture of a set of workers linked by common labor-market outcomes, the basic labor-market data usually presented provide limited clues as to how race, political economy, and on-the-ground relationships shape power asymmetries.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 present data on the joblessness dimension of the Black job crisis. Figure 1 reveals the widely understood racial disparity in unemployment. The ratio of Black unemployment to White unemployment averaged 2.4 in the 1980s, 2.3 in the 1990s, 2.2 in the 2000s, and 2.2 between 2010 and 2016. What is not widely understood is that the highest annual unemployment rate for Whites was 7.2% in 2010; during only six years did the lowest annual unemployment rate for Blacks fall under 7.2%.
FIGURE 1
Unemployment Rate: Black and White, 1979–2016

Note: Shaded vertical bars represent recessionary periods.
Source: Author’s analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

FIGURE 2

Note: Shaded vertical bars represent recessionary periods.
Source: Author’s analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data.
(Note: the time trends of the two data series mirror one another. This is important because it captures the reality that Black and White workers experience similar and dissimilar fates in the labor market.) One shortcoming of the narrow racial disparity framework whereby everything is viewed through the lens of racial difference is that the framework glosses over those instances where changes in the political economy affect workers of all races.

Figure 2 presents a better measure of joblessness. As a measure of joblessness, the official unemployment rate has many weaknesses, chief among them the fact that the metric is a function of an individual’s participation in the labor force. The employment–population ratio is a better measure of joblessness or, more precisely, employment probabilities. The ratio captures the proportion of the working-age population that is employed. As expected, Figure 2 shows that Whites have greater employment probabilities relative to Blacks. Once again, for the most part, the two data series move in tandem between 1979 and 2016. Recessions appear to cause a sharper decline in the employment–population ratio for Blacks than for Whites.

What is noticeable about the gender comparison within the Black population presented in Figure 3 is the convergence of the employment–
population ratios beginning in the mid-1990s, as the employed share of the Black female population rose at a faster rate than did the employed share of the Black male population. It is important to note that this ratio examines the civilian noninstitutionalized population, and so any interaction among gender, race, and incarceration would only come into play with post-incarceration employment prospects.

The six following tables present data on the other aspect of the Black job crisis: low-wage work. Table 1 presents data on where Black workers work: the industrial distribution of Black employment. This is important because most policy interventions focus on industries. This chart and the four that follow it present a picture of the gender distinction with respect to employment within Black workers. While the public sector is an important employment niche for Black men and Black women, it is much more important for Black women compared with Black men. In addition, employment in the health care sector is key for Black women and not that important for Black men.

### Table 1
Industrial Distribution of Black Employment  
(pooled data: 2011–2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care and social services</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and business services</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and hospitality</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and utilities</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial activities</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and mining</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 paints a sharper portrait of these differences. Health care is the seventh most important sector for Black male employment, while it is the leading sector for Black women. Manufacturing is the second leading employer of Black men but only the seventh leading employer for Black women. Thus, public policies targeting specific industries are not gender neutral with respect to impact: interventions to protect and strengthen jobs in health care impact Black women more than Black men; conversely, interventions designed to affect manufacturing impact Black men more than Black women.

Tables 3 and 4 illustrate how concentrated Black female employment is relative to the concentration of Black male employment. The three leading sectors of employment for Black women capture 58.9% of all Black women workers. For Black men, the three leading sectors capture 40.0% of Black male workers. (Examining the three leading employers of Black women, just 33.4% of Black male workers are in those sectors; examining the three leading employers of Black men, 35.4% of Black women work in those sectors; see Table 1.) The five leading sectors of employment for Black women capture 74.0% of all Black women workers; the five leading sectors of Black male employment capture 61.0% of all Black male workers.
## TABLE 3
Top Five Industries, Black Women
(pooled data: 2011–2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health care and social services</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and business services</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and hospitality</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


## TABLE 4
Top Five Industries, Black Men
(pooled data: 2011–2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>15.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and business services</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and utilities</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## TABLE 5
Industrial Distribution of Employment by Nativity
(pooled data: 2011–2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Foreign Born</th>
<th>Native Born</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care and social services</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional and business services</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure and hospitality</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation and utilities</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial activities</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational services</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wholesale trade</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture and mining</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Because Black immigrants constitute a rising share of all Black workers, Table 5 presents a comparison of the industrial distribution of employment for native-born and foreign-born Black workers. With the exception of the public sector’s and health care’s share of total employment, the distribution of the two groups of Black workers looks remarkably similar.

Table 6 illustrates Black low-wage work by industry for Black women and Black men. The first panel of data presents the share of workers in each
industry that receives low wages. In the public sector, 21.5% of all workers received $12.45 or less. We see that a greater share of Black women work for low wages (37.0%) compared with Black men (30.8%). The second panel presents each industry’s share of total low-wage work. Low-wage workers in the public sector constitute 11.9% of all low-wage Black workers. Gender disparities in the second panel reflect the differential treatment within industries and the different industrial distributions of employment presented in Tables 1 through 4. For instance, the fact that 30.1% of low-wage Black women workers are in health care reflects that 40.0% of Black women in health care are low-wage workers (the first panel) and the fact that health care is the largest employer of Black women (13).

Figures 4 and 5 present data on special elements of Black work. Commentators are recognizing that the decline in unionization is a cause of the rising income inequality since the mid-1970s. Figure 4 shows how Black workers are impacted by this decline. The figure presents data on union density—the share of workers who are union members. In 1983, 36.4% of Black male workers were union members; the corresponding figure for Black women was 25.8%. These figures began to converge, so by 2016,
FIGURE 4
Black Union Membership Rate, 1983–2016


FIGURE 5
Black Wages by Percentiles, 1979–2016

the figures were 14.4% and 12.5%, respectively. (Overall, 31.0% of Black workers were union members in 1983 and 13.4% in 2016.)

Figure 5 presents data on Black intra-race wage inequality. Between 1979 and 2016, the median wage for Blacks in the lowest wage percentile rose by 0.7% ($8.94 to $9.00). For the 50th percentile (the overall median wage), the increase was 3.7% ($15.41 to $15.98), but for Black workers in the 90th percentile, the median wage grew by 24.8% ($28.12 to $35.08). Thus, the political and economic forces generating rising income inequality in the entire society have the same effect when examining just the Black community. These parallel trends raise a provocative question: if political advocates are increasingly clear on the damaging effects of rising income inequality on democracy in the United States, what are the effects of rising Black income inequality on Black politics?

BLACK WORKER ORGANIZING OUTSIDE OF THE NATIONAL BLACK WORKER CENTER PROJECT

A cursory glance at the history of Black activism reveals that whenever there has been a widely felt sense of Black activism, there has been a Black worker (or Black economic justice) manifestation of it. The first Great Black Migration (circa 1910–1930) triggered a radical change in Black civil society as Blacks left the rural South for urban destinations in the South, North, and West and caused what Joe William Trotter called “the proletarianization” of the Black community—the formation of an urban industrial Black working class. As the new urban migrants interacted with established Black communities and forged a new world in the context of new racial hierarchies, a vigorous push for Black economic justice emerged. In many cities, residents began “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” boycotts to force retail stores to end their discriminatory hiring practices. In 1935, Black organizers formed the National Negro Congress, and one of its main prongs of work was to build support in the Black community for the organizing conducted by the newly emerging industrial unions under the umbrella of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Having successfully organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph built the March on Washington Movement in 1940 to demand the federal government cease its discriminatory hiring practices. Under the threat of 100,000 marchers in Washington, D.C., President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which desegregated federal defense industries.

The second Great Black Migration (circa 1940–1970) envelops the Montgomery–Selma phase of the civil rights movement and the Black Power phase of that movement. While the traditional focus on the early years of the modern civil rights movement was on bus boycotts, Freedom Rides, and the struggle for voting rights, the period also saw significant campaigns
for Black economic justice. Black unionists active in unions such as the Teamsters, the United Automobile Workers, the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, the United Steelworkers, and District 65 (a retail clerks’ union) fought racial discrimination in their communities and in their unions. They formed the Negro American Labor Council and played a leading role in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Community activists fought against discrimination in hiring; in the construction arena, they developed the idea of “community control” of jobs (i.e., if development projects are taking place in the Black community, those jobs should go to community residents).

During the Black Power phase of the modern civil rights movement, Black workers in many unions formed caucuses to push for changes within their union. In addition, these years saw the increase in union organizing among Black workers as typified by the Memphis sanitation strike in 1968 and strikes among hospital workers in Charleston and Baltimore in 1969. On a broader scale, in response to the drift by A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin to the political center—muting their criticism of the AFL-CIO and supporting US policy in Vietnam—and the overall conservatism of the AFL-CIO leadership, Black labor leaders formed the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

This relationship between Black civic activism and Black worker organizing continues today. In response to a spate of extra-judicial killings of Blacks, a vibrant Black Lives Matter movement arose. This activism sparked a variety of responses within the labor movement. The AFL-CIO established its Labor Commission on Racial and Economic Justice and held hearings on racism within unions around the country. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) committed itself to becoming a racial justice organization. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union has supported efforts to restore a variety of rights for the formerly incarcerated. UNITE HERE has renewed efforts to address Black employment within the hotel industry. Several unions have endorsed an expanded use of collective bargaining under the umbrella of “Bargaining for the Racial Good.” Outside the formal labor movement, the Fight for $15 has aggressively linked efforts to raise the wage in the fast food industry with efforts to fight police brutality. The Restaurant Opportunities Center has challenged racial segregation within the restaurant industry. The Organization United for Respect (OUR, formerly OUR Walmart) has deepened its racial justice work so that its members are more aware of racism felt by non-White Walmart workers. Groups in Chicago have fought anti-Black discrimination in temporary staffing agencies.
THE NATIONAL BLACK WORKER CENTER PROJECT

It is within this larger context that NBWCP has emerged as an effort to establish a network of local Black worker centers attempting to build power among Black workers in order to transform local conditions for Black workers and then leverage that power to have an impact nationally.

A Brief History of the National Black Worker Center Project

While NBWCP was constituted in 2014, the origins of its local affiliates have longer histories. One strand of activism emerging from the Black Power phase of the civil rights movement focused on organizing Blacks in the workplace as the central pathway toward Black liberation. Many young Black revolutionaries took it upon themselves to obtain jobs in factories or to use their professional skills in the direct service of the Black working class. From this milieu, the two oldest affiliates of NBWCP developed. The first, Black Workers for Justice (BWFJ) formed in 1981. Although based in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, its geographic focus was initially the entire state of North Carolina, and it eventually expanded its reach throughout parts of the South. Among its campaigns were efforts to form minority (nonmajority: where less than 50% of the workforce were members) unions in plants in North Carolina. It also supported the development of public sector unionism in the South in conjunction with United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America. BWFJ recognized that Black working-class life did extend beyond the walls of the workplace, so it engaged in a variety of efforts to address the community interests of Black workers. Finally, BWFJ has worked with the Farm Labor Organizing Committee to promote solidarity between Black workers and the emerging Latino workforce in North Carolina. The second affiliate, the Mississippi Worker Center for Human Rights, was formed in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1995. Similar to BWFJ, the Mississippi Worker Center for Human Rights, while based in a small town, has a statewide focus. The worker center supported efforts to organize catfish workers in the state and has recently emphasized the enforcement of worker compensation laws as a way to improve the conditions facing workers throughout the state. In addition, the organization has been part of the progressive network in Mississippi. The second period of Black worker center formation occurred between 2005 and today. The late 1990s through the early 2000s saw a rapid transformation of labor force demographics in the United States as immigration changed the composition of populations in most parts of the country. In response to these changes and the challenges facing these new workers, a vibrant worker center movement emerged. These new forms of worker organizations were largely focused on immigrant workers and their associated civil society and began to receive significant funds from...
philanthropy. At the same time, the Black job crisis continued to rage. Since the mid-1970s, the Black community was ravaged by deindustrialization, the crack epidemic, mass incarceration, and increasing attacks on a Black employment niche—the public sector. Yet a confluence of the particularities of anti-Black structural racism, transformations in Black civil society, and philanthropic indifference to Black organizing meant that there was not a growth in Black worker organizing similar to what occurred in immigrant communities.

However, a second wave of Black worker centers slowly emerged. In New Orleans, the devastation following Hurricane Katrina resulted in two shocks to the local labor market: large numbers of immigrants arrived to rebuild the city, and large numbers of Black workers found themselves initially displaced from the city and then, upon return, found themselves further marginalized in the labor market. The New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ) formed initially to deal with the exploitation faced by immigrant workers, but quickly organizers found themselves needing to deal with the challenges facing returning Black workers. NOWCRJ initiated a special project called Stand with Dignity to deal with the special problems facing Black workers. Their first campaigns dealt with issues of public housing and the need to use federal housing monies to employ local residents.

In Los Angeles, Black organizers had been exposed to the vibrant immigrant worker center ecosystem and seen the possibilities of powerful Black workers organizing from their involvement in SEIU’s security officers’ organizing campaign, which intentionally projected the needs of Black security officers. Initially based out of the UCLA Labor Center, these organizers began to work with Black union leaders, staff, and members to analyze the possibilities of addressing the problems facing Black workers in Los Angeles, and the result was the Los Angeles Black Worker Center (LABWC), formed in 2009.

In Chicago, experienced labor and community organizers, responding to the twin impacts of a still-heavily racially segregated city and massive deindustrialization, began to explore forging new organizational forms that would be rooted in the city’s Black working class. The result was the 2012 launch of the Workers Center for Racial Justice, with early campaigns examining employment practices associated with the expansion of the mass transit rail line on the city’s South Side and a “Ban the Box” campaign that resulted with the state government removing from applications the check box that asks whether applicants have a criminal record.

In Washington, D.C., an organization emerging from the community development corporation movement transformed itself into a hub of organizing across a variety of issues. In the employment arena, ONE DC
conducted campaigns around the right to income and racial equity in hiring on development projects. Around 2011, the organization began to explore the idea of forming a worker center as a component of the overall thrust of ONE DC, and its Black Workers Center was created. One unique feature of the work there was the combination of workforce development activity in conjunction with the Laborers’ International Union of North America and the creation of a series of cooperatives.

With this Black worker center activism as a backdrop, NBWCP was created. During Phase One of this process, the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education (UCB Labor Center) incubated the organization. Specific outcomes were formalization of the organization with legal incorporation, including establishment of organizational bylaws and its inaugural board of directors; launch of two Black worker centers (the Bay Area in 2013 and Baltimore in 2016); organization of two major convenings of Black worker center staff, members, and supporters in Oakland (November 2014, November 2015). In 2015, Phase Two of the process began when the UCB Labor Center officially launched NBWCP, the organization became a fiscally sponsored project of the Movement Strategy Center (MSC), and MSC began to benefit from the funding relationships that had been cultivated by the UCB Labor Center. Most important, in July 2016, NBWCP hired its first executive director. This act led to an expansion of the funding base of the organization, an increase in staff for the organization, and the launch of its first major campaign—Working While Black—in Washington, D.C., in November 2016.

The Work of the National Black Worker Center Project
The work of NBWCP and its affiliates can be placed in three primary buckets:

- Building member-driven organizations
- Organizing and policy campaigns
- Changing the narrative

Building Member-Driven Organizations
Central to the functioning of the Black worker centers has been the development of member-driven organizations. Throughout NBWCP, several different activities have been used to identify potential members, including neighborhood canvassing, one-on-ones, information tables at various events, surveys, outreach at workforce development sites, and listening sessions. Often, these activities are not distinct but are seen as a progression of activities. For instance, having a table at particular events might lead to a one-on-one session with an organizer that might lead to an invitation to a listening session.
Once members have been identified and engaged in campaign work, member development activities include formation of street action teams so that members build community with each other during the campaign, member-engaged lobbying with key targets, involvement in other elements of the campaign work, political education sessions, and power-analysis training linked to the campaign in question.

Organizing and Policy Campaigns
Affiliates of NBWCP have been involved in a variety of organizing and policy campaigns that can be grouped into four areas: getting Black workers into good jobs, conducting broader policy fights, encouraging civic engagement, and exploring economic alternatives.

- **Getting Black workers into good jobs.** A major campaign undertaken by LABWC involved working in a broader coalition to impact the employment practices used by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority as it expanded its rail system. Key policy planks included a project labor agreement to ensure good labor standards on the expansion, a local-hire provision so that Los Angeles residents could work on the expansion, and an innovative “diversity in hiring” provision so that Black workers would intentionally be included in the local hiring. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, BABWC was deeply involved in a coalition that successfully urged the Alameda County Board of Supervisors to pass and implement an ordinance that called for Alameda County to directly hire the formerly incarcerated into its county government jobs. This direct-hire approach is distinct from the “ban the box” approach inasmuch as the latter strives to lower the barriers to employment opportunities, while the former strives to result in direct employment opportunities. In Chicago, the Worker Center for Racial Justice has collaborated with UNITE HERE Local 1 to set up a hotel hiring hall. While this was not a classic hiring hall with a direct route into a hotel job, the partnership did open up a pathway into unionized hotel jobs for Blacks that heretofore had been closed.

- **Conducting broader policy fights.** As a second campaign, LABWC worked with other organizations in a coalition to increase labor standards enforcement. As they pushed the coalition to see that racial discrimination is a violation of basic labor standards (“employment discrimination is the ultimate form of wage theft”), they found out that state law did not sufficiently empower local entities to combat racial discrimination in employment. This sparked a campaign for a new state law correcting this oversight. The main partner with LABWC on this campaign was SEIU United Service Workers West. The resulting
legislation—The California Anti-Employment Discrimination Action of 2017 (SB 491)—was passed by the California Assembly and Senate only to be vetoed by the governor. One of the earliest campaigns (2013) by the Worker Center for Racial Justice in Chicago was to join forces with other organizations in Illinois to get the governor to sign an executive order eliminating “the box” on applications for state jobs.

- **Encouraging civic engagement.** The civic engagement efforts of Black worker centers recognize that their vision to improve the lives of Black workers is not limited to workplace issues. Consistency requires attempts to improve the quality of life for the Black working class in and out of the workplace. Across the country, an important element of progressive activism has been the thrust to elect district attorneys with a reduced “law and order” mentality. In Chicago, the Worker Center for Racial Justice was active in the campaign to elect Kimberly Foxx as Cook County’s district attorney in 2016. In New Orleans, the Stand with Dignity project approached the criminal justice issue from a different angle. In the midst of canvassing a local housing project, they ran across stories of many residents who could not obtain driver’s licenses because of outstanding traffic fees. The worker center coordinated with local officials to host warrant clinics in the housing project that facilitated reduction of the fees. (In one case, $23,000 in fees and penalties was reduced to $9.)

- **Exploring economic alternatives.** Across NBWCP, some affiliates find that many of their initial members feel alienated from a political economy that devalues them as Black workers, and their response is a search for alternatives to the status quo. ONE DC is exploring the development of worker cooperatives. Two cooperatives already implemented are a child care cooperative and a cleaning cooperative. It's important to recognize co-op development within the organization’s overall mission, which includes worker rights training, workforce development and job placement, and purchasing a building to house these activities.

**Changing the Narrative**

NBWCP and its affiliates recognize that a major component to building power is engaging in the battle to change the narratives around Black work and the Black job crisis. The dominant conservative narratives assume Blacks—as a group—lack the capacity to contribute to the US economy and that Blacks—once again as a group—assume some culpability for their subordinate position in the labor market. Dominant liberal narratives travel the spectrum along two themes: the role of individual behavior in racialized outcomes (relative to structural factors), and the role of state interven-
tion and collective action in addressing the racialized outcomes. Neither set of narratives is sufficient to advance any qualitative solutions to the Black job crisis.

Given this, the primary national campaign of NBWCP has been Working While Black (WWB), a collaboration between the national office and local affiliates to gather stories from members, produce videos and other communication tools, and disseminate these stories. Any change in narrative surrounding the Black job crisis that challenges dominant narratives must be rooted in the experiences of Black workers. Therefore, WWB has been an effort to bolster the communications capacity of the affiliates, use this additional capacity to elicit member stories and campaign stories that provide a view of the Black job crisis “from below,” and outline the efficacy of collective campaigns to address the crisis.

GOING FORWARD: KEY CHALLENGES FACING THE NATIONAL BLACK WORKER CENTER PROJECT

The challenges facing NBWCP can be grouped into two broad categories: developing vibrant local affiliates, and building the proper national “footprint.”

Developing Vibrant Local Affiliates
In different degrees, each affiliate faces the interrelated problems of organizational development, sustainability and resources, scale and scope, and political education. It is important to recognize these challenges are faced by most emerging, small, and under-resourced worker centers regardless of the base of the organization. One can imagine an organizational life cycle trajectory where emerging organizations attempt to assume the functions of a maturing or mature organization with much less capacity. In this context, staff may be working without a job description or across multiple job descriptions; work plans might be, at best, loose parameters guiding the work; and norms and structures that support accountability within the organizations are weak. During the emerging phase, these challenges are amplified by limited financial resources and the reality that initial streams of revenue are either very small, tied to expectations that don’t fully align with the actual needs of the organization, or both. Most NBWCP affiliates are in the early emergent phase of organizational growth.

In addition, these challenges are amplified by the reality that the affiliates are Black worker centers. This reality contains unrealistic expectations because emerging Black worker centers are improperly compared with immigrant worker centers across all phases of the organizational life cycle or they are quickly pigeon-holed into narrow workforce development efforts.
The dearth of philanthropic support of Black organizing over the past 20 years compared with the support of immigrant organizing means the networks and relationships that can support immigrant worker organizing as staff move along a variety of career paths that include organizer, lead organizer, different types of deputy directors, and executive director do not exist for Black worker organizing.

Linked to these issues are the issues of sustainability and financial resources. As noted previously, worker centers, and Black worker centers in particular, are under-resourced. While their work lies at the nexus of organizing and service delivery, the power-building imperative means that mainstream philanthropic resources and government support are difficult to acquire. The magnitude of the Black job crisis and some of the narrative surrounding worker centers ("filling the organizing gap where unions are not present") places immense pressures on Black worker centers to take on tasks that exceed the ability of available resources to successfully be tackled.

The gap between needs and capacity, the episodic nature of foundation support, and the push from many elements of philanthropy for "sustainable" revenue flows has led some Black worker centers to explore income-generating strategies. This is understandable—the bills must be paid—but it is important to remember that just as the failure of private markets to independently produce socially optimal amounts of certain goods like education and health care leads to the need for government intervention in the marketplace, a social system based on racial capitalism will never sustain efforts to support power building among Black workers. This is not a rationale for disengaging from the market system or maintaining funding streams dominated by philanthropy. It is a cautionary note that exhortations for sustainability without an explicit recognition of the challenges and limitations of doing so in this market economy fail the very constituencies who lie at the center of our concern.

An additional challenge involves the scale and scope of Black worker centers’ programmatic thrusts. Within most geographically bounded networks, multiple organizations exist to satisfy the variety of needs of the fields: for example, multiple churches, mosques, and temples across several denominations address the faith needs of a region; several local unions address the diverse needs of workers in a region. However, the expectations—driven by a competition for scarce resources—are that one Black worker center can address the multiple dimensions of the Black job crisis in a particular region. The difficulty of this approach can be seen immediately when one considers, by way of an example, that New York City has a population of 8.6 million, with Blacks (native-born and immigrant) making up 24.4% of that total. Black worker centers (actually, all worker centers) must be allowed to grow within boundaries—geographic, sector, strata—
that make success more likely. This means developing organic connections with the Black working class based on deep organizing within designated targets and not developing into multiservice centers attempting to become a “Jack of all trades” with the associated implication of “master of none.”

A final major challenge in this area lies in the arena of political education. While we “experience” race and capitalism in complicated, nuanced, and intertwined ways, we often “talk” about race and capitalism as if they are separate phenomena. These disconnects—between our experiences and our talk and between race and capitalism—manifest themselves in the activities of Black worker centers in a variety of ways. For example, often, the initial workers attracted to Black worker center activities have a strong racial consciousness and want to act against the racial discrimination they experience in a power hierarchy that is racially stratified. When key issues revolve around local hire, job access, and/or unemployment, some of these workers gravitate to the notion that the ultimate solution is “for us to hire our own people.” A presentation of the problem that focuses on the racial disparity without linking the inequity to the dynamics of a market economy supports such solutions. The associated goals lead to strategies and tactics where key allies are no longer Black workers but rather the Black elite who have the requisite entrepreneurial resources and inclinations, along with government and corporate actors who have access to financial capital. To avoid this trajectory (and similar ones that are rooted in a disconnect between racism and capitalism), Black worker centers need political education efforts that are founded on members’ experiences and that facilitate a learning process where members can see their experiences through a racialized political economic framework.

Building the Proper National “Footprint”
The ultimate strength of the modern civil rights movement and the expansion of the labor movement has been dynamic local activism. At the same time, the victories of those movements also were a function of a nationwide presence in a national narrative about social justice and in the national arenas where federal policies were determined. Consequently, a challenge facing NBWCP is how to address this dialectic in today’s context. The historical trajectory of the network has correctly placed a great deal of weight on the importance of developing local Black worker centers. Still, if done properly, the synergy between local affiliates and a national center can be very powerful and enhance the implementation of the power-building imperative at both levels.

One question is what is the “value added” of the national to local work? If the value added is nonexistent, then the national federation will crumble as affiliates cease thinking of themselves (and more importantly, acting) as
members of a national network. The notion of “value added” cannot be imposed from above. Local Black worker centers must see concrete ways that a well-resourced national center enhances their work. Some possibilities include a series of “communities of learning” where local experiences can be shared across affiliates or a set of capacity-building working groups (including a potential training institute) where members or staff from affiliates participate to advance their skills in specific areas (e.g., communications).

A second question is what are the appropriate national campaigns led by the national center? Related to that question, when should the national center initiate and lead a campaign with a federal target? In these campaigns, what is the appropriate expectation of the role of affiliates? When should the national campaign consist of coordinated local campaigns (e.g., several local Black worker centers advancing a similar policy campaign to target state legislatures)?

A third question: What is the effective relationship between the national center and other segments of the larger progressive movement? There is a very strong networking tendency among progressives. While this aggregation can be very powerful, it can also reallocate scarce resources away from essential power-building tasks. As the progressive movement grapples with the realization of the persistence of anti-Black racism and the need to fight it on several fronts, there is a tremendous demand on NBWCP (and other Black organizations) to enter into non-Black spaces. This activity is important. However, to approach these spaces with integrity and power, the activities must not overwhelm the need to deepen connections with the Black working class, forge dynamic Black worker centers locally, and build coalitions and networks that stitch together elements of Black civil society.

CONCLUSION

Probably the most critical problem in the Other America is the economic problem. By the millions, people in the Other America find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of prosperity. But the problem is not only unemployment, but it’s UNDER employment or SUB employment. People who work full-time jobs for part-time wages.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Just three weeks before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke before the Drug, Hospital, and Health Care Employees Union, District 1199 (commonly known as Local 1199—the predecessor union to today’s 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East and the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees). The epigraph to this section, above, captures his characterization of “the economic problem”: poor people facing
unemployment and underemployment. His prescription accurately captures the Black job crisis today. King’s final efforts—supporting the striking sanitation workers in Memphis and organizing the Poor People’s Campaign—indicates he understood the need for the power-building imperative.

At the time of this writing (2018), residents of the United States face an extraordinary situation whereby the levers of federal power are controlled by political forces whose actions and words are hostile to core values of justice and equality. Simultaneously, around the country, bright rays of hope are emerging as people from all walks of life seek to re-assert those values. However, the success of these efforts depends on successfully merging an assertion of values with efforts to build power.

This chapter discussed efforts of the National Black Worker Center Project to build this power among Black workers. It described the Black job crisis in detail, sketched the linkages between broader Black community activism and Black worker activism, and discussed the efforts of NBWCP and its affiliates to address the Black job crisis through organizing Black workers. It closed by detailing the challenges facing these organizing efforts. Hopefully, the lessons here can be absorbed and applied as we attempt to forge what Dr. King and others called “the Beloved Community”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I would like to thank Cherrie Bucknor, doctoral student in sociology at Harvard University, for providing the initial data analysis presented in this chapter.

ENDNOTES


2 A full discussion of the power-building imperative is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a brief sketch of it entails the following: political organizing where the principal goal is building collective power not advancing individual advancement; political work that understands the dialectical relationship between service provision and member-driven organizing; and the understanding that movement-building requires building locally based membership organizations, developing a progressive narrative about social change, and forging a broad coalition around that progressive narrative.

3 These (and subsequent racial) data are non-Hispanic Black and non-Hispanic White.

4 The shaded vertical bars represent recessionary periods.

5 This is in contrast to a focus on what Black workers do—the occupational distribution of Black employment—which is not presented in this chapter.

6 Our analysis used two thirds of the overall median wage as the threshold for low wages; using these data, the median wage was $18.68 and the low-wage threshold was $12.45.

Chapter 6

“Greedy” Institutions or Beloved Communities? Assessing the Job Satisfaction of Organizers

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INTRODUCTION
In June 2018, the Supreme Court issued a decision on Janus v. AFSCME, which eliminated the ability of labor unions to collect an agency fee from non-union members to cover the cost of collective bargaining. The decision has significant implications for the way many unions recruit and build their membership bases. This is thus an opportune moment to take stock of core union assets, in particular the professional organizers, who will be essential to preserving and expanding the membership base. Unlike most modern-day progressive organizations that depend on foundations and donors to support their efforts and recruit like-minded individuals to participate in campaigns, unions must rely on their own members (and thus the organizers who build that membership) for the vast majority of their funding. Unions are not able to pick and choose their members—they must persuade workers who have been selected by the employer to make the decision to join up, most often in the face of sophisticated and well-funded efforts to discourage them from doing so. Employers resist unionization because they do not want workers to have their own independent bases of power in the workplace. For unions, the source of that power comes from their ability to build an active membership base, and a set of committed leaders who are willing and able to act collectively.

At the core of every anti-union campaign is the attempt to other the union, portraying it as an alien third party. Fundamentally, professional organizers
have to seed a consciousness and build a community in the workplace through intensive one-on-one relational organizing conversations and concerted leadership identification and development. They must drive the campaign through systematically building worker support for the union by identifying and recruiting key workplace leaders and providing the training and support necessary for them to recruit their colleagues and stand up to the anti-union deluge that is certain to come. The work does not end when a union campaign is won. It is the organizer’s role to work with leaders to embed a union culture at the workplace where workers are in relationship with each other and comfortable with exercising their collective power to defend conditions of work and improve them over time. The work entails establishing a dynamic organization that is compelling to members to want to take part in, working with a leadership group that is always thinking about how to deepen and broaden worker identification and engagement. Union organizing is incredibly creative and rewarding work, but it is also extremely challenging.

Despite the importance of organizers to building, preserving, and expanding union membership and helping unions achieve their core purpose, we have only limited research on the factors that affect organizers’ ongoing satisfaction with and commitment to their jobs (notable exceptions are Bunnage 2014 and Rooks 2004). Existing research focuses on job satisfaction among people who do “careers as calling,” including those who do “justice jobs,” or jobs focusing on service provision to underserved communities (Rooks 2004). While there are undoubtedly parallels, that research does not examine job satisfaction in relation to the power-building purpose of careers such as organizing. Understanding the factors that shape job satisfaction among organizers helps us understand some of the broader struggles unions and other organizations have had related to building power to achieve their goals.

This chapter draws on survey data to examine the job satisfaction and occupational challenges of career organizers, particularly as related to the power-building purposes of unions. We present original data from a 2015 survey of 570 participants in events surrounding the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute’s 25th anniversary. Founded in 1990, the Organizing Institute is a center within the AFL-CIO whose mission is to help recruit and train organizers for affiliated unions. In March 2015, the Organizing Institute hosted a National Organizers Workshop in Washington, D.C., bringing together union and non-union organizers from across the country as part of a series of events celebrating its 25th anniversary. We worked in partnership with the Organizing Institute to design and conduct a survey of the organizers invited to the conference. We examine this data in light of a systematic review of existing literature to predict job satisfaction in organizing as a function of the lived experience of organizers in the context of their jobs and organizations.

Overall, we find that a significant percentage of organizers are not spending the bulk of their time on the core tasks associated with power building (such
as recruiting and developing leaders) and, relatedly, that those key power-building tasks are the ones they find most challenging. In addition, we find that organizers report challenges related to management, supervision, and other job characteristics, and that these challenges are felt disproportionately by women. These findings thus point to clear, actionable ways in which organizing jobs can be changed to improve the trajectory and experience of organizers in a way that could also orient them more toward the core work of building power. We discuss these implications in the conclusion.

ORGANIZERS AT THE CENTER OF THE LABOR MOVEMENT

From at least the 1930s to the present day, full-time organizers have played crucial roles in unions, leading unionization efforts and contract fights. Years of militant action and membership gains led by organizers and rank-and-file leaders characterized the 1930s and 1940s. Long-running ideological warfare within the New Deal coalition and the labor movement itself, however, culminated with the 1947 Taft–Hartley law. Requiring all trade unionists to sign affidavits declaring that they were not Communists, this law led to a wholesale purge of many talented and committed organizers and rank-and-file activists (Goldfield 1989; Lichtenstein 2002). The depoliticization of the movement during this period presaged an acute loss of power from the late 1970s onward. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration’s famous busting of PATCO, the air-traffic controllers’ union, chilled unions and exacerbated this ongoing loss of power for the movement (McCartin 2006).

Nevertheless, even throughout these difficult years, unions have continued to mount organizing drives and contract fights and to employ large numbers of full-time organizers (McCartin, this volume; Windham 2017). In the 1990s and 2000s, labor experienced a revival of interest from activists in the progressive movement. An influx of post-1960s organizers with strong social justice ideals went to work for labor unions, some of which had grown bureaucratic and distanced from their militant roots (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Ganz et al. 2004; Voss and Milkman 2004; Voss and Sherman 2000; Zald and Ash 1966). They also brought significant skills to movement work (Compa 2004).

Data shows that approximately 6.7% of private sector workers and 12% of public sector workers are unionized in the present day, although union density varies dramatically between states (Hirsch and Macpherson 2017). Although unionization rates have declined dramatically since the 1980s, approximately 14 million American workers still belong to unions. Further, alt-labor organizations, such as worker centers and labor/community coalitions, have expanded their reach in recent years. In alt-labor, a 2018 census of worker centers (for this volume) identified 226 organizations, in addition to the 41 and 17 affiliates, respectively, that the community/labor coalitions Jobs With Justice and Partnership for Working Families have (Fine and Theodore 2012;
Jobs With Justice 2016; Partnership for Working Families 2015). Unions, along with social movement organizations, are thus still formidable institutions with substantial budgets and staff that continually recruit and employ professional organizers in significant numbers at the national, state, and local levels.

Organizing has been at the center of recent debates about the direction of the labor movement. During the 1990s, the AFL-CIO experienced its first contested election in the history of the federation, in which the “organizing” candidate, John Sweeney, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), was victorious. A decade later, its affiliates engaged in a pitched battle over the strategic direction and leadership of the movement. The need for unions to focus more effort and resources on organizing figured prominently at both junctures.

In 1995, as part of its program for revitalization, the AFL-CIO established the Organizing Institute to recruit and train organizers for its affiliated unions. The Organizing Institute established a pipeline for students and other activists to enter the labor movement. Despite the strenuous efforts of the Sweeney administration, only six unions made a substantial commitment to organizing. The rest—whether as a consequence of the high cost; internal politics; gender, racial, and ethnic disparities between existing leaders and members and the unorganized; and other internal structural and cultural factors, or some combination—did not move organizing the unorganized to the center of their work (Milkman and Voss 2004). In 2005, a set of unions led by SEIU split from the AFL-CIO. Calling themselves Change to Win, five AFL-CIO member unions (SEIU, UNITE HERE, the Laborers, the Teamsters, and the United Food and Commercial Workers) that were disappointed in the lack of progress made by the federation in reversing labor’s decline, pushed for a near-total redefinition of the AFL-CIO’s role, which, they argued, was necessary to stimulate a return to large-scale worker organizing. Established through the merger of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1955, the AFL-CIO was set up as a voluntary coalition with little formal power over its affiliated unions. Change to Win proposed to streamline the federation while also giving it substantial power over member unions, with particular emphasis on the need for each union to focus its organizing efforts on a strategic economic sector—its “core industry.” While unable to fulfill its vision, over the years, Change to Win has focused the great majority of its staff and resources on strengthening the strategic organizing and research capacities of affiliates.

DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZERS

Despite the importance of organizers and organizing to the labor movement, there has been only a limited set of studies about the experience of organizers.
Although a handful of qualitative studies have emerged (Rooks 2004; Schurman 2005), there are, to our knowledge, no large-scale studies of organizers’ job experiences and satisfaction. Not only do we lack an empirical picture, we also lack a theoretical one; industrial relations theory provides little guidance in theorizing the relationship between organizers’ individual aspirations and organizational roles and structures. We can draw some ideas from the literature on “careers as calling” because organizers are also motivated by a commitment to helping others, feel morally compelled to do what they do, and make significant sacrifices as a result. Organizing is also, however, a distinct occupation. Unlike in other professions, organizers work toward systemic solutions to social problems by working with people who are directly affected by them to build organizations and take action.

To fill this gap and provide a picture of the unique experience of organizers in the United States, we worked in partnership with the Organizing Institute to field an original survey in March 2015 of approximately 700 union and non-union organizers from around the country. The goal of the survey was to examine the day-to-day experiences and perspectives of organizers, to deepen our understanding of what the experience of organizing is like, and to enable organizations to make better strategic choices about how to recruit, train, and retain professional organizers. The survey asked a range of questions, including questions about pathways into organizing, job satisfaction, the day-to-day experience of organizing, respondents’ perspectives on what elements of the job were most challenging, and demographics. The survey was conducted online. All registrants were invited to complete the survey in the month prior to the conference, and extensive outreach was carried out at the conference itself so that those who had not done it ahead of time could do it at the conference. As a result of diligent efforts by digital organizers prior to the conference and conference staff working with the Organizing Institute, just under four hundred organizers completed the survey online prior to the conference; an additional two hundred organizers completed it at the conference. In the end, we had 570 respondents, representing more than 80% of the total number of people who attended the conference.

Table 1 shows some basic descriptive data on our respondents: 65% of our respondents were full-time, paid organizers, and 67% worked for labor unions. Approximately equal proportions of men and women completed the survey, with about 1.7% of respondents reporting that they were gender nonconforming. Our sample also had relatively high rates of racial diversity. Fifty-two percent self-identified as White, 15% as African American, 18% as Latino, 9.8% as other or mixed race, and 5% as Asian. The majority of our respondents were either college graduates or had some college education. Our respondents ranged in age from 20 to 72, with the median age being 37. Among our respondents,
9.8% had been in organizing for less than one year, 19% for one to three years, 20% for four to six years, 13% for seven to nine years, and 37% for more than ten years.

We do not have a good way of knowing how representative our sample is of organizers working across the country because there is not any such census of organizers. There is potential bias in our sample based on who self-selected to attend the Organizing Institute’s conference. Nonetheless, despite bias that may exist, our data provides an important glimpse into the experience of a diverse group of union and non-union organizers across the country.

The best way to understand the day-to-day experience of organizing is to examine the way organizers spend their time. Overall, as shown in Figure 1, we find that organizers largely have to split their time between doing the core

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<td>Community organization</td>
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<td>Multi-stakeholder organization</td>
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<td>Multi-issue campaign organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other/mixed race</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate/GED</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate/BA</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some graduate work</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Years Organizing</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–3 years</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–9 years</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more years</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median Age</strong></td>
<td>37 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
work of organizing—membership recruitment, relational engagement, leadership development, community building and the like—and administrative work. Over 40% of organizers spent five hours a week or less on membership recruitment while 35% spent 11 hours or more. Thirty-five percent spent five hours or less on leadership recruitment and development, and 34% spent 11 hours or more. Thirty-five percent spent five hours or less on internal organizational and staff meetings while close to the same number spent six to ten hours per week. Close to 60% spent six to fifteen hours per week on other and administrative work.

To understand what organizers found most challenging about their jobs, we examined six categories of potentially challenging work in the survey:

- **Organizing**, including membership recruitment and asking people to take on a task, a responsibility or leadership role, or responsibility for recruiting others
- **Mobilizing**, including public speaking, running meetings, doing turnout for events and organizing actions
- **Strategic capacity**, including development of strategy, campaign planning, and research
- **Self-management**, including time management and developing and sticking to a work plan
- **Managing others**, including supervising and managing other organizers and staff
- **Administration and fund-raising**, including database maintenance and writing
Not surprisingly, close to 20% of organizers ranked the core practices of building power in the workplace—namely, getting people to take on leadership roles and getting people to take responsibility for recruiting others—their top challenges. Further, 17% also ranked developing leaders and recruiting members as one of their top challenges. Seventeen percent identified time management and 13.5% identified supervision of staff as one of their top challenges.

These perceptions of what was most challenging were not evenly distributed across our respondents, however. All ages ranked organizing-related tasks to be their greatest challenges, but organizers 30 years and younger and those with less than one year of organizing experience ranked self-management as a significant challenge. Organizers between ages 31 and 50 and those with ten or more years of experience identified managing others as a significant challenge, but organizers with one to six years of experience identified organizing-related tasks as the most challenging aspect of their work.

EXPLAINING JOB SATISFACTION AMONG ORGANIZERS

With this picture of the day-to-day experience of organizers and the challenges they face, we can now turn toward examining the sources of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) among organizers. Research on job satisfaction within “careers as calling” can provide a useful starting point. This research concludes that those who feel morally compelled to do these jobs accept significant sacrifices in income, family life, and well-being to do work they love (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Thompson and Bunderson 2003). Those who seek these jobs show a greater commitment to their work and express satisfaction regardless of the material benefits associated with it (Bunderson and Thompson 2009). Nonetheless, despite the commitments that bring people to this work, research shows that many organizations employing these kinds of workers experience high turnover. Research shows that structural job characteristics can crucially affect people’s willingness to stay in these jobs. Scholars find that workers are most likely to leave justice jobs as a response to restrictive organizational policies, voice, a lack of training and mentoring opportunities, and the nature of the job (Bunnage 2014; Rooks 2004). This suggests that structural factors such as job characteristics, organizational structure, the availability of adequate training, and working environment are equally, if not more, important than status and salary in determining turnover in these organizations.

Based on our own experiences and scholarship, we submit that similar patterns should emerge in examining job satisfaction among organizers. Organizers care deeply about the extent to which they can participate and be heard in organizational decision making, and about the distribution of authority in their organizations and the quality of leadership. Studies have shown that the distribution of authority in local unions, for example, affects the allocation of...
resources for organizing and strategies for organizing, as well as organizing outcomes (Martin 2007). As one female organizer stated in a previous study of organizers, “I would do anything for an organization if I am heard” (Foley 2010).

To assess satisfaction, we develop a conceptualization of satisfaction that draws on the literature on justice careers (Thompson and Bunderson 2003), as well as the high-performance work practices literature in the industrial and human relations fields (Becker and Huselid 1998; Cappelli and Neumark 2001; Combs, Liu, Hall, and Ketchen 2006; Kochan and Osterman 1994; Kochan and Rubinstein 2000; Kochan, Eaton, McKersie, and Adler 2013; Macduffie 1995). The literature on justice careers has stressed the importance of alignment of moral values at work, while the literature on high-performance work practices has emphasized the importance of voice, participation, and job design (Freeney and Fellenz 2013; Grant 2007).

We also look particularly at satisfaction levels affected by participation and assessment of leadership. Unions, in particular, are large organizations in which careers are impacted by effective leadership at the local level as well as meaningful mentoring and development between people at different levels of experience and positions in the hierarchy (Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar 2010). Therefore, satisfaction with the relational and interactional dynamics with the immediate supervisor can be an important dimension of job satisfaction. In the past, union jobs often provided little formal training and mentoring, leaving organizers to acquire skills through “lay apprenticeship” (Feekin and Widenor 2000, 2001). Eaton (1995) found that many labor leaders reported learning their trade through a “sink or swim” approach.

Finally, we also examine organizers’ satisfaction with work–life balance and the emotional aspects of the job. Rooks (2004) argues that dissatisfaction with the lack of work–life balance in organizing, and the physically and emotionally demanding nature of the work were two of the main reasons behind graduates of the Organizing Institute leaving the union movement. Organizing can exact a significant emotional toll. Organizers often have to manage their own emotions, such as despair after a failed campaign, as well as others’ emotions—such as fear and anger among workers—in situations that can often be highly conflictual (Kurtz 2002; Lopez 2004; Rooks 2004; Rooks and Penney 2016). Indeed, in our own survey, we found that job stress was the thing people would most like to change about their job. To capture all these dimensions of job satisfaction, the survey listed 27 different aspects of people’s jobs and asked them to list their satisfaction with each item on a five-point scale of “very unsatisfied,” “somewhat unsatisfied,” “neither unsatisfied nor satisfied,” “somewhat satisfied,” or “very satisfied.” As shown in Table 2, if we just look descriptively at the data, we find that, overall, the highest levels of dissatisfaction had to do with job-related stress as well as the organization’s
willingness to challenge unproductive members of the staff. The next highest levels of dissatisfaction related to size of workload, performance evaluation, opportunities for upward mobility, and the ability to influence organizational decisions and practices. There was a significant gender gap, with males reporting statistically significant higher levels of overall job satisfaction, satisfaction with how well their voice was heard in their organization, and satisfaction with the quality of their supervisors. There was no difference between males and females in terms of their satisfaction with the type of tasks they perform in their jobs or with organizational leadership.

In addition to looking at what organizers found satisfying (or not) about their jobs, we also wanted to examine the individual, organizational, and experiential correlates of job satisfaction. To identify possible correlates of job satisfaction, we drew on previous research examining job experience, gender, race, education, income, and job characteristics. We discuss each of these factors in turn.

**Experience**
Several studies have pointed to the high concentration of youth in justice jobs (Bunnage 2014; Rooks 2004). These jobs allow youth to fulfill their idealistic goals and have the kind of flexibility they want (Beadle and Knight 2012). Because they tend to be relatively unattached and geographically mobile, younger people are able to take on the grueling hours required in organizing (Rooks 2004). As workers age, however, they accumulate family and community responsibilities that often conflict with the extensive demands of organizing. Rooks (2004) found that older organizers cope with the tension by leaving these occupations altogether in search of less demanding work. Others move off the front lines into supervisory roles, which allows them to minimize occupational stress and reduce work hours without abandoning their global commitment to social change. The same study found that organizers who stayed had learned to compromise their idealism to conform to the demands of bureaucratic unions (Rooks 2004).

**Gender**
Most unions have had a male-oriented culture built around the assumption that men could work long hours and be away from home for long periods of time than women could (Schurman 2005). Rooks (2004) memorably described this occupational culture—a willingness to work all the time, extensive travel, social isolation, and giving up on having multidimensional interests and activities—as the “cowboy mentality.” Even as more women have entered the field, these basic parameters of union organizing jobs have not changed. Because many women are still the primary caregivers for younger children and aging parents, the demands of organizing present a significant challenge for women, and many of them choose to leave the field as a result (Rooks 2004).
## TABLE 2
Descriptive Statistics for Dependent Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Wording</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Have Voice in Organization</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to air questions or concerns without fear of retaliation</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making authority or independent freedom to take action</td>
<td>3.84</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to influence organizational practices</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to influence strategic direction as a whole</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization's willingness to share information with you</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Satisfied with Job/Task</strong></td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours required</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment security</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>1.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible work arrangements/scheduling</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel required</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic job duties</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of workload</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical work environment</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with whom you work closely</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of job-related stress</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of fund-raising you are expected to do</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of Supervisor</strong></td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor's appreciation of your knowledge, skills, and abilities</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of feedback from your supervisor</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How your work performance is evaluated or appraised by your supervisor</td>
<td>3.49</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How you are acknowledged or rewarded for good work by your supervisor</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productivity of others on your team</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of what you are supposed to be doing and what the priorities are</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning and training opportunities offered to you</td>
<td>3.77</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational Leadership</strong></td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization's overall vision</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership's ability to carry out vision</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization's willingness to challenge unproductive members of staff</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Satisfaction (Composite)</strong></td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1- to 5-point scale, from very unsatisfied to very satisfied. Matrix format.

A 2005 study of female organizers found that “by far the greatest challenge for these women revolves around balancing the demanding schedule and extensive travel typically required of organizers with their roles as family and community members” (Schurman 2005: 14). Emotional conflict and additional pressures built up when the job precluded women from fulfilling their roles as
wives, partners, mothers, and community activists. One organizer’s quotation summed up the dilemma: “Women are raised as social creatures. . . . [We] have families. . . . [H]ow do you have a life and organize?” (Schurman 2005: 16). Rooks (2004) has argued that this dominant culture of organizing, in concert with the demands of the work itself, has undermined the labor movement’s ability to diversify its organizing ranks, particularly along gender lines.

**Race**

Previous scholarship on the experience of organizers of color offers a mixed view. On the one hand, evidence suggests that organizers of color have much to be dissatisfied about in the union movement. While membership of people of color has increased in unions, the hierarchical ranks remained predominantly White (Bronfenbrenner and Warren 2007; Hunt and Rayside 2000). Not only have the upper ranks of union jobs remained typically White and male, seniority systems in many unions historically discriminated against people of color and women (Riccucci 1990). In a study of Union Summer participants (a paid internship program for young people to become involved in organizing), Bunnage (2014) found that although the program expended considerable effort to recruit people of color, the retention rate was a little more than half that of whites. Women of color, in particular, were least likely to be retained in the labor movement after completing the program.

The union movement has also been heavily critiqued for placing economic and class-based issues above issues of gender and race, and failing to find intersections among these platforms (Kurtz 2002). On the other hand, unions have consciously expanded diversity in their ranks, especially since John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO (Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Hunt and Rayside 2000; Kelley 1998). The change in organizing philosophy of the AFL-CIO led by unions such as SEIU and UNITE HERE (Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998) galvanized first- and, especially, second-generation immigrants to work as organizers in unions (Milkman 2006; Yu 2008). Second-generation immigrant union organizers report a great appreciation for their jobs as opportunities to serve their communities and right the injustices they witnessed (Yu 2008). Many describe their jobs as a calling (Yu 2008). Among union occupations, the percentage of people of color in organizing leadership has increased. The percentage of lead organizers of color increased from 15% to 21% from the late 1980s to the late 1990s (Bronfenbrenner and Warren 2007).

Organizers of color also were found to have achieved better outcomes than their White counterparts. As Bronfenbrenner and Warren (2007: 145) found:

> While the overall win rate in [National Labor Relations Board] campaigns for female lead organizers averages 53 percent (compared to 42 percent for men), the average win rate for lead organizers of color is 58 percent (compared to 41 percent
for White leads), and for lead women of color organizers is 69 percent (compared to 43 percent). And when the lead organizer is a woman of color in units with over 75 percent women of color, the NLRB election win rate is an astounding 89 percent.

Similarly, Ganz (2009) argued that diversity within the leadership group of the United Farm Workers stimulated tactical and organizational innovation.

**Education**

In the past few decades since the 1980s, a “new breed” of organizers has entered labor organizing. These organizers are younger and relatively highly educated, especially in service sector unions (Reed 1990). Higher education levels of union staff have been associated with innovation and greater effectiveness, although the relationship to organizing win rates is mixed. For example, Voss and Sherman (2000) found that the presence of staff with higher education along with technical skills and organizing experience outside of the labor movement are necessary preconditions for unions to fully innovate. While Reed (1989, 1990) found that higher levels of education of organizers are linked to campaign success, Bronfenbrenner and Juravich (1998) found education level to be statistically insignificant in its relationship to rate of success.

High levels of education present other challenges for organizations: college-educated organizers expect more from their organizations. Rooks (2004) documented the initial expectations of college graduates who enrolled in the Organizing Institute. They believed “new labor” was more ideologically progressive compared with traditional unions, that unions would be diverse workplaces and also fight for greater diversity in society, and that the strategies espoused—such as militant organizing—would lead to “true worker empowerment” (Rooks 2004: 214–215). Disillusionment upon having these expectations violated was the most common reason that graduates left the labor movement within 18 months of graduation (Rooks 2004: 211).

**Income**

In Rooks’ (2004) study of recent graduates from the Organizing Institute, no one reported income as being a source of grievance in their organizing jobs. While this would suggest that income should have no effect on organizer satisfaction early in their careers, our own work over the years has indicated that union staff appreciate being able to do justice work in an environment that provides a minimum level of income and job security. This was often cited to us as a reason for transition to labor from community and other social movement organizations. Moreover, studies on commitment to and satisfaction from work have shown in general that higher levels of income are correlated with increased commitment and satisfaction (Gao-Urhahn, Biemann, and

Working mothers, in particular, report greater ability to focus on their work and greater satisfaction at higher levels of income because extra income enables outsourcing childcare and other tasks that facilitate work–family balance (McManus, Korabik, Rosin, and Kelloway 2002). Often, those who dedicate themselves to justice jobs who are themselves socioeconomically disadvantaged are forced to choose between low-paying justice jobs and the need to make a living. Perhaps relatedly, in Bunnage’s (2014) study of Union Summer program participants, no people of color from working-class backgrounds stayed in the union movement after completing the program.

### Job Characteristics

Characteristics of the job and task, such as workload and hours worked, stress, and the nature of work tasks, are important factors influencing job satisfaction. The literature on justice careers stipulates that those who undertake work in this field tolerate long hours and high workload out of commitments to the larger mission (Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Thompson and Bunderson 2003). However, evidence suggests that those in justice jobs care deeply about the nature of the task, and particularly whether the tasks they are given serve to advance their personally held cause (Berg, Grant, and Johnson 2010). Tasks that do not directly lead to serving the mission, or that are seen to jeopardize the cause, can be a source of dissatisfaction for those in justice jobs. When tasks challenge core values that workers view as central to the mission, they can constitute a “violation of expectation” severe enough to trigger exit (Thompson and Bunderson 2003).

Based on earlier studies that found organizers believe new labor’s emphasis on militant organizing tactics should translate into true worker empowerment (Rooks 2004), it is our view that organizer satisfaction will correlate with tasks that are associated with worker empowerment. These tasks include recruiting and providing support to worker leaders, recruiting workers through house calls and worksite visits, and motivating and inoculating workers to withstand anti-union tactics. Beyond organizing drives and contract campaigns, organizers engage leaders and members in public policy and electoral campaigns, and organize workers to sign up for recurring monthly donations to the union political action committee. In recent years, however, overall administrative tasks carried out in unions have been on the rise as a result of an increase in mergers across unions, a rising staff-to-member ratio, and changes in the nature of organizing that place more emphasis on researching employers’ vulnerabilities and mounting corporate campaigns (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey 2004; McAlevey 2016). Also, negotiated settlements have increased the amount of administrative tasks performed by organizers (Behrens, Hurd, and Waddington 2004).
Local Versus National Levels of Organization

One of the recommendations made by Schurman and the Berger–Marks Foundation (2005) was that organizing should be based locally. For organizers, working on national campaigns often translates into constant traveling and the social and emotional isolation that accompanies it (Rooks 2004). Furthermore, mentoring and development is likely to be both more available and personalized when an organizer is rooted in relationships with colleagues and worker leaders in a local organization (Feekin and Widenor 2000; Fletcher and Hurd 1998).

To examine the relationship between these individual, organizational, and experiential characteristics and job satisfaction, we ran a series of multivariate ordinary least-squares regressions for most of our analyses. Our goal in these analyses was to identify what the correlational patterns were among people’s individual characteristics, their experience of organizing, and their levels of satisfaction with their job. At the individual level, we included variables for gender, the number of dependents under the age of 17, marital status, age, education, whether the respondent was a person of color, whether the person worked full time, personal income, and whether the respondent had a partner who was employed part time or full time. In addition, we included variables related to the person’s organization and their experience of organizing. These variables included the number of previous organizing jobs a person had had; whether they worked for a union; whether the organization was a local, state, or national organization; and the amount of time they spent on administrative work in their job. Finally, we included some interaction terms.

The results of our regression analyses are shown in Table 3. If we look at each of our measures of satisfaction, we find some interesting patterns. First, having had more organizing jobs is related to lower levels of overall satisfaction, satisfaction with voice in the organization, satisfaction with job characteristics and tasks, and satisfaction with supervisor. Note that bivariate analyses show that there appears to be a drop-off in terms of job satisfaction between the four- and six-year and seven- and nine-year marks and that satisfaction increases after ten years or more.

We also found an interesting set of patterns related to demography. Women who work for unions have less overall satisfaction than their union counterparts who are male, and they have less satisfaction with job characteristics and tasks, supervisors, and organizational leadership. Women of color in particular were less satisfied with organizational leadership. Respondents with more children under the age of 18, however, were more likely to be satisfied with job characteristics and tasks. Overall, however, organizers of color were more satisfied in general, and, in particular, more satisfied with the quality of supervision they received. Consistent with previous research from Bunnage
### Table 3
Impact of Individual Characteristics on Job Satisfaction
(OLS regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Job Satisfaction (Composite) (1)</th>
<th>Have Voice in Organization (2)</th>
<th>Satisfied with Job/ Task (3)</th>
<th>Quality of Supervisor (4)</th>
<th>Organizational Leadership (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of organizing jobs in career</td>
<td>0.074 (0.125)</td>
<td>0.057 (0.159)</td>
<td>0.016 (0.116)</td>
<td>0.134 (0.153)</td>
<td>0.164 (0.164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (dummy)</td>
<td>0.359 (0.285)</td>
<td>–0.095 (0.362)</td>
<td>0.283 (0.264)</td>
<td>0.563 (0.349)</td>
<td>0.602 (0.374)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children under 18</td>
<td>0.057* (0.031)</td>
<td>0.038 (0.039)</td>
<td>0.067** (0.029)</td>
<td>0.041 (0.038)</td>
<td>0.058 (0.041)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (dummy)</td>
<td>0.130 (0.150)</td>
<td>0.181 (0.189)</td>
<td>0.080 (0.139)</td>
<td>0.163 (0.183)</td>
<td>0.170 (0.197)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>–0.0004 (0.0007)</td>
<td>–0.006 (0.009)</td>
<td>0.003 (0.007)</td>
<td>0.005 (0.009)</td>
<td>–0.004 (0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>–0.048 (0.051)</td>
<td>–0.085 (0.065)</td>
<td>–0.004 (0.048)</td>
<td>–0.040 (0.063)</td>
<td>–0.127* (0.068)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person of color (dummy)</td>
<td>0.260 (0.283)</td>
<td>–0.107 (0.358)</td>
<td>0.213 (0.262)</td>
<td>0.680* (0.346)</td>
<td>0.253 (0.372)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income</td>
<td>0.121* (0.072)</td>
<td>0.102 (0.092)</td>
<td>0.109 (0.067)</td>
<td>0.099 (0.088)</td>
<td>0.147 (0.094)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner employed (dummy, full or part)</td>
<td>–0.075 (0.151)</td>
<td>–0.033 (0.191)</td>
<td>–0.151 (0.139)</td>
<td>0.105 (0.184)</td>
<td>–0.013 (0.198)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed by union</td>
<td>0.095 (0.273)</td>
<td>–0.232 (0.345)</td>
<td>0.093 (0.253)</td>
<td>0.281 (0.333)</td>
<td>–0.168 (0.359)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational level (local to national)</td>
<td>0.005 (0.075)</td>
<td>–0.032 (0.095)</td>
<td>0.002 (0.069)</td>
<td>0.012 (0.091)</td>
<td>0.054 (0.099)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent on administrative tasks</td>
<td>–0.026 (0.056)</td>
<td>0.013 (0.071)</td>
<td>–0.024 (0.052)</td>
<td>–0.023 (0.068)</td>
<td>–0.043 (0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed full time (dummy)</td>
<td>–0.27 (0.156)</td>
<td>–0.087 (0.197)</td>
<td>0.001 (0.144)</td>
<td>–0.049 (0.190)</td>
<td>–0.064 (0.205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female * number of children under 18</td>
<td>–0.008 (0.049)</td>
<td>0.025 (0.062)</td>
<td>–0.009 (0.045)</td>
<td>–0.005 (0.060)</td>
<td>–0.010 (0.064)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female * work for union</td>
<td>–0.576** (0.276)</td>
<td>–0.394 (0.350)</td>
<td>–0.449* (0.255)</td>
<td>–0.804** (0.338)</td>
<td>–0.627* (0.362)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person of color * work for union</td>
<td>–0.029 (0.272)</td>
<td>0.198 (0.350)</td>
<td>–0.075 (0.251)</td>
<td>–0.185 (0.331)</td>
<td>0.197 (0.357)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person of color * female</td>
<td>–0.227 (0.256)</td>
<td>0.035 (0.323)</td>
<td>–0.134 (0.237)</td>
<td>–0.457 (0.312)</td>
<td>–0.567* (0.336)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of organizing jobs * income</td>
<td>–0.038 (0.023)</td>
<td>–0.041 (0.029)</td>
<td>–0.027 (0.022)</td>
<td>–0.051* (0.028)</td>
<td>–0.056* (0.031)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.488*** (0.602)</td>
<td>4.479*** (0.760)</td>
<td>3.317*** (0.577)</td>
<td>2.920*** (0.733)</td>
<td>3.756*** (0.790)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj. R²</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>0.035</td>
<td>0.057</td>
<td>0.051</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2014), our findings indicate that unions are particularly challenged in working with organizers who are women of color. More highly educated people, however, were less satisfied with organizational leadership.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

When we put all of the analyses together, our data raises questions that get to the heart of how the field thinks about power building. In particular, we wonder whether organizers are developing the skills and spending the time on the tasks that are most essential to building collective power. Strikingly, organizers ranked core organizing tasks such as membership recruitment and getting people to take on leadership roles and responsibility for recruiting others as the most challenging aspects of organizing. Many of them also reported spending relatively little time on these tasks. Yet, from the perspective of building power and growing the union, they are arguably the most important, especially if unions will no longer be able to rely on the collection of agency fees.

Organizers are labor’s most precious resource in terms of the essential work of growing the movement. To do this work, organizers need to want to spend the lion’s share of their time recruiting members, developing leaders, and building organizations. Yet they must feel confident that they know how to do these things effectively. Recruitment, leadership development, and getting people to take responsibility for recruiting others are difficult tasks. If solid practices are not implanted and nurtured, many organizers will gravitate to less challenging ones.

Taken together, our results also suggest that there appear to be some general questions about managerial and cultural styles confronting the field of union organizing as a whole. Stress and workload have consistently emerged as the number one issue for organizers, raising the question of whether there have been attempts to implement alternate models, what became of these experiments, and whether there are interventions that could be made in the future to lower the level of stress. Is stress a fact of life that is endemic to organizing, or is it endemic to a particular managerial and cultural style of organizing that could be changed? Are there counterbalancing measures that organizations might take to reduce the level of stress among organizers?

In 2005, based on focus groups with women organizers, the Berger–Marks Foundation made a series of recommendations including basing organizers locally rather than requiring them to travel long distances, creating organizing teams and opportunities for organizers to share lead organizer jobs, providing more time off between assignments, and offering more assistance with child and dependent care. They also recommend upgrading the status of the organizer job within unions and providing better ongoing training and mentoring (Schurman 2005). We are not aware of many unions that have implemented these recommendations.
Quality of supervision and organizers’ ability to manage others also emerged from our data as critical issues for organizers. Young organizers, female organizers, and newer organizers identified time management and self-management as a key challenge. The social justice field in general has long been notorious for a lack of training regarding management and supervision. This is likely due to some combination of ambivalence toward hierarchy and/or bureaucracy, a lack of exposure to managerial techniques, and a lack of resources. In recent years, some programs have emerged to fill this void, especially with respect to providing training and coaching for organizational leaders. The question is how to ensure that more unions and other economic justice organizations implement them and make them more broadly and deeply available within their organizations.

To understand more about how unions build a diverse base of organizers, it would seem important to pay attention to trends among particular subpopulations. In order to grapple with challenges facing the field not only with regard to entry-level positions, but also at the most senior levels, attention should also be paid to the leadership pipeline. In this regard, there seems to be some gender bifurcation, where women report feeling more challenged by strategic capacity issues such as strategy development and campaign planning and men report greater challenges with managing others. These findings suggest that the Organizing Institute, individual unions, and allied organizations might be advised to develop a strategy for working with women organizers in particular around strategic capacity issues and for supervisory trainings to be sensitive to gender dynamics.

In thinking about long-term retention, there was a palpable drop-off in job satisfaction at the six-year mark, which anecdotally also seems to be around the time when many organizers leave the field. This raises the question of what steps might be taken to raise levels of job satisfaction for organizers at this stage in their career so that they are more likely to remain. Some of these steps would likely be similar to those discussed previously in this chapter. In addition, sociologists have pointed to the value of communities of learning and practice that offer practitioners at similar points in their careers a space to come together to identify issues they are interested in exploring, to learn from what others are trying, to share their own experiences, and to bring in outside experts to present on specific subject areas (Van Maanen and Barley 1984; Wenger 2000).

In this study, we have found that the issues union organizers identify today are remarkably consistent with earlier qualitative studies of the field. Thus, we are left with a fundamental question: why has the occupational structure of organizing changed so little? Even as enormous shifts have taken place in the nature of work, technological advances have revolutionized communication, and the occupational ranks of organizing have diversified, the structure of the job itself seems to be frozen in time. It does not have to remain so. At this
moment when American democracy is under terrible assault and social inequality has reached unprecedented levels, making union organizing a viable career for a broad range of people is more important than ever.

ENDNOTES

1 Authors are listed in alphabetical order and contributed equally to the article. We would also like to acknowledge our superb collaborators at the AFL-CIO led by Lynn Rodenhuis and Allison Porter of the Alvarez/Porter Consulting Group.

2 When asked what they would like to change most about their jobs, after the level of stress, organizers ranked the size of the workload, employment security, hours and compensation, and quality of supervision (especially with respect to clarity of their role and priorities and opportunities for learning and training).

REFERENCES


The story of US labor history over the past few decades is usually presented as a narrative of steady decline in union membership and the inability of unions to successfully organize against growing employer opposition and eroding legal protections. The ascendancy of Donald J. Trump to the presidency in 2016 only reinforced that declension narrative. Trump’s election, facilitated by the erosion of union density and corresponding suffering of working-class families in key Midwestern states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, called attention to the failure of unions to thrive during the administration of President Barack Obama. Obama’s 2008 election had raised hopes that a union revival was in the offing. But not only did unions not revive during the Obama years, union density dropped to 10.7% from 12.4% during his presidency. Although Obama signed an executive order that raised wages for federal contractors, his appointees to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) streamlined its procedures, and the Affordable Care Act helped many working families gain health insurance, a string of policy defeats outweighed these achievements for the union movement: the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), a long-anticipated reform of aging US labor law, was derailed by a Senate filibuster; Congress refused to take up comprehensive immigration reform; five states enacted “right-to-work” laws (raising the number of right-to-work states to 27); 15 states enacted curbs on public sector collective bargaining or the ability of public employee unions to collect “fair-share fees” (or agency fees) from the workers they represented; and the US Supreme Court edged toward overturning state laws that allowed public sector unions to collect agency fees from the workers they represent.¹

While the major outlines of this declension narrative are undeniable, the way it is often presented has tended to distort our understanding of the forces that have led to union decline and to obscure the rich variety of promising innovations that have emerged from the labor movement and its allies over the past generation that, taken together, might point the way forward for 21st-century worker organization. Building on research I conducted with my colleagues Jennifer Luff and Katie Corrigan, this chapter offers a corrective on
both counts. First, it argues that the roots of labor’s crisis stem less from the failure of unions to prioritize organizing than from the sharp erosion of worker bargaining power produced by economic reorganization and by the related collapse of workers’ ability to engage in successful collective actions to counteract their diminishing bargaining power. Second, it argues that the loss of bargaining power and reliable traditional vehicles for collective action prompted a range of experiments as unions and their allies attempted innovations in collective bargaining and collective action in light of new developments in the economy. Although these innovations have not yielded a “magic bullet,” and labor’s policy agenda has lagged in response to them, in their broad outlines we might be able to glimpse labor’s future. As this chapter suggests, these innovations might harbor the seeds of a 21st-century revival of worker organization and bargaining power.

MORE THAN A FAILURE TO ORGANIZE

To grasp the significance of the innovations that have emerged from the labor movement and its allies in recent years, we must first free ourselves from the relentlessly single-minded attention on unions’ failure to organize, which has tended to dominate both academic literature and discussion around the labor movement. From the 1970s to the early 21st century, labor reformers and academics focused overwhelmingly on organizing as the tool that would revive labor’s fortunes. This led them to propose changes in labor law that would better protect workers’ rights to form unions and, beginning in the 1990s, to push unions to commit more resources to organizing. Both efforts—the push to reform policy and the bid to increase unions’ commitment to organizing—yielded frustration.

The inability of labor’s allies to amend the law to protect workers’ right to organize against the increasing opposition of employers was the clearest failure. By the mid-1970s, unions were well aware of the degree to which the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) no longer protected workers’ rights to organize. With the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Democrats in firm control of the House and Senate, labor’s allies attempted to pass a comprehensive reform of the NLRA only to see their effort die in a Senate filibuster in 1978. The same fate would meet the effort to pass the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA) during the Obama administration in 2010.

Having failed to pass laws that would ease union organization, unions nonetheless saw no choice but to increase their efforts to organize new members if they were to survive. “There must be a renewed emphasis on organizing,” as argued in “The Changing Situation of Workers and Their Unions,” the 1985 special report of the AFL-CIO’s Committee on the Future of Work. The report’s recommendations that unions spend more on organizing, reach beyond their traditional ranks to organize professionals and white-collar workers, and
create associate membership programs produced little change. While most AFL-CIO unions changed little in response to the AFL-CIO’s prodding, a number of organizations made a concerted effort to prioritize organizing.5

One of these was the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In many ways, SEIU had been a rather traditional organization before the Reagan era. Its roots stretched back to an effort by Chicago’s building janitors to organize in 1902. It was chartered as an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor in 1921. By the 1960s, it had amassed a quarter of a million members. Under the leadership of George Hardy, the union took an aggressive and expansive approach to organizing. “If they’re breathing, organize them,” Hardy famously urged his colleagues. John Sweeney, the leader of the union’s large New York City local, 32BJ, was fully committed to this vision. He rose to the local’s presidency in 1976 and succeeded Hardy as general president of SEIU in 1980.6

Under Sweeney’s leadership, SEIU revamped its internal culture to make organizing its top priority. In 1984, Sweeney tapped Andy Stern, then president of Local 668, the Pennsylvania Social Services Union, to come to Washington as the union’s new organizing director. He also brought in a young organizer named Stephen Lerner to run the union’s property services division. With support from Sweeney and Stern, Lerner launched the Justice for Janitors campaign in 1986, which led to breakthroughs organizing low-wage janitors—many of whom were immigrants—in major cities such as Denver, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.7 Justice for Janitors helped change SEIU. Before the mid-1980s, like most unions, SEIU prioritized membership service above new organizing. “Promotion, power, and glory came from being a tough bargainer and fighting for existing members that voted in union elections,” Stern explained. Consequently, “organizing workers into unions was underfunded and undervalued.”8 SEIU helped make organizing the center of attention in the labor movement.

By 1989, the AFL-CIO was devoting increased attention to organizing, creating the Organizing Institute (OI) in 1989. With initial funding from SEIU, the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWU) (forerunner of the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees [UNITE]), the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the United Food & Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), the OI developed a training program available to any AFL-CIO–affiliated union. The OI recruited from university campuses as well as among rank-and-file members, and thousands of organizers got their start as OI trainees. Many unions created their own organizing training programs as well.9

Yet while a number of unions began prioritizing organizing by the early 1990s, union membership continued to slip. In response to that erosion and to Republican takeover of the Congress in 1994, Sweeney sought election as
president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, pledging to commit massive resources to organizing. He won on a ticket that included Richard Trumka of the United Mine Workers and Linda Chavez Thompson of AFSCME.

Sweeney’s election marked the ascendancy of the organizing model of unionism. A number of unions dramatically stepped up their commitment to organizing. In 1998, the Steelworkers boosted its organizing budget from $13 to $40 million, funded by a special dues assessment. At the same time, AFSCME increased dues to generate an additional $8 million for organizing. In 2002, the Teamsters pledged to spend $60 million per year on organizing. The AFL-CIO issued a Federation-branded credit card and used a portion of the profits to create a special organizing fund. Although the AFL-CIO never reached the goal Sweeney promised in 1995 of spending 30% of its budget on organizing, it doubled organizing expenditures during his tenure.\(^\text{10}\)

Unions achieved their most significant organizing successes in property services, the public sector, and in health care organizing. The biggest gains arose from unions’ creative collaboration with friendly state and local governments to classify homecare and childcare providers who received public subsidies as state workers who could bargain collectively with state and local governments, as happened when 74,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles County joined SEIU in 1999. But most organizing campaigns failed to achieve such large breakthroughs. Outside of health care and the public sector, few new organizing campaigns succeeded, regardless of the union responsible.\(^\text{11}\)

Sweeney’s effort to jump-start organizing across the labor movement soon ran into stiff headwinds, suffering three staggering blows in quick succession. In 1998, his ally, Teamster president Ron Carey, was deposed by James Hoffa after a bitter election battle. Then–vice president Al Gore, a union ally, lost the controversial 2000 presidential election to union opponent George W. Bush. Finally, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, pushed the nation in the direction of conservatism and xenophobia. This sapped the union movement of much of the energy that it had gained from alliances it had struck with environmentalists and other anti-globalization activists during the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999 and with immigrants and their advocates after the AFL-CIO reversed its long-standing opposition to immigration reform in 2000.\(^\text{12}\)

By the time George W. Bush won re-election and Republicans consolidated control of Congress in 2004, the organizing spirit that had suffused the AFL-CIO in the early days of Sweeney’s rise to power had given way to dissatisfaction and internal division. Andy Stern, by then president of the SEIU, emerged as Sweeney’s most pointed critic. Together with several of the AFL-CIO largest unions, Stern argued that Sweeney had not done enough to energize organizing across the movement. When Sweeney refused to step aside in 2005, Stern and his allies—including the Teamsters and UFCW—withdraw their unions from the AFL-CIO in 2005 to create a rival federation, Change
to Win. As Sweeney had done a decade earlier, they too pledged to make organizing the top priority of their federation. “Organizing is our core principle,” explained Change to Win’s chair, Anna Burger. “It is our North Star.” But Change to Win’s effort to jump-start mass organizing proved no more successful in the long run. Within a decade of its founding, its membership had dwindled.

For four decades, the union movement had endeavored to revive organizing through labor law reform and increased investments by unions themselves, yet union membership continued to decline. Some have argued that a commitment to organizing was never embraced by enough unions to produce a turnaround for the movement. There is some truth in this critique. Sweeney, Stern, and other proponents of the organizing model never made converts of many of their colleagues. But labor’s commitment to organizing was stronger than many critics allow, and its failures cannot be attributed primarily to the timidity of some union leaders, their inability to enact labor law reform, or even to the increased opposition they faced from employers. Rather, the primary cause for union decline lies in the convergence of a set of developments larger than the unions or their employers—a wholesale transformation of the nation’s economy and the relationship of that economy to the government.

This transformation included changes in structure of the national and global economy, the rise of neoliberal policies, the changed structure and function of corporations, the increasing influence of financial markets over corporate governance, the decreased leverage that the workplace holds as an arena for coalescing and deploying collective power, the privatization of public services and underfunding of the public sector, and the degree to which the political system has become both polarized along party lines and paralyzed by that polarization. Together, these developments sharply eroded worker bargaining power and undercut collective action. By doing so, they made it harder to organize workers no matter how much energy and commitment unions devoted to organizing. Grappling with these structural changes would increasingly force labor activists to look beyond organizing efforts alone to experiment with new ways to bargain and act collectively.

STRUCTURAL EROSION OF BARGAINING POWER AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Many commentators cite globalization and automation as key developments undermining workers’ ability to exercise collective power. To be sure, trade liberalization, the offshoring of jobs, and the introduction of computer-based technologies did help undermine bargaining power in manufacturing and other pockets of the economy. But other developments proved more broadly damaging. These included deregulation, the financialization of the economy, and the “fissuring” of the labor market.
Three forms of deregulation eroded worker bargaining power in the late 20th century. First, a bipartisan embrace of deregulation led to the adoption of policies that devastated worker bargaining power in parts of the economy that had once been labor strongholds, such as transportation. The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 introduced increased competition in the airline industry, triggering mergers, layoffs, and restructurings that forced airline workers to compete with each other as never before. The Motor Carrier Act of 1980 led to a proliferation of low-cost, hypercompetitive trucking companies that undercut the Teamsters’ ability to protect wages and benefits through its master freight agreement.

Second, key elements of federal regulation affecting workers, including the minimum-wage and immigration law, became subject to policy drift. The creation of a national minimum wage through the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1938 had once helped buttress the industrial union movement. “No more important labor legislation has ever been introduced into Congress,” said Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (ACW). But by the late 20th century, efforts to update the FLSA ran into increased opposition. The minimum wage was never raised during the two-term presidency of Ronald Reagan. It lagged behind cost of living increases and has never caught up. Between its passage in 1938 and 1981, the minimum was raised every 2.87 years on average. Since 1981, the average length between increases has nearly doubled to 5 years. Even more problematic was the policy drift that affected immigration law in the years after the passage of the Hart–Cellar Act in 1965. As US immigration law remained inert—except for the temporary fix that came from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act—tens of millions of immigrant workers entered the US workforce without legal status and were vulnerable to exploitation.16

Finally, the agencies responsible for enforcing regulations that protected workers were starved for resources. As David Weil has documented, inflation-adjusted spending devoted to the enforcement of the FLSA remained almost unchanged between the Reagan and Obama administrations, even as the size of the nation’s workforce ballooned.17

The rise of neoliberalism and its deregulatory tendencies facilitated another process that disempowered workers: financialization. In some ways, financialization fed on the achievements of organized labor. The first modern pension fund was not created until General Motors and the United Automobile Workers signed the Treaty of Detroit in 1950, but by 1990, pension funds controlled $2.5 trillion in assets, half of which were invested in common stocks. The deregulatory spirit that rose to the fore by the late 1970s created new opportunities for the large pools of capital that were now seeking improved return on investment. Wall Street gave rise to new entities, including hedge fund and private equity investors; new methodologies, including leveraged
buyouts; and a new ideology—“maximizing shareholder value.” Together these developments transformed the economy, and the FIRE sector (finance, insurance, and real estate) doubled its share of the GDP.¹⁸

Financialization changed the behavior of corporate employers. Between the 1920s and the 1970s, corporate consolidation and efforts to vertically and horizontally integrate led to the rise of managerial capitalism. It produced corporate giants whose place in the economy was secure enough that their decisions could take into account not only the interests of their stockholders but also of some of their stakeholders, including in some cases their workers. Unions were well suited to deal with these corporate entities. In the last quarter of the 20th century, however, as the principle of maximizing shareholder value became dominant, driven by growing pools of capital seeking short-term returns, managerial capitalism gave way to shareholder capitalism. As this happened, investors came to see large-scale, diversified conglomerates as worth less than the sum of their parts and to pursue strategies of selling off their pieces and making them leaner profit-driven machines with a single corporate mission: raising their stock value. This gave rise to what Gerald Davis calls management by markets, in which corporate managers were increasingly hostage to strategies that promote stock values. While managerial capitalism grudgingly tolerated unions, shareholder capitalism was increasingly anti-union when corporate managers found that weakening, shedding, or avoiding unions and downsizing, outsourcing, and automating jobs positively influenced stock values.¹⁹

Deregulation and financialization in turn paved the way for a dramatic reorganization of the employer–employee relationship, driving a process that David Weil calls the fissuring of the American workplace. This was a process whereby employers sought to contract-out work, construct global supply chains, rely increasingly on temporary employees or independent contractors, and expand their businesses through strategies such as franchising that dispersed ownership responsibilities and accountability for workers’ welfare. By the end of the 20th century, it was becoming less common for workers to be directly employed by the entities in whose workplaces they labored, unlikely that they would remain with the same employer for most of their working lives, and more likely that they be temporary employees or independent contractors who lacked regulatory protection or the right to organize and bargain collectively.²⁰

Deregulation, financialization, and fissuring has sharply eroded worker bargaining power since the 1980s. The decline in union membership figures only hints at the extent to which bargaining power plummeted. A better measure is the precipitous decline in workers’ abilities to engage in collective action that would enhance their bargaining leverage. While strikes had been the most reliable form of worker collective action in the 20th century, they suddenly lost their punch. The number of major work stoppages (involving at least 1,000 workers) dropped from 289 per year in the 1970s to 35 per year in
the 1990s and never recovered (the average has been 15 per year in the 2010s). The extent to which unionized workers, fearful of replacement, came to view strikes as dangerous or futile suggests how far bargaining power had tipped toward employers.21

By the late 20th century, it was becoming clear to a growing number of labor activists that unless unions could find ways to reconstitute bargaining power in light of the late 20th-century transformation of the economy, no amount of money and effort poured into organizing was likely to produce a turnaround in organized labor’s fortunes. Out of necessity, activists were forced to develop new approaches to organization, bargaining, and collective action.

MOTHER OF INVENTION: THE EMERGENCE OF INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES

Two things characterized the labor innovations that began emerging in the late 20th century. First, successful organizing campaigns tended to pair organizing strategy with creative ways of marshaling bargaining power. Organizing success increasingly depended on the existence of a sound bargaining strategy and mechanisms that could either prod government into supporting or encouraging bargaining relationships or create extra-governmental forms of pressure or encouragement that might function in lieu of effective government regulation. Developing bargaining strategies that might win the support of actors other than the union and the employer was often crucially important to an organizing success. Second, innovative strategies tended to emerge in an ad hoc fashion to address deep-seated dysfunctions in a labor relations system that was devised for a form of economy that was receding into the past. To navigate that disjuncture, successful campaigns frequently had to devise ad hoc workarounds, tactics that might be characterized as “hacks” of a broken system of labor relations.

Cataloging and characterizing the full range of experiments and innovations is challenging. Any taxonomy is bound to create some arbitrary distinctions between related innovations. But, after surveying a wide range of strategic innovations, my colleagues and I found that grouping them into six basic categories helped illuminate key contributions of the innovators. We called these categories Reconstructing the Bargain, Public Goods Unionism, Capital Strategies/Public Investment, Alternative Union Recognition Strategies, Creative Militancy, and Alternative Worker Organizations.

*Reconstructing the Bargain* was an innovation that involved devising strategies to organize and bargain beyond the individual employer, such as organizing entire markets rather than individual companies, bargaining with purchasers or financiers up and down supply chains, establishing public authorities as employers of record for collective bargaining, securing retention agreements with public authorities, and creating public and private mechanisms to enforce
such agreements. Examples of this innovation included SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign, the fair food campaign of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), and the successful organization of homecare workers by SEIU and AFSCME. Justice for Janitors targeted building owners in an effort to pressure them to agree to labor standards that would allow SEIU to get their building service contractors. The CIW used a boycott of large-scale tomato purchasers to force growers to agree to labor standards and the creation of the penny-a-pound fund for tomato workers. SEIU and AFSCME pushed states such as California and Illinois to have the government act as the employer of record for homecare workers for the purposes of collective bargaining. In each of these cases, bargaining with the direct employers of workers was infeasible. However, reconstructing the bargaining table to bring other entities into the bargain—building owners, tomato purchasers, or state and local governments—was necessary before successful organization could be accomplished.22

Public Goods Unionism sought to align organizing and bargaining with broader community interests such as the achievement of living wages, affordable housing, environmental justice, public health, or food justice. This approach is embodied by Jobs to Move America, which is attempting to link urban mass transit solutions to the creation of union jobs, the Don’t Waste LA campaign of the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), which seeks to build a modern sustainable system of waste removal that will address the issues of poor communities and create decent-paying unionized jobs, or the Supermarket Task Force organized in Detroit by MOSES (Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength) and the UFCW, which is advocating for the alleviation of “food deserts” through the construction of unionized supermarkets and improved transit. The widespread use of community benefit agreements or project labor agreements that ensure the hiring of local, demographically representative, and either unionized or union-eligible workers is perhaps the most common form of this approach.23

Capital Strategies/Public Investment entailed using investment strategies, such as shareholder mechanisms, labor-friendly private equity, and public financing to advance organizing and bargaining objectives. With this strategy, unions try to use capital as leverage; invest in quality, union-friendly jobs with public and private resources; and secure contract language on profit sharing, executive compensation, and other issues not traditionally part of bargaining. Examples of this approach range from the AFL-CIO’s Housing Investment Trust, which has used its capital to promote projects employing union labor, to Vital Healthcare Capital, a spinoff of SEIU Capital Strategies, created with the help of a Ford Foundation grant, which provides flexible financing and development services to support quality health care and good, unionized health care jobs in low-income underserved communities. Other examples include the Green Justice Campaign of Community Labor United in Boston, which
won public subsidies and outreach programs that made home weatherization affordable and accessible to low-income communities, while increasing wages and improving labor standards for weatherization workers, or the Emerald Cities Collaborative, a national nonprofit network of organizations working to make cities more environmentally and socially sustainable through infrastructure projects that promote union jobs with high wages and career paths for their residents, especially women and minorities.  

Alternative Union Recognition Strategies saw unions pursue a variety of strategies to avoid bitterly contested elections under an NLRB regime in which the employer has an inherent advantage. These strategies have included pushing employers to agree to neutrality and card-check union recognition, a strategy widely used by UNITE HERE in its organizing of hotels and food service providers. A related strategy is the securing of neutrality agreements from employers, in which the employer agrees not to contest a union’s bid for recognition in an unorganized workplace (an approach often paired with card-check recognition). This was the approach the United Automobile Workers (UAW) took in organizing the Dana Corporation in 2003. Yet another example is the negotiation of election procedure agreements in which employers and unions agree to rules of engagement that govern a union election campaign. Typically, both sides agree not to use certain weapons, and elections are expedited. SEIU’s organization of Catholic Healthcare West employed this approach.

Through Creative Militancy, unions attempt to revive and redefine strikes and related work actions. In some cases, unions infused traditional strikes with the spirit of human rights struggles. This happened in 1989 when 37,000 mineworkers in Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, and participated in a wildcat, or unsanctioned, strike, joining 1,900 already striking Pittston Coal mineworkers, who had walked out in protest of Pittston’s termination of healthcare and retirement benefits. That wildcat strike helped Pittston workers prevail and helped pave the way for the 1992 Coal Act mandate that forced companies to provide certain health and retirement benefits. In other cases, workers unprotected by law engaged in work stoppages. This happened in 1998 and 2007, when the New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA), an organization of independent contractors, organized strikes that improved wages and won an AFL-CIO charter for its organization in 2011. But the most creative repurposing of the strike occurred in the one-day walkouts by small numbers of Walmart associates affiliated with the OUR Walmart campaign or fast-food workers affiliated with the Fight for $15 intended to dramatize their plight. These walkouts sought to use strikes primarily as political or public relations actions rather than efforts to shut down businesses. In some cases, it gave workers the power to change the terms and conditions of employment or muster the political will for legislative or regulatory change; in many ways, the successful use of militant tactics depended on other structural factors.
The development of *Alternative Worker Organizations* represented perhaps the most significant of all the innovations to emerge in the late 20th century. In an economy where unionization proved increasingly difficult, activists created a range of alternative organizations to advance worker power. Worker centers and minority workplace organizations (or minority unions) were the two most significant iterations of this tendency.

The worker center idea can be traced back at least to the 1970s and the organization of the national working women’s membership organization 9to5. Building a membership base through creative campaigns such as the Heartless Employer and Scrooge of the Year awards and brandishing the threat of anti-discrimination lawsuits effectively, 9to5 advocated for “pink collar” workers. By the early 1980s, other non-union low-wage workers began turning to local advocacy centers. African Americans in the Carolinas, and immigrants in New York City’s Chinatown and in El Paso, Texas, organized the first modern worker centers. A wave of organizing in the late 1980s and early 1990 among Latinx and Southeast Asian immigrants spread the worker center idea and led to the founding of model efforts such as the Centro de Derechos Laborales (the Workplace Project) in suburban Long Island and the Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance, both launched in 1992. These early worker centers offered social services and legal advice and orchestrated local campaigns against wage theft and discrimination. By the early 2000s, worker centers, such as the Restaurant Opportunities Center, began focusing on workers in specific industries. By 2015, there were more than 200 worker centers around the United States.²⁷

Worker centers helped give birth to several national networks. Among these were the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), founded in 2001, which organized immigrant day laborers; the National Guestworker Alliance (NGA), established in 2006, which advocated on behalf of H2 visa workers in the United States; and the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA), founded in 2007. These organizations adapted to conditions unfavorable to unionization. Traditional collective bargaining was difficult to envision for day laborers who might have a different employer each day, or for domestic workers whose employers were as numerous as the workers themselves, but collective action could win improvements in these workers’ lives. NDLON affiliates set up day-laborer cooperatives in some cities, the NGA exposed US employers who exploited guest workers, and the NDWA helped secure passage of a bill of rights for domestic workers in New York State.²⁸

Worker center-like organizations also served those outside of the low-wage labor market. The Freelancers Union (founded in 2001), like NDLON, NDWA, and NGA, advocated for workers who could not readily unionize. It signed up dues-paying members who worked in a variety of jobs, especially in the entertainment and media industries, offering them access to a group health insurance plan, legal advice, and more.²⁹
A second model of alternative worker organization workplace-based organizations lacked official certification as collective bargaining representatives but functioned as minority unions. Such organizations emerged in settings where unions were either not strong enough to win certification or were not allowed to win it under law. Several minority unions are affiliated with the Communications Workers of America (CWA). Alliance at IBM, Washington Alliance of Technical Workers (WashTech), and Working at GE (WAGE) formed in response to imminent company takeaways or a failed organizing campaign (in the case of WAGE). Another CWA affiliate, the Texas State Employees Union, exists as a minority union owing to the restrictions on collective bargaining for public employee in Texas. Other examples include the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO) at Yale University, affiliated with UNITE HERE; and the Dick’s (Sporting Goods) Employee Council, affiliated with the Steelworkers. In 2006, the Steelworkers unsuccessfully attempted to use Dick’s Employee Council as a test case for a legal theory that the NLRA grants minority unions collective bargaining rights, yet that strategy continues to draw adherents among legal theorists.

Although minority organizations have not won the right to bargain collectively with their employers, some of them have found ways to take collective action and win improvements in wages, benefits, and working conditions. OUR Walmart, launched in 2011 by the UFCW, is a case in point. At its peak, OUR Walmart membership was made up of past and present Walmart employees from more than 600 stores in over 43 states. It fought to get its members more respect at work, better pay, improved health care, and predictable scheduling by engaging in public actions such as one-day strikes and pickets outside Walmart stores on Black Friday, the stores’ busiest day. Rather than seeking recognition as a bargaining agent, OUR Walmart sought to take advantage of workers’ rights to engage in collective action under Section 7 of the NLRA. By some measures, OUR Walmart made significant headway. In 2015, Walmart announced wage increases that many observers attributed to OUR Walmart’s success in drawing negative attention to the company’s labor practices. The UFCW ultimately found it difficult to sustain OUR Walmart, which produced negligible income from its own membership. In 2015, the union withdrew its support, and OUR Walmart became an independent and scaled-down entity. Even so, it continued its agitation by developing a smartphone application called WorkIt, which acts as a digital shop steward informing employees of their rights and helping them navigate the company’s internal regulations and grievance procedures.

Alternative worker organizations have struggled to become financially self-sufficient. But recently they have made headway in addressing this problem. OUR Walmart hopes to realize revenues from its WorkIt app. Fast-food workers involved with the SEIU’s Fight for $15 in New York City have developed
another creative alternative. After years of organizing and intense lobbying, they pressured the New York City Council to adopt a law in 2017 that gives fast-food employees the ability to make voluntary contributions to not-for-profit organizations of their choice through payroll deductions. The creation of Fast Food Justice, a 501(c)(4) group funded by fast-food workers’ payroll deductions and capable of advocating on their behalf, stops well short of giving the workers a collective bargaining vehicle. But it does not take much imagination to see how such an organization might lay the experiential basis for a future self-funded union of fast-food employees.  

The examples above suggest that as unions and worker activists struggled to deal with an economy reshaped by deregulation, financialization, and fissured employment, they developed a wide range of innovations from “reconstructing the bargain” to building new forms of organization. Taken together, these innovations suggest some of the features that might define a 21st-century revival of worker organization and bargaining power.

MOVING INNOVATION TO THE NEXT LEVEL: COMMON-GOOD BARGAINING

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing effort to reinvent collective bargaining in response to the erosion of worker bargaining power and collective action has emerged from a group of public sector unions and their allies who have embraced an initiative called Bargaining for the Common Good. As was the case with other innovations, this initiative arose in response to urgent necessities. The Great Recession propelled a generation of militantly anti-union Republicans into office, including governors Scott Walker of Wisconsin, Rick Snyder of Michigan, and Chris Christie of New Jersey. They promptly implemented austerity budgets and launched attacks on public sector unions, characterizing their members as a new elite who enjoyed expensive benefits—such as defined benefit pensions—that were unavailable to most of the private sector workers whose taxes paid for those benefits. Capitalizing on such sentiments, Walker, the most successful of the bunch, pushed Act 10 through his state legislature, effectively ending collective bargaining for most state and local government workers. These anti-unionists also found allies on the US Supreme Court: in 2012, Justice Samuel Alito signaled that it was time to review and overturn state laws that allowed public sector unions to collect agency fees from the workers they represented.

Realizing their vulnerability in this new context, some trade unionists advocated an approach that would soon be called Bargaining for the Common Good. They argued that the continued pursuit of traditional collective bargaining would isolate unions, allowing their opponents to pit union members against taxpayers. An entirely new approach was called for.
The outlines of that approach first became visible in Chicago under the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Just as several Midwestern states elected anti-union governors in 2010, union reformer Karen Lewis and her Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) were elected to office within the CTU. Lewis’s team were determined to take a different approach to the union’s contract negotiation in 2012. They resolved to go into bargaining arm in arm with community allies and parents, merging the union’s traditional demands with a range of new proposals that went far beyond the parameters of traditional bargaining. The CTU joined with a range of groups including the Grassroots Collaborative, a network of 11 membership organizations; Parents for Teachers; and Stand Up Chicago, a union-sponsored group that specialized in direct action protests. They issued a report called *The Schools Chicago’s Students Deserve*, which laid out demands for smaller class sizes, improved facilities, wrap-around programs, and other items that went beyond the confines of the wages, hours, and narrowly defined work issues about which the union was legally permitted to bargain. Significantly, the CTU challenged the financing of the school system, exposing the fact that the school district lost hundreds of millions to toxic interest rate swap deals struck with Wall Street firms. By making the financial industry’s exploitation of the school district an issue and demanding that this issue be taken up in negotiation, the CTU placed itself in the position of defending the interests of Chicago taxpayers. The union’s demands attracted broad-based support and placed Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a Democrat who had embraced an austerity agenda, on the defensive. When the union went on strike in September 2012, Emanuel was forced to accede to many of its key demands.35

Similar creativity was displayed by state workers in Oregon and teachers in St. Paul the following year. Oregon’s SEIU Local 503, which represents homecare, childcare, university, and state workers pursued a campaign called In It Together in preparation for their 2013 contract negotiations. Local 503’s demands extended well beyond pay and benefits for its members, calling for a broad investigation into the ways in which banks were ripping off Oregonians, demanding tuition freezes for the state university, and a state lawsuit that would recoup millions lost by state retirement funds resulting from banks’ secret manipulation of the London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR). Meanwhile, the St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) took a page from the CTU’s playbook, convening community allies and jointly drawing up a list of 29 items to advance at the bargaining table. Included among them were demands for an expanded preschool program; additional nurses, counselors, librarians, and social workers; a reduction of standardized testing; and a commitment that the school district would cease doing business with any banks that foreclosed on the families of school-aged children during the academic year. Although neither Local 503 nor the SPFT won all of their demands, their approach to
collective bargaining shattered the taxpayer-versus-union dynamic that had come to characterize so much public sector bargaining.  

In May 2014, activists involved in these efforts convened at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in a conference that helped to popularize the term Bargaining for the Common Good to describe their approach. Participants included a delegation from Los Angeles that was in the process of launching a campaign called Fix LA. It allied the city’s leading public sector unions—SEIU Local 721 and District Council 36—with a broad cross-section of 20 community groups and faith-based organizations in a common cause to restore cuts made in city services in response to the recession and to improve the lot of LA’s struggling public sector workers. In March 2014, the campaign released a report titled No Small Fees, which noted that Los Angeles was spending more taxpayer money paying fees to the private firms that marketed its municipal bonds and other financial services ($290 million) than it was spending on caring for the city’s streets ($160 million). The report blamed the financial industry for forcing austerity on the city and demanded that LA use its $106 billion worth of assets, payments, and debt issuance as leverage to “demand better deals with Wall Street, so that it can invest more in our communities.” After a year-long contract campaign, the union won most of its demands, including the city’s commitment to hire 5,000 workers and a commitment by the city to study and seek to reform its relationship with Wall Street.  

Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) campaigns drew inspiration from many of the innovations or “hacks” that had emerged from the labor movement over the previous few decades. But these campaigns took the most significant step yet in the effort to redefine collective bargaining to meet the needs of 21st-century workers. BCG campaigns sought to revise three fundamental elements of traditional collective bargaining: its participants, its processes, and its goals.  

BCG campaigns sought to expand the stakeholders represented at the bargaining table. Whereas traditional collective bargaining was premised on a simple bilateral bargain between management and labor, BCG campaigns sought to give the community a voice in bargaining by jointly crafting bargaining demands and in some cases—such as St. Paul—to have community representatives physically present during bargaining. Even as they pulled community allies into bargaining on their side of the table, BCG campaigns also attempted to bring the powerful economic actors that so often dominate public policy to the table on the other side. Realizing that public sector employers often functioned on austerity budgets, the campaigns attempted to “bargain with Wall Street” by making the relationship between the financial industry and government a subject of bargaining.  

BCG campaigns also transformed the processes of bargaining. Rather than constructing coalitions in which unions recruited community allies at the last
minute to support pre-formulated union demands in a quid pro quo transactional relationship that was not intended to survive beyond the contract campaign, these efforts sought to build enduring alignments of interest groups that shared a common vision and narrative and worked to accumulate lasting power over time through campaign victories. BCG campaigns were also prepared to use Creative Militancy when necessary. The campaigns operated from the assumption that traditional political action and bargaining strategies would no longer give public sector workers sufficient leverage. Chicago teachers struck, St. Paul teachers threatened to strike, and Fix LA protesters blocked streets to dramatize their demands. In each case, unions found that militancy or the threat of militancy was most effective if the union was advocating goals that served the common good, not the narrow interests of their members.

Finally, the BCG campaigns broadened the goals of collective bargaining. Since the inception of public sector bargaining in the 1960s, unions have been forced to bargain over a narrow range of economic issues that allowed union opponents to argue that public employees’ gains came at the taxpayers’ expense. At the same time, unions were forbidden from bargaining over a whole range of issues that might allow them to make common cause with the community. BCG campaigns made a conscious effort to break out of this box, even advancing demands that were outside the scope of what the law permitted. Even if they failed to resolve these issues, the simple act of raising them changed the bargaining dynamic.

Despite their promise, BCG campaigns have spread slowly. Public sector bargaining is highly decentralized, and any effort to change it must be embraced at the local level. At the same time, unions are tradition-bound organizations—and arguably, nothing in the union movement is more impervious to radical reinvention than the bread-and-butter act of bargaining. In perilous times, some unions fear the risks of reinvention. But they might soon have little choice. As this chapter goes to press, indications are that the US Supreme Court will soon overturn the long-standing precedent that permits unions to negotiate contracts that require the workers they represent to pay for the costs of their representation through agency (or fair share) fees. If the court does as expected in the case of Janus v. AFSCME, it will force on the entire nation elements of the anti-union regime that Scott Walker enacted in Wisconsin—and the results could be devastating for union finances and strength. If they are to resist the anti-union forces that are now gathering, public sector unions will need all of the allies they can find, and BCG campaigns provide a good model for how to build such alliances.

Finally, the BCG approach need not remain confined to the public sector. Private sector bargaining continues to deteriorate. Not only do employers resist unionization, the very structure of employment continues to change in ways that disempower workers. The application of BCG principles to the private
sector might provide new leverage for workers who are experiencing this disempowerment. An intriguing implementation of the BCG approach can be found in the campaign to organize bank workers that is currently being bankrolled by CWA, which has made an effort to link the organization of these workers to efforts to reform the nation’s corrupt finance industry. “The importance of this campaign extends beyond improving, or maintaining, conditions for individual workers,” the union insists. CWA asserts that “many of the abuses of the financial industry which caused the 2008 crash, including unethical actions and predatory lending, could in fact have been prevented if workers had the protection to speak with an independent voice and whistleblower protections.”

If they ever hope to unionize the powerful banking industry, workers will require such a broadly conceived mission in which their union fights not only to protect its members through collective bargaining but uses their collective power to protect the public from predatory financial practices.

TRAVELING AN UNCHARTED PATH

Organized labor has been in crisis for a generation. Over time, that crisis has generated a growing list of creative innovations, as the brief survey offered here makes clear. While none of these innovations by themselves have provided a resolution to the crisis, a consensus is beginning to emerge around one fundamental proposition: labor cannot simply organize its way out of this crisis; it must also reorganize itself, reframe its approach to bargaining, and revive its capacity for creative militancy in the service of the common good. Doing so means traveling down an uncharted path, for 20th-century methods will not suffice in meeting the needs of workers in the 21st century. But as this survey suggests, a growing number of labor activists are ready to meet the challenge.

ENDNOTES


3 See, for example: Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies, eds. Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard W. Hurd, Rudolph A. Oswald, and Ronald L. Seeber (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in...


8 Stern quoted in Stillman, Stronger Together, 20.


19 Rana Foroohar, Makers and Takers: How Wall Street Destroyed Main Street (New York, NY: Crown Business, 2016); Eileen Appelbaum and Rosemary Batt, Private Equity at Work:
STRATEGIES TO REINVENT COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

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NO ONE SIZE FITS ALL

33 Fast Food Justice, see https://www.fastfoodjustice.org.
39 On the bank workers’ project, see Communications Workers of America (http://bit.ly/2EkKHOP).
Chapter 8

The Strike as the Ultimate Structure Test: Rebuilding Working-Class Power Through Mass Participation Strikes

JANE McALEVEY

2016’S MOST SUCCESSFUL U.S. UNION ORGANIZING DRAWS ON THE POWER OF MASS STIKES

To abandon the strike is to abandon the concept of wage labor; for the essence of wage labor as opposed to slave labor, is refusal to work when conditions of work become unbearable.

John Steuben

In September 2015, at 4:30 in the morning of his night shift, nurse Michael Winn cold-called nearby Temple University Hospital in Philadelphia, which is unionized, to ask about its conditions and its union. Winn didn’t know the nurses he was calling. He and his co-workers in the emergency department at the nearby non-union Hahnemann University Hospital had just experienced a heartbreaking and deeply frustrating patient-care crisis caused by systemic short staffing. When he reached the switchboard, he asked to speak with the charge nurse in the emergency department.

“Hi. Temple ER. May I help you?” the charge nurse asked.

“Hi. My name is Michael. I’m a nurse over at Hahnemann’s, and we are having an incredible staffing crisis. I want to pick your brain for a minute: I know you have a union at Temple. Do you like your union? Does your hospital get away with substandard care and nurse abuse the way our hospital management’s does?”

“We’d never tolerate those conditions, and I love my union!” Temple’s charge nurse answered.

When Winn heard the response, he and his co-workers decided they needed a union. Within days, union nurses from Temple University Hospital, who were members of the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP), began meeting with their non-union counterparts at Hahnemann Hospital. By January 20, 2016, Winn and his 850 co-workers overwhelmingly voted yes (516 to 117) to forming a union through a National Labor Board Relations (NLRB) election. Yes, an NLRB election.
Had Winn reached a nurse who didn’t know or care about the hospital’s union, it’s fair to say he wouldn’t have considered that the solution to his problem could be forming a union.

In Philadelphia, the union at Temple University Hospital seems as strong as any union in the heyday of the American labor movement described in the 1940s and 1950s—and for some of the same core reasons. As in those earlier decades, the Temple workers forged intense solidarity through one of the largest strikes in the United States. In 2010, 1,600 nurses and technical workers at Temple walked off the job in an open-ended strike. It garnered strong support actions from the city’s unions, as well as from politicians, editorial boards, and the general public. The central issue in the strike was a gag order on nurses proposed by hospital management during the successor contract negotiations for the Temple workers’ fourth contract with PASNAP as their union. The gag order was intended to silence mounting complaints about dangerous short-staffing levels lodged by empowered union nurses through a special State of Pennsylvania reporting hotline, Project DISCLOSE. The management-proposed gag order read: “The Association [PASNAP], its officers, agents, representatives and members shall not publicly criticize, ridicule or make any statement which disparages Temple, or any of its affiliates or any of their respective management officers or medical staff members.”

Adding to the fury of the nurses and technical staff, Robert Birnbrauer, a Temple human resources department director, was quoted by the news media as saying to the nurses and techs, “If you want your constitutional rights, you need to go somewhere else.” Taking Birnbrauer at his word, the nurses and techs decided that “somewhere else” would be the streets of Philadelphia. They were there for 28 days until they defeated management in a public relations romp. The strike received so much press that it would be difficult even today to find a nurse in Philadelphia who wasn’t aware of the month-long Temple strike. Area nurses like Winn also knew that as a result of the strike, Temple had the best-paid nurses and staffing safeguards in Philadelphia, won through their union strike and struggle.

Days before the lopsidedly pro-union vote at Hahnemann Hospital on January 19 to January 20, 2016, however, the 330 nurses at Delaware County Memorial Hospital (DCMH) had voted 164 to 130 to unionize on January 15 to January 16 (164 to 130). Two weeks later, on February 8, just off Broad Street—the same street as Temple—470 nurses at St. Christopher’s Hospital voted 311 to 49 to unionize. Over the next two weeks in February, two more units of both outpatient and technical workers at St. Christopher’s and DCMH would vote yes to joining the nurses in their hospitals. And on April 8, the nurses at Einstein Medical Center—also on Broad Street, to the north of Temple, the biggest hospital of the 2016 campaign and most strategically
important because of its ranking and prestige in the Philadelphia labor market—
voted to unionize (463 to 343).

But seeing the handwriting on the wall from the successive elections, Einstein
management had hired one of the top union-busting firms in the United States: IRI, Inc. There were a dozen union busters in the hospital in the weeks leading
up to the election. In fact, the first sighting of IRI consultants inside the
hospital was in late March 2015, when the union had leafleted about
unionization outside the hospital. The consultants, therefore, had been
trying to work the Einstein nurses into an anti-union crusade for almost
one full year by the time of the election, resulting in a narrower win than
in most of the other recent contests. There were 926 nurses eligible to
vote, of whom 806 cast ballots (86% of all nurses cast a ballot). The 463
yes votes were equal to the number of no votes combined with the 120
who hadn’t voted (343 no votes, with 120 who didn’t participate in the
vote).

Within the byzantine NLRB-defined legal period of seven days from
the date of the election—the number of days either side in an election has
to file objections to a union election—an urgent fax stated what a courier
simultaneously hand-delivered to the union offices: an official objection
by management’s lawyers to the union election at Einstein, seeking
immediate relief and stating that the hospital refused to recognize the
union because of its allegations of malfeasance on the part of the union.

METHODOLOGY

I used mixed qualitative and quantitative methods in writing this chapter. I
was a participant observer in the 2016 organizing campaign in Philadelphia.
Prior to that year, starting in 2013, I was an occasional consultant to PASNAP,
conducting training on power and strategy. I was in regular discussion with
union leadership starting in January 2016 but was unable to move because of
my post-doc requirements at Harvard, which involved teaching full-time in
January and February. In April 2016, eight days after the Einstein hospital
management filed election objections with the NLRB, I delivered the keynote
speech to the annual convention of PASNAP. There I met with top nurse lead-
ners who urged me to move to Philadelphia to help the campaign. On May 1,
PASNAP hired me to do two jobs: to coordinate the citywide first contract
campaign across the hospitals and to try to win recognition of the union at
Einstein, which would include negotiating the contract if we overcame hospi-
tal management in the fight to win union recognition.

The legal charges filed by the hospital had the potential to lock the workers
into what is typically five years of legal appeals and judicial rulings, a process
that we understood from experience was developed by A-level union busters
to destroy the workers’ hopes of forming the union, despite their voting yes in a sanctioned NLRB election. I moved to Philadelphia in May, just in time for the first of a series of legal hearings that were to be conducted about the employer’s objections—hearings where we were preparing dozens of nurse witnesses to testify. I remained there until late October. I continued to fly in and out in November and phone in regularly for December’s end-game strategy.

During the course of the campaign, we held weekly shift-change meetings (at seven in the morning and seven in the evening, to make them accessible to all workers) where we had discussions with hundreds of nurses, city and state elected officials, journalists, lawyers for our side and the opposing counsel, and hospital management. As part of the organizing work, the staff team held roughly 1,000 face-to-face, semistructured conversations with nurse and technical staff rank-and-file organizers (those workers elected or actively and regularly participating in organizing committee meetings and eventually as members of the negotiations committees). The 1,000 nurse and technical rank-and-file organizers conducted roughly another 5,000 conversations with an additional 1,500 semistructured one-on-one conversations with their co-workers between May and October. All of these semistructured conversations were based on what organizers call “written raps”: raps typically being a one-page model conversation practiced first among paid union organizers, then between union organizers and rank-and-file organizers. These conversations are structured to ensure that consistent information is distributed to the mass of the workers and to ensure that consistent information will be returned from the same mass of workers (an example of one of the dozens of raps intended to have a mass number of semistructured conversations is shown in the appendix to this chapter). As part of the staff development effort, weekly raps had to be written for all hospital teams and sent to me by 5 p.m. each Sunday. I refined, changed, adjusted, or corrected key aspects of the rap if needed; the organizing teams met every Monday morning to practice the final weekly raps. I conducted full staff team meetings every Monday at 9 a.m. across the hospital teams and attended hospital-specific meetings that were held later and staggered throughout each Monday.

In preparing this chapter, I conducted ten semistructured interviews in March and April 2016 with nurses and union organizers. I did archival research, primarily retrieving key statements and exchanges posted to both the pro-union and anti-union websites put up for each hospital. I also led a second team, a four-person research team, during the same period. The job of the research team was to do a comprehensive geographical power structure analysis (PSA) on the Philadelphia labor market. The PSA team did extensive research on the health care labor market in Philadelphia, including top-performing hospitals,
and obtained hospital rankings by public patient satisfaction reports, strategic planning documents made by each hospital, and deep background searches on the CEOs and members of the board of trustees or directors for each hospital in which we were engaged in active campaigns.

Additionally, our PSA research team conducted 40 structured interviews with journalists, academics, political appointees in various agencies, and management staff. The team sat in on and observed agency meetings, city council meetings, and meetings of other public bodies that had relationships to either hospital management board members or hospital financial plans. The PSA team exhaustively researched election contributions, especially all contributions by the hospitals engaged in the campaign, as well as contributions of the Hospitals & Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania and its subgroups. The team also geo-mapped the newly organized members of the union by political districts and precincts. In total, the PSA research team logged roughly 1,000 hours of research time into the Philadelphia power structure, mostly over the months of July and August. I conducted several PSA interviews personally as a method of initially teaching and training the researchers how to conduct a structured PSA interview conversation.

As coordinator of the citywide campaign, I had full access to the PASNAP database. The system for data collection and management that PASNAP uses, called Broad Stripes, is designed for social movement organizing. It is capable of holding many strands of segmented and mergeable data per worker. For the Philadelphia 2016 contract campaign, we had just under N = 3,200 for the newly organized workers, plus an additional 2,000 workers at the already unionized Temple University Hospital. The Temple union’s existing contract, by coincidence and great luck, expired on September 30, 2016. These 2,000 workers, the ones who conducted one of the largest strikes of the new millennium, were added to the contract coordination. As such, the data pool I was working with was N = 5,200.

This chapter focuses primarily on one hospital, Einstein, where the top union busters had decided there would be no union. Specifically, it focuses on the effort to move the most virulently anti-union department—what organizers call the “biggest worst”—from anti-union to pro-union. This chapter examines a small section of union actions. It is a story of significant success in a period of massive union decline. My aim is to understand in depth the dynamics and strategies in which particular hard-fought victories are achieved and how workers build resilient organizations. I argue that understanding the success at Einstein offers important insights into attempts to rethink and revitalize the future labor movement.
HIGH-PARTICIPATION STRIKES AS STRUCTURE TESTS,
STRUCTURE TESTS AS UNION DEMOCRACY TESTS,
PASNAP’S ORIGINS, AND ROUTINIZATION OF STRIKES

Strike leadership should be much broader than the regular union leadership; for the greater the participation of the rank and file, the stronger the strike.

John Steuben

The US working class is at its weakest power in a hundred years. Working-class unity in the workplace, as measured by successful strikes, is at an all-time low. Working-class solidarity in the electoral arena has given way to working-class disunity; workers vote for anyone who promises any form of radical change, whether progressive or reactionary. This chapter makes four interrelated arguments, and all four points are interdependent:

1. There have always been strategic sectors where workers position structurally in the labor market enables them to conduct and win strikes, versus more general masses of workers less structurally capable of using the strike weapon and therefore less capable of challenging the ruling class.

2. Within the strategic sectors, examples from the 1930s include auto, steel, and coal workers and today include health care, education, and transport and logistics, to name a few.

3. Once union leadership within the strategic sectors stopped using strikes as their most powerful weapon, they no longer needed to build strong worksite organization.

4. Thus, weak worksite organization lies at the root of the power crisis of the US working class today. The result is that the vast majority of what’s left of today’s unions, including many in strategic sectors, are unprepared for the kind of attacks that began in earnest with the 2010 elections, and continue with the Supreme Court case AFSCME v. Janus.

Writing in the 1920s, John Steuben remarked in his book Strike Strategy, the first of its kind, “The strike organization must have a wide, democratic base; that is a large section of strikers must be involved in the various phases of activity. A strike needs active participants, not observers.” Although Steuben gives many reasons rank-and-file workers must be fully engaged in the planning for and execution of what he calls the “strike machinery,” no single reason is more important than his simple statement that “a strike needs active participants, not observers.” Steuben, a machinist who eventually became a full-time organizer for the CIO, was on the team that helped organize steel workers in the 1930s. I use his definition
of a strike: “A strike is an organized cessation from work. It is the collective halting of production or services in a plant, industry, or area for the purpose of obtaining concessions from employers. A strike is labor’s weapon to enforce labor’s demands.” This definition of a strike stands in contrast to today’s symbolic strikes, which have the character of a protest but lack the power of the collective withdrawal of labor.

In the post-Reagan era in the United States, to overcome or defeat the efforts by employers to replace workers during a strike, strike strategists generally won’t consider a strike unless and until no fewer than 90% of the workers are ready to unite and walk off the job. In addition, the workers have to possess some strategic capacity to even contemplate using the strike weapon. With the exception of rare highly specialized or individually significant workers—say, 19 engineers at a jumbo aircraft maker such as Boeing, who are the only people who can certify that a new plane is ready to fly without its crashing—most worker power comes from their large numbers and their unity, not their irreplaceability. But this has always been true; there have always been workers with more capacity to strike and workers with less capacity to strike. In the 1930s and 1940s, the radical leaders inside the CIO weren’t equally focused on all sectors of workers. They weren’t even somewhat focused on all types of workers; rather, they were very focused on industries that they believed presented the best opportunity for workers to exercise the strike. This chapter focuses on one such key strategic sector today, health care. In thinking through the factors that enable workers to strike, strategists of any era have to consider a long list of criteria, including the following:

• Are the workers hard to replace or easy to replace?
• Are the concessions costs high or low?
• Is it possible to stop production, or seriously constrain production, by the withdrawal of labor?
• Is the broader community likely to support the workers or the employers if a strike is held? Can the workers’ actions change the likelihood of whom the public sides with by their actions?
• Is the time of year good or bad for a strike, encompassing factors such as weather and climate, major holidays, or specific events such as elections or major conventions?
• Reflecting some criteria that originate with modern globalization, can the physical workplace itself be moved to another region, state, or part of the world, or are there structural factors that limit the mobility of the facility? Is the employer an identifiable target?

The answers to these questions are essential to strike outcomes.
In the United States, as a result of 40 years of globalization, the dominant industries of the new millennium are characterized by service provision and service workers, who are easily or fairly easily replaced. In addition to the active engagement of the rank-and-file workers, Steuben spent considerable energy in his nearly 100-year-old *Strike Strategy* discussing the importance of paying close attention to the most vulnerable workers, and indeed, the unemployed: “Should the thousands upon thousands of unemployed in any given industry develop a feeling that their union is not concerned with their welfare and does not put up a fight for their immediate needs, they will look upon the union as a ‘fair weather friend’ and may turn against organized labor.”

Steuben even provides a chapter focused on persuading spouses, families, and communities to embrace the cause of a strike. For example, according to Steuben, beyond being sure that key facilities or departments are ready to strike, “similar committees should meet with the Mayor, City Councilmen, church leaders, civic organization leaders, heads of political parties and other influential persons in the community. All of this must be done as part of strike preparations. The problem of molding public opinion in support of the strike must not be left until after the strike begins.”

PASNAP was birthed by nurses who were dissatisfied by the union they were a part of in the 1990s and who decided to break away and form a new, independent union in 2000. According to Patty Eakin, a recently retired nurse who worked at Temple University Hospital for 29 years and is the founding president of PASNAP, she and her co-workers at Temple originally formed a union with the Pennsylvania Nurse Association (PNA). But by the early 1990s, PNA had come to be dominated by management-side nurses, not bedside or staff nurses. (Management nurses are not eligible to be part of collective bargaining or unions in the United States.) Tired of PNA, the Temple nurses decided to leave the organization, along with nurses at 17 other hospitals.

In 1995 at Temple we de-certified PNA and joined PSEA HC (Pennsylvania State Education Association, Health Care, a new division created by the teachers’ union in Pennsylvania to capture the many groups of nurses who were unhappy being in an association with management nurses). We were actually the 17th local [hospital] to de-cert PNA. By 1999 everyone in PSEA HC was pissed off and disgusted with our terrible contracts and wanted out, or wanted to do something. In early 2000, we made our plans to exit PSEA. Our agreement with PSEA was re-negotiated every two years and happened to be up in April of 2000. One of the best days of my life was going into the meeting with the PSEA officials with my other two comrades and giving them a letter stating we were out. They were blown away.
On May 29, 2000, there was a founding convention where the Temple nurses voted officially to leave the PSEA and founded PASNAP. By the time of the convention, another group of nurses from Butler Memorial Hospital, who had already left the PSEA, decided to join the Temple nurses in PASNAP. By late June 2000, the nurses had decided to hire a small staff team with experience in organizing and negotiations. Both of PASNAP’s early staff hires came from what was then an independent national union called simply 1199, a union widely considered an effective and politically left and militant union. Its origins and methods today are steeped in the socialist-dominated era of the US labor movement.\(^{19}\)

The preamble of an unpublished training manual written by Bernie Minter—the only of its kind used by 1199 when it was still an independent national union,\(^{20}\) states that a union is defined as the following:

**Progressive Trade Unionist**

- To raise the class-conscious level of working people.
- To clarify the fact that there are sides and define them.
- To work for rank and file control and collective decision making on all levels.
- To maximize participation in union life, understanding that people participate based on their understanding.

Later in the same manual, in a section describing the two directions unions can go (democratic or top-down control), Minter wrote:

> A union cannot choose who shall be members. We have no choice but to organize whoever the boss hires. Therefore, we will constantly have thousands of new members who have never gone through struggles and who reflect the thinking of society at large. The overwhelming majority see three sides. The boss is one authority the union is another (good) authority. The workers have to maneuver to get the most they can from both sides. The basic strength of the union depends on how well we can change three sides to two.

Since their founding as a union, nurses and technical workers in PASNAP have walked off the job eight times. Seven of those strikes happened since 2010. As Table 1 demonstrates, workers who are presumed to self-identify as professional have no trouble deciding to strike when the leadership of the union places a premium on teaching workers that they win the most by exercising class power. In fact, in the 1199 tradition, gleaning from experience, interviews, and manuals, it is clear that what workers can win has everything to do with how much power they themselves can build. On the heels of a union election, no matter the percentage of workers voting for or against the union, PASNAP’s
organizers continue the same aggressive organizing approach that they used during the initial organizing drive. If the union didn’t prioritize raising workers’ expectations that they can win a life-changing contract by being ready to “strike to win,” they’d have no incentive to build mass participation and a resilient workplace structure once they had secured a yes vote in a union election. This goes to the heart of the issues that Bernie Minter addressed in his 1199 manual, written in the early 1960s, where he discussed the two directions in which a union can go.

If the purpose of the union is to teach workers to win, which is PASNAP’s understanding of its purpose, strike preparation is key to every aspect of the organization’s core work—including its approach to the ongoing life of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hospital (and Unit, If Applicable)</th>
<th>Date of Strike</th>
<th>Duration of Strike</th>
<th>Unit Size and % Not Crossing</th>
<th>Date of Contract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temple University Hospital</td>
<td>Apr. 1–28, 2010</td>
<td>28 days</td>
<td>1,000 RNs, 600 techs; 97%</td>
<td>Apr. 29, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkes-Barre General Hospital</td>
<td>Dec. 23, 2010</td>
<td>1-day strike, 4-day lockout</td>
<td>510; 89%</td>
<td>May 3, 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkes-Barre General Hospital</td>
<td>Dec. 3–5, 2013</td>
<td>1-day strike, 2-day lockout</td>
<td>485; 92%</td>
<td>Sep. 5, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilkes-Barre General Hospital</td>
<td>Jul. 4–9, 2014</td>
<td>5-day strike</td>
<td>485; 90%</td>
<td>Sep. 5, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crozer Chester Medical Center</td>
<td>Sep. 21–25, 2014</td>
<td>2-day strike, 3-day lockout</td>
<td>570; 100%</td>
<td>Jun. 15, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armstrong County Memorial Hospital techs</td>
<td>Mar. 31–Apr. 2, 2015</td>
<td>1-day strike, 2-day lockout</td>
<td>125; 90%</td>
<td>Jun. 8, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delaware County Memorial Hospital, RNs and techs</td>
<td>Mar. 6–10, 2017</td>
<td>2-day strike, 3-day lockout</td>
<td>460; 98% (100% of RNs out; 7 lab techs crossed)</td>
<td>Apr. 20, 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to the “not crossing” column, the number was never less than 90%, though accurate numbers for the 10% who might have crossed was not available for all strikes. Also, lockouts are considered strike days in this table because the workers are aware during voting for a strike authorization that the employer is likely to lock them out for more days, with more loss of pay, less time to return to their normal life routines, etc.
unions—unions filled with workers who have been disappointed with the approach to the work that lowers workers’ expectations, an approach that is commonly understood as business unionism. In the new millennium, most unions considered to be progressive in the larger social-change movement are the same unions that deliberately lower workers’ expectations about what they can expect or hope to win in the collective bargaining process.

One of the sister unions to PASNAP is the Massachusetts Nurses Association (MNA). Like PASNAP, MNA is independent of any national union or national federations, but both pay dues to their local central labor councils (CLCs, bodies of the AFL-CIO) and collaborate with other unions on local politics and other key labor solidarity efforts. PASNAP and MNA have codified their solidarity by forming an overt and contractual partnership, the Northeast Nurses Association (NENA), whose sole purpose is to pool union dues money and union-organizing staff to assist workers in the hardest organizing fights. The organizing wins that workers achieved in Pennsylvania were due in part to the strategic partnership the two unions have forged, facilitated by their geographic proximity and their shared sense of the purpose of the union. A third, far smaller, union is part of the strategic organizing collaborative, the New York Association of Nurses. (In the case of New York, there is a much larger nurses’ union that is not a party to the NENA collaboration.)

NENA reflects the focus on teaching workers to win as a core value of the union in its approach to the very definition of what new organizing or external organizing means. In the unions considered to be the dominant national unions in the service sector, and in fact for two decades at the AFL-CIO, “new organizing” or “external organizing” refers only to the moment the workers win the union but not to the struggle to achieve the first collective agreement. In NENA, the first contract fights are understood to be a legitimate component of new organizing. In the early 1990s in one of the largest unions in the United States, and certainly in the largest hospital workers unions, SEIU made its position on this issue official and carried its own philosophy that workers’ contracts don’t matter to the national AFL-CIO. That set the tone of the new organizing department at the national labor federation as one focused exclusively on dues growth—not the expansion of worker power.

SEIU led the breakup of the national labor movement and created a breakaway alternative federation, Change to Win (CTW), founded by seven unions, all of which projected in a substantial public relations effort that they were the organizing unions, the unions that were going to grow the US labor movement. And their definition of growth was completely divorced from the quality of contracts that workers would win when they formed a union. Collective bargaining was downgraded entirely, with dues growth metrics replacing teaching workers how to win strong contracts. From the
view of workers themselves. The irony that seven unions broke away, declared themselves the organizing unions, and explicitly decided to jettison collective bargaining was hard to miss. Yet because the vast majority of so-called progressive allies—including community groups, philanthropists, journalists, and faith-based groups—have such a limited understanding of how unions function and what workers want when they survive a tough union election, the same irony was lost on them.

**EINSTEIN MEDICAL CENTER: EXHIBIT A IN HOW UNIONS THAT STRIKE TEND TOWARD INTERNAL DEMOCRACY AND HIGH WORKER AGENCY**

*Buying munitions is one thing, tactical preparation is another. Employers do not stock up on gas and revolvers and then just sit back and wait for things to develop; often they hire men with military training and background to survey their plants and outline plans for a “tactical situation.”*  

John Steuben

In mid-April 2016, when Einstein management filed a bevy of legal charges challenging the workers’ election, the workers and PASNAP leadership understood the strategy was intended to destroy the union by legalizing the fight for half a decade. The vote to form the union was 463 to 343. If the purpose of the union is to teach workers to win—and winning includes actually achieving a contract that addresses the core issues negatively affecting the workers every day—the approach of the union is to immediately make a plan to win over the 343 no votes to the cause of the union. To build a 90% active unity, the percentage required to make a credible strike threat, there’s no possible way to achieve those numbers without directly engaging the 343 no’s to shift their position radically from anti-union to pro-union. In a view that came to pre-dominate the so-called organizing unions, those 343 no votes don’t matter because there would never be a plan to focus on the contract negotiations at all, thus mitigating the need to teach the workers to build a strong worksite organization.

Part of the reason I was hired by PASNAP was to figure out how to beat the employer and develop a strong union despite Einstein management’s decision to kill the union with a long, protracted legal fight that would demobilize the workers who voted yes, refuse to start any contract negotiations, and snuff out the entire union victory with a series of proven tactics designed to defeat unions in the post–Ronald Reagan era. There were two things I understood from prior experience. First, we had to force the employer to actually *drop* its legal charges. It simply would not work to allow the legal fight to run its course, even if the workers won the fight at every stage.
strategic employer approach is to automatically and endlessly appeal at each ruling in the legal fight, which drags on for years. Second, the workers themselves would have to overcome the internal divisions and build the worksite organization strong enough to demonstrate supermajorities for the union if we were to have a credible campaign to convince the broader general public that the employer’s actions were immoral and anti-democratic. The challenge was that to achieve supermajorities meant moving a substantial number of workers from equating union with bad to equating union as a force for good. And doing so at the same time that the employer was publicly steadfast, the workers would never have a union.

Because Einstein management had hired an A-level union-avoidance firm, the full-time consultants brought in to devise and direct the management’s anti-union campaign hadn’t left when the election was over. The consultants remained and built their anti-union beachhead in several departments. The biggest was in the telemetry unit (Tele), where 66 nurses had all but shut out the union and voted no in the election. Even though NLRB union elections are conducted by secret ballot, good organizers and strong worker committees that practice a discipline called worksite charting can predict how each worker will vote. The method relies on endless structure tests, essentially a mechanism to assess each worker’s opinion of forming a union throughout the campaign. From the view of winning a strong contract, 7% of the anti-union animus resided in this single unit. Although there were smaller pockets of scattered no votes throughout the hospital, the largest block of anti-union nurses resided in a unit that is literally walled off from other units. Tele nurses are the nurses who sit, astutely staring at computer screens that are hooked to patients in almost every room, monitoring their oxygen level, heart rate, status of liquid medications, and so forth. Without the support of this unit, the Einstein workers couldn’t achieve a credible strike threat.

Because the workers there had actually led the anti-union campaign, just how to approach Tele was particularly challenging. They regularly contributed to an anti-union Facebook page and an official website. In the posts, there was not only hostility but also a virulent strain of anti-unionism. In conversations with pro-union worker leaders about what had happened during the campaign, they would throw up their hands and exclaim there was no way to change the nurses’ view in Tele. They believed they had tried everything. But with an approach to unionism centered on teaching workers to win, the conversation from the union staff with the pro-union workers was consistent: you (not the paid union staff) have to win over the no votes to be able to seriously win anything substantial in this hospital.

The initial strategy was to step back and do a serious assessment of the leadership in Tele, who were the most respected workers among all the workers in that department. Had we correctly assessed who the real, informal, or organic
leaders were among their peers? What had been the effort to move the department previously? One conclusion was that the assessments to identify Tele’s most respected workers might easily have been wrong because the union-avoidance firm had instructed the workers not to talk to anyone about their unit or the union. While conducting the review of the anti-union effort in Tele, several names surfaced as people identified as holding some leadership. Out of 66 workers, Liz Miller on the night shift was the only functioning contact the union had. And the night shift of any hospital is always significantly smaller than the day shift because management’s incorrect assumption is that patients sleep at night and are not in need of nearly the same attention as they are during the day. Of course, anyone who has ever been hospitalized overnight knows that at night, patients are either awake in pain or fear, or are woken up for various tests, IV bag changes, administration of medications needed in short-time intervals, lab tests, and so forth.

So one person would talk to us: Miller, who had voted yes for the union. She is close to retirement, a seasoned nurse working in a unit with many new and young nurses, many of who were people of color. Miller is a classic case of someone who is a pro-union activist but not a leader. She is a songwriter and musician when she isn’t working the night shift. Miller was recently elected the Pennsylvania representative for the American Songwriters Association (a membership group for songwriters, but not a union). She identifies as a feminist, as someone who experienced second-wave feminism in the 1970s and the changes that women, including registered nurses, had to fight for to secure basic decent treatment and respect. I like Miller: she is funny, exuberant, and incredibly strong with her opinions. She makes me want to hear her sing in a smoke-filled Nashville bar. She was interesting and easy to spend time with.

But as the lead on a campaign where my job was to teach the workers to win and, specifically, to overcome the significant crisis of the Tele department, there wasn’t much Miller could do. In my discussions with her, and in a formal interview conducted after the campaign, she discussed at length that, to her, the union idea was an obvious one: Why wouldn’t the workers want a union? She was extremely frustrated by her inability to move the younger nurses. She loved her unit and felt very good about her co-workers, except for on the vexing issue of how to get them to see what she saw: a union as a good choice for nurses.

Miller began attending pro-union meetings in December 2015, when the effort to build a union at Einstein was picking up energy after it had faltered seven months earlier. There was an uptick in energy again because management had done what corporate management does at some point: cheated the workers, all of them. In late August 2015, management made hospital-wide internal changes to sick-leave and attendance policies. Interestingly, the policies were
changed, according to the management memo, by the city of Philadelphia’s becoming one of the first cities in the United States to affirm a citywide sick-leave ordinance, run by progressive activists on the heels of New York City’s passing an extremely limited policy of three paid days of sick leave per year. Philadelphia’s new ordinance was similar to New York City’s, and those high up in management at one of the biggest hospitals in Philadelphia decided that if they must amend the sick-leave policy for what they considered low-level employees and contractors, they’d make higher-paid workers foot the bill by taking away and seriously restricting their sick-leave policy. Here, we are discussing the prospect of registered nurses losing sick time and having a more stringent attendance policy as a response to progressive social policy.

According to Miller, the imposition of the policy was an affront to all the nurses. Teams of managers explained to all workers in the hospital that if they were late a few times, it would be considered a day missed. If they were sick, they must bring a doctor’s note to prove it. The nurses who had been trying to form the union early in 2015—but who had hit the wall not only with no one in Tele being interested but also in the critical cardiac and other units—were suddenly having other nurses approach them asking about unionization. Miller, who had always been the one person in her unit who wanted the union, was able to convince one day-shift worker, whom she identified as someone that other nurses listened to, to attend her first union meeting on the heels of the sick- and attendance-leave policy debacle. That day-shift nurse was Marne Payne.

Payne was an energetic, 29-year-old nurse, who, like Miller, loved working in her unit. She had been there for nine years prior to the start of the discussion of a union. Payne was still finishing nursing school during her first two years of working at Einstein, and she was doing an externship at the hospital. She started as a nurse in the Tele unit in August 2009. For Payne, Tele was a smart choice because there was upward mobility from it: if you were a Tele nurse, you worked next to the cardiac critical care unit (CCU), and you could grow into becoming a cardiac nurse, considered a highly skilled position. And upward advancement was important to Payne. As she tells it, although her parents didn’t go to college, they pushed hard for her and her two siblings to succeed. All three work in health care in Philadelphia, which is not surprising given that health care and education are the backbone of modern Philadelphia’s economy. Growing up Black in the Philadelphia suburbs, Payne lived in a house that was very academic. She describes how her father, who had not attended college, pressured her in school: “I could get a 92 on a test, and my father would say, ‘Why didn’t you get a 96?’ He was never pleased.” For Payne, hitting key life milestones, like graduating from high school with good grades, buying a house, and securing a job with decent pay and room
for growth, mattered a lot. “Remaining independent and a free thinker mattered, and that’s how I approach Einstein, my patients, and the union,” she says.

Not long after the hospital imposed the new sick-leave and attendance policies, Payne says she literally yelled that they needed a union. “I remember the first time I said anything about a union, I went running down the hallway at work saying we needed a union,” she says. “I started screaming that we needed a union.” Payne liked and respected the manager in Tele. She considered her to be straightforward and an advocate for the nurses in her unit. But the new sick-leave and attendance policies, in Payne’s and many other nurses’ minds, were completely disrespectful. She says that her own manager knew it but couldn’t protect the nurses from the hospital-wide policy.

This dynamic—when workers realize that even if they like their manager, their manager doesn’t control key decisions—is often crucial to worker self-awareness that they themselves might have to do something to restore their dignity.

Not long after Payne expressed the need for a union, she was called into the office by her nurse manager and told she wasn’t allowed to talk about a union in the hallway. After having been a loyal nurse for years, and one who by her own description prizes her free-thinking ways, being told that she was forbidden to talk about something probably compelled Payne to attend her first union meeting just weeks after the incident.

At Miller’s urging, Payne attended what they experienced as their first union meeting. It was December 2015. The meeting was at Chickie’s and Pete’s sports bar. Payne remembers that she thought it was a good enough conversation, but it was way too loud: “I couldn’t hear anything.” During the next meeting, she listened to a union staffer describe the types of things they could win if they formed a union. Payne began to do research to fact-check the discussion about what a union could and couldn’t do. Not long after, hospital management began holding daily anti-union meetings. By Payne’s description, her manager was very good at telling nurses why they shouldn’t have a union. “My boss was right out there from the starting gate, pushing hard against the union,” she says. “Anyone who hadn’t made up their minds yet, my manager got them. She did a really good job keeping the atmosphere on our floor very anti-union.”

A combination of factors informed Payne’s initial decision to be against the union, including her manager and most of her co-workers’ acquiescing that they had it okay and that a union might disturb that. This is exactly what A-level union-avoidance consultants do: as with the highly paid public relations consultants that are front groups for the fossil-fuel industry, their goal is to drive serious doubt about any union claims of workers winning a better life.
And if that fails, they resort to fear: fear of job loss and fear of change, of something bad happening. The professional fossil-fuel-doubter industry is somehow better understood by progressives and liberals in the United States, but it created its playbook from the union-busting industry. Doubt, then fear.

In Payne, IRI, Inc., the professional union busters who were by then throughout the hospital, found their leader. Despite going to a second union meeting, Payne decided that “everyone at the union was a liar.” She decided to run against the union. True to her spirit, when she made up her mind that the union was making promises it could not keep, her drive made her all-out against the union. It’s worth noting that no successful union organizer promises workers anything. In fact, a cardinal rule of such unions as PASNAP and 1199 is that organizers never make promises. That Payne came to believe she had heard union organizers making promises was likely a result of intense penetration of IRI, conducting what Miller described as “nonstop mandatory meetings.”

The kind of meetings and the intensity and pace of them are a trademark A-level union-busting strategy. In the lingo of union battles, the consultants from the union-avoidance industry were conducting what are called captive audience meetings. Captive because the meetings are on work time and mandatory. If a worker, even a free thinker, thinks she can say no when they call her in—even if she is caring for a patient—she is wrong. Refusing to attend mandatory captive audience meetings is considered gross insubordination and an offense that can be grounds for firing. IRI was in full swing in the Tele unit.

According to Miller,

We were getting letters in our mailboxes at work every day from our manager, saying, “As a personal favor to me, I want to ask you to vote no to the union.” And I was thinking, this was really not fair, this isn’t personal, we are doing this because you can’t get it done, you can’t make things change—we have to.

But the manager was working the day-shift nurses hard. Miller says,

They are afraid of Maryanne [the manager]. I was arguing with the day-shift nurses, but they were being told if they supported the union, they were going to be traitors. And management was pulling everyone away from the patients for these meetings for one hour or more at a time to move the traitor message.

To Miller, the meetings were infuriating. But to most nurses in her unit, they were effective. From Miller’s view, the young, new nurses never had to advocate for themselves. They didn’t go through the experience years earlier
of being told they had to wear dresses every day at work. Miller remembers in the 1970s, when everyone in her unit decided to come to work the next day wearing pants not dresses. Overnight, they won the right to wear pants to work. Such experiences are what separated Miller from the young nurses who dominated the day shift.

Payne became one of the most vocal and visible anti-union nurses. She says that she would monitor the pro-union Facebook page, and “if PASNAP was on social media pushing something, I went on social media and pushed for the opposite. The people I trusted were against the union, so I went all out and campaigned against PASNAP.”

The day before the vote, Payne took to social media, imploring nurses to vote no. She used an analogy about a highly recruited and highly touted star player coming to Philadelphia’s storied football team and failing spectacularly. The team was locked into a long contract with a player who just couldn’t deliver what everyone promised he would. The nurses were the fans, and they would be humiliated forever by a union, like the fans of the football team. Similar to climate-change-denier messaging, she wrote, “Not all unions are bad, but I believe PASNAP is the devil.” She closed the piece by writing, “Service above self!! VOTE NO!! VOTE HELL NO!!”

**BUILDING THE WORKERS’ CONFIDENCE**

*Strike preparations must necessarily vary. What they are depends on the character of the expected struggle. If the strike is to take place in a factory or industry where hitherto collective bargaining was not in effect, the major task is to bring the workers into the union. This means to develop the organizing to a peak. In such an intensified recruiting and union building drive, care must be taken that the key plants and departments receive special attention.*

John Steuben

In every weekly meeting with the Einstein nurses who had voted yes to the union and who were attending regular Wednesday meetings, the problem of what to do about the Tele unit was a key topic. They simply couldn’t get to supermajority numbers without moving the Tele department and a few other clusters of anti-union nurses in other units.

The union strategy was to act like a union and move forward, despite the vexing and frankly terrifying legal charges that at that point no one saw a way out of. In late May 2016, the first ruling of the local NLRB came down in the nurses’ favor. The local tribunal dismissed all of the employer’s allegations of wrongdoing and recommended that the hospital recognize the union. And immediately, as if the union-avoidance law firm had already long prepared its appeal, the employer started what we knew it would: the appeals game of
endless delays. The nurses issued a flier to their co-workers declaring victory, and management put out a long memo to all nurses explaining that they were immediately appealing the ruling and would not recognize the union, ever.

This was the work of the union-avoidance consultants from IRI: this phase of the operation is called futility. It’s standard in their playbook. Futility is a special type of doubt. The message, delivered constantly, is that even though you vote to form a union, you will never have one. You will never win. And true to the moment, just after the hospital filed the appeal to the next-level court in the appeals process, nurse attendance plummeted at the regular 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. Wednesday meetings. The nurses who limped in to what had been robust evening meetings reported that others throughout the hospital had read the long e-mail from management stating that they’d never have a union and that the hospital would appeal it all the way, as long as it took.

The goal of the union at this stage is to raise expectations again that workers can win. How to do this successfully in the face of the formidable management memos would be key. The fact that we had one favorable legal ruling wasn’t a real comfort because it read just like a legal ruling: the only people who could understand nearly any sentence in the 30-odd pages of legalese were lawyers. Nurses aren’t lawyers, and although they can easily decipher endless complexities in medical terms, a 30-page legal ruling wasn’t going to lift the spirits of 1,000 nurses.

We knew who could understand the legal language, however: politicians, probably half of whom are lawyers. We knew someone other than nurses or the nurses’ union had to send the message to the nurses that the hospital was going to eventually lose. One of the PASNAP organizers had formerly been a very successful fund-raiser to key politicians in the area—likely the most highly valued position to almost any politician. She was tasked with getting a letter written, on official letterhead, to the hospital CEO from powerful Pennsylvania politicians. It would state that they were aware of the hospital’s tactic of stalling unionization, that the legal ruling in favor of the nurses would prevail, and that they stood with the nurses.

This letter had two objectives: to lift workers’ spirits and give them hope, and to have them see people perceived as more important than the hospital CEO challenging his authority. The CEO, Barry Freedman, considered himself a liberal Democrat. He was known to attend fund-raisers for Democrats running for office. We had researched him not only by talking with the nurses but also with key players in unions in New York City, where Freedman had previously been a hospital CEO. On June 7, ten senators, including ones who hailed from the important Appropriations Committee, signed the letter siding with the nurses and against management. It stated their awareness of the nurses’ election and that the NLRB had ruled in favor of the nurses. The final paragraph of the letter stated:
We support the nurses’ efforts to improve the quality of care of their patients by creating an organized, collective voice in their workplace. We believe it is in the best interest of our constituents and the community for [Einstein Medical Center] to respect that decision. Instead of spending healthcare dollars on expensive “union avoidance” consultants, put those funds toward building a partnership with your nurses, who interact with the patients you serve every day.25

Within minutes of knowing the letter had been sent to the CEO, we made hundreds of black-and-white copies, as well as more expensive color copies, showing the official, gold-leaf stamp of the Senate of Pennsylvania. We quickly gave copies to the nurses, and they went floor to floor, handing out the letter as if it were Halloween candy.

It worked. More nurses attended the subsequent Wednesday meetings, and those who came once again believed they could win the fight. It’s hard to underestimate the value of outsiders, important ones, validating workers’ dreams while union busters are simultaneously presenting nightmarish futility. The discussion at the meeting centered on what must happen next. From experience, the staff of the union understood that management, and particularly the CEO, would immediately sow doubt in the minds of the senators that there was actually real nurse support for the union. In fact, we predicted that because of an inflated hiring binge just as the union vote occurred—a strategy to make management look as if it was listening to the nurses and would hire more staff to lessen the crushing patient load—the CEO was likely to tell the senators there wasn’t even majority support for the union: out of 1,000 staff nurses, only 463 had voted yes, and he would claim the numbers of support were falling.

To combat the CEO’s message, the nurses needed to quickly get a hand-signed, real majority petition to show, rather than tell, that the CEO was lying. The nurses in the room were worried about getting a supermajority of no less than 65%. They’d never gotten a majority to do anything up to that point. The discussion was simple: the nurses had to achieve a supermajority or management would get the upper hand.

For the union staff, the hand-signatures-only petition was a structure test, a mechanism to help assess where worker organization was strong, weak, or middling. A structure test is a key tool to help understand which nurses had serious support among their colleagues and which were enthusiastic but couldn’t persuade colleagues to sign the open-letter petition to the CEO. Structure tests are crucial at every phase of a tough union campaign. Without them, everyone walks blindly, having no idea whether, or where, there’s real majority support. Because time was of the essence, we decided not to focus on the Tele department and instead use the petition mostly to reassess how nurses were feeling,
given the legal ruling’s rambling. Would nurses who had previously taken any kind of pro-union action quickly sign the petition demanding the employer drop its legal appeal, recognize the union, and get to the negotiations table?

There was pushback from some nurses who thought we should take the letter from the senators and hold a press conference. But we explained that nothing other than a supermajority of nurses signatures would counter the boss’s likely challenge that a majority in fact wanted a union. These moments, where union staff who have experience in many rounds of employer warfare teach the worker leaders—all of whom are new to a union fight—are key to winning in high-risk, high-tension, high-stakes union wars. We understood this petition was a test, but that it was also urgent for the fight. If the nurses could demonstrate a real majority, it would also help in the effort to move Tele and other anti-union departments because management’s message to the senators was the same as it was to the anti-union clusters: no nurses really want the union, even if a few accidentally voted for it in April. It was late June at that point, and there was still no legal recognition of the union. Every other hospital that had voted yes was already many sessions into their negotiations. That was the employer’s futility message.

Weeks later—certainly longer than was ideal—the nurses reached a majority, then a bare supermajority, on their petition. Good enough to go, and “go” was the order of the day. The plan was for the nurse leaders to march the petition to the CEO, an act of challenging authority. Enabling workers to constantly make acts of defiance is key to the long buildup to having a credible strike threat—because a strike is the highest act of defiance. But marching the petition into the CEO’s office would be only the first act. The second act would be groups of nurses meeting and hand delivering the petition (enlarged to 3 by 6 feet) to each member of the hospital’s board of trustees. We needed to do this to expand the universe of nurses acting defiantly. There were a couple dozen community VIPs on the board of trustees, and hand delivering the giant, signed petition and a packet that contained the legal ruling and the senators’ letter would provide an opportunity for many nurses to experience acting defiantly.

Experienced organizers also know how union busters hide their destructive tactics from everyone other than the nurses and line managers. In the United States, private hospital boards are typically made up of prominent members of the community—including philanthropists who donate to the children’s cancer wing and get their names on hospital buildings. Board members most certainly do not want negative publicity nor do they want well-loved nurses appearing unannounced at their offices, pronouncing that their hospital is anti-democratic and attacking its employees.
The union began to get reports that the CEO was increasingly agitated. He had called the senators to tell them what we had predicted he would—that nurses didn’t want the union and that the union was just a money-grubbing special interest group. But when the hospital trustees began calling the CEO to demand that nurses stop coming to their offices—and in the case of a few liberals on the board, questioning the CEO’s leadership—the dynamic was shifting. In all the right ways.

With pressure mounting and nurses themselves getting stronger and stronger, the next opportunity for action was clear: the national Democratic Party Convention in late July, where Hillary Clinton would be anointed as the presidential nominee. We knew this was a key moment, with national and international media focused on the city with its proud liberal political structure about to spread its wings like a peacock to show off its success to the world. The idea that thousands of nurses, beloved in all opinion polls as the most trusted workers in America—and women to boot—would be potentially walking picket lines, protesting union busting and unsafe staffing conditions was a specter we were certain that local politicians would not tolerate.

The timeline, however, was moving faster than the nurses’ organization was growing. Futility and fear were still being driven by the union busters daily. Despite the real pressure hospital management felt from the nurse’s actions, they weren’t backing down. More leverage was needed: the leverage of nurses walking picket lines during the Democrats’ convention. Union president Eakin, herself a nurse who had been part of the 2010 Temple University Hospital strike, was a sitting member of the local Labor Council, where all unions coordinated in endeavors such as political campaigns. We decided that Eakin needed to get a resolution from the Labor Council that called on all unions to support the nurses who would be picketing the Democratic National Convention.

We didn’t know until Eakin arrived at the Labor Council meeting that months earlier, the Labor Council had signed an actual no-protest agreement with the official Host Committee of the Democratic Party! Furious texting went back and forth between Eakin—sitting in the meeting and being told the other unions could not support the nurses—and our team. Despite the foolish “labor peace” accord holding the council back, we knew that the discussion at the Labor Council was about to ripple straight into the halls of Democratic Party power. From the view of the unions who were complicit with the idea of labor peace during the convention, Eakin’s description of nurses—most of whom are female—walking picket lines while the first serious female candidate for president was accepting an already troubled nomination was about to explode in front of elite Democratic Party circles.

I was looking at my watch, counting the minutes until a strong-arm from the Dems called Eakin to tell her what she could not do. I was inoculating with her, getting her ready to stand her ground, and at that moment, had we
not already had a supermajority petition hand-signed by the nurses demanding the CEO drop his legal appeal, the entire effort would have unraveled against us. This is a superb example of why majority petitions matter. Behind the scenes, calls began between myriad players: What would it take to back the nurses down? Democratic leaders and the male leaders of the Labor Council were consternated. Meanwhile, we were frantically trying to move the nurses who had just barely pulled off their first supermajority petition to take a strike vote, an act way too serious for such an early stage of worker development. So discombobulated were the politicians and labor leaders that we realized if we could only get a credible picketing threat, we would likely have the leverage needed to get the Democratic Party elite to tell—forcibly tell—the CEO that he must withdraw his legal charges.

Nurse organizers in the hospital had put up thousands of fliers throughout the hospital calling for an emergency all-nurses’ vote about picketing in ten days. One of many quirks of labor law (which should more aptly be called boss or management law) is that to even picket, a legalized, formal ten-day notice of intent to picket must be sent in order for workers not to be punished. The clock was ticking: the Democratic Convention was ten days away, and the moment of leverage would disappear fast.

We decided to have Eakin ask the Labor Council to send a letter to the hospital CEO, cc’d to the Democratic Committee, simply stating his concern about the nurses’ plight and how unfortunate it would be if there were labor action during the convention. Key to everything happening at this frenetic moment was the fact that PASNAP had conducted a strike at Temple University Hospital six years earlier, which was considered highly successful. Had that not been true, the threat of action would likely have fallen on deaf, or at least highly suspicious, ears.

The affable elected head of the Labor Council liked Eakin, and he and the other unions had supported her and her 1,600 colleagues during the Temple strike. We knew that we needed to get the plan moving quickly by suggesting a way for him to go on record supporting the nurses. In his mind, writing the letter wasn’t violating the no-protest agreement. Even though we had a supermajority petition demanding that the hospital drop its legal appeal, recognize the union, and start collective bargaining negotiations, we knew that in order to make our request of others legitimate, we had to have an affirmative vote from the nurses to authorize the sending of a legal, formal, ten-day picket notice.

We held a hastily called meeting and had do what real organizers do best: be honest, be straightforward, be clear, explain exactly what the strategy is, make it compelling, and lay the decision squarely on the nurses. Everyone was nervous about the 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. meetings: it was unfortunate that we had to have a night-shift vote first because our top nurse supporters worked the day shift in most units.
We were either winning this vote or missing the biggest act of leverage possible. I laid it out exactly as Bernie Minter—of 1199 fame and the author of the manual that taught it was a sin to lie by omission or commission—had instructed. Our 7 A.M. meeting was in a church basement two blocks from the hospital. A statue of Jesus stood behind me as I described the options: take a really strong action—an action people didn’t feel ready for—and defeat their boss and win the union, or be consumed with fear of direct action and lose our moment of maximum power.

After many questions and much discussion of concerns, the affirmative vote from the night-shift nurses was unanimous. We took a picture of all hands raised, and we put it on slides for the 7 P.M. meeting of the day-shift nurses. By then, news was spreading through the day shift that the night-shift nurses had voted to authorize the ten-day picket notice. By the evening meeting, held in the basement of Nick’s Roast Beef, a restaurant near the hospital where we could get maximum turnout, an overflowing crowd of nurses voted to send the CEO a picketing notice.

Every politician in town knew the nurses were voting. The Labor Council knew the nurses were voting. By 8 the next morning, Eakin, the public face of a massive and successful strike at Temple University Hospital, faxed the letter from the nurses authorizing the ten-day notice to picket to the entire power structure. Exactly three hours later, I received a phone call from the hospital legal counsel—the law firm Fox & Rothschild, long entrenched in the Democratic and Republican power structures—offering to meet to see whether we could work out the differences between nurses and the hospital.

The first thing I told the hospital’s lawyer was that any actions we would take would have to be ratified by the nurses themselves. I explained that neither I nor PASNAP leadership were the kind of unionists who would make decisions for the nurses—only they could decide their future. I explained, therefore, that if we were to meet, these meetings would not be secret, and the union would cut no deal. The lawyer hung up after telling me that there was “no way, no way in hell” the CEO would agree to meet if it wasn’t secret. My nerves were fraying. I called the head of union and quickly explained that I had said no to a secret meeting with the CEO. We were tense about the moment, about my decision, about everything.

Before we could decide whether to give in, just enough time had passed—one hour—before the lawyer called back, saying, “Okay. Give us dates for a meeting.”

Days later, after three rounds and many hours of high-stakes meetings between CEO Barry Freedman and me, along with the hospital’s law firm and the executive director of the union, and done in consultation with key nurse leaders, we had a deal. Interestingly, despite the fact that the three meetings were premised on my telling the management team that any deal we hammered out would have to be ratified in a formal vote by the nurses themselves,
the CEO and his lawyer were furious that PASNAP stuck to our guns that there was no deal until the nurses voted to withdraw the notice to picket. We were three days from the planned picket, which meant we were two days from the day Clinton would make her acceptance speech.

We called an emergency meeting, which was packed with even more nurses than the recent meetings. I explained the deal: if they voted to rescind their picketing action, the employer would withdraw its legal appeal, recognize the union, and start contract negotiations immediately. There was very little discussion, and the nurses voted immediately to accept the deal. Why not? They had a massive victory, surrendering basically nothing and learning the most important lesson of all: by standing strong and taking high-risk action, they had won big. Although negotiations hadn’t started, the nurses had won their union after management emphatically said they would never have one.

FROM “PASNAP IS THE DEVIL” TO “THANK YOU, JESUS”

As a rule, unorganized or newly organized workers have no appreciation of the value of organization and solidarity. Their chief concern is whether or not they will derive immediate material benefits from joining the union, or by going out on strike.

John Steuben

After teaching the workers how to build their worksite organization from the narrow vote back in April to moving some April no voters to pro-union—enough to produce the crucial supermajority petition demanding that their employer drop its legal appeal—it was finally time to focus entirely on the intransigent Tele nurses. In most departments of the hospital, the nurses’ exhilaration was palpable. But Tele was dug in. Throughout the summer, with the exception of Miller, Tele nurses refused to talk to any other nurses or union staff. Candace Chewing, the staff organizer assigned to Tele, was fearless and fearsome. She hatched a new idea: to have PASNAP president Eakin phone every Tele nurse with a personal message that the union was heading to negotiations and everyone else would be making decisions for Tele if they didn’t participate. We took Payne off her call list, deciding that based on a bad interaction between them months earlier, Eakin would not be effective with her.

Our theory was several fold, based on decades of experience. First, we already knew that this group had not decided, as had some others who had also voted no, to simply change their minds post-election and join the winning side. Second, we were using the authority of the union president to call them all and either get them live or leave a voice mail message. We assumed this would at least be interesting to some nurses. Third, we crafted a very particular message: the heart of it was that other nurses in the hospital would be making decisions about the Tele unit if it didn’t participate in making its own decisions. We role-played and practiced the message with Eakin: “Every unit
has elected negotiations committee members but yours. All nurses are presently reading drafts of the contract and on crucial issues, no one has any idea what nurses in your unit want, so they will just make it up for you if you continue to not be involved.”

We added something else: “Management told you over and over and over you wouldn’t ever have a union and now you do. Do you still believe them when they tell you nurses can’t win raises and improvements through the upcoming negotiations?” We borrowed the tactic of climate-change deniers and union busters of sowing doubt. We were turning doubt against management, however, which was already putting out a message that just because it recognized the union, it would not give in to any demands in negotiations.

We also had Eakin make the calls from her cell phone, not the office, so the nurses in Tele would not know who was calling, or at least they would not know it was PASNAP calling. And we knew all the calls had to happen in a flurry so that the union busters wouldn’t hear about it and tell nurses not to talk to the union president. Not surprisingly to us, Eakin did not get through to most nurses. One day-shift Tele nurse, Evan, picked up the phone. Eakin is charming and sincere, like most nurses. She was reading from her written rap because she wanted to say it all just right. When Evan asked, “Okay, what should I do next?” Eakin answered, “Agree to take a follow-up call from your union organizer, Candace Chewing, and talk the steps through with her.” Evan agreed. Within an hour, Chewing was on the phone, having her first phone conversation in three months with a unit of nurses who had hung up on her previously.

Chewing asked Evan to gather some Tele nurses and meet her in the cafeteria the next day (the staff organizers had decided to start sneaking into the hospital cafeteria, blending in with patients’ families, and holding meetings). He agreed. While Chewing and I were making plans for exactly how to handle the meeting, we had been debating whether I should go, as the chief negotiator, or whether a key worker leader should attend with her. We decided she needed to take one of our most effective nurse leaders with her, one who was strong and had a great way of talking union all on his own.

The nurse we decided to send was Pat Kelly, who had spearheaded the entire drive back in 2014 and stuck with it all along. Kelly was a single father of three kids who had to work the night shift: he could be home to take his kids to school and be there when they got off the bus to feed them, start their homework, and head off to the hospital. Kelly was definitely the leader of the leaders at this point, and he’d proven persuasive in several earlier tough meetings with nurses who once believed the union to be a bad idea.

I was waiting anxiously by the phone the next day. Who would show? Would they show? What would happen? When my cell phone lit up with the message on the screen saying, “Candace calling,” I stared for a minute, hoping for good news.
First, Chewing explained she wanted to give me the good news. Payne and Evan showed up, along with another nurse we had a hunch was also a leader among nurses in the unit, Patricia Graves. Three of them. The bad news was that Payne still hated the union, and she was angry that Kelly was at the meeting. She yelled at him, really yelled at him. “Okay, keep going,” I said to Chewing. “Tell me everything you said, everything Pat said, and everything they said.” That level of detail is exactly what lead organizers use when we are doing what’s called a debrief with a more junior organizer, when we are teaching them the craft of good organizing. Chewing continued but wanted to cut to the chase first and informed me that the next step—the only next step she could think of in a very tough meeting—was to ask them to return the next day and meet with me, the chief contract negotiator, to hear exactly how negotiations would work.

I blurted out the first thing that came to my nervous mind, “Candace, am I wearing a suit or a dress? Which one?” That level of detail is also just as important when trying to move the most important leader in a big unit from anti-union to pro-union.

Without missing a beat, Chewing told me that a dress would work better; otherwise, someone in management might notice me in the cafeteria. I called Kelly next because I wanted to hear what he thought about the meeting, as well as to reassure him. When he answered, he told me, “I am not sure how that meeting went. I didn’t play a big role because the first thing that happened was Marne looking at me and said, ‘What are you doing here?’” He was still shaken: he wasn’t used to being yelled at by anyone, let alone the leader of the anti-union effort.

Later, when I interviewed Kelly about the meeting and his entire history with the Tele unit, he said that from the very beginning, Tele had been a problem for him. He said that back in January, before the vote, before management’s legal appeals and everything else,

Tele was the first place I came across two nurses who said, “Absolutely not. No, we aren’t interested. The union won’t do anything for us. We don’t want to pay dues.” It was the first negative response when we were trying to form the union. In other units they were disengaged, but in Tele, they said a very loud no to me and to all our attempts.27

I asked Kelly what he thought I should do the next day when I met with Payne and Graves. We agreed the entire focus would be my discussing the contract, walking through the draft line by line with them.

Chewing and Kelly, at my instruction, had left a draft marked “confidential” with the Tele nurses, a bit of a risk because we didn’t want management to have our proposals before negotiations. But it was a risk worth taking if we would earn their trust. The draft was in good shape already. If anything would
to get them to move, it was the realization that negotiations really were about to start and they actually had had no say up to that point.

By the next day when I walked into the cafeteria, there were a couple other top nurse leaders lingering in the cafeteria. They wanted to listen nonchalantly, as if paying no attention, to the conversation! Everyone, every nurse leader, was nervous with me. We had spent so much time talking about Tele, and the importance of Tele with the entire committee, that we couldn’t ever get to a credible strike threat or therefore a great contract without moving Tele. This moment reminded me of many other moments just like it (especially when two other top nurse leaders pretended to eat their food at the next table, just so they could listen).

Chewing and I waited at the table, fidgety. When Payne and Graves entered, on their lunch break, they had the contract draft in hand and marked up from the night before. Good sign, I thought: not just that they showed, but they had been reading the draft contract. They were clearly uncomfortable. I made myself more relaxed at that point, friendly but not too friendly, more serious than friendly, and I had my Harvard Law School business card for them as the first order of business.

Thirty minutes later, after I had walked them through how negotiations worked in a good union such as PASNAP—since I was considered an outsider from Harvard at that meeting—and how in a democratic union, all workers were invited and encouraged to attend their own negotiations and that it would be crucial to have Tele nurses participating, the meeting had to end because their lunch break was over. We asked Payne and Graves to take union membership cards and sign up more than half their unit—the number they would need to hold elections in their unit for seats on the formal negotiations committee. They took the cards, said they’d think about it, and left. Everyone ran over as soon as Marne and Pat left to ask what happened.

At nine the next morning, less than 24 hours later, Payne called Chewing to say she had some signed union membership cards, and her unit had decided whom they wanted to represent them in negotiations. Chewing called me excitedly, but she literally couldn’t talk coherently. She kept blurting something out about cards in her hands. I asked her to text me so I could understand. I couldn’t tell whether she was crying or sick. The text read: “34 signed union membership cards from Tele.” The nurses had done it. They had cracked the “biggest worst.”

To keep teaching her, I told Chewing she had to call back Payne and explain that they had to have an election—this was a democratic union; they could not simply appoint their representatives. Neither Payne nor Graves, clearly the two real leaders, were nominating themselves. They had decided that the representatives would be Miller and a male nurse whom we had not met nor knew of. So I told Chewing to add, “Jane said she and Patricia actually have to be nominated for their unit to be taken seriously.”