

New forms of worker voice in the 21st century

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Executive Summary

Rising US income inequality and the erosion of the middle class have emerged as central issues of our time, sparking protest movements and populist political victories. While Americans hold polarized views about unions, myriad scholars have found that a strong labor movement played a critical role in mitigating inequality and enabling the growth of a large middle class for much of the twentieth century. Yet unions have struggled to maintain their political and economic power in recent decades. For most of the 1940s and 1950s, unions represented over 30 percent of employed workers.¹ By 2016, just 12 percent of all US workers, and only 6.4 percent of private-sector workers, were unionized – and these numbers are expected to continue to decline.²

Today, as the economic gulf widens and the labor movement wanes, a growing number of Americans see a need for worker voice mechanisms.³ The new MIT Worker Voice Study finds that almost half of non-unionized workers would join a union given the opportunity, including a majority of young workers and the lowest-paid workers, and almost two-thirds of black workers.⁴ Nearly six in ten Americans still approve of labor unions⁵ – and the vast majority of those in a union still would vote to join again if asked.⁶ This suggests an increasing need for worker voice and labor organizing, but a decreasing ability of traditional unions to respond to that need, for reasons both within and outside of their control.

This key finding of the Worker Voice Study – that Americans want more voice at work, but traditional unions may not fully address this need – sparked a conversation among three dual MBA/MPA students with varied exposure to the labor movement, but a common commitment to economic justice. Working with Holly Fechner at Harvard and Tom Kochan and the Worker Voice Study team at MIT’s Good Companies-Good Jobs Initiative, we undertook a semester-long independent study project focused on new forms of labor organizing in the 21st century. We began with the question: what innovations are bubbling up on the margins of unions and the traditional collective bargaining framework to rebuild worker voice and power in America?

This paper synthesizes our findings. It briefly reviews the history of the US labor movement as it informs labor issues today, provides a landscape of non-traditional organizing efforts, and offers three detailed case studies on promising “alt labor” organizing efforts that shed light on the opportunities for those trying to rebuild worker voice.¹ These case studies – which form the centerpiece of the paper – are organized around three core questions, based on SEIU 775 president David Rolf’s “power, scale, and sustainability framework”:

1. How – and how successfully – are non-traditional efforts building *power* for workers’ voices?
2. What approaches are helping them achieve both broad *scale* and deep engagement with their members, constituents, and beneficiaries?
3. Which tools and methods for building financial *sustainability* are proving most effective?

¹ We use the terms alt labor, non-traditional labor organizing, emerging/emergent forms of worker voice, and worker voice organizations interchangeably. We noted through our research that the term “alt labor” is not entirely accurate, as many of the emergent forms of organizing were incubated or are led by unions, and those emergent forms that are untouched by unions still share many of the same “pragmatic” goals of unions.

Section One, our historical analysis, leads to two conclusions about the unique challenges and opportunities facing the new labor movement. First, to address worker priorities, alt labor organizations must make incremental improvements to day-to-day work experience while simultaneously engaging in broader “consciousness-raising” and movement-building. Second, shifts in the nature of work – including the explosion of subcontracting and more fluid relationships between managers and front-line workers – create a need for more flexible labor organizations. Alt labor groups and unions should therefore operate as collaborators rather than competitors, which will require creativity and flexibility on all sides.

Section Two, our analysis of the current landscape of worker voice efforts, summarizes a landscape review of more than thirty worker voice organizations, and offers archetypes that encapsulate trends observed across the alt labor landscape. Our findings align with our historical analysis. We conclude that new labor organizations, much like their union predecessors, are primarily working toward pragmatic improvements in wages, hours, and working conditions. They may be missing opportunities to provide more comprehensive supports, including training and relocation support and greater control over work norms and culture, and to influence labor policy. Ultimately, the landscaping exercise reveals a patchwork of organizing efforts that, while promising, do not yet go far enough to address the evolving needs of workers and lack the funding models to ensure durable, independent power.

Despite gaps within the landscape, case studies of three individual alt labor organizations –Lobster 207, OUR Walmart, and Coworker.org – offer tremendous hope. These forward-thinking groups are testing creative organizing strategies that would not be possible within the legal confines of traditional unions. They are reimaging worker voice and representation for a diverse, 21st century economy.

Our first case study profiles Lobster 207. Officially formed in 2013, Lobster 207 is a local lodge of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (“IAM”) and a cooperative business. Today, it represents approximately 550 lobstermen, and provides members with opportunities to influence the direction of the lobster industry and to capture more financial value from the trade. Lobster 207 has achieved major legislative victories, purchased a wholesale lobster business to allow members to share in profits of their catch, and given voice to lobstermen across Maine’s coastline.⁷ With support from IAM, Lobster 207 developed a unique two-pronged political and economic strategy: gain power and demonstrate value through political success in the short term, and position lobstermen to respond to economic pressures in the long term through worker ownership.

Applying Rolf’s “power, scale, and sustainability framework,” Lobster 207 draws power from its partnership with IAM, and models the value of union/alt-labor coalition-building. This case reveals the enduring need for union political organizing experience, tactics, and institutions. Without the support of the IAM at the local, regional and national level, the lobstermen would not have been able to quickly achieve political victories or pull together the financial package that allowed for the buyout of the wholesale business. At the same time, Lobster 207 has found a fresh source of power in the cooperative approach, which offers a promising avenue to organize and empower independent workers. Lobster 207’s sustainability model relies on both collection of union dues and its innovative business model. Turning to scale, Lobster 207’s local scale has natural limits, but it is worth exploring replication of this hybrid union/cooperative approach in other industries and geographies.

OUR Walmart, the subject of our second case study, blends traditional organizing with AI and technology tools to build networks and advise Walmart workers on their rights. As many as 150,000

Associates at more than 4,000 stores (or 10 percent of Walmart's US workforce) have participated in campaigns – despite Walmart's fierce anti-union practices. OUR Walmart's major victories include improving pregnancy policies, influencing Walmart to increase its minimum wage, and improving senior employees' treatment of Associates. Like Lobster 207, OUR Walmart has roots in union ties. Much of its seed funding came from the United Food and Commercial Workers, though it operates as a standalone entity, and its organizers bring significant union experience. However, OUR Walmart staff praise the flexibility and experimentation possible outside the traditional union structure.

Applying Rolf's framework, OUR Walmart draws power from its strategic deployment of both in-person solidarity-building and new technology. While the group exerts significant influence on behalf of retail Associates, there is opportunity to increase scale by mobilizing players across the entire Walmart supply chain and engaging in policy advocacy. OUR Walmart has several plausible paths to sustainability, but none are fully proven out. Promising options including providing fee-based services to members, or consulting to other retail workers on their organizing efforts.

Our third case subject, Coworker.org, is a nonprofit website that supports workers to build online networks and develop petitions to change workplace practices. Coworker.org provides a resource for workers – including non-unionized workers and independent contractors – to self-organize around the issues that matter to them, using social media. To date, 500,000 workers have formed 20 active networks, attracted media attention, and won notable victories, from extending paid parental leave to Netflix employees to exposing consumer fraud at Wells Fargo.

Turning to Rolf's axes, Coworker.org's digital platform enables workers to build power by shifting traditional hierarchies. Managers are joining frontline workers in organizing and signing Coworker.org campaigns, shifting the standard labor/management dichotomy. Coworker.org's data tools (e.g., online polling) address information asymmetry between workers and employers, and high-profile online campaigns speak directly to corporate boards and shareholders at the top of the value chain. Scale ranks among Coworker.org's greatest advantages: the digital platform offers the visibility and reach to quickly mobilize workers and the public, including forming networks across industries and geographies. A larger challenge for Coworker.org is building strong community online, and establishing the infrastructure to sustain engagement over time. Some labor groups have addressed this by pairing Coworker.org's digital tools with face-to-face meetings and protests, to strengthen worker solidarity and commitment. Finally, Coworker.org benefits from a lean philanthropy-based business model, but must expand and diversify revenue to achieve greater independence and expand its reach.

Section Six, our conclusion, summarizes findings from our historical analysis, landscaping, and case studies. It confirms that worker voice organizations are winning vital incremental victories for workers, but have not achieved sufficient penetration to revitalize the US labor movement, nor tackled the consciousness-raising work required to change policy and public discourse. In part, this reflects the single greatest barrier impeding their work: lack of stable, sustainable revenue.

Ultimately, we conclude that building a broad and deep 21st century labor movement will require strategic coalition-building between traditional unions and new labor groups, that leverages their complementarity. Alt-labor organizations operating outside the legal framework of traditional unions can test models and tools appropriate to the new economy. Groups like Lobster 207, OUR Walmart, and Coworker.org are organizing independent contractors, finding unexpected allies (in managers,

customers and even shareholders), and testing game-changing technology tools that offer access to distributed networks and high-speed mobilization. Using social media storytelling, they are lifting up workers' stories to shift popular discourse.

Yet technology platforms are most effective when used in tandem with traditional, face-to-face organizing tactics and institutional structures developed and honed by unions to build sustained solidarity and achieve policy victories. With this in mind, we call for the formalization of the informal learning and sharing already underway between unions and alt labor. It will take the combined efforts of traditional worker voice organizations and new labor groups – operating with a shared and well-articulated vision – to invigorate worker voice and address inequality in the 21st century.

1. Introduction: Historical Context of Labor Organizing

The Oscar-winning 1976 documentary *Harlan County, USA*, about the unionization efforts of coal miners in rural Kentucky, ends on a bittersweet note. After a deadly 14-month strike against Duke Energy, the workers earn their collective contract. Months later, over 100,000 members of the United Mine Workers union strike together, an impressive show of solidarity and power from organized labor. And yet, the contract won through the strike divides the membership, passing with only a slight majority of votes. Footage shows a group of miners torn between their dissatisfaction over the contract and their sympathy for the constraints in which the union president found himself during negotiations.

This ambivalence reflects the precarious state in which the US labor movement found itself in the 1970s. On the one hand, the labor movement was a major force in American politics and economics. The 21 million union members in 1979 was the highest number until that point.⁸ Unions were indispensable to Democratic political success on a national level. On the other hand, in 1978, a Democrat-controlled Congress fell just short of passing what would have been one of the most important labor reforms in decades.⁹ And while union membership as a percent of employed Americans was still a respectable 25% in 1979, that represented an eight-point decrease from the highs of the 1940s and 1950s.¹⁰

Those countervailing trends are a distant memory. Since the Harlan County miners went on strike, the slow drop in unionization rates has gone into freefall. So-called “right-to-work” laws have gutted private-sector union finances, and the courts may soon do the same to public-sector unions nationally. The movement is increasingly divided and internally conflicted, with no signs that the traditional institutions will rebound soon. Today, in the words of historian Nelson Lichtenstein, “little in American culture, politics, or business encourages the institutionalization of a collective employee voice.”¹¹

Curious about how the labor movement is responding to this crisis and struck by the lack of discussion of labor issues at our policy and business schools – even at a moment when rising inequality is a frequent conversation topic – we sought to understand the state of new labor organizing outside the traditional union, collective bargaining framework. Working with Holly Fechner at Harvard and Tom Kochan and the Worker Voice Study team at MIT’s Good Companies-Good Jobs Initiative, we reviewed the history of the US labor movement as it informs labor issues today, gathered research on workers’ top concerns and other trends in the economy affecting the labor movement’s structure and responses, landscaped non-traditional labor organizing efforts, and developed case studies on promising efforts that shed light on the opportunities and cautions for those trying to rebuild worker voice.

Specifically, we sought to answer three questions, based on SEIU 775 president David Rolf’s “power, scale, and sustainability framework”:

1. How – and how successfully – are non-traditional efforts building *power* for workers’ voices?
2. What approaches are helping them achieve both broad *scale* and deep engagement with their members, constituents, and beneficiaries?
3. Which tools and methods for building financial *sustainability* are proving most effective?

Before diving into our answers to these questions, though, it is important to understand where organized labor as a whole is today, how it got there, why that matters, and what is now needed. The next sections offer our brief analysis of these topics.

I. The rise and fall of the “labor question” – and the labor movement

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the challenge of reconciling the gap between the democratic and equitable ideals of American political culture and the disproportionate economic power wielded by large corporations became known as the “labor question.”¹² In 1911, according to an article by labor economist Robert Hoxie in the same year, Socialist candidates won elections in 33 states and almost 200 municipalities in a “sudden advent” of “followers of the red flag.”¹³ Four years later, Louis Brandeis told the US Industrial Commission shortly before he joined the Supreme Court that political democracy also required “industrial democracy,” or a means to give workers a substantive voice in the enterprises where they worked.¹⁴

The Great Depression brought new urgency to this already pressing debate. By the mid-1930s, several pillars of what historian Alex Keyssar calls the “grand bargain” between capitalist and working-class interests – including the National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act, which allowed collective bargaining), unemployment insurance, minimum wages and overtime, and social security – set the framework that still underpins labor law today.¹⁵

As a result, in the ensuing decades the “labor question,” writes Lichtenstein, “seemed on its way, if not to resolution, then to a well-constrained manageability.”¹⁶ For most of the 1940s and 1950s, unions represented over 30 percent of employed workers and income distribution became much more equal.¹⁷ Between the end of World War II and 1973, living standards for working-class Americans doubled even as unemployment dropped far below levels from the first half of the 20th century.

And yet, perhaps because of these trends, the “labor question” slowly lost its prominence in the US.¹⁸ In the words of left-leaning journalist Harold Meyerson, “once the New Deal and the union upsurge of the 1930s and 1940s created the first middle-class majority in the history of the world, the labor question fell off the list of liberals’ concerns.”¹⁹

At the same time, changes in the corporate culture and economy began to further undercut union strength. The rise of “Chicago School” economists like Milton Friedman and a shareholder value-maximizing business ideology reduced what business support there was for organized labor and facilitated corporations’ attacks on unions. “Fifty years ago,” wrote legal scholar Lynn Stout in 2012, if one “asked a director or executive what the purpose of the corporation was, he was likely to answer that the firm had many purposes: to produce satisfactory returns for investors, but also to provide good jobs to employees, make reliable products for consumers, and to be a good corporate citizen. All this changed in the 1970s.”²⁰ Richard Freeman, “the dean of American labor economists,” estimates that in 1950, only one in 200 workers who voted for unionization was fired during the organizing drive, but that had risen to nine by the early 1990s.²¹ Some companies engaged in “double breasting,” opening non-union subsidiaries that were essentially the same company just to get around unionization.

Likewise, even as globalization and technological change began threatening workers’ bargaining power, “a fundamental restructuring of employment” known as “fissuring” started to take hold. In this practice, companies contract their frontline workers instead of hiring them as employees. Unlike

employees, contractors have little protection under US labor law and cannot bargain collectively for wages, benefits, and working conditions.²² Freelance and contract work has ballooned in recent decades, increasing to almost one in six workers by late 2015 (some estimate over a third of US workers do at least some non-employee work), creating what some have called the “patchwork economy.”²³

Thus, especially starting in the 1980s, the labor movement suffered “a catastrophic free fall in the private sector that continues to this day,” in the words of SEIU 775 president Rolf.²⁴ In 1991, labor lawyer Thomas Geoghegan wrote, “‘Organized Labor,’ say those words, and your heart sinks. I am a labor lawyer, and my heart sinks. Dumb, stupid, organized labor; this is my cause.” These laments have only become more poignant. By the turn of the millennium, 90% of US private-sector workers were employed “at will,” meaning they could be fired on a moment’s notice for almost any reason (or no reason).²⁵ State laws passed in the wake of Republicans’ 2010 wave election rendered unions substantially weaker still.

As of 2016, 12 percent of all US workers, and only 6.4 percent of private-sector workers, are in unions.²⁶ The number of states where private-sector unionization rates are at least 10 percent has crashed from 42 in 1983 to no more than eight today.²⁷

And there are few signs of a renaissance for “traditional” union organizing. Research suggests that only 20 percent of organizing drives with enough support to petition for a unionization election result in a collective bargaining contract, and this decreases to 10 percent if management engages in scarcely punished “unfair labor practices” to fight the drive.²⁸ Public-sector unions seem poised to go the way of their private-sector brethren should the Supreme Court rule as expected in *Janus vs. AFSCME*. Unions, which “have failed time and again to change American labor law...fight about the same policies on state power over collective bargaining as they did in 1947.”²⁹ Moreover, as political scientist Ronald Inglehart notes, social class-based voting had fallen so low in the US by 2000 “that there was virtually no room for further decline.”³⁰ Consequently, while the Great Depression produced mass unionization, the recent Great Recession “has only intensified labor’s downward spiral and business’s ascent.”³¹ As Rolf explains, “one could no more bring back such a unique set of historical factors and conditions than one could repeal refrigeration, globalization, or the Internet (each of which also in its own way helped hasten union decline).”³²

“What would it take for labor to come back?” said a senior union staffer in 2011. The financial crisis “was the crisis we were waiting for, and it didn’t do it.”³³

II. Why the labor movement’s decline matters

Maybe it’s fine that organized labor has collapsed. Maybe, just as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell once called low voter turnout “a sign of a content democracy,” low unionization is the sign of a content working class.³⁴ But, maybe not.

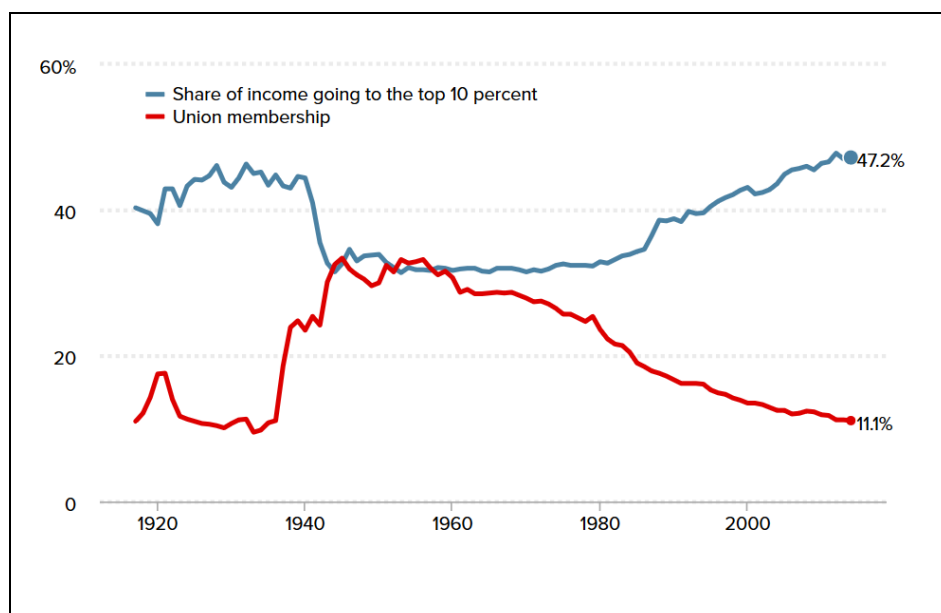
Actually, most non-unionized workers want more voice and representation in the workplace. In 1977, 30 percent of non-unionized workers told surveyors that they would vote to join a union. Roughly the same percent answered the same way when Richard Freeman posed the question in 1995. But today, the MIT Worker Voice Study found, that figure has shot up to almost half, including a majority of young workers and the lowest-paid workers, and almost two-thirds of black workers. If all these workers did join a union, membership would increase by roughly 55 million.³⁵ Moreover, over 70 percent want “a more flexible and cooperative voice in workplace and corporate affairs.”³⁶ While

public approval of labor unions is down from its highs of the 1950s, it has increased in recent years to the point where nearly six in ten Americans still approve³⁷ – and the vast majority of those in a union still would vote to join again if asked to do so.³⁸

“Some might find it ironic,” wrote Kochan, the Worker Voice study leader, “that as union membership and power declined over the years, a growing majority of Americans ‘approve’ of and see a need for unions” or other worker voice mechanisms.³⁹

Research suggests that these survey respondents are onto something important for both economic and political reasons. In fact, a strong labor movement may be the single most important factor mitigating inequality in the twentieth century. Sociologist Jake Rosenfeld has found that “organized labor’s demise” has played a “central role...in exacerbating inequality of various kinds.” He argues “organized labor wasn’t simply a minor bit player in the ‘golden age’ of welfare capitalism in the United States. It was the *core equalizing institution*” (emphasis added).⁴⁰ Similarly, Kochan concludes that “unions and collective bargaining have historically been the strongest and most consistent institutions for achieving gradual improvements in worker wages and for reducing income inequality” and thus “have served as the most important instrument of economic and social progress for working families of the twentieth century.”⁴¹ Even former US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, who faced criticism for resisting action on labor policy while serving in the Obama Administration, wrote recently that “America needs its unions more than ever” because “the most important factor explaining what is happening [with stagnant wages] is that the bargaining power of employers has increased and that of workers has decreased.”⁴² The left-leaning Economic Policy Institute (EPI) found in 2015 that “the single largest factor suppressing wage growth for middle-wage workers over the last few decades has been the erosion of collective bargaining.”⁴³

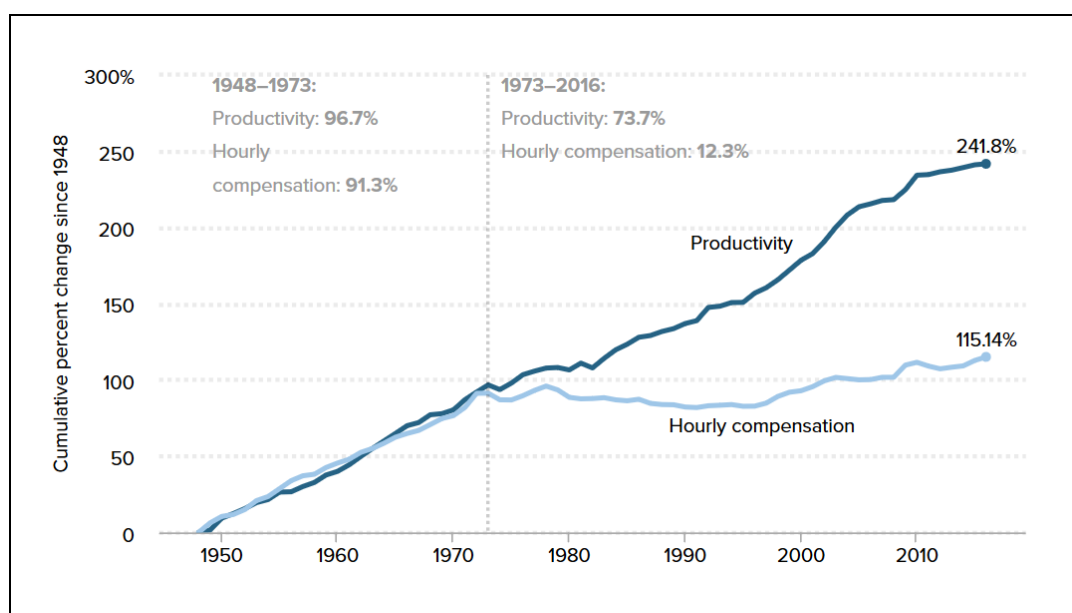
Figure 1: Declining unionization predicts increased income share for top 10%⁴⁴



The data back up these claims. Figure 1, also from EPI, shows unionization rates and the share of pre-tax income going to the top decile from 1917-2011. The R^2 of the correlation of these two variables is 0.77. It rises to an astonishing 0.9 if one lags the income share data by 3-5 years, consistent

with the idea that a decline in unionization presages an increase in income inequality. Economist Brigham Frandsen used a quasi-experimental regression discontinuity design to estimate the causal effect of unionization on income distribution and found that unions “raise the lower end of the distribution by around 30 log points, with a much smaller effect on the upper tail,” and increase job security for workers in the bargaining unit (though there also are modest negative effects on employment for lowest-skilled workers not in the bargaining unit). His estimates suggest that “about one quarter of the increase in the variance of log earnings from 1979 to 2009 can be accounted for by falling US private sector unionization rates,” consistent with Kochan and Lee Dyer’s conclusion that “the decline of unions and worker bargaining power since the 1980s account for between 20 and 30 percent of the rise in income inequality.”⁴⁵ Meyerson highlights that “even those who have never bargained collectively will feel the loss” of union power given research showing that nonunion workers get higher wages when others in their industry unionize, since companies face pressure to pay competitively. Hence, from 2000-2007, reductions in wages and benefits accounted for three quarters of the rise in corporate profits, according to research from JP Morgan.⁴⁶

Figure 2: Wages have not kept up with productivity since the 1970s⁴⁷



Importantly, the relative strength of organized labor helps explain rising inequality in ways that other oft-cited factors cannot. The Clinton Administration, for instance, attributed the rise to technological change. But, as Freeman explains, other countries “also introduced modern computer-driven technologies without increasing inequality as much as the US.” Instead, from 1959-2005, “real earnings in virtually all other advanced countries increased substantially, at roughly the same rate as the increase in productivity”⁴⁸ – whereas in the United States, wages have remained nearly stagnant for decades (Figure 2). Additionally, economists like David Autor are increasingly finding that “journalists and even expert commentators tend to overstate the extent of machine substitution for human labor,” with the supposed net job-killing effects of automation appearing more in theory than practice thus far.⁴⁹ Nor can educational gaps explain the rise: workers today are more educated and productive than in the past, yet wages fell from 52 percent of GDP in 1970 to 43 percent in 2016.⁵⁰ Finally, globalization is an insufficient explainer, either for the demise of labor or US levels of inequality. US unions have lost ground in service as well as tradeable industries (e.g., the percent of construction

workers unionized fell from 40 percent in 1973 to 15 percent in 2004), and the US has a lower unionization rate than any other industrialized democracy. Consequently, despite being substantially wealthier on a per-capita, purchasing-power-parity basis than most EU countries, Freeman estimates that “workers in the bottom 10 percent of a typical EU country earn about 44 percent more than Americans at the lowest 10 percent of the US distribution,” plus receive national health insurance and other benefits.⁵¹

Organized labor also has helped strengthen some of the most fundamental aspects of the American political system. As Lichtenstein argues, “an organized working class remains essential to the health of a democratic polity.” He emphasizes that even in their reduced size – and despite a checkered history on racial issues – “trade unions are the most multiracial of all institutions” and “the republic’s largest set of voluntary organizations.”⁵² Indeed, US government statistics show that African Americans are overrepresented in unions, perhaps partly because unions can provide protection against employer discrimination.⁵³

“When the *Titanic* sank in 1912,” writes Lichtenstein, “many saw the tragedy as a metaphor for the fate of a class-stratified capitalism.... Today, such class hierarchies have returned in an equally ugly fashion. Inequalities of wealth, income, and social security have returned to a pre-New Deal configuration.” As a result, finding ways to rebuild worker voice in the US is “not just an effort to resolve America’s labor question,” but a fight for “the revitalization of democratic society itself.”⁵⁴

III. Lessons to guide the future of labor organizing

The overarching takeaway from our historical review is that there is growing support for labor organizing, especially among non-unionized workers, but declining unionization rates overall. This suggests an increasing need for worker voice but decreasing ability of unions to respond to that need.

Luckily, there is hope for a renaissance based on historical precedent. After a decade of declining union membership, the head of the American Economic Association stated in 1932 that unions wouldn’t expand in the economically distressed 1930s – yet unions then “had their greatest growth of membership in US history.” Likewise, in the 1950s, the AFL-CIO’s president asserted that “it is impossible to bargain collectively with the government,” just a decade before public sector unions began taking off in full force.⁵⁵ Thus, Kochan explains, while “declines tend to be gradual and extended” in the labor movement, resurgences “tend to come in abrupt and unpredictable bursts.”⁵⁶

Nonetheless, as noted above, even many observers steeped in and sympathetic to unions do not foresee a return of traditional union organizing in the private sector to the levels of its 1950s apogee. Andy Stern, former SEIU president, argued in 2004 that “we aren’t going to rebuild the labor movement to what it was – that workforce and economy no longer exist.” Instead, “we need to transform unions, not try to return to the old model.”⁵⁷

So, what should the future movement learn from history? We are struck by two lessons.

Lesson 1 – Effectively organizing workers may require re-igniting a sense that change is possible, in the way that “industrial democracy” animated workers in the 1930s and 1940s.

Despite some notable exceptions (e.g., the 1964 strike at General Motors, where workers’ stridency surprised even the United Automobile Workers leadership, and more recently, John Sweeney’s efforts

to restore the AFL-CIO to its more activist roots⁵⁸), American unions generally have evolved into pragmatic, status quo-biased organizations focused on tangible but very incremental improvements to the day-to-day work experience – and away from the consciousness-raising focus on “industrial democracy” envisioned by some of the progressive supporters and leaders of the early labor movement. This evolution has many causes – such as the Wagner Act’s limiting of collective bargaining to wages, benefits, and working conditions; the struggles of organized labor to sustain its more sweeping ideology in the face of intransigent corporate opposition; and the ideology of some major labor leaders – but its results have undercut organized labor’s strength and contributed to the move away from class-based voting that Inglehart described. Yet now, many workers likely are cognizant of their declining power as inequality widens, and their sense of self-efficacy at work (and in the political sphere) may have diminished; effectively organizing workers may require re-igniting a sense that change is possible, in the way that “industrial democracy” animated workers in the first half of the twentieth century.

The need for “consciousness raising” suggests that new labor groups need to pay more attention to membership growth and advocating for non-members than many unions have done traditionally (as most infamously illustrated by AFL-CIO head George Meany, who said in 1972, “I used to worry about...the size of the membership.... I stopped worrying because to me it doesn’t make any difference.”⁵⁹). Of course, there is such thing as too broad a focus. For example, the Knights of Labor arguably struggled in the late 19th century because they lacked a coherent uniting vision.⁶⁰ However, if “consciousness raising” is to be articulated by workers today, coalition and movement-building must re-enter center stage.

Lesson 2 – New efforts must be flexible to respond to evolving worker needs, as we learned that labor law and structures of the past could not keep pace with changing economy

As Lichtenstein notes, in a world of increasingly subcontracted work, “the idea of collective bargaining between one union and one employer is clearly an antique notion.... The Wagner-era legal framework stands as an obstacle to unionization.”⁶¹ Moreover, even some of the most progressive unions’ leaders have historically demonstrated a territorial and protectionist mentality that lends itself to conservatism and risk aversion. For example, even as General Motors’ worker-led Saturn Corporation subsidiary showed promising results in the 1990s, then-UAW president Steve Yokich told Kochan that Saturn was “not the f_____ kind of union I come from and not the kind we want associated with the UAW.” Experiences like this led Kochan and Dyer to conclude that “the sad reality is that labor leaders couldn’t make up their minds on whether to support and champion the new approach or remain committed to the twentieth-century model that has led to their downfall.”⁶² The labor laws developed in the past century are ossified, and the structures that grew of them lack the flexibility and creativity to embrace change and evolve culture.

As the following section illustrates, many organizations already have begun this creative rediscovery.

2. Current Landscape of Worker Voice Efforts

The historical context of labor organizing is well documented, while the current landscape of non-traditional labor organizing efforts is not. There is a litany of organizations and efforts that are advancing worker voice in our economy today.² Some self-identify as worker advocates or as part of the “alt labor” movement, and others do not. Some are independent, standalone entities, while others exist inside unions or even inside companies themselves.³ To understand how and if emerging forms of worker voice are building power, achieving scale, and operating sustainably, we first had to ask: who are these organizations?

We spoke with labor experts and conducted a desktop review to identify an inventory of worker voice organizations. Our list is by no means exhaustive, and we do not claim expertise on these organizations’ missions and programming. Nonetheless, we undertook a simple review of the worker voice landscape. First, we assembled observations on the goals and methods of these organizations. Second, we sketched a few archetypes that are helpful to loosely summarize what is happening in the alt labor landscape. Finally, we wrote three detailed case studies on the following organizations: Lobster 207, OUR Walmart, and Coworker.org. Our survey concludes that there are pockets of response and innovation in our economy, but that the patchwork efforts as they exist today do not go far enough to address the evolving needs of workers and lack the funding models to ensure durable effect.

I. Observations

The 33 organizations listed in the figure below advance worker voice in non-traditional ways. Through brief desktop research, we sought to assemble themes that cut across the landscape. We make the following observations related to the goals that these organizations work towards and the methods that they use to advance worker voice.

Figure 3: List of worker voice organizations⁴

AFL-CIO Worker Center Partnerships	LaborX
Alianza Nacional De Campesinas	Laundry Workers Center
Blue Green Alliance	Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy
Center on Policy Initiatives	National Day Laborer Organizing Alliance
Chinese Progressive Association	National Domestic Workers Alliance
CLEAN Carwash Campaign	National Guestworkers Alliance

² Organizations that likely do not self-identify as alt labor include Glassdoor.com and LaborX

³ A number of organizations reviewed are union-affiliated such as AFL-CIO’s Working America and the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers’ (IAM) Lobster 207

⁴ This list includes only external organizations, and does not consider internal, company-led initiatives that advance worker voice, such as ombudsmen processes, quasi-works councils, board structures, affinity groups, and conscious culture, in our analysis. We see these as important potential levers to improve worker voice, but due to difficulty accessing information on these efforts, we focus here only on external, non-company-led efforts.

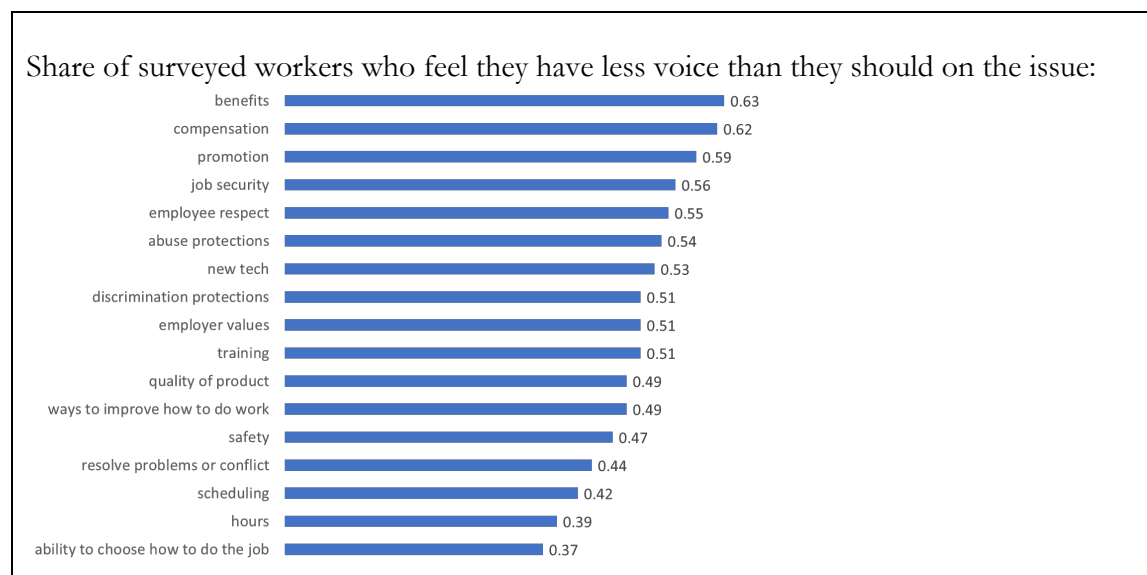
Coalition of Immokalee Workers	National Taxi Workers Alliance
Contratados	OUR Walmart
Coworkers.org	Partnership for Working Families
Drivers Network	Raise Up Massachusetts
Fight for 15	Restaurant Opportunities Center United
Freelancers Union	SherpaShare
Glassdoor	Tech Workers Coalition
Green for All	Turkopticon
Interfaith Worker Justice	Workers Lab
Jobs with Justice	Working America
Justice for Janitors	

Observation 1: Organizations are working towards traditional, pragmatic goals

Emerging efforts are focusing on “bread and butter” outcomes that unions traditionally advanced. For example, most of the organizations that we reviewed enable worker voice in pursuit of outcomes such as higher wages, better scheduling, improved benefits, escalation and grievances support, and solidarity. These pragmatic issues are relevant to workers. In a representative survey of workers, MIT discovered that workers expect to have some say on most issues that affect them but a particularly large say on issues related to personal treatment (e.g. safety, protections against discrimination and abuse, and employee respect) and work control (e.g. hours, scheduling, ability to choose how to do work, and resolving problems).⁶³ It makes sense that alt labor efforts work towards these goals. However, the MIT study reveals that there are voice representation gaps in issue areas beyond hours, wages, and working conditions as well, as the next observation shares.

Observation 2: Alt labor can do more to respond to evolving worker needs

The MIT Worker Voice survey shows (see figure below) that workers today want more voice on a wider range of issues than those delineated explained above. Yet, only about half of the organizations reviewed are working towards goals related to workforce readiness, such as training, inclusion and diversity, information transparency on hiring, and exit opportunities. Additionally, only a handful of organizations are addressing the nature of work, that is, workers’ voice on the quality of products and services, operational improvements, technological advancement, and innovation opportunities. The case for non-traditional organizations to support evolving worker needs is strong.

Figure 4: Workers want voice on a range of topics⁶⁴

First, workers who are better trained, with more information about employer practices, and with skills to apply to different settings, have more power. They can demonstrate value through skill-building, make better employment decisions, and have more leverage through improved exit opportunities. Initiatives to develop the American workforce are important as the economy evolves. Apprenticeship training has traditionally been led by unions while workforce development initiatives are led predominantly by government funders and their non-profit partners. Alt labor efforts could step up to take a broader role than unions did in improving the quality, transparency, and mobility of skills in the labor market.

Second, the pace of change in the economy makes long stints with one employer less likely, so organizing efforts that can support lifelong work and growth, across sectors or employers, would be attractive to workers. Unions missed an opportunity to provide lifelong membership and to receive dues by supporting workers once they leave a company represented by the union. Alt labor organizations should not make the same mistake.

Finally, alt labor has an opportunity to create a new narrative around what worker voice can mean, adding nuance to the management-labor dichotomy. Workers and management could identify shared goals and voice through employee involvement to solve problems, innovate with technology, and connect to customers.

Observation 3: Organizations lack structural alignment and practical resources to affect policy

Structurally, the landscape of alt labor organizations is not set up to collectively advocate for sweeping policy change, a la new labor law. That is, a significant number of efforts are organized in a similar manner to how unions organized at inception: by skill and proximity. Half of the organizations we reviewed have a demographic or sector focus, with most organizing at a local or community level. As unions have expanded their focus and become umbrella organizations for workers from vastly different occupations, perhaps the specificity of some alt labor organizations is filling a need for

industry-specific organizing. Even if focused and specialized efforts are needed, the fragmentation of the landscape suggests that political involvement or policy advocacy would be challenging to coordinate.

Tactically, alt labor organizations lack the resources – tactics, time, and funding – to influence broad scale policy. The most successful efforts for influencing policy across the landscape have been affiliated with unions, from the case of Lobster 207 in Maine to the Fight for \$15 nationally. This suggests that the tactics and track record of unions in political organizing remain relevant. Meanwhile, worker centers are primarily community-based and tend to focus on worker advocacy on an individual or local level. Organizations like Coworker.org and OUR Walmart advocate for change at the company level, and Freelancers Union has achieved policy success at a municipal level in New York City. Across the landscape, budget constraints and service delivery or platform maintenance for workers limit the actual resources that alt labor organizations can commit to pure political organizing. In sum, if alt labor is going to have an effect of a similar magnitude as unions over the last century, it seems that the policy toolkit needs to be built up or partnerships with unions strengthened.

Observation 4: Alt labor face a funding challenge, and direct service offers an opportunity

Nearly all of the organizations we reviewed rely on philanthropic funding or membership based dues. To retain independence, labor organizations need new revenue models, potentially based on unrestricted revenue from membership dues or fee-for-service earned income. The need for “independence” bears emphasis. Most nonprofits are familiar with the pressure to design programs and services based on funder interests rather than client needs. The dues system has given unions a source of unrestricted revenue not reliant on economic elites. Finding ways to replace that flexible and independent revenue source will be important if new labor groups hope to be as powerful as traditional unions once were

Luckily, insights from both labor and non-labor organizations (e.g., the NRA and AARP⁶⁵) suggest that providing tangible services to members is a way to build member engagement and mobilization. Direct service provision can attract workers to engage with a new organization, and if done in a value-add way can be a source of financial sustainability for alt labor organizations that struggle to fund themselves. There are pockets of funding and service innovation across the landscape. OUR Walmart intends to negotiate discounted services for its WorkIt platform users while the Freelancers Union operates a for-profit insurance arm for its members. Coworker.org is exploring commercialization of its data for investment decisions, while ROC-United is exploring fee-based cooking or pairing classes for consumers. Direct service provision for earned income is a path that some, but not all, alt labor organizations are pursuing. It represents an opportunity to engage with workers and consumers while at the same time ensuring the durability of a mission.

II. Archetypes

We have identified five archetypes to make sense of the various alt labor forms. These categories are not mutually exclusive and not hard-coded. They are simply a shorthand for understanding who is doing what in parallel to traditional collective bargaining.

The five archetypes that we observe are: work shapers, worker centers, coalition builders, platform connectors, and information equalizers. In this order, these new forms serve workers with varying degrees of specificity and engagement, ranging from high touch to high tech. At the high touch end,

we have work shapers who directly influence the ownership and control of work in a specific company or industry. We also observe how worker centers are highly targeted and engaged in important hand-holding of workers. At the other end of the spectrum, information equalizers are not advocating for specific workers but instead bringing transparency to the labor market in a high-tech way.

The table below highlights these archetypes, which are explained below with brief comments on the strengths and challenges of the model. Either a mini-case is included in this section, or a full-length case in subsequent sections for each archetype.

Table 1: Archetypes of Alt Labor and Examples

Work Shapers	Worker Centers	Coalition Builders	Platform Connectors	Information Equalizers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobster 207 • Independent Drivers Guild 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) • Laundry Workers Center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working America • Raise Up Massachusetts • Blue Green Alliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OUR Walmart • Coworker.org • Freelancers Union 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LaborX • Glassdoor • Turkopticon
High Touch ←—————→ High Tech				

Work Shapers: putting influence or ownership directly in the hands of workers

Work shapers are new models that give workers formalized voices on the *inside* of companies. For example, consider the Independent Drivers Guild and Lobster 207, the latter of which is profiled at length in a subsequent section. In each of these cases, the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) was involved in setting up a new approach to giving workers direct influence over their work without collective bargaining. Rather than representing workers, the IAM helped independent contract workers gain completely new seats of power in their industries. Lobstermen in Maine formed a cooperative so that they could capture more economic value for themselves and influence the industry as a larger player. Uber drivers in New York City formed a Works Council to speak directly with management at Uber, influencing technology development of the Uber app and payment options like tips. These examples are unique because they find ways to give power to independent contractors. However, what defines them in a class of themselves is the way in which they gain power. The IAM, lobstermen, and drivers created *new* positions of power within an industry or company. They transformed their roles from price-takers to price-makers by identifying a structurally new way to be a worker. The lobstermen now own their own business and in effect *are* management.

Worker Centers: directly engaging with workers day-to-day in targeted communities

In 1992, there were five worker centers across the US. By 2005, there were at least 139 centers.⁶⁶ According to the Economic Policy Institute, worker centers are community-based organizations that engage in a combination of service, advocacy, and organizing to support low-wage workers, with many originating to serve predominantly immigrant populations. The worker center is high-touch and highly targeted, and both provides services to workers and engages with broader coalitions for policy change. As summarized by EPI:

“They are gateway organizations that provide information and training in workers’ rights, employment, labor and immigration law, legal services, the English language, and many other programs. They represent a new generation of mediating institutions that are integrating low-wage workers into American civic life and facilitating collective deliberation, education, and action. Worker centers provide low-wage workers a range of opportunities for expressing their ‘collective voice’ as well as for taking collective action.”⁶⁷

Worker centers differ from unions in key ways according to EPI: they are place- and people-based instead of employer-based, they focus on skill education that is not necessarily work-specific, they do not rely solely on membership dues, and they take a collaborative approach to working with community partners and institutions. The strength of the model is in the power it draws from members who appreciate its relevance and direct service. The weakness of the model is in its natural limits to scale (because it is place- and community-based) and its sustainability position (because it relies on foundation funding). In fact, worker centers receive on average 61% of their budgets from foundations.⁶⁸

Table 2: Restaurant Opportunities Center

The mission of the Restaurant Opportunities Centers (ROC) United is to ensure that all people who work in restaurants can achieve financial independence and improve their quality of life. The rapidly-growing restaurant industry ranks among the lowest paid and least unionized industries. Saru Jayaraman and Fekkak Mamdouh launched ROC following September 11, 2001, to support displaced workers. Based on the success of the effort, several other cities approached ROC about expanding, and ROC United, a national umbrella organization, was born. Today, ROC United includes over 25,000 restaurant workers and over 300 high-road employers. It has won more than a dozen workplace and political campaigns, such as minimum wage increases, and more than \$10 million in discrimination payments and misappropriated tips. ROC has provided training to more than 5,000 workers.

Coalition Builders: moving beyond the union to the masses to advocate for a fairer economy

Coalition builders are what they sound like: they connect people who may not have shared experience, bringing their voices together toward a collective purpose. Whereas platform connectors work towards micro-goals (e.g. workplace goals or direct services), coalition builders work to influence macro-level policy that affects more than just those involved in the coalition. Coalitions draw on traditional organizing tactics of unions, but without the attachment to a workplace or collective bargaining. They use mail, phone, and door-to-door organizing to rally people towards systemic policy change goals, such as a minimum wage increase or family paid medical leave. The reach of coalition builders is wide, but their sustainability is unclear as their efforts typically are campaign-based. The power of coalition builders has to-date come from persistent organizing efforts and the ability to recognize leverage points in a system (e.g. the Justice for Janitors’ campaign to pressure building owners as opposed to the contracting companies that directly hired the janitors). Coalition builders have an opportunity to strengthen their cases for a fairer economy if they can raise the consciousness of the public at large in addition to affected workers.

Table 3: Working America⁶⁹

Working America was launched by the AFL-CIO in 2003 as a vehicle for organized labor to reach out to non-workers who nonetheless may be energized about issues such as wages, healthcare, and paid leave. It focuses on intensive, repeat canvassing of non-union households on campaigns that may be of mutual interest to the canvassed person and local labor groups (e.g., a \$15 minimum hourly wage). This approach requires flexibility in messaging: for example, some people may have a negative reaction to unions but respond better to issues positioned as related to “worker voice.” AFL-CIO is the primary funding source, though Working America also has been experimenting with \$5-per-year voluntary membership contributions (though a contribution is not required to become a member), as well as fundraising while canvassing. The organization reports three million members, though there are varying levels of activity and participation across those members. Working America is an example of an effort to build coalitions with a much broader segment of the American workforce than is currently unionized.

Platform connectors: using platforms to unite workers for specific change, regardless of geographic proximity

These organizations connect workers who do not share geographic proximity (as opposed to worker centers, which often are geographically focused). These platform connectors have identified a source of power that is hard for workers to capture without a flexible, platform-based intermediary: the strength of workers mobilized by shared interests and in large numbers. They work towards concrete goals or services that workers demand. Organizations like Freelancers Union, Coworker.org, and OUR Walmart have built platforms that allow workers to share their experiences and learn from each other. The platforms of Coworker.org and OUR Walmart are based on technology that allows group formation, secure messaging, and petition forming. The platform of Freelancers Union is less overtly technology-based, but enables workers to share best practices and pool resources for benefits – tools and services that are accessible online and through in-person forums.

The business models used by platform connectors are not standardized. However, the three organizations mentioned above generate, or plan to generate, earned income to evolve the business model away from a reliance on philanthropic funds. Because these organizations have platforms that support continual engagement and can add new functionality to their platforms, they are well positioned to develop new revenue streams, such as by offering content or services to users.

Platform connectors are defined by their platform components and ability to connect workers who may not otherwise have drawn on each other’s experiences. The strength of the model is scale: the efforts tap into sizable worker populations that are not limited by geography or specific employers. Unions recognized that they needed to shed their trade-specific mandates in order to expand their membership base. Platform connectors are starting from a broader membership lens to begin with. The ability for these organizations to reach a large and broad segment of a workforce – through an open and fungible platform – is a huge leap for worker voice. The 21st century economy is fissured and demands flexibility of workers not just in hours, but in skills and across sectors. A new labor movement must be flexible as well, and the platform connectors are closest to providing that flexibility to workers in this new economy.

Information Equalizers: using data to increase transparency in the labor market

Information equalizers are those emergent organizations that are shedding light on the labor market, including employer practices, wages, employee experience, job availability, skill requirements, and so on. These organizations take the form of matching algorithms, rating marketplaces, and job markets. Regardless of intent, such innovations can empower workers with information to make better decisions and can pressure employers to act differently. The power of these organizations is in helping workers overcome information asymmetry by promoting transparency.

The success of these organizations for improving worker voice is not yet clear, but their emergence raises interesting possibilities, especially because many have viable commercial models behind them and are technologically scalable. Other organizations are learning from their successes. For example, Coworker.org, a platform connector per the above taxonomy (and the subject of a full case later in this document) is thinking about how to build their power and sustainability through the use of data. What is today an online platform for petitions and network forming could tomorrow be a source of data for investors to make socially-responsible investments in companies, and for management to subsequently respond. Data can be used both as a business model and as a source of power. Workers can learn about job openings, skill qualifications, working conditions, management reputation, and salary and benefits through information equalizers.

Table 4: Glassdoor⁷⁰

Glassdoor was founded in 2007 by entrepreneurs with experience in the tech industry. As far as we can tell, the company does not brand itself as a labor organizer, yet it is built on the idea of worker voice. It is a public-facing database for jobs and information about companies, provided by employees. The website allows workers of all levels and background to learn about or report on a company. The result is a database that organizes information that gives people power to make the right decisions: company reviews, CEO approval ratings, salary reports, and benefits comparisons. The data is used by investors too, providing a public feedback loop to inform, and hopefully improve companies' organizational health and worker experience. Glassdoor demonstrates how information can build worker power.

III. Cases

The subsequent sections review detailed cases of three alt labor efforts: Lobster 207, OUR Walmart, and Coworker.org. We chose these cases for a few reasons. First, much has already been written about worker centers and coalition builders, and information equalizers are too nascent to self-identify as “alt labor” for full-length cases. The stories of work shapers like Lobster 207 and platform connectors like OUR Walmart are rich and ready to be shared. Second, we think that these cases represent particularly exciting directions for the future of worker voice. On one hand, we have an example that represents a new way to be high touch – that is, by placing ownership of business itself in the hands of workers. On the other hand, we have examples that represent new ways to be high tech – that is, by building platforms that let workers lead and develop their own power. Together, these cases show us that power, scale, and sustainability are possible if labor leaders give the reins to workers, persevere in the face of challenges, and think experimentally and collaboratively.

3. Case: Lobster 207

I. Context

“I am very proud to be a fisherman, I’m a fourth generation. It’s a tough industry to get into and stay in.”

- Rock Alley, IAM Local 207 President

Lobster 207, formally known as the Maine Lobstering Union (MLU), is both a local lodge of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (“IAM” or “Machinists”) and a cooperative business. It was officially formed as both a co-op and a union in 2013. By November 2017, Lobster 207 represented approximately 550 lobstermen, of which 250 were in good dues-paying standing.⁷¹ In the course of five years, Lobster 207 has influenced major legislative victories, purchased a wholesale lobster business, and given new voice to lobstermen.

The organizing efforts of Lobster 207 were a response to pressures and changes felt across the lobster industry in Maine. The industry is an important part of Maine’s economy. In fact, 83% of the lobster landings in the United States are from the state. They have a value of more than \$500 million annually.⁷² In an economy that has not recovered to pre-recession levels and with rural GDP growth negative through 2013, what happens in the lobster industry matters.⁷³

The industry is regulated by the Maine Department of Marine Resources, which establishes lobster management zones (mostly rural coastal areas and small islands) and manages lobster licensees. The number of licensees is limited and in 2016 there were 5,664 licensees across classes and apprentice categories.⁷⁴ In Maine, only licensed lobsterman can own and operate a lobster boat. In addition to licensed lobstermen, there are also unlicensed sternmen who are allowed to fish with a licensed captain. For this case study, reference to lobstermen includes sternmen as well.⁵ State, as well as national regulations, not only limit who can fish lobster but also specify where fishing can take place, set limits on types of equipment used, and restrict which lobsters can be harvested based on size and if egg-bearing.

The livelihood of lobstermen is directly related to the amount caught during season and the price paid by buyers on shore. The classic supply-demand relationship influences prices. Historically, prices have exceeded \$6 per pound only when the number of landings is significantly low, typically in the winter off-season. The price drops to around \$3 per pound in the peak of the summer hauling season.⁷⁵ Beyond the market based reasons for fluctuations in price paid to lobstermen, many lobstermen believe that collusion takes place and influences what prices they receive at the dock. See Appendix 1 to this section for historical price and landings data in Maine.

In addition to seasonal fluctuations in price based on supply, vertical integration and conglomeration has effected the industry. For example, one of the world’s largest seafood suppliers, Thai Union, which owns brands like Chicken of the Sea, has a history of vertical integration. A firm leader has said, “Thai Union’s vertical integration has been key to our division’s success in the shrimp, tuna, and pasteurized crab categories. We are excited about the growth possibilities of a similar relationship in North Atlantic lobster.”⁷⁶ In another example, Forum Capital, a real estate conglomerate with Russian founders, invests in companies with ties to lobster harvesting in Maine: East Coast Seafood, Garbo Lobster, and

⁵ Women who fish for lobsters typically also refer to themselves as “lobstermen” or “sternmen”

Maine Fair Trade Lobster.⁷⁷ The lobster supply chain is increasingly global. Unlike in prior generations, most of the owners and operators of the businesses in Maine that buy and process lobsters are no longer people that live in the same small communities as the lobstermen.

The Maine Lobstermen's Association ("MLA"), while seemingly a logical ally for traditional lobstermen in Maine, represents diverse interests of lobster-related players across the value chain, including trap and stock suppliers, boat builders, insurance firms, restaurants, and financial services, as well as lobster wholesalers and retailers. Listed as members in the MLA directory are also Thai Union and Forum Capital affiliates.⁷⁸

I. Worker Needs

"They [lobstermen] were realizing the worst price for their catch, and they literally could not afford to go [out] ...they were in a place, whether they thought organizing was a good way to combat it or not, they knew something needed to be done... they were voicing their frustration about the obvious thing: price. But another huge piece was all the things that regulate and dictate how they go to work every day. They've never formally had a way to get involved and have a voice in their own industry."

- IAM Organizer

In the context of the industry landscape presented above, lobstermen face a number of pressures that threaten their way of life. Lobstermen are self-employed: they work for themselves or share in the catch of boats they fish on that are operated by licensed lobstermen. They sell their catch as price-takers to buyers on shore. "They are at the mercy of wholesalers who are in charge of global distribution."⁷⁹ The business of fishing is one often passed on through family tradition and is one that defines communities up and down the coast of Maine, especially "Downeast" (the northeast, rural coast of Maine). Lobster fishing drives the economy of small communities just as much as it defines the identity of the men and women who captain or work as sternmen the lobster boats.

In 2012, lobster prices hit a twenty-year low. Fishermen were facing prices around \$1.80 per pound, compared to \$3-4 rates typical for the season.⁸⁰ In parallel, environmental groups were trying to limit where lobstermen could fish and pressuring regulators to require use of new and more expensive boat and haul equipment. Lobstermen were legally unable to band together to be price-makers due to anti-trust laws, and lobstermen did not have a strong, coordinated voice across neighborhood lobster advisory councils, let alone in the statehouse. When lobstermen were talking about not fishing due to the low prices in 2012, the local press talked about how this could be a violation of anti-trust laws and the Commissioner of the Maine Department of Marine Resources warned "that an organized work stoppage may be illegal" and the State of Maine would take action "against any criminal behavior".^{81,82}

Lobstermen in Vinalhaven, Maine wondered what they could do and who they could work with to better their lot in the face of regulatory demands, depressed prices, and a changing industry landscape.

II. Origin Story

Union formation: prices spark concern, machinists hear the call

In December 2012, a Vinalhaven lobsterman was explaining his situation to his brother, who worked in a shipyard nearby and was represented by IAM District 4. Hearing the lobsterman's frustration of being unable to influence his own livelihood, the brother suggested a meeting with the Machinists.

After the initial contact, the IAM District 4 realized that this would not be a traditional organizing drive since there was no employer to bargain with. However, the IAM thought this relationship with the lobstermen was worth exploring. Organizing lobstermen would fit with the broad union goals of empowering workers by bringing them together to act collectively to promote their own interests: more control over who profits from the value of what they produce, a stronger voice in the legislative arena, and maintaining the viability of their communities. IAM District 4 received approval and support for its Eastern Territory Vice President and the IAM's International President to start this unusual organizing campaign. IAM District 4 received assistance from the union, including financial support to hire a full-time organizer and access to the wide range of research, communications, legal, training and other IAM resources that are normally made available to organizing campaigns.

In early 2013, leaders from the IAM District 4 hosted open meetings for lobsterman to gather and share their experience and challenges. Machinist leaders and organizers provided structure to the gathering, but made it clear that lobstermen would have to take the lead in organizing themselves. By February, 99 lobstermen had signed A-cards, demonstrating interest in IAM representation.

At the end of March, the IAM District 4 brought a contingent of lobstermen to the William W. Winpisinger Education and Technology Center in Maryland. There, the IAM team laid out both history and strategies to “navigate the rapidly changing world of work in the 21st century.”⁸³ The goal of the trip was to help the lobstermen to develop a strategy for building their own political and economic power, and to understand tactically how to organize a membership base. The trip not only did that, but it also highlighted the cultural alignment between the lobstermen and the machinists. Lobstermen view themselves as workers engaged in strenuous and dangerous work, seeking to provide for their families; the same way traditional IAM members define themselves. In between training sessions, the IAM team and the lobstermen shared an outing to explore the local crabbing industry (and to eat crabs, of course). Based on the feedback from these participants, IAM District 4 held two more of these trainings sessions to involve other lobstermen who wanted to become more involved in the organizing effort.

The group of lobstermen returned to Maine. Soon, with the aid of a full-time IAM organizer, the group of unionized lobstermen grew through many phone calls, community meetings, discussions at the docks, and home visits. In the summer of 2013 the lobstermen began referring to themselves as “IAM Local 207” since 207 is the area code for Maine and the organizing of lobstermen had expanded up and down the entire Maine coast. The initial spark to organize was depressed prices. However, as the fishermen came together with collective frustrations and learned from the experience of the Machinists, they realized that they would be able to push back on more than just low prices at the shore. They would also be able to collectively fight back against how they were being pressured by regulators, environmental groups, and conglomerates. The local was formed based on the goals in the table below.

Table 5: IAM Local 207 goals

- Build collective power of Lobstermen as IAM members
- Create a State-wide co-op to market lobsters, for union lobstermen to share in profits of MLU Co-op
- Provide economic viability for lobstermen and their communities
- Support lobstering as a career choice for next generation
- Support Maine businesses and Maine economy
- Increased political power and influence over regulation, locally and statewide
- Engage in environmental activities to protect lobsters, their habitat, and the ecosystem of the Maine coast
- Engage in other IAM union activities⁶

Forming Local 207 was a unique proposition for both the lobstermen and IAM. Traditionally, the IAM represents workers at an employer that the union has a collective bargaining relationship with. Yet, lobstermen are self-employed. To whom would the lobstermen self-advocate, and for what? While economic pressures were the initial rallying call for the lobstermen, it was a tough issue to tackle for a few reasons. First, demanding higher prices on shore from buyers would be futile as market prices were not set locally and were influenced by global supply and demand. Even if there was some collusion going on concerning the price paid at the dock, it was impossible to identify who the key price setters were. Second, as independent workers, lobstermen would violate anti-trust restrictions by embarking on any coordinated efforts to demand a minimum price.

The IAM helped Local 207 developed a unique two-pronged strategy – political and economic – that would allow lobstermen to respond to economic pressures in the long term, but gain power through political success in the short term.

Political influence: legislative and political wins demonstrate value of Local 207

First, Lobster 207 prioritized the building of political power in the short term. Political organizing allowed lobstermen to directly influence regulations that were inhibiting their livelihoods and in doing so to demonstrate value to lobstermen who might join the ranks. The lobstermen drew directly on IAM tactics to influence the industry. Lobster 207 members testified at hearings and spoke with their legislators. Lobster 207 both introduced new legislation and responded to existing legislation. Groups of lobstermen showed up at the capitol in Augusta, Maine, finding voice in their organized, larger numbers. Maine’s relatively small population, coupled with the fact that lobstermen were based on the coast, far from the capitol, made this a particularly powerful feat. By being part of the IAM, the lobstermen in IAM Local 207 not only benefited from support of other IAM locals in Maine, but their legislative activities gained the backing of other unions in the state. The result of this strategic initiative and tactical actions by members was immense. The table below lists some of the political victories to which Lobster 207 has contributed.

Table 6: Political successes

⁶ IAM also integrated Local 207 in other union activities like it would any other IAM Local. For example, IAM Local 207 participates in the Maine State Council of Machinists that includes the IAM locals in Maine from the wide variety of industries. IAM Local 207 also works with the Maine AFL-CIO. Additionally, IAM Local 207 has sent delegates to the IAM Legislative Conference in Washington, D.C. and IAM Local 207 President Rock Alley spoke at the IAM’s quadrennial Convention in Chicago, Illinois in 2016.

- Introduced bill that passed into law, protecting lobstermen on military duty from losing their license while on tour (2013)⁸⁴
- Partnered with the Sierra Club to defeat a project that would have allowed dredging by the Army Corps of Engineers in the Penobscot Bay
- Pressured legislators to oppose or support bills that would directly affect lobstermen: loosening of dragging restrictions on fishermen, electronic monitoring of fishermen, and limited increase in lobstermen license fees to fund a marketing collaborative
- Helped defeat a Right to Work bill that would have prohibited employers from requiring employees to join a union or paying dues (2015)⁸⁵
- Encouraged and supported members to run for office, with Robert Alley elected and re-elected as State Representative and many members elected to serve on local lobster councils

Cooperative formation: a co-op as the first step towards economic returns

Second, to set the stage for long-term economic influence, the IAM helped the lobstermen of Local 207 incorporate as a statewide marketing co-op called the Maine Lobstering Union (MLU) in September 2013.⁷ This would exempt the lobstermen from anti-trust restrictions and allow them to work together to be a price-setter rather than a price-taker. The table below lists the proposition of becoming a statewide co-op, which is technically a Fishermen’s Collective under federal antitrust law, a Fish Marketing Association under Maine law, and a cooperative according to the IRS.

The legal distinction of becoming a co-op enables IAM Local 207 members to collectively own a business to market their catch and engage in other business activities, such as processing, without violating anti-trust laws. Instead of having no control over what happens to their catch once it is sold at the dock, IAM Local 207 members now have the ability become the “middlemen” who can negotiate wholesale price based on a larger volume than any single fisherman could offer. IAM Local 207 members will share in the profits of the co-op. To be a member of the MLU, one must hold a Maine lobster license or be a sternman, join IAM Local 207 as an Associate member, live in Maine, and be over 18.

Table 7: Components of becoming a statewide co-op

- Exemption from anti-trust restrictions
- Members are also IAM Local 207 members
- Election of IAM Local 207 board would also serve as MLU Co-op Executive Board to oversee business
- Members vote on major developments, and are not liable for Local 207 debt or obligations
- Profit-sharing for members who sell their lobsters to the MLU
- Group buying to reduce costs to IAM Local 207 Lobstermen: insurance, ropes, traps, fuel, bait, loans, mortgages, etc.
- Influence over future of industry as larger economic player

⁷ There are many different types of cooperatives. A marketing co-op allows farmers and fishermen to jointly sell what they grow or catch and engage in related activities (such as processing). The farmers and fishermen own the marketing co-op. They are not employees. Land O’Lakes and Ocean Spray are two well known marketing co-ops. Other common types of co-ops are producer co-ops where the employees make the goods or provide the services of the employee-owned business; and consumer co-ops, such as food co-ops.

Business formation: acquiring a business finally enables return of value to lobstermen

Legislative victories were the first phase of success for Lobster 207, but improving economic livelihoods of lobstermen paints the next phase of Lobster 207's vision. According to an IAM District 4 representative, success for Lobster 207 is not just having a voice in Augusta, but also helping small communities thrive and uniting lobstermen across the coast. Economic components of success require Lobster 207 to think like a business in order to return economic value to lobstermen and their communities.

While winning political victories in Augusta and building up membership across the coast, Lobster 207 leadership began the long process of figuring out how to turn its marketing cooperative into a functioning business. Luckily, a family in Trenton, Maine, three hours north of Vinalhaven, had heard about the efforts of lobstermen. That family owned the Trenton Bridge Lobster Pound and had been in both the restaurant and wholesale business for four generations. The family liked the mission of Lobster 207 and agreed to sell their wholesale portion of the family business to the lobstermen's cooperative.

In February 2017, IAM Local 207 voted at a general assembly meeting to purchase the wholesale operations of the Trenton Bridge Lobster Pound, to hire the existing CEO of the family business to stay on, and to fund the transaction with an innovative financing package. Through this \$4 million acquisition, Lobster 207 now owns a building with two large indoor pounds for storing lobsters and space for its sorting operations, trucks, other equipment, a fenced-in cove that can be used as an outdoor lobster pound, and land to expand. More importantly, the pound's wholesale business was already operating and had a recurring customer base of restaurants and distributors bringing the lobsters near and far. Purchasing an existing business and hiring an experienced operator would allow the lobstermen to continue to do what they do best – haul lobsters – while capturing more value from the lobster value chain. See the Appendix for a diagram of how the lobstermen interact with the new wholesale business.

The lobstermen would not have been able to finance the acquisition of their own wholesale business without the support of the Machinists. Local banks were hesitant to lend to a unionized co-op that was affecting the politically and locally sensitive lobster industry. After three local banks rejected proposals by IAM Local 207 to acquire an existing wholesaler, the IAM called on its relationship with the Bank of Labor, based in Kansas.⁸⁶ The Bank of Labor supports the banking and investing activities of unions and affiliates. The Bank of Labor was able to provide a loan to help finance the transaction and to provide a large line-of-credit.⁸ Roughly half of the \$4 million deal was financed by the Bank of Labor loan and line of credit, which was secured by the property, plant, equipment, inventory, and insured accounts receivable of the wholesale business. About a quarter of the acquisition was financed by unsecured loans from other IAM locals. The remaining quarter came from a note from the seller. The transaction could not have been completed without a Backup Letter of Credit from the IAM Grand Lodge (headquarters) to provide additional assurances that the Bank of Labor would be repaid in the event that the business collapsed and the collateral securing the loan and part of the line-of-credit turned out to be less than the expected value.

⁸ In the lobster industry, lobstermen are paid in cash; yet the wholesale business does not normally receive payment from its customers for 30 to 60 days. The wholesale business may also hold onto lobsters as inventory for reasons such as letting soft shelled lobsters that have recently molted develop a harder shell. Thus, a wholesale business needs a line-of-credit to deal with the buying of lobsters in cash yet having assets tied up in accounts receivable and inventory.

The elected 8-person IAM Local 207 Executive Board are also the officers of the Maine Lobstering Union and have oversight over the cooperative, including its management and operations. That executive board brings forward major decisions that require voting – such as expansion investments – to the general membership at Special Meetings. IAM District 4 provides support for organizing and business assistance as needed, according to a Space and Services Agreement with MLU.

Looking forward: political voice in Maine and economic empowerment of lobstermen and communities

As an established force in the state capitol and the owners of a functioning business, the members of Lobster 207 have a unique path in front of them. They need to collectively advocate for their interests in the changing industry, manage the direction of a wholesale business, and grow their membership base to ensure the strength of their political and economic position.

The lobstermen have demonstrated the ability to advocate for their interests and grow their membership. Members continue to plan runs for office and respond to industry-specific legislation. IAM organizers continue to visit lobstermen at their ports and in their homes, up and down the Maine coast.

Since the wholesale business is still in its first year of Local 207 ownership, it remains to be seen how successful the co-op will be in generating long-term economic gains for members. The Executive Board decides on how to allocate profits back into the business or to members, after paying financing costs from acquisition. Members who sell their lobster through the Lobster 207 cooperative, either directly or through their current shore side buyers, would receive dividends according to their contributed share of the total lobsters sold. The first profit sharing decision will be made in early 2018, based on annual sales to-date of the wholesale operation. In the meantime, the lobstermen have demonstrated economic power in nudging middlemen buyers on shore to sell to the MLU. IAM started organizing lobstermen in late 2012 when lobstermen were angry about how low the price at the dock was; the average price that lobstermen received throughout the state was 52% higher by 2016, the highest level since 2006.⁸⁷

Stakeholders will be able to capture a more complete picture of how independent lobstermen form both a union and cooperative in the next few years. In the meantime, independent workers, business leaders, and labor leaders alike can learn from the challenges and successes that Lobster 207 has realized to-date. One way to do so is to assess the efforts to advance lobstermen's voice on axes of power, sustainability, and scale, which we do below.

III. Power Assessment: Strength in numbers, political tactics and training, and union solidarity

"The flood of red t-shirts as they filled the State House was awe inspiring. Winning a legislative fight that's good for lobstermen and good for Maine just adds to my pride."⁸⁸

- IAM District 4 member

The harnessing of power in the lobster industry, by the fishermen themselves, can take many forms as discussed above: political and economic, for example. At the core of any political win or economic value that lobstermen gain is a strength in numbers that is founded on shared experience. The formation of collective interest was based on a response to depressed prices that directly affects incomes of not just lobstermen, but their families and small towns. The rise of that collective interest was possible due to readily available training, tactics and support from the IAM for the political sphere.

The impact of that collective interest has come since 2013 in the form of red-shirt-clad lobstermen showing up in Augusta, Maine, surrounded by Machinists from industries ranging from shipbuilding to ironworkers, who showed up in solidarity. The importance of political power due to a quickly organized member base, training, and support from other union members outside of the industry cannot be overstated. Without political wins, it seems likely the Local would not have had the momentum to attract more lobstermen and buy a business.

IV. Sustainability Assessment: Innovative use of business building in parallel to union dues

‘It’s a really unusual thing – we never have members proposing to raise dues!’⁸⁹

- IAM representative

The sustainability of any worker voice initiative relies on funding. While much remains to be learned through time, the Lobster 207 model appears sustainable. It is both a union and cooperative business, and thus has a dues revenue stream supporting IAM representation and a sales revenue stream supporting profit sharing. Even if one of these were to fail, there is some level of political or economic power that has a chance to survive. However, the combination of the two streams would be greater than its parts and the enduring nature of this set-up depends on the co-op’s success.

The dues stream of funds seems relatively stable, albeit with high transaction costs. Members pay dues as Affiliate members of IAM. In its early years, members of IAM Local 207 actually raised from the floor an initiative to raise dues by \$10 per month. Pricing dues is one hurdle not faced by Lobster 207, but collecting dues is another. Because lobstermen are paid at the docks or by middlemen buyers, the IAM cannot subtract dues payments from a paycheck as is typically done in an employer-union-member relationship. IAM representatives have to chase down lobstermen to collect checks – a tough endeavor in a state with one of the longest coastlines in the US. In the future, it is possible that Lobster 207 can collect dues from profit sharing withholdings but that is far off. In the meantime, members view dues as a valuable contribution for IAM support.

The business was reportedly profit-positive at purchase, and there is no indication that the business cycle changed following acquisition, especially because the CEO remained. The business strategy is to grow in two phases.

Currently, the business is using existing infrastructure of small middlemen to buy lobsters from its members in Joesport/Beals, Vinalhaven, and Mt. Desert Isle. Prior to acquisition, the business purchased lobster from only 30 boats. Post acquisition by Lobster 207, the business is purchasing lobster from 130 member boats.⁹⁰ Additionally, the business is newly branded as “union lobster,” drawing orders from union consumers nationwide and attention from local casinos who are interested in sourcing from Lobster 207 because a few members are Native American. Lobster 207 has a website that supports online ordering with marketing on social media channels. The business was able to deliver a large order of fresh lobster to a contingent of tech workers at the popular Burning Man festival in Black Rock City, Nevada, a story that was picked up by high-profile media outlets like USA Today.⁹¹ The spin on business-as-is suggested here are strong signs for the sustainability of the business.

However, the ability to grow the business and buy lobsters from members across the state is crucial if Lobster 207 wants to share profits with all members. The second phase of Lobster 207 business growth includes expanding purchasing into other areas where members are located and eventually

expanding statewide. The ability to buy across the state would attract more members to the cooperative and union. The ability to share profits would also influence member appeal. The executive board faces debt repayments, operational expenses (including roughly 30 employees' salaries), and capital investment costs that may need to be prioritized for long term success – which may require withholding dividends to members in the short term.

Overall, the prospects of Lobster 207 surviving to represent lobstermen well into the future is strong, based both on a dues model and an innovative business acquisition and operation.

V. Scale Assessment: Possibilities to replicate the model, but scale locally has natural limits

“If we’re successful here, we can think about other places: lobstermen in Canada, fishermen on the West Coast, and others.”

- IAM representative

The final element by which one can understand Lobster 207’s successes and challenges is scale. While power and sustainability are high, Lobster 207’s prospects for scale are low. Scale can occur on two levels: organic growth and replication.

Organically, there is an upper limit to the number of lobstermen that can be represented and brought into the cooperative. With approximately 5,000 licenses in the industry, and not accounting for inactivity or sternmen, Lobster 207 is already in contact with about 10% of the market.⁹²

Considering replication, an important question is if unions or other workers can replicate the Lobster 207 model. The political organizing that occurred is certainly replicable. However, it did draw on a lot of hard work and professional organizing and it was specifically targeting a localized and specialized target member base. The economic organizing that occurred is highly regulated and more difficult to replicate. The laws regulating cooperatives and associates are complicated at state, federal, and IRS levels. For marketing co-ops like IAM Local 207 where the owners are not employees, the anti-trust protections are only available to farmers and people who fish. So, freelancers and other independent contractors could not form a marketing cooperative unless Federal laws are changed. However, there are other examples of successful worker-owned co-ops that can inform scale. The United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives estimates that there are 300 to 400 worker cooperatives in the country, and many more abroad.⁹³

VI. Takeaways for the Future of Worker Voice

Lobster 207’s efforts reveal the importance of collectively engaging in political activities. The demonstration of political victories, often bipartisan, early on empowered lobstermen to use their voice more than they had in the past and also attracted other lobstermen to the cause. Political victories can come in the form of resistance to existing legislation, proposed legislation, or government-funded activities. Policymakers are far from the frontlines of any employment activity. It is workers who have the expertise to know what needs to be fixed. Yet, political involvement is not always at the forefront of worker consciousness. The political organizing role that unions play is thus crucial because it demonstrates the power of political action and the empowerment that stems from that collective voice. Future efforts to advance worker voice, through unions or alternative organizing efforts should raise worker consciousness through political organizing.

A second lesson from Lobster 207 relates to the importance of using shared identity to build solidarity, especially when geography fragments professional connectivity. The proximity of machinists to lobstermen created a source of power that lobstermen could draw on in the political organizing process. Identifying common experiences of struggle can empower people to work together and give people hope in doing so. In a sense, the lobstermen were quite homogenous – with identical professions that led to shared identities. Homogeneity was a source of success in organizing lobstermen. However, physical distance more often than not separates workers who otherwise would be able to identify shared experiences. In the case of Lobster 207, that distance was real. What shortened the distance between lobstermen was a community of machinists that came from different fields but shared similar aspirations.

Third, developing an influential voice for workers requires persistence. Lobster 207 has been a work in progress since the end of 2012. The local IAM team has reflected on how they had to overcome multiple challenges. On one hand, many people had misperceptions about who the union was, equating them to the “mafia” or to outsiders who were not lobstermen. Those perceptions had to be overcome, and an organizer reflected what it took: “you have to work to get into those families...build trust...it’s face-to-face, on the phone, talking to them all the time, for five years.”⁹⁴ The formation seen today is the result of professional organizers and motivated lobstermen – driving hours at a time to meet another potential member and convincing workers to make short term tradeoffs in time spent on the job and time spent advocating for that job. In another thread, finding financing that was willing to disrupt a traditional industry and to work with union-backed activities was contentious and involved a lot of relationship building. The group faced multiple rejections from banks before working with the Bank of Labor to assemble financing that involved numerous parties and commitments.

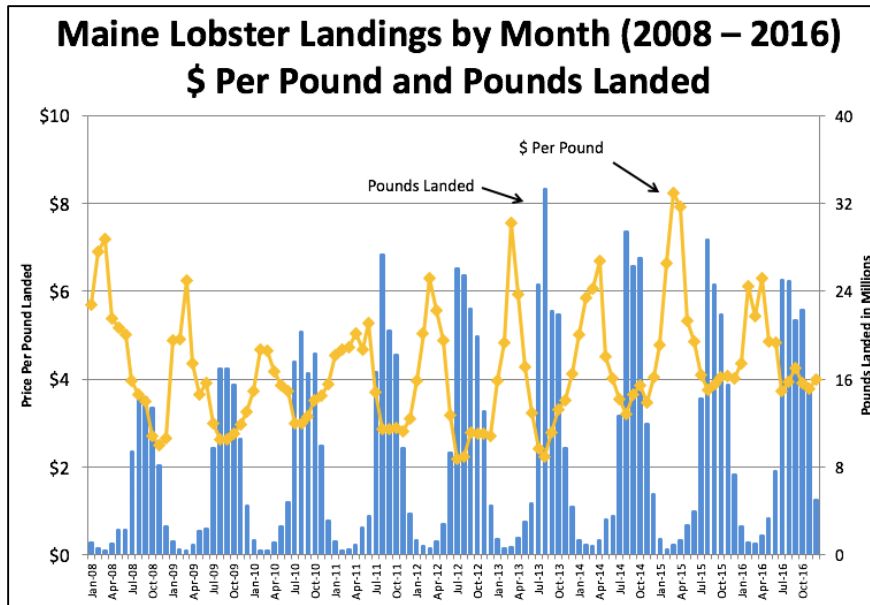
Fourth, the case sheds light on another opportunity for worker voice: worker ownership. The role of unions and labor organizing has traditionally been to intermediate between managers and employees. This requires a rather objective view on who is an owner, a manager, or an employee. The fissuring of the workplace and the rise of independent workers makes this distinction less clear, and sometimes less relevant. Worker-owned businesses provide one model to go beyond the labor-capital or employee-manager dichotomies. The model supports wealth creation just as much as it supports voice and empowerment for workers. In the case of Lobster 207, the co-op thinks not just about profits for itself, but also the health of the ecosystem it operates in. An organizing representative shared, “we are bringing the middlemen on shore into our business, rather than pushing them out with our new power.” In addition to wealth and voice, running a business, if successful, is inherently more sustainable than relying on fees or donations. At face value, it may seem that unions should not propagate this model as it eliminates the need for an intermediary (because the management-labor divide is now one). However, the Lobster 207 case demonstrates mutually beneficial roles for local unions and worker-owned businesses to work together.

Finally, the case of Lobster 207 reveals that there is still a role for union strategies, tactics and institutions, thus emphasizing the need for unions and new labor efforts to view each other as complements, rather than substitutes. Labor unions can be incubators of new approaches. The early successes of Lobster 207 were directly due to organizing and political strategies developed with the Machinists and built in formal training based on historical successes. Without the institutional support of the IAM at the local, regional and national level, the lobstermen would not have been able to quickly achieve political victories or pull together the financial package that allowed for the buyout of the wholesale business. This value was deployed in the semi-traditional manner through the formation of IAM Local 207, supporting this like a traditional organizing campaign, and the signing up of dues-

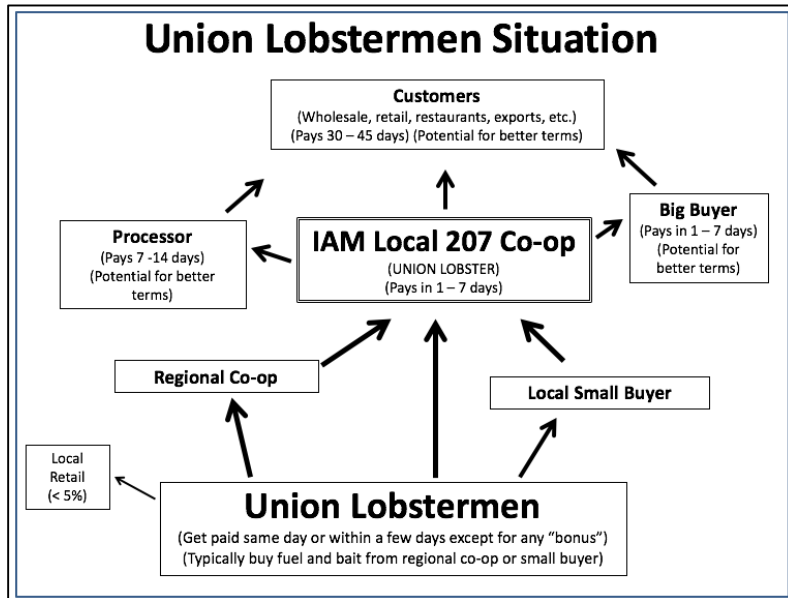
paying members. The case proves that independent workers can be organized and their voices can be brought forward, so long as the union involved is responding directly to specific needs and bringing their best knowledge and tactics forward to help. In non-traditional ways, perhaps unions may be able to export what they are really great at through new models: consulting services, sharing infrastructure, incubating new ideas, and partnering with non-traditional organizations, from business to non-profits. The challenge for unions here is to be collaborative as opposed to prescriptive, and open instead of anchored.

VII. Appendix

A. Lobster Supply and Pricing⁹⁵



B. Business Ecosystem⁹⁶



C. Political Voice at the State House

A picture from the State House in Augusta, Maine, where Maine Lobstermen and District 4 Representatives gather in front of State Representative Mick Devin (D) to protest LD 1549, a bill that threatens the lobster industry.⁹⁷



4. Case: OUR Walmart

II. Worker Need and Origin Story

“Organizers must not be afraid of being catalysts that help workers build independent organizations and experiment. The decision about forming an organization can’t be left up to the government or employers. The presence of workers ready to initiate organization building should be the only prerequisite necessary for an organization to exist.”

- Dan Schlademan, Co-Director, Organization United for Respect⁹⁸

Cynthia Murray, a Walmart Associate in Laurel, MD, was fed up. Two days before, a younger female Associate had come up to her in tears after a confrontation with a manager. “They’re coming for you next,” Cynthia remembers the younger Associate, who quit the next day, saying to her. The day after that Associate quit, Cynthia was called into the personnel office. The personnel manager told her that she would be moved from her current role, operating the switchboard, to one that would require heavy lifting and much more movement – a problem for Cynthia, who had left her trucking job to work for Walmart due to a severe back injury. When Cynthia protested and mentioned her doctor’s notes, the manager became livid. “You’re going to do what I tell you to do,” Cynthia recalls the manager saying. Cynthia stormed out. On the way back to her desk, she bumped into an organizer from the United Food and Commercial Workers union (UFCW), who gave her a card about the union. According to Cynthia, “that was the start of our relationship” that led to the creation of United for Respect @ Walmart, more commonly known as OUR Walmart.

With over 1.5 million US employees – “more than the population of Vermont and Wyoming combined” – Walmart is the country’s largest private-sector employer by a wide margin.⁹⁹ It also has earned a reputation as one of the most difficult settings for labor organizing. In 2001, after 11 meatpackers at one Texas Walmart voted to join UFCW, Walmart got rid of all its butchers throughout its stores.¹⁰⁰ When workers at a store in Quebec voted for unionization, Walmart closed the store – a decision that the Canadian Supreme Court later found violated labor law.¹⁰¹ The hundreds of thousands of new hires at its more than 5,000 US stores are required to watch a video “that derides organized labor” soon after they join the company.¹⁰² To some, the failure to unionize workers at Walmart contributed directly to unions’ “lost power to set wage and labor standards” nationally.¹⁰³

Enter Dan Schlademan. A veteran of labor organizing with the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Dan joined UFCW in early 2010 to relaunch its Walmart efforts. Despite hearing repeatedly from skeptics that organized labor was dying, Dan saw potential for a rebirth. “The history of the US labor movement shows constant ebbs and flows,” Dan argues.

That said, Dan knew that traditional union models were insufficient by themselves in the Walmart context. Luckily, UFCW was up for experimentation. “I was given the freedom to think creatively,” he says, “which was really exciting.”

After spending 2010 gathering insights from past UFCW campaigns at Walmart, Dan, fellow SEIU alum Andrea Dehlendorf, Cynthia, Allan Forest (another Associate; Allan passed away in 2012) and 98 other Walmart Associates gathered in Bentonville, AR (where Walmart’s headquarters are located) in 2011 to publicly launch OUR Walmart and to call for improved wages and benefits as well as more respectful and less retaliatory treatment in the workplace. The following year, an even larger group attended the annual shareholder meeting to push shareholders to encourage better treatment of

workers. These events were crucial for building momentum. The Associates realized, according to Dan, that “I’m not crazy – there are other people who feel like I feel.”

This campaign continued to grow over the following years. Though most of its funding came from UFCW, it never sought to unionize Walmart workers and always operated independently under the auspices of a newly formed group called Organization United for Respect, or OUR, which made “OUR Walmart” its primary project.⁹ Cynthia believes that this independent status was crucial to building interest in OUR Walmart among Associates, given the obstacles to unionization at the company. To increase its independence further, in 2015, OUR Walmart’s leadership decided to seek new and more diverse funding sources for the organization and reduce reliance on UFCW funding. Today, OUR Walmart operates as a wholly standalone entity with no ties to UFCW.

III. Organizing Approach: Old-school activism + new-school technological tools

“We’re not trying to become the collective bargaining representative for Walmart workers. We’re trying to demonstrate that collective action can lead to change and power.”

- Dan Schlademan

“I was feeling broken, really defeated. I thought, ‘Wow, I worked so hard, and here I am, back on my couch, hurt.’ When the call came, I let my answering machine pick up because I could barely get up. I heard this guy say, ‘If you want to see change in your workplace and if your workplace is not safe,’ and before he could say his name and number, I picked up.”

- Girshriela Green, Walmart Associate, Crenshaw, CA¹⁰⁴

OUR Walmart has sought to build an organization that is resilient to employer pushback, levers power for meaningful change within Walmart, and gives workers a sense of community. In doing so, it relies on a multi-pronged organizing approach. As noted above, it brings Associates from across the country together to meet in person and develop bonds, appear at shareholder meetings, and coordinate campaigns. Closely related to these efforts is its focus on civil disobedience. OUR Walmart is “a little IWW-ish,” Dan explained, referencing an early-twentieth century group, Industrial Workers of the World, known for its radical activism.¹⁰⁵ Cynthia, for instance, fondly recalls a 2012 sit-in that shut down a Walmart store and nearby roads in Hyattsville, MD, for which she was arrested and spent a night in jail. “We wanted them to realize that we don’t plan on going anywhere,” she says.

The “Respect the Bump” campaign illustrates how OUR Walmart’s distributed network and multi-faceted organizing approaches come together. Girshriela Green, a Walmart Associate in the Crenshaw area of Los Angeles who had become involved with OUR Walmart after work injuries left her incapacitated, got connected in 2014 to another Associate in Texas, Chrissy Creech, through an OUR Walmart Facebook group that Girshriela had helped to start. Chrissy had begun bleeding while

⁹ Organization United for Respect (OUR) is a non-profit organization, organized under the laws of the District of Columbia. OUR brings together low-income workers, their families and communities to improve working conditions in the retail industry throughout the United States, promote human and civil rights secured by law, build strong and healthy communities, and end all forms of discrimination. OUR Walmart is a project of OUR. OUR does not intend or seek to represent retail employees over terms and conditions of employment, or to bargain with retail employers, including Walmart.

pregnant after her manager reportedly had forbidden her requests for bathroom breaks. The Associates in the Facebook group met in person at Chrissy’s home, where Chrissy’s mother gave the campaign its name by touching her daughter’s stomach and saying of Walmart, “They need to respect this bump!” The group of Associates prepared a resolution on pregnancy policy for the annual shareholder meeting while Dan and Andrea helped get several legal and policy organizations involved to support the effort. Not long after, Walmart changed its policy, perhaps to preempt discussion of the issue at the shareholder meeting. Later, after a pregnant Associate was fired for missing work while recuperating from injuries incurred when two TVs fell on her at a store in Illinois, several dozen Associates – including some from other states – showed up to protest and organized hundreds of calls to demand Walmart investigate the incident.¹⁰⁶

OUR Walmart staff believes that worker-initiated and worker-led efforts are key to its success. “This wasn’t something we picked from a meeting room in DC,” Andrea says of Respect the Bump. “There was energy and passion in the base.” Girshriela is one of several volunteer “OUR Walmart leaders,” Associates who complement OUR Walmart’s small paid staff of less than twenty people. Yet the professional staff and structure of OUR Walmart also is crucial. “Because of our structure,” Andrea emphasizes, “we could nimbly get behind and amplify the effort, help gather more examples and stories, and bring together the women for a training. Plus, we could connect them to national organizations working on economic justice.” Cynthia stressed the importance of this professional organizer support. “As a worker you have to learn your rights. For example, I can’t go talk to a worker who is with a customer, but I can talk to them in the parking lot. We had to learn the right way [to organize] if we wanted to do it peacefully and be heard.”

The organizational infrastructure of OUR Walmart also has been instrumental in developing its unique use of technology. Because of Walmart’s sprawling network of locations, technology always has been key to the organizing effort: many of the campaigns begun by Walmart Associates, such as Respect the Bump, have originated in closed Facebook groups that OUR Walmart maintains. OUR Walmart staff also noticed that the scope of questions workers asked on Facebook were broader than one might expect. For instance, if Walmart cut a worker’s hours suddenly, he or she might struggle to make rent, and thus would ask in the Facebook group for guidance in avoiding eviction. Yet as the number of campaigns and participating Associates grew, OUR Walmart realized that Facebook (and other platforms workers used, such as Reddit) was not the ideal platform because good answers to Associates’ questions were being lost over time as new conversations started. “People need support beyond just what Walmart HR provides,” says Andrea, “so they come to the social network. The question is, how can we make it more efficient to get that support?”

In 2016, the organization released a new smartphone app called WorkIt. Through the app’s chat function, current and former Walmart workers answer each other’s questions in real time. An IBM-powered artificial intelligence program works in the background to identify questions that have been answered already. It also identifies the best answers to those questions so that workers can get quick, high-quality answers and useful information is not lost over time.¹⁰⁷ Walmart management sought to dissuade Associates from using the app, instructing store managers to tell workers that the app is a trick to get them to “turn over personal information to the union by using deceptive and slick looking social media and mobile apps,” according to the *Wall Street Journal* (note: OUR Walmart was no longer formally affiliated with any union by the time it released WorkIt).¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, Andrea reports that as of November 2017, WorkIt has been downloaded over 10,000 times, and OUR Walmart is close to releasing features that will integrate the app with text messaging and Facebook.

The result of OUR Walmart's efforts, Dan contends, is a "paradigm shift for workers." With the support of OUR Walmart and the leadership of Associates like Cynthia and Girshriela, Walmart workers increasingly see that they "can self-organize and build powerful distributive networks."

IV. Power Assessment: OUR Walmart has built significant influence on behalf of Associates

"We've had so many people who have stood with us and helped us. They have been from everywhere and are just so amazing. People were scared – they were scared of losing their job. I said, 'You'll lose it anyway – they can fire you if they don't like the way you look. So, you can let them do that, or you can do something to help everybody.' You've got to stand for what you believe."

- Cynthia Murray

By combining a platform for worker-led organizing with knowledgeable support from seasoned labor organizers, OUR Walmart has enabled Associates to achieve several victories. OUR Walmart sees as its greatest accomplishment its contribution to Walmart's February 2015 decision to raise its company minimum wage to \$10 per hour as of February 2016. Other retailers, such as TJ Maxx, followed suit shortly, evidencing Walmart's role as a standard-setter for the retail industry.¹⁰⁹ While it is impossible to know exactly how much OUR Walmart's activities affected the decision (e.g., a tightening labor market also may have been a factor), it is noteworthy that major national media outlets, such as *The New York Times* and *USA Today*, cite OUR Walmart (along with the National Employment Law Project) as a primary advocate for wage increases, and Walmart's CEO told CBS that the "debate over inequity" affected the company's decision.¹¹⁰ The Huffington Post named OUR Walmart as "the group that spearheaded the strikes" that may have factored into the raise.¹¹¹

Arguably the clearest evidence of the power OUR Walmart exerts is in Walmart's defensive response. OUR Walmart learned during the discovery process of a legal case related to campaigns in 2013 that Walmart had hired intelligence services from Lockheed Martin and contacted the FBI to keep an eye on organizing activities. It fired several Associates for their participation in OUR Walmart campaigns and even ranked Walmart locations by the amount of labor organizing activity.¹¹² That OUR Walmart provoked these measures and largely has thrived in the face of them is testament to its power.

But perhaps the most important change for workers is one of the least measurable: a sense of increased respect for Associates and vendors by more senior employees. According to Cynthia, "managers used to scream and yell at workers in front of customers." When OUR Walmart polled Associates to understand their priorities, she says, increased wages came in second. The top priority: respect. Cynthia attests that the workplace experience is meaningfully different now – not just for many Associates, but workers at some vendors and other companies who interact with Walmart store managers. She is particularly excited that OUR Walmart members have spoken at Walmart shareholder meetings in Bentonville to propose shareholder resolutions "under our own name," as opposed to as a component of environmental or social responsibility reporting.

As noted above, OUR Walmart views the fact that Associates drive campaigns as key to its power. "We don't set the agenda," Dan explains. Rather, OUR Walmart seeks to provide an entry point and supporting services to help Associates communicate and self-organize.

Of course, OUR Walmart must rely heavily on the volunteer activities of Associates because it is not a union empowered to negotiate with Walmart on behalf of employees. Yet OUR Walmart staff and Associate leaders see an upside in this constraint. First, because of the distributed nature of the

organization, it is more resilient to pressure on Associates in any one store or geography. Second, its independent structure allows it to be more nimble and experimental. Similarly, explains Cynthia, “we’re not confined to a box. A union is confined to what’s in the contract [it negotiates]. But we need to think outside the box.”

At the same time, some labor organizers have criticized OUR Walmart for focusing on Walmart’s retail workers rather than others in the company’s supply chain. One longtime union organizer, Peter Olney of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, views the supply chain as “the company’s strategic weak point.” He argues, “If we really seek to build power among Walmart workers, it will require the organization of their supply chain. Organization of retail workers at stores is not sustainable without the company’s proprietary distribution centers.”¹¹³ Andrea notes that while OUR Walmart’s membership presently is limited to current or former Walmart retail workers, the organization is expanding its partnerships with groups working on other parts of the supply chain (e.g., those advocating on behalf of garment workers in Bangladesh).

Overall, there is compelling evidence that OUR Walmart’s advocacy on behalf of Associates has exerted substantial power in service of important improvements for those workers. To exert its power throughout the company, though, may require more concerted efforts or additional partnerships to connect with others involved in Walmart’s expansive network.

- V. Sustainability Assessment: OUR Walmart has several plausible paths to sustainability, but none are proven yet

“It is a wonderful and amazing but not large enough group of funders in this space. We’ve been really serious since Day One that foundation funding is a bridge, not a long-term strategy.”

- Andrea Dehlendorf, Co-Director, Organization United for Respect

Andrea says that “having a sustainable revenue model is the number one, above-all issue that all [new labor] organizations face. Nobody has figured it out at the level that’s needed” to exert power at scale. In particular, “dependence on foundation support is a big structural problem.”

OUR Walmart is no exception. When it was incubated as a campaign by UFCW, its funding came out of that union’s coffers. While that offered some stability, UFCW leadership ultimately found it difficult to justify spending substantial sums of member dues on an effort that by definition would not generate new membership for the union. There has long been a tension among traditional union leadership between whether to focus on current members or organizing new members. But directing resources toward efforts that, while supportive of labor organizing generally, aren’t expected ever to lead to new members? That is an even bigger hurdle to clear. Not surprisingly, other non-union efforts like the Fight for \$15 also have faced some pushback within the unions backing them.¹¹⁴

As a result, OUR Walmart’s income since splitting from UFCW primarily has come from foundations (specific numbers are not available because the organization’s 501(c)5 tax status – the IRS designation for labor organizations – means that it does not have to disclose its finances in the way that 501(c)3 nonprofits do, but the organization says its budget is in the millions of dollars). However, the organization aims to become free from any dependence on large philanthropic gifts by roughly 2020. To that end, it spent much of 2017 developing new revenue models.

One possibility OUR Walmart is exploring is to use a mixed funding model based on fundraising events, individual donations, and small monthly contributions from members who are willing and able. As Andrea notes, the latter source is related to the scale question. “If you don’t reach tons of people, it’s a challenge to generate enough revenue. The folks who we work with can’t pay \$65-per-month dues, but if they can pitch in \$10 per month and we can get tens of thousands to do that,” OUR Walmart clearly would be much closer to financial sustainability.

A related approach to raising small-dollar funding from members would be to charge a fee that entitles paying members to extra benefits. For example, OUR Walmart could offer help on more complicated legal questions than those that WorkIt answers or provide access to discounted rates the organization negotiates for childcare support or financial services.¹¹⁵ This fee could be charged as a subscription or on a fee-for-service basis. There could be a multi-tiered membership model that offers an increasingly sophisticated set of services at higher-fee levels for members who need it. Yet OUR Walmart must be careful not to rely too heavily on raising funding from members, lest it experience mission creep or stray from its mission of supporting Walmart workers.

Finally, OUR Walmart, like Coworker.org, also is experimenting with an organization-to-organization sales model. In OUR Walmart’s case, the team has begun “white labeling” its WorkIt platform for licensing to likeminded organizations.

Regardless of the model OUR Walmart chooses, one encouraging trend is that more Associates and other interested stakeholders are reaching out to OUR Walmart, rather than the other way around. “The direction of engagement has changed,” Dan reports. Less resources needed for outreach means more resources available to support the organization’s campaigns. This trend also is encouraging for reaching scale, which is the topic of the next section.

VI. Scale Assessment: Although the path to scale is not yet clear, the potential exists

“Walmart is a behemoth. It’s much more than an enterprise or firm – it’s an entire logistics infrastructure with tons of suppliers and intermediaries. It’s an entity larger than many countries. So, you’ve got to look at its whole supply chain. Walmart is a way to transform the entire retail sector because they set the standard. This is really a lever for sector-based organizing.”

- Andrea Dehlendorf

As of today, OUR Walmart staff report that 100-150 thousand Associates have participated in some way in one of its Facebook (and, increasingly, WorkIt) groups or other campaigns. Although this includes both former and current Associates, comparing it to the current total US Associate workforce of roughly 1.5 million suggests that the organization is reaching 5-10% of that workforce – an impressive reach but also one that implies room for growth.

Another key metric is the number of stores at which Associates have participated in a given campaign. For example, when Walmart changed its sick-leave policy to state that managers could no longer accept doctor’s notes as proof of illness for longer leaves, a petition started by an OUR Walmart member garnered signatures from workers at roughly 4,000 out of Walmart’s 5,000-plus US stores. As Dan notes, “these aren’t just anonymous signatures. People understand that this is a campaign, that the company will get their names. And it’s different from, for example, a MoveOn.org campaign. These are workers going to their employer, who has a lot of power over them.”

OUR Walmart also is aware of the need to think beyond Associates eventually, though partnerships to reach farther into the Walmart logistics juggernaut – and to Walmart employees outside the US – remain nascent. Initial efforts to support Associates and others in the Walmart network in countries such as China, Brazil, South Africa, and the UK mostly have been episodic thus far.

Yet OUR Walmart’s long-term vision aims at an even broader scope. Soon, OUR Walmart hopes to conduct similar campaigns with other companies’ retail workers. The white-label WorkIt licensing is an early step in this direction. Historian Nelson Lichtenstein noted in 2013 that OUR Walmart’s activities could “provide a playbook” for workers at other companies like Marriott or Whole Foods where union organizing has proven difficult in the face of management opposition.¹¹⁶ OUR Walmart is working to make Lichtenstein’s prediction come to fruition.

One of the challenges the organization faces in pursuing this objective is the degree to which workers tend to identify with their employer, despite high turnover. Andrea left SEIU to join OUR Walmart because it “seemed like the biggest and most serious effort to shift the context around workers’ rights” throughout the private sector. But, as Dan has found, “if we were to put out a survey on an ‘issue facing retail workers’ and we targeted it on Facebook to people who work for Target and Amazon, no one would click on it.” If the survey instead mentioned “an issue facing Target employees” or “Amazon employees,” the response rate likely would be much higher.

This dynamic illustrates one of the core challenges facing labor organizers in the US today: there is no broadly shared “worker” identity in the United States. Instead – and with some notable exceptions, such as the Fight for \$15 – it generally seems necessary to organize employer by employer. One can argue over whether that is a cause or consequence of the US’ firm-based bargaining system, but regardless, OUR Walmart is encountering this structural difficulty in mobilizing Americans on labor issues at scale.

VII. Takeaways for the Future of Worker Voice

“We know that the labor movement won’t survive in its current state.... The question for those of us invested in the future of labor is this: Are we bold enough to build something different, and better, than what has come before?”
- Dan Schlademan¹¹⁷

OUR Walmart’s experience to-date has the following implications for other worker voice organizations.

First, labor organizing is possible even in unfavorable circumstances. Walmart is one of the largest and most notoriously anti-union companies in the country. And yet, OUR Walmart has been able to help workers make inroads on high-priority issues. This is a source of hope for the labor movement. It also raises the possibility that “alt-labor” (i.e., non-union) organizing may work better in these types of settings, given the structural obstacles to unionization and the flexibility that independent organizing provides. OUR Walmart also has experienced other upsides of being an independent organization, including the ability to try different tactics and a sense of urgency that can generate creative ideas for revenue streams (even if those revenue streams remain unproven relative to traditional dues models).

Second, technology is most effective when used to complement, not replace, in-person organizing. Facebook groups, WorkIt, and other technological tools have been crucial to OUR Walmart’s power

– especially for the distributed network model it has pursued. Yet those tools have been most effective when they are used to facilitate in-person efforts, such as civil disobedience, protests outside stores, and activities at shareholder meetings. Moreover, in-person meetings, such as the initial meeting of 100 Associates in Bentonville and, more recently, the meeting at Chrissy Creech’s home in Texas that launched Respect the Bump, have been the strongest catalysts for major campaigns. As new and shiny as technological tools seem, it is important for organizers to employ them in service of generating in-person efforts, rather than as a diversion of resources away from those efforts.

Third, labor organizers need to connect to workers’ current identities and priorities, even if that suggests a longer path to broader “consciousness-raising.” Just as OUR Walmart has found it more effective to reach out to workers as employees of a given company rather than as self-identified “workers” more broadly, so has it chosen to call its members “Associates” because that is how most Walmart workers identify. Dan says that “some in the labor movement attacked OUR Walmart for using the term ‘Associate’ because it is the language of the corporation. But in focus groups, people didn’t see themselves as ‘workers’ or ‘labor.’ They see themselves as ‘Associates.’” Cynthia agrees. She notes that “Sam Walton said that if you want to know how to run your company, ask your associates. And he called us ‘Associates’ because we’re partners.” Cynthia, like many other workers, is not seeking an adversarial relationship with Walmart – though, as shown, she is not afraid to go that route if it seems necessary. Rather than viewing this dynamic as an obstacle to movement building, organizers should view it as useful information to help them connect with workers in many different organizational settings.

Finally, scale is achievable through corporate or public policy. OUR Walmart has engaged in a few public policy battles – such as proposed legislation related to scheduling, the minimum wage, and sick time – but overall these efforts have been a lower priority. The organization’s view is that with the right leverage points, scale is possible with corporate policy changes at large companies: “when Walmart raised its minimum wage to \$10 an hour, it impacted more workers” than more localized minimum wage raises, Dan argues. Additionally, he believes that building power independent of specific parties or politicians is important for the labor movement to have leverage “so we don’t just have a repeat of the last decade where our candidates are elected and don’t follow through on what they’ve committed.” In the end, changing public policies will do more to improve the structure that guides all labor organizing – especially as it pertains to smaller companies – but OUR Walmart’s experience suggests, in Dan’s words, that “scale can be set by a combination of corporate and public policy campaigns.” As Cynthia notes, “if we change Walmart, we can change the world. And that makes my heart happy.”

5. Case: Coworker.org

I. Need and Origin Story

“As our economy shifts, the definition of an ‘employee’ is changing, too. Whether you’re a freelance journalist, a professional athlete or an adjunct faculty member, it’s important that everyone have the power to improve their jobs. At Coworker.org, anyone can petition an employer, client or supply-chain employer for changes they’d like to see.... At Coworker.org, we’re interested in building technology for the labor movement of the future — one that’s nimble, responsive, and inclusive of all working people.”

- Coworker.org¹¹⁸

Coworker.org is a digital organizing platform founded in 2013 by Jess Kutch and Michelle Miller. The Coworker.org website provides workers with the tools to understand their rights, connect with colleagues, and launch online petitions to advocate for changes at work. Coworker.org is a nonprofit organization with an annual budget of about \$850,000, that has recently expanded to six full-time employees.¹¹⁹

While Coworker deliberately operates outside the bounds of traditional labor organizing, the organization traces its roots to a leading union. Jess Kutch and Michelle Miller met at the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), where Michelle directed member engagement programs and Jess managed online campaigns (before transitioning to an Organizing Director role at Change.org). In their work in digital organizing, these two labor leaders made a set of observations about trends in the labor movement that would shape their later work at Coworker.org.

First, they registered the importance and the challenge of reaching workers not represented by unions, as union density declines. Second, they learned that the best organizing strategies often come directly from workers. As Jess explains, “Workers themselves know what the low-hanging fruit is, where there’s enough general support, where the employer has a losing position on something.”¹²⁰ Jess and Michelle increasingly observed workers turning to technology tools – Facebook groups, microsites, Reddit threads, letters to Gawker, and so on – to engage in self-organizing. These workers could identify the issues that resonated with their colleagues, and build coalitions within and beyond traditional organizational boundaries through social media platforms. Importantly, self-organizing workers regularly surfaced issues that fell outside the scope of issues that unions have traditionally addressed, such as concerns about corporate regulation of tattoos or hairstyles.

Third, Michelle and Jess observed that in short-term campaigns outside formal labor institutions, workers took on voluntary roles like talking to media or leading petitions, and they organically developed leadership and organizing skills. In a climate where media tends to dismiss unions, these workers’ campaigns were portrayed in a strikingly positive light, as pro-worker “David and Goliath” stories. However, self-organizing workers would often build a network of concerned employees for a quick campaign, then dissolve – leaving campaign organizers open to employer retaliation and missing an opportunity for ongoing actions. Michelle and Jess’ findings suggested an opportunity to leverage technology tools to enable sustained, worker-led digital organizing to complement traditional union outreach.

In this context, Coworker.org introduced an innovative approach to fill gaps left open by new employment norms and the decline of unions. According to Michelle, the founding question behind the platform was, “can we reach workers where they are, through basic tools, and support them to run campaigns around issues that they care about?”¹²¹ The vision was to offer expertise and support to help workers create and maintain large, decentralized networks inside their companies. If executed correctly, Coworker.org could build the infrastructure to keep workers engaged well beyond a typical six to eight-week “flash moment” campaign cycle.¹²²

Since its founding in 2013, more than half a million active workers have joined Coworker.org, launched petitions, earned media attention, and won meaningful victories at work. While common patterns emerge across campaigns – such as frequent petitions on scheduling practices, wages, and dress codes – successful petitions are diverse and customized to individual workplaces. Thanks to Coworker organizing, Netflix extended paid parental leave to hourly employees, including dads and adoptive parents. McDonalds fired a manager who allegedly harassed an employee. FIFA announced that the Women’s World Cup would not be played on turf, after athletes organized on the platform. Whistle blowers exposed consumer fraud at Wells Fargo. A wrongfully terminated Delta Airlines employee brought attention to his suit and reached a settlement. REI employees created their own workers’ Annual Report for the firm, available to shareholders online. These represent just a handful among dozens of successful employee mobilization efforts launched on Coworker.org over the past four years.

II. Organizing Approach

“Coworker.org allows you to start, run, and win campaigns to change your workplace. Have an idea for improving your workplace? Start by creating a Coworker.org petition and talking to your coworkers about your campaign. Every day, people are launching and joining campaigns around issues large and small -- from improving an office breakroom to providing paid sick leave to employees. Anything is possible when coworkers join together.”

- Coworker.org¹²³

Coworker.org is not affiliated with a particular industry or employer; the digital organizing platform provides resources for workers across sectors to build worker voice within their companies. Workers can use the site to communicate and strategize with colleagues, collect data on workplace norms, and launch and disseminate online petitions to both fellow employees and customers. Coworker.org began with a petitions tool because the organization’s founders observed that workers were already using petitions for social media organizing. Once users enter the site, they fill out a simple form to launch a campaign: who they are petitioning, why, and additional background. They then share it with colleagues using social media and word of mouth. Often, the discussion may have started at work or online before the petition goes live.

The Coworker.org team occasionally recruits organizing worker networks to use the platform. More often, workers find their own way to the site. Once they are active, Coworker staff support their organizing efforts, including providing media coaching and outreach, connecting workers across business locations, and disseminating digital communications to workers across their internal network to celebrate wins and sustain engagement. Coworker.org staff find email newsletters particularly effective in keeping workers involved across multiple campaigns. According to Jess, “we’ve learned that what keeps people active is a thoughtful and active email program” with “curated content,” since “most workers don’t get communications about what is happening in their company.” E-newsletters

developed by Coworker staff include company news, worker stories and trends from social media “about what workers are thinking about”, findings from surveys and polls that help workers identify trends inside their companies (on workplace conditions, scheduling, wage theft, etc.), and recent media coverage.¹²⁴ Emailed surveys ask workers what they want to tackle next to foster sustained interaction and organizing commitment.

III. How Workers Use Coworker.org: Alia Todd and Tupelo Honey Café

“Tupelo Honey Café is synonymous with the idea of Southern hospitality. There are always biscuits on the table and your sweet tea glass is never empty. In fact, the restaurant is so hospitable that within 5 years it’s been able to open 10 new locations across the Southeast and has announced plans to expand beyond the region and double locations over the [next] two years.

However, patrons might not know that this growth has come at a personal cost for employees. Tupelo Honey Café employees know that with growth comes change. We have absorbed our fair share of change. From eliminating free food while working to scrapping incentive based pay raises for tipped employees, it’s getting harder and harder to feel like a valued member of the team. We have also watched as our company pads its profit margins and expands the brand on the backs of the lowest paid employees and their families. Over the past couple of years, corporate management decisions have diminished the reasons we loved working for this company.”

- Alia Todd and Hayley Ingram, petition on Coworker.org¹²⁵

Alia Todd has spent nearly two decades in the restaurant industry, working in the “front and back of the house” as a server, bartender and pastry chef.¹²⁶ Her experience using Coworker.org to increase wages for restaurant workers illustrates how workers engage with the platform, and how this digital organizing tool enables them to build networks and power to achieve victories at work.

Alia is based in Asheville, North Carolina, and works at Tupelo Honey Café. This popular café began as a single location, and gained popularity for its sustainably-sourced Southern food. In 2008, Stephen Frabitore – a consumer packaged goods executive turned entrepreneur – purchased the restaurant, with a vision to scale across the Southeast.¹²⁷ Today, Tupelo Honey has locations across 16 cities in Colorado, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.¹²⁸ In recent years, Alia Todd describes “enormous growth” and in turn “a changing business,” including a noticeable shift in worker experience.

In 2014, Alia reached a tipping point: “I got really disillusioned. Decisions were made in board room with no regard for us. I was interested in standing up for a semblance of democracy in the workplace. I was tired of complaining with friends in bars after work.”¹²⁹ Alia founded Asheville Sustainable Restaurant Workforce (ASRW) to mobilize Asheville’s restaurant workers. With support from Just Economics, a local progressive organization, she developed a mission statement and learned organizing tactics. She began meeting one-on-one with workers across the industry to hear their stories and challenges, from wage theft to lack of benefits. She often found these workers on Facebook, where they vented frustrations about their jobs. As she spoke to them in person, they echoed her own experience: things seemed to be getting much worse for the 340,000 restaurant workers across North Carolina, a state with “real lack of regulation and policy that reaches us.”¹³⁰

Alia was “careful to stay away from the word ‘union’ because I believe you can organize even outside that structure and it’s not important to me what we call it.” She refers to ASRW as a “worker collective” of volunteers. It’s not a registered nonprofit and receives no funding. “We’re not even grassroots. We’re *the roots*,” she jokes. “We’re working from the very bottom up, trying to build power by standing up.” Alia imagines “a future with enough power and support to be able to call businesses, deal with people one on one, call attention to the issues, and advocate for workers.”¹³¹ In 2014, ASRW gradually gained visibility. On one spring Saturday, an ASRW workshop on human rights made it onto the front page of the *Asheville Citizen Times* – and was forwarded to Jess Kutch of Coworker.org.

Thus began an enduring partnership between the ASRW and Coworker.org, a partnership that illustrates the power of the platform to increase the visibility of worker struggles and pressure employers into changing their practices. After Jess and Michelle read about the ASRW’s efforts, they reached out to Alia, and shared Coworker.org as a potential resource. Alia saw the platform’s potential, but wanted to wait for an issue that she felt confident could capture popular and media attention before launching a petition.

That summer “things were getting worse and worse” at Tupelo Honey Café. Then, the company slashed wages for its bussers, from five dollars and fifteen cents to two dollars and thirteen cents, the federal minimum for tipped employees. Alia explains, “we had staff who had worked for a couple years or more. Some were students. The company was trying to save money by paying people less, and they legally could.... Someone, somewhere made the decision.... We said don’t do it; it will affect morale. They said, ‘it’s out of my hands. It’s above me.’ They were just the executor.” The wage reduction policy spanned Tupelo’s locations. Alia was shocked – and sure she had found the right issue for Coworker.org.

Alia believed Tupelo Honey Café had an Achilles heel: its public reputation as a “good community actor.” The restaurant website proclaims: “We have a deep appreciation for the ingredients that go into our Southern food and for the farmers who grow them. Responsibly sourced ingredients are the foundation of every dish.”¹³² In 2011, Tupelo Honey’s owner won Asheville’s Mission Health System Good Health-Good Business Award for ethical leadership.¹³³ Yet as Tupelo Honey branded itself as a socially conscious business, worker voice was missing from the narrative. As Alia explains, “there’s a big conversation about what’s happening in the industry but very little representation of what workers are experiencing and how they live. Affordability, housing...working people are losing fast and big time.”¹³⁴

In September 2015, Alia and her coworker Hayley Ingram launched a petition on Coworker.org. Each woman feared she would be vulnerable acting alone, but together they knew they would be protected by National Labor Relations policy, as part of a concerted effort of workers questioning their wages and working conditions. Their petition asked Tupelo Honey to reinstate wages to original levels across Southeastern locations. The petition was launched at an ASRW meeting; Jess Kutch attended in support.

The next day, Alia and Hayley were called into a meeting with their store’s general manager, head of human resources, and head of marketing. The managers brought documents and argued that workers could still live well with the wage reduction. They urged Alia and Hayley to withdraw their petition, but the two women held firm.

The petition spread online organically and rapidly. With help from Jess and Michelle, Alia spoke with staff at two other Tupelo Honey locations to garner support. Local media picked up the story. Over 100 employees signed the petition. Importantly, its biggest supporters were Asheville’s dining public. Within a month, it received more than 1,200 signatures. Tupelo Honey quietly raised its wages at the flagship location, and then in Raleigh and Charlotte.

Alia continues to leverage Coworker.org in her organizing work. She says the platform is like the “old school walking around with clipboard but in a digital way. It saves time, energy, and resources.” She calls it the “perfect tool to help amplify issues.” She is currently running an ASRW petition on Coworker.org, to ask the city to change tipping policy at its arena. Thanks to the campaign’s visibility, she has recently held meetings with the Mayor and City Council.

- IV. Power Assessment: Coworker.org’s digital platform enables increased campaign scale and visibility, and supports the 21st century workforce to build portable organizing skills and reach key decision-makers at the top of the value chain

“Typically, if a partner has an issue or a concern, and they want to be heard, they are persuaded to speak to their store manager, who then voices that concern to the district manager, and then to a regional manager, and so on, and so forth.

By the time this concern reaches the corporate structure, it’s been watered down, smoothed over and sanitized.... When you don’t feel heard, or listened to, you feel like you don’t matter....”

- Jaime Prater, Open Letter to Starbucks on Coworker.org, reprinted in Business Insider¹³⁵

Coworker.org’s innovative, web-based organizing approach offers new avenues for isolated workers to connect and build collective power. An assessment of the Coworker.org platform points to five key sources of power made possible through the digital platform organizing approach, summarized below.

Digital organizing accelerates speed and scale of network-building, enabling workers to line up a large volume of workers and allies rapidly. Workers can elicit engagement and signatures at a far faster rate than traditional organizers could knock on doors or change minds in the break room, and can build dense online worker networks across geographies and even companies. Ultimately, Coworker.org uses digital tools to draw on the oldest source of worker power: community. As more and more workers operate as independent contractors or feel psychologically isolated within their work environments, online networks offer an avenue to build quick connections. Workers might wonder if a frustration at work – like not being able to show tattoos – is a personal issue, particularly after a manager dismisses their complaints. Finding coworkers who share their perspective helps to legitimize worker frustrations and create a sense of solidarity and self-efficacy. As Michelle explains, “For most workers, the instinct is to complain and then not really know what to do. The more you can find other people, take action, and win, the more likely people are going to be to stand up...and increase their expectations of employers.”

Coworker.org’s technology tools force corporate transparency and overcome the information asymmetry often used by managers against workers. Typically, a key source of employer power – particularly in an increasingly fissured economy – is power over data and information. The employer controls systems, wages, and scheduling, and isolated workers can only self-advocate based on their anecdotal experience or data released by employers themselves (e.g., public data on gender pay

disparity). Using digital networks, Coworker.org connects workers, enabling them to aggregate information, spot trends, and diagnose systemic problems.

Coworker.org's high-speed data collection tools give workers direct access to worker-generated data. Through its Data Labs, the platform enables employees to share and aggregate information about their workplace conditions and organizing priorities. Using simple polls and surveys, employees can identify behavior patterns inside their companies, such as scheduling norms. The platform offers a simple avenue to collect data and expose findings to the employer, and as needed to customers, media, and shareholders.

Workers in the new economy can no longer count on traditional unions within firms, set up to represent lifelong employees. Coworker.org supports independent contractors and non-unionized workers to build power – and provides them with portable skills and tools to carry across jobs. Coworker.org is most commonly used by non-unionized workers, who may or may not be full-time employees in conventional firms. They use Coworker.org to develop skills, such as building allies and talking to reporters, with support from the nonprofit's staff. Mobile workers take these skills with them as they move from job to job, and they remain connected on the platform. Coworker.org can adapt alongside an increasingly mobile workforce, engaging former employees of companies, and following workers across employers. Workers can also learn from campaigns launched by other networks, as evidenced by frequent copying and pasting from past petitions, and messages between workers across industries. Importantly, workers need not limit their campaigns to a single firm or geography; for example, 55,000 restaurant employees have joined forces across establishments.¹³⁶

Coworker.org opens up another critical source of power by encouraging workers to align with managers rather than relying on a wholly adversarial mental model. According to Jess, “it’s really important to keep in mind that exclusion of managers from traditional trade unions is an artificial distinction from the NLRA. Much of labor movement really bought that, and it’s part of the culture of Marxism of not liking managers. But if we’re talking about power and agency over working conditions, managers often lack it too, just at a higher level.”¹³⁷ Coworker.org leadership draws a valuable distinction between productive and unproductive labor/management conflict. Building worker power requires pushing management, but individual managers often lack agency over their own working conditions, and can serve as important allies and paths to power in companies. For example, as Starbucks built a network on Coworker.org, shift supervisors and managers joined campaigns, increasing their credibility and reach.

Furthermore, contemporary workplaces often lack the clear labor/management distinctions of industrial factories, enabling greater empathy across employment levels. As Jess explains, “the manager-worker distinction is not how people see themselves on the job.”¹³⁸ This aligns with findings of MIT’s Worker Voice survey: Worker Voice survey respondents rated supervisors as the most effective mechanism for making their voices heard to management – even more effective than unions.¹³⁹ As Jess and Michelle argue, workers should not have to choose between adversarial and collaborative mobilization. These are two approaches that can be developed and selectively deployed in tandem, to maximize adaptability and in turn power.

Finally, Coworker.org uses the visibility of an online platform to reach the top of the value chain, including the shareholders playing an increasingly outsized role in corporate decision-making. In their story of the successful 2006 Justice for Janitors campaign at the University of Miami, Stephen Lerner, Jill Hurst, and Glenn Adler recount the SEIU’s strategy to “focus our campaigns on the top of the

money chain where money and power are concentrated, rather than only on the direct employer.”¹⁴⁰ In an increasingly fissured workplace, in which workers have little direct contact with the ultimate decision-makers shaping their experience at work, traditional organizing methods may fail to target the true locus of corporate power. High-profile online organizing offers a more direct connection to those at the top of the value chain, from CEOs to Boards and shareholders. To this end, Coworker has been particularly effective in attracting sympathetic media coverage to worker campaigns. While some companies are more sensitive to media attention than others, consumer-facing businesses – especially those serving affluent, socially conscious consumers like REI and Starbucks – react quickly to negative media attention that risks eroding a brand and worrying shareholders. Inviting customers to sign petitions and serve as public allies can also attract shareholder attention and accelerate employer response.

Coworker has also explored opportunities to communicate directly with corporate shareholders to fast-track changes to employee policy. Given the rise of impact investing and impact-oriented shareholder advocacy, Coworker staff observe an increased appetite for data about working conditions in publicly traded firms. At REI, cooperative members convene annually, the firm’s equivalent of a shareholder meeting. At a recent convening, workers who had organized on Coworker circulated a pamphlet on their recent campaigns (focused on wages and scheduling), and initiated direct dialogue with cooperative members. At a recent Starbucks shareholder meeting, workers in the Coworker.org network asked questions, and shared stories about the impact of reduced paid parental leave. Their presence garnered media attention and access to top corporate decision-makers. More recently, a group of socially responsible shareholders introduced a resolution mandating that Starbucks report various aspects of their paid leave policy. Starbucks quietly made improvements, including introducing leave for adoptive parents.¹⁴¹

V. Sustainability Assessment: Coworker.org benefits from a lean business model, but must expand and diversify revenue to achieve greater independence and stability

Coworker.org is a small, lean organization, still in its infancy. In 2014 and 2015, its budget remained relatively flat at around \$500,000. By comparison, in 2015 the older and more established Restaurant Opportunities Center had a budget of nearly \$4 million and Working America had a budget of \$4.3 million. Like many tech platforms, Coworker.org requires minimal capital costs, and staff work remotely from multiple cities. The organization’s leadership do not spend the bulk of their time fundraising, and there is no dedicated Development Director on the six-person team.

While Coworker.org can get by as a scrappy organization, there are risks to its lean model and lack of diversified revenue. The organization is mostly foundation-funded, with support from the Knight Foundation, JM Kaplan Fund, New Venture Fund, and Echoing Green. Notably, these are not the “usual suspect” foundation funders known to invest in organized labor, but funders committed to innovation and entrepreneurship. This speaks to the value of Coworker.org as a new kind of labor organization, attracting fresh sources of capital to worker organizing. It also speaks to leadership’s strength framing the organization’s work in 21st century terms, as an agile tech startup and a platform of worker-centered digital products.

To reach its full potential and scale, Coworker.org will need to secure additional funding, ideally from a more diverse range of sources. Like many alt-labor organizations, Coworker imagines a more independent, stable future, in which the organization relies less on philanthropy. The agency has surfaced several creative strategies to generate independent income, but none are proven out.

Two proposed revenue generation models merit discussion. First, Coworker has explored setting up a mutual aid fund, where workers make small-dollar contributions, and share and manage insurance funds to meet emergency needs. For example, service and retail workers living paycheck-to-paycheck might risk losing their homes during family health emergencies or climate disasters. A fund could provide support and stability in times of crisis, and like an insurer Coworker could take a small fee to manage funds.

A second strategy leverages Coworker's strength in collecting real-time data from frontline workers about their experience inside companies. As previously noted, public equities investors are increasingly interested in Environmental, Social, and Governance considerations, including firms' human capital management practices. Currently, while robust reporting tools cover environmental standards, far fewer resources capture social practices within companies, beyond written corporate policy that may not reflect the lived experience of workers. Coworker envisions launching a subscription service that provides access to data, and standardized reports to inform investment decisions. Data could include worker-reported reviews of parental leave and anti-discrimination policies, and would be more structured and representative than Glassdoor. Coworker has vetted this idea with the investment community, and received strong interest.

These two inventive approaches merit further exploration and testing. Yet running a revenue-generating business is challenging, and both these projects are ambitious in scope. With such a small team and budget Coworker.org has limited ability to invest the time and resources to get these businesses off the ground. The organization may need to secure additional seed funding and staff expertise to bring these visions to life. Securing generous, unrestricted funding is no small feat, and may require building stronger relationships with the tech and entrepreneurship communities that have taken interest in Coworker.org's work to date.

- VI. Scale Assessment: Coworker.org has a wide reach, and its digital tools can be paired with face-to-face organizing to build strong communities and sustain engagement across broad online networks

Given the organization's relatively small budget, Coworker.org has achieved remarkable scale since 2013. The Coworker platform has drawn 500,000 workers, who have formed 20 active networks. The digital platform's unique ability to rapidly scale campaigns across geographies is evidenced by the successes of the Starbucks network. The network's first petition on barista dress codes attracted international attention, drew support from 12,000 workers, and changed corporate policy in a matter of weeks. Since that victory, 40,000 Starbucks workers (more than 7 percent of global employees) have engaged, launching more than 50 campaigns. Major media outlets like the *New York Times* and *Business Insider* have covered these campaigns, and *CNBC* sited the campaigns as a business risk facing Starbucks and its investors. Using Coworker.org, Starbucks workers have successfully achieved wage increases, scheduling improvements, and multiple dress code improvements, and catalyzed the creation of a new C Suite position, Chief People Officer. Last summer, Starbucks workers organized through Coworker wrote a thoughtful seven-part vision statement affirming what the company could be, from the shareholder experience to the customer experience.

The flexibility of the Coworker platform also enables workers to forge broad networks across companies, such as networks of independent drivers and restaurant employees. Campaigns frequently engage both workers and customers. Leadership has also explored building geographic networks that

span industries. In this context, there is no clear cap to the platform's growth potential. Users span companies, industries, and geographies. Even workers who would likely avoid a union turn to Coworker. Leadership reports a base of users who seem to be introverts, who find it easier to engage and advocate in an online setting and prefer text messages to phone calls when interacting with staff.¹⁴² Thus, Coworker.org has already built a significant community of engaged workers, and has virtually endless opportunity for continued growth and the right model to achieve that growth quickly.

Coworker.org's ability to scale rapidly stands out as one of the platform's greatest strengths – but scale may come at the expense of the personal attention and deep community connection at the core of traditional union organizing. As Michelle puts it, “In face to face [organizing], scale is slow and solidarity is fast. In digital, scale is fast and solidarity is slow.” Indeed, a central question that Coworker is currently exploring is, “what does solidarity and community look like inside these loosely organized digital networks?”¹⁴³ Deep relationships across workers help to sustain engagement over time, particularly when victories are few and far between. Alia Todd warns of the risks of “petition fatigue,” as the same network is asked to sign and push for multiple campaigns for incremental workplace changes, many of which may fail. The same open, online platform that enables rapid scale may also enable saturation and in turn disengagement, if workers fail to communicate and act strategically.

Coworker.org staff is attentive to these concerns, and is actively exploring ways to foster deep connections online. Furthermore, organizers like Alia Todd have overcome the pitfalls of a web-based tool by using Coworker as a complement to in-person meetings, thereby pairing scale and visibility with relationship-building. While this dual approach is more difficult when workers span multiple geographies, it is certainly still achievable, particularly if workers meet face-to-face to build local hubs and use digital tools to create global spokes.

VII. Takeaways for the Future of Worker Voice

“The traditional narrative of workplace organizing is very adversarial. But when you actually root it in [the narrative that]...these are workers with personal issue and they're taking it on, it lets people's guard down from defensiveness.... Long-term, my hope that this behavior will be normalized and even healthy work places will have this because sometimes H.R. doesn't resolve the issues.”

- Michelle Freeman

At a historical moment when traditional unions have markedly declined and are often on the defensive, new organizations outside traditional union structures may offer hope. Coworker.org demonstrates how new technology can enable worker voice organizations to reimagine the boundaries of worker solidarity networks and rapidly scale. Coworker.org's experience to date has the following implications for other worker voice organizations:

Digital platforms provide a promising antidote to many recent challenges faced by unions, given their potential to foster large, distributed networks with high visibility and significant power. Historically, the US labor movement has tended to grow in exponential spurts, not linearly.¹⁴⁴ Coworker.org's digital platform may be uniquely suited to replicate this growth pattern, given the platform's history of enabling quick, large-scale coalition building for networks like Starbucks employees. Because Coworker.org operates outside the legal framework and industry structure of traditional unions, the platform can foster broad networks across worksites, industries, and geographies; provide tools and

skills that 21st century workers carry across jobs; and engage both managers and customers as partners to frontline workers, all key sources of power largely inaccessible to traditional unions.

Conversely, operating outside the union structure – as a platform rather than a traditional labor organization – comes with disadvantages, including lack of predictable contract negotiations, worker protections, or the face-to-face relationships that help to raise consciousness and drive systemic change. Something may be lost when workers rely on online campaigns rather than contract relationships and collective bargaining. Contract negotiations provide a more focused, cyclical process, whereas constant petitions may begin to weigh on workers and companies alike. There are also negotiation advantages to bundling multiple issues in a single contract rather than relying on many individual win-lose campaigns. As a platform, Coworker.org also has limited ability to protect workers who may feel “an enormous amount of fear for stepping out,” as Alia Todd describes.¹⁴⁵ Even if employers violate the law, the platform has little recourse beyond media outreach. As previously described, as a digital tool Coworker.org prioritizes scale ahead of solidarity. It may be possible to get lots of workers to sign a petition for an incremental change at work, but can Coworker.org change minds online? It remains to be seen whether Coworker.org is equally well suited to engage in larger-scale consciousness raising efforts or policy campaigns.

While Jess and Michelle deliberately launched Coworker.org outside a union – where greater flexibility is possible – many of their technology tools and strategies can be replicated inside unions, or deployed as complementary tools. For example, American Airlines, one of Coworker.org’s largest networks (with about 17,000 employees who have launched about a dozen campaigns) is a unionized firm. The first American Airlines campaign on Coworker.org came from a 55-year-old flight attendant, who had spent 25 years at the company. She saw the corporate office making decisions that risked pushing out older workers. She approached her union, who told her they had filed a grievance and to sit tight. Instead, she started a campaign on Coworker.org, promoted it to her colleagues, and got thousands of signatures. She shared the petition with the union, and they delivered it alongside their filing, enhancing their standard approach, and demonstrating Coworker.org’s value as a supplementary tool rather than a competitive threat. Thus, while different kinds of innovation may be easier to incubate outside the union structure, successful approaches can be re-integrated or deployed in tandem once they are proven out.

Just as importantly, Coworker.org’s weaknesses – lack of face-to-face organizing to build solidarity and sustained engagement, and drive policy change – are core expertise of unions. This suggests that unions and digital platforms can be mutually gap-filling; rebuilding the labor movement will require creative coalition-building that leverages strengths and openly names weaknesses. This will require that unions respect and support alt-labor efforts, and recognize their complementarity.

At a moment when media and political discussion of unions tends to demonize worker organizations, Coworker.org may be positioned to change the popular discourse to lift up workers and the organizations that serve them. The visible, widely-shared online storytelling enabled by Coworker.org can connect the public directly to worker experience by raising up workers’ personal narratives. Coworker.org campaign pages tend to include both a collective demand and several compelling worker stories explaining the personal impact of an employer’s policy (often in the comments section). Michelle explains, “So much of what we do is story based and rooted in the narrative of personal experience. We’re hearing compelling narratives about your workday, and raising that up.... It creates permission for people to talk about this.” These stories help to soften the typical, adversarial labor/management organizing narrative, by rooting demands in compelling personal anecdotes. Over

time, these stories can help to normalize worker demands and campaigns, such that even the healthiest workplaces offer avenues for worker voice. “It’s about this bigger story of what it means for us to go to work all day,” Michelle says. “Work isn’t something we do off to the side of our lives.”¹⁴⁶

To take full advantage of their strengths and achieve scale, online platforms like Coworker.org need to develop robust earned income streams, and increase their relevance across less brand-conscious companies. As described above, Coworker.org is a small organization with a relatively flat budget since its launch in 2013. The agency relies heavily on foundation support. To ensure long-term viability and independence, alt-labor organizations must develop reliable earned income streams, such as the two promising approaches proposed but not yet proven out by Coworker.

Furthermore, the most successful campaigns on the Coworker.org platform to date have taken place at companies that invest heavily in their brands and cultivate progressive, conscientious, and affluent consumers, such as REI, Starbucks, and Tupelo Honey Café. As Alia Todd argues, “Some companies and employers are more sensitive to media attention. If you’re a consumer-facing business, you’ve invested a lot of money and resources in your brand. If that’s contradicted by workers sharing [stories] with the media, that’s a big deal, but it’s not for many other employers.”¹⁴⁷ If online worker voice platforms rely heavily on media coverage and visibility, they will need to find leverage points that affect the behavior of less conscientious, lower-profile companies – many of which rank among the most egregious violators of labor rights.

6. Conclusion: The Future of Worker Voice

This inventory of worker voice organizations and set of case studies emerged from a deep sense of urgency. While we came to this research from varied perspectives, we shared a common passion about addressing growing US income inequality – and a conviction that traditional organizing practices stand out among the most promising levers to achieve redistribution. Yet across our business and public policy graduate programs, few professors ever reference labor unions, even in classes that deal directly with management practices or income gaps. Many of our peers have never had a close friend or family member active in a union, and carry only stereotypes about union norms. This comes as no surprise, with less than 7 percent of the private sector and just 12 percent of the total employed workforce unionized (a number we expect to shrink further still following *Janus vs. AFSCME*).¹⁴⁸ Our generation has inherited a decimated, stigmatized, and internally divided labor movement, with little clear hope for revival. Faced with this troubling landscape, we sought to explore what could be done.

Through the course of a semester-long reading and research project, we studied labor history, and explored the state of new labor organizing outside the traditional union framework, trolling for a source of energy to power the 21st century labor movement. As an organizing principle, we relied on David Rolf’s “power, scale, and sustainability” framework:

1. How – and how successfully – are non-traditional efforts building power for workers’ voices?
2. What approaches are helping them achieve both broad scale and deep engagement with their members, constituents, and beneficiaries?
3. Which tools and methods for building financial sustainability are proving most effective?

The conclusion that follows offers hypotheses in response to each of Rolf’s three question, and closing thoughts about sources of concern and optimism as we look ahead.

I. Building Power for Workers’ Voices

The workers we interviewed described a loss of control over their day-to-day work experience, as globalization and fissuring altered their experience at work. These patterns render workers powerless, isolated, and unable to access key decision-makers, even as the inequality gulf widens. More than wage increases, they crave greater respect and a sense of being seen and heard by their increasingly distant employers.¹⁴⁹ This is the set of frustrations that triggered Alia Todd’s petition to Tupelo Honey Café on Coworker.org, and prompted a lobsterman to complain to his unionized, ship-builder brother about the loss of pricing power on the docks as the industry vertically integrated. These two workers could call on worker voice organizations to advocate for change. Yet most American workers lack access to such outlets. Without a community of allied colleagues, workers might fail to see the ways in which these challenges are systemic – and instead experience them as individual, everyday injustices.

Political scholar and former Kennedy School Dean Archon Fung offers a helpful framework to draw out the distinction between individual and systemic inequality. He argues that four levels of power govern our experience in the world.¹⁵⁰ The first level is everyday power; a Starbucks employee experiences everyday power (or lack thereof) when her boss tells her to cover her tattoos at work. The second level of power is laws and policies, such as the minimum wage laws achieved through campaigns like the Fight for \$15. The third level is structural power, which Fung calls the power that

determines the “shape of the playing field.” As an example, he offers the fissuring of the American workplace, a fundamental economic restructuring that changed the nature of work, and left workers unsure who their employer is and thus unable to demand a higher wage. Finally, Fung speaks of “ethical and epistemic” power, which shapes the world of ideas and values.¹⁵¹ To illustrate this level of power, we might point to media narratives that vilify unions as blocks to innovation and job-killers, and scare working class Americans from the institutions that are arguably best positioned to restore their economic livelihood.

Labor organizations can most effectively build power by operating on all four levels. We have argued that the new labor movement must speak to the “bread-and-butter” concerns of American workers *and* seek to rebuild workers’ aspirations for industrial democracy. The work of new labor groups often begins with tangible improvements to everyday work concerns, such as helping a worker voice a complaint. Supporting workers in these incremental ways can build trust in and engagement with a labor group, and lay the foundation for concerted legal efforts such as wage campaigns. By encouraging workers to share their experience and expose systemic inequalities, groups can then build momentum for the more complex, slower-moving work of structural and discursive transformation.

To understand the successes and failures of new labor organizing efforts, we apply Fung’s framework to address Rolf’s question. We conclude that alt-labor organizations are achieving meaningful incremental victories within Fung’s first two levels of power, but have exerted less energy and achieved less success in reshaping systemic and discursive norms.

Levels One and Two: Worker Voice Organizations are Amassing Incremental Power

Our scan of new labor organizations indicates strong aptitude for building everyday power. The worker voice organizations we interviewed prioritize “meeting workers where they are” and addressing their immediate pain points at work, from dress code shifts at Starbucks, to protections for pregnant Associates at Walmart. These are the incremental victories that unions have long advanced – and eighty-one percent of the alt-labor organizations that we reviewed continue the traditional focus on wages and wellbeing. As they should. These are the issues most salient to American workers: MIT’s Worker Voice Survey indicates that workers most strongly want say on issues related to personal treatment and work control.¹⁵² When worker voice organizations target these tangible issues and achieves “quick wins,” they build credibility and power, and ignite a sense of efficacy and solidarity among workers that can gradually help to shift more complex power levels.

These everyday victories can potentially set the stage for legal and political victories. While groups like Coworker.org and OUR Walmart have been somewhat tentative in pursuing policy change, Lobster 207 demonstrates high competency in exercising level two power. In part, Lobster 207’s political focus reflects the fact that lobstermen are a distributed workforce of independent contractors, without a single employer to lobby. As such, the union moved immediately into political organizing. Previously isolated Maine fishermen discovered strength in numbers, and passed legislation with direct implications for their work experience. Their political wins snowballed, and gave them a renewed sense of hope for their towns and for future generations. Their experience suggests that other alt-labor organizations like Coworker.org and OUR Walmart can benefit from more direct engagement in politics and policy, not only to improve collective worker outcomes but to raise collective consciousness.

Levels Three and Four: More Must be Done to Change Systems and Discourse

From everyday and legal power, we move to structural and discursive power. The alt-labor organizations we profiled here – unlike many Worker Centers and Coalition Builders – have been less directly engaged in systems change work. However, alt-labor groups are increasingly experimenting with promising strategies to shift structural power. Coworker.org is attempting to reshape the playing field by directly targeting shareholders and other key players at the top of the power structures that govern experience at work. OUR Walmart is exploring a move down the fissured economic ladder to suppliers, with the thought that engaging additional players across the value chain builds power to challenge those holding capital and squeezing workers. These efforts have proven critical to building power when targeting high-profile, brand-conscious companies. Coworker.org’s vision to collect and disseminate worker experience metrics for use by impact investors could amplify the impact of this approach.

Ultimately, the most daunting and important task facing the new labor movement is to change mindsets and popular narratives to rebuild faith in unions and their alt-labor alternatives. Leading up to the 2016 election, Working America canvassers knocked on doors and spoke to voters in swing states, with a focus on non-unionized, politically diverse, voting households. They reported that in these regions, “constituents are feeling deep anxiety about a changing economy that is leaving them behind, and bereft of security and hope. Over the past decades, their feelings of despair and anger have risen.”¹⁵³ Tellingly, conversations revealed that these Americans do not blame fissuring or corporate power for their hardship; they hold “all politicians” responsible. According to Working America, “Wall Street and corporate elites have successfully obscured their outsize role in shaping the US economy for their own gains, as working-class voters across the racial spectrum are much more likely to identify politicians, not corporations or Wall Street CEOs, as the primary actors in affecting their economic lives....”¹⁵⁴ Among the voters who put Donald Trump in office (many of whom represent the formerly unionized working class), distrust of politicians and political organizing can drive skepticism and apathy toward worker voice organizations. Labor organizations will need to orchestrate a shift in level four power to rebuild their credibility and density among these communities.

Our research suggests that digital platforms may be uniquely positioned to shift popular discourse by lifting up the stories and struggles of individual workers. Platforms like Coworker.org and OUR Walmart enable workers to self-organize, and tell their own stories. Both organizations believe this worker-driven approach is central to their power, and may make them more effective than union bureaucracies. Through social media storytelling, workers shed light on their experience at work and elicit empathy, softening the common assumption that worker organizations’ messages are aggressive and adversarial. When media outlets pick up these stories and retell them sympathetically, they help to change public perception and discourse.

Supportive media coverage offers a first step, but is unlikely to change public discourse on its own. This suggests the importance of attracting and training the next generation of labor leaders both within and outside unions, to publicly articulate a vision and rallying cry that brings along America’s diverse workforce.

II. Achieving Broad Scale and Deep Engagement

An analysis of the new labor landscape – and detailed study of three innovative organizations – indicates limited workforce penetration to date. Cumulatively, OUR Walmart, Lobster 207, and Coworker.org have engaged approximately 660 thousand US workers. Coworker.org has achieved the greatest scale thus far, reaching 500 thousand workers across industries since 2013. OUR Walmart staff report that as many as 150 thousand Associates or ten percent of the current US Associate workforce have participated in one of its Facebook, WorkIt, or other campaigns, across roughly 80 percent of Walmart’s five thousand US stores. However, OUR Walmart and Coworker participants may be one-time users of social media sites rather than sustained members. Lobster 207 measures its reach through full union membership, and has achieved roughly ten percent penetration among Maine’s 5,000 licensed lobstermen (not accounting for sternmen), a relatively small market.¹⁵⁵

The reach that these organizations have is impressive given their budgets, staff sizes, and short lifespans. However, their scale is just a drop in the bucket when compared to historic unionization levels and the size of the labor force, estimated at nearly 168 million in 2016 by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹⁵⁶ Using another lens, the MIT Worker Voice Study indicates roughly 55 million non-unionized workers who would opt to join a union given the opportunity; by this measure, the three alt-labor groups profiled here reach just over one percent of the target market, with Coworker.org driving the bulk of that engagement – not nearly sufficient penetration to revitalize the US labor movement.¹⁵⁷

One source of potential scale for alt labor is strategic extension. While unions have often limited their membership to a specific industry group, groups like Coworker.org extend support to all workers, and encourage workers across industries to share petitions and best practices. OUR Walmart has already seen how its wage victories can set standards across the retail industry, and sees opportunities to conduct campaigns for other companies’ retail workers. The Machinists sees opportunities to extend the Lobster 207 union/cooperative model to other agriculture industries like logging. However, this requires contending with complex state, federal, and IRS cooperative regulations.

Another source of scale is collaboration. Given the unique sustainability constraints facing new labor organizations, it may be unrealistic to expect that they reach union-level workforce saturation in the near-term. Instead, we propose that achievement of both broad scale and engagement will require deeper levels of collaboration across traditional unions and new labor groups. The right question is not whether alt-labor can replace unions, but how new labor organizations can supplement and strengthen the proven union structures that have long enabled workers to build power and economic opportunity. In particular, alt-labor can play a role in introducing and incubating technology tools, to bring traditional labor into the 21st century.

While unions have too often viewed alt-labor groups as direct competitors, these organizations may be their greatest hope for increased scale and sustainability. We view the relationship between unions and alt-labor as symbiotic, and their survival as interdependent. Most new labor organizations, including the three groups we have chosen to profile, emerge directly from union structures. The vision for Coworker.org emerged from the experience and observation of its founders during their years at the SEIU. While OUR Walmart is now independent, early support and incubation came from the UFCW. Lobster 207 offers a prime example of internal union creativity: the Machinists have applied their trusted organizing model to an unexpected segment of independent workers, inventing

a fresh model with potential for replication across other sectors. Efforts like these may be the key to union longevity; new labor models both within and outside unions can play an important role as agile innovators that test new engagement strategies, enabling unions to scale what works.

What Unions Can Learn from Alt Labor to Enhance Scale

What can unions learn and draw from alt-labor efforts? Digital technology platforms like OUR Walmart and Coworker.org offer unprecedented opportunities to scale worker voice, by tapping into broad worker populations and high-speed online tools. These platforms provide structure to harness the social media organizing that was already bubbling up through Facebook, Reddit, and other channels. They enable network formation, secure messaging, and petition development and dissemination. Organizers can use these tools to mobilize workers around concrete, incremental workplace demands, such as dress code changes and wage increases. Using this pragmatic approach, workers can scale campaigns at unprecedented rates: digital platforms offer access to massive, distributed networks and high-speed communications and mobilization.

Furthermore, flexible, platform-based intermediaries operating outside the legal framework of traditional unions can be more responsive to the conditions of the new economy, and can cast a wider net to include a larger and more powerful population of American workers. Unconstrained by the NLRB's labor/management dichotomy and the industry and company confines of traditional American unions, these organizations can think creatively about the boundaries of worker solidarity networks, fostering broad networks across worksites, industries, and geographies, and engaging managers, customers, and even shareholders as allies. As both Saru Jayaraman of ROC-United and Sara Horowitz of the Freelancers Union argue, these organizations can increase their scale and power by positioning as organizations for everyone, not just "exploited, marginalized populations." Sara explains, "We're getting confused about what a worker is, and decided that a worker has to be a vulnerable, lower-skilled worker. We're all workers. So we've been adamant that you have to cover people across the economic spectrum."¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Saru notes that one in two working Americans have held jobs in the restaurant industry: "We do not describe this as some sort of hyper-exploited group.... This is America."¹⁵⁹ This broader definition of workers enables both labor/management partnership and engagement of white collar independent contractors, broadening the tent and thereby increasing opportunities for engagement and impact.

Alt-labor organizations can also support workers in companies with little hope of unionization, such as Walmart and Amazon.¹⁶⁰ Not only are workers at these companies limited by union-busting practices, they must contend with high turnover rates (as one Walmart worker explained, "turnover rate in my store is over 200 percent").¹⁶¹ With digital platforms available, workers need not wait on full-stop unionization to begin organizing. Importantly, these platforms also enable workers to build skills and access tools that they carry across jobs, in line with turnover trends.

What Alt-Labor Can Learn from Unions to Enhance Impact

Alt-labor organizations are uniquely positioned to achieve scale through new tools and networks. Yet as we have seen, scale may come at the expense of deep engagement, and sustained solidarity. Technology platforms are most effective when used in tandem with traditional, face-to-face organizing tactics developed and honed by unions. OUR Walmart's technology tools or Alia Todd's Coworker.org petitions have been most effective when paired with in-person efforts, from community meetings of the ASRW or the Respect the Bump campaign team, to protests at shareholder meetings.

Where can new labor groups turn for expertise in face-to-face organizing to build solidarity and sustained engagement, and drive policy change? Perhaps to those longtime experts in mobilization: the unions.

As the Lobster 207 experience shows, unions like the Machinists know how to knock on doors and change minds. “Organizer Joel,” as his union shirt charmingly calls him, remembers getting stranded on a remote Maine island during his first week on the job, without cell service or mainland contact. That storm was a ticket to building deep relationships with an island of fishermen and their families, the initial force behind Lobster 207. When it comes to raising worker consciousness and fighting long legislative battles for structural change, a one-off online petition may fall short; the deep engagement cultivated through in-person organizing can drive the sustained engagement needed to rebuild the labor movement.

As the Lobster 207 case shows, unions are particularly savvy in building political power. Policy change is another important avenue toward scale, but has not emerged as a top priority for alt-labor organizations, especially technology platforms like OUR Walmart and Coworker.org. In part, this reflects the ease of launching rapid-fire “bread and butter” workplace campaigns online, rather than slow-moving systemic battles. This indicates another gap in the landscape that unions, as well as policy-focused alt-labor organizations, can help to fill.

Taken together, these observations suggest that unions and new labor organizations will need to forge coalitions to optimize for both scale and engagement, leveraging their complementarity. Our recommendation, then, is for unions and new labor groups to develop a shared strategy to innovate, incubate, and integrate. Outside unions, greater flexibility and reduced bureaucracy allows alt-labor groups to engage in productive experimentation, including the engagement of non-traditional populations like independent contractors and manager allies, and the use of technology tools to drive scale. The most successful among the new organizing approaches can be replicated inside unions, or deployed as complementary tools (as the Coworker.org American Airlines example shows). This aligns with the recommendation offered by Andy Stern in 2004: “we aren’t going to rebuild the labor movement to what it was – that workforce and economy no longer exist.” Instead, “we need to transform unions, not try to return to the old model.”¹⁶² The goal, then, is to transform unions, not replace them – and new labor organizations offer the most promising testing ground to enable a transformation.

III. Building Financial Sustainability

“What is this next form of unionism? The key piece is a business model independent of government and foundations.... We’re asking labor groups to be like recipient donors, and it’s not about building their own economic power.”

- Sara Horowitz, Freelancers Union¹⁶³

The single greatest challenge facing the labor movement today, and the greatest impediment to power and scale, is financial sustainability. Every organization interviewed pointed to financial independence as a top challenge. Unions have historically relied on mandatory union dues automatically deducted from a corporate paycheck to provide flexible funding to support their work – alt labor nonprofits have no such steady income stream. As Andrea at OUR Walmart expressed it, “in the absence of collective bargaining [and its dues structure], having a sustainable revenue model is the number one,

above-all issue that all [new labor] organizations face. Nobody has figured it out at the level that's needed."¹⁶⁴

Without a reliable unrestricted revenue stream, the alt labor organizations we researched and interviewed tend to depend heavily on foundation support. These findings align with a 2005 study of community organizing groups, which found that the average group received sixty-three percent of its budget from foundation grants.¹⁶⁵ This is troubling for multiple reasons. First, it significantly limits the potential scope of worker voice efforts, given the narrow number of foundations willing to invest in labor organizing (one study showed that foundations gave only one percent of their grants to progressive organizing).¹⁶⁶ The resource scarcity problem is exacerbated by the rapid growth of the nonprofit sector, which has expanded by twenty percent over the past decade (as compared to private sector growth of less than three percent).¹⁶⁷ Given the breadth of nonprofit organizations tackling inequality, alt-labor groups must actively compete with progressive nonprofits for a limited pool of funding. Alt-labor groups report that they are resource constrained and vulnerable, particularly given foundations' increasingly common demand that their grantees leverage a one-time grant to become self-sustaining.

Second, to secure needed support nonprofit organizations may feel pressure to design their programs based on funder interests rather than organizational priorities. This can translate to requesting funding for flashy new programs rather than core needs like professional development, technology and administration, or policy advocacy. Put differently, labor groups dependent on foundation funding run the risk of being captured by capital, and contorting their programs to funder preferences rather than worker-driven priorities. Foundations also often impose burdensome reporting requirements that stretch staff. Finally, garnering support from foundations – much like wealthy individual donors – may require affluent or well-connected personal networks uncommon for grassroots, worker-led labor organizations.

Organizations like OUR Walmart see foundation funding as “a bridge, not a long-term strategy.”¹⁶⁸ This begs the question, what are the most promising mission-aligned avenues for securing unrestricted revenue? Among the organizations profiled in preceding pages, membership programs and other fee-for-service revenue streams emerge as viable if often nascent approaches. Many alt-labor organizations are testing promising approaches:

- The Freelancers Union attracts paying members by providing portable benefits to self-employed workers.¹⁶⁹
- The National Domestic Workers Alliance provides dues-paying members with training, and discounts to pharmacies and other services.¹⁷⁰
- OUR Walmart's WorkIT platform provides benefits to workers including education and support, and the group is exploring charging a subscription or one-time fee for extra benefits, such as legal aid, or discounted rates for negotiated benefits like financial services and childcare.¹⁷¹
- Coworker.org is exploring both a mutual aid fund for workers and a subscription-based data service for impact investors.

These efforts offer hope, but they are no silver bullet. Labor organizations often struggle to access the up-front capital to get promising new business projects off the ground.¹⁷² It can be equally challenging to successfully run a profit-positive business. Nonprofit managers may lack business training and time to successfully launch a new venture – even in the for-profit sector most business ventures fail, and

running a business requires a different set of skills than running a union. A Bridgespan study showed that 71 percent of nonprofit earned revenue ventures in 2000-2001 were unprofitable, five percent were breaking even, and less than a quarter were profitable (and among these, half failed to account for indirect overhead costs).¹⁷³

As OUR Walmart points out, membership-based organizations must charge rates accessible to workers and be cautious about the risk of exploiting the workers it aims to serve. Viability requires both large volumes of members (since small fees only generate meaningful revenue in aggregate), and successfully chasing down workers to collect dues (a difficult task without automatic deduction). A 2006 study of worker centers found that they receive only two percent of their budgets from dues, perhaps a reflection of the many challenges associated with this funding model.¹⁷⁴ Engaging a more diverse cross-section of the workforce – such as through Coworker.org’s labor/management coalitions and the Freelancers Union’s varied worker representation – could help to alleviate this, since managers and higher-paid workers could invest in “premium” membership services.

Tellingly, the most promising sustainability model uncovered in our research was Lobster 207’s joint revenue generation approach, which includes both a traditional union dues structure adapted to independent contractors, and the cooperative’s sales revenue stream. While this model is not yet proven out (and staff have struggled to collect dues from independent contractors without the standard payroll deduction), it provides two likely sources of consistent, unrestricted revenue, aligned with the incentives of workers themselves. This suggests the need for further exploration into worker ownership models – and specifically hybrid union/cooperative models – as a path to financial sustainability for worker voice organizations.

What might still be missing from these efforts? We view the membership programs of nonprofits outside the labor movement, including the NRA and AARP¹⁷⁵, as particularly useful models. These organizations provide valued services to members to drive engagement and loyalty. In the same vein, labor organizations should strive to provide customized services unavailable from other sources, and to serve workers across a lifetime of career growth. In particular, alt labor should aim to provide labor market adjustment supports, including training, insurance, and job matching services. This would help to fill a clear need in the new economy, as workers transition across jobs and industries more frequently.¹⁷⁶

In the meantime, given that foundations still provide vital stop-gap support to seed alt-labor organizations, our research also suggests a need for funders – particularly the many foundations who list inequality in their core mission – to invest more heavily in labor organizations, including providing unrestricted, multi-year grants.

IV. Implications

Reflecting on our findings, we see significant challenges ahead for the labor movement. While alt-labor groups are achieving incremental everyday and even legal shifts in power, reviving public confidence in organized labor will require more concerted efforts to shift structural and discursive norms. Disempowered workers who have been told to blame politicians for their plight must begin to hold their companies – and the financialization of the economy – accountable. This is not to recommend “shaming the corporations” as a sole strategy. Instead, corporate leaders should be

pushed to better support and collaborate with their workforce. As Zeynep Ton argues, many leading companies like Costco have already improved financial performance while attending to the needs of their workforces. But it is not enough to lift up these exceptions; we must set new norms.

While there is much work to be done, we see hope in three observations. First, as noted in our introduction, there is significant demand for worker voice mechanisms, both internal and external to companies. Even as union membership has declined in recent years, American support for worker voice mechanisms continues to rise.¹⁷⁷ Nearly sixty percent of Americans approve of unions,¹⁷⁸ and a strong majority of union members would vote to join again if asked.¹⁷⁹ The MIT Worker Voice study indicates that non-unionized workers want more voice and representation in the workplace, with the strongest preference among young, low-paid, and black workers.¹⁸⁰ Research on alt-labor organizations confirms these trends, with workers eager to participate in online conversations about their experience at work, and build communities of like-minded workers.

Second, if history indeed suggests that there is hope for a renaissance in the labor movement, alt-labor's technology tools may provide what's needed to stimulate growth. In the 1930s, following a decade of declining union membership, unionization suddenly exploded.¹⁸¹ What might it take to trigger the "abrupt and unpredictable bursts" of growth we have seen before?¹⁸² New technology platforms are uniquely positioned to achieve scale in organizing efforts, and may therefore be uniquely suited to facilitate an exponential increase in American worker participation in organizing efforts.

Finally, we see tremendous opportunity for strategic collaboration between unions and new labor groups, to build collective worker voice. To date, these groups have too often operated as competitors rather than embracing their mutual dependency. Building a broad and deep 21st century labor movement will require strategic coalition-building between traditional unions and new labor groups. Alt-labor groups operating outside ossified labor laws can provide a valuable testing ground for new technology tools that match new work norms. These groups also introduce a more expansive understanding of worker networks, beyond individual companies, sectors, or worker demographics, and the standard labor/management dichotomy.

However, these organizations operate with significant funding constraints that impede their ultimate scale and power. Furthermore, they have much to learn from unions' history of face-to-face engagement, solidarity-building, and political participation. Given the complementary strengths of traditional and new labor organizations, we call on alt-labor to strengthen and expand proven union structures, and on unions to welcome rather than resist the alt-labor groups that will be critical to their expansion and longevity.

We take solace in the fact that such collaboration is already underway, informally. Most of the alt-labor organizations in our inventory emerge from and have direct touchpoints with unions. Worker centers are often referred to as being front organizations for unions. OUR Walmart was seeded by a union, and Coworker.org emerged from experiences in the SEIU. Lobster 207 and the Independent Drivers Guild *are* unions, operating under the Machinists tent. Unions are already informally serving as incubators and partners. The task, then, is to formalize and normalize such coalition-building, and articulate a unified strategy to invigorate worker voice in the 21st century. Ultimately, this is not a prescription to rebuild labor as it was, but to reimagine worker voice as it can be for a diverse universe of workers in a much-changed and rapidly-evolving economy.

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- ¹⁸¹ Richard Freeman and Kelsey Hilbrich, “Do labor unions have a future in the United States?” In Robert Rycroft, *The Economics of Inequality, Poverty, and Discrimination in the 21st Century*, Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013.
- ¹⁸² Kochan, 2005.