REPORT

PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM

MODELS FOR BUILDING A UNION WHEN THERE'S NO CLEAR PATH TO A MAJORITY OR A CONTRACT

EMERGENCY WORKPLACE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

Building a union is always hard work. But in certain workplaces, the task of winning union certification and a contract may not be viable for many years to come.

Workers in those jobs may feel they have no options, but in reality there are age-old models of unionism they can pursue.

WE CALL THIS TYPE OF ORGANIZING "PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM"

This report and ongoing series of case studies is written by Colette Perold and Eric Dirnbach with individual case-study contributions from a range of authors cited within.

Sarah Cougill, Megan Svoboda, Carlos Bergfeld, Natalie Robbins, Pedro Bortoto, Brad Kerr, Gavin Gassmann, Ike McCreery, Wes Holing, Sydney Buchan, and Stephen Crowe helped frame the project and develop the report.

The authors thank Eric Blanc, Kate Diedrick, Katie Romich, Mark Meinster, and the many workers and organizers we interviewed for their feedback along the way. Those workers and organizers are quoted throughout the pages that follow.

All errors, of course, are our own.

March 2025

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NEW FOREWORD FOR 2025

Trump's reelection has left workers asking if it's still possible to organize new unions, or if the labor movement will even continue to exist in the U.S. The answer to both questions is an emphatic—"yes"! While the terrain workers will be fighting on may change, workers and union organizers should avoid panic. During Trump 2.0, there are surprising reasons for optimism, and workplace organizing will become more important than ever.

This report is about what we call "pre-majority unionism" — an approach to building unions that will become increasingly helpful throughout this Trump term. We originally published the report in October 2022 but have updated it for the second Trump presidency to help workers meet the challenges of the moment. We've also added new case studies on the forty-year history of the pre-majority union at **IBM** and the **DURHAM ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATORS**.

Pre-majority unionism means organizing with your coworkers and acting like a union even if you don't yet have a collective bargaining agreement or official union recognition from your boss. It is a model that many workers will want to adopt in the immediate future since winning official union "recognition" will become harder under the second Trump presidency, especially in the private sector.

WHAT DOES TRUMP'S PRESIDENCY MEAN FOR LABOR?

Like under all Republican presidencies, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)—the body that oversees union organizing in the private sector—will become less worker friendly. In the least extreme scenario, workers will still be able to run NLRB elections under Trump, though they should expect to depend on even less support from the Board than they currently do.

In the most extreme scenario, some are warning we could see the end of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). This would take us back to the same conditions the U.S. labor movement was initially built under, and is a possibility that unions should gear up for.

Either way, we can expect cuts to the NLRB's funding and staffing, making it harder for unions organizing in the private sector to get cases cleared and elections certified. Private-sector union election numbers overall may fall again.

But non-NLRB, alternative strategies like pre-majority unionism can keep up labor's momentum and pave the way for a broader union resurgence down the line. They are strategies that public-sector and private-sector unions have used successfully throughout U.S. history, and they are ones we must look to now more than ever.

With the original EWOC Pre-Majority Unionism report we wanted to help equip workers with an organizing strategy appropriate for contexts where there was no clear or immediate path to winning a first contract.

Under this second Trump presidency, workers may want to pay special attention to our **CASE STUDIES**, which show how workers have built formal, sustainable, dues-paying organizations outside of the NLRB-framework. In the absence of official employer recognition, strong organizational structures will help pre-majority unions continue to build and sustain power during this increasingly hostile period.

Pre-majority organizing has its particular challenges but also a significant advantage: Any group of workers can start organizing now on their own to win gains at work without running a union election. Yes, there are significant benefits to winning union recognition and bargaining a contract, but in a new period where that will become harder to do and take longer to accomplish, pre-majority organizing provides a path for how to start organizing immediately.

While pre-majority unions are often started by the workers themselves, unions can also initiate pre-majority campaigns, especially in contexts where workers lack the right to collective bargaining (like many gig workers or public sector workers in red and some purple states) as well as at larger employers where it will likely be a marathon, not a sprint, to get to a company-wide contract.

Pre-majority unions can also be a great way to start building workplace power, to win significant gains, to train new worker leaders, and to prepare for a hopefully better environment for union elections in the future.

The most important thing is that millions of workers want a union and can start organizing now. And they don't have to figure this out on their own: anyone can contact EWOC anytime for training and assistance.

A fighting, powerful labor movement is our best bet to defeat Trumpism and the billionaires. As we show in the following pages, pre-majority unionism is an important tool for reaching this goal.

WHAT IS PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM?

WHY LET YOUR BOSS DICTATE WHETHER OR NOT YOU'RE A UNION?

Workers today want to join a union more than at any other point since the 1960s. Yet only around 10% of U.S. workers are union members, and that number has been slowly declining for decades. The biggest reason is that if you want a union but you work at an employer determined to keep unions out, or if you work in the public sector in one of the roughly 25 states with anti-union public-sector legislation, labor law works against you. In light of this, most established unions don't put meaningful resources into organizing workers at major nation-wide companies or half of the country's public sector workplaces.

If you're a worker in one of these types of workplaces and you've reached out to a union to start organizing, you've likely been told that it'll be almost impossible to get recognized as a union, let alone win a contract, unless labor law changes. But what most workers don't know is that there's **another kind of unionism outside of the traditional model that workers in these more difficult workplaces have been using for decades to fight for dignity and build the labor movement—even when the traditional unionization route isn't available to them.** We call this model **pre-majority unionism.**

DEFINING PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM

Pre-majority unionism means workers organizing and acting like a union even in circumstances where they do not have a contract or where winning a contract does not seem to be a realistic near-term prospect. It's about **being a union in all the other ways traditional unions are, whether or not the boss recognizes that union as a legal entity it's required to bargain with.**

In the cases we document here, workers engage in pre-majority unionism with the eventual goal of employer "recognition" and a contract (or what's called a "collective bargaining agreement"). The main differences between the cases we cover are (1) how likely the workers believe employer recognition is, and (2) how they choose to organize based on that assessment. In some cases, pre-majority unionism is the only way the workers can organize successfully for the foreseeable future. In others, it's one step in a strategy of building toward a traditional union election.

We've found that the most successful cases of pre-majority unionism have been pursued for one of the following five reasons:

1. The workers are in the **public sector** — where the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) does not apply—in conservative states with no collective bargaining rights, making it impossible to win official union recognition without major legal reform.
2. The workers are in the private sector in **states with anti-union legislation** (such as so-called "right-to-work" laws), also making union recognition much harder to win.
3. The employer is a **massive nation-wide or global company** where unionizing at one location or within one franchise at a time is an enormous challenge or has been tried and failed repeatedly.
4. The workers have already voted for a union through a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election and won, but the employer has **dragged out contract negotiations** for months or years beyond the expected timeframe.
5. The workers are in **contingent work arrangements** with no collective bargaining rights. The major examples for this category are "gig" workers and other independent contractors.

In each of these areas, pre-majority unionism has been the only path workers have found to fight for justice and build worker power in the near-to-medium term.

THREE THINGS PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM IS NOT

1. IT DOES NOT OPPOSE UNION CERTIFICATION.

There are versions of worker organizing that oppose union elections, employer recognition, and collective bargaining agreements on principle, but we believe union recognition should be an aspiration where possible. The tactics and strategies that workers pursue must meet the goals, level of militancy, and structures available in a given workplace. All tools must remain on the table for shifting the balance of power in the workplace and beyond.

Instead, pre-majority unionism recognizes that, despite the fact that workers have won union elections at the most anti-union workplaces (at time of publication, at Amazon and Starbucks, for example), official NLRB elections and union contracts still remain very hard to win at the scale we need. This is because labor law and the way it gets enforced have become increasingly stacked against workers since the late 1940s, and even more so since the 1980s (see "**OVERVIEW OF UNION HISTORY, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTION**").

For us, recognizing this reality is not a reason to **oppose** union recognition, but a reason to fight like hell for it, and to find other ways of organizing when necessary. Powerful worker movements have been taking this alternate path for decades.

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> **ADDING PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM TO OUR ORGANIZING TOOLKIT DOES NOT MEAN OPPOSING CONTRACTUAL UNIONISM.**

2. IT DOES NOT OPPOSE COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS.

Some organizers argue that winning union recognition or a contract necessarily results in workers being more passive and less militant. We disagree.

Adding pre-majority unionism to our organizing toolkit does not mean opposing contractual unionism. While there are unions that use the excuse of contract bargaining to concentrate knowledge in the hands of a few workers and staff, and to generally divest from on-the-ground worker organizing, we do not agree that one necessarily follows the other.

Winning union recognition and a contract can be a democratizing and profoundly empowering experience for workers, teaching them the power of solidarity across differences, collective action, and worker leadership. Crucially, it adds to the structural stability of unions and the labor movement as a whole. A central pillar of the broader fight for labor-law reform must focus on expanding rights and organizing pathways to achieve these ends free from employer interference, and pre-majority unionism is one tool to accompany that battle.

3. IT DOES NOT OPPOSE MAJORITIES.

Although we like the term "pre-majority" more than any other option, there's one caution we need to give. The limitation of the term "pre-majority" is that it suggests **minority** support over **broad base-building**. But to be in a "pre-majority" union does not mean workers can get comfortable as a minority and stop growing their membership. It just means that the path to get to a majority may be unconventional or take longer than usual. In all cases, at all times, premajority organizing should always be looking to build worker majorities.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

All unionization starts as pre-majority organizing because it begins with a small group and then grows—if successfully, to majorities. In fact, the first unions in the U.S. were versions of what we're calling pre-majority unions. The concept is not new, and it's been called many different things over the years: "minority unionism," "non-contractual unionism," "solidarity unionism," and others (see "**GLOSSARY**").

Emma Kinema, campaign lead of CODE-CWA, describes the language problem that arises when workers try to give this kind of non-traditional unionism a name. In the case of the Alphabet Workers Union, she says: "I would simply describe [them] as a union, because that's what they are."

The late Saladin Muhammad had a similar perspective. In a 2021 interview about organizing in the U.S. South, he said:

> It's important for workers to understand that real union organization starts with worker organization. It is not just about being legitimized by the National Labor Relations Board…. We don't say we act like a union, we say we are a union.

There are many workers and organizers building pre-majority unions who also just call it "unionism," plain and simple. When comparing models, we find the term "pre-majority" to be helpful for many workers, but it doesn't matter what term you use as long as it resonates with your coworkers. Call it something else, or don't call it anything at all. Just go build your union.

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> **OVER THE YEARS, IT'S BEEN CALLED MANY DIFFERENT THINGS: "MINORITY UNIONISM," "NON-CONTRACTUAL UNIONISM," "SOLIDARITY UNIONISM," "DIRECT-JOIN" UNIONISM, AND OTHERS.**

WHY PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM NOW?

Pursuing elections overseen by the NLRB to achieve formal employer recognition and a union contract remains the principal strategy for most unions. But in a context in which labor law has become increasingly anti-worker, and the NLRB often won't adequately enforce the right to organize, this strategy has failed to grow the labor movement meaningfully in recent decades. (See "**OVERVIEW OF UNION HISTORY, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTION.**") The union density rate (the percentage of all workers who are union members) is now around 10% nationwide and 6% in the private sector. These numbers sink lower nearly every year.

For decades the number of annual private sector NLRB elections and workers organized had been falling, reaching a low of only about 500 election wins and 30,000 workers organized during each of the early COVID-19 pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. However, for the past three years unions have been doing better at winning elections in what could be the beginning of an upsurge, with increasing elections, wins and workers organized: In 2024, nearly 100,000 workers organized through NLRB elections, the most in several decades. This was assisted to some extent by the best NLRB we have seen in many years, under a fairly pro-union President Biden. However, for the labor movement to grow, the number of workers organized each year needs to be five or ten times higher. This report has some tools we believe can help us get there.

The major culprits in the broader pattern of union decline have been employer union-busting and major economic transformations like deindustrialization and corporate restructuring. Changes to federal labor law and the way it gets enforced have made it commonplace for employers to engage in

crippling and often illegal tactics to oppose union organizing. But in addition to these structural factors, the labor movement's all-or-nothing approach to unionization (either workers push for official recognition or they're not a union) has also inhibited its potential to grow.

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What people often forget is that the labor movement needs to grow by **millions** of workers in order to even remotely shift the balance of power in this country. The speed and scale at which worker militancy needs to grow will by necessity outpace unions' ability to staff election efforts. For these reasons and more, pre-majority unionism must remain on the table for unions to have a shot at seizing on the next labor upsurge.

We at EWOC are by no means the first to raise these strategic and tactical questions. In addition to supporting efforts to reform labor law, labor strategists have been looking for new ways to organize more workers into unions for over 30 years. There have been experiments with “corporate campaigns” and fighting for “card check” certification. There have been campaigns such as Fight for $15 and United for Respect, and a worker-center movement that has grown to help workers with wage theft and other workplace abuses outside of collective bargaining agreements. These types of campaigns have often been called “alt-labor” because of how they break from traditional unionism, and in certain aspects they fit the pre-majority mold too. (For more, see Further Resources.)

These campaigns and tactics have been the subject of recent debates in New Labor Forum and In These Times. This EWOC report builds on these conversations, offering in-depth background, case studies, analysis, and additional resources.

WHAT DOES EWOC HAVE TO DO WITH PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM?

This report features a longer section on the unique **CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES** faced by workers in pre-majority unions, but perhaps the biggest constraint on pre-majority unionism is the lack of financial resources. Without contracts that require and streamline the collection of membership dues, workers are in a position of organizing their coworkers to pay dues while fighting workplace battles at the same time, in many cases without feeling the gains of the union beforehand.

Workers in our case studies approach the question of dues in different ways. In several cases, the workers' organizing is subsidized by a parent union at the beginning, with the parent union contributing less over time as the pre-majority union's dues-paying membership numbers grow. In some cases the parent union has been unable to subsidize the workers' pre-majority organizing over the long haul, and when funding gets pulled, the campaigns fizzle out.

Despite the fact that pre-majority unionism has often required more resources than the traditional labor movement can expend, at EWOC we believe that pre-majority unionism does not need to be as resource-intensive as it has been in the past. With the renewed interest in labor unions, along with the organizing infrastructure we have built within EWOC, we have new models for activating volunteer union organizers to support worker campaigns over time.

We train hundreds of volunteers to support workers anywhere fighting for justice at work. When workers reach out to us, we assist them in starting their organizing, often without affiliation with an established union. When the workers, as a union, have built up enough strength—which often includes fighting and winning workplace improvements— they may choose to pivot to a formal union recognition process.

Because of our mass volunteer base, EWOC is in a position to support both the early stages of union election campaigns and longer-term pre-majority campaigns all on a shoestring budget. Our volunteer organizer model opens up new pathways for pre-majority organizing that weren't available to the labor movement in the past.

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> **BECAUSE OF OUR MASS VOLUNTEER BASE, EWOC IS IN A POSITION TO SUPPORT BOTH THE EARLY STAGES OF UNION ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND LONGER-TERM PRE-MAJORITY CAMPAIGNS ALL ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET.**

There is no one union strategy that will work everywhere. But experience shows that militant, rank-and-file-led workplace organizing by non-union workers must be supported and strengthened on a large scale for the labor movement to be able to seize on union upticks and expand its ranks.

We hope this report offers tools for workers forging their own pre-majority union paths today. With thoughts, questions, comradely disagreement, or more stories and lessons to share, please join the conversation on X or Bluesky @organizeworkers **#premajority**. Want to tell your story of pre-majority unionism? Email us at info@workerorganizing.org.

OVERVIEW OF UNION HISTORY, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTION

How the labor movement got into its current troubles and how pre-majority unionism can add another tool to rebuild worker power

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF UNION POWER

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> **WORKERS IN THE U.S. HAVE BEEN ORGANIZING TOGETHER, FORMING UNIONS OR OTHER ORGANIZATIONS, AND GOING ON STRIKE FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS.**

INITIAL GROWTH OF UNIONS

Workers in the U.S. have been organizing together, forming unions or other organizations, and going on strike for hundreds of years. In the early 1800s, this often involved groups of workers organizing in a pre-majority fashion, stopping work to protest their working conditions and get improvements. As capitalism developed, workers built more formal organizations. They formed a number of union federations after the Civil War, including the National Labor Union in 1866, the Knights of Labor in 1869, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1886.

Organizing in the 19th century was often dangerous and risky, as employers would fight union organizing efforts using violence, and the government would typically side with employers in breaking strikes. Unions had little legal protection and were often considered by various courts and the press to be illegal conspiracies among workers to raise wages.

Unions were often associated with radical and socialist politics. With the founding of the AFL, many unions eventually began to distance themselves from radical politics and emphasized that they were only seeking better wages and working conditions within capitalism. One reaction to this on the left was the formation of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in 1905, which explicitly rejected capitalism.

The most common form of union until the 1930s was a **craft union**, where workers who did the same kind of job banded together. This led to situations where a workplace might have workers in several different unions according to their jobs. Associated with this was the common idea that only “skilled” workers should be union members. This left out a lot of workers considered “unskilled” at the time, who were often female, Black, or immigrants.

THE RISE OF UNIONS FOLLOWING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

In the 1930s, workers and unions reacted to the devastating conditions of the Great Depression with a massive wave of organizing and strikes. By 1935 the Roosevelt administration responded to this labor upsurge by passing the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which established a legal framework for workers to join unions, hold elections, and bargain contracts with their employers.

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The NLRA led to a huge wave of successful union elections. It contained some powerful concepts on the rights of workers to engage in concerted activity, and unions were able to seize it as a tool for mass organizing.

It was seen at the time by most of the labor movement as a huge advance, but critics saw some problematic elements built into it. For example, it was rooted in the Constitution’s “Commerce Clause,” which means that union formation was tolerated by the state as a way to minimize disruptions to commerce. This eventually sowed the seeds for anti-labor laws like the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 and court decisions later on that weakened unions’ abilities to strike. The nature of the NLRA is still subject to debate today.

Moreover, in the 1930s, more workers in the labor movement began to promote the idea of industrial unions, where all workers in a workplace would organize together into the same union, regardless of the kind of work they did. This kind of organizing would typically involve assembly line workers at huge manufacturing employers, which were generally avoided by craft unions. These workplaces had large numbers of immigrant and Black workers, many with radical politics that informed their organizing.

Several of these new industrial unions formed the Congress (initially Committee) of Industrial Organizations (CIO) which helped organize hundreds of thousands of workers in auto, steel, rubber, electric and other industries. The CIO was part of the AFL until it was kicked out in 1938, largely over this difference in organizing philosophy and political positions. Crucially, because of their more expansive notions of what a worker is and does, and who the real class enemy is—bosses, not “lower-skilled” workers—these industrial unions were seen as politically more radical. Indeed, they were often communist-, socialist-, or anarchist-led.

UNION BUREAUCRACY AND DECLINE

The labor movement grew dramatically in the 1930s through the 1940s and reached a peak of over one third of the U.S. workforce in the 1950s. By then unions had become established institutions. While some unionists believe this moment of increased formalization was

a positive development, others—including many unionists on the political left—believed that the biggest unions at the time prioritized organizational stability at the expense of deepening their shop-floor militancy.

The more formalized the union bureaucracies were, the more distant from the membership they became, turning into top-down organizations that in many cases lacked genuine democracy. The book "The Long Deep Grudge," by labor historian Toni Gilpin, is a great story on this kind of union transition, as the militant Farm Equipment workers, affiliated with the United Electrical (UE) workers union, eventually merged into the more conservative and bureaucratic United Auto Workers (UAW) in the 1950s.

The AFL and CIO merged in 1955 to form the AFL-CIO that exists today. This happened largely because the political differences between the federations had decreased dramatically, as the AFL accepted industrial unionism and the CIO had purged its Communist leadership during the late 1940s and early 1950s McCarthy Era.

Though the number of union members continued to grow into the 1970s, peaking in 1979 at about 21 million members and 23.5 million workers covered by union contracts, the percentage of the total workforce in unions (membership rate) started a long slow decline to where it is today, at about 10%. Moreover, the number of large strikes has also declined dramatically, from hundreds annually in the 1950s to low double digits in most recent years. The reasons for these declines in members and strikes have been greatly debated for decades, and constitute one of the most serious problems facing the labor movement.

> **THE REASONS FOR THESE DECLINES IN MEMBERS AND STRIKES HAVE BEEN GREATLY DEBATED FOR DECADES, AND CONSTITUTE ONE OF THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEMS FACING THE LABOR MOVEMENT.**

(See "Union Renewal" in Further Resources.) The following sections offer reasons for this long-term decline and show how pre-majority unionism can become an important tool for reversing the downward trend.

UNION STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

In the U.S., the basic group in a union is the "bargaining unit," which includes the workers in a workplace who are covered by a particular contract. Then there is the "local," which usually includes all the bargaining units in a certain area. For large bargaining units, that group of workers may constitute its own local. The locals will have regular membership meetings, and most of the workers' participation in the union will be with the local.

The members pay union dues to the local, while private sector workers who choose not to join the union pay a slightly lower "agency fee" in states without so-called "right to work" laws. Private sector workers who are non-members pay nothing in "right to work" states, as do non-members in the public sector in any state. Agency fees cover the costs of representing the workers, including non-members.

"Right to work" laws are state level anti-union rules, enabled by the Taft-Hartley Act, that allow workers covered by a union contract to be non-members and pay nothing to the union. Since the 2018 "Janus" Supreme Court case, this applies to all non-members in the public sector anywhere.

At the next level up, those locals are often grouped together into district or regional councils, sometimes at the state or multi-state level, and then into national or international unions. It's called international if the union has members in the U.S. and Canada, which includes many major unions in North America. A portion of the members' dues is paid by the local to the next level up in the structure, which will pass on some to the next level, and so on.

Nearly all major unions are members of the AFL-CIO union federation. Most unions are also members of local central labor councils in cities or state labor federations, or global union federations, typically based in Europe.

The unions' basic job typically falls into several areas that can be thought of as "representational" and "associational," with different unions prioritizing each category differently.

> **THE UNIONS' BASIC JOB TYPICALLY FALLS INTO SEVERAL AREAS THAT CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS "REPRESENTATIONAL" AND "ASSOCIATIONAL," WITH DIFFERENT UNIONS PRIORITIZING EACH CATEGORY DIFFERENTLY.**

- **Representational**: The union represents the members for collective bargaining and handling issues in the workplaces, where the union has the certification as exclusive worker representative. The union also represents the members in political and lobbying activities, or any campaigns where the union is an active member and participant.
- **Associational**: The union organizes new workers by assisting them in running campaigns to gain union recognition or build power and win improvements at the workplace. The members also participate in the life of the union, at local meetings and other events.

All unions need to perform representation functions, but a focus primarily on these activities done largely by staff is often called "service model" unionism. There is a danger in this approach, since it may lead members to view the union as a provider of representational services in exchange for members' dues. This is the toxic "third party" idea, where the union is understood as a separate organization from the workers.

The more progressive model is sometimes called the "organizing model," where members are heavily involved in every aspect of union activity. So even the representational activities shouldn't just be union staff doing all the work, such as bargaining or grievance handling. Ideally, members themselves would be involved, with assistance and coordination by staff. A union with active members will be more democratic and have better outcomes in organizing, bargaining, and all other activities. (See "Membership-based Organizing" in Further Resources).

> **A UNION WITH ACTIVE MEMBERS WILL BE MORE DEMOCRATIC AND HAVE BETTER OUTCOMES IN ORGANIZING, BARGAINING, AND ALL OTHER ACTIVITIES.**

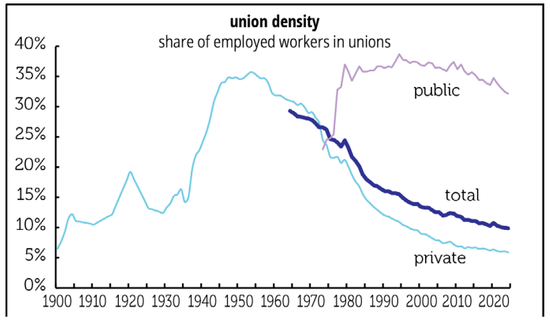
LABOR MOVEMENT STATUS AND RECENT TRENDS

UNION DECLINE

The discussion of alternate forms of organizing has become increasingly urgent as the number of unionized workers has declined for decades.

As mentioned in an earlier section, the percentage of all workers who are union members, organized into traditional unions with union recognition and contracts, is called "union density" or the "union membership rate." This figure peaked in the 1950s at about 35%. The number of total union members peaked in 1979 with about 21 million workers. These numbers have been falling for decades since. The chart above shows the union density over the last century, and more importantly, the decline since the 1950s.

This is a result of the employers' move to restructure tens of millions of jobs, including shifting work overseas or to non-union facilities, outsourcing work to domestic subcontractors, and misclassifying workers as independent contractors. Employers also ramped up their union busting. Beginning with the Reagan administration in the 1980s, the federal government aided the attack on organized labor through intense levels of union busting, the removal of regulations on corporations, and decades of conservative court decisions that made organizing and striking more difficult.



Doug Henwood LBO News - "Unions Lose Some more"

A changing economy, corporate restructuring, and union busting were then met on the labor side not by large-scale organizing efforts, but instead by labor-management partnerships that often failed to deliver any benefit. Again and again, unions lobbied to pass labor law reform that would help penalize union busting and enable more organizing, but all these efforts have failed. While the NLRB under Democratic administrations is often better at enforcing labor law, and has made pro-union procedural changes, it can only do so much without more substantive legal changes.

> **TODAY, MORE THAN 14 MILLION WORKERS ARE UNION MEMBERS, ABOUT 10% OF ALL WORKERS.**

Today more than 14 million workers are union members, about 10% of all workers. The private sector union density today is particularly alarming at only about 6%, similar to the early 1900s, while the public sector is about 32%. The percentage of workers covered by union contracts, which also includes workers who choose to not be union members but are in the bargaining unit, is slightly higher for all these numbers.

BUT MORE WORKERS WANT UNIONS

This decline is not because workers don't want unions anymore. Tens of millions of non-union workers approve of unions and want to join them.

Gallup's August 2024 poll of union approval shows public support for unions at 70%, among the highest levels since 1965. Over three quarters of workers under 35 approve of unions.

For decades, surveys have shown that there is a tremendous "worker voice gap," an unmet need for worker organizations. A 2018 survey shows that nearly 50% of non-union workers would vote for a union if they could. A 2021 survey found that "56% say the large reduction over the past several decades in the percentage of workers who are represented by unions has been 'somewhat' or 'very' bad for the country, while 60% say this has been bad for working people." Another 2021 poll found strong support among workers for unions at their workplace, with the highest support from those who earn less than $25,000 per year (58%), between $25,000 and $50,000 per year (57%), and among people with less than a high school education (60%). More than half of lower income workers would support a strike at their job. (See "What Workers Want" in Further Resources.)

The challenge is to find ways of helping all these workers organize, while acknowledging that the traditional strategy through workplace elections has not been successful on a mass scale for a long time.

The next sections discuss the traditional organizing approach and why it's not reaching all the workers who want a union.

TRADITIONAL UNION ORGANIZING PRIMARILY THROUGH THE NLRB

UNION ELECTIONS

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 was the landmark labor law that established most private sector workers' legal rights to organize at work. In addition to defining labor rights in the private sector, it set up a government entity called the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) for enforcement.

> **"IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING THE NLRA, A STANDARD FORM OF UNION ORGANIZING THROUGH THESE ELECTIONS AND SUBSEQUENT CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS HAS DEVELOPED.**

The NLRB oversees union representation elections at nearly all private-sector workplaces. The Railway Labor Act of 1926 serves a similar purpose for the transportation sector, with the National Mediation Board overseeing union elections under slightly different procedures. The federal government and many states have set up similar systems for public-sector workers through public employee relations boards.

In the years following the NLRA, a standard form of union organizing through these elections and subsequent contract negotiations developed. The traditional process is as follows:

- A union organizes with workers at a workplace to **sign up at least 30% of the workers** on union authorization cards. In practice these days, it's typical to sign up well over a majority of the workers, usually 65% or more.
- A 2023 NLRB ruling created the Cemex framework, where a **majority of workers can demand recognition** and the employer has to grant it or file for an election to test that majority. It's unclear how long that framework will survive under Trump's NLRB.
- Alternatively, **authorization cards are filed with the NLRB** along with a petition for an election. The NLRB determines if the collective bargaining unit represented by the cards and the petition is appropriate.
- The **NLRB schedules an election**, usually within a few months, where the workers vote "yes" or "no" on whether they want to be represented by the union. If 50% +1 of the voting workers vote "yes," the workers have officially formed and joined the union at that workplace.
- The **NLRB certifies the union** as the exclusive representative of the workers and requires the employer to negotiate a contract, also called a collective bargaining agreement, with the union.

In practice, every step of this organizing and bargaining process is often obstructed by the employer. Upon learning of the union organizing campaign, the employer will typically engage in union-busting practices, both legal and illegal, designed to instill doubt and fear in the workers. It may contest the bargaining unit to try to exclude or include certain workers based on where it assesses union support in the workplace. It will likely hold mandatory "captive audience" meetings on a regular basis to misinform workers. Though a recent NLRB ruling has banned mandatory meetings, it's unclear how long that rule change will remain. If the workers win, the employer may protest and appeal to the NLRB to delay certification. Even if the workers certify a union, the employer may refuse to bargain a contract in good faith.

Often these employer tactics are "unfair labor practices" (**ULPS**), which the union can bring to the NLRB for prosecution. However, ULPs can take many months or longer to process, and the penalties are usually so minor that they don't impact the employer's behavior. Also, long delays in scheduling elections, certification, and bargaining, all while worker turnover occurs at the workplace, hurts the ability of the workers to build and maintain solidarity.

> **"DESPITE THIS EMPLOYER OPPOSITION, UNIONS ARE FAIRLY GOOD AT WINNING THESE ELECTIONS, WITH A WIN RATE OF OVER 70% IN RECENT YEARS.**

These delays are one of the main ways employers bust union organizing, using refined psychological techniques during the months leading up to an election to scare workers away from unionizing. If the employer has dragged out the bargaining process long enough, a group of workers may be so frustrated (usually misdirecting their anger at the union) that they will try to "decertify" their union after the fact, sometimes with employer assistance.

The Economic Policy Institute reports: "While 86% of workers who chose a union were able to win a first contract in the 1950s, that share declined to less than 70% in the 1970s. By the 1990s, it was down to 56%." Other studies have found that a large percentage of unions fail to get a first contract within one year and that it takes over a year on average to reach a first contract. In some cases workers never get a contract at all—the employer delays, and the workers give up.

Despite this employer opposition, unions are fairly good at winning these elections, with a win rate of over 70% in recent years. Winning elections and negotiating strong contracts can transform workers' living conditions, political beliefs, and sense of solidarity, and should absolutely be pursued where strategically viable. But they are also time consuming and labor intensive, which is why unions are running fewer of them now.

Workers having to go through this elaborate process, often under intense employer interference, means that far too few workers are successfully organizing unions and bargaining contracts in this way. This has led to the search in recent decades for alternative ways of organizing, and efforts to reform labor law.

CARD CHECK NEUTRALITY

The NLRA has always authorized an employer to voluntarily recognize a union. Thus another organizing approach is for the union and workers to convince the employer to recognize the union based on the majority of workers' support. The new Cemex framework reinforces this.

One example is called "card check neutrality." With card check, the employer agrees to be neutral and recognize the union based on a majority of the workers signing union authorization cards, often checked by a mutually chosen third party, and sometimes within a specified time period. If the workers achieve a verified majority, they are certified by the NLRB and contract bargaining begins.

To achieve the employer agreement to this process often requires an intense pressure campaign over time. But if successful, the advantages to this approach are that there is no drawn-out election time period during which the employer can engage in union busting, and no particular date set by the NLRB where the union is judged to have won or lost.

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> **THE FIGHT WITH THE EMPLOYER IS NEVER AVOIDED ENTIRELY — IT'S EITHER A FIGHT FOR THE CARD-CHECK PROCEDURE, OR DURING THE UNION ELECTION AND CONTRACT BARGAINING.**

The union has much more time to organize and can submit the cards at the time of its choosing. The workers sign cards under a neutral atmosphere until they are ready to submit them for certification. However, the fight with the employer is never avoided entirely—it's either a fight for the card check procedure, or during the union election and contract bargaining.

Card check certification has grown in recent decades, but is still used less often than elections, although the data on this is harder to find. Card-check certification can have multiple dynamics. The worst-case scenario is when union leadership makes concessions to the employer in advance, often behind closed doors, to get an agreement from the employer before beginning to actually organize workers. The best scenario is when a union organizing campaign is so powerful that it forces management to concede to its demand for recognition directly.

LABOR PEACE AGREEMENTS THROUGH LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Related to this approach is what are often called "labor peace agreements." In these cases, the government will require that private sector employers benefitting from some kind of public subsidies or assistance sign a labor peace agreement with a union where they essentially agree to the card-check neutrality process. The guiding rationale is that employers benefiting from public subsidies should not fight union organizing, or that the public wants to protect its subsidy investment from potential labor disruption. This intention is good, but workers should take note that unions' efforts to obtain these agreements can sometimes offer too many concessions to employers, trapping workers in a process that undermines their full rights to organize and strike.

RECOGNITION STRIKES

A "recognition strike" happens when workers who are not officially certified as a union go on strike to force their employer to recognize the union and bargain a contract. This is protected activity under the NLRA but comes with some legal restrictions. For example, picketing can usually occur for no more than 30 days.

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> **UNIONS SHOULD CONSIDER HOW THE RECOGNITION STRIKE TACTIC COULD BE REVIVED.**

More commonly used in the past, recognition strikes can be a powerful strategy. As with other strikes, there's a risk that the employer may try to replace the workers with scabs. Labor law unfortunately allows in most cases for the temporary or permanent replacement of striking workers. However, unions should consider how the recognition strike tactic could be revived and used much more often in the right circumstances.

The Cornell Labor Action Tracker 2024 Annual Report identified 13 strikes that had union recognition as a demand.

WHAT THE FUTURE MAY HOLD: "MEMBERS-ONLY" BARGAINING

There is an argument, advanced by law professor Charles Morris in the book "The Blue Eagle at Work" and others, that the NLRA should allow for "members-only" collective bargaining. This means that any group of workers should be able to form a union, without an election, and demand contract bargaining from their employer for their members only.

This was a more common occurrence in the pre-NLRA era, but NLRB practice evolved fairly quickly to exclude this possibility. Reclaiming this right would take a prolonged fight by the labor movement, a friendly NLRB, and overcoming the inevitable challenges in court. There may also be the problem of the formation of company-friendly members-only unions. (See "Proposals" in Further Resources and debates about members-only bargaining here and here.)

WHY AREN'T MORE WORKERS IN UNIONS?

THE NLRA AND ELECTIONS

There are a lot of factors involved in the decline of the labor movement. The huge growth phase for unions started during the Great Depression years of the 1930s. There was a tremendous amount of organizing, coupled with labor law changes, most notably the passage of the NLRA in 1935. Unions were able to organize millions of workers through the 1940s and into the 1950s largely using the election procedures

established by the NLRA. However, in the following decades, the union membership rate started to fall, and the decline accelerated in the 1980s and beyond.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, an average of about 500,000 private sector workers participated in over 6,000 NLRB elections every year, about 1% of the workforce annually. But in recent decades, there have been less than 2,000 elections per year in the private sector, with less than 0.1% of all workers participating.

There are various ways to understand this decline and the role played by the NLRA framework. What's certainly true is that after labor hit its peak in the 1950s, employers gradually began to find ways of undermining union organizing (see "**LABOR MOVEMENT STATUS AND RECENT TRENDS**").

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> **UNIONS HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO FIND WAYS TO MAINTAIN HIGH LEVELS OF EFFECTIVE ORGANIZING AS EMPLOYERS INCREASINGLY COMMITTED UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICES WITH MINIMAL PENALTIES.**

This was coupled with a number of conservative court opinions over time that eroded union power and emboldened employers. They allowed employers to replace striking workers, close union workplaces, and engage in effective union-busting practices. Unions have not been able to find ways to maintain high levels of effective organizing as employers increasingly committed unfair labor practices with minimal penalties.

UNION STRATEGY AMID DECLINE

The NLRA, while perhaps groundbreaking in the 1930s, has gotten more anti-worker over time due to the way it's been interpreted and enforced. Labor law reforms to restrict union-busting practices and support organizing, such as the PRO Act, would be very helpful in rectifying these issues.

There's another perspective that believes it's the NLRA framework itself that is the problem. This is the position taken in the book "Tell the Bosses We're Coming" by Shaun Richman which argues that "the combination of exclusive representation, mandatory agency fees, no-strike clauses and management rights are the foundation of our peculiar union shop" and has influenced unions to evolve characteristics that are no longer effective enough.

Another related critique of unions from the left is that they have lost the militancy that helped them grow in the 1930s, and have become staff bureaucracies that have learned to manage their decline. With the merging of the AFL and CIO in 1955, unions channeled the militancy and class-oriented unionism of their members into "**BUSINESS UNIONISM**," conceding their strike rights over time and accepting management's terms for control over day-to-day working conditions. Unions allowed themselves to become domesticated and manageable, making political choices in how they would operate that have become difficult to undo. From this perspective, unions need to recover that militant spirit in order to grow again.

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> **UNIONS ALLOWED THEMSELVES TO BECOME DOMESTICATED AND MANAGEABLE, MAKING POLITICAL CHOICES IN HOW THEY WOULD OPERATE THAT HAVE BECOME DIFFICULT TO UNDO.**

Coupled with this view is the idea, long promoted by Labor Notes and others, that unions have to be much more democratic and member-run, in order to develop that necessary militancy. Recent books by the late union strategist Jane McAlevey stress the need for unions to embrace solid worker organizing, rather than mobilizing and advocacy. Joe Burns, in "Class Struggle Unionism," emphasizes the need for unions to regain their militancy and ability to conduct successful strikes. (See "Union Renewal" in Further Resources.)

So unions find themselves with a dilemma. While labor law reform will help them grow considerably, they may not be able to achieve meaningful labor law reform until they are large and disruptive enough to win it. If unions continue to organize in the same ways they've been doing, they will not grow quickly enough. To increase union density by just 1% per year, unions would need to organize over one million workers annually into unions. But current election campaigns are organizing about 100,000 workers or less per year. While there was a recent surge in election wins over the last three years, it's highly unlikely that trend will continue under this second Trump NLRB. Even if it did, since tens of millions of workers want to be in a union, at this rate or organizing it would take unions hundreds of years to organize all these workers. The status quo is not sustainable. This is where pre-majority unionism can help.

WHAT ARE SECTION 7 RIGHTS?

YOUR RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE

Section 7 rights refer to the rights that workers in the private sector have to organize collectively. It's part of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which **only applies to the private sector**.

It's important to note that workers in the **public sector** have an intrinsic right to organize through their constitutional First Amendment rights of Free Speech and Assembly. Workers in the public sector may also choose to organize around specific municipal, county, or state labor bills (see an analysis of how public sector collective-bargaining legislation in particular varies by state).

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> **YOUR ABILITY TO WIN JUSTICE AT WORK WILL ALWAYS COME FROM THE AMOUNT OF POWER YOU BUILD WITH YOUR COWORKERS, NOT FROM A LEGAL DECISION HANDED DOWN BY THE GOVERNMENT.**

Before we dive in further, a word of caution: worker organizing is always fundamentally a question of power, not law. While you have the rights **no matter where you work** to organize with your coworkers, your ability to win justice at work will always come from the amount of power you build with your coworkers, not from a legal decision handed down by the government. Nonetheless, when used appropriately, legal tactics such as leveraging Section 7 rights can help protect and even strengthen organizing efforts.

SECTION 7

Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) declares that all workers have a right to engage in "concerted activities," meaning collective action at work. This means that a group of workers acting **together** can make demands of their employer and do so with the protection of the law. This does not apply to individuals—only to **groups**. If one worker asks a boss for paid sick time, according to the law she can be fired. But if a group of workers asks a boss for paid sick time, according to the law they cannot.

Here's Section 7 in full:

> Employees shall have the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection, and shall also have the right to refrain from any or all of such activities except to the extent that such right may be affected by an agreement requiring membership in a labor organization as a condition of employment as authorized in section 8(a)(3) [section 158(a)(3) of this title].

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> **THE EMPLOYER MUST KNOW WHY YOU ARE TAKING COLLECTIVE ACTION.**

A crucial aspect of Section 7 is that the employer must know **why** you are taking collective action. If the action is carried out in secret, and the boss has no information that concerted activity is taking place, it may not be protected under Section 7, and workers could be disciplined.

Workers who do not have officially recognized unions are still protected by this law, and pre-majority unions can craft very effective strategies with knowledge of how Section 7 applies to them.

A United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) pamphlet, "Your Right to a Union, Build it Now" from 2008 gives a helpful example:

> Workers sign a petition demanding the boss meet with them to negotiate a longer lunch period. That is concerted protected activity. It is a group activity, it is about a workplace issue and obviously the boss upon reading the petition knows what it is all about. If a group of workers leave work early because they are mad that the lunch period was shortened, and they never tell the boss why they are leaving, it may not be protected activity. The boss could discipline the workers for leaving work early and truthfully claim that he didn't know they were protesting the cut in the lunch period.

The pre-majority unions we write about in this report use Section 7 rights as a way to protect and strengthen collective action. For a full explanation of how to identify organizing issues and plan campaigns using Section 7, see "Your Right to a Union, Build it Now."

For information on how to use Section 7 to strike without union recognition, see this article by Richard de Vries, originally published in Labor Notes.

CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES OF PRE-MAJORITY ORGANIZING

Pre-majority organizing faces all the challenges of worker organizing that you'll find anywhere. As with any organizing strategy, a large group of workers must come together and build power and confidence over time to challenge their employer and fight for workplace improvements. But a pre-majority organizing strategy which achieves neither official recognition nor a collective bargaining agreement has particular challenges of its own that merit further discussion. It also has some advantages, since it doesn't encounter some of the obstacles found in the traditional organizing route.

The main advantage to pre-majority unionism is the most important one of all: When it's the only type of unionism available, pre-majority unionism is a valid, time-tested, and powerful tool that workers can pursue to win demands, fight for justice, and build the labor movement. Workers can win material gains while also learning how to organize, often strengthening their parent unions and the labor movements in their municipalities and states. Pre-majority unions are also a way to maintain worker organization in cases where a fight for union recognition is possible but many years away.

Beyond the availability of pre-majority unionism in deeply anti-worker contexts or within massive companies, pre-majority unionism has the following challenges and advantages.

1. RELATING TO THE TRADITIONAL UNION PATH

CHALLENGES

When the familiar union organizing model is to get recognition and a union contract, other strategies may feel less real to some workers. Winning an election and getting official recognition are concrete achievements. A written, collectively bargained contract is a tangible accomplishment. Without these traditional organizing milestones, workers may wonder what the union is really accomplishing, whether their dues money is being well spent, and if this effort is worth the risk. There may not be enough well known examples of pre-majority organizing that can inspire workers to see this as a viable path.

ADVANTAGES

Pre-majority unions organize at their own pace around the issues they care about without going through the often tortuous NLRB process that employers have learned to fight. Moreover, workers can win improvements at any time, not just during contract negotiation periods. They are also not bound by no-strike or management-rights clauses that are standard in union contracts.

2. KEEPING MOMENTUM GOING

CHALLENGES

Pre-majority organizing does not have any built-in milestones like filing for a union election, winning the election, or bargaining a contract. Moreover, victories will likely not come until significant organizing has happened and enough workers have been brought into the union. So there may be problems with keeping the active union members motivated and engaged early in the process, whenever things seem to be moving slowly, or during the inevitable periods of low activity. Demoralization can easily set in. Furthermore, if the union isn't constantly growing and organizing, it is likely shrinking and getting weaker with worker turnover. It's critical to find ways to motivate and excite members on a regular basis.

ADVANTAGES

Progress in pre-majority organizing can still be measured, and can use internal benchmarks of the union's own choosing. These may include celebrating reaching a certain percentage of union membership in the workplace, publicizing actions taken by the workers in the workplace or legislatively, and claiming all the victories achieved along the way.

3. CREATING A BARGAINING AND GRIEVANCE STRUCTURE THAT MAKES THE UNION "REAL"

CHALLENGES

The pre-majority union may never reach formal recognition, and there may never be official acknowledgement from the employer that union activity forced it to make an improvement. There is also no law that entitles workers in non-recognized unions to representation during disciplinary meetings with management. For workers in recognized unions, these rights are called Weingarten Rights, and they offer protection and lend additional legitimacy to the union.

ADVANTAGES

Pre-majority unions can achieve informal or de-facto recognition. If the union organizes enough members and gains enough strength, the employer may engage in unofficial discussions on issues the union brings to its attention. The union can facilitate this by creating a stewards network or committees authorized to deal with the employer on issues.

Particularly important is how the union sets up structures to deal with worker grievances that arise. The union may never have a formal written grievance procedure with the employer, but if the union is strong enough, it may develop informal procedures for defending individual workers against attacks from management.

4. CONSOLIDATING AND CLAIMING VICTORIES

CHALLENGES

Unlike in traditional unions, workers in pre-majority unions are not covered by binding contracts and are therefore not able to maintain concessions from their employer over the lifespan of that contract. Similarly, they do not have legal measures in place to help them bargain up to better conditions for the following contract. This means that pre-majority unions can find themselves in the regular position of having to defend every single win.

In addition, without a written contract pre-majority unions may not have a central document outlining improvements that the union has won through negotiation. It can be common for a pre-majority union to campaign over an issue, only to find that the employer makes an improvement in response to that campaign—but without crediting, acknowledging, or meeting with the union at all.

Sometimes employers even go out of their way to create elaborate justifications to convince workers that the union had no relation to the improvement. These rationales can be convincing. Common ones include: the employer was already planning on giving it; they're just keeping up with inflation; the workers met certain (arbitrary) efficiency quotas and therefore deserved it; or the boss was just waiting for a certain change internally in upper management. This way of dismissing the union's impact on workplace improvements is harder in traditional unionism because a contract itself is a clear acknowledgement of all the concessions the union forced management to make.

It's therefore critical for pre-majority unions to make it clear to all the workers which victories it has won through its organizing. All those improvements have to be defended from then on through continued organizing.

ADVANTAGES

The union can win gains at any time, rather than primarily through contract bargaining every set number of years. Employers also have a harder time "third-partying" the union in pre-majority contexts, because it's clear who won these gains—the workers themselves.

In traditional unionism, there can be a tendency for workers to think the contract itself is what matters, or that "the union" as a third party will handle things, and ultimately disengage from building their union.

In pre-majority unionism there is no mechanism for this to happen because workers must be actively engaged at all times. While the need for constant militancy in pre-majority unionism can lead workers in some cases to get burned out, in others it has been a powerful way to learn how to remain a fighting union over time.

5. RETALIATION AGAINST LEADERS AND ACTIVISTS

CHALLENGES

In the private sector, workers who are active in pre-majority organizing have the same legal "concerted activity" protections as workers in traditional campaigns. In the public sector, workers have their constitutional rights to free speech and assembly, and in some states, explicit organizing rights. That said, there is always the risk of retaliation against union leaders, especially when a campaign is not public. It's critical for any union to defend its members against retaliation, otherwise workers will be more reluctant to join. A pre-majority union will probably not have a written grievance and arbitration procedure to rely on and will have to take more regular legal action or direct action.

ADVANTAGES

A pre-majority union has many of the same organizing rights a traditional union has. In the private sector, this includes filing Unfair Labor Practice charges, public campaigning, and protests. Depending on the state, this may also be true for workers in the public sector. However, a pre-majority union also has the ability to strike, stop work, and hold other similar job actions that traditional unions typically are barred from doing during the contract period. Overall, the best defense against the possibility of retaliation is to have a union strong enough that the employer doesn't want to risk a confrontation.

6. AVOIDING THE CLIQUE PROBLEM

CHALLENGES

Since the early stages of building a pre-majority union require intensive commitment from a core group of activists without seeing major initial gains, it can be easier for that core to maintain their commitment to organizing if they're doing it with a group of friends. This is understandable, but if not actively combatted it will ultimately undermine the union's goals. As Ed Bruno (Director of Organization of the UE during the **PWOC** campaign) explains, if the union comes to be associated with one closed-off friend group (for example, all young workers, all white workers, or all workers from the same part of town) and isn't building out its base enough to wield genuine power at work, it can end up proving to other workers why they don't need a union!

This can be a problem in any kind of union organizing, but may be easier to fall into in pre-majority organizing. This is due to the lack of workplace-wide bargaining, the lack of a built-in mechanism for dues collection, and the absence of the default diffusion of workplace gains throughout the entire workplace that unions achieve once they've won a contract. Contractual unionism therefore evens the playing field, since all workers—regardless of difference—are impacted by the contract equally and, in most cases, have dues deducted from their paychecks automatically. This unites workers in the same or similar job categories across an entire workplace by virtue of their job

rather than their identities or personal interests. This built-in incentive for unity emphasizes the workers' collective class interests and makes it harder for bosses to play groups of workers off one another in order to weaken their power.

ADVANTAGES

The ability of pre-majority unions to organize workers across job classifications can be a boost for unions trying to diversify their organizing committees. All successful campaigns and unions must involve a broad group of workers representing many jobs and demographics. A pre-majority union can involve all workers at a workplace, without being divided up into separate bargaining units—for example, production, office, janitorial, technical, or security staff, which sometimes results in traditional organizing. The goal should always be to build a leadership group, activist network, and membership base that reflects the genuine range of ages, genders, races, religions, workplace departments, and job classifications that exist in the workplace.

7. SUSTAINING A BROAD LEADERSHIP AND COMBATTING TURNOVER

CHALLENGES

All unions need to constantly train and build the next generation of leaders to step up over time. Pre-majority unions, however, are particularly vulnerable if they fail to do this. There is no official recognition and written contract that guarantees at least some union presence in the workplace, even if the union becomes weak. If a leadership vacuum develops, or not enough activists are involved, the union ceases to function effectively and its power can quickly wane. The organizing will be unlikely to succeed if only a small number of workers are doing it, and frustration and burnout sets in. This problem often exists in traditional unions as well, but the risk is not as great.

ADVANTAGES

Without as much reliance on traditional union staff to keep the union going, workers have to maintain their own strength. The continued presence and strength of the pre-majority union needs a strong leadership team, democratic governance, and an active membership. It's also critical for pre-majority organizing to have a broad leadership and activist group to share the work and effectively build power.

8. CONVINCING WORKERS TO PAY DUES

CHALLENGES

Traditionally a union contract includes an agreement with the employer to automatically deduct funds from the workers' paychecks and send them to the union. This is either the full union dues for members, or the smaller "agency fee" for private sector non-members in states without so-called "right to work" laws. Private sector non-members in states with "right to work" laws and public sector non-members in all states pay nothing. Without this agreement, the union has to directly convince each worker to financially support the union, and many workers may not feel that they need to.

Because there is no mechanism in place to diffuse worker wins throughout an entire workplace in pre-majority organizing, workers need to work especially hard to involve their co-workers in union campaign work at the same time that they ask them to become dues-paying members. Without being plugged into ongoing union work, workers who don't have collective bargaining agreements may not realize how much union building is taking place, and may feel too removed from it to recognize the need for union dues.

If a traditional union is only as strong as its worker participation, this is all the more true for pre-majority unions. In some cases, the dues may not be enough to cover the union costs, which means further fundraising is needed, or subsidies from a parent union, if applicable.

ADVANTAGES

The positives of not having employer dues deduction are that the employer doesn't know the number of union members or who the union members are, which is critical information that can harm the union. Moreover, pre-majority unions have to stay in regular contact with workers and be very responsive to their concerns, which facilitates organizing. When convincing their coworkers to pay dues, pre-majority union members use many of the same tactics that workers in traditional union campaigns use.

9. OUTSIDE STAFF NOT "GETTING IT"

CHALLENGES

A parent union may assign outside organizing staff to assist the pre-majority union during its growth. There is a danger that these organizers, and other staff throughout the parent union, may feel that the pre-majority union is not making enough progress, or is not developing into a "real" union.

It's critical that the parent union have realistic expectations about what can be achieved in the short term and understand the ultimate goal of a sustainable union that can be achieved over time.

ADVANTAGES

Because pre-majority unionism is generally less staff-centric and more member-driven than traditional unionism, a union staffer being out of touch with the membership may have less of a negative impact on the union overall.

10. REQUIRES RESOURCES AND LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

CHALLENGES

During the establishment and early growth phase of the pre-majority union, it often needs heavy resource assistance from the parent union (or a committed, well coordinated volunteer organizer network). There has to be patience for a multi-year campaign before the

union is established enough to run on its own with the dues it collects from its members. If there is no parent union formally assisting this effort, the workers should recognize that it may take even longer before it's strong enough to win significant victories. Workers should be prepared to develop and grow the union over many years.

ADVANTAGES

Successfully getting to the point where workers are winning wide-reaching victories means the union has been built in a true grassroots way, from the bottom-up.

11. THE DANGER OF ORGANIZING THE BOSS BEFORE ORGANIZING THE WORKERS

CHALLENGES

As in all union organizing, there comes a time when the workers have to decide whether to remain underground or go public. In traditional union organizing the path is clear: workers usually stay underground until they have signed up over 30% of the workforce (though best practice is to wait for 60% to 70%) to announce their support for forming a union.

In pre-majority organizing, with fewer built-in benchmarks, the decision is a more dynamic one and must be based on a sober assessment of where the union's strongest support is and how management is likely to respond. If support for the union is very weak, management may not feel enough pressure and may wave away the union as a few pesky workers.

But if the union is strong enough to pose a potential threat but not yet strong enough to force management's hand, management may introduce a slower, more savvy, and less antagonistic version of union busting. For example, they may let the union continue to organize all while offering individual promotions to garner favor, encourage workers to spy on one another, or create workplace improvement committees to co-opt the union efforts.

In these cases, the union can become what former UE officer Ed Bruno describes as the "canary in the coal mine" or an "adjunct to HR," indicating to the boss where the problems are so they can fix them before the union can start agitating effectively. It's what CWA's Katie Romich calls "organizing the bosses before organizing the workers."

ADVANTAGES

If the union is in this position but its support base is solid, then inoculation, worker education, and savvy responses can be enough to maintain or even gain support at this stage. Given the slow initial build in pre-majority unionism, these calculations about when to go public always require careful strategy and must be rooted in the reality of the workplace dynamics.

For pre-majority unionism, the union has the flexibility to go public at any time, and doesn't have to worry about timing it to an NLRB election filing.

12. BUILDING POWER ACROSS JOB CLASSIFICATIONS

CHALLENGES

In traditional organizing, workers can opt to organize within a job classification that the union assesses has the best chance of winning. For example, organizing might happen among production workers at a factory if those workers are assessed as very pro-union, but won't have to encompass the clerical workers in the same factory if those workers are assessed as anti-union. Organizing within one job classification can be easier because you need to identify only a small number of workplace issues that the majority of workers will share. This usually makes the organizing quicker and more powerful from the start.

ADVANTAGES

Pre-majority unionism has a major advantage when it comes to defining who gets to be part of the union within a given employer. Organizing for an NLRB election often forces workers to separate into bargaining units based on what the NLRB decides is a "shared community of interest." Deciding who's part of this "community" is not completely up to the workers, but instead can be influenced by the employer and is based upon job classifications, responsibilities, and worker levels of training or education. This straight-jacketing works as a tool of the bosses to separate workers from one another.

Instead, in pre-majority organizing, workers often pursue what's called "wall-to-wall" organizing, meaning all workers across all job categories can join the union.

In these cases, workers often report that organizing across job classifications has been a fundamental source of strength for their union: it adds more people power more quickly and can make it easier to expand membership. More vulnerable workers often feel safer joining the union when they see their less precarious coworkers stand up for themselves and others. And it generally contributes to a sense of solidarity, with workers across an entire employer learning how connected their struggles are, and how important it is to remain united.

13. SETTING PRIORITIES

CHALLENGES

In wall-to-wall pre-majority unions, setting union-wide campaign priorities can be difficult, since different types of workers will have a wide range of workplace concerns. The main pitfall to avoid is trying to run multiple campaigns at once without a sober assessment of which workplace issues will generate the types of support needed to carry them to victory and, in turn, result in membership expansion.

Without these assessments, pre-majority unions can succumb to "kitchen-sink" or "laundry-list" style organizing where the workers try to tackle every workplace issue they can find at once. This often results in the same small group of workers supporting all the campaigns at

all times—a recipe for watered-down wins and worker-organizer burnout.

ADVANTAGES

If strategic, winnable priorities are set, having the wall-to-wall network in place to get support from workers in non-affected job categories can be a major boost for a campaign. One way to set priorities is to take on campaigns that are employer-specific rather than job-specific, such as budget transparency, legislative actions, tuition waiver or educational programs, or workplace safety issues. Another approach is to collectively decide to focus on a set number of job-specific campaigns, setting goals and success markers for each campaign, then taking turns supporting the different workers' campaigns throughout their campaign arcs. It is crucial for pre-majority, wall-to-wall unions to have strong mechanisms in place for setting union priorities with a realistic plan-to-win for each campaign.

14. DECIDING WHEN TO START ORGANIZING

CHALLENGES

Traditional union organizing is usually all or nothing: either you win union recognition and a contract, and then become a union, or you fail to do this and "lose" your union. This all-or-nothing mentality in traditional union organizing confines workers' union activity to artificial time tables. It also leaves out many pro-union workers at workplaces that have lost elections, are far from being able to file for an election, or have won an election but can't get a contract.

ADVANTAGES

"Organize now" is the motto that several pre-majority campaigns use. There is no need to wait for union staff to show up or for legislation to tilt in the workers' favor since pre-majority organizing can start at any point in time. Not sure if you'll reach a majority? Not sure if you have the legal right to form an NLRB-recognized union? Not sure whether the unions in your area will want to take on your fight? None of this matters for pre-majority organizing. The time for you and your coworkers to be a union—whether your boss recognizes your union or not—is always now.

CASE STUDIES

9TO5 THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WORKING WOMEN

By Debra Bergen and Eric Dirnbach

9to5 is the organizing campaign for women office workers that started in Boston in 1972. It responded to the wave of women joining the workforce in the 1960s and 1970s, many into secretarial jobs under conditions of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. This campaign can be understood in a number of ways. It was an industry worker association and a part of the working-class feminist movement focused on wages and working conditions, including the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace. It was also a kind of pre-majority campaign in that it organized a relatively small number of workers at many employers in various sectors to improve overall conditions. It eventually affiliated with SEIU and ran traditional union campaigns in some workplaces involving NLRB union elections. The campaign inspired the popular 1980 film and song.

FORMATION AND STRATEGY

9to5 was founded by Karen Nussbaum and Ellen Cassedy, both office workers at Harvard University. They started a local newsletter titled "9to5: Newsletter for Boston Area Office

From Teen Vogue, "The 9 to 5 Movement: How Women Got Angry, Got Organized, and Made Labor History"

Workers" in 1972 and used it to organize women office workers, officially launching the 9to5 association the next year.

Cassedy discusses in Teen Vogue how women workers encountered the workplace in that era:

> It was at this point that millions of women began pouring into the workplace, many of them into what became known as the "pink-collar ghetto" — low-wage jobs with little mobility. Influenced by the Civil Rights and feminist movements, they wanted rights and they wanted respect. In the newly configured economy, one in three working women was an office employee. As the clerical workforce grew by leaps and bounds, so did a sense of injustice among the women whose job it was to type, file, staple, mimeograph, and photocopy. Women office workers were tired of low pay, discrimination, and training men to be their supervisors. A half-century before the #MeToo movement, they wanted an end to sexual harassment and the whole host of petty indignities they were subjected to.

> As one woman put it, "We are referred to as 'girls' until the day we are retired without pension[s]."

9to5 sent Cassedy to attend the new Midwest Academy organizer training school in Chicago to help figure out the group's strategy. Cassedy recounts some of the training in her new book, "Working 9 to 5." According to Cassedy, one of the instructors noted that:

> …9 to 5 [had been] operating on the 'rock pile theory'…and that would never get us anywhere. The point was not to get people into a meeting room one by one—to pile them up and keep them there until it was time to figure out how to move forward. Instead, we should start by doing something—something effective. When people heard about it, they'd come flocking, eager to join in.

Cassedy took back the Midwest Academy theory of change that 9to5 would use effectively to:

- Win reforms that improve people's daily lives
- Make sure that when people win reforms, they see those gains as rights they've achieved through their own collective power
- Alter existing relations of power, weaken the domination of the few, and strengthen the hand of the many

An early action occurred when 9to5 discovered that large employers in Boston illegally colluded to keep women's clerical wages low, through an association called the Boston Survey Group. Through demonstrations and picketing, and filing an antitrust complaint, they put an end to that collusion and won a 10% wage increase. 9to5 also filed discrimination lawsuits against major Boston publishing companies that were paying women significantly less than men, settling for $1.5 million in back pay, and better employment policies.

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> **9TO5 FILED DISCRIMINATION LAWSUITS AGAINST COMPANIES THAT WERE PAYING WOMEN SIGNIFICANTLY LESS THAN MEN, SETTLING FOR $1.5 MILION IN BACK PAY, AND BETTER EMPLOYMENT POLICIES.**

The campaign organized in non-traditional ways, with plenty of humor, funny songs, skits about sexist bosses, and bad boss contests to help change the idea of what was acceptable boss behavior. 9to5 held organizing lunches, surveyed women workers, published reports, held public hearings, and drew up a Bill of Rights for Women Office Workers. That Bill listed demands such as "clearly defined and written job descriptions, compensation for overtime work, regular salary reviews, maternity benefits, on-the-job training programs, and benefits equal to those of men."

9to5 campaigned for affirmative action plans and more effective enforcement. It picketed on National Secretaries Day demanding "Raises Not Roses." The campaigns to pressure major companies such as John Hancock Insurance and First National Bank to raise wages were often successful.

9to5 spread to other cities, as it organized against the unfair conditions it discovered. An example is the protest against unequal pay at National City Bank in Cleveland, Ohio. They found that male bank staff were paid 50% more than women, in violation of federal anti-discrimination laws. Because the bank handled federal money, 9to5 was able to push the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs to take action. All of this organizing was outside of traditional collective bargaining.

PARTNERING WITH TRADITIONAL LABOR

Cassedy recounts how 9to5 encountered sexism from some male labor leaders of that era. But in 1975, 9to5 teamed up with a respectful partner, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), to form Local 925 and do more traditional union organizing and collective bargaining with women workers. In 1981, they received a charter from SEIU to organize as District 925. See the brochure from District 925.

These campaigns spread to other cities including Cincinnati, Detroit, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Hartford, New York, Seattle, and Atlanta. There were successful union elections and contract victories, but 9to5 ran up against the same union-busting strategies that were becoming more common, especially in the private sector in the 1980s.

In an interview, 9to5 co-founder Nussbaum talks about the dual nature of the group as bridging the women's and labor movements:

> On the one hand, we were building a wing of the women's movement that was for working women, who didn't otherwise identify with the women's movement. This was a way to expand the women's movement to a new group of women who otherwise weren't getting there. On the other hand, we were bringing the women's movement into the labor movement. So we were operating to create a home for working women in the women's movement, and for women in the labor movement.

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> **CO-FOUNDER NUSSBAUM TALKS ABOUT THE DUAL NATURE OF THE GROUP AS BRIDGING THE WOMEN'S AND LABOR MOVEMENTS.**

9to5's dual structure as a worker association and a union meant that it was using a variety of organizing strategies. Labor historian Lane Windham summarizes the success of 9to5's unique approach in "Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide.":

> The union, SEIU Local 925, won a few NLRB elections, but it found that most of the private-sector employers it challenged were able to block workers' organizing efforts by manipulating and breaking labor law. The association had more success…

The 9to5 founders were essentially the foremothers of what today is known as 'alt-labor,' the wave of workers' centers, associations, and campaigns that seek to build power for workers outside the collective bargaining paradigm in the early twenty-first century. For a time, these women labor activists were able to use the new organizing forms of the women's movement, in combination with community organizing tactics, to build an entirely new doorway into economic security and greater equality for America's workers.

> **"9TO5'S DUAL STRUCTURE AS A WORKER ASSOCIATION AND A UNION MEANT THAT IT WAS USING A VARIETY OF ORGANIZING STRATEGIES.**

9TO5'S IMPACT AND LEGACY

9to5 ran into the tough conservative environment of the 1980s that confronted the entire labor movement. Today, businesses still exploit women workers through lower pay and other discriminatory tactics, particularly in low wage sectors. But 9to5 nevertheless played a crucial role in empowering women workers, raising the issues of gender discrimination and sexual harassment, and improving working conditions.

The 9to5 association still exists in several states, and SEIU has Local 925 in Seattle. A documentary about the movement was released in 2021.

Overall, 9to5 is a fascinating example of a major national campaign, led by women, that built a worker association to organize within secretarial occupations in a number of industries. It used diverse approaches, including both traditional NLRB union elections, and non-traditional pre-majority strategies including workplace actions and community organizing tactics.

REFLECTIONS ON ORGANIZING WITH 9TO5

By Debra Bergen

This is a reflection about the working women's organization 9to5.

You never know where life will take you. As a volunteer for EWOC, I feel as if I have come full circle as an organizer. The pre-majority unionism strategies and tactics used in many of EWOC's campaigns are very much the same as those used and described by Ellen Cassedy in her book "Working 9 to 5" in the late 70s and early 1980s. Based on my own experience with District 9to5 and my time with EWOC, they are indeed, very much the same and are still applicable today.

I got my start in organizing shortly after I graduated from SUNY New Paltz in 1978 while I was employed as a clerical worker at Syracuse University. I volunteered as a rank-and-file member of the organizing committee in a campaign led by the UAW's TOPS division (Technical, Office, Professional and Service). While the union drive did lead to an election that was held after I left the university, it was not successful.

Upon moving back to New York City in 1980, I joined Women Office Workers (WOW), the New York City branch of 9to5 National Association of Working Women. While volunteering for WOW, I was a member and chair of the recruitment committee and conducted leafleting and outreach in the community. Our objectives were to recruit office workers who were interested in organizing for better working conditions to build a viable organization to take collective action.

WOW also provided educational sessions to NYC women office workers and formed a Labor History Committee, of which I was chair. The committee implemented "Working Women Make History," a program sponsored by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities Labor History Project. The Labor History committee coordinated three activities.

- A forum event on Rosie the Riveter
- A four-session course on the history of working women
- A skit on the history of clerical organizing

We also established a resource library for members in the WOW office.

While at WOW-NYC from 1981-1982 and working with an organizer from the newly formed District 925/SEIU, we became the "NYC District 9-2-5 Organizing Council." We targeted specific sites for possible union campaigns with emphasis on insurance companies and banks. I got a job at an insurance company as a "mole" in the hopes of starting a campaign there, but it did not materialize. As coordinator of the council in 1981, I was a representative of WOW at the National Associations of Working Women's 9to5 summer school at Bryn Mawr, in the tradition of the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers in Industry founded in 1921.

My years at WOW informed the trajectory my life would take in the years to come. I went on and received a Certificate in Trade Union Studies for Women from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations in June 1982 and in 1991 obtained an MSILR from Cornell University/CUNY. I have organized and represented hospital, home care workers, physicians, and university workers.

I am now retired from the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY as Director of Contract Enforcement after 27 years, but my years as a labor educator, organizer, and negotiator were all due, in part, to the sisterhood and solidarity I experienced at WOW. As I read "Working 9 to 5," it reminded me of my experiences with WOW — organizing efforts that were very similar to the approach taken by EWOC in the cases where we support workers organizing for recognition and power in the workplace, absent an established union.

Once you have organized your co-workers, you have your union!

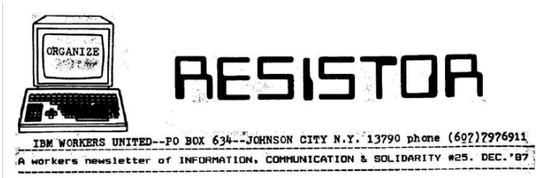
IBM WORKERS UNITED AND THE ALLIANCE@IBM

By Colette Perold

The IBM union handed out their first pamphlet at the IBM factory in Endicott, New York, in 1976. A pre-majority union for all forty years of their existence, they called themselves IBM Workers United starting in 1976, then renamed as the Alliance@IBM when they affiliated with the Communication Workers of America (CWA) in 1999. They eventually closed in 2016 after IBM shed over 70% of its U.S.-based workforce, decimating the Alliance's membership levels. But at its height, the Alliance@IBM had members in almost every state where IBM had factories and branch offices. The case study that follows describes their origins, several pivotal moments in their growth, their affiliation with the CWA, their orientation to pre-majority unionism (what some of the workers called "minority" unionism, and what CWA at the time was calling "member-based organizing," plain and simple), challenges they faced, and wins they achieved over their forty-year history.

PRE-MAJORITY ORIGINS

IBM Workers United (IBM WU) began as a cohort of IBM manufacturing workers that IBM management called the "troublemaker generation." Hired in 1973 and 1974, many were self-described radicals and anti-war activists—some, Vietnam War veterans themselves—who didn't swallow the company line about IBM being a "family" as easily as their predecessors did.



Banner from IBM Workers United newsletter "Resistor."

They didn't think of themselves as a union from the start. Lee Conrad, one of the original IBM WU members, told me: "It was just a small group of us that were a little ticked off at what the company was going through at the time." They put out a flyer in Endicott and had local community activists hand it out. From there, they expanded to Poughkeepsie (NY), Burlington (VT), San José (CA), Charlotte and Raleigh (NC), and other newer IBM plants in the South. Their initial campaigns were a mix of broader political interventions, like raising awareness of IBM's role in South African Apartheid, and local environmental and shop-floor concerns. Chief among these were building broad ties with local community organizations in Endicott to force IBM to clean up and compensate for its toxic spills in the area, and getting IBM to protect its workers from the toxic chemicals it was forcing them to use in the plants.

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> **IT WAS JUST A SMALL GROUP OF US THAT WERE A LITTLE TICKED OFF AT WHAT THE COMPANY WAS GOING THROUGH AT THE TIME.**

Once IBM WU went public in 1984 (see next section), they began traveling to different IBM plants around the country, leafleting on company grounds, and signing up workers to their mailing lists. The workers developed activist and informal steward networks across the company, regularly confronting their bosses at shop-floor meetings called by management, and successfully pushing back against top-down decisions about restructuring, shift length, benefits, and more. Beyond public confrontation, they also engaged in traditional bread-and-butter organizing campaigns, winning occasional concessions for groups of workers at a time, sometimes in one facility, and on at least one occasion, for an entire job classification across the firm nationally (Customer Engineers). They also became a visible presence both inside and outside IBM's yearly shareholder meetings, taking over discussions about shareholder actions from the inside, and hosting rallies attended by local AFL-CIO affiliate members on the outside.

By the time they affiliated with CWA in 1999, IBM workers favored a pre-majority approach for three primary reasons. First, they had seen how major tech firms colluded with the NLRB to dole out unfavorable bargaining-unit determinations when workers did file for elections one facility at a time. The case of a failed election at NCR stood out to Lee as particularly demoralizing. IBM as a corporation was more powerful than many of these other firms, and IBM workers believed IBM would do the same.

Second, they had brief experiences organizing toward recognition votes one factory at a time, first with the IUE in 1995, and then with the IBEW in 1999. These unsuccessful attempts showed the workers the dangers of carving up their membership into NLRB bargaining-unit distinctions prematurely. Many of the workers eventually came to see the blue-collar/white-collar coalitions they had forged from IBM factories to branch offices as a source of strength—and kicking out the white-collar workers divided them unnecessarily — the boss was already trying to divide the workplace, and they saw no reason to aid in that effort.

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> **MANY OF THE WORKERS EVENTUALLY CAME TO SEE THE BLUE-COLLAR/ WHITE-COLLAR COALITIONS THEY HAD FORGED FROM IBM FACTORIES TO BRANCH OFFICES AS A SOURCE OF STRENGTH, AND KICKING OUT THE WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS DIVIDED THEM UNNECESSARILY.**

Third, IBM was a unique type of anti-union employer. While the firm engaged in repressive union-busting tactics, they relied more heavily on what the Alliance@IBM's CWA staff organizer Steve Early called their "union substitution apparatus." Since the mid-1930s IBM continuously boasted some of the highest wages and strongest benefits packages in the industry. It developed "open-door" employee complaint policies that created, for some workers, a sense of being listened to at work

(though as Early and Rand write, workers often called these "'open door' grievance mechanisms" an "'out-the-door' procedure for workers who try to use them").

IBM developed a culture of company loyalty that Alliance member-turned CWA organizer Ralph Montefusco describes as a "cult" that ran on internalized guilt and threats of "betrayal" for stepping outside of the "family." (For context, for many decades IBM mandated workers sing along to the IBM company songbook filled with lyrics praising IBM executives.) For IBM WU and Alliance@IBM worker leaders, choosing a minority-union approach—with an eye toward an eventual contract—was their best shot at growing their ranks in this particular type of anti-union workplace.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT: INTERNATIONAL UNIONS, TECH WORKER NETWORKS, CWA, AND OTHER ORGANIZED GROUPS WITHIN THE FIRM

While IBM famously never negotiated a collective bargaining agreement in the U.S., many of its international operations did. These international unions were one of the greatest sources of strength for IBM WU members. The turning point for IBM WU came in 1983 when the IBM Japan union reached out to IBM WU and representatives from both met in Montreal. There, they planned the first international IBM workers meeting in Tokyo to take place the following year, with representation from Canada, Greece, France, Germany, and Italy. These international meetings became annual occurrences. The group initially called itself IBM Workers' International Solidarity, then merged with the Switzerland-based UNI Global Union and renamed itself the IBM Global Union Alliance. It existed until 2014, and by the end, had fifteen member countries.

But back in 1983, nothing emboldened IBM Workers United members more than seeing that IBM was actually capable of working with unions, and seemed to tolerate them well enough elsewhere. At this point IBM WU was still underground in the U.S., so when IBM WU leader Lee Conrad attended the 1984 meeting in Japan and was told that IBM Japan management was "looking for the American," his Japanese coworkers gave him sunglasses to wear. ("Like that would help!" said Lee. "No, all that did was help them say, 'there's the guy with the sunglass, that must be him.'") When he came back to the U.S., he felt empowered by the international solidarity, and also realized there was "no such thing as an underground anymore." This is when IBM WU decided to go public.

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> **IN 1983, NOTHING EMBOLDENED IBM WORKERS UNITED MEMBERS MORE THAN SEEING THAT IBM WAS ACTUALLY CAPABLE OF WORKING WITH UNIONS, AND SEEMED TO TOLERATE THEM WELL ENOUGH ELSEWHERE.**

Another source of strength outside of IBM WU's membership came from early tech-worker networks based largely in Massachusetts and California. The CWA was working on several campaigns starting in the early-1980s to organize high-tech workers, bringing union and non-union workers together across the industry to share tactics at firms like NCR, Western Electric, Digital Equipment Corporation, Wavetek, and others. IBM WU members were always active in these networks.

In 1985, the CWA under President Morty Bahr committed to organize IBM globally in collaboration with unions around the world, publishing a global study of the company and its labor relations. While these pronouncements aggravated some IBM WU members who felt CWA leadership was acting without consulting workers on the ground, IBM WU also believed that an information- and resource-sharing partnership with CWA would work in their favor. They agreed to collaborate, but only after CWA committed in writing to respect IBM WU's autonomy.

In addition to working with community and labor leaders outside the plants, they also worked with another IBM employee network, the Black Workers Alliance (BWA). IBM WU grew out of the manufacturing plants, and BWA, the offices. The BWA also included managers in its ranks. But the two groups found much to work on together, from their campaign to get IBM to pull its operations from Apartheid South Africa to fighting racial discrimination within IBM. They also spoke at each other's events. BWA leader Ken Branch was one of the closest connections to IBM WU, and joined international IBM union meetings as well.

THE PENSION UPRISING

The biggest turning point in their growth came in 1999, when IBM went to a cash-balance pension plan, cutting the value of workers' pensions by 40%. "All hell broke loose at IBM," said Lee. "I started getting calls at work saying, 'Are you that union guy?' We ought to start doing something!'" While the preexisting IBM WU structures and the visibility of its leaders helped support the upsurge in worker activity, the spontaneous nature of the uprising also exceeded its bounds.

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> **MASS MEETINGS SPRUNG UP AROUND THE U.S., AND MEETING ROOMS AND HALLS WERE STANDING ROOM ONLY.**

Mass meetings sprung up around the U.S., and meeting rooms and halls were standing room only. Congressional leaders took on the fight as their own, most famously Vermont's Bernie Sanders (his 1999 town hall on the issue is available online), New York's Maurice Hinchey, and others. IBM was forced to testify in congress. Through the uprising, union membership grew to its highest point of over 400 members, and their official "supporter" list shot to over 4,000. The company began issuing concessions: depending on age and year of service, some workers became eligible to opt into keeping their pension.

The pension uprising helped IBM workers see for themselves what the union was capable of, and that same year they formally affiliated with CWA District 1. Administratively, they were part of a "national Local," Local 1701 (much to Trekkies' dismay, the number came from the IBM Endicott address, not the USS Enterprise).

BECOMING THE ALLIANCE@IBM

The CWA affiliation was a natural fit for the workers. While they always kept the possibility of a collective bargaining agreement alive, both they and the CWA knew that they had to keep building the union from the ground up before they could get there. Like the UE (see: **PWOC** and **CAAMWU** case studies), the CWA was one of the only other major unions that recognized the difficulties of NLRB election drives in the high-tech sector and was interested in supporting these efforts. Steve Early explained to me CWA's relationship to pre-majority unionism in the high-tech sector as follows:

> Some of the way CWA ended up with supporting these projects was trying it the traditional way, being rebuffed in that fashion, not disappearing IUE-style [referring to the earlier, short-lived IUE effort at IBM], and then trying to find a way for as long as possible to continue to support people in their own self-organizing.

The relationship between members and leadership was generally strong, though as with most pre-majority campaigns affiliated with established unions, there were occasionally tense negotiations with the CWA executive board over the budget. Often in these cases, member-leaders feel they have to "prove" themselves or their campaigns in a way formally recognized unions do not. "There were times I was pulling my hair out," said Lee. "You can see I don't have any left!" But in general, CWA was very supportive of the Alliance@IBM effort, contributing roughly $150,000 a year to the union, with membership dues bringing in roughly $15,000 yearly.

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> **WHAT WE CARE ABOUT IS WORKERS SELF-ORGANIZING AND BUILDING SOMETHING.**

Both Lee and Ralph attribute CWA's steadfast support of the Alliance@IBM to Larry Cohen, who was CWA's Director of Organizing and Mobilizing when the Alliance kicked off, and President for most of the final decade of its existence. In an interview, Larry told me his orientation to non-contractual unionism is one that runs deep across much of CWA to this day: "What we care about is workers self-organizing and building something." Under Larry's leadership as Organizing Director and then President, worker campaigns had to meet the criteria of having a "vital organizing committee," meaning each committee member had to be able to reach at least 10 to 20 other workers "in some meaningful way," with their organizing becoming "broader and deeper" over time.

This commitment to the organizing committee was never abstract; CWA leadership always needed the numbers. "We count everything," said Larry. But within the criteria, CWA supported vital organizing committees' campaigns whether the workers were likely to achieve collective bargaining or not. "I don't think we ever abandoned any campaign that met the criteria," said Larry. "We say that organizing is for as long as it takes."

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> **THE WORKERS' AFFILIATION WITH THE CWA HELPED THEM FORMALIZE THEIR ORGANIZING AND DEVELOP A MORE SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURE.**

The workers' affiliation with CWA helped them formalize their organizing and develop a more sustainable structure. Workers got training and support for phone banking, implementing worker rating systems to assess union support, professionalizing their communications systems and documents (something the workers say mattered a lot to IBM employees given their self-perception as an elite class of worker), and wider reach nationally for connecting with workers both in and outside IBM.

They were also able to pay someone to maintain their website and run email lists. "We were like the initiators of this kind of online union organizing at the time," Lee told me. "It was pretty much brand new." They used mass email blasts to plan for actions and recruit new members in smaller, more rural offices around the country. Workers would occasionally hack into the IBM system to pull new lists of workers, and in the case of a particularly large email list, a worker sent it to them saying: "it fell off a truck." These types of "guerilla" tactics are what allowed them to keep their membership and support base informed.

Also thanks to the many strong CWA locals that existed across the country, the two shop-floor leaders who joined the CWA payroll (Ralph Montefusco and Lee Conrad) were able to access CWA resources and office space while they traveled around the U.S. supporting local organizing campaigns across the firm. Both Lee and Ralph identify this access and support as a major source of strength for their organizing outside of their respective home bases of New York and Vermont. Ralph even had keys to several CWA offices around the country, and when he traveled the country visiting Alliance committees, he was able to use those spaces to host worker meetings, make photocopies, and use a phone and computer.

Their affiliation with the CWA also allowed them to become active in their local AFL-CIO chapters, with Ralph and Lee both serving on local executive boards.

CHALLENGES AND WINS

Several Alliance@IBM members recognize they faced organizing limitations because of their pre-majority model. For example, they often struggled to turn issue-based campaign wins into longer-term organizing structures, something they credit to management's union substitutionism. They also acknowledge the

informational hurdle they faced in conveying what it meant to be part of a non-traditional union formation, without mandatory dues deductions and formal company recognition.

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> **AS OFTEN HAPPENS IN PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM, EMPLOYER CONCESSIONS THAT RESPONDED TO UNION ACTIVITY WERE HARDER TO CLAIM AS UNION VICTORIES.**

And as often happens in pre-majority unionism, employer concessions that responded to union activity were harder to claim as union victories (see **CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES**). For example, during the pension uprising, IBM’s capitulation ended up eating into some of the union’s newly strengthened base, as several of the white-collar workers who joined the fight could no longer be convinced of the need for the union once their own immediate interests were served.

At the same time, Alliance members have no doubt that the number and scale of the worker battles they won and sustained within the company over decades would not have happened without the robust union structures they built.

Beyond winning issue-based campaigns, interrupting shareholder meetings, and many instances of holding management accountable on the shop floor, IBM WU and Alliance members had other major wins. In the early 1980s, working alongside local environmental groups in Endicott, they forced IBM to clean up a toxic spill to the tune of several million dollars. In 2005 they won damages related to an age discrimination case in response to IBM’s pension restructuring. They won a mileage campaign to support field-based Customer Engineers. They developed much closer relationships to local congressional leaders than did IBM, producing a significant advantage for the workers during local hearings over IBM’s state subsidies. They helped IBM workers in several countries, from Chile to Italy, win their own domestic battles against the firm. The list goes on.

And while they struggled to turn all of their newsletter subscribers and supporters into active, dues-paying members (the former outweighing the latter more than ten-to-one), the influence they wielded within the firm could be felt with every public action and confrontation with management. The Alliance@IBM members were seen by their coworkers as the primary authority on what was taking place within IBM, and eventually the only informational source the workers could trust. Facing looming threats of offshoring but unable to get any direct information from the company, IBM employees began leaking internal information to the Alliance, which it would then post online and send to all members, supporters, and subscribers. They became one of the most important sources of information for investigative journalists as well, which in turn weakened IBM’s public perception on a number of fronts.

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> **IBM WORKERS KNEW WHO WOULD HAVE THEIR BACKS AND WHO COULD ACTUALLY HELP THEM OVERTURN SHOP FLOOR INJUSTICES. THEY KEPY IBM ON THEIR HEELS. WITHOUT EVEN A CONTRACT IN TOW, THE ALLIANCE SHIFTED THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE FIRM, AND DID SO AGAINST ALL ODDS.**

All in all, in their non-traditional, pre-majority form, the Alliance achieved something remarkable: IBM workers knew who would have their backs and who could actually help them overturn shop floor injustices. They kept IBM back on their heels. Without even a contract in tow, the Alliance shifted the balance of power in the firm, and did so against all odds.

LESSONS

In reflecting on their lessons from decades of struggle, Lee and Ralph had the following advice for workers in pre-majority unions today: Find like-minded people as soon as you can to help you deal with feeling isolated. Become a genuine source of real information if you’re able to, so your coworkers know they can reliably trust you. Use your communication platforms to obscure your size when you’re just starting out so you look bigger than you are. Don’t be afraid of guerilla tactics where appropriate (information leaks from employees were crucial to their success). Collaborate with environmental and community-based organizations around the local facilities where you work. Form strong ties with other unions in your area, and show up at one another’s events. Get media coverage of major issues and actions, especially around public-interest campaigns (subsidies, environmental concerns, etc). And don’t forget to do non-organizing activities together (like softball teams) so that social connections are at the base of your organizing.

As for unions thinking of taking on pre-majority campaigns for the first time, Steve says:

> Sometimes you can’t really predict when there’s going to be an upsurge over some issue. And it certainly helps to have a network of people with organizational experience in place when that occurs.

For union leaders concerned about the financials, Steve adds, laughing: “But is it gonna happen in the next budget year?” Steve’s point is clear: union upsurges can’t usually be predicted.

This is the reason Larry Cohen likes the metaphor of vending machines for how not to run a union campaign:

> You know, you put in a quarter, you ordered a soda, you didn’t get the soda. You start with the coin release, then you start pounding, then you start kicking, then you knock the machine over—and you’re either going to get the fucking soda or the quarter.

Larry says that some national union leaders, and even some on the left, still think this way about campaigns. But unfortunately that's not how worker movements are built and sustained over time. Reflecting on union leaders who aren't yet planning to support pre-majority campaigns today, Larry says:

> I'd say you've got to figure out how to reorient so you can [take on these campaigns], especially under Trump. You better be prepared that your strength will be the members and the stewards that fight with them every day. You can collect some amount of money—it can even be a token amount—but we better be prepared to make that commitment to workers.

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SOMETIMES YOU CAN'T REALLY PREDICT WHEN THERE'S GOING TO BE AN UPSURGE OVER SOME ISSUE. AND IT CERTAINLY HELPS TO HAVE A NETWORK OF PEOPLE WITH ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN PLACE WHEN THAT OCCURS.

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This case study of IBM workers' union efforts draws from union pamphlets and other archival materials, newspaper reports, and interviews with two of the long-term IBM shop-floor leaders—Lee Conrad and Ralph Montefusco—who eventually went on the CWA payroll to dedicate themselves fulltime to their organizing. Also interviewed were the CWA union representative assigned to the Alliance@IBM, Steve Early, and CWA Director of Organizing-come-President, Larry Cohen.

This case study is part of a bigger project. If you had any experience with either IBM Workers United or the Alliance@IBM and would like to talk with the author, she would love to hear from you at colette.perold@colorado.edu.

PWOC PLASTIC WORKER ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

By Colette Perold

The Plastic Worker Organizing Committee (PWOC) was a project of the UE from 1989-1993. It was one of the first major attempts to experiment with new ways of organizing in the manufacturing sector during the anti-union crusades of the 1980s-90s. With worker committees in roughly 100 plastics factories, PWOC built more than 12 regional committees over its lifespan to coordinate campaigns and build solidarity across the plastics industry.

While PWOC fell short of its ultimate goal of unionizing large swathes of the plastics sector, it had many wins along the way, and produced lessons that rank-and-file and militant unionists would be wise to study closely.

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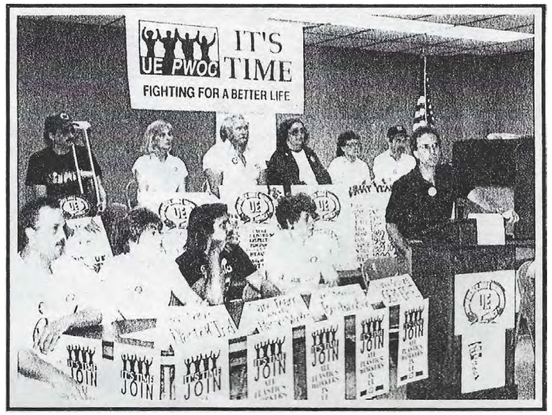
WITH WORKER COMMITTEES IN ROUGHLY 100 PLASTICS FACTORIES, PWOC BUILT MORE THAN 12 REGIONAL COMMITTEES OVER ITS LIFESPAN TO COORDINATE CAMPAIGNS AND BUILD SOLIDARITY ACROSS THE PLASTICS INDUSTRY.

The impetus for building PWOC came from two core places. On one end, the late 1980s to early 1990s was the time when U.S. manufacturing most rapidly moved overseas and to the U.S.



UE PWOC flyer, November 1990. Original caption reads: "Representatives of 3,500 plastics industry workers in Erie County, Pa. at press conference to announce their intention to organize. UE-PWOC National Chairperson Ed Bruno is at the podium."

South where labor protections were weaker. At the same time, U.S. industry was shifting from manufacturing goods with metals to plastics. This meant that plastics was a growing sector, and plastics factories were sprouting up in areas where UE had either a strong union presence already, or had recently lost members due to factory closures.

The idea to build PWOC therefore had three primary goals: (1) to rebuild the UE's presence in the manufacturing sector, (2) to do so strategically, in an area of industrial growth, and (3) to innovate new organizing models to address the crisis faced by organized labor beginning in the mid-1970s.

The initial plan was ambitious: to organize worker committees across the plastics sector one region at a time. In Erie, PA specifically, the goal was to lead to a general strike for a "master contract" across several factories at once. This militant, multi-shop, region-wide strategy, was

approved for funding by a vote of UE members with the support of the UE's top leadership.

Geographically, PWOC ultimately developed a presence in six areas: Los Angeles, CA; Chicago, IL; Milwaukee, WI; Erie, PA with a smaller presence in Philadelphia, PA; across Indiana; and in southern Ohio. On three occasions in PWOC's four-year span, regional committees elected delegates to gather in Pittsburgh to strategize with other unionized plastics workers.

The combination of these three layers of worker organization—at the factory level, the regional, and the national—helped workers build the class consciousness they needed to carry forward their industry-wide pre-majority organizing.

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> **THE COMBINATION OF THESE THREE LAYERS OF WORKER ORGANIZATION—AT THE FACTORY LEVEL, THE REGIONAL, AND THE NATIONAL—HELPED WORKERS BUILD THE CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS THEY NEEDED TO CARRY FORWARD THEIR INDUSTRY-WIDE PRE-MAJORITY ORGANIZING.**

TRADE UNION UNITY LEAGUE (TUUL)

The PWOC model drew inspiration from the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) of the early 1930s and its predecessor organization, the Trade Union Education League (TUEL), of the 1920s.

Made up of worker radicals from across the political Left and sponsored, in part, by the Communist Party USA, the TUEL sought to push the AFL (see **OVERVIEW OF UNION HISTORY, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTION**) to the Left and away from its anti-solidaristic, craft-union roots. To a lesser degree, it also formed worker committees in areas where there was no union presence. The work of building new industrial unions in workplaces without union representation was carried on more concertedly by TUEL's successor, TUUL, beginning in 1929.

Workers who were trained by the TUEL and TUUL became the leaders who helped form several well known CIO unions including the UE, the UAW, the Farm Equipment Workers, and others.

The UE saw TUEL and TUUL as a model precisely because of how they were able to scale up with minimal resources: from individual committees across multiple factories to the ultimate founding of major industrial unions. UE organizers who would go on to build the PWOCs held a union-wide reading group to study TUEL/TUUL founder William Z. Foster's 1937 iconic "What Means a Strike in Steel" as they drafted the initial PWOC strategy. (In April 2022 workers in the Amazon Labor Union [ALU] described Foster's similar 1936 pamphlet "Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry" as a major source of inspiration for their successful campaign to win the first union election at Amazon.)

THE THEORY BEHIND PWOC: FROM TUEL/TUUL TO "SWEEP ELECTIONS"

It's worth noting that even throughout PWOC, the UE did not consider this type of organizing a "pre-majority union" strategy. The idea of workers winning campaigns on the shop floor before filing for an NLRB election was always the strategy the UE pursued. Dave Cohen, who came out of the ranks of a UE factory in the Northeast that got offshored and shuttered, was the only full-time UE staff member whose work was dedicated exclusively to PWOC. As he put it in an interview with EWOC, before the PWOC moment: "We didn't think of it as premajority unions. You try to get people to raise hell. And then at some point you think you can make a run to an NLRB election, and you do." In other words, the UE saw NLRB elections as a necessary step, but never the secret ingredient that would turn "workers" into a "union" the way many unions today do. The union was always the workers themselves fighting for justice and building power.

This made expanding on the TUEL/TUUL model a natural fit for the UE. Some of this came from the PWOC planners' unique interpretation of TUEL and TUUL. "What's worth talking about," UE's then-organizing director Ed Bruno told EWOC, "is that [management in the 1930s] recognized the union at General Electric, General Motors, Westinghouse, Steel, and others, for purposes of grievance representation **for the union's members only**" before the unions gained full recognition with the passing of the NLRA. According to Ed, this is a key part of the origin story of the CIO that is often overlooked. "This was unionism **on the way to** being a majority," he told EWOC.

While **MEMBERS-ONLY BARGAINING** is not possible under our current legal framework (and there is significant debate about whether it should be), Ed says the same lessons of how TUEL/TUUL organized still apply today.

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> **WE DIDN'T THINK OF IT AS PRE-MAJORITY UNIONS. YOU TRY TO GET PEOPLE TO RAISE HELL. AND THEN AT SOME POINT YOU THINK YOU CAN MAKE A RUN TO AN NLRB ELECTION, AND YOU DO.**

Ed describes how cadres ("or what the academics now call 'committed cores,'" he added) began forming in 1928, either "resurfacing from the World War I days or established by the political parties" in key factories. These cadres comprised a mix of Communists, "home-grown radicals," IWW members, or "just troublemakers" who started to network together and share experiences. While they tried to unionize throughout that period, nothing worked, according to Ed, until they won members-only bargaining and could begin competing for members. This network of cadres was a major element of the formation of the CIO. (See **OVERVIEW OF UNION HISTORY, STRUCTURE, AND FUNCTION**).

The success of the TUEL/TUUL cadre model is what led Ed and the rest of the PWOC architects

to devise a concept Ed calls “sweep” elections. This is what they put to the test with PWOC.

SWEEP ELECTIONS

The concept of “sweep elections” involves connecting committed cores, or cadres, across workplaces, going public with that network early on, and strengthening that network until reaching a “breakthrough” in one workplace that catches on at the others. The goal is to achieve union recognition and bargaining at several workplaces at the same time.

One of the key ingredients to a successful sweep election is what Ed calls the “calling card” issue. This means finding one major worker issue that (1) all workers can connect with, and (2) connects workers’ workplace concerns with broader issues of citizenship outside of work. Examples of “calling card” issues Ed gives are, for nurses, nurse-to-patient ratios, and for workers during the early days of the U.S. labor movement, a shorter workweek combined with the right to public education.

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> **THE GOAL IS TO ACHIEVE UNION RECOGNITION AND BARGAINING AT SEVERAL WORKPLACES AT THE SAME TIME.**

Another way to understand connecting workplace issues to those of citizenship is that, when you’re doing it, you are buttressing your **SECTION 7** rights (the right to organize with your coworkers at work) with your constitutional First Amendment rights (to speak and to assemble in public). “It’s a lot safer for a workplace to be out on the street,” says Ed.

With the right calling-card issue identified, Ed says that the most successful sweep elections move from the shop-floor to the public arena very quickly. This both **empowers** workers and **protects** them. In a sweep-election strategy, those that go “too deep” in one individual workplace end up failing, he says, because they get too caught up in their own workplaces and lose sight of the broader movement.

What you’re ultimately aiming for are “breakthroughs” that catch fire, not unlike the initial Starbucks organizing drive in Buffalo, NY. One of the greatest examples of a “breakthrough,” according to Ed, is the one that gave us the modern labor movement: When workers won a contract for their members at the famous sit-down strike of 1936-7 at General Motors in Flint, Michigan, they inspired 477 more sit-down strikes involving over 500,000 workers the following year. With that, millions of workers formed unions, flooding into both the CIO and the AFL.

According to Ed, none of this would have happened without the network of cadres.

After developing the concept of “sweep elections” with PWOC, Ed expanded on it to build unions in the south, including the first ever recognized nurses union in Texas. It is now a core concept used in the Southern Workers Assembly—one of the most vibrant efforts to organize workers in the South today.

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> **IT’S A LOT SAFER FOR A WORKPLACE TO BE OUT ON THE STREET.**

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: PWOC TACTICS AND CAMPAIGNS

In terms of its geographic spread, the majority of PWOC activity was concentrated in four areas: greater Los Angeles, where there were around a thousand plastics factories; the Milwaukee-Chicago manufacturing corridor; Erie, Pennsylvania; and southern Ohio. The decision to focus on these four areas came from two places: (1) A research process that assessed where the plastics industry was concentrated in the country; (2) A strategic assessment of where UE membership was concentrated or where UE already had existing membership in plastics factories. Erie was one of the cities that best exemplified both. At the time it was one of the most industrialized cities in the U.S., and the UE represented workers at the big General Electric locomotive factory. The idea in Erie specifically was to build committees across 50 factories at once.

UE first made contact with plastics workers in a highly public way: by doing flyering blitzes. For example, in Erie, PA they would flyer for 3-4 days at a time, with blitzes involving local UE members, around 20 UE staff members, and around 25 college students, several of whom were affiliated with nearby DSA chapters. With a list of 60 target factories in the greater Erie area, these workers, organizers, and activists sought to establish contacts across different shifts at as many factories as possible.

Once the UE had established contacts, building committees to organize workers around their issues was the next step. One of their main strategies was training workers in how to exercise their NLRA **SECTION 7** rights. This meant using all the tools legally available under the NLRA to take collective action as non-unionized workers to fight injustice on the factory floor.

One of the most memorable campaigns for PWOC members in Erie, PA, where PWOC had committees in 15 factories, came when the major temp agencies in the area that contracted with local plants started telling temp workers they were forbidden to unionize by law. Fearing the growing labor unrest in plastics factories, temp agencies were doing whatever they could to stifle PWOC’s organizing so as not to risk their contracting relationships with local plants. Tad Temporaries, one of the largest temp agencies in Erie, issued a statement explaining that “plastics union organizers are putting on a strong push to organize all plastics shops,” falsely claiming that temporary workers could not legally “participate in voting” for a union, or in “any discussion thereof of union business” in the U.S.

In response, the day before July 4th, 75 plastics workers—led by a (particularly tall) UE field organizer, Peter Knowlton, dressed as Uncle Sam—picketed the Tad offices, chanting: “We Want Democracy, Not Hypocrisy!” From there, Uncle Sam and six other workers marched into Tad’s office with reporters from three local news stations and delivered a copy of the Bill

of Rights, along with a letter from PWOC, which Uncle Sam then read: "Your notice telling employees that they cannot participate in any discussion of union business," it said, "not only violates national labor law, but also the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution."

With the message clearly registering, workers then took turns educating Tad officials about their right to organize. Tad officials got visibly nervous and quickly conceded their error. Workers demanded Tad put a correction in writing, and soon after Tad circulated a second notice to temp workers correcting the first and clarifying the workers' right to organize. Their win in forcing Tad to backtrack and fess up was extremely empowering for the temp workers involved.

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> **PWOC MEMBERS COUNTED 100 FACTORIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY THAT IMPLEMENTED THE RAISE IN RESPONSE TO THEIR ORGANIZING.**

Other tactics PWOC used included pickets, marches, and community events. In one march, campaigns had built so much power that 50 workers took their march straight **through the factory**. Picnics and other social events in which workers had the chance to tell their stories and connect over common workplace struggles was crucial to their building trust in one another. PWOC's largest events exceeded 500 workers. At one, PWOC members connected their workplace issues with those of basic citizenship in "sweep-election" style, rallying for National Health Care. Petitions for their National Health Care campaigns garnered several thousand signatures each. PWOC members also regularly joined the picket lines of sister and brother unions nearby.

One of their biggest wins was in response to a coordinated campaign for $1/hr raises across the plastics sector. After three months of the campaign, PWOC members counted 100 factories across the country that implemented the raise in response to their organizing.

COMMUNITY ELECTIONS

As part of their larger strategy to build the union through militant struggle **before** jumping to NLRB elections, PWOC innovated a tactic they called "Community Elections" in which they staged their own union elections without seeking governmental certification or company recognition per se. (The Community Election model was later pitched to Jobs with Justice, becoming the "Workers Rights Boards.") Though partially symbolic, these Community Elections had a major impact on the plastics worker organizing.

PWOC ran their Community Elections as systematically as the UE runs NLRB elections. Support on the shop floor was assessed by having workers sign pledge cards or show their union pride publicly with union t-shirts, stickers, or buttons. PWOC committee members tracked their support closely, with detailed worker information listing who was a strong supporter, weak supporter, undecided, or anti-union. (Sometimes they used a numbering system the way many unions do today, but they insisted on keeping written evaluations of workers to discourage what Dave Cohen calls a "static view of people" making it harder to assess when and where support shifts given changing conditions in the workplace.)

When the numbers showed a majority of workers in support of the union, the committee would recruit a well known community leader like a pastor or congressperson's chief aide to oversee the election, and then announce it.

While the workers usually knew that management would not want to join in the election, they sent a worker delegation to invite the company anyway. To them, this legitimized their process while also flexing their muscles and calling management's bluff. From there, they'd run publicity in the local press announcing the election. As PWOC staffer Dave Cohen told EWOC, if workers were going to take bold action like this, they needed to be as "out in the open" as possible.

In addition to their careful analysis of shop-floor union support, PWOC made sure to check two other crucial boxes in their election organizing. First, they made sure their lists included the full names of management and every boss in the factory. The one time they did not confirm their list enough times was the only Community Election they lost. In this one case, management turned out bosses to vote, and since the lists were inaccurate, the election overseer did not have enough information to refuse the bosses a vote. (Unfortunately this one had a high-profile election overseer: a congressman's chief aide.)

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> **ONCE THE WORKERS WON THEIR COMMUNITY ELECTION, THEY FELT A STRONGER SENSE OF BEING PART OF A UNION. FROM THERE, GOING INTO AN NLRB ELECTION FELT TO THEM MORE LIKE DEFENDING A UNION RATHER THAN WAITING TO SEE IF THEY HAD SUPPORT.**

After that one Community Election loss, PWOC created a system in which anyone who claimed to work at the factory but whose name was not on the list wanted to vote, the election overseer would put their ballot in a separate envelope labeled "to be determined later." As with NLRB elections, these votes were then consulted if the election results were close enough that the "to be determined later" ballots could shape the outcome.

Another central element of the Community Elections was making sure to turn out **every single worker** to vote, even those they knew would vote against the union. They did this because in the few factories where they did not turn out the "no-votes," the workers across the factory ended up questioning the validity of the vote. Having a transparent and equal process was a necessary ingredient for the workers to feel empowered by their election results.

In the end, Community Elections had two major outcomes: a good psychological effect on the workers, and a stronger support base in the cases where the workers did end up pursuing NLRB elections. Like an informal version of

the **CARD CHECK NEUTRALITY** process, workers could run their election as early or late as they wanted to, thereby avoiding the boss' union busting. The Community Election results therefore felt like the true expression of what workers wanted.

The effect was powerful. Once the workers won their Community Election, they felt a stronger sense of being part of a union. From there, going into an NLRB election felt to them more like defending a union rather than waiting to see if they had support. They won a handful of these NLRB elections this way, and in all the others they lost by much slimmer margins than had been otherwise standard in plastics organizing at the time.

OBSTACLES

One of the main obstacles PWOC faced in their organizing mirrored the broader trends taking place across the economy. The UE assumed their target areas would be promising to organize because they were all union towns in heavily industrialized areas. But plastics workers in general had such low expectations of their jobs that it was hard to convince them to fight for better conditions. Workers tended to buy into management propaganda that said that plastic labor was as cheap as the new plastics economy itself, regardless of how much money bosses were raking in. In response, PWOC adopted the slogan: "It's Time." The slogan contrasted the poor conditions in the plastics factories with the high-tech nature of plastics at a moment when the U.S. was becoming increasingly obsessed with the allure of shiny digital toys.

PWOC organizers found that plastics workers tended to think of their jobs as temporary no matter how long they ended up working in plastics factories. There was always a sense that the best job would come from leaving plastics and getting hired at General Electric or a steel or paper mill—not from improving the conditions at the plastics plants themselves. Dave explained it to EWOC: "People had no holidays, no paid vacation…and were always bouncing back and forth between their job and unemployment checks…they had no expectation of having health insurance. No conceptions of what a pension plan was. They didn't realize that it was the unions that got those good jobs" at the other plants in the area.

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> **ANOTHER OBSTACLE THEY FACED IN A HANDFUL OF PLANTS HAD TO DO WITH THE WORKER COMMITTEE AT THE PLANT OSSIFYING ITSELF AS AN IN-GROUP AND LOSING TOUCH WITH THE SENTIMENT AMONG THE WORKERS MORE BROADLY.**

Another obstacle they faced in a handful of plants had to do with the worker committee at the plant ossifying itself as an in-group and losing touch with the sentiment among the workers more broadly. While this can happen in any union, whether NLRB-recognized or pre-majority, the specific problem PWOC faced was figuring out at what stage to formalize worker committees.

There were differences of opinion on how loose or rigid to build out pre-majority committees within the UE. According to Dave, it was in factories that formalized their committee leadership through elections too quickly that they began to lose the rank and file. In one of the factories with the tightest, most inward-facing committee, a different union succeeded in organizing the workers away from the UE.

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> **THE STEWARD STRUCTURE YOU NEED WHEN YOU'RE FIGHTING FOR A UNION IS DIFFERENT FROM WHAT YOU NEED WHEN YOU HAVE A CONTRACT…WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR IS MOTION. IT MIGHT NOT BE WHERE YOU'RE AT. IT MIGHT NOT BE MILITANT ENOUGH. BUT YOU CAN'T GET TOO INGRAINED.**

In another, the committee became a clique of all white men who refused to organize with women and Black people, and the UE had to remove them from office for violating the UE constitution. Dave told EWOC:

> The steward structure you need when you're fighting for a union is different from what you need when you have a contract. I always tell people that what we're looking for is motion. It might not be where you're at. It might not be militant enough. But you can't get too ingrained.

The absence of support from other unions was another obstacle. As UE's Director of Organization, Ed Bruno went to several unions to pitch them on the PWOC concept, but according to Ed, even the unions who were most enthusiastic about the idea didn't have organizing departments at the time and couldn't marshal the resources to put toward this type of slower-build, regional, sweep-election strategy.

As with several other pre-majority unions, the question of ongoing financial support was a deciding factor in the bulk of the PWOC campaigns coming to a close. Although around 2-3 UE staff members in each core PWOC region were able to dedicate some of their staff time to building PWOC, Dave was the only full-time staffer. After four years the UE—already member-led and less reliant on staff than most unions today—realized the slow nature of the build was draining too much of their already tight pool of resources.

As Dave and past president of UE District 2 Judy Atkins wrote in an article in 2004, a TUEL formation like PWOC would require ongoing union support or the long-term commitment of politicized volunteers, either on the ground or on the shop floor—much like what EWOC is building today—to sustain itself in the long run.

THE ROLE OF BARGAINING IN PRE-MAJORITY CONTEXTS

In assessing what he would do differently as the national coordinator of a campaign like PWOC, Dave said he would recommend doing more to cultivate a relationship—however adversarial—

with the bosses. “I always tell people,” Dave told EWOC: “that if you want [the bosses] to surrender to you, they have to have someone to talk to in order to surrender to.”

The best example of a missed opportunity for bargaining took place in the Erie PWOC hub. The Erie PWOCs met with the local Chamber of Commerce which had a plastics council. “We heard through the grapevine later on that they were split 50/50,” Dave told EWOC:

> Half [the council] thought they should cut a deal with the union, and the other half, run by one of the biggest companies, wanted to fight to the death.

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> **THAT IF YOU WANT [THE BOSSES] TO SURRENDER TO YOU, THEY HAVE TO HAVE SOMEONE TO TALK TO IN ORDER TO SURRENDER TO.**

But PWOC committee leadership and UE staff did not ultimately follow up with the plastics council as much as they should have, says Dave: “With all this premajority stuff, you have to actually be bargaining as you go.”

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> **WITH ALL THIS PREMAJORITY STUFF, YOU HAVE TO ACTUALLY BE BARGAINING AS YOU GO.**

Ed echoes the same idea. In a pre-majority context you can’t just “make the demand on the employer” and leave it up to the employer to respond, says Ed. “The demand is not the remedy.” Instead, you have to “make the demand to *meet* to **discuss** the remedy.”

Ed gives this hypothetical: Workers have a problem and they know how it needs to be fixed. With a problem and a proposed remedy, they now have a “demand.” But rather than just announce the demand, they should try to **meet with management as a union** about the problem itself. If the workers have enough power, management may meet with them as a union. But in most cases they won’t, because that would be a form of de facto recognizing the union, and most employers won’t do that because of how empowering it can be for the workers.

When management (in all likelihood) refuses to meet with the workers, the workers can start publicizing the refusal. Ed says:

> ‘They won’t meet with us!’ So [they] put the question on the question of meeting…And in certain campaigns you probably could create a whole litany: ‘We raised vacation policy, they refused to meet. We raised this and they refused to meet. We raised that and they refused to meet.’ You want to build the sense that the only way we’re going to get these people to meet is to go on strike or change the law—whichever comes first.

Orienting the organizing toward **meeting** helps workers learn for themselves how much power they need to build in order to force management to table. This grassroots approach to recognition and negotiation gets to the “whole matter of what collective bargaining really means,” says Ed.

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> **ORIENTING THE ORGANIZING TOWARD MEETING HELPS WORKERS LEARN FOR THEMSELVES HOW MUCH POWER THEY NEED TO BUILD IN ORDER TO FORCE MANAGEMENT TO TABLE.**

PWOC’S FINAL DAYS

While there are strategic lessons to be learned from the UE’s work on the PWOC campaigns, according to Ed the greatest obstacle to the PWOCs’ success was not actually internal to the campaigns. It was structural, rooted in the transformations taking place across the global economy.

The plastics factories with PWOC committees had less capital invested in the plants than did the plastics and other factories producing heavier industrial equipment. This meant they could more easily shutter and move overseas. Plastics workers likely knew this because of their close familial and community contacts in plants with heavier equipment and more specialized processes.

At the same time, the PWOCs were expanding in the four years prior to the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which received major national attention during the 1992 presidential election. While there aren’t too many reports of plastics companies threatening to move to Mexico if the workers organized—a threat that would have be illegal if used—national attention was being paid to Texan Independent candidate Ross Perot’s famous warning of a “giant sucking sound” of jobs moving to Mexico if NAFTA were implemented. With NAFTA in the headlines, this was one of the most difficult times for factory organizing.

PWOC’S LASTING EFFECTS

In the years following PWOC’s close, workers in factories with strong PWOC committees but that didn’t win NLRB elections would call the UE saying they were having a particular shop-floor issue and asking for organizing advice. Some even thought the UE was their union already because the PWOC flyering blitzes made them think they already had a union representing them and assumed the flyers were part of an ongoing union battle.

In Erie, PA, a few factories with strong PWOC committees won NLRB elections 10 years after PWOC’s close. And in Ohio, plastics workers at one factory ended up successfully striking for recognition.

After thousands of plastics workers were in motion through PWOC for four intense years of struggle, not to mention several successful NLRB elections and many more close calls, PWOC left a lasting legacy across the plastics sector.

These after-effects beg the question: what could longer-term investments in "sweep-election"-style, pre-majority campaigns produce?

Reflecting on PWOC's four short but mighty years of existence, Ed told EWOC: "It turns out you can't do a sweep [election] quite that fast." Despite the PWOC slogan "It's time," Ed told EWOC that a joke began circulating among workers and organizers as PWOC closed up: "Well, maybe it wasn't quite time."

> **"IT'S CLEAR IN HINDSIGHT THAT FOR PWOC TO HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL, IT WOULD HAVE NEEDED LONGER-TERM INVESTMENT AND COMMITTED VOLUNTEER SUPPORT.**

With the (likely empty) threat of moving factories overseas or to the U.S. South, mixed with the low esteem associated with plastics work, it's clear in hindsight that for PWOC to have been successful, it would have needed longer-term investment and committed volunteer support. But "unions are not good on longer-range things," Ed told EWOC.

It might now be time for that to change.

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Unless otherwise noted, information from this article comes from Judy Atkins and David Cohen's "A Proposal for a Twenty-first-Century Trade Union Education League; An Attempt to Solve the Crisis of Organizing the Unorganized," WorkingUSA 7, no.3 (2004) and author interviews with Dave Cohen, Ed Bruno, and Peter Knowlton.

CAAMWU-UE THE CAROLINA AUTO, AEROSPACE AND MACHINE WORKERS UNION

By Colette Perold

CAAMWU'S FIRST FIGHT: CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE FACTORY FLOOR

The Carolina Auto, Aerospace and Machine Workers Union (CAAMWU-UE) in North Carolina got its start in 1990 when workers at the African-American–majority workplace at Consolidated Diesel Company (CDC) won an eight-month petition campaign for a paid day off for Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Many of these workers—who manufactured the engines for the iconic Dodge Ram pickup truck—were Black workers who grew up on farms under the sharecropping system before the defeat of legal segregation.

Their fight to win a paid MLK Day holiday was significant therefore not just because the workers won a major workplace demand but also because of the civil-rights and worker-power message the workers conveyed with their win. They were not going to bow down to the entrenched white political and economic power of North Carolina's Rocky Mount region.

After winning MLK day as a paid holiday, these workers formed the CDC Workers Unity Committee in 1990. In 1994, they affiliated with the UE, and in 1999 they joined with North Carolina public workers to establish the statewide UE Local 150. In 2001 they joined forces with another pre-majority union at the Vermont American machine tool plant to form CAAMWU-UE—the only private-sector chapter of UE Local 150.

CAAMWU-UE Local 150 members after their 2002 PIB Wage & Hour Lawsuit Victory. Nashville, NC, July 19, 2006.

Today, with over two decades of existence, a consistent membership of several hundred workers, and a series of shop-floor victories, the CAAMWU is likely the most successful pre-majority union in the private sector in recent labor history.

> **"CAAMWU IS LIKELY THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PRE-MAJORITY UNION IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR IN RECENT LABOR HISTORY.**

CAAMWU'S PRE-MAJORITY ROOTS

CAAMWU-UE (and its predecessor the CDC Workers Unity Committee) came out of a

project of Black Workers for Justice called the Rocky Mount Workers Unity Council. Before their MLK-day victory, they forged connections between the community and the workplace in the fight for racial justice by carpooling people from three rural counties to a People's Health Clinic near the factory. Their model has always been to build political power in the region at the same time they grow their collective power on the shopfloor.

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> **THE WORKERS' DECISION TO PURSUE PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM CAME FROM THE EXPERIENCE CDC WORKERS WITNESSED IN THE 1980S AND 1990S: WORKERS REPEATEDLY LOSING NLRB ELECTIONS IN THE SAME FACTORY BY EXTREMELY NARROW MARGINS.**

Their main organization soon became the Community Empowerment Alliance (CEA), and through the CEA they sought to win Black majority rule in the area. By 2015, the town of Whitakers had a Black female mayor and mostly African-American women on the city council. As writer and organizer Mariya Strauss writes, CDC workers and the CEA "saw that to win policies that would benefit everyone equally, they would not only have to organize within the plant but also have to break the entrenched political power structures in their towns." To this day, CAAMWU counts on the public support of local church and community leaders for their shopfloor campaigns.

Ultimately, the CDC workers' decision back in 1994 to pursue pre-majority unionism — and to do so in affiliation with the UE — came from the experience CDC workers witnessed at nearby plants at increasing rates in the 1980s and 1990s: workers repeatedly losing NLRB elections in the same factory by extremely narrow margins. This was at the time when manufacturing was shifting increasingly overseas and to the U.S. South, where labor protections were weaker.

Examples of repeat NLRB election losses with slim margins in the Rocky Mount and Wilson areas of North Carolina took place primarily with workers organizing with the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers of America (ACTWU). These were at Genbearco, Standard Products, and Safelite. In the Standard Products plant, workers lost three elections over the course of ten years but still weren't willing to give up their fight. They started implementing a pre-majority steward structure with elections, dues, and bylaws, then asked the UAW for continued support. But as CAAMWU member Jim Wrenn told EWOC, the UAW "turned their back on these workers and walked away."

After watching this nearby fight at Standard Products, workers at CDC who wanted to form their own pre-majority union reached out to UE. According to CDC workers, the UE was the only union willing to support this type of militant, bottom-up, non-contractual unionism in auto-parts plants in right-to-work North Carolina.

UNION MEMBERSHIP

Over the years, both the number of plants organized by CAAMWU and the number of dues-paying members in the union have risen and fallen. In 2008, CAAMWU lost Vermont American (then renamed Bosch) workers when the plant closed. But in 2011, they began organizing the facilities-maintenance and housekeeping workers at CDC (now called Cummins Rocky Mount Engine Plant). These workers are subcontracted through a company called C&W Services.

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> **WE ALL HELP BUILD THIS ENGINE, MAKE THE ENGINE WORK. SO WE FIGHT FOR EVERYBODY, NOT JUST THE CUMMINS WORKERS, BUT THE CONTRACT WORKERS IN THE PLANT.**

Because pre-majority union members are not forced into the straight jacket of NLRB job classification categories, these facilities maintenance and housekeeping workers have been able to join the same union as the plant's manufacturing workers, despite being directly hired by different employers. In fact, at the time of writing, the president of CAAMWU comes from the C&W Services section of the union. CAAMWU workers see this as a major source of their strength. As Jim Wrenn explained at an EWOC event in 2021, "We all help build this engine, make the engine work. So we fight for everybody, not just the Cummins workers but the contract workers in the plant."

As of the time of publication, CAAMWU collects union dues in four ways: (1) payroll deduction through the credit union; (2) Automated Clearing House (ACH) transfers; (3) cash; (4) UE Local 150's system of dues collection through bank card drafts. CAAMWU dues cover all of their operating expenses; they have never received financial support in the form of subsidies from the UE National.

CAAMWU'S TACTICS

In the absence of a legally binding collective bargaining agreement, CAAMWU members organize around other legal structures that help them win material concessions from their employers. These include filing Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints, Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) charges, and Wage and Hour claims.

These tactics are one part of a broader approach toward unionism that CAAMWU members call the "petition tradition." While traditional NLRB-recognized unions with grievance structures in place tend to move right through their designated administrative procedure to resolve workplace issues, rather than build shopfloor power in order to organize around them, CAAMWU workers take their collective membership empowerment seriously. Organizing around petitions is paired with shop-floor actions like coordinated sticker-wearing days and winning vocal support from local political and religious leaders. (For more on this see Strauss p.108.) Being forced to fight back with collective action rather than diluting that

source of potential power into an individualized grievance process has kept the Cummins managers on their toes. Petitions get upwards of 300–500 signatures. Jim told EWOC, "Even though the company does not technically recognize us, they have to deal with us because of the way we address issues… . The company has tried to [scare us and] say we will not win this or win that — and then we win."

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> **BEING FORCED TO FIGHT BACK WITH COLLECTIVE ACTION RATHER THAN DILUTING THAT SOURCE OF POTENTIAL POWER INTO AN INDIVIDUALIZED GRIEVANCE PROCESS HAS KEPT THE CUMMINS MANAGERS ON THEIR TOES. PETITIONS GET UPWARDS OF 300–500 SIGNATURES.**

CAAMWU WINS

Their wins include paid holidays, reinstatement—with back pay—of workers fired unfairly, shorter shifts, a doubling of their bonus pay, and major improvements to benefits packages. After 12 years of fighting for pay scale improvements, the company conceded with an overhaul of their pay scale system in 2007. In 2013 CAAMWU members organized their largest petition drive to date in protest of 0% raises for technicians that year (the same year CAAMWU's skilled trades members won $0.75 raises). With over 500 signatures, workers ultimately won $0.80 raises for technicians in 2014, surpassing the raises in the skilled trades.

In response, management went out of its way to claim the raises were "market" driven and had nothing to do with the union. Workers saw management's acrobatics to deny the union's campaign as so obvious that it only added to their feeling of victory.

They have also won several NLRB ULP cases through settlement agreements, many of them about upholding workers' rights to distribute union materials or wear union gear. Between 1994 and 2001, they won several cases over unlawful language in the employee handbook prohibiting the distribution of union literature on company grounds, along with other rules banning distribution of union literature. In one case the company violated the terms of a prior settlement, and because it could be found in contempt of court, it was forced to place bins in the plant labeled "union literature" for workers to distribute their newsletter "Unity News."

According to the late Saladin Muhammad, former UE organizer, this case was won in a fourth circuit court named the "Jesse Helms" court after the racist senator from North Carolina. "We won in **his** court," said Saladin Muhammad in an interview with franknews and Payday Report (emphasis added). This was another double victory for the workers.

The union repeated several of these charges again beginning in 2011, this time with the contracted C&W facilities and housekeeping workers in the plant. In these cases C&W workers won the right to distribute union literature in the break area and solicit petition signatures in the parking lot. And when a C&W manager threatened to terminate C&W workers for wearing union stickers, the NLRB required the C&W site manager to read all C&W workers their rights, with two NLRB agents observing. When Cummins issued a new uniform policy banning all hats except for Cummins hats—what the workers believed was their way of banning union hats—the NLRB in 2016 said the company could ban any type of non-Cummins hats except for union hats of any color. And in 2020, when the C&W worker and CAAMWU president wore a union sticker that said "Black Lives Don't Matter at RMEP" (Rocky Mount Engine Plant) and was ordered to remove it, the NLRB upheld the right for workers to wear union stickers regardless.

In a major organizing win in 2020, 16 workers from the block line department of the plant were working during a major storm, and as flood waters began rising in the area management would not close the plant. On their lunch break the workers decided they were going home because of safety reasons, and they informed their manager they were doing so as a group. When management disciplined them in response, CAAMWU filed labor board charges and the NLRB found merit in the case. The company was forced to remove the discipline and post a notice on the bulletin board.

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> **THIS TYPE OF COLLECTIVE ACTION IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE DISASTER IS GOING TO BE INCREASINGLY NECESSARY.**

This type of collective action in the face of climate disaster is going to be increasingly necessary especially in the wake of the high-profile climate-related worker deaths like the ones at Amazon (Illinois) and Mayfield candle factory (Kentucky) during the tornados of 2021.

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> **WHEREVER POSSIBLE, CAAMWU MEMBERS MAKE SURE MANAGEMENT POSTS THE NLRB SETTLEMENT NOTICES ON BULLETIN BOARDS, AND THEY USE THOSE POSTINGS TO EMPOWER COWORKERS TO KEEP ORGANIZING IN THE FACE OF THE COMPANY'S LIES AND MISTREATMENT.**

Like in the flood waters case, wherever possible CAAMWU members make sure management posts the NLRB settlement notices on bulletin boards, and they use those postings to empower coworkers to keep organizing in the face of the company's lies and mistreatment.

CAAMWU has also been at the forefront of taking legal action to gain recognition through "members-only" bargaining—something that was legal in the 30s and 40s, but that the NLRA has made harder to pursue. (See debates about members-only bargaining here and here.) They hosted the first UE National Non-Majority Union Conference in Whitakers, NC in 2004, and soon after won their first "members only" settlement,

with 202 workers receiving a full bonus they were denied years earlier.

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> **CAAMWU HAS ALSO BEEN AT THE FOREFRONT OF TAKING LEGAL ACTION TO GAIN RECOGNITION THROUGH "MEMBERS-ONLY" BARGAINING—SOMETHING THAT WAS LEGAL IN THE 30S AND 40S, BUT THAT THE NLRA HAS MADE HARDER TO PURSUE.**

Crucially, over the lifespan of the union the most significant membership increase came in 2007 after a succession of shop-floor victories. These included their successful payscale petition of June 2006, a lawsuit victory the following month, a letter asking for voluntary members-only employer recognition roughly two months after that, then two all-employee meetings called by management: the first to attack the union, then one the following week to announce wage improvements. After two consecutive wins, watching the company get nervous, then winning another victory, workers figured out how to channel their power into an expanded membership base.

Then “more than ever,” Jim told EWOC, “I think workers on the shop floor as well as management felt the union knocking on the door.”

Championing the twin fights against racial oppression and for worker dignity, CAAMWU’s strategies have become models for developing working-class political power in the U.S. South.

MORE ON CAAMWU

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UCW UNITED CAMPUS WORKERS

By Eric Dirnbach

United Campus Workers (UCW) is a multi-state union that focuses on organizing public-sector higher education workers, largely in states where they have no legal collective bargaining rights. They are affiliated with the Communications Workers of America (CWA).

Started in Tennessee in the 2000s, UCW spread in recent years to other states in the southeast U.S. and then elsewhere. It now has a presence in Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin. It is a wall-to-wall union, open to all workers at public higher education institutions. It includes all job categories, from instruction, to research, academic support, service, maintenance, clerical, and technical workers.

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> **[UCW] IS A WALL-TO-WALL UNION, OPEN TO ALL WORKERS AT PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS. IT INCLUDES ALL JOB CATEGORIES, FROM INSTRUCTION, TO RESEARCH, ACADEMIC SUPPORT, SERVICE, MAINTENANCE, CLERICAL, AND TECHNICAL WORKERS.**

UCW organizers Kate Diedrick, Karly Safar, and Melanie Barron described the unique unity among all campus workers in their union in an article in The Forge:

Photo by Jim Darling (Public Workers United). Rally for Collective Bargaining Bill. CWA 7799.

> One of the strengths of UCW’s model is that we bring members together across job categories and institutions to make demands in a unified voice, challenging the decision-makers who seek to undercut us, divide us, or dismiss the issues of one worker group as not relevant to another worker group.

UCW IS A PRE-MAJORITY UNION

There are tens of thousands of potential UCW higher education members in each state where UCW-CWA organizations exist currently, and hundreds of thousands overall in those states. UCW has organized over 7,000 of these workers at about 60 campus locations. Because this is a small percentage of all the workers, UCW is a “pre-majority” union. On some campuses or in some states, it might reach a majority in the future. Moreover, UCW estimates that there are over one million higher education workers in

the U.S. not covered under existing collective bargaining legal frameworks that could be organized into pre-majority unions.

Because these workers have no formal union recognition or legal collective bargaining rights, the campaign strategy is to organize workers to fight for improvements in wages, benefits, and working conditions outside of formal contracts. Union action often leads to wins, even without the administration acknowledging the union's role.

> **BECAUSE THESE WORKERS HAVE NO FORMAL UNION RECOGNITION OR LEGAL COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RIGHTS, THE CAMPAIGN STRATEGY IS TO ORGANIZE WORKERS TO FIGHT FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN WAGES, BENEFITS, AND WORKING CONDITIONS OUTSIDE OF FORMAL CONTRACTS.**

In conservative states with no public sector collective-bargaining rights, UCW leaders advise that general Constitutional protections provide the right to organize. Per the UCW-CWA website:

> In states where public employees lack a framework for collective bargaining, constitutional Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Association protections give you the right to join a labor union, and organize collectively to seek improvement of the terms and conditions of your employment. …Political activities such as picketing, rallies, and leafleting on your lunch break or after work are forms of expression and free association, and are expressly protected.

In 2022, faculty across all of the UCW locals have formed a national Faculty Defense Network to unite and fight back against nation-wide attacks on public higher education.

UNION STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS

UCW locals and chapters have historically received some staffing and funding assistance from the parent union, CWA, and most locals have their own staff as well. Workers at each campus and in each state have autonomy in their organizing, but UCW does have some common demands as outlined on its website.

- A living wage of $20+ per hour base pay for all campus workers
- Elimination of student fees for graduate workers
- Health insurance subsidization for graduate workers
- Increase in stipends for graduate workers
- Cost of living adjustments for all campus workers
- Increases in minimum per-class rates for non-tenure track professors

> **IN ADDITION TO TRADITIONAL SHOP-FLOOR ORGANIZING ON ISSUES THAT COME UP WITH DIRECT SUPERVISORS, UCW UNION ACTIONS INCLUDE HOLDING RALLIES AND MARCHES, SIGNING PETITIONS, AND POLITICAL LOBBYING.**

UCW has organized chapters across job categories at each campus, while also creating job-specific committees as needed. In their article in The Forge, UCW organizers emphasized the benefits of the chapter structure:

> Rather than dividing workers into separate organizing committees by job category, UCW unions meet as chapters to bring together all of the workers on a particular campus. This structure creates space for members across job categories to share their issues; have difficult conversations about topics such as pay differentials, power imbalances, gendered workloads, racism, and classism; and develop joint demands.

Members pay dues directly to the union, as there is no payroll deduction collected by the employer. The union provides training and has an organizing toolkit that helps locals get started by forming a steering committee and holding organizing conversations. In addition to traditional shop-floor organizing on issues that come up with direct supervisors, UCW union actions include holding rallies and marches, signing petitions, and political lobbying.

ORGANIZING LEADS TO WINS

UCW has racked up a number of victories over the years. The issues range from specific grievances of particular members to broader issues that impact everyone, according to UCW organizers in The Forge article.

> While UCW locals campaign on a broad range of member issues — low pay, high grad fees, lack of cost-of-living raises, pay equity — we unite around common, big-picture, and long-term demands: increased public support for higher education and decision-making power for workers and students.

The union organized to stop a large-scale job privatization scheme in Tennessee, which could have potentially outsourced 10,000 jobs at the state's university system. The union also won a salary increase for lecturers at UT-Knoxville and successfully fought to establish a $15 per hour minimum wage at the University of Memphis.

In Kentucky, UCW campaigning won a $15 per hour minimum wage at all campuses, impacting about 2,000 workers. The union also helped get a raise for grounds workers. It's interesting that the administration in that case denied that the union had anything to do with the raise. But Julia Miller, a UCW-Kentucky member, explained the dynamic that wins often follow union action:

> I am not surprised that that is the message they're putting out. But it is a little bit confusing. We have had multiple times where workers have taken action, and then something changes. Never attributed to us, of course, by the administration, but when we do things, things happen.

In Virginia, their list of wins includes a graduate workers stipend raise in the UVA Anthropology department, as part of their Respect and a Fair Deal for Graduate Workers campaign. The union has also won reinstatement of a doctoral advisor for graduate student workers, won clear terms and conditions for graduate teaching assistants in the UVA English department, won raises, stipends and increased health care coverage for groups of workers at William and Mary, and won funding to renovate a building at Virginia Commonwealth University which had mold contamination.

The UCW-Georgia local won the elimination of a special institutional fee that was imposed during the Great Recession and cost students about $450 per semester. The union has also exposed the relationship of the state's higher education system with a private student housing company, which has a multi-billion dollar student housing contract and had lobbied the schools to reopen during the pandemic.

A win in Louisiana eliminated graduate workers fees, which can be up to $2,000 per semester. In Colorado, the union's Fight for $15 campaign won a raise at the UC-Colorado Springs campus.

FIGHT TO LEGALIZE BARGAINING RIGHTS?

Debates within UCW are ongoing on the kind of organizing the union should be doing, including how and where to fight for more formal bargaining rights, which would require state labor law reform. All UCW chapters believe that building worker-power at the campus level is central. But in a handful of states where there may be an opportunity to align with other parts of the labor movement and win legalization of public sector collective-bargaining rights, there are conversations about the level of priority the union should place on it.

"DEBATES WITHIN UCW ARE ONGOING ON THE KIND OF ORGANIZING THE UNION SHOULD BE DOING, INCLUDING HOW AND WHERE TO FIGHT FOR MORE FORMAL BARGAINING RIGHTS, WHICH WOULD REQUIRE STATE LABOR LAW REFORM.

One example of this struggle is in Colorado. The state passed collective bargaining rights for a narrow subset of state public employees in 2020, and for county workers in 2022. Given that these legislative victories excluded strike rights, UCW-Colorado joined with other units in its local, CWA-7799, to fight for and win the passage of the Public Workplace Protection Act, which strengthens more public sector workers' ability to organize. In 2024, CWA-7799 with UCW-Colorado won the right to collective bargaining for Denver municipal workers—this time including the right to strike. UCW-Colorado continues to look for avenues to extend collective bargaining rights in the public sector, though maintaining the right to strike is paramount for its members.

The United Campus Workers of Virginia and Georgia have worked on political programs to fight for strong public sector collective bargaining legislation. UCWGA worked with legislators in 2021 to introduce a public sector bargaining bill at the General Assembly. Municipal and county employees in Virginia won a bargaining framework in 2020, but it excluded state employees and higher education. Through their Political Coalition & Policy Committee, UCWVA members continue to fight for a strong bargaining framework for all public sector employees. They are very conscious that attempts may be made to exclude graduate student workers and intend to build enough power to ensure that grad student workers are included.

SHOWING WHAT'S POSSIBLE

UCW is the largest pre-majority, multi-state union campaign in the country and shows what's possible for this kind of organizing. Moreover, it's rare to see this level of commitment to comprehensive organizing throughout the South. CWA deserves a lot of credit for committing to long-term funding for a campaign that will likely take some time to become fully self-sustaining, but that in the meantime can lay an incredibly important foundation for more organizing in the South by the whole labor movement.

"UCW IS THE LARGEST PRE-MAJORITY, MULTI-STATE UNION CAMPAIGN IN THE COUNTRY AND SHOWS WHAT'S POSSIBLE FOR THIS KIND OF ORGANIZING.

P.S.

If you haven't seen it yet, Linqua Franqa is a former UCW member and gives a shoutout to the union in the award-winning labor anthem Wurk!

AWU ALPHABET WORKERS UNION

By Ike McCreery

The Alphabet Workers Union (AWU) is a wall-to-wall pre-majority union at Alphabet, the multinational tech conglomerate including Google, YouTube, and others. We represent workers from across the company and have engaged in legal recognition fights as well as other majority and minority strategies.

AWU launched January 4, 2021, with 100 mostly full-time workers after years of worker unrest at Google. We have since grown to 1,400 members out of a 150,000-person North American workforce and a 250,000-person global workforce. We are affiliated with Communications Workers of America (CWA).

AWU is a unique example of a wall-to-wall, pre-majority union at an extremely large and powerful corporation and represents the immense opportunity for organizing at megacorporations, especially among headquarters and office staff, as distinct from logistics or service staff.

BACKGROUND

AWU's structure evolved through a confluence of historic factors, inside Google, across the tech industry, and in the context of other union efforts.

Activism among white-collar Google workers had been escalating for several years: employee concerns around policies on Google's social media platform, then worker protests culminating in the cancelation of

a drone artificial intelligence contract, then a 20,000-person global walkout protesting sexual harassment, discrimination, and others. Google's response to worker activism took a harsher turn when it fired five workers at the end of 2019. Many who would become leaders in AWU cite those firings as the moment unionizing became a real possibility.

Contemporaneously, union efforts among blue-collar contractors at Google had been taking hold. In 2016, Google shuttle drivers organized, followed in 2017 by security guards across Silicon Valley. As of this writing, cafeteria workers across Google's campuses are 90% unionized with UNITE HERE, having seen their first recognition victory in 2019. The first white collar workers at Google to unionize, contractors in Pittsburgh, affiliated with the Steelworkers and won a recognition vote in 2019 and ratified a contract in 2021.

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> **THE TECH INDUSTRY HAD SEEN A MOVEMENT OF INCREASED WORKER ACTIVISM.**

All the while, the tech industry more broadly had seen a movement of increased worker activism, driven largely by the Tech Workers Coalition (TWC). This movement developed a narrative persona of the "tech worker," which included both technical workers as well as blue-collar workers working at tech companies. Activism in the adjacent games industry had also been accelerating, as demonstrated by the emergence of Game Workers Unite (now in part folded into the Game Workers Coalition). When CWA, AWU's parent union, founded the Campaign to Organize Digital Employees (CODE), they hired a Game Workers Unite organizer to lead the effort.

This white-collar activism, blue-collar unionism, and narrative shift together shaped how the founding AWU members conceived of themselves. They saw themselves as a network of "tech workers," spread across many of Google's offices and functions, overrepresentative of white-collar tech workers but aspirationally organizing alongside blue-collar tech workers.

Although AWU's structure felt like a foregone conclusion by the time workers convened in Chicago in December of 2019 to discuss building a union, the framing of that conversation — the "we" of Google workers and the possibility of a union — were profoundly shaped by this historical context. CWA brought to Chicago decades of deep experience organizing wall-to-wall minority unions: at United Campus Workers (profiled in the **UCW CASE STUDY**), Texas State Employees Union, and others. All of these factors continue to shape AWU members' understanding of our union, as well as our theories of power and change.

LAUNCH

After a year of organizing in secret, AWU decided in late 2020 to go public. The focus supercharged our recruitment: in the weeks leading up to launch, our membership grew quickly from a few dozen to well over a hundred.

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> **WE LEARNED TO FALL BACK ON OUR STRENGTHS: A CLEAR STORY FOR WHY AWU IS NECESSARY AND A STRONG CULTURE OF ORGANIZING.**

When we launched, our membership exploded from 200 to 800, then leveled off as the organization tried to catch up to the hypergrowth. Ahead of time, we had developed a plan for contacting and orienting new members, but we were nonetheless unprepared. As members and staff organizers managed the communication and administrative work of going public, we also worked hard to contact, welcome, and train all the new members. To our surprise, many new members simply never responded to our outreach. Over time, we came to believe that many who joined were "ideological members:" workers who believed in unions, wanted to support us financially, but didn't want to contribute beyond that. When we were able to make contact, we found our pre-majority structure made orientation more

difficult but all the more necessary: many new members struggled to understand our structure and strategy at first because it didn't fit their preconceptions. We learned to fall back on our strengths: a clear story for why AWU is necessary and a strong culture of organizing.

WALL-TO-WALL PRE-MAJORITY STRATEGY

AWU leaders place as much emphasis on AWU's wall-to-wall structure as on our pre-majority structure and see the two as connected.

The most important reason for choosing the wall-to-wall pre-majority structure is Alphabet's sheer size and workplace structure. The founders were building off of years of white-collar worker activism at Google, working with the new "tech worker" identity, but scattered across the workforce.

"We chose this structure because we didn't think we could get 80,000 people in secret … and because we couldn't come up with a way … to meaningfully divide them up into bite-sized chunks," says AWU's organizing chair.* It's the workplace's enormous size and densely networked structure, especially among the white-collar staff, that make the wall-to-wall pre-majority structure appealing. Workers collaborate closely across different roles and geographies, and even across different parts of the corporation, so separating off parts of the workforce just isn't a viable organizing strategy.

Kickstarter United, a wall-to-wall union of 85 which won their majority election in 2020, demonstrates how a heterogeneous workplace, if small enough, can successfully form a majority union. Starbucks Workers United has taken on another massive organizing challenge, but the workforce is relatively standardized and segmented, making organizing store-by-store viable. Even within AWU, these factors have played a role, as our majority victories have come from more segmented parts of the workforce; but for the task of organizing across the entire workforce, something broader was necessary.

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> **IT'S THE WORKPLACE'S ENORMOUS SIZE AND DENSELY NETWORKED STRUCTURE, ESPECIALLY AMONG THE WHITE-COLLAR STAFF, THAT MAKE THE WALL-TO-WALL PRE-MAJORITY STRUCTURE APPEALING.**

When AWU launched, organizers conceived of the project as a minority union, not a pre-majority union.

"I think we did a bad job … when we launched, of communicating minority versus pre-majority, and I think we've really suffered for it in the long run. People don't realize that is the goal," says Chris Schmidt, former AWU secretary. But that goal has been shaped by AWU's experience: Parul Koul, AWU president, recounts:

> I think the shift to the language of pre-majority happened in part because it gives you a sense of direction about where you're going, and I think it also happened in part because more of our membership and … industry is also starting to think more concretely in terms of the gains they could have through a formal contract.

Layoffs across the tech industry in 2023 and 2024 and AWU's experience of recognition victories among some contractor workers (more below) have contributed to that concrete thinking.

Security was a consideration more unique to Alphabet, and illustrates another way of thinking about pre-majority unionism: organizing in public. Google likes to brand itself as an advertising company, but it's really a surveillance company. Schmidt points out:

> Organizing at Google means not being secret in effect … Google can monitor everything you say, which means you have to reorient your approach to be security safe with being public.**

Organizing in the open, before having a majority, meets this challenge head-on.

There are two other considerations that reinforce the wall-to-wall strategy. The string of blue-collar union victories, the emergence of the first white collar union in 2019, and TWC's emphasis that "tech workers" include anyone who works in tech, put a focus on a deeply-felt issue across Google's campuses. Alphabet separates its workforce into two-tiers: full-time employees ("FTEs"), who have access to Google's world-famous benefits; and temps, vendors, and contractors ("TVCs"), who don't. AWU's wall-to-wall structure allows us to have members across both tiers, bringing workers together across the divide and challenging what is seen as "one of the great injustices" of our workplace, as Koul says.

The intent on unionizing wall-to-wall also had a more historical and ideological component. Early leaders knew of the Congress of Industrial Organization's (CIO) industrial organizing strategy in the 1930s, which played a defining role in US labor's strongest era in the mid 20th century. They saw parallels between our situation and the industrial situation that confronted the early CIO, when highly-stratified workforces came together to form massive industrial unions, challenging some of the most powerful corporations in human history.

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> **AWU'S EARLY LEADERS SAW PARALLELS BETWEEN OUR SITUATION AND THE INDUSTRIAL SITUATION THAT CONFRONTED THE EARLY CIO.**

At launch, though, AWU's structure was met with some consternation among labor commentators. "Collective action at work cannot be disassociated from bargaining power and a union representing .001 [0.1%] of workers has little such power," wrote one commentator. Organizing.Work ran an article using AWU as an example of what it calls "top-first campaigns," which, the author claims, prioritize activity at the top of the organization, "while the minutiae of organizing in shops and work groups is

treated as an afterthought, or an inevitability once a campaign reaches a certain size." AWU leadership circulated this article when it ran shortly after our launch, reading it not as a condemnation — the author made some very wrong assumptions about our strategy — but as a warning. For all of the reasons above — historical identity formations, size and structural considerations, security, focus on the two-tier workforce, and inspiration from the CIO's industrial organizing strategy — we chose this structure despite its drawbacks.

RECRUITMENT AND STRUCTURE

From the beginning, AWU has strongly emphasized relational recruitment based on existing workplace structures, as is typical among contemporary union organizing. The bulk of organizing happens in organizing committees embedded in two overlapping structures: geographically-focused chapters and organizationally-focused workplace units.

Emphasis on one or the other structure has oscillated as AWU has moved through phases, reacting to moments and experimenting with different strategies. The earliest union organizing was based in the preexisting geographic networks of activists. At launch, we shifted focus to organizing by workplace organization, thinking that those networks were stronger, that workplace issues were more similar, and that we could wield structural power more effectively. We found, though, that geographically-based relationships were too critical, so we switched back to focusing on geographically-based organizing. "I think that organizing by location has been solid as a starter, getting off the ground. … Physical proximity is nice for meetings. … It's a good structure just to get more momentum," says AWU's organizing chair. As prospects for building density within workplace organizations improve, however, there has more recently been renewed focus on organizing by team, with results still to be seen.

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> **FROM THE BEGINNING, AWU HAS STRONGLY EMPHASIZED RELATIONAL RECRUITMENT BASED ON EXISTING WORKPLACE STRUCTURES.**

AWU has made use of recruitment strategies beyond relational organizing as well. The networks of the founding full-time workers fail to reach many workers, especially TVCs. AWU has reached those workers through press, social media, mass emails, and surveys, followed by cold calls, one-on-one meetings, and trainings.

Members pay dues at 1% of total compensation. When discussing dues, AWU organizers emphasize the importance of dues as a way of building collective power, with particular emphasis on challenging the very common misunderstanding that our union is a fee-for-service (affectionately referred to as the "vending machine" union model).

While organizing is taken up by workers across the union in chapter- and workplace-unit organizing committees, union-wide structures maintain most of the bureaucratic and other functions of the union: communications, membership, infrastructure, legislative-political, and other committees.

AWU hosts what we call "union days," online webinars that all union members, and sometimes non-member workers, are encouraged to attend (recordings can be found on our YouTube channel). Topics generally focus on organizing efforts across Alphabet, either ongoing or retrospective. Schmidt emphasizes the importance of these spaces: "Keep in mind at all times that you're all one team working together. … Share in each other's successes constantly, and make every success of every part of the union a success for the whole union."

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Although AWU is a pre-majority union, we have taken a **multi-pronged** and somewhat **ad hoc strategic approach**, making use of different strategies and tactics that fit the many heterogeneous situations in which we organize.

True to our original conception as a minority union, AWU has relied heavily on non-majority tactics to win material victories. A town hall among data center workers won a reinstitution of COVID hazard pay. One petition won Raters millions of dollars per year in raises, and another won interns stipends for summer work.

AWU has started racking up majoritarian victories as well, surprising early leadership and actually shifting AWU's strategic outlook. In 2022, Google Fiber retail workers in Kansas City won a recognition election 9-1, a monumental first recognition victory. The YouTube Music Operations team in Austin, Texas, got organized the same year, filed for recognition, and won 41-0. In a historic ruling, the NLRB affirmed Alphabet as a joint employer, after the YouTube workers staged a dramatic joint employment "wedding" between Cognizant, the contracting agency that employs them, and Google. The Google Help Content Creation team, jointly employed by Google and Accenture, followed in 2023, winning their recognition 26-2. Workers in these units will bargain for separate contracts.

Unfair labor practice charges have won workers their jobs back, and have provided key victories in recognition campaigns as well. In addition to majority legal strategies, a majority strike threat in 2022 won Google Maps workers a work-from-home extension.

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> **WE HAVE TAKEN A MULTI-PRONGED AND AD HOC STRATEGIC APPROACH.**

AWU is pursuing broader campaigns challenging company-wide policies in addition to the smaller campaigns in specific corners of the corporation, though these have been less successful. AWU's Every Google Worker campaign emphasizes the two tier workforce structure. As it was conceived, this campaign allows AWU to organize around solidarity as an issue, front-and-center, which we see as a critical strategy in an environment with such a diversity of work experiences. AWU members

have also been involved in campaigns such as No Tech for Apartheid and ongoing salary-sharing efforts across the company, but the connection with AWU is looser.

STRENGTHS SO FAR

The strengths of AWU's structure emphasize the strategic links between the wall-to-wall and pre-majority components of the model and demonstrate the power of AWU's multi-pronged approach. The flexibility of the pre-majority structure has allowed AWU to be resourceful and strategic in our organizing efforts.

AWU's structure supports a wide variety of organizing efforts, all across the company, all at once. AWU has been able to focus on areas that are strategic, either because workers are particularly keen to organize or because workers have a disproportionate amount of power due to their roles in the production process.

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> **AWU HAS BEEN ABLE TO FOCUS ON AREAS THAT ARE STRATEGIC, EITHER BECAUSE WORKERS ARE PARTICULARLY KEEN TO ORGANIZE OR BECAUSE WORKERS HAVE A DISPROPORTIONATE AMOUNT OF POWER DUE TO THEIR ROLES IN THE PRODUCTION PROCESS.**

"The possibilities of what we could choose to do are so vast that we can make strategic choices about which parts of the company we should really focus on," says Koul, though she admits that, while the victories among contractors' units so far have been powerful, AWU hasn't been able to fully make use of this strategic opportunity.

That workers in every organizing effort across the company have AWU to support them has been immensely beneficial. Schmidt explains:

> We have the flexibility to build up a broad base, find good opportunities in a formal way, in a structure that allows us to grow without the need to build from scratch each time, and that gives us the opportunity to figure out what's next in six different places at once. … We don't need to set up separate structures or tools. … It's really possible to build in either strategic or high-energy places all at once.

And each effort creates more institutional experience and knowledge; each effort gets a bit easier. All leaders I interviewed emphasize how much they, and AWU as a whole, have learned in the past three years. When I compare my memories of the frantic, disorganized, and grueling earlier organizing efforts, such as the responses to retaliation workers experienced after the walkout, to the methodical and patient efforts of today, the value of the pre-majority union structure is clear.

AWU has also benefited immensely from our corps of members who can support the strategic organizing above, despite not being situated in strategic work locations themselves. These members can make phone calls, do research, train and mentor newer organizers. Since all members also pay dues, these members' dues support the staff organizers who are a critical part of AWU's organizing capacity.

And, in addition to the opportunity to organize in particularly promising places, whether because they are high energy or strategic, there is also benefit in the act of organizing across work areas. "In some ways, what we're doing is not so much organizing everyone under the same roof, as much as it is creating a structure that creates easy connections between, in some cases, what are genuinely distinct groups," says Koul. She goes on:

> I think that we can and have been able to leverage that in order to help other sectors of the workforce organize. … It is a way to be strategic. … An FTE has access to a director or a VP in a way that our members who are Raters don't. … That kind of cross collaboration is useful and strategic for organizing, and it bolsters people's sense of morale. People feel like, it's not just me, the people around me care what's happening in my workplace.

There are both structural and emotional gains from this collaboration. Different workers have different powers that can be combined in powerful ways. As Koul emphasizes, FTEs have access to organizational power that TVCs do not; on the flip side, TVCs organizing has absolutely energized and inspired FTEs across the corporation, as mentioned earlier. And, organizing wall-to-wall makes it possible for workers across the company, as a group, to analyze how the company structure works and develop strategy accordingly.

> The biggest lesson is, look under your roof and see who's in the shop; and maybe the thing that makes sense is for your particular job role to organize as your own unit; but the importance and value of having those cross connecting relationships and really truly being in solidarity together, and building up to a structure where you're doing joint decision-making; you should always be thinking about those things.

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> **A UNION AT GOOGLE MIGHT EASILY LOOK INEVITABLE IN HINDSIGHT, BUT THE WALL-TO-WALL, PRE-MAJORITY MODEL MADE WHAT WAS OTHERWISE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBLE.**

Perhaps beyond any other strengths of the wall-to-wall pre-majority structure is simply AWU's existence. A union at Google might easily look inevitable in hindsight, but the wall-to-wall, pre-majority model made what was otherwise impossible possible. AWU provides an example of worker organizing within Big Tech and is a symbol of resistance at a nexus of the tech industry.

CHALLENGES

The leaders I interviewed stressed first and foremost the challenge of focus. Organizing across such a large corporation, while exciting and providing the many opportunities discussed above, has challenged AWU to maintain clarity of both purpose and strategy.

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> **AS AN ORGANIZATION, HOW DO YOU SET PRIORITIES, AND HOW DO YOU SAY, WE’RE ONLY GOING TO WORK ON THESE THREE THINGS FOR THE NEXT YEAR?**

“We’re trying to do too much,” says Koul. “The possible world of all the things you could focus on organizing is just enormous. And you have members from all over the place who want to focus on organizing in their neck of the woods. And so as an organization, how do you set priorities, and how do you say, we’re only going to work on these three things for the next year?”

The challenge of focus is exacerbated by having many different campaigns progressing at different phases: the whole union, with our various campaigns, can’t move together in lockstep, so creating coherent strategy is hard.

Additionally, AWU has found it difficult to build solidarity across workers in very different work positions. “You actually have to forge solidarity through action and through organizing between different groups,” Koul emphasizes, “and it’s probably more harmful if you just call yourself wall-to-wall but then don’t actually structurally address some of those issues.”

AWU has sought more blue-collar workers, but Alphabet’s white-collar staff, especially engineers, remain overrepresented. The diversity of work roles is only part of the problem, though; it’s also just hard at the scale at which AWU is currently operating, and it will only get harder. “Solidarity comes from shared understanding,” says Schmidt, “and building shared understanding is hard in an organization this size without really strong shared spaces.”

Some of these problems may have been less acute earlier in AWU’s history, when excitement around the group identity was fresher. “When we started, and we were 200 people in total, we had an easier time having a sense that we were all working together on things,” recounts Schmidt. “As we have grown, it has become harder for people to identify with … union-wide needs.”

That change in group identity over time points to the final organizational challenge AWU seems to be facing: sustainability. Any organizing effort ebbs and flows, but AWU’s structure may exacerbate these ebbs and flows. Koul worries that, over time, the organization might spread ourself too thinly, without the density necessary for sufficient power, and that could open up additional vulnerabilities.

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> **SOLIDARITY COMES FROM SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING IS HARD IN AN ORGANIZATION THIS SIZE WITHOUT REALLY STRONG SHARED SPACES.**

And aside from organizational issues, AWU is operating in a challenging context. The tech industry is notorious for its high turnover, and for a union that represents such a small portion of the workforce, where density is a long way off, keeping up with attrition has been and will continue to be a constant struggle. There is also a notorious lack of urgency felt among the highly privileged staff.

As Schmidt cautions:

> Don’t let people fall into a hole of disconnecting, and avoid playing Model UN with rules and regulations as a way of getting people involved, because the type of people who get and stay involved in that case are just not most effective at creating energy.

While this advice applies among any workforce, the engineers who make up the bulk of Google’s workforce seem particularly prone to falling into these traps.

Finally, there is simply the raw power of the opposition: in this case, one of the most powerful megacorporations ever known to humanity. The path to power is not clear, and on the incremental path between here and there, Google has the “ability to trivially snap their fingers and destroy a thing,” Schmidt emphasizes, as it has done after unionization victories among YouTube workers and Raters.***

Power imbalances exist at any workplace, but at a megacorporation such as Google, the power imbalance is extreme. Even in the most favorable organizing conditions, with a clearly defined work unit that is structurally important to Google, management is still able to destroy the unionization effort by relocating the workers and/or the work, even if it costs them some in the short run.

CONCLUSION

AWU is a beacon for organizing at megacorporations, especially among headquarters staff and in a notoriously anti-union sector. While AWU continues to grow, amid a growing union movement across the American tech sector and the U.S. more generally, we will need to transition to more exponential growth if we are to fulfill our original vision of a wall-to-wall unionized Alphabet.

Nonetheless, AWU’s emergence from years of prior activism at Google and across the tech industry demonstrates the power of developing worker identity prior to a more formal organizing drive. Our multi-pronged and ad hoc strategic approach has presented challenges of focus and coherence, but has garnered a variety of majority and minority victories. AWU seems to be the best possibility for challenging Alphabet and its monstrous power, and

exemplifies how workers might challenge other megacorporations as well.

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> **[AWU] DEMONSTRATES THE POWER OF DEVELOPING WORKER IDENTITY PRIOR TO A MORE FORMAL ORGANIZING DRIVE.**

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** Quotes and other material come from interviews with the author.*

*** AWU keeps most of its information off of Google platforms. While there is no conclusive evidence that Alphabet is monitoring personal communications of its workers, Alphabet certainly has the technical capability to do so, and Google’s privacy policy includes language about protecting against issues “that could harm Google.”*

**** As of this writing, Google seems to be dropping entire Appen contracts just as it did with Cognizant after the YouTube workers victory.*

Ike McCreery is an organizer, researcher, and engineer. They chaired the organizing and steering committees of the Alphabet Workers Union and were a founding member of Tech Workers Coalition Seattle. They worked as a senior site reliability engineer at Google.

DAE DURHAM ASSOCIATION OF EDUCATORS

By Maggie Radack and Sonja Thalheimer

The Durham Association of Educators (DAE) is a wall-to-wall union of public school workers in Durham, North Carolina. We organize in uncommonly difficult conditions because of anti-union state laws that have been in effect for decades.

HISTORY OF DAE

North Carolina has been a right-to-work state since 1947, meaning that there is essentially no history of requiring workers to join their union or pay an agency fee when they are hired. It has been illegal for public-sector unions such as ours to engage in collective bargaining since 1959 and for public-sector workers to go on strike since 1981. This is a big part of why North Carolina has one of the lowest union membership rates in the United States, with only 2.4% of wage and salary workers belonging to a union in 2024.

DAE is part of the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) at the state level and the National Education Association (NEA) at the national level. The statewide Black teachers union (NCTA) and the statewide white teachers union (NCEA) merged in 1970, forming NCAE. Because we are a wall-to-wall union, all Durham Public Schools (DPS) staff can join as dues-paying members, including teachers, instructional assistants, cafeteria workers, student support staff, transportation workers, custodians, interpreters, administrators, and

many more. It is both a strength and a challenge to be made up of so many groups with both shared and distinct interests.

Prior to 2024, DAE was consistently a union with minority membership density. During those years, we ran a variety of successful campaigns at the local level, including bringing all custodians working in DPS in-house, fighting to secure the release of an undocumented DPS high school student from an immigration detention center, and stopping the closure of two DPS elementary schools slated for state takeover. DAE also led the rest of the state in closing schools for the two statewide days of protest in Raleigh in May 2018 and May 2019. All of that built the groundwork for our decision in the summer of 2023 to run a majority membership campaign.

YEAR 1: 2023-2024

In the fall of 2023, we launched one of the biggest union drives in the recent history of the South. At that point, we had three main goals for the school year:

- Reach majority union membership density, which would mean tripling our membership numbers

- Win a DPS budget from the DPS Board of Education (BOE) and Durham County that funded democratically decided priorities
- Win union recognition and a seat at the district decision-making table through a Meet & Confer policy from the BOE

Win union recognition and a seat at the district decision-making table through a Meet & Confer policy from the BOE

Little did we know that we'd also be responding to a major classified staff pay and budget scandal caused by our district administration and would have to make some emergency demands that spring.

MAJORITY MEMBERSHIP

Our majority campaign took a huge team effort from member leaders and union staff alike. There are about 5,200 DPS employees. In the fall of 2023, we had about 800 union members; by May 2024, we had over 2,600 members.

We tripled our membership in one year because we purposefully grew our internal organizing structures to allow for more spaces for rank-and-file members to step up into leadership, and for more leadership development, coaching, and support. We also tripled our membership because DPS workers watched their union member coworkers jump into action and lead the fight against the district's proposed classified staff pay cuts during the mid-year budget scandal, proving that we are a fighting union for all DPS staff.

We grew and adapted our internal organizing structures to include:

- Worksite-level organizing committees (OCs) of member leaders: These OCs ideally had ratios of about 1:10, OC member:turf at as many worksites as possible to run structure tests, do listwork, recruit members, etc.
    - We refer to the ~10 coworkers that each OC member is responsible for checking in with and organizing into taking action, such as signing a petition or attending an event, as being on that OC member's "turf"
    - A structure test is a test of our organizing structure, designed to see how many workers we can reach in a short amount of time
- A district organizing committee (DOC): This committee included worksite-level OC members and regularly met and voted on overall campaign strategy, sometimes on an emergency basis.
- A district-wide coordinating committee (CC): This committee included at least one leader from each strong worksite OC to lead the DOC, and met monthly in addition to DOC meetings.
- A chair support team (CST): This team led the campaign, supported the CC, and met every other week in addition to CC and DOC meetings.
- A separated and clarified governance structure: The executive board handled issues of governance, including finances, internal elections, and formal endorsements, separate from the organizing campaign.

We also used "commit to majority" union membership forms starting in October 2023. This allowed non-members to join our union

Clarifying Our Organizing Structure

Coordinating Committee

The CC is dedicated to creating and coordinating district-level campaigns. For the CC, someone can either nominate themself or be nominated by a coworker. The existing CC, primarily the Onboarding Workgroup, will confirm that that person is meeting the requirements and then invite them onto the team.

District Organizing Committee

The DOC is a rank-and-file organization dedicated to identifying district-level issues around which we educate, agitate, and organize our members and coworkers. For the DOC, a worksite leader or OC team can invite those people onto those teams, prioritizing organic leaders in the worksite across a range of departments, roles, identities, job classifications, etc. Someone can also nominate themself!

Worksite-Level Organizing Committee

These are folks who are interested in doing worksite-level work. They are committed to moving campaign projects throughout the worksite, e.g. gathering feedback, input, and temperature checks on campaign questions, demands, tactics, etc. for their 10ish people, attending worksite-level OC meetings as needed, and are a member of DAE (full member or CTM). *Many of them will also be on the DOC.* For the OC, a worksite leader or OC team can invite those people onto those teams, prioritizing organic leaders in the worksite across a range of departments, roles, identities, job classifications, etc. Someone can also nominate themself!

We gave this handout to our DOC to help clarify our structure; it is missing the CST, and our structure has changed a bit for the 2025–2026 school year.

by pledging to automatically become full dues-paying members as soon as we hit majority, and was modeled after traditional union card-check campaigns.

We engaged as many members as possible in the task of making membership asks and offered regular training and practice in making skilled membership asks. We followed an "agitate, hope, urgency, you" (AHUY) structure for organizing conversations and planned multiple ways for rank-and-file members to make membership asks of our coworkers across the district. We asked our coworkers to join during:

- Phonebanking evenings
- Blitz days: Members took off a day of work to spend in another building making membership asks, often guided by a "hot list" of workers to target made by a member leader of that building, including when and where to find them during the school day.
- Parking lot posses: Members stood in building parking lots before and after school to talk to workers about membership, the campaign (such as asking them to sign a petition or come out to an event), and identify leaders to help build organizing committees in colder schools.

We also developed budget demands in tandem with making membership asks so that potential members could see what we were planning to fight for and win via our collective power.

We developed and carried out district-wide structure tests, including a majority fall petition of initial budget demands and a seat at the table for our union.

In January 2024, it came to light that district administration had mismanaged the DPS budget, and they announced that they were going to take back the raises they had given classified staff that fall and cut their years of experience. We used the strong organizing structures we built to organize the closures of 19 schools as "Days of Protest" against DPS's decision to cut classified workers' pay to balance their budget and to demand our seat at the decision-making table to help solve the crisis.

An external threat we sometimes face as a union is the idea that we are a "teachers' union," rather than a public-school staff union, which truly represents all certified and classified staff. Classified staff are not licensed by the North Carolina Department of Instruction (whereas certified staff are) and include custodial staff, cafeteria workers, physical therapists, occupational therapists, bus drivers and monitors, instructional assistants, buildings and maintenance staff, and many more. Our decision to fight the classified pay cuts, and our success in delaying the pay cuts for two months thereby keeping $5 million in the pockets of our classified co-workers, lent credibility to the idea of us being a union for every DPS worker. This helped us recruit members, in particular classified staff who had been affected by the pay debacle.

Finally, we kept a very fun countdown to majority in our DOC WhatsApp chat. We all posted pictures of the new members we recruited so that everyone could feel the energy build as we got closer and closer to majority and feel encouraged to make more membership asks themselves. We hit majority on May 6, 2024 and celebrated together that weekend at a Majority Strong cookout before pivoting to our budget fight.

BUDGET FIGHT

We rounded out the 2023-2024 school year by winning the largest DPS budget increase in recent county history, including:

- A local pay increase for teachers with a master's degree (North Carolina eliminated master's pay in 2013 per section 8.22 of S.L. 2013-360)
- An exceptional children's (EC) and English as a second language (ESL) teacher supplement
- A certified staff supplement increase
- $8.8 million dollars towards reversing classified staff pay cuts (although classified staff did not see much of this money the following year; this pay scandal has yet to be fully rectified at the time of publication)

We won these demands by using our organizing structures to carry out a robust handwritten letter-writing campaign to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) from DPS workers and community members and to send delegations of DAE members to meet with BOCC members. We also turned DPS workers and community members out to attend and give public comment at both BOE and BOCC meetings, including a huge rally and march to the BOCC budget public hearing.

MEET & CONFER

Meet & Confer is a legal alternative to collective bargaining in the North Carolina public sector. When we began our fight for union recognition and our right to negotiate with DPS administration through Meet & Confer, districts in 40 states (including Washington D.C.) were using collective bargaining to negotiate with their public school unions. Districts in five states, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Iowa, and Virginia, were using a combination of collective bargaining and Meet & Confer, and districts in three states, Alabama, Tennessee, and Texas, were using only Meet & Confer. Only North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia had no collective bargaining or Meet & Confer policy for public school unions in any of their districts.

It made strategic sense to build toward majority while also fighting for a Meet & Confer policy because we thought it was more likely that the DPS BOE would recognize our union and grant us our seat at the table within the existing North Carolina laws once a majority of our coworkers had joined our union. However, after hitting majority membership density, it took another full year of organizing to finally win a Meet & Confer policy from our BOE.

YEAR 2: 2024-2025

This past school year (2024-2025), DAE had another set of goals, some continuing from the previous year: defeat the privatizers running for North Carolina state office and elect public school champions, continue building our membership and our internal organizing structures, and finally win and negotiate through Meet & Confer.

ELECTIONS

We ran a robust canvassing operation leading up to the election in November. We trained 360 canvassers, many of whom were coworkers that we turned out through our worksite-level organizing committees. Canvassers knocked over 7,000 doors, and we identified over 2,500 pro-public education votes in Durham, including many of our coworkers, again through our OCs. Our public school champions won their gubernatorial and state superintendent races easily, but Supreme Court Justice Allison Riggs won by fewer than 800 votes. This shows that our electoral work in Durham, only possible because DAE is a well-organized majority union, was critical to her victory.

We know that in order to win everything we and our North Carolina public school students deserve, public school workers must lead and engage in this type of electoral work across the state to ultimately flip our anti-public school General Assembly. That is why NCAE continues to carry out majority campaigns in union locals across the state. (As of this publication, we have three NCAE locals who have hit majority membership density: Durham, Asheville, and Edgecombe.)

MEET & CONFER

For two full school years, while building toward majority, and especially once we had hit majority membership status, we pushed the

BOE to pass a strong Meet & Confer policy. Winning this policy was challenging for many reasons, including the amount of political education it required us to offer our base, the length of time that it took to win, and the specific dynamics of our local BOE and district administration.

Not having a precedent for a Meet & Confer policy — or rather, the precedent being that workers have no rights and should be grateful for crumbs — was a huge challenge. It meant that in every organizing conversation with coworkers, we had to remind and teach folks that we all deserve more and deserve better and that Meet & Confer would be our best avenue through which to win what we deserve.

Meet & Confer is an abstract concept, especially in a state without collective bargaining for public-sector workers; it's a challenge to organize around our basic union rights and recognition as opposed to concrete issues and material needs. Consequently, it was essential to connect winning Meet & Confer to issues such as the demands of our bus drivers and monitors in our transportation campaign of this past year, just as we had connected it to the issue of classified pay and budget transparency the previous year.

Connecting with the transportation campaign was important for another reason: keeping workers united. As a wall-to-wall union, we are proudly made up of workers from all departments, and at times, this can be tough. Transportation workers can feel quite separate from workers who work directly in school buildings, but we built a transportation organizing committee during the 2024-2025 school year during a huge district-wide transportation crisis, where we had such a shortage of drivers and bus routes that many students did not have reliable transportation to or from school. That was critical for building trust among all workers and resolving some of this division. It also countered the argument that "DAE doesn't actually represent all workers in DPS" that some BOE members and our superintendent used to discredit our fight for Meet & Confer and union recognition.

Finally, it was a challenge to sustain the fight for Meet & Confer for the long haul without immediate wins, especially as abstract as that fight felt for much of our base for much of the year. The previous year's fight during the 2023-2024 school year had been hugely exciting — difficult, yes, but the campaigns throughout the year were largely energizing, and we sustained momentum all spring through our end-of-year budget fight. This past year, we had to find ways to help each other continue to feel hopeful during a much less exciting second year of organizing.

WINNING TACTICS

We first introduced the idea of a Meet & Confer policy as "a seat at the table for our union" in our fall 2023 petition that also included budget and other working conditions demands. We cited the early 2024 budget crisis and classified pay scandal as evidence of the urgent need for transparent and collaborative decision-making with DPS workers. We emphasized that our seat at the table could have prevented the crisis and demanded to collaborate with the district to solve the classified pay issue through Meet & Confer, which still has not happened at the time of publication, although classified staff salary scales are on the agenda for our first Meet & Confer negotiation session in October 2025.

Our members held walk-ins before school at multiple worksites to draw attention to our demand for Meet & Confer. We flyered our coworkers and parents in carpool lines about the union busting that our district was engaging in, and asked them to email and phone zap the BOE and superintendent and to attend BOE meetings.

We maintained public pressure at BOE meetings by holding rallies and press conferences before the meetings and organizing public comment from supporting DAE members and community members, including members from other sector unions in Durham. (See video of our public comment at a May 2024 BOE meeting.)

We ran a district-wide "Union Rights Now" photo petition in fall 2024 and turned it into a large banner of over 1,000 photos, which we brought to BOE meetings and other events. We posted some of these photos and quotes from DPS workers about why they wanted a Meet & Confer policy on social media.

We delivered signed public letters to the BOE and superintendent, including:

- A letter in support of Meet & Confer from other union leaders, including the local public school union president from the district our superintendent had most recently worked in before coming to Durham.
- A letter from lawyers stating that Meet & Confer is fully legal in the state of North Carolina.

We sent multiple member delegations to meet with BOE members and the superintendent. We also organized a political education session for some of our BOE members. In this session, they learned from union leaders and BOE members in other states with effective Meet & Confer policies in place about the success of using the policy to enact districtwide changes, such as new curriculum rollouts. This helped move our BOE members to be more supportive of Meet & Confer.

Perhaps most significantly, in December 2024, member leaders refused to continue private Meet & Confer policy development meetings with the superintendent and his team once they began moving backwards on parts of the policy upon which we had already agreed, and we instead insisted on only meeting publicly.

The following month, our members held building-level meetings at over 40 worksites to identify issues and increase political education about Meet & Confer among our coworkers. We then built our first Meet & Confer platform and elected our Meet & Confer negotiation team.

Our newly elected Meet & Confer team then led four public meetings with BOE members and the superintendent and his team, respectively, in spring 2025. They publicly discussed our spring budget and non-economic demands with our bosses before the Meet & Confer policy was even passed. In this way, we modeled for our coworkers and the community how Meet & Confer negotiation sessions would work in

the future. Hundreds of people attended these meetings in person, and we also live-streamed each meeting on YouTube. Audience members used red and green cards to show group dissent or approval of what the BOE members and superintendent were saying.

We made "report cards" showing which of our demands the BOE members had committed to in these meetings. We displayed them at BOE meetings and printed them on flyers to continue to increase public pressure in our budget fight. This also helped model the way we planned to hold our bosses accountable in our future official Meet & Confer sessions.

We ensured local press coverage by writing relevant op-eds and inviting the press to our rallies and public meetings. We also maintained a strong social media presence.

We ultimately won not just an initial Meet & Confer policy in April 2025 (the first in North Carolina public school history), but a BOE vote to amend the policy the following month to finally give us the strong policy we deserve, which will serve as a powerful precedent across North Carolina.

NEXT YEAR AND BEYOND

DAE will start our official Meet & Confer negotiations in October 2025, and we cannot wait to see what we are able to win through that new structure. However, we are very clear that simply having a Meet & Confer policy will not immediately improve the working and learning conditions in DPS.

What we are able to win through Meet & Confer depends on how strong and organized we are as a union. We will need to build up organizing committees in worksites without them. We will need to organize hard and show up en masse to public Meet & Confer negotiation sessions. We will need to fight together with Durham parents, caregivers, and community members for what we and our students deserve.

Ultimately, we still have so much work to do at the local and statewide level, and many of the obstacles we've faced are still present. The next many years will continue to require us to grow and evolve as a union. We will need to respond to the recurring challenge of ensuring that this work is sustainable for those of us who lead it, as well as to new and unexpected challenges.

But we know that we will be more nimble and powerful as a union than we've ever been before. All of our members who have been involved in our campaigns over the past two years have been transformed: we are stronger, more organized, more connected, and we more fully know what is possible if we dare to imagine it and fight for it together.

GLOSSARY

Here are some common union words and phrases.

AGENCY FEE

The amount a worker pays to the union when they are in a private sector workplace covered by a collective bargaining agreement, but they are not a union member. This only applies in non-**RIGHT TO WORK** states. The fees are intended to cover the costs of representation activities for the union.

BOYCOTT

A tactic used by workers and consumers to pressure employers through a mass refusal to purchase their products or otherwise patronize the business.

BUSINESS UNIONISM

A negative term indicating that a union has a top-down, staff-driven approach that prioritizes labor-management partnerships, minimizing conflict with employers and lacks adequate member participation and democracy.

CARD CHECK

A method for workers to organize a union in which a majority of employees in a bargaining unit sign union authorization cards, and that is used as the basis for employer recognition of the union.

CLASS-STRUGGLE UNIONISM

Organizing and union activity is directed by the members within a left, anti-capitalist political framework. Similar to **RANK-AND-FILE UNIONISM**, but with an emphasis on workers organizing as part of the working class, whose interests are necessarily opposed to those of management because of how capitalism structures businesses and government to incentivize exploiting workers. The UE calls this Them and Us Unionism.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

The process whereby a union and employer negotiate a contract.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENT

A written contract between a union and an employer that covers the wages, benefits, working conditions, and other issues related to employment and that usually lasts three or more years.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING UNIT

The group of workers from one or more workplaces that organize together and bargain a contract with the employer.

CONCERTED ACTIVITY

The rights, protected by the National Labor Relations Act, of two or more employees to act in concert to form, join, or assist labor organizations in order to affect their wages, benefits and working conditions.

CONTRACTUAL UNIONISM

A union organizing strategy that prioritizes obtaining a negotiated collective bargaining agreement with the employer.

DIRECT-JOIN UNIONISM
Another name for pre-majority unionism where workers join the union directly as dues-paying members even if the union does not have recognition or a contract.

EXCLUSIVE REPRESENTATION
The rights and responsibilities of a union to be the sole representative for a bargaining unit of workers in negotiations with an employer.

LOCKOUT
An employer action that seeks to force the terms of a settlement by refusing to allow union employees to work or by shutting down operations.

MEMBERS-ONLY BARGAINING
Only the members of the union bargain with the employer and receive the benefits won through those negotiations. While used in the pre-NLRA era, the NLRB currently does not require employers to bargain with workers who don't have official recognition as the exclusive bargaining representative.

MEMBERS-ONLY UNIONISM
An organizing strategy where the union officially only represents workers who have signed up as members, though the union will typically fight for improvements for all the workers.

MILITANT MINORITY
A group of workers who are at the forefront of leading their union into worker-led struggles to build power on the shop floor. Militant minorities can exist within unions that have contracts and unions that do not.

MINORITY UNIONISM
Another name for pre-majority unionism, where the union has likely organized less than a majority of the workers at a workplace or employer and does not have a contract.

NLRA
National Labor Relations Act, the federal labor law passed in 1935 that outlines the rights of most private sector workers to organize unions and engage in collective bargaining.

NLRB
National Labor Relations Board, the federal agency in charge of enforcing the National Labor Relations Act, which protects the rights of most U.S. workers in the private sector to organize unions and engage in collective bargaining.

NON-CONTRACTUAL UNIONISM
Another name for pre-majority unionism where workers fight for improvements at work without necessarily having a contract.

OPEN-SOURCE UNIONISM
The union is open to all workers at any workplace who want to join, even if they are the only one at their workplace and there is no organizing campaign ongoing.

PRE-MAJORITY UNIONISM
Workers in a given workplace organize for better workplace conditions even though they do not have official recognition or a union contract. Usually less than a majority of the workers at an employer are involved, even though most unions aspire to achieve majorities or supermajorities.

RANK-AND-FILE
This refers to the union members as a whole rather than the union's elected leadership or staff.

RANK-AND-FILE UNIONISM
Organizing and union activity that is directed by the **RANK-AND-FILE** workers of a union, meaning the workers themselves and not the elected leadership or staff.

REPRESENTATION ELECTION
An election overseen by the NLRB whereby the workers in a bargaining unit choose whether or not to officially form a recognized and certified union.

RIGHT TO WORK
Refers to state laws that prohibit any agreement between a union and an employer that mandates that workers in a bargaining unit must pay union dues or agency fees. This means that non members will pay nothing but still get all the benefits of the union's work, including the contract.

SECTION 7 RIGHTS
The rights outlined in the NLRA Section 7 that protect concerted activity of workers.

SOLIDARITY UNIONISM
A form of organizing used most by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) that prioritizes rank-and-file worker direct action to improve wages, benefits and working conditions, and usually does not seek official union recognition or a collective bargaining agreement. A similar concept to pre-majority unionism.

STRIKE
The concerted withholding of labor by workers from their employer until certain terms and conditions are met.

UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICE (ULP)
Conduct prohibited by the NLRA. For example, when an employer retaliates against union supporters or interrogates workers about their support for the union.

WALL-TO-WALL UNIONISM
A form of organizing where all the workers at an employer are eligible to be involved in the union. Wall-to-wall unions generally have to be non-contractual unions by necessity because if they file for a union election they are sometimes forced to abide by "professional/non-professional" job category distinctions as per the NLRB. That said, if every different job classification at a given employer has official recognition and a contract with the employer, but all are affiliated with the same national or international union, this is often called **wall-to-wall representation** even though the workers are technically in different bargaining units.

WILDCAT STRIKE
A strike undertaken by union workers without official union authorization.

WORKER ASSOCIATION / WORKER CENTER
An organization of workers in the same industry or geographic area that works to improve wages, benefits and working conditions, and also provides services to workers such as assistance with wage theft or immigration cases. It generally does not have or seek official recognition and a contract with employers.