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REPORT FROM THE FIELD

Worker-led Unionization Sweeps the US

Eric Blanc

Labor Studies and Employment Relations, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
Email: ericblancsf@gmail.com

Abstract
Over the last half-decade, worker-led struggles have spread across US cafes, warehouses, universities, media outlets, and beyond. Reviving the bottom-up spirit that enabled unions to make their big breakthrough in the 1930s, recent worker-to-worker initiatives have shown how this can be done in our sprawled out, economically decentralized conditions. Building off the best traditions of left trade unionism, and leaning on the novel affordances of digital tools, they've pioneered new forms of organizing that can extend widely enough to confront the systemic ills plaguing working people.

Keywords: unions; worker-to-worker organizing; strategy; digital tools; strikes; Starbucks; Amazon

Introduction

Over the last half-decade, worker-led struggles have spread across US cafes, warehouses, universities, media outlets, and beyond. Reviving the bottom-up spirit that enabled unions to make their big breakthrough in the 1930s, recent worker-to-worker initiatives have shown how this can be done in our sprawled out, economically decentralized conditions.

Labor's most astute opponents have clearly identified the threat posed by this growth in worker-driven organizing. Littler Mendelson, the country's most notorious union-busting law firm, sounded the alarm in a 2022 report:

> There has been a shift in how people are organizing together to petition for representation. What was once a top-down approach, whereby the union would seek out a group of individuals, has flipped entirely. Now, individuals are banding together to form grassroots organizing movements where individual employees are the ones to invite the labor organization to assist them in their pursuit to be represented.[1]

Lamenting that "the ability to encourage activism has never been easier," the report stressed that this "is especially true with the younger workforce … [that is] more progressive thinking." And because communication costs have dropped dramatically, it's now easier for rank-and-filers to take the initiative – and to get trained by other

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workers nationally. As Littler Mendelson's report notes, social media has permitted employees to "begin organizing on their own in a grass-roots fashion. … [and] allows local organizers to use the collective knowledge of the best organizers around the countries."[2]

As indicated by Littler Mendelson, two things crucially differentiate the new organizing model from traditional, staffed up union efforts. First, workers get organizing efforts off the ground without established union support. Second, workers train other workers in organizing methods.

Unwilling to wait for change from above, a growing number of workers have taken their futures into their own hands and inspired others to do the same. Building off the best traditions of left trade unionism, and leaning on the novel affordances of digital tools, they've pioneered new forms of organizing that can extend widely enough to confront the systemic ills plaguing working people. Lillian Allen, a Starbucks worker organizer in Austin, Texas, put it well: "Our movement is really exciting, because not only is it shaking up these large corporations, but also because it's going to shake up the way that unions work in this country."[3]

A workers' groundswell: 2018–2023

With most unions doing relatively little to reach the unorganized, workers have stepped up to organize themselves. In the process, they've caught everybody by surprise. "There's just this organic sort of—I don't know what to call it. More like an uprising"—that's how West Virginia Republican State Senator Mitch Carmichael struggled to describe the grassroots educators strike that swept his state in February 2018, and which immediately spread to Oklahoma and Arizona in March.

More workers struck in 2018 than in any year since 1986 and, unlike the defensive and defeated labor battles of the Reagan years, the recent red state strikes were offensive in their demands, mostly illegal, statewide in scope, and generally victorious in their outcomes.

In West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, tens of thousands of rank-and-file educators founded viral Facebook groups to overcome their unions' risk-aversion and cohere themselves across far flung regions. With the benefit of hindsight, it's now possible to see that West Virginia heralded the onset of a new model of bottom-up unionism. The biggest difference from past forms of worker-to-worker unionism was that digital tools enabled workers' movements to have a far broader geographic reach. In a pre-digital era, rank and filers could only regularly deliberate with coworkers who lived close enough to meet in person. But with the advent of social media, they have been able to coordinate across wide spatial expanses on the cheap.

These K-12 teacher walkouts also presaged other organizing dynamics common to many bottom-up unionization drives since 2020: they were usually initiated by young, radicalized workers; they mostly (though not always) relied on systematic workplace and community organizing; and they propelled themselves forward through contagious momentum.

The next big wave of bottom-up activism hit in response to COVID-19. Virtually overnight, the pandemic exposed employers' willingness to put profits over their employees' health. It also made clear the indispensability of "essential workers," and

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clarified to millions of workers the dangers of having no meaningful voice at work. Countless skirmishes, big and small, swept American workplaces.

Some sense of the exponential growth of grassroots workplace activism can be gleaned from the website Coworker.org, a platform to support self-initiated worker actions like petitions on management. From February to March 2020, there was a 3800 percent increase in worker campaigns and a 4043 percent growth in actions.[4]

The meatpacking industry was a major center of strike activity in this period. Some strikers were non-union. At the Perdue plant in Kathleen, Georgia, a packer named Kendaliyn Granville explained why she and her coworkers had walked out on March 23: "We're not getting nothing – no type of compensation, no nothing, not even no cleanliness, no extra pay – no nothing. We're up here risking our life for chicken."[5] In other cases strikers were unionized, but they took action without waiting for permission from union leaders. For instance, in Greeley, Colorado, roughly one thousand workers at the JBS meatpacking plant refused to come in to work on Monday, March 30. *The Denver Post* reported that union officials were just as surprised as management: "The union received the report about the mass call-offs Tuesday morning," according to the paper, which added that the union was "pressing JBS USA … for more information on the call-offs" and "lobbying for additional protections for workers."[6]

The COVID crisis was not the only factor creating a groundswell of workplace direct action. An exceptionally tight labor market has given workers unprecedented leverage. A new National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the most pro-worker since 1937, has done everything in its power to boost unionization. And these conjunctural factors mixed explosively with longer-term processes, like accumulated economic grievances and the politicization of young people, whose radical inclinations were boosted by Bernie Sanders's 2020 presidential run and the eruption of Black Lives Matters protests in the summer of that same year.

Once the worst of the COVID-19 crisis began to ease, it was clear to those who bothered to look that the US had entered its ripest moment for new workplace organizing since the early 1940s. In October 2021, worker-to-worker struggles broke back into the mainstream of US politics. Echoing the earlier strike dynamics in West Virginia, over 10,000 blue-collar John Deere workers—coordinated nationally through rank-and-file Facebook groups—forced a strike by rejecting the tentative agreement that United Auto Workers officials had agreed to with management. Two weeks into the strike, workers rejected yet another agreement. Only after a full month of striking did management finally cave to workers' demands.

A few weeks later, Starbucks baristas (euphemistically dubbed "partners" by the company) voted to unionize at the Elmwood store in Buffalo, New York. To their surprise, they received an avalanche of requests from workers across the country, asking how they could do the same. Rather than rely on staff to field and guide these leads, Buffalo baristas hopped on countless Zoom calls to directly train their peers across the country. After giving specific organizing tips to one such worker during a December 2021 online panel hosted by Bernie Sanders, Buffalo partner Gianna Reeve insisted to them: "You have power within yourself to do things that you could not imagine you could do."[7]

Over the following 6 months, hundreds of Starbucks stores unionized. Though they've yet to win a first contract, they *have* forced the company to concede on crucial

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demands. These include the introduction of credit card tipping (resulting in major take-home pay bumps); the ability to pause mobile orders when slammed with customers; a starting wage of no less than US$15 an hour; significant investments to upgrade failing equipment; quicker sick time accrual; looser dress codes; and the removal of multiple CEOs.

In the process, the transformative experience of the campaign has also helped build a new generation of worker activists. Here's how Maggie Carter described the day of her Knoxville, Tennessee store's late March 2022 NLRB election, the first Starbucks union win in the South:

> It was a beautiful feeling to know that we did it, we showed up for each other and we didn't allow these corporations to continuously abuse us. It felt like victory, but also just sweet liberation. You know they kept telling us 'We want you to vote no, we want you to be a partner with Starbucks.' And it's like, 'I've been that for three years, bro. This is the most I've ever felt like a partner right now, today, when I won this election.'

Similar worker-to-worker unionization waves soon began to spread across multiple industries—higher-education, journalism, cafes, social services, retail, tech, museums, and nonprofits. To the shock of organized labor and corporate America alike, a young, ragtag crew of multiracial warehouse workers somehow managed to defeat Amazon in an April 2022 union election. "It's the best feeling in the world," declared worker leader Chris Smalls, popping champagne in front of the NLRB's Brooklyn office.

Like at Starbucks, the Amazon Labor Union (ALU), has yet to win a first contract, but it has nevertheless won major concessions. After ALU won its election at the JKF8 warehouse in April 2022, Amazon reversed its no-cell-phones-at-work policy and declared it was giving US$1 billion in pay raises over the following year.[8] A shift in workplace culture and power at JKF8 has likewise been significant. Michelle Valentin Nieves—a conveyor operator and ALU vice president at JFK8—describes how winning their election impacted dynamics at the warehouse:

> It feels much different now. Managers have changed, they're not as cocky as they were before. You don't see as much of the 'I'm going to write you up or terminate you because you get on my nerves, just cause I feel like it.' So the managers have changed, and workers have changed — people are not as scared as they used to be.

This shift, she added, involved a major change in herself as well:

> Before, I would just see myself as an individual and not as part of a collective. Like it used to be that if one of my work friends was wrongfully terminated, I'd be like "Oh man, poor Jason, I hope that he gets another job real soon — farewell and good luck, I'll buy you a drink Friday night." You know what I mean? Where as of now, you know, it's like, if that happens I'm grabbing a bunch of people to go together to speak with human resources, we'll rally, send out a mass text, pass our fliers, all that.

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As a result of these successes, labor finally regained real momentum nationwide. And this began changing the organizing dynamics on the ground. "I've never seen this number of workers reach out to our union before," notes Alan Hanson, organizing director of United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 400.

> The amazing thing is when they reach out, they've already done all the things staff organizers normally have to train people to do: map out their workplace, ID leaders, build a representative committee. I've had more worker-initiated campaigns in the last few months than I'd had total since I started organizing in the late'90s.

Hanson's experience is not unique: the breadth of worker-initiated unionization efforts today—and the overwhelmingly pro-union political climate—constitutes a major difference from the 1990s and 2000s when labor's halting-then-aborted turn to new organizing stumbled over the inordinate staff resources required to spark workers to unionize. Effective organizing is context specificand a new context has opened up new possibilities for movement unionism.

Unions would do well to connect more with individuals like Vince Quiles, a 27-year-old Home Depot worker in North Philadelphia, who in the spring of 2022 decided to unionize his store after working there for 6 years:

> You know, I saw what Chris Smalls did and it showed me, 'Wow, if you really put your mind to it, you can unionize anywhere.' It just takes someone to step up to the plate, to put themselves out there and build an organizing team—to take the risk to do it. So seeing Amazon and Starbucks and all that, I figured it might as well be me.

For some radically inclined workers, a hope to inspire copycat efforts became a powerful organizing incentive. "We knew that if we were successful in this, it would most likely lead to other locations organizing as well," notes Claire Chang, one of the workers who led the successful drive at NYC's SoHo REI. "I think people normally feel hopeless, that nothing is going to change.… We're helping change that." And, sure enough, their March 2022 election win spurred others across the US to follow suit.

Workers across the country are beginning to see that non-union jobs can become union jobs—and that they personally can play a role in making that happen. In the process, they have begun to change themselves and their coworkers. Purnell Thompson, a stablehand who helped unionize his Medieval Times castle in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, explained how the unionization process brought them all together:

> We definitely got closer. A good example is the queens never really used to talk to us stable hands—I don't think it was from any mean spirited place, but like I've been working there for two years and I know a couple of queens who just constantly forgot my name, even though it's printed on the back of my shirt. But now we're all grown pretty close, we know each other very well, and we stand up for each other. With all the crazy union busting [management has] thrown at us, we've had to trauma-bond.

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People can reach deep inside themselves when connected to a big cause that is worth fighting for. A Starbucks partner from Seattle explained such feelings in a Reddit "Ask Me Anything" thread on unionization:

> Personally, unionising has taught me how to advocate and speak up for myself in all areas of my life. I've found my motherfucking calling, dude. There's nothing else I'd rather be doing during late- stage capitalism!!! Is it stressful? Of course. Is it difficult? Nothing worth fighting for is easy. Is the company gonna gaslight and manipulate you? You bet! But don't quit! This is everything!

Workers can also take big risks. For example, in 2018, Moira Madden got a job in Buffalo, New York as a case worker for the Adoption STAR agency, helping expectant parents who were considering placing a baby up for adoption. "A bunch of us are adopted ourselves, and we worked extremely hard for the sake of these children and their parents," she recalled. "But the workplace itself was abusive, they really ground us down. It's a non-profit, but functions more like your average private company."

Leaning on the organizing skills she had picked up as a member of Democratic Socialists of America, she and a coworker began in early 2022 to reach out to their coworkers to discuss unionizing. Moira knew that doing so was a serious personal risk, since she and her partner were trying to have a kid and they needed her health insurance. "It was an incredibly stressful and intense time," she recalls. "But I gave the unionization effort my all." Unfortunately, a colleague squealed to management right before they went public. On April 6, 2022, Moira and three co-organizers were immediately fired, with management barely giving any semblance of a legal pretext. Expectant mothers in the system were, from one day to the next, left with no staff support. And with her own health care taken away, Moira and her partner had to put a pause on trying to have a baby. Despite all this, she didn't regret having taken the initiative: "the owners were—they *are*—so greedy and arrogant. We needed to do it."

Despite pervasive union busting, labor's momentum steadily increased in the wake of the pandemic. So too has media and popular attention. To cite just a few examples: Antiwork—a misleadingly named Reddit group focused on exposing bad working conditions and promoting unionization—shot up from 80,000 members in early 2020 to 2.3 million members by late 2022. And the labor-focused media outlet More Perfect Union, founded in the wake of Bernie Sanders's 2020 presidential campaign, has received over 350 million views on its videos of workers fighting back.

In the battle for public opinion, labor is finally landing some serious blows. Billie Adeosun, a Starbucks barista in Olympia, Washington, summed it up well: "I love that we've made unionizing sexy." Everything now hinges on translating broad popular support for unions into organization and power.

Conclusion

Recent wins demonstrate the movement's potential. In 2022, union elections went up 52.4 percent and over 273,000 workers joined unions. Many bottom-up drives across the US economy have won good first contracts, including at chains like Colectivo, a coffee chain in the Midwest, and Burgerville, a fast-food company in the Pacific Northwest. To be sure, workers at mega-corporations like Amazon are still a long way

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away from winning a first contract. That will likely take many years, more intervention from state actors, and far greater organizing resources from established unions.

The recent groundswell has increased pressure on established unions to raise their ambitions and finally start fully funding efforts to organize the unorganized. But it remains to be seen whether such a shift will take place before the current momentum is killed off by union busters, a recession, or a return of the Republican Party to the White House.

While it is impossible to predict this worker-led uptick's future, it has already provided what's long been missing for organizing: a plan to win. Recent worker-led efforts build off the long history of left trade unionism, but they aren't just more of the same. Through trial and error, workers are forging something new in the heat of battle. "There's no blueprint for what we're doing," notes Daisy Pitkin, a national staff organizer for Starbucks Workers United. Recent worker-led struggles have provided, if not a blueprint, then at least a road map for other workers, unions, and social movements to follow in their footsteps.

Notes

1. Michael J. Lotito et al., "WPI Labor Day Report," Littler Workplace Policy Institute, accessed 27, 2022, https://www.littler.com/files/wpi_labor_day_report_2022.pdf.
2. Ibid, 34.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this article are from interviews the author conducted in 2023 for his forthcoming book *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Workers Organizing Can Transform America* (University of California Press, 2025).
4. In Coworker's nomenclature, campaigns are largely "petitions" and "actions" are largely petition signatures. Thanks to Drew Ambrogi from Coworker for sharing these data.
5. Sarah Hammond,"'This is not a Playing Matter': Perdue Plant Employees Walk out over COVID-19 Concerns," *13WMAZ,* accessed March 23, 2020, https://www.13wmaz.com/article/news/local/perdue-employees-walk-out-as-coronavirus-concerns-grow/93-7c7bdcbb-f3ec-439b-b541-9070e758b5cb.
6. Shelly Bradbury, "More than 800 Greeley Meat Packing Plant Workers Call Off as Coronavirus is Confirmed Among Employees," *The Denver Post*, accessed March 31, 2020, https://www.denverpost.com/2020/03/31/jbs-meat-plant-greeley-colorado-coronavirus/.
7. "SOLIDARITY BREWING: A Town Hall Discussion with Starbucks Workers," accessed December 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yolib6O7xhU.
8. Matt Day, "Amazon Raises Hourly Wages at Cost of Almost $1 Billion a Year," *The Seattle Times*, accessed September 29, 2022, https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazon/amazon-raises-hourly-wages-at-cost-of-almost-1-billion-a-year/.

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