

Alt-labor's turn toward politics and public policy to combat the exploitation of low-wage workers

Building power and 'punching above their weight'

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Unequal Power

Part of the [Unequal Power](#) project, an EPI initiative to reestablish the understanding in law, politics, economics, and philosophy, that equal bargaining power between workers and employers does not exist. Recognizing this inherent workplace inequality will bolster freedom, economic fairness, workplace protections and democracy.

Executive summary

Over the last two decades, nonprofit “alt-labor” groups—a diverse lot of organizations consisting of community-based worker centers and other social and economic justice groups whose primary missions include fighting for workers’ rights—have emerged in numerous cities around the nation to help nonunionized, low-wage workers combat exploitation. During this time they have become increasingly adept at using public policy, rather than collective bargaining or direct economic interventions, to achieve their goals and to strengthen basic workers’ rights. Despite their small numbers—there are only about 250 alt-labor organizations scattered across the United States—they have led dozens of successful policy campaigns to combat wage theft, strengthen health and safety laws, fight discrimination and sexual harassment, create domestic workers’ and temporary workers’ bills of rights, defend immigrants’ rights and women’s rights, end bias-based policing, and advance economic and racial justice.

Alt-labor groups have laid the groundwork for these policy victories by making subtle but important changes to the political environment in which policy decisions are made. Specifically, they have worked assiduously—and carefully, given legal restrictions on political activities by tax-exempt organizations—to build new electorates (registering new voters, naturalizing citizens, and expanding their base to new geographic locations); broaden the issue agenda (organizing and mobilizing voters around new issues, incrementally building on policy gains, and seizing opportunities to expand the range of ideas deemed legitimate); and alter electoral dynamics (ramping up organizing activities during election cycles and, through new 501(c)(4) organizations, explicitly endorsing candidates and intervening directly in electoral campaigns).

Because these interventions affect political incentives and discourses, rather than manifest in campaign contributions or other more readily measurable indicators, they have tended to fly under the radar. But they are no less consequential for their subtlety. Across a wide range of

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political contexts, alt-labor’s political work has paved the way for policy victories that have created new rights and protections for vulnerable workers where none previously existed.

By conventional metrics, the organizations are remarkably weak. Most are small, resource-poor, financially dependent upon philanthropic foundations, and operationally constrained by their nonprofit status. Their members, most of whom are low-wage immigrants and Black, Indigenous, and people of color, are socially, politically, and economically marginalized, with many unable even to vote. In contrast, their adversaries are often well organized, well funded, socially dominant, and enjoy easy access and influence in government. Moreover, their model seems to compare unfavorably with the traditional labor union model of political engagement.

How, then, are they managing to make headway? This study reports on findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with leaders and members of 28 alt-labor groups. It uses a “diverse case” selection strategy to maximize variance along multiple dimensions of group characteristics and political contexts to highlight patterns common to all. It finds that alt-labor groups of all types are working to build three types of power:

- **Power within:** Rather than try to replicate the union model of building a critical mass of organized workers in certain sectors of the economy, alt-labor groups seek to *go deep* with a smaller base of workers anchored in geographic and often racial or ethnic communities.
- **Power with:** Rather than mobilize around a single issue, alt-labor groups often fashion policy agendas that reflect an intersectional, “whole worker” approach to organizing that extends their purview beyond wages and working conditions to include racial justice, immigrant rights, women’s rights, and other issues affecting their communities while leading them to forge coalitions with a wide range of allies.
- **Power to:** Alt-labor groups compensate for their lack of resources with resourcefulness, doing more with less. Notable capacity-building experiments include organizing models built around new technologies, “sister” 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations that permit overt electioneering, and novel resource-sharing umbrella groups.

Well aware of their many weaknesses and constraints, alt-labor groups are working to leverage and augment their distinctive strengths: their deep roots in local communities and the racial and ethnic bonds that unite their members; their positions within larger ecosystems of progressive-minded groups; and the flexibility of their organizational forms. By tapping into, harnessing, and developing these strengths, alt-labor groups are building sources of power that they can draw upon in their efforts to alter their political environments and advance their policy goals.

Given the diminutive stature of most groups and the myriad ways in which the American political economy is stacked against low-wage workers, the groups’ system-changing ambitions may seem somewhat surprising, or even quixotic. But these activist workers and

organizers are not shrinking violets. Many have been deeply influenced by radical organizing traditions, including Latin American and Black liberation movements, and they do not view inherited, status quo power arrangements as fixed or immutable. Their entire disposition is to try to *change* the system in which they operate.

Their accomplishments to date demonstrate the political capacities of marginalized, low-wage workers who organize collectively to combat their exploitation and oppression. Although race-class-subjugated communities are often depicted solely in terms of their disadvantages, and although they are, indeed, sites of vast inequalities, they should not be understood in terms of their “political deficits.” In many cases, these are sites of dynamic political activism.

Alt-labor’s political and policy work, however, faces several limitations and constraints. First, not every group has pivoted toward politics and policy. Younger and more under-resourced groups have tended to remain more focused on casework, individual services, and community organizing. Among those that have pivoted, different groups prioritize different aspects of political engagement; some devote more resources to policy campaigns than others; and each group faces myriad idiosyncratic and context-specific challenges.

Second, most groups are geographically constrained, with most work taking place at the city, county, and state levels. It is not confined to blue states and urban areas—groups in red and purple states and in rural and suburban areas are doing the same kinds of power-building, political engagement, and policy-centered work as those in blue areas. But wherever they are, their strength is rooted in their local bases of support, a situation that limits a group’s reach and makes expansion to new states and regions challenging.

Third, the scope of alt-labor’s policy goals has thus far been rather limited. Most often they have fought to secure only the most minimal standards of fairness, decency, health, and dignity on the job—not the transformation of industries or the institutionalization of worker voice in corporate decision-making.

Finally, it is worth noting that public policy is itself limited as a pathway to workers’ rights, and employment laws are not always the best way to make workers’ rights real. Yet, until an overhaul of national labor law becomes possible, employment laws represent low-wage workers’ last best hope of combating exploitation and recovering some protections in the workplace.

In sum, with little other recourse, a growing number of alt-labor groups have turned to politics and policy to combat the systemic exploitation of low-wage workers. To increase their probabilities of success in the policymaking arena, they have sought to alter the political environment in which policy decisions are made. Taking this path has required that they build up their own sources of power, which they have done by harnessing and leveraging their unique strengths. Organizers see this power-building, political, and policy work as a never-ending fight: their purpose is not to win every battle—it is to persevere, grow, remain nimble, continually build power, and make incremental gains whenever possible.

Introduction

When we talk about labor activism and the defense of workers' rights, we usually think of organized labor, whose mission of course is to represent and collectively bargain for the interests of workers. But over the last two decades a new array of players—nonprofit “alt-labor” groups¹—has become increasingly adept at using public policy, rather than collective bargaining or direct economic interventions, to combat exploitation in the workplace and strengthen basic workers' rights. Despite their small numbers—there are only about 250 alt-labor organizations scattered across the United States—these groups were cited by journalists as leading advocates in 73% of all successful minimum wage, paid sick leave, and fair workweek laws enacted in 93 cities and counties between 2003 and 2019.² They also led dozens of successful policy campaigns to combat wage theft, strengthen health and safety laws, fight discrimination and sexual harassment, create domestic workers' and temporary workers' bills of rights, defend immigrants' rights and women's rights, end bias-based policing, and advance economic and racial justice.

Alt-labor groups have strategically laid the groundwork for these policy victories by making subtle but important changes to the political environment in which policy decisions are made. Specifically, they have worked assiduously (and carefully, given legal restrictions on political activities by tax-exempt organizations) to:

- **Build new electorates** by registering new voters, naturalizing citizens, and expanding their base to new geographic locations, effectively creating new constituencies of support for their favored policies and candidates;
- **Broaden the issue agenda** by organizing and mobilizing voters around new issues, incrementally building on policy gains, and seizing opportunities to expand the range of ideas deemed legitimate;
- **Alter electoral dynamics** by ramping up organizing activities during election cycles and—if the group had a social welfare, 501(c)(4) side organization—explicitly endorsing candidates and intervening directly in electoral campaigns.

Because these interventions affect political incentives and discourses, rather than manifest in campaign contributions or other more readily measurable indicators, they have tended to fly under the radar of many observers. But they are no less consequential for their subtlety. Across a wide range of political contexts, alt-labor's political work has paved the way for policy victories that have created new rights and protections for vulnerable workers where none previously existed.

The ability of alt-labor groups to alter local political landscapes and raise labor standards through public policy presents something of a puzzle. By conventional metrics, these nonprofit workers' rights organizations are remarkably weak. Most are small, resource-poor, financially dependent upon philanthropic foundations, and operationally constrained by their nonprofit status. Their members, most of whom are low-wage immigrants and Black, Indigenous, and people of color, are socially, politically, and economically marginalized, with many unable even to vote. In contrast, their adversaries are often well

organized, well funded, and socially dominant, and enjoy easy access and influence in government.

Moreover, alt-labor's model seems to compare unfavorably with the traditional labor union model of political engagement. Whereas unions historically derived their political clout from their associational and structural power (their power in numbers and their members' strategic position in production processes), alt-labor groups have neither managed to grow a mass base of dues-paying members nor developed the ability to significantly affect production processes or supply chains. Alt-labor groups thus find themselves in the peculiar position of trying to build and exercise power in the political arena without the concomitant associational or structural power that has long propelled the traditional labor movement (Wright 2000; Silver 2003).

How, then, are alt-labor groups managing to make headway for their members in the political and policymaking arenas?

Part of the answer involves structural features of the American political system—such as its highly decentralized form of federalism and its largely inattentive public—that enable well-organized minorities to make advances by strategically selecting favorable local governing venues and seizing windows of opportunity when they arise (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Kingdon 1984). As Janice Fine (2005, 187) recognized early on, these features have long enabled low-wage immigrant workers, despite their disadvantaged status in American society, to build and exercise greater political than economic power. In her groundbreaking scholarship on worker centers, Fine (2005, 2006) also emphasized how these workers rely on organization, alliance, and public empathy to win unlikely policy victories. I endeavor to build on Fine's first two insights here. Most subsequent scholarship has tended to emphasize the third—the public empathy aspect—showing how across a range of contexts, marginalized workers have gained political traction by using “symbolic leverage,” drawing upon their “moral authority,” and bringing public awareness to their plight to build empathy and popular support for policy change (Chun 2011, xiii; Bobo 2009; Fine 2011; Agarwala 2013; Choo 2016; Mattoni 2016; Rhomberg 2018, 253; Rosado Marzán 2017, 411).

But most alt-labor organizers are loath to rely on the vicissitudes of public opinion to advance the cause of workers' rights. And they are not particularly eager to reinforce a narrative in which low-wage workers are framed as helpless victims or dependent on the goodwill of others. Although workers' stories of exploitation are critical ingredients in most successful policy campaigns—they are particularly helpful in generating favorable media coverage and in persuading legislators to support policy change—they are not especially empowering to members outside of that context. As Marcela Diaz, executive director of Somos Un Pueblo Unido in New Mexico, explained, “Right now there's a public narrative about immigrants being incredibly vulnerable victims. But our members don't feel that way. In everything we do, we ask: Where are we coming from? How can we get people to support the *strength* in our community and to support organizations like ours and people like us who are actually moving things forward?”

For a growing number of alt-labor groups, resolving this puzzle has become a central preoccupation: How to build and exercise power in the political arena without relying on the moral/empathy frame? How to build and leverage workers' collective *strength*?

To learn how they are approaching this difficult task, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with leaders and members of 28 alt-labor groups scattered about the country, using a “diverse case” selection strategy to maximize variance along multiple dimensions of group characteristics and political contexts (Gerring 2006; Seawright and Gerring 2008).³ The groups are listed in **Appendix Table 1**. Leveraging this heterogeneity, I seek to highlight patterns common to all.

I find that alt-labor groups of all types are working to build three types of power:

- **Power within:** Rather than try to replicate the union model of building a critical mass of organized workers in certain sectors of the economy, alt-labor groups seek to *go deep* with a smaller base of workers anchored in geographic and often racial or ethnic communities. Their base-building efforts emphasize individual empowerment, community building, and transformational organizing (Han 2014). This work is not expensive, but it is time-intensive and has proven difficult to grow to scale. It has, though, generated deep bonds of solidarity, buoyed the groups during tough times, and facilitated adaptation to changing conditions (Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021).
- **Power with:** Rather than mobilize around a single issue, alt-labor groups often fashion policy agendas that reflect an intersectional, “whole worker” approach to organizing (McAlevey 2014). This approach extends their purview beyond wages and working conditions to include racial justice, immigrant rights, women’s rights, and other issues affecting their communities while leading them to forge coalitions with a wide range of allies. This outward-reaching, purview-expanding, coalition-building work can spread the groups thin and trade off other priorities. But it also enables them to broaden their reach, generate synergies with others, and gain strategic benefits and efficiencies.
- **Power to:** One way alt-labor groups compensate for their lack of resources is with “resourcefulness,” to borrow from Marshall Ganz’s (2000) well-known formulation. Through organizational innovation, they try to do more with less. Notable capacity-building experiments include organizing models built around new technologies, “sister” 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations that permit overt electioneering, and novel resource-sharing umbrella groups.

Well aware of their many weaknesses and constraints, alt-labor groups are working to leverage and augment their distinctive strengths: their deep roots in local communities and the racial and ethnic bonds that unite their members, their positions within larger ecosystems of progressive-minded groups, and the flexibility of their organizational forms. By tapping into, harnessing, and developing these strengths, alt-labor groups are building sources of power that they can draw upon in their efforts to alter their political environments and advance their policy goals.⁴

To be sure, alt-labor groups have long engaged in these activities as a matter of course—base building, coalition building, and organization building are elemental to the strategy and practice of organizing (e.g., Ganz 2006)—and not every group conceives of this work as building power that can be deployed in the political sphere. But in recent years, as groups have become frustrated by the limits of what they can accomplish through casework and direct economic actions alone, a growing number have turned toward policy and politics as a means of scaling up their efforts, and their power-building work has taken on an increasingly political cast. Many have found, for example, that their base-building and leadership development work lends itself rather naturally to electorate building and to grooming candidates for elective office. Their coalition-building work, likewise, helps them to project a larger presence in local politics and signals a breadth of support for their expansive issue agendas. And their organizational innovations enable them to intervene in electoral and legislative politics in new ways. But there is no formula: The links between their power-building efforts and their creative interventions in the political arena are varied and wide ranging.

Given the diminutive stature of most groups and the myriad ways in which the American political economy is stacked against low-wage workers (Hacker et al. 2021), the groups' system-changing ambitions may seem somewhat surprising, or even quixotic. But these activist workers and organizers are not shrinking violets. Many have been deeply influenced by radical organizing traditions, including Latin American and Black liberation movements, and they do not view inherited, status quo power arrangements as fixed or immutable. Their entire disposition is to try to *change* the system in which they operate.

Although their policy successes to date have been modest by historical standards and enforcement is still a work in progress in many locations, they have been accumulating fast and spreading to states and localities across the nation, demonstrating the plausibility and efficacy of the political path to recovering workers' rights. Moreover, they demonstrate the *political capacities* of marginalized, low-wage workers who organize collectively to combat their exploitation and oppression. As Soss and Weaver (2017) and Michener (2020) have written, although race-class-subjugated communities are often depicted solely in terms of their disadvantages, and although they are indeed sites of vast inequalities, they should not be understood in terms of their "political deficits." In many cases, these are sites of dynamic political activism.

As this paper demonstrates, these workers have built and harnessed political power through their assiduous base-building, coalition-building, and organization-building efforts. They have deployed this power in the political arena, making subtle but important shifts to the political landscape—building new electorates, broadening the issue agenda, and altering electoral dynamics. These shifts have laid the groundwork for far more impressive policy victories—raising labor standards, improving working conditions, and creating new rights and protections for their communities—than most observers would have thought possible, given the groups' small size, limited resources, and the relative strength of their adversaries. "What makes worker centers special," said Sophia Zaman of Raise the Floor Alliance, "is that they punch above their weight. They deploy resources in really scrappy and brilliant ways to expand their reach and deliver more sophisticated results for low-

wage workers.”

Alt-labor’s political and policy work, however, faces several limitations and constraints, and the groups’ many achievements ought to be viewed in proper perspective. Before turning to the evidence and analysis, some caveats and qualifications are in order.

First, as noted, not every group has pivoted toward politics and policy: Although all engage in the power-building activities described above, younger and more under-resourced groups have tended to remain more focused on casework, individual services, and community organizing. Among those that have pivoted, different groups prioritize different aspects of political engagement; some devote more resources to policy campaigns than others; and each group faces myriad idiosyncratic and context-specific challenges. But variation in group behavior does not seem to correlate with some of the bigger structural factors such as partisan context, sectoral focus, or network affiliation; rather, it seems best explained by each group’s distinctive history, its members’ countries of origin, its mix of personalities, its organizational culture, its “strategic capacity” (Ganz 2000), and the like. Those are the keys to understanding how each group operates, what each group is fighting *for*, and why, in any given instance, a particular group might deviate from the broader patterns identified here. Such factors are important in their own right and should be attended to—as existing scholarship has done exceedingly well (e.g., Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Milkman and Ott 2014). But the purpose of this study is different—it is to use this rich heterogeneity to draw out patterns common to all.

Second, most groups are geographically constrained: Most of their work takes place at the city, county, and state levels. It is not confined to “blue” states and urban areas—groups in “red” and “purple” states and in rural and suburban areas are doing the same kinds of power-building, political engagement, and policy-centered work as those in blue areas, as we shall see. But wherever they are, their strength is rooted in their local bases of support, a situation that limits a group’s reach and makes expansion to new states and regions challenging. It also means that local policies are inherently vulnerable to state preemption and that enforcement is an ongoing problem, due to the typically limited enforcement capacities of subnational governments, as discussed below.

The third limitation involves the scope of alt-labor’s policy goals. Although many alt-labor groups share the ideological commitments and long-term aspirations of social-movement-oriented labor unions and see themselves as constituent parts of the labor movement (and not as alternatives to it, as the moniker alt-labor might imply), most often they are fighting to secure only the most minimal standards of fairness, decency, health, and dignity on the job—not the transformation of industries or the institutionalization of worker voice in corporate decision-making. Although they do ultimately seek social, economic, and political transformation, their policy work, thus far, has focused overwhelmingly on preventing exploitation, discrimination, harassment, abuse, wage theft, and dangerous working conditions. Although their policy ambitions have grown decidedly bolder in recent years (e.g., to include policies like just-cause termination and more, as discussed below), their goals have tended to be more defensive than transformative in nature. As Tom Juravich (2018) writes, rather than compare their work with that of unions, they ought to be

understood as operating largely “in distinct arenas of power against fundamentally different adversaries.” Indeed, rather than view alt-labor as filling the gaps left by eroded unions, it would be more accurate to see alt-labor as fighting for workers’ basic human rights while incrementally working to raise the floor on labor standards. In other words, what unions no longer do, alt-labor does not replace (Rosenfeld 2014), and enormous structural problems in the American political economy remain (Mishel 2021; EPI 2021).

Finally, it is worth noting the limitations of public policy as a pathway to workers’ rights. As compared with unionization and collective bargaining, employment laws contain no built-in mechanisms for generating collective action and voice in the workplace; they are blunt instruments that feature high barriers to access and often reproduce inequalities; they are geographically dispersed across states and cities; their implementation is contingent upon budgetary politics, administrative will, and the embrace of “strategic enforcement” by government agencies; many employers nevertheless fail to comply with the law; and many workers remain unaware of their rights or fearful of asserting them (Weiler 1990; Berrey, Nelson, and Nielsen 2017; Galvin 2019; Weil 2005; Fine, Lyon, and Round 2021; Fine and Bartley 2018; Galvin 2016; Gleeson 2012; Hertel-Fernandez 2020). Employment laws, in other words, are clearly not the best way to make workers’ rights real. But until an overhaul of national labor law becomes possible, they represent low-wage workers’ last best hope of combating exploitation and recovering some protections in the workplace.

In sum, with little other recourse, alt-labor groups have turned to politics and public policy to combat the systemic exploitation of low-wage workers. To increase their probabilities of success in the policymaking arena, they have sought to alter the political environment in which policy decisions are made. Taking this path has required that they build up their own sources of power, which they have done by harnessing and leveraging their unique strengths. The bulk of this paper is devoted to examining the component parts of alt-labor’s power-building work and how it has been deployed in the political sphere. But first, let us discuss some of the problems alt-labor groups emerged to address, some of the factors motivating their turn toward politics and policy, and some of the challenges they face.

Background: Wage theft, the rise of worker centers, and the turn to policy

Over the last several decades, a convergence of several major economic, social, and political developments has transformed the nature of work in the United States. Heightened global economic competition, deindustrialization, the “financialization” of the economy, and the rise of supply chains and production processes predicated on subcontracting, outsourcing, offshoring, and franchising have resulted in a “fissured” workplace and an abundance of poor quality, low-wage jobs (Weil 2014; Kalleberg 2011; Davis and Kim 2015). Meanwhile, as millions of low-wage immigrant workers have entered the workforce and private-sector labor unions have declined, conservative politicians have deliberately weakened labor and employment standards, leaving millions of low-wage

workers increasingly vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace (Estlund 2002; Milkman 2006; Bernhardt et al. 2009; Galvin 2019; Mishel, Rhinehart, and Windham 2020).

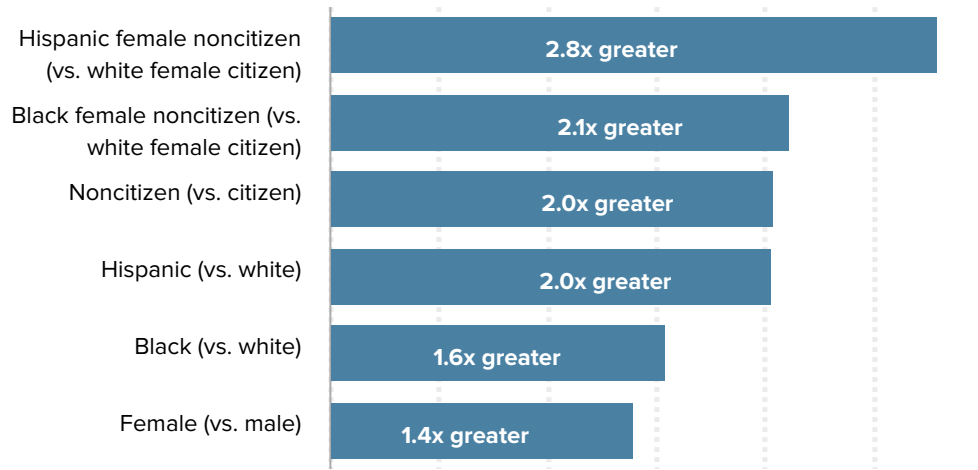
Although most low-wage workers technically have the legal right to unionize, precious few have been able to: In 2019, only 3% of low-wage workers in the private sector were unionized.⁵ This lack of union representation has been particularly problematic for workers who perform indispensable work but whose race, ethnicity, gender, and citizenship status renders them especially vulnerable to wage theft, discrimination, sexual harassment, unsafe or unhealthy working conditions, and other forms of exploitation. Indeed, it is a tragic irony that some of the hardest-hit, least-protected workers during the Covid-19 pandemic have been low-wage immigrant workers and people of color working in long-undervalued jobs that are now deemed “essential” (Kinder and Ross 2020; Gould and Shierholz 2020).

The most common and pernicious problem these workers face is wage theft, or the failure to pay workers what they are legally owed. In highly competitive sectors featuring many small subcontractors, thin profit margins, and slack low-wage labor markets, many employers seek to save on labor costs by evading minimum wage, overtime, and wage payment laws. With minimal government oversight and weak penalties, the structural incentives for noncompliance are strong (Ashenfelter and Smith 1979; Weil 2005; Galvin 2016). Analyzing Current Population Survey data, I find that about 15% of low-wage workers were paid less than their state’s minimum wage between 2009 and 2019, on average.⁶ These workers lost about \$1.67 per hour on average, or 21% of the minimum wage to which they were legally entitled.⁷ The highest rates of minimum wage noncompliance were found in the private households (27%), personal and laundry services (23%), membership associations (22%), and agriculture (20%) industries. Noncitizens and Latinx workers were about twice as likely to suffer a minimum wage violation as U.S. citizens and white workers, respectively, and women and Black workers were about 1.5 times as likely than men and white workers.⁸ When the interaction of gender, race, and citizenship are taken into account, the effects of discrimination were compounded: Latina women who were not U.S. citizens, for example, were 2.8 times as likely to experience a minimum wage violation than were white women who were citizens; noncitizen Black women were 2.1 times as likely (**Figure A**).⁹

Over the last two decades, alt-labor groups have emerged in numerous cities around the nation to help these nonunionized, low-wage workers combat these forms of exploitation. The groups are a diverse lot. They include organizations that self-identify as “worker centers” as defined in Janice Fine’s classic 2006 text; community-based organizations that do not consider themselves worker centers but whose primary mission includes fighting for workers’ rights; national and regional alliances of workers’ rights groups; and “amalgams” that include workers’ rights divisions within their broader organizational purviews.¹⁰ Worker centers, which Fine defines as “community-based mediating institutions that provide support to and organize among communities of low-wage workers” (2006, 11), constitute the organizational core of alt-labor.¹¹ In their latest count, Fine, Narro, and Barnes (2018) identified 226 operational worker centers in the United States, a sign of dramatic growth in a short period of time, as only a handful were in

Figure A

Probability of minimum wage violation relative to reference group, 2009–2019

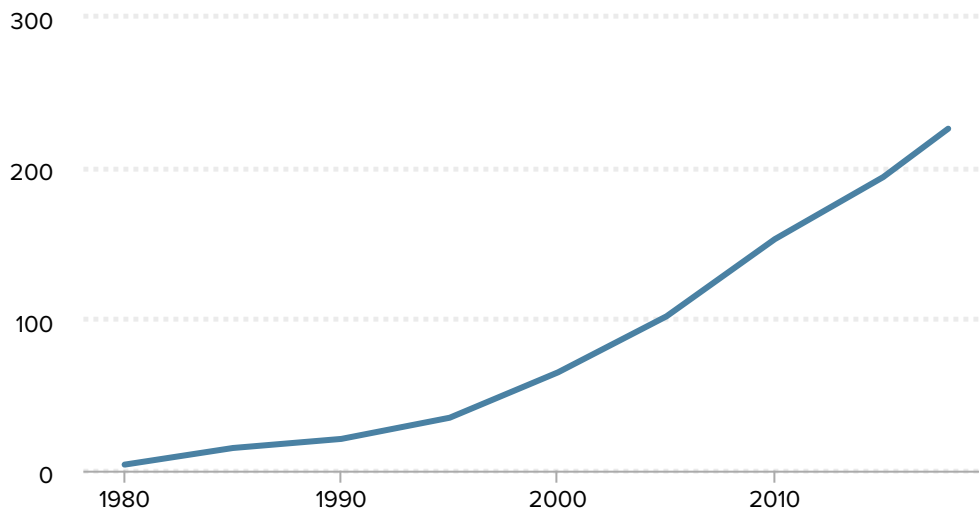


Source: Minimum wage violation rates calculated using CPS-ORG data compiled by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2020. CPS-ORG Uniform Extracts, Version 2.5.

Economic Policy Institute

Figure B

Fast growth in the number of worker centers, 1980–2018



Source: Computed from Fine, Narro, and Barnes 2018, p. 14, Fig. 2.

Economic Policy Institute

operation in the early 1980s (Figure B).

The number of worker centers is always in flux, however, for several reasons: Some of the smaller, poorer groups do not always survive; nationally federated organizations like the

National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) periodically seed new groups in new locations; and preexisting groups that did not previously tackle workers' rights issues often "evolve" to take on worker center functions in response to the needs of their members. Worker centers typically help workers document their grievances, file formal complaints with regulatory agencies, and sue unscrupulous employers; many also offer language and skills-training classes to help boost members' job prospects; almost all emphasize community building, community organizing, and leadership development; and each also undertakes a wide range of other activities specific to that group's context, culture, and membership needs.

Despite their central focus on workers' rights, worker centers and kindred alt-labor groups are not, and have never been, unions. They do not serve as workers' exclusive bargaining representatives or engage in collective bargaining; many do not require dues payments, and those that do tend to treat dues as a symbolic gesture of commitment and solidarity more than as a reliable source of income for the organization. Nor are they structured like typical nonprofit organizations: Although most provide direct services to needy workers, they have endeavored to go well beyond service provision. They also seek to empower workers, develop their sense of individual agency, mobilize them in collective action, and help them demand justice through a broad range of tactics and strategies (Fine 2005, 2006, 2011; Fine, Narro, and Barnes 2018; Eidelson 2013; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010; Milkman and Ott 2014; Rosado Marzán 2017; Theodore, Gutelius, and Gonzalez 2019; Fisk 2020).

One of the most well-known strategies is the "workplace justice campaign," also called "direct action," in which groups of workers seek to bring maximal public attention to their employers' abusive behavior and boost their leverage in demanding redress by orchestrating spectacular public demonstrations, disruptive actions, boycotts, and other types of public shaming strategies. Carefully targeted and strategically organized, direct actions are usually successful, achieving some form of recompense for aggrieved workers. These campaigns often advance movement-building goals as well, generating what sociologist Rachel Meyer has termed "collective efficacy" and Meyer and Fine call "grassroots citizenship" (Meyer 2017; Meyer and Fine 2017).

Confronting low-road employers one at a time, however, can be very costly in terms of the resources expended and opportunity costs incurred. Because the labor violation has already occurred, workplace justice campaigns are inherently reactive—they do little to deter exploitation in the future—and once the campaign is over, the employer retains its outsized authority and may well continue to exploit workers. The same is true for filing complaints with state agencies and initiating lawsuits: Many organizers call them "band-aids" because they are reactive fixes rather than proactive deterrents. To be sure, direct actions, complaints, and lawsuits are all critically important tools in the fight against worker exploitation—especially when used as leverage in combination with one another—but they often drain worker organizations of precious resources without making much of a dent in the underlying power imbalance in the workplace.

This, more than any other reason, is why alt-labor groups have increasingly turned to

public policy—to state laws, local ordinances, and other uses of public authority—to combat workplace exploitation and strengthen workers’ rights. Like workplace justice campaigns, policy campaigns serve as rallying points for generating collective action, building solidarity, and empowering workers.¹² But unlike workplace justice campaigns, public policies have the potential to raise the floor on labor standards across thousands of workplaces and entire geographic regions in one fell swoop. “That’s how we scale up our efforts,” explained Adam Kader, policy director and former longtime worker center director at Arise Chicago. “Our path to scale is via policy. We go over the heads of all these employers. Then, theoretically, we’ve changed every workplace in the entire region.” If properly designed and executed—e.g., with strong penalties and vigorous enforcement—employment laws can reduce the incidence of labor standards noncompliance (Galvin 2016). When low-road employers nevertheless continue to violate the law, policies provide mechanisms through which workers can petition the state to hold employers accountable.

Alt-labor organizers often describe public policy as an alternative way to recreate, one policy at a time, the semblance of a collective bargaining agreement that is enforced by the state. “We are trying to fill the holes of what a collective bargaining agreement can get workers, for the workers who don’t have a collective bargaining agreement,” Deborah Axt, former co-executive director of Make the Road New York (MRNY), told Jane McAlevey (2014, 185). “For the many workers in the informal economy, we are trying to put as many pieces together as we can to offer protections as if they had a contract.” But Axt and other organizers also understand fully the limitations of employment law. They tend to view it as a last resort in the context of declining unions and widespread exploitation of low-wage workers—a workaround solution to raise the floor on labor standards and recover some workers’ rights.

At their most aspirational—when asked to sketch their boldest vision for the future—many organizers paint a similar picture: Each new policy win contributes in a piecemeal way to building a different kind of state, one that views the employment relationship from the perspective of workers at least as much as from the perspective of employers and business owners, one whose operations are geared toward protecting workers’ rights and raising the floor on labor standards at least as much as toward promoting economic growth. Ideally, this reconstituted state regulatory apparatus will work hand-in-glove with a reformed national labor law and revived unions, with each helping to fortify the other (Block and Sachs 2020; Fisk 2020).

The rough outlines of this vision are, in fact, starting to appear in select urban locations. Consider the growing complement of pro-worker policy enactments that have accumulated over the last 10 years in Chicago, Cook County, and across Illinois. Alt-labor groups, in coalition with labor unions and others, have been instrumental in persuading city, county, and state lawmakers to enact multiple minimum wage increases, anti-wage-theft and wage protection laws, earned paid sick leave, fair workweek advance scheduling requirements, a temp workers’ bill-of-rights law, a domestic workers’ bill-of-rights law, an anti-retaliation ordinance, and whistleblower protection for workers who report discrimination and harassment. They have also created new state enforcement capacities

via the new Office of Labor Standards in Chicago (founded in 2019) and the Workplace Rights Bureau in the Illinois attorney general’s office (founded in 2015), both of which are empowered to investigate employers and enforce the new employment laws. Chicago-area worker organizations view these accomplishments as only the beginning (e.g., Doussard and Lesniewski 2017; Oswalt and Rosado Marzán 2018).

But “deep blue” Chicago, where alt-labor groups work in solidarity with traditional labor unions and other powerful groups and where almost all elected officials are Democrats, is not the only city where alt-labor groups have made headway in recent years. As noted above, between 2003 and 2019 alt-labor groups were cited by local newspapers as leading advocates in 73% of all minimum wage, paid sick leave, and fair workweek laws enacted in 93 cities and counties throughout the United States (see **Appendix Table 2** for detailed list). Alt-labor groups were hardly solely responsible for getting these laws passed, nor would any claim to be; as indicated in the appendix, they almost always worked in coalition with unions and other community-based groups. But they were high-frequency repeat players: While dozens of other types of advocacy groups were instrumental in particular times and places, only alt-labor and traditional labor groups were consistently on the front lines.¹³ A similar pattern can be observed in subnational anti-wage-theft policies. Doussard and Gamal (2015) found a strong and statistically significant relationship between the number of worker centers in a state and the introduction of 255 state-level anti-wage-theft laws in 2004–2012; Galvin (2016) similarly found that most of the 12 major wage-theft laws passed between 2006 and 2013 were the result of vigorous advocacy by worker centers and allied groups.

Impressive as these victories are, most organizers would hasten to note that they only scratch the surface of the problem. Many of the policies that manage to survive the legislative process are too watered down or limited in geographic reach to make much of a dent in the structural power imbalance in the workplace; most establish only minimal labor standards, provide only the most basic rights and protections, and promulgate only the most nominal standards of decency. Many laws are woefully under-enforced, and even under the best enforcement regimes, such as in San Francisco, worker exploitation remains a persistent, pernicious problem (Galvin, Fine, and Round 2020). Even straightforward minimum wage laws, as we have seen, do not guarantee that workers will actually be paid the minimum wage.¹⁴

These glaring limitations notwithstanding, many alt-labor groups view employment laws as low-wage workers’ last best hope until labor law is reformed. With limited labor market power and little other recourse, workers have turned to the state to protect their rights. “It is the *loser* who calls in outside help,” political scientist E.E. Schattschneider (1960) wrote frankly in his classic text. “It is the weak, not the strong, who appeal to public authority for relief” (16, 40).

But in moving the conflict out of the workplace and into the political arena, alt-labor groups have swapped one set of formidable challenges for another. Although the democratic process is theoretically open to all—in storybook pluralism, any group can compete for the chance to use public authority for its purposes—in practice, the political system features

high barriers to entry. As political scientists have shown, the policymaking process favors well-organized groups with long time horizons, deep pockets, and personal connections with decision-makers—i.e., business groups. Such groups enjoy both policy responsiveness from elected officials and substantial agenda control: They are able to keep issues off the agenda, add their preferred issues onto the agenda, and reframe issues to favor employers' interests. And as Fine and Shepherd (2021) show in their contribution to this series, business also wields multiple forms of “structural” and “instrumental” power in both the policy development and enforcement stages. In contrast, low-wage workers, who have historically lacked organized group representation, are among the *least* likely to enjoy policy advocacy or responsiveness from elected officials (Baumgartner and Leech 2001; Bartels 2016; Strolovitch 2008; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Hojnacki et al. 2012; Gilens and Page 2014). Other barriers to equal participation include biases in the campaign finance and candidate selection systems, institutionalized voting restrictions, structural vote-dilution strategies, corporate rent seeking, “revolving door” lobbying, regulatory capture, and more. The political system, in short, is stacked against low-wage workers and structured in ways that sustain and reproduce existing power imbalances.

What is more, by standard measures, alt-labor groups are structurally very weak. Although a majority are now affiliated with national networks that lend them some additional capacity and scale (Fine, Narro, and Barnes 2018), most are small, poor, and lacking in institutional capacity. They tend to employ only a small number of modestly paid staff, and their membership numbers are low—typically in the hundreds. Gates et al. (2018) find that worker centers' median annual revenue in 2012 was \$410,000, with a modal revenue of only between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Most are registered as 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, a classification that imposes strict limits on the activities in which they can engage, a point I will return to later.

Because they lack a robust dues-paying membership base, most alt-labor groups have turned to external sources, like philanthropic foundations, government agencies, and wealthy donors, but this path has produced dependencies and inhibited the development of potentially more resilient and autonomy-generating dues-based funding structures (Fine, Narro, and Barnes 2018). Gates et al. (2018, 42) find that funding from private foundations accounted for roughly 80% of worker center revenue in 2012, with some reporting upward of 97%. This dependency has caused many groups to alter their activities to comport with foundations' priorities, as set from on high. Although these priorities are usually complementary to the groups' ongoing work—emphasizing civic engagement, leadership development, base building, and so on—and although funded groups are typically *selected for* their ongoing work in these areas, meaning they are already doing it—the grant-seeking process can also push groups in directions they had not previously intended to go, cause them to sacrifice some of their autonomy, and undermine their commitment to bottom-up decision-making processes (e.g., Smith 2017; Francis 2019).

Given the manifold constraints and pitfalls associated with the alt-labor organizational model, how have these groups managed to make headway for their members in the

Table 1

Variation among alt-labor groups in sample (n=28)

Characteristic	Number of groups with given characteristic
Age	12 older (founded 2007 or earlier), 16 younger
Region	8 Northeast, 6 Midwest, 9 West, 5 South
Geographic reach	10 local, 12 state, 6 multi-state
State partisan context	12 “blue,” 4 “purple,” 7 “red,” 5 offices in all three
Industrial focus	6 single, 22 multiple
Network affiliation?	15 yes, 10 no, 3 own network
Annual revenue	7 under \$500K, 9 \$500k–\$1m, 7 \$1m–\$3m, 5 over \$5m
Worker center?	10 yes, 4 amalgam, 5 other, 3 alliance, 6 501(c)(4)

Notes: “State partisan context” indicates which political party controlled state government during most years of the group’s existence, with emphasis placed on control of both houses of the state legislature. Following convention, “blue” indicates Democratic, “red” indicates Republican, and “purple” indicates divided or alternating control. “Worker center?” indicates whether the group self-identifies as a worker center. See Appendix A for further details.

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political and policymaking arenas? The following sections summarize the common trends I have observed in my study of more than two dozen alt-labor groups between 2018 and 2021.¹⁵ These groups were carefully selected to maximize diversity across a range of group characteristics and contexts (see **Table 1** and Appendix Table 1 for further details), a common case-selection technique for the purpose of descriptive analysis (Gerring 2006; Seawright and Gerring 2008).

Although the term *alt-labor* is sometimes used by journalists to describe any worker movement that is not explicitly tied to a labor union—including the (union-funded) Fight for \$15 movement, online platforms like coworker.org, and the wildcat teacher strikes of 2018—I use the term more narrowly here. For the purposes of the present investigation, I treat alt-labor groups as registered nonprofit organizations whose primary purpose involves organizing low-wage workers to fight for workers’ rights. This categorization includes all worker centers, by definition; other community-based groups, alliances, and organizations that do not self-identify as worker centers but whose primary mission includes fighting for workers’ rights; and “amalgams” like Make the Road New York (McAlevey 2013) that have grown into large organizations that tackle a wide range of issues, yet workers’ rights remain central to their mission. Because these groups have assumed many different organizational forms, I sought to sample a diversity: stand-alone groups; groups that are affiliated with a major alliance; groups that are affiliated with more than one alliance; groups that serve, themselves, as umbrella groups, alliances, or federations of smaller groups; groups that are registered under the tax code as 501(c)(3) organizations; and groups that are registered as 501(c)(4) organizations (note that all (c)(4)s are affiliated with a (c)(3), and a few have other registrations as well).

Despite significant variation across groups and contexts, some clear patterns emerge.

Although different groups are at different stages in their power-building projects, all are deeply engaged in efforts to build three related but analytically distinct sources of power: *power within* their membership base; *power with* allies; and *power to* undertake a wider range of activities. A growing number are drawing upon these sources of power to ratchet up their civic engagement and political activities—a strategy that has enabled them to forge an alternative path to strengthening workers’ rights through politics and public policy.

Building *power within*: Base building

Although a few select groups have grown their membership rolls into the thousands, most have a small base of active members. Group leaders acknowledge that membership rolls may never be large enough to provide them with the kind of associational power upon which labor unions have long relied. Their strength, they believe, comes not from the size of their membership or the extent of their financial resources, but from the intensity of their members’ commitments to fighting for each other, their shared sense of community and solidarity, the depth of their personal relationships, and the creativity, courage, and tenacity they bring to their collective actions.

To build these less-quantifiable sources of power on shoestring budgets, the groups emphasize what the political scientist Hahrie Han has called “transformational organizing”: They work to transform the “motivations and capacities of their members to cultivate greater activism” (2014, 10; also see Theodore, Gutelius, and Gonzalez 2019). That is, rather than “going broad” by trying to build power in numbers, they “go deep” by empowering individual workers, raising a collective consciousness, and building strong bonds of community and solidarity. They train their members to be autonomous, motivated organizers, elevate them to leadership roles in the organization, and empower them to develop programming and lead collective actions. They try to build meaningful, authentic relationships among members and cultivate mutual accountability and a sense of collective identity across race, class, gender, and country of origin. When executed well, transformational organizing can be self-reproducing and generative: It can lend organizations resilience, flexibility, and adaptive capacities that enable them to operate amid uncertainty and carry out a wider range of unknown activities in the future, even in the absence of substantial financial resources (Han 2014; Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021).

Worker centers and other community-based workers’ rights organizations attract members through two main channels: classic community organizing approaches (door knocking, one-on-one discussions with neighbors) and the provision of services and support to workers (English language classes and other skills training, know-your-rights trainings, assistance in filing wage claims, and initiating litigation). However workers find their way into the organization, the simple act of coming together and forging meaningful relationships is viewed as fundamental to base building. As the sociologist and organizer Marshall Ganz noted in conjunction with the Gettysburg Project, drawing on Tocqueville:

“Through the process of coming together, individuals learn to move beyond their narrow self-interest. They move toward an enlightened self-interest and a broader understanding of common interests and common purpose....equality of voice can translate into the power or the capacity to achieve common purpose” (Zitha 2014).

Ana Maria Archila, co-executive director of the Center for Popular Democracy and previously co-executive director of Make the Road New York (the group with the largest membership base in my sample), told me:

Powerlessness is so inside people’s bodies—or like the glasses we can’t take off—and we practice it so much in our society that I think a lot of our work is actually like doing interventions, creating the space for people to peel away a little bit the layers of that so that they can get to a place of creativity and fearlessness, tap into courage....Basically just a room with someone to facilitate a conversation, some food and some space for socializing—that was the basic formula for building a membership organization [Make the Road New York] that is now 25,000 people or so. The space for people to take off the many layers of accumulated experience of not being powerful.

In coming together and building relationships, those who lack power can begin to reinterpret their experiences as unnatural injustices, as products of an unequal distribution of power in society and in the workplace—not just “the way things are.” As the political scientist John Gaventa (1982) writes, the first stage of rebellion is that “the powerless must be able to explore their grievances openly, with others similarly situated. They must develop their own notions of interests and actions, and themselves as actors” (257). Only then can they “mobilize upon” those issues and demand change.

Offering a safe, nurturing environment in which workers can build authentic connections, develop a collective consciousness, hone their leadership skills, and begin to tackle real, urgent problems—these are the key ingredients of power building *within* the organization. They lend the group resiliency and versatility, which it needs to weather ups and downs, and adaptive capacity, which it needs to seize opportunities when they arise (Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa 2021). As Jessica Vosburgh of the Adelante Alabama Worker Center in Birmingham says, building a strong, member-led organization that works to empower community members to act collectively is a critically important, if often overlooked, form of power: “There are things you can do that are like building alternative power structures...[around] personal-level, interconnectedness and relationships. That *is* building power—just not in a, ‘I’m going to go lobby the city council kind of way.’”

Most workers find their way into the groups after they have suffered wage theft, sexual harassment, verbal or physical abuse, injuries at work, discrimination, retaliation, and/or other forms of exploitation on the job. What they seek is practical support and advocacy. Many are unaware of their legal rights, unacquainted with the bureaucratic and legal processes they must navigate in order to vindicate those rights, or fearful of the consequences of reporting exploitation (Gleeson 2010). Most expect the group to help them sue their boss or complain to the authorities. “They think, ‘You are a nonprofit, you

are here to help me,” one worker-organizer noted. Ultimately, they want a judge or state agency to order their employer to pay back the wages they stole, give them their job back, or get their abusive supervisor fired.

All workers’ rights groups provide some amount of assistance to workers in contacting employers directly (writing “love letters,” as organizers at Worker Justice Wisconsin call them), filing complaints, or pursuing legal remedies, and some even spend the majority of their resources on these activities. But many have scaled back or outsourced their support services in recent years. To be sure, services have long served as crucial recruitment tools—and still draw many workers in to worker centers—and lawsuits can be very effective mobilizing tools in building social movements (e.g., McCann 1994). But many groups have come to see services as counterproductive because they effectively *individualize* workers’ experiences. Complaints to state departments of labor are made by individuals; the “private right of action” permits legal action by an aggrieved individual worker against his or her individual employer (as many states forbid class action wage-hour lawsuits); and forced arbitration proceedings are similarly dyadic. The individualized pathways of redress provided by employment laws can reinforce the isolation and alienation many workers already feel and undermine the groups’ larger goals of fostering a collective consciousness and generating sustained collective action.

Consequently, before most groups will meet one-on-one with aggrieved workers to discuss their situations, they require them to attend a workshop with other aggrieved workers and a subset of more experienced members, often on a weekday evening. Such workshops serve important agitation and consciousness-raising functions. Organizers try to accomplish a few things. First and foremost, they welcome newcomers and try to communicate that “you’re not alone; we’ve all been through the same thing; that’s why we’re here,” said Axt of Make the Road New York. Staff and trained member-leaders then try to deconstruct the individualistic premises and assumptions workers often bring with them. They try to help the newcomers see that what they perceive as a personal, individual grievance is actually a collective problem shared by others in the room, explained Kader:

You think you’re individually aggrieved, it’s because of your individual identity alone, and you all want attorneys. Those are the three assumptions workers are bringing to the table. We quickly have to dismantle all three. First we say: OK, well look around—there’s more than one of you. So this is not a personal problem. This is a social problem. Number two: You said the reason you’re exploited is because your boss is Hindu and you’re not. Well, the brother next to you said his boss is Mexican and he’s been exploiting him too. So maybe your boss is racist against Mexicans, but that’s not the *only* factor. Clearly exploitation is bigger than simply prejudice against a certain nationality. And third, you can only get from the law what the law provides. With organizing you can get whatever you want. It’s a question of how much power you can build.

Organizers thus help workers to reinterpret their experience of exploitation as a symptom of the broader power imbalance in the workplace and in American society. It may well be

true that their particular employer is unusually cruel and abusive, but that employer is not the real problem. The crux of the issue, groups try to communicate, is the vast inequality of power that exists in the workplace and in the broader society.

Organizers walk newcomers through the basics of federal, state, and local employment and labor law rights and protections, showing what kinds of things employers can and cannot legally do and what options workers have. At that point, many workers learn, to their great disappointment, that elements of their employers' behavior that may be most offensive to them—especially verbal abuse, disrespect (belittling, name calling, shouting), and related offenses—are rarely illegal. They learn how policy decisions are made, how pro-employer biases and loopholes get inserted into laws during the policymaking process, how laws are not self-enforcing, and where power really lies in their communities. Some workers become interested in digging deeper into the power analysis and consider organizing strategies, while others are eager to move on to the complaint/litigation process.

At the same time, the groups recognize that too much orientation around individualized support services trades off the groups' broader power-building goals. "If what you want to do is only resolve your wage case, then we're going to support you, but in a very limited way," explains Rachel LaZar, director of El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos in Albuquerque, N.M. "What we're about is growing power. So if you want to join a movement to grow power with other low-wage workers, this is how you do that....Of course, people are at different levels of being politicized: Not everyone's there, and so we try to recognize and work where people are at....[But] our organizers should not be case managers. If that's what they're doing, we're really not doing anything to end wage theft, or shift dynamics of power, and that's what we need to be doing." Some organizations downplay services for more ideological reasons—because they are more inspired by other models, such as Black nationalist and civil rights movements, or Latin American liberation and guerilla movements—or simply because they believe other models are more scalable than the service-based organizing and direct-action models.

Using Freire-style popular education and "train the trainer" methods, groups ranging from El Centro in Albuquerque to WeCount! in Homestead, Fla., to New Labor in New Brunswick, N.J., hold training sessions to empower workers to become, themselves, organizers and activists. They learn about the history of labor rights, organizing, and power and oppression in the U.S.; the history of domestic work, farm work, and other industries their members work in; and the nuts-and-bolts of community organizing, conducting power analyses, and countermobilizing. Trained "Defensoras Comunitarios" then go out into their communities and meet more workers at schools, churches, and other community spaces to conduct further community-building and leadership development trainings. Most groups also have committees focused on policy campaigns, civic engagement, and voter education.

These activities—the peeling away of the layers of powerlessness, the building and deepening of relationships among community members, popular education, power analyses, consciousness raising, and leadership development—are all fundamental

elements of base building. Although only a limited number of workers remain active year-to-year, the groups' base-building methods enable them to continually build and rebuild a core cadre of committed activist worker-members. These efforts to build a solid inner core of activist members lends the groups the resilience, versatility, and adaptive capacities they need to expand their issue agendas, develop strong coalitions, and launch the wide range of political and policy campaigns discussed below.

***Building power with:* Issue expansion and coalition building**

Most of the issues around which alt-labor groups organize emerge organically from members' lived experiences: the day laborer's wage theft, the meatpacker's unhealthy and unsafe working conditions, the domestic worker's sexual harassment, discrimination in placing temp workers, retaliation against farm workers who dare to complain. Although these forms of exploitation are widespread and affect millions of workers, they are experienced individually by people who are usually isolated from one another and scattered across industries, geographies, and workplaces. Absent the efforts of alt-labor groups to bring these workers together and help them reinterpret their individual experiences of exploitation as collective problems that result from deeply rooted power asymmetries, those experiences would remain isolated incidents and individual problems. One of the functions of alt-labor groups, in other words, is to pay the costs of overcoming workers' collective action problems by providing a place for workers to congregate, build personal connections, and formulate concrete issue agendas upon which to act collectively.

As they begin to construct their collective issue agendas, members invariably link the racism, xenophobia, and sexism they face inside the workplace to the same oppressive forces they, their families, and their neighbors face outside the workplace in their communities. Alt-labor organizers help them draw out these connections in much the same way that Jane McAlevey describes "whole worker" organizing: "Whole-worker organizing seeks to engage 'whole workers' in the betterment of their lives. To keep them consistently acting in their self-interest, while constantly expanding their vision of who that self-interest includes, from their immediate peers in their unit, to their shift, their workplace, their street, their kids' school, their community, their watershed, their nation, their world" (2014, 14). Because alt-labor groups seek to be highly responsive to their members' needs and concerns—and because many groups make decisions about which campaigns to pursue through bottom-up democratic processes—the result is often the formulation of broad, multifaceted issue agendas.

Rather than single-mindedly seeking to combat wage theft, in other words, alt-labor groups often construct issue agendas that also include fighting anti-immigration policies, racial discrimination, gender discrimination, and specific challenges facing their communities, such as housing, public education, environmental hazards, and more. In their view, each crisis flows from the same underlying problem, which is the outsized power of

those who oppress them and their own lack of influence over the decisions that shape their lives. Each issue on their policy agenda thus offers a separate door onto the same fight: an opportunity to chip away at the power asymmetry.¹⁶

Agendas that transcend workers' rights issues are also instrumentally useful: By tackling multiple issues simultaneously, groups can pivot from one fight to the next; adjust to the different tempos of different campaigns; mix and match bolder, more ambitious goals with smaller, more winnable fights; and shift focus from a demoralizing loss along one front to an uplifting victory on another. And to the extent that broader issue agendas facilitate coalition building with a wider range of groups, they effectively multiply the groups' points of pressure on the political system.

Typically, policies are pursued by entering into coalitions with multiple partners. Some coalitions are more durable, featuring strong relationships and formal organizational ties; others are more ad hoc and instrumental. Practically speaking, pursuing multiple campaigns with multiple allies can make for some difficult choices about which campaigns to prioritize and which to put on hold; it can spread groups thin and deplete their resources; and it can strain alliances between groups and with their champions in government who may be friends on one issue but opponents on the next. Most organizers acknowledge these sorts of challenges and feel they must constantly make difficult tradeoffs. But they insist that "this is the work," as it reflects the urgent needs of their members.

The incentive to build power with others is also a rational response to organizational weakness: Coalitions enable scrappy groups to share resources, generate efficiency gains, and magnify their collective influence; they also signal to elected officials the breadth and intensity of support for an issue, thereby reducing the political risk associated with adopting the coalition's position (Schlozman and Tierney 1986; Hojnacki 1997, 1998; Mahoney 2008; Hojnacki et al. 2012; Heaney and Lorenz 2013). Coalitions also enable information sharing and trust building, which helps allied groups remove roadblocks to mobilization. On the flip side, coalitions can sometimes conceal adversarial relations between groups, paper over frictions, and obscure power differentials within the coalition.

Still, by far the most common way alt-labor groups seek to build collective power is "through the creation and nurturing of alliances," as Bill Okerman of the Needham Area Immigration Justice Task Force in Massachusetts put it. There is perhaps no concept more fundamental to organizing than that of building "power with" or "relational power," which Marshall Ganz describes as "the benefits of social cooperation and our capacity to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish alone" (Ganz 2006; also see Brookes 2013; Loomer 1976). Jo Rowlands (1997) similarly describes "power with" as "a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together." The following examples illustrate some of the benefits as well as the challenges alt-labor groups encounter in their efforts to build collective power through coalition building.

One group that brings together a diverse set of low-wage workers in pursuit of multiple,

overlapping issues within a single organization is the New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ). This group is organized into three distinct identity-based "projects." The Congress of Day Laborers comprises predominantly immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and some Caribbean countries, and their industries range widely, from construction to home health care to domestic work. NOWCRJ's Stand with Dignity project includes predominantly under- or unemployed Black workers, including many gig workers. The third group, Alianza de Trabajadores Oriscos y Pescados (Seafood Workers Alliance), comprises mostly workers with H-2B visas (temporary, nonagricultural jobs) predominantly from Mexico who organize up the supply chain to impact buyers of Louisiana-packed seafood. Although each project develops its own campaigns independently, all NOWCRJ members come together to conduct political education and power analyses and to provide mutual support. The key is to "find a common target, which requires constant learning, constantly renewing the politic," explained Executive Director Ursula Price. "But if we do the work to dig down a layer, we find a common fight." Centering the analysis on power in its multiple manifestations helps the group transcend its workers' many diverse backgrounds and identify a common purpose.

Worker Justice Wisconsin (WJW) was founded in 2018 when two organizations—the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin and the Workers' Rights Center—merged for the explicit purpose of pooling resources and reducing redundancies in their overlapping work in the city of Madison. WJW now serves as both a service-oriented worker center and a centralized hub for coalition building and generating collective action among interfaith, labor, and community groups. As Executive Director Rebecca Meier-Rao explained, "We're aware that we're small and by ourselves, we're fairly powerless, especially as we devote a lot of our resources to taking care of workers that are coming to our worker center. The only way we get the word out is to build partnerships and coalitions....Our sense is that if we are not in coalition, our impact will be limited. And even if we grow, we won't be powerful enough to go against strong forces alone."

Although WJW is one of the smallest groups in my sample (with only \$114,000 in income in 2019 and only four part-time staff members), the coalition-building imperative Meier-Rao perceives is not a function of WJW's size or level of financing. The largest group in my sample, the Center for Popular Democracy (CPD), which reported almost \$29 million in revenue in 2019, has 95 staff members in nine states and three large cities, and which nurtures 55 affiliated partner groups in 131 cities across 34 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C.—was founded on the same premise: to "aggregate institutional resources and relationships," said Co-Executive Director Andrew Friedman. CPD sought to institutionalize linkages between base-building groups scattered about the country, establish routines for regularly disseminating resources and sharing best practices, and build collective political capacities to win a "pro-worker, pro-immigrant, racial and economic justice agenda." Several of CPD's larger affiliates maintain their own coalitions and networks—for example, Piñeros Campesinos Unidos Noroeste (PCUN) in Oregon, United for Respect (UFR, formerly OUR Walmart), Make the Road, and Casa de Maryland—which, through partnership, extends each group's reach further still.

Although most alt-labor groups view themselves as militant agitators engaged in a long-

term struggle to fight exploitative employers, white supremacy, patriarchy, and neoliberalism, groups that work predominantly within specific industries often seek to fashion political alliances with groups they might otherwise oppose in order to make progress in reforming industrial practices. High-road employers and business associations with an interest in leveling the playing field and rooting out unscrupulous employers who use wage theft to gain a competitive advantage, for example, can make useful partners for alt-labor groups in policy campaigns. Such partnerships can demonstrate to elected officials the breadth of support for reform. In politics, “you have to have unlikely alliances,” Price of NOWCRJ explained. “You have to find common ground with people you don’t agree with.”

The Restaurant Opportunities Center (ROC) United, for example, has put considerable effort into forging partnerships with high-road employers and local restaurant associations that support higher wages and other protections for restaurant workers in order to level the playing field. Making change in the restaurant industry, ROC leaders have come to believe, requires support from all: “Without allies it cannot work,” explained Fekkak Mamdouh, co-founder and former co-executive director. “You need the restaurant owner, you need the consumer, you need the city council people, you need the Congress people, and you need tourists, too.” ROC encourages its restaurant-owner allies not to leave their local restaurant associations but to “stay inside and fight from within....You have to be in it to change it,” said Mamdouh. “Our members should be on the board.” Saru Jayaraman, ROC co-founder and former co-executive director, agreed: “We’ve expanded our definition of who’s most affected—we’ve come to understand it’s not just workers, it’s employers—and built a broader social movement organization based on that.” Other examples include the National Domestic Workers Alliance’s (NDWA) partnership with Hand in Hand and PCUN’s participation in the Equitable Food Initiative, a coalition including corporate retail firms and farm owners that “certifies” companies that agree to abide by higher labor standards.

Alt-labor’s most common allies, of course, are labor unions and other nonprofit community-based organizations. Some alt-labor organizers dislike the term *alt-labor* because they see themselves as a constituent part of the labor movement—full stop—and not as an alternative to it, as the term might imply. In fact, many alt-labor groups and labor unions are formally allied. In 2006, the AFL-CIO launched the Worker Center Partnership to strengthen ties to worker centers, and its network has grown in intervening years. Informal alliances are also quite common. Within my sample alone, 10 of the 22 501(c)(3) groups have ties to labor unions that range in formality from memberships on local labor councils with voting rights to courtesy affiliations that merely recognize a solidarity relationship.

Despite these formal and informal ties, the relationship between traditional and alt-labor has been described as a “mismatch” in practice (Fine 2007). In part, the explanation is structural: Whereas traditional unions typically focus on organizing bargaining units within companies in targeted sectors for the purpose of engaging in collective bargaining, worker centers tend to focus on “raising labor standards community-wide...[and] building a grassroots social movement that can transform society.” Worker centers do often encourage their members to unionize, but they tend to see union organizing as a means,

not an end, and are more concerned with “broader issues of social reproduction and economic and political incorporation” than most (but certainly not all) unions. There can be substantial cultural differences between unions and workers’ rights groups as well. Within some unions, discussion of immigration and worker centers are “still quite fraught” and “marked by misconceptions and misunderstandings” (Narro and Fine 2018, 70).

Some alt-labor leaders, in turn, feel that unions have long since lost their edge. “They forgot to be the Knights of Labor,” one told me. “Their fights are more around money.” Another stated plainly that although they work together regularly, “we’re small and scrappy and uninfluential in their eyes.” Another organizer explained that while alt-labor has “moved unions in a more radical direction, they take offense to the notion that we’re influencing their agenda. The power dynamic is definitely unequal.” Such frictions notwithstanding, many unions and alt-labor groups have built constructive, mutually beneficial relationships with one another. “We are all part of the same movement,” said Sophia Zaman of Raise the Floor Alliance. “We share the same goals: Healthy and dignified work for all.”

But whereas alt-labor groups are young and still growing, traditional labor unions have decades of experience and established networks from which alt-labor groups can benefit—a point stressed by the scholar and organizer Jane McAlevey, whose experiences and writings have influenced alt-labor and traditional labor organizers alike. In many cases, coalitions with labor unions may therefore more properly be viewed as “borrowing” unions’ power rather than building power together. There is no question that alt-labor groups often ride the coattails of more established, well-funded, politically connected labor unions, especially in state-level policy campaigns where state labor federations have established clout. But in city- and county-level policy campaigns, where alt-labor groups are building and exercising greater political power—as discussed further below—their partnerships are becoming more equal.

The same can be said for alt-labor’s alliances with more experienced community-based nonprofit groups. In Birmingham, Ala., for example, the relatively young Adelante Alabama Worker Center has found its alliances with more established groups representing the Black community to be essential. When Adelante launched a campaign to contest bias-based policing, end police coordination with ICE, and push for criminal justice reform, for example, its alliances with predominantly Black organizations that had deep community ties were very helpful. “Having well-known organizations that have been around for a lot longer and that have a much stronger base both with faith-based organizing and in the African American community—even if it’s just them willing to put their name on certain things, or if we do—it makes a difference....We couldn’t do the work we were doing if we weren’t both leading certain coalitions and participating in other ones,” said Jessica Vosburgh, Adelante founder and executive director.

In recent years, the cultural differences between labor unions and alt-labor groups seem to have dissipated a bit as their memberships have converged in terms of their demographics and worldviews. Some of the more diverse, growth-oriented labor unions, like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), have publicly recognized that

business-style unionism is no longer as effective as it once was and have experimented with campaigns like Fight for \$15. In that well-known campaign, SEIU partnered with alt-labor and other community-based groups across dozens of cities and states while providing most of the funding for the massive protests. Unions increasingly recognize that the labor movement needs to be more bottom-up, led by empowered members and energized by dense networks of mobilized allies at the grassroots (McAlevey 2016; Tattersall 2008). In this spirit, a growing number of public-sector unions have advanced “Bargaining for the Common Good” initiatives, in which coalitions of unions and community groups seek to deepen ties and collectively push for improvements to their communities, employing a diversity of tactics and organizing models (Sneiderman and McCartin 2018). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many teachers’ unions with an interest in broadening their base of community support did the same. The union-rights organization Jobs with Justice serves a similar purpose, bringing local labor and community groups together in common action.

Coalitions of all types, of course, are difficult to form and maintain, and it takes significant effort to operate them in equitable ways (Van Dyke and McCammon 2010; Strolovitch 2008; Tattersall 2005). As Van Dyke and Amos (2017) note, five of the key factors scholars have identified as critical to coalition formation—social ties; organizational structures; ideology, culture, and identity; the institutional environment; and resources—are certainly not present in every case. This may help to explain why some of the coalitions in which alt-labor participates are short-lived (though many policy campaigns are short-lived by nature). However, some of the “emergent properties” scholars have observed to be critical to coalitional longevity—including commitment to the coalition, respectful interaction, and trust—are certainly found in the more successful and long-lasting partnerships established between groups in my sample (Van Dyke and Amos 2017; Levi and Murphy 2006; Hojnacki 1997). CPD’s Andrew Friedman explained the value of shared commitment, respect, and trust: “We can only propose things that make sense if we have roots. You have to think about ‘who do you have relationships with, what kind of power do you walk into the room with?’ That is like 98% of our time. Then you get in the room and you’re like: ‘We know each other, we trust each other. We’ve talked about this. We agree.’”

In all these ways, alt-labor’s outward-reaching, purview-expanding, coalition-building work involves “enlarging the scope of conflict” between low-wage workers and their exploitative employers. By forging coalitions with a wide range of groups, alt-labor groups are effectively *socializing* what “was once regarded as a purely private matter concerning only the employer and the individual workman” (Schattschneider 1960, 10). In so doing, they are shifting the conflict with abusive employers out of the shadows of “private government” (Anderson 2017) and into the public, political arena, where they stand a fighting chance of influencing outcomes.

Building *power to*: Organizational capacity building

Another way alt-labor groups compensate for their lack of resources is with “resourcefulness,” to borrow from Marshall Ganz’s well-known formulation (2000, 1005). Specifically, they look for ways to do more with less. Notable innovations in recent years include organizing models built around new technologies, launching sister 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations that permit overt electioneering (Fellner 2020), and establishing novel resource-sharing umbrella groups. Groups that lack the financial wherewithal or desire to expand in these ways tend to experiment with unconventional organizing projects and other creative tactics. Alt-labor groups are finding ingenious ways to enhance their organizational capacities and build the “power to”—a “generative or productive power” that enables “new possibilities and actions” (Rowlands 1997, 13).

Worker centers have always been organizationally innovative; Janice Fine describes them as “hybrid organizations” that combine elements of “social service agencies, fraternal organizations, settlement houses, community organizing groups, and unions to social movement organizations” (2006, 12). Alt-labor groups that do not consider themselves worker centers have similarly recombined organizational models in novel formulations and engaged in experimentation, improvisation, and entrepreneurial innovation (Oswalt 2016; Griffith and Gates 2019). The main impulse behind their experimental spirit is simply that the groups feel they are working in uncharted territory—building and exercising political power for low-wage, marginalized workers—and it is not obvious how that ought to be done, said Friedman of CPD: “It is not totally clear to us how, in a society organized around white supremacy, patriarchy, and money, you can actually build power for people who don’t have money, aren’t white, and aren’t men.”

The organizational development of United for Respect offers a case study in how alt-labor groups have developed through experimentation. Initially funded by the United Food and Commercial Workers Union to help Walmart workers organize and push for changes in the corporation’s infamously harsh labor practices, UFR now targets the entire retail sector and has morphed into a radically different kind of workers’ rights organization—both from its original form and from the more familiar community-based worker center model. As Dan Schlademan, co-founder and co-executive director, explained, “We don’t have the answer to the question of what we’re ultimately trying to build, but we feel like we’re on the path of building it.”¹⁷

UFR’s organization draws inspiration from the multileader, distributed-network “starfish” model as described in *The Starfish and the Spider* by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom (2006). Schlademan likens UFR to a starfish: “If you cut a starfish in half, you get two starfish. You cut a spider in half, it’s dead.” In an industry where workers and organizers must always react to corporate management decisions regarding store closings, wages, benefits, and so on, UFR must be able to adapt and regenerate when its limbs are severed. When Walmart closed seven stores in Southern California in early 2016 as part of a “global restructuring”¹⁸ (arguably in response to worker agitation for improvements in

wages and working conditions), “it had a huge impact on workers in LA but it didn’t destroy our national networks,” Schlademan said. “When a company attacks us it has an impact, but it doesn’t kill us.”

UFR relies heavily on online interaction to engage workers: It reports hundreds of thousands of retail workers in its online network who regularly interact, sign petitions, take surveys, and so on. It also reports thousands of “activists” who take part in UFR campaigns; hundreds of “leaders” who organize those campaigns; and about 15 paid staff organizers, about 10 of whom work primarily on training leaders (who then train activists). There are no physical offices: Most work is done remotely, leveraging online tools and apps. With its primary corporate targets (Walmart and Amazon) spanning multiple states and frequently on the move, an organizational model rooted in a particular geography would be counterproductive, they argue. UFR’s goal, therefore, is to remain nimble and make it less costly to swoop in when campaigns need to be organized in a hurry.

The recent response of laid-off Toys “R” Us workers to their unfair treatment offers an illustrative example (Lieber 2018). After the well-known toy store declared bankruptcy in 2017 and unceremoniously fired 33,000 workers without severance pay or benefits—while its executives made off with multimillion-dollar bonuses and payouts and private equity firms made hundreds of millions—UFR took a flier on organizing the laid-off workers, dedicating two paid staff to a month-long organizing effort. Using a combined online-offline strategy, UFR discovered thousands of workers who wanted to sign petitions and act collectively to demand severance pay, and it identified leaders at several Toys “R” Us communities who were eager to organize their coworkers. Whereas the traditional organizing model would have required staff to organize workers at locations around the country one store at a time, UFR’s strategy enabled it to build a network online, identify key people, and move quickly to take advantage of workers’ outrage while emotions were still high and the media were still attentive. Reflecting on how the group’s organizational model “lowers the price of taking risks,” Schlademan noted that its initial investment in the campaign was so minimal that if the campaign had failed, the cost to the organization would have been negligible. In the end, laid-off workers won a \$20 million severance fund created by the private equity firms—an outcome widely seen as a major victory.

After the Toys “R” Us campaign, UFR urged lawmakers in New Jersey (where Toys “R” Us was headquartered) to enact a severance-protection bill to preempt similar crises in the future. The bill was successfully enacted in 2020. UFR is now working to pass similar laws in other political contexts—which points to an advantage of UFR’s flexible model: Whereas geographically rooted worker organizations are often dependent on having friendly Democratic governing majorities to get policies passed in their localities, UFR is able to venue-shop to achieve gains for workers wherever and whenever opportunities arise. Its corporate focus is an advantage as well, enabling it to make gains for workers in deep red states: When Walmart responded to pressure to raise wages (raising the base wage to \$10/hour in 2015) and introduce more worker-friendly pregnancy policies, beneficiaries included thousands of Walmart workers in states where statutory minimum wage hikes would have been next to impossible to achieve.

It should be underscored, of course, that UFR is the only alt-labor group thus far to adopt an industry-specific, mostly virtual, distributed-network model while pursuing both public policy and industrial transformation through direct economic intervention. The other industry-specific groups in my sample—ROC United, WDP, CWC, NDWA, and PCUN—similarly pursue a combination of public and private actions, but most of their work is geographically rooted in their communities, and they generate most of their power and resilience from their base and the ties that bind their members together. Thus, what UFR gains in nimbleness and efficiency it may sacrifice in terms of human connection, mutual commitment, and community power. Conversely, what community-based groups gain in resilience and solidarity, they may lose in terms of scope and agility. Further comparative analysis of these two models is clearly needed.

Perhaps the most notable organizational innovation in recent years, however, involves the formation of sister organizations under the 501(c)(4) social welfare section of the Internal Revenue Code. This nonprofit status enables the groups to explicitly endorse candidates for public office, devote unlimited resources to legislative lobbying, and engage in overt electioneering, so long as the latter does not constitute the (c)(4) group's primary activity. It also opens another fundraising stream, enabling groups to raise money for their explicitly election-focused activities from wealthy donors and political action committees. As Kim Fellner (2020) writes in her study of the emergent model, some groups are still figuring out how to “mesh” the (c)(3) model with the developing (c)(4) model, and she argues that in some cases the (c)(3) side's “community organizing work” has suffered. Yet most groups report that “venturing into legislative and electoral politics seems like a natural next step, a sign of maturity and capacity” as they reached the limits of what they could accomplish under (c)(3) restrictions.

The Workers Defense Action Fund (WDAF), for example, was launched in 2014 as the sister 501(c)(4) organization to Workers Defense Project (WDP), a 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2002 and headquartered in Austin, Texas. After more than a decade of organizing low-wage workers, predominantly in the construction industry, WDP organizers began to feel that the group's (c)(3) status was leaving it on the sidelines while others exerted critical influence over candidate selection and policy platform formation. It created WDAF, therefore, to give its members greater voice in the political process and to provide a vehicle for expanding the group's community engagement and policy advocacy work. The other 501(c)(4) groups in my sample followed a similar pattern of expansion.

All divide responsibilities between their “sibling” groups: Consider LUCHA in Arizona, whose (c)(3) organization, the Arizona Center for Empowerment, focuses on civic engagement, leadership development, individual empowerment, and community building, while its eponymous (c)(4) organization, LUCHA, coordinates the group's more overtly political activities—candidate endorsements, electoral campaigns, lobbying, and policy campaigns (while also performing some issue education, leadership development, and other functions.) In pursuing all of these activities under the same umbrella, led by the same two co-executive directors, the group has managed to build power quickly and generate some big policy and electoral wins. In 2016, for example, LUCHA led successful campaigns to increase Arizona's minimum wage to \$12 by 2020 and create a right to paid

sick leave; in 2020, it defeated the Republican governor's top priority, a ballot referral that would have amended the state constitution to ban sanctuary city laws. Through its assiduous efforts to register and mobilize Latinx voters, LUCHA helped to dramatically drive up Latinx turnout in Arizona in 2018 (to 49%, up from 32% in 2014 and surpassing even the 47% turnout in the 2016 presidential year) and elect friendly state legislators and a Democratic senator. During the pandemic election of 2020, LUCHA was one of the only groups doing in-person canvassing. It registered 47,000 new voters and made almost 3 million calls: journalists credited LUCHA with helping Joe Biden win the battleground state by a small margin in November. More (c)(4) activities are discussed in the next section.

Experimenting with new organizational models, like UFR's distributed-network model, and launching entirely new forms, like 501(c)(4) side organizations, are only two of the ways in which alt-labor groups pursue versatility through organizational innovation. Others include developing novel resource-sharing umbrella groups for coalitions of worker centers (like Raise the Floor Alliance in Illinois, founded in 2014, which unites all eight Chicago-area worker centers in common purpose, runs coordinated state-level policy campaigns, and provides a centralized mechanism for collective fundraising¹⁹), innovative revenue generation models, rapid response units, and other experimental initiatives.

Acting politically: Altering the political environment

Previous sections discussed some of the ways in which alt-labor groups are building sources of power, or forms of strength, that they can draw upon in their many endeavors: They are empowering individual workers, building strength in community, building collective power with others in pursuit of broad and inclusive issue agendas, and building organizational capacity in pursuit of agility and versatility. In recent years, a growing number of groups have strategically drawn upon these sources of power to transform their local political contexts. Their base-building work, for example, has facilitated electorate building and candidate recruitment; their coalition-building work has helped them to broaden the issue agenda and expand the range of policy ideas that are deemed legitimate; and their organization-building efforts have enabled them to intervene in electoral and legislative politics in new ways—including running bolder policy campaigns and, under certain conditions, successfully replacing unsupportive incumbents with champions and “genuine friends” (Bawn et al. 2012). And each type of power building helps support multiple other types of political activities as well.

This section offers some illustrative examples of how alt-labor groups have altered their political environments, providing them with more leverage in the policymaking and policy enforcement processes. This, I would argue, helps to explain how alt-labor groups have been able to “punch above their weight” in politics and enact many pro-worker policies despite their diminutive size and the structural disadvantages they face in the political arena.

Building new electorates

Most alt-labor groups are registered under the 501(c)(3) section of the tax code and do not have (c)(4) side organizations. Consequently, they are strictly prohibited from endorsing or even implying an endorsement of candidates for public office, they cannot explicitly campaign for or against particular candidates, and legislative lobbying cannot constitute a “substantial part” of their activities (IRS 2021). And yet, there are many ways in which (c)(3) organizations can act politically, so long as those activities remain nonpartisan. They can organize policy-centered issue education campaigns, hold public forums, organize public demonstrations, publish voter guides, field candidate questionnaires, commission polls, do limited direct lobbying, undertake leadership development, and engage in a wide range of civic engagement initiatives including voter registration, door-to-door canvassing, get-out-the-vote drives, naturalization campaigns, and more. These permissible activities leave considerable room for (c)(3) groups to shape the political context in which policy decisions are made without running afoul of IRS tax exemption requirements.

Let us consider a few examples of how (c)(3) alt-labor organizations have leveraged their greatest strength—their solid core of activist members (their “base”)—to build new electorates and expand their influence to new geographic locations, effectively creating new constituencies of support for their favored policies and candidates.

Consider the yeoman’s work undertaken by the Heartland Workers Center, which is headquartered in South Omaha, Nebraska, but has eight locations in the eastern part of the state, including in Schuyler, a very small city 73 miles west of Omaha. According to the 2020 Census, Schuyler had a population of 6,547, 73.2% of which was “Hispanic or Latino.”²⁰ Its largest employer was the food corporation Cargill, with about 2,000 employees. In 2014, Heartland began organizing meatpacking workers in Schuyler. After about nine months of door knocking, Heartland had built a core team—a base—that was ready to undertake a program of civic engagement and voter mobilization ahead of the midterm elections. The team learned that of the 1,200 Latinos who were eligible to vote in Schuyler, only 14 had voted in the previous election: “Fourteen: one-four,” executive director Sergio Sosa said. Given time constraints, an extensive get-out-the-vote operation was not feasible, so Heartland resolved to “use the Latin American technique.” The Schuyler team pulled together a list of 250 friends and family who were eligible to vote and committed to going “*with* your family and your compadres to vote—to hold them to account.” In the election, the number of Latinx voters in Schuyler increased almost tenfold, to 136 voters. Turnout increased again in 2016, and by 2018 there were 900 Latinx people voting in Schuyler.

Heartland’s Schuyler group then mapped out the power structure in the city and discussed where it might be able to make inroads if community members chose to run for elective office. It identified two open seats on the city council, a board position on the chamber of commerce, seats on the board of education, and so forth. The group encouraged leaders from within its communities to run, aware that their candidacies would attract more voters to vote. The more Latinx voters who turned out, the more attractive it would be for quality candidates to run the next time. “It is a long-term strategy, voting and electing,” Sosa said.

“But we got the first Mexican Latina elected to city council in the whole state, in Schuyler. We got the first Salvadoran Latino to become a city councilor in Schuyler, and we got two on the school board of education.” Building a new electorate from scratch and developing leaders from within, Heartland was altering the political landscape in eastern Nebraska one small city at a time.

Alongside its workers’ rights and leadership development initiatives, Heartland also runs a nonpartisan initiative called “I Vote for My Family” in the greater Omaha metro area to promote civic participation and education. Young volunteers—many the children of undocumented immigrants—canvass their neighborhoods to educate eligible voters on how to register and vote on behalf of their mixed-status families and mixed-status community. Some of the organizers are themselves undocumented: “But I voted maybe a hundred times!” one exclaimed after getting 100 eligible voters to register and commit to voting. In 2020, Heartland’s I Vote for My Family initiative reported knocking on 14,000 doors, making 120,000 phone calls, and getting over 12,000 people to commit to voting. Joe Biden’s 2020 victory in the 2nd Congressional District of Nebraska—thought to be a potentially pivotal electoral vote—was owed in part to Heartland’s efforts to register and mobilize thousands of first-time voters (Burbach 2020).

Or consider how, in the red state of Iowa, the low-wage immigrant worker community in Iowa City has steadily deepened its political footprint through its community organizing around workers’ rights and by developing leaders from within. Historically, interactions between Iowa City’s city council and the minority immigrant community in Iowa City were few and far between. But in 2012, community organizer Mazahir Salih helped to co-found the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa. Salih worked with others at the center to empower and politicize low-wage immigrant workers, register them to vote, and encourage them to attend city council and county board meetings to make their voices heard. Their regular attendance at the normally quiet, sparsely attended meetings came as a shock to some incumbents and longtime residents, but over time elected officials began to respond to some of the citizens’ concerns. In 2017, the low-wage immigrant worker community urged Salih to run for an open at-large seat on the city council. She won easily, becoming the first immigrant to serve on the council and the first Sudanese-American woman elected to public office in the United States. She is now the mayor pro-tem of Iowa City.

Leveraging their strengths at the grassroots to build new electorates in new geographies, alt-labor groups can demonstrate to elected officials the breadth of support for their policy agendas. Broadening their membership base into rural and suburban areas, for example, can help to highlight the universality of the issues workers face. Somos Un Pueblo Unido, headquartered in the liberal, urban state capital of New Mexico, Santa Fe, has grown into a statewide political force by assiduously working to expand its presence in rural areas across the state.

“Not only were we not getting what we need in the Rio Grande corridor, but people are dealing with wage theft all across the state: in poor communities, in conservative communities, in high-Native-American-population communities, in Latino communities,”

Marcela Diaz explained.

So over the last 10 years, Somos strategically established membership teams in the small, rural areas of the state—in the cities of Espanola, Clovis, Portales, and Gallup, as well as in the counties of Lea, Chaves, and San Juan. Now, with a diverse membership base that includes urban as well as suburban and rural workers, and Latinx, Hispanos (“Nuevomexicanos”), Black, Native American, and white workers, Somos has been able to challenge the notion that workers’ rights are mere “urban” issues: “We’ve been doing (c)(3) electoral work in those communities for years. And it’s small, but it’s ‘small but mighty!’ We’re building our base, we’re building the base of voters, we’re doing issue education in these communities—we’re building an electorate slowly.”

By fanning out and creating new constituencies in new geographies, alt-labor groups are literally creating new populations of voters, demonstrating the breadth of support for their agendas, and establishing additional points of leverage in the political system. Building new electorates is thus one of the primary ways alt-labor groups alter the incentives of elected officials.

Broadening the issue agenda

Alt-labor groups also work to alter the terms of debate by inserting ideas and policy proposals that were previously unthinkable or blocked from consideration (sometimes called moving the “Overton window”)(Astor 2019). The power to shape the agenda, the late great political scientist E.E. Schattschneider argues, is the ultimate instantiation of power:

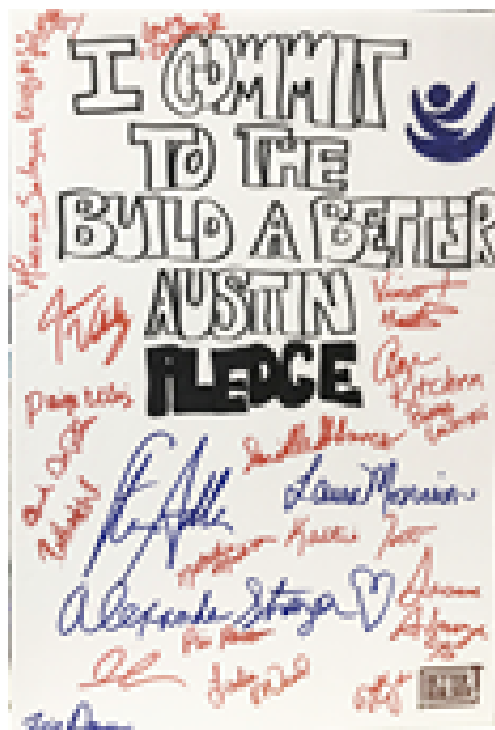
The definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power; the antagonists can rarely agree on what the issues are because power is involved in the definition. He who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of the alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power. (1960, 68; also see Bachrach and Baratz 1963)

Alt-labor groups seek to define the alternatives and shape the policy agenda in several ways. First, through their field work, the groups leverage (and further develop) their members’ organizing skills to canvass neighborhoods, listen to voters about their concerns, educate voters on the implications of policies currently being discussed for their communities, and encourage community members to become active and engaged. As discussed, many of the groups’ issue agendas percolate up from the community in this fashion.

For example, in Texas the new 501(c)(4) Workers Defense Action Fund, discussed above, used its new funding stream to hire and train more staff and volunteers to conduct comprehensive canvassing of predominantly Latinx, Black, and diverse working-class communities in and around the cities of Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. WDAF began talking to thousands of residents who had historically been disengaged from the electoral process. Canvassers listened to community members’ concerns, discussed

Figure C

Workers Defense Project 2018 policy platform pledge



Source: *The Austin Bulldog* (Martin 2018).

Economic Policy Institute

issues on the legislative agenda, encouraged them to envision an alternative agenda centered on their issues, and helped them organize to take collective action with their neighbors. As word of WDAF's large field program spread, aspirants for elective office began to seek out information on what its canvassers were learning. By 2018, 21 of the 28 candidates for the Austin City Council signed WDAF's policy platform (**Figure C**), which included a six-point plan to raise construction labor standards, implement and expand Austin's "Freedom Cities" policies (to limit police cooperation with ICE), enforce the city's paid sick leave law, provide support for immigrants in deportation hearings, and boost care for injured workers. Rather than endorse candidates and their prepackaged platforms, in other words, *candidates were endorsing WDAF's platform*. "It's really incredible to see how elected officials and people who either have power or are seeking power actually respond, and shift their own issue agendas to include the issues that are important to working families that have historically been disenfranchised," said Co-Executive Director Emily Timm.

The second way groups seek to broaden the policy agenda to include issues of importance to their members is through incremental policy victories that accumulate over time to expand the range of policies deemed legitimate. The Workers Defense Project's first policy success, for example, was in 2005, when the group managed to prevent from becoming law in Austin an anti-solicitation ordinance that would have criminalized day

labor. That defensive victory prompted the group to be more proactive and push for workers' rights that did not yet exist—like rest breaks for construction workers, which their research showed would save lives, in 2010. The victory on rest breaks built momentum for campaigns to mandate Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) trainings for all city contracts and to close a major wage-theft loophole in state law. Each subsequent campaign led to bolder demands. By 2016, WDP had persuaded the Austin City Council to link permits for public construction projects to WDP's "Better Builder" standards (living wage, workers' compensation, OSHA training, and third-party onsite monitoring). In 2018, WDP led a successful campaign for earned sick leave in Austin, which grew into two successful parallel campaigns in Dallas and San Antonio in 2019. One policy at a time, WDP has been "expanding what peoples' rights are," said Emily Timm.

The third way groups broaden the agenda is by exploiting exogenous shocks and highly salient national social movements—from crises like Covid-19 to #MeToo to the Fight for \$15 to the Movement for Black Lives—to advance new policies in their local political contexts. Although the groups would prefer always to be able to set the agenda on their own timetables, they often find themselves in a defensive posture or trying to take advantage of opportunities that arise independently of their organizing efforts to expand the range of what is considered possible in local and state policy arenas. Deborah Axt of MRNY explains it this way:

The Fight for \$15—we weren't the ones who dreamed that up—but breaking through that [initial disbelief that \$15 was realistic], and then taking to the streets, you can really put out much bolder, difficult-to-win things. And then it becomes the agenda—or at the very least, *you're shaping the poles of the argument*. And that makes so much possible. Even if you don't win the big bold thing that you're putting out there, you really can shape the terms of the conversation.

Through their assiduous power-building efforts, alt-labor groups try to put themselves in a position to exploit opportunities when they arise. Saru Jayaraman of ROC explains: "We saw a big moment with #MeToo and Time's Up, which elevated everything we've been doing for 20 years and opened the door to put it on the agenda in 16 states. Sixteen states introduced [the One Fair Wage policy to eliminate the "tipped" subminimum wage in 2019]—that wouldn't have happened 15 years ago." One Fair Wage was passed by ballot initiative in Maine, Flagstaff, Ariz., and Washington, D.C (later overturned by the D.C. City Council), and in the legislature in Michigan; and in July 2019 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to do the same. Campaigns are currently ongoing in seven states and in Washington, D.C.

From the \$15 minimum wage to paid sick leave to ending the tipped minimum wage to Raise the Floor Alliance's current campaign to create just-cause dismissal in Illinois, alt-labor groups have been expanding the policy agenda and helping to legitimize dialogues around issues considered too extreme to contemplate only recently. In addition to the policy campaigns discussed above, a nonexhaustive list of envelope-pushing policy campaigns organized by groups in my small sample would include the successful campaign organized by the Chicago Workers' Collaborative, Warehouse Workers for

Justice, and the Raise the Floor Alliance to pass the Illinois Temporary Workers' Bill of Rights (Responsible Job Creation Act) in 2017; NDWA's successful campaigns to enact Domestic Workers' Bills of Rights laws in nine states and the city of Seattle; the successful 2010 campaign by WeCount! in Miami-Dade County to pass an anti-wage-theft ordinance that grants hearing examiners subpoena and enforcement powers and provides for liquidated damages; El Centro's successful campaign to get domestic workers coverage under New Mexico's minimum wage law; the Heartland Worker Center's successful campaign for a Nebraska wage collection law providing workers with a private right of action; Make the Road New York's formative work on behalf of the landmark New York State anti-wage-theft law of 2010, paid sick leave in New York City in 2014, the blocking of major banks' financial backing for private prison and immigrant detention companies, the stopping of Amazon from opening a headquarters in Queens, and more; Somos Un Pueblo Unido's efforts to enact the first-in-the-nation citywide living wage ordinance in Santa Fe in 2003, statewide minimum wage increases and anti-wage-theft laws in 2007 and 2009, a state ban on bias-based policing in 2009, two-tiered drivers licenses for undocumented immigrants, and the securing of green energy jobs for rural workers in New Mexico's Energy Transition Act of 2019; PCUN's successful campaign to pass Oregon's Voting Rights Act in 2019, end the use of toxic pesticides, and more; CPD, CPD Action, and UFR's Fair Workweek initiative, which has produced advance scheduling laws in nine different states and cities thus far; the Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa's success in raising Johnson County's minimum wage to \$10.10, holding local employers to account for the higher wage floor after state preemption, and raising the minimum wage for Iowa City employees to \$15 an hour by 2021; New Labor's successful campaigns in support of New Jersey's new \$15 minimum wage, earned paid sick time, and anti-wage-theft laws, and its current campaign for a temp workers' bill of rights; and bold Covid-19 relief efforts organized by Adelante, Somos, CWC, CPD, PCUN, New Labor, WDP, WeCount!, NDWA, El Centro, Heartland, CWJEL, Needham, and WJW.

Altering electoral dynamics

Another way alt-labor groups seek to alter their political environments is by ramping up their organizing activities during election cycles, as the examples above illustrate, and, when the groups have launched 501(c)(4) side organizations, by explicitly endorsing candidates and intervening directly in electoral campaigns.

Let us stick with the example of WDAF, which has managed to affect the outcomes of several legislative races. In 2016, for example, it successfully unseated conservative Republican Kenneth Sheets in Texas House District 107 after Sheets introduced a bill to preempt the ability of cities to condition public projects and tax incentives on higher labor standards—a key tool used by WDP and the Austin City Council to strengthen workers' rights in a state where many other pro-worker initiatives were preempted by the state. His threat to undercut this key workaround raised WDAF's ire, and the group resolved to defeat him in the next election. With WDAF's help, Victoria Neave—a young Latina who grew up in a working-class family—defeated Sheets by a slim margin (and was reelected in 2018 and 2020 by wider and wider margins).

WDAF has also helped elect candidates to office who party theorists call “genuine friends”—not merely allies or supporters, but leaders who emerge from within the community and “have actually demonstrated their commitment through prior service” (Bawn et al 2012). Gregorio Casar, for example, worked at WDP before he was elected to the Austin City Council; another WDP staff member sits on the Austin Community College Board of Trustees; WDP co-founder Cristina Tzinzun placed a close third in the 2020 Democratic primary for U.S. Senate; and Co-Executive Director Jose Garza was elected Travis County district attorney in 2020.

Naturally, different political contexts call for different strategies. In predominantly Democratic states and cities, overt electioneering in primary campaigns can be counterproductive. In the Democratic city of Santa Fe, N.M., for example, Somos Un Pueblo Unido avoids primary campaigns for local and state offices, instead concentrating its efforts on canvassing, voter education, and get-out-the-vote campaigns. These activities demonstrate to elected officials that the group has the organizational capacity and willingness to do the hard work of voter engagement. When Somos then seeks elected officials’ support on controversial policies, the politicians know the group is capable of undertaking significant voter mobilization campaigns to back them up.

But in 2018, when Republican U.S. Representative Steve Pearce—who represented New Mexico’s 2nd District, covering the southern half of the state—announced his retirement, Somos launched its (c)(4) group, Somos Acción, in large part to help its favored candidate, Xochitl Torres Small, win the seat. The Democratic Party did not consider the open-seat race competitive, as it had been held by Republicans for 36 of the previous 38 years and Pearce had won the previous two elections with over 62% of the vote. Somos Acción organized an ambitious door-knocking campaign in deep red areas of southeastern New Mexico where its members were concentrated, alongside mail and digital media campaigns. Although the towns were majority Latinx, most Latinx residents had not previously voted. While the Torres Small campaign and other (c)(4) groups were turning out record numbers of voters in bluer areas of the district, Somos Acción was the only group canvassing voters in those rural areas. Many voters reacted with surprise, telling canvassers: “You’re the only ones that have come—not even the candidate has come,” Diaz reported. “The only money that was being invested was being invested through us—and we had a *medium*-sized operation as a (c)(4) in those communities.” Torres Small won by 3,722 votes.

Unlike WDAF, Somos Acción has not yet become directly involved in candidate recruitment or endorsements in those rural areas of the state because it does not yet “have other forms of power in these communities—we have base and we have strategy and that’s about it,” said Diaz. Still, its (c)(4) operation has given Somos Un Pueblo Unido another channel through which to exert political leverage. “It puts us in a different position,” Diaz explained. “We feel that it’s a step in our power-building trajectory...We always say, everything is helping us build power.”

A similar pattern is evident in Oregon, whose political geography is similar to New Mexico’s, with some very liberal urban and suburban strongholds in the Northwest region

of the state but the rest of the state is almost exclusively rural, conservative, and dominated by Republicans. In 2016, PCUN's (c)(4) organization, APP, ran a "parallel" campaign on behalf of Teresa Alonso-Leon, a "genuine friend," for state legislature, knocking on 16,000 doors and mobilizing predominantly Latinx workers and their families. Alonso-Leon won by just over 1,000 votes, becoming the first Indigenous, migrant Latina in the Oregon legislature. Over the next four years, APP ran more field programs on behalf of its favored candidates, mobilized voters around ballot initiatives affecting Latinx working families, and fought for several legislative changes. APP has since helped to elect and reelect several other Latinx and Latinx-friendly candidates to the state legislature, to the Woodburn School Board, and to the mayoralty of Woodburn.

Of all the groups in my sample, the (c)(4) groups Make the Road Action and the Center for Popular Democracy Action are perhaps the most vigorously engaged in electoral politics—likely a reflection of the size and resources of their combined (c)(3) and (c)(4) organizations and the extensive networks each maintains separately and collectively (every Make the Road organization is also a "partner" of CPD). MRA, for example, endorses candidates and mobilizes its formidable base to "hold electeds accountable by mobilizing the vote against them if necessary and supporting folks from our community and other allies to run for office as well," said Axt. In 2020, MRA reported making over 2.3 million phone calls and sending over 1.8 million texts in Pennsylvania, Nevada, New Jersey, and New York.²¹ It also conducts extensive voter-education campaigns and seeks to generate maximal publicity around its campaigns for workers' rights, immigrant rights, LGBTQ rights, affordable housing, public education, and more. MRA formulates a policy platform to flesh out its issue agenda, usually in alignment with the Working Families Party, with which MRA is a national and state affiliate.

Influencing outcomes

The desired payoff of all this power-building and political work, of course, is influence over policy outcomes and governing practices, and the most straightforward measure of influence is a tally of policy victories—did the groups achieve the legislative changes (or ballot initiatives, administrative changes, etc.) they sought? As Appendix Table 2 reveals, alt-labor groups are clearly making some headway in this regard. But this crude measure may obscure as much as it reveals, since it does not account for campaign failures or policy campaigns that were never launched due to lack of influence or anticipation of failure.

Political influence is notoriously difficult to measure, but one can catch glimpses of it in the altered behavioral patterns of candidates and elected officials. Even within my limited sample, for example, one can observe it in several instances—such as when three-quarters of the candidates for Austin City Council pledged to support WDAF's policy platform in 2018, as noted above, or in the greater responsiveness of the Iowa City City Council to immigrant residents' concerns. Another example involves Arise Chicago's annual Faith-Labor-Action Breakfast. Every year, the group brings together hundreds of allies, including

union representatives, immigrant rights advocates, faith leaders, other community leaders, and prominent elected officials to celebrate progress for worker justice (and fundraise) with awards, speeches, music, and food. In Democratic primary years, candidates for governor, attorney general, and many other elective offices make a point of attending the breakfast and indicating their support for Arise’s agenda. It is quite a scene to behold. But like most alt-labor groups, Arise downplays the extent of its political clout and is loath to claim more power than it actually has. Said Kader: “We can take a position on anything, but unless we’re working it, it’s meaningless....We’re not so powerful that if we put our name on something, suddenly all aldermen are going to pay attention.” That said, the Cook County commissioner from the 1st District sits on Arise Chicago’s board of directors, and the group is in regular touch with many Chicago aldermen, the mayor’s office, the Cook County board, and the new Office of Labor Standards (OLS).

But perhaps the most consequential measure of influence involves detectable shifts in governing operations. After all, alt-labor groups cannot rest content with policy enactments alone. Because policies are not self-enforcing, and because enforcement agencies make policy decisions too—for example, whether to respond only to complaints or also to undertake proactive, strategic enforcement—many alt-labor groups believe that it is at least as important to strengthen the state’s regulatory capacities and to influence government practices as it is to pass new laws. They view the *orientation* of government as “a political problem that requires organizing, power and a policy solution” (Fine 2017, 5). Let us therefore briefly discuss two types of efforts alt-labor groups have pursued along these lines: building new state capacities, and creating co-enforcement partnerships between government and worker organizations.

Since local wage-and-hour ordinances are not usually enforced by state and federal agencies, the proliferation of new municipal and county-level policies across the country over the last two decades has prompted the establishment of labor standards enforcement agencies in at least 20 cities and counties (Fine and Bartley 2018, 4). These agencies are responsible for enforcing many local employment laws, but their approaches can vary (Fine, Lyon, and Round 2021). Many alt-labor groups have therefore sought to influence their work, strengthen their mandates, ensure they are provided with more resources and staff, and assist them directly through co-enforcement partnerships and routinized communication about problematic industries and low-road employers.

Consider the Chicago Office of Labor Standards. Prior to its establishment in 2019, the city of Chicago’s enforcement capacities were severely limited. If employers did not pay their workers Chicago’s higher minimum wage or did not allow workers to use their earned sick time, workers’ only recourse was to complain to the Chicago Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection, whose main responsibilities were to issue business licenses and serve as a watchdog for consumer fraud. By 2018, it had become quite clear that the department did not have the capacity to enforce the newly enacted ordinances.

Arise Chicago took the lead in reassembling its coalition of allies from previous policy campaigns to wage a new campaign to create an OLS modeled on existing labor standards enforcement offices in Seattle and San Francisco. Successfully enacted on

October 31, 2018, the new OLS's charge was to enforce the city's minimum wage, earned paid sick leave, and anti-wage-theft laws. It was given subpoena and audit powers, it could revoke the business licenses of employers found guilty, and it was charged with responding to complaints, proactively investigating, and collecting and distributing back wages owed. Half of the fines it collected from violators would go toward funding the agency's operations.

The historical significance of establishing an Office of Labor Standards in Chicago—the site of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*—cannot be exaggerated. And the relative ease with which the alt-labor coalition managed to beef up the city's enforcement capacities (at least on paper) was a testament to the extensive political groundwork it had laid in the years prior. Staffing, funding, and operating the office would take more time, and effective enforcement remains a work in progress, but the strong relationships forged between the groups and the personnel in the OLS are proving to be critical (Oswalt and Rosado Marzán 2018; Rosado Marzán 2021).

The groups' ability to alter the city's regulatory capacities and reorient its priorities also had what political scientists call “policy feedback effects”—incentivizing the groups to pursue still further policies that the new agency could be tasked with enforcing in the future (Pierson 1993). In early 2019, Chicago-area worker centers and their allies began to lobby the city council for a Fair Workweek ordinance, to fall under OLS's purview, which would mandate that workers be given advance notice in their scheduled work hours. It passed in July and was added to the OLS's docket the following year. Likewise, the OLS was tasked with enforcing an anti-retaliation ordinance enacted in May 2020 to prohibit employers from firing, demoting, or retaliating against any employee who complied with the mayor's public health emergency travel order during the Covid-19 crisis. And in 2020, Arise Chicago, the Latino Union of Chicago, NDWA, and other groups joined in an innovative partnership with the OLS to launch “Your Home Is Someone's Workplace,” an initiative to promote and defend domestic workers' rights.

The growth of the OLS and its expanding mandate signaled progress in the groups' efforts to reorient government operations toward protecting workers' rights and away from simply helping business comply with the law. Although these were only incremental steps, in Kader's words they represented tangible movement toward the ultimate goal, which was:

To assemble the kind of robust welfare state guaranteed by local governments that we typically never had, in a way that Western Europe has traditionally had, that isn't negotiated through contracts, but is state-based....To me, that's the end game of all this policy talk. I want, for example, paid paternity leave and maternity leave for every low-wage worker in Cook County. And I don't care who is the guarantor of it. If it's not the employer, fine—we'll go on and we'll make the county make you do it. That's the aspiration.

Another way alt-labor groups have managed to alter government practices is through the establishment of co-enforcement partnerships with state enforcement agencies. Co-enforcement is an innovative approach to labor standards enforcement wherein worker

organizations, embedded in low-wage workers' communities, help government agencies monitor, report, and enforce labor standards in high-violation sectors where vulnerable low-wage workers are less likely to complain. As Janice Fine has described, co-enforcement arrangements draw upon each partner's "nonsubstitutable" capabilities, such as worker organizations' strong, trusted relationships with workers and state regulators' power to inspect worksites, demand information, and punish noncompliant businesses (Fine and Gordon 2010; Fine 2017; Patel and Fisk 2017; Fine and Bartley 2018). Co-enforcement partnerships exist or have existed in Seattle, New York, San Francisco, Austin, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and the state of California, and are currently being developed in numerous other states, cities, and counties (Fine and Bartley 2018). Indeed, in early September 2021 the Chicago Office of Labor Standards took the first steps toward establishing a co-enforcement partnership with Arise Chicago, awarding the group a \$100,000 grant to conduct outreach and education to raise awareness about workers' rights and "increase access to the protections offered by the OLS" among workers in underserved communities.²² The primary benefit of co-enforcement, of course, is more effective and efficient enforcement of workers' rights in hard-to-investigate, low-wage industries with high violations—which is precisely alt-labor's goal. As an analytical matter, the proliferation of these arrangements further demonstrates alt-labor's growing influence over the orientation and operations of government.

Conclusion

Each alt-labor group has its own distinctive identity, organizational history, internal culture, and mix of personalities, and each faces different sectoral and contextual challenges. But in my examination of a diverse cross-section of groups, I have identified three types of power building in which all alt-labor groups are deeply engaged: building *power within* their membership bases; building *power with* allies in pursuit of expansive issue agendas, and building *power to* undertake a wider range of activities through organizational innovation. These forms of power can be deployed for political purposes or not, as each group chooses. Although not every group has become deeply politically engaged—some of the younger and less well-resourced groups have been reluctant to move beyond individual services and the basics of community organizing—all the groups in my sample readily acknowledge the general trend that has swept the alt-labor movement in recent years: A growing number of groups have turned to politics and public policy in order to forge an alternative path to combating workplace exploitation and strengthening workers' rights. They have drawn upon their distinctive strengths to punch above their weight in the political arena, making subtle but important changes to the political environment in which policy decisions are made. In many cases, this work has paid off, giving their members greater voice in the policymaking process and paving the way for new workplace rights and protections where none previously existed. Starting as they have from a position of significant weakness, their accomplishments to date have been impressive.

Along the way, alt-labor organizers have learned a number of strategic lessons. Here are two of the bigger takeaway points:

1. Rather than try to solve all their members' problems, alt-labor groups must try to leverage those problems to build power. If alt-labor groups set out to help every worker achieve justice for every grievance, they would be organizations that performed valuable service functions but would be unable to do anything else. They would be stuck in a perpetually reactive pose—responding to symptoms rather than attacking the root causes of the problems. To be sure, individual member services, lawsuits, and workplace justice campaigns are important ingredients of base building, as discussed above: They are often the main point of entry for workers who become activists. But by themselves, they do little to alter the extreme imbalances of power in the workplace, in society, or in the political system. That is why alt-labor groups must try to pick their battles wisely and devote their limited resources strategically to actions that advance their larger goals. They must constantly assess their relative power and evaluate potential actions for whether they advance their power-building goals. As Marcela Diaz of Somos Un Pueblo Unido explained:

It's not actually our job to solve all these problems. It's our job to utilize problems to grow power. It's how can we *use* these problems—*exploit* these problems—to continue to build power....You go to one of our meetings and the first thing people do is say OK, what's our number-one goal? And it just rolls off the tongue of our members: Build power for immigrant families and low-wage workers. OK, so everything we do in this meeting has to meet that goal. So if we're doing a vigil, we're not doing a vigil just to do a vigil, we're not doing an action just because it's some kind of day of action somewhere. If we're doing a fundraiser, if we're doing a this, if we're doing a that—who can explain how this is going to build power for us?

Similar sentiments were echoed by most everyone I spoke to. For example, Saru Jayaraman of ROC United:

Choosing a campaign has to be both about what workers want and making sure that what we're fighting for is getting at the heart of our ultimate mission, which is changing the power dynamic between the industry and the workers. If we choose an issue that doesn't get at changing the power balance, it doesn't actually fulfill our long-term mission. Workers want a lot of things—but among those things, what are the most strategic to get at the power dynamic?

Similarly, Adam Kader of Arise: “Our policy agenda [going forward] will probably be directed by how is it building our political power....It's just a constant evaluation of how much power we have.”

2. Shifting the balance of power between the powerful and the relatively powerless is a never-ending fight, and alt-labor groups are playing the long game. One of their primary objectives, therefore, is simply to persevere and grow while strategically husbanding their power resources. Their purpose is not to win every battle—it is to stay in the fight. As such, they must think constantly about how to stockpile their power resources, nurture their strengths, learn from setbacks, adapt, and, most of all, develop “grit,” says Andrew Friedman of the Center for Popular Democracy:

It is a battle for power and it doesn't stop. It's not like: Oh, we won! It's like: We won *today*. We are constantly fighting, and the fight isn't going to go away, I don't think. So we're just trying our best and we're trying to look around and learn. What I am more mindful of, with time, is how totally complicated it is, and the role of creativity, courage, persistence, and luck in this is. So we're trying to build an institution that can stay in the fight, that gets a bunch of people who have those characteristics in the same fight—and then we've just gotta *stay*. And when we have a horrible, annoying disaster happen, we try and learn from it. It's like when educators talk about grit: *That's* the most important thing, more important than math, more important than reading. It's the ability to learn and go on.

Developing grit requires awareness of the ephemeral and dynamic nature of power. Again, Diaz eloquently explains:

The number-one job of the organizer is to help our members, in any given moment, assess our power at that moment. That's it. Because it changes every day, depending on a whole host of issues that sometimes has nothing to do with us....The goal is continue to build as much power as we can—and it's going to look different at different moments—so that we can continue to be able to alter the relations of power and be able to change things fundamentally over time, knowing that that's a never-ending job, and also knowing that we can pass these really great policies *that we worked hard for*—and they can disappear!—if we don't actually have the power to sustain them.

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Appendix
Table 1

Name	Headquarters	Year founded	Worker center?*	Geographic reach	State partisanship	Sectoral focus	Network affiliation?	Total revenue (from most recent 990 available; last election year used for c4s)
<i>Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN)</i>	Woodburn, OR	1977	Amalgam	state	blue	Agriculture	CPD, Alianza Poder	\$403,781 (2018)
<i>Arise Chicago</i>	Chicago, IL	1991	Worker center	local	blue	multiple		\$949,384 (2019)
<i>Somos Un Pueblo Unido</i>	Santa Fe, NM	1995	Amalgam	state	blue	multiple	AFL-CIO	\$1,067,276 (2019)
<i>Pilipino Workers Center (PWC)</i>	Los Angeles, CA	1995	Worker center	local	blue	multiple	NDWA	\$960,570 (2018)
<i>Make the Road New York (MRNY)</i>	New York, NY	1997	Amalgam	local	blue	multiple	CPD	\$24,939,711 (2019)
<i>Chicago Workers' Collaborative (CWC)</i>	Chicago, IL	2000	Worker center	local	blue	Temp staffing	RTF	\$839,208 (2019)
<i>New Labor</i>	New Brunswick, NJ	2000	Worker center	state	blue	multiple	IWJ, NDWA, NDLON	\$532,053 (2017)
<i>Workers Defense Project (WDP)</i>	Austin, TX	2002	Worker center	state	red	Construction	IWJ, AFL-CIO, NDLON, CPD	\$2,277,932 (2019)
<i>Restaurant Opportunities Center United (ROC)</i>	New York, NY	2004	Amalgam	multi-state	all	Restaurant		\$5,727,743 (2019)
<i>New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice (NOWCRJ)</i>	New Orleans, LA	2006	Worker center	state	purple	multiple		\$1,898,871 (2020)
<i>WeCount!</i>	Homestead, FL	2006	Worker center	local	red	multiple	NDWA, AFL-CIO, NDLON	\$279,464 (2019)

Appendix
Table 1
(cont.)

Name	Headquarters	Year founded	Worker center?*	Geographic reach	State partisanship	Sectoral focus	Network affiliation?	Total revenue (from most recent 990 available; last election year used for c4s)
National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA)	New York, NY	2007	Alliance	multi-state	all	Domestic work	own	\$12,457,744 (2019)
El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos	Albuquerque, NM	2009	Other	local	blue	multiple	NDWA	\$372,092 (2019)
Heartland Workers Center (HWC)	Omaha, NE	2009	Worker center	state	red	multiple		\$1,706,997 (2019)
Living United for Change in Arizona (c4)	Phoenix, AZ	2010	501(c)(4)	state	red	multiple	CPD	\$2,525,302 (2018)
Arizona Center for Empowerment	Phoenix, AZ	2010	Other	state	red	multiple		\$915,057 (2019)
United for Respect (UFR)	Oakland, CA	2011	Other	multi-state	all	Retail	CPD	\$809,139 (2019)
Center for Popular Democracy (CPD)	New York, NY	2012	Alliance	multi-state	all	multiple	own	\$28,906,156 (2019)
Center for Worker Justice of Eastern Iowa (CWJEI)	Iowa City, IA	2012	Other	local	purple	multiple	IWJ, AFL-CIO	\$182,663 (2017)
Needham Area Immigration Justice Task Force	Needham, MA	2012	Other	local	blue	multiple	MIRA	\$1,300 (2019)
Adelante Alabama Worker Center	Birmingham, AL	2014	Worker center	local	red	multiple	NDLON	\$548,444 (2019)
CPD Action (c4)	New York, NY	2014	501(c)(4)	multi-state	all	multiple		\$9,209,630 (2018)
Make the Road Action (c4)	New York, NY	2014	501(c)(4)	multi-state	purple	multiple		\$1,958,884 (2018)
Raise the Floor Alliance	Chicago, IL	2014	Alliance	state	blue	multiple	own	\$1,732,015 (2020)

Appendix
Table 1
(cont.)

Name	Headquarters	Year founded	Worker center?*	Geographic reach	State partisanship	Sectoral focus	Network affiliation?	Total revenue (from most recent 990 available; last election year used for c4s)
Workers Defense Action Fund (c4)	Austin, TX	2014	501(c)(4)	state	red	multiple		\$833,589 (2018)
Acción Política PCUNista (c4)	Woodburn, OR	2016	501(c)(4)	state	blue	multiple		\$682,866 (2018)
Somos Acción (c4)	Santa Fe, NM	2018	501(c)(4)	state	blue	multiple		\$221,166 (2018)
Worker Justice Wisconsin	Madison, WI	2018	Worker center	local	purple	multiple	IWJ, AFL-CIO	\$114,000 (2019)

Notes: The study was conducted between 2018 and 2021. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person, and the author engaged in “direct observation” to the extent possible prior to Covid-19. Quotes from organizers in leadership roles are attributed when permission was granted. Because most worker-members discussed personal experiences—rather than focusing solely on “events (current or historical), views, etc.” not considered human subjects research by Northwestern University IRB—interviews with most members are considered “off the record” or “on background,” unless otherwise noted. Note that 10 groups explicitly self-identify as “worker centers” (Arise, CWC, New Labor, PWC, WDP, NOWCRJ, WeCount!, Heartland, Adelante, and WJW). Three are national or regional alliances of worker centers and other community-based groups (CPD, NDWA, and RTF). Four are “amalgams” that include worker centers (Somos, PCUN, MRNY, and ROC). Five do not self-identify as “worker centers,” but fighting for workers’ rights is central to their mission (El Centro, ACE, UFR, CWJEL, and Needham). Six are 501(c)(4) organizations that fight for workers’ rights and are affiliated with one of the above (CPDA, MRA, WDAF, Acción Política PCUNista, Somos Acción, or LUCHA).

Economic Policy Institute

City and county fair workweek, minimum wage, and paid sick leave laws, 2003–2019, and participation by alt-labor groups

Fair workweek			
City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
<i>Santa Clara County, CA</i>	2014	✓	EBASE, IWJ
<i>San Francisco, CA</i>	2015	✓	CPA
<i>New York, NY</i>	2017	✓	MRNY, CPD
<i>Philadelphia, PA</i>	2017	✓	UFR, CPD (Fair Workweek Initiative)
<i>San Jose, CA</i>	2017	✓	EBASE
<i>Seattle, WA</i>	2017	✓	CPD (Fair Workweek Initiative)
<i>Emeryville, CA</i>	2018	✓	EBASE, CPD
<i>Chicago, IL</i>	2019	✓	Arise, CPD, CWC, RTF, ROC, WWJ (Fair Workweek Chicago)
Paid sick leave			
City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
<i>San Francisco, CA</i>	2006	✓	CPA
<i>Washington, DC</i>	2008	✓	ROC (Paid Sick Days for All Coalition)
<i>Seattle, WA</i>	2011	✓	Casa Latina (Seattle Coalition for a Healthy Workforce)
<i>New York, NY</i>	2013	✓	DWU, MRNY, CPD, ROC (New York Paid Sick Days Coalition)
<i>Washington, DC</i>	2013	✓	ROC (Paid Sick Days for All Coalition)
<i>New York, NY</i>	2014	✓	DWU, MRNY, CPD, ROC (New York Paid Sick Days Coalition)
<i>Oakland, CA</i>	2014	✓	EBASE, ROC (Lift Up Oakland)
<i>Montgomery County, MD</i>	2015	✓	CASA de Maryland, IWJ (Working Matters Coalition)
<i>Philadelphia, PA</i>	2015	✓	ROC, TWA-PA (PA Coalition for Healthy Families and Workplaces)
<i>Pittsburgh, PA</i>	2015	✓	Hill District Consensus Group (Pittsburgh United)
<i>Tacoma, WA</i>	2015	✓	El Comite (Healthy Tacoma)

Appendix
Table 2
(cont.)

Fair workweek			
City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
<i>Berkeley, CA</i>	2016	✓	EBASE (Berkeley Minimum Wage Initiative Coalition)
<i>Chicago, IL</i>	2016	✓	Arise, UFR, ROC, NDWA (Paid Sick Time Chicago Coalition)
<i>Cook County, IL</i>	2016	✓	Arise, UFR, ROC, NDWA (Paid Sick Time Chicago Coalition)
<i>Los Angeles, CA</i>	2016	✓	Black Worker Center, CARECEN, KIWA, ROC (Raise the Wage LA)
<i>Minneapolis, MN</i>	2016	✓	CTUL
<i>San Diego, CA</i>	2016	✓	IWJ, Employee Rights Center (Raise Up San Diego)
<i>Santa Monica, CA</i>	2016		
<i>St. Paul, MN</i>	2016	✓	CTUL
<i>Austin, TX</i>	2018	✓	WDP (Working Texans for Paid Sick Time, Work Strong Austin)
<i>Duluth, MN</i>	2018		
<i>San Antonio, TX</i>	2018	✓	WDP (Working Texans for Paid Sick Time)
<i>Westchester, NY</i>	2018	✓	MRNY (WCLC)
<i>Dallas, TX</i>	2019	✓	WDP (Working Texans for Paid Sick Time)
<i>Emeryville, CA</i>	2019	✓	EBASE
Minimum wage			
City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
<i>San Francisco, CA</i>	2003	✓	CPA, LRCL, POWER
<i>Santa Fe, NM</i>	2003	✓	Somos
<i>Santa Fe, NM</i>	2007	✓	Somos
<i>San Jose, CA</i>	2012		
<i>Albuquerque, NM</i>	2012	✓	El Centro, Ole, ROC
<i>Montgomery County, MD</i>	2013	✓	CASA
<i>Prince George's County, MD</i>	2013	✓	CASA

Appendix
Table 2
(cont.)

Fair workweek			
City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
Bernalillo County, NM	2013	✓	El Centro
Seatac, WA	2013		
Oakland, CA	2014	✓	Ebase, ROC (Lift Up Oakland)
San Francisco, CA	2014		
Chicago, IL	2014	✓	ROC, Arise (Raise Chicago Coalition)
Louisville, KY	2014		
Las Cruces, NM	2014		
Sante Fe County, NM	2014	✓	Somos (Santa Fe Living Wage Network)
Seattle, WA	2014	✓	Casa Latina (15 Now)
Birmingham, AL	2015		
El Cerrito, CA	2015		
Emeryville, CA	2015	✓	Ebase
Los Angeles, CA	2015	✓	BWC, CARECEN, KIWA, ROC (Raise the Wage LA)
Los Angeles County, CA	2015		
Mountain View, CA	2015	✓	Ebase, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
Palo Alto, CA	2015	✓	Ebase, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
Johnson County, IA	2015	✓	CWJEI
Lexington, KY	2015		
Portland, ME	2015		
Kansas City, MO	2015		
St. Louis, MO	2015		
Tacoma, WA	2015		
Flagstaff, AZ	2016	✓	LUCHA (Flagstaff Needs a Raise)
Berkeley, CA	2016		
Cupertino, CA	2016	✓	Ebase, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)

Appendix
Table 2
(cont.)

Fair workweek			
City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
Los Altos, CA	2016	✓	EBASE, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
Malibu, CA	2016		
Pasadena, CA	2016	✓	NDLON
San Diego, CA	2016	✓	IWJ (Raise Up San Diego)
San Jose, CA	2016	✓	EBASE, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
San Leandro, CA	2016	✓	EBASE
San Mateo, CA	2016		
Santa Monica, CA	2016	✓	SMART
Sunnyvale, CA	2016	✓	EBASE, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
Washington, DC	2016	✓	ROC
Linn County, IA	2016		
Polk County, IA	2016	✓	CCI
Wapello County, IA	2016		
Cook County, IL	2016	✓	Arise
Belmont, CA	2017		
Milpita, CA	2017	✓	EBASE, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
Richmond, CA	2017		
Santa Clara, CA	2017	✓	EBASE, LUNA, WPU (Santa Clara countywide campaign)
Montgomery County, MD	2017		
Minneapolis, MN	2017	✓	CTUL
Redwood City, CA	2018		
St. Paul, MN	2018	✓	CTUL
Fremont, CA	2019		
Menlo Park, CA	2019	✓	EBASE

Fair workweek

City/county	Year	Alt-labor group cited as leader in campaign?	Group name (ad hoc coalition name)
Novato, CA	2019	✓	Comite Vida (North Bay Jobs with Justice)
Petaluma, CA	2019	✓	Comite Vida (North Bay Jobs with Justice)
South San Francisco, CA	2019	✓	EBASE
Denver, CO	2019	✓	COPA, UNE (Work Here Thrive Here)

Abbreviations/acronyms: Arise = Arise Chicago; BWC = Black Worker Center; CARECEN = Central American Resource Center; CASA = Casa de Maryland; CCI = Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement; COPA = Colorado's People's Alliance; CPA = Chinese Progressive Association (San Fran); CPD = Center for Popular Democracy; CTUL = Centro de Trabajadores Unidos in la Lucha; CWC = Chicago Workers Collaborative; CWJEL = Center for Workers Justice of Eastern Iowa; DWU = Domestic Workers United; EBASE = East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy; El Centro = El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos; IWJ = Interfaith Worker Justice; KIWA = Koreatown Immigrant Worker Alliance; LRCL = La Raze Centro Legal; LUNA = Latinos United for a New America; MRNY = Make the Road New York; NDLON = National Day Labor Organizing Network; NDWA = National Domestic Workers Alliance; POWER = People Organized to Win Employment Rights; ROC = Restaurant Opportunities Center; RTF = Raise the Floor Alliance; SMART = Santa Monica Allied for Responsible Tourism; Somos = Somos Un Pueblo Unido; TWA-PA = Taxi Workers Alliance for Pennsylvania; UFR = United for Respect/OUR Walmart; UNE = United for a New Economy; WCLC = Westchester Community/Labor Coalition for Earned Sick Time; WDP = Workers Defense Project; WPU = Working Partnerships USA; WWJ = Warehouse Workers for Justice

Sources: These data were collected via systematic search of thousands of full-text local newspaper articles using Newsbank and Google News. Search terms included the jurisdiction in question and broad search terms (e.g., "minimum wage"), and encompassed the year prior to policy enactment as well as the year after enactment. The list of Fair Workweek laws was compiled from [HRDive](#) and the Center for Popular Democracy's [Fair Workweek Initiative](#). The list of minimum wage laws was drawn from the Economic Policy Institute's [Minimum Wage Tracker](#), with omissions added by the author (San Francisco 2003, San Jose 2012, Montgomery County 2013, and Santa Fe 2007). The list of paid sick leave laws was compiled from the National Partnership for Women and Families' ["Current Paid Sick Days Laws"](#) fact sheet, SHRM's April 15, 2019 article ["Paid-Sick-Leave Laws Continue to Give Employers Headaches,"](#) and A Better Balance's resource page on ["Paid Sick Time."](#)

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Endnotes

1. The term *alt-labor* has grown dramatically in popular usage since labor reporter Josh Eidelson (2013) first coined it in *The American Prospect*. Lexis-Nexis shows 173 nonduplicate news stories using the term since Eidelson’s story was published (as well as 67 law review and journal articles and 52 briefs, pleadings, and motions).
2. Author’s calculations. See Appendix B for detailed list.
3. This report presents the initial findings of a larger study that will be published as a book. See further discussion of methods in the next section; see list of groups in Appendix A.
4. For more on the distinction between sources and forms of power, see Lacombe 2021.
5. “Low-wage” is defined as workers in the bottom quintile of their state’s income distribution. Statistics estimated by the author using CPS-ORG data (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2020, CPS-ORG Uniform Extracts, Version 2.5, Washington, D.C.).
6. Statistics estimated by the author using CPS-ORG data. Note: these are *conservative* estimates of minimum wage violations: (1) calculations use the Center for Economic and Policy Research’s most consistent wage variable, “wage4,” which includes overtime, tips, and commissions, thereby inflating wage estimates; (2) for applicable minimum wage, we use lowest applicable wage rate (state rather than city/county, small business rate, etc.), except when state lacks own minimum, in which case we use federal rate; and (3) CPS is known to undercount Latinx and undocumented workers, low-income men tend to exaggerate their wages, and other measurement issues likely downward bias violation rates. See Bollinger 1998; McKay 1992; Roemer 2002; Bernhardt et al. 2009.
7. This does not take into account the possibility that many of the workers who were paid less than the minimum wage were likely promised wages higher than the statutory minimum.
8. Noncitizens are also far more likely to get hurt or killed on the job than U.S. citizens as well (see Grabell and Berkes 2017). Note that “noncitizen” refers to any person born outside the U.S. who is not a naturalized U.S. citizen (e.g., refugee, asylee, undocumented immigrant, legal permanent resident).
9. Some of the increased risk is due to the industries in which the respondents worked and the states in which they lived. When we control for industry and state, the estimates are as follows: Black, Latinx, and noncitizen workers were about 1.5 times as likely to suffer a minimum wage violation as white workers and U.S. citizens, respectively; Hispanic and Black women who were not citizens were about 1.9 times as likely as white women who were citizens. Neither industry nor state is necessarily independent of the workers’ race, gender, and citizenship, however; controlling for industry and state denies employment and residential segregation. Thus, the unconditional estimates are reported above.
10. “Amalgam” is from McAlevey 2013.
11. Also see Milkman 2007; Milkman, Bloom, and Narro 2010.
12. Some alt-labor groups view policy campaigns as primarily useful for movement-building purposes. Explained Tim Bell of the Chicago Workers’ Collaborative: “The policy campaigns are

very useful for mobilizing workers. That's the major use for them. The regulation that you get out of them can create tools for building power around enforcement of the regs. But the biggest use you get out of them is that it's an opportunity for workers to have movement, and it's an opportunity for them to have a voice in something....So what this does is it gives us a vehicle to bring all those workers together.”

13. On the role of unions, see Galvin 2020.
14. In many industries, exploitation of low-wage workers is an endemic feature that is engrained in business models and linked to macroeconomic conditions. These structural determinants of wage theft are overlooked in the “bad apple” theory of labor standards violations. On the stubborn persistence of wage theft across economic and political conditions, see Bernhardt et al. 2009; Cooper and Kroeger 2017; Galvin 2016; Galvin, Fine, and Round 2020; Galvin et al. 2021.
15. This report presents the initial findings of a larger study that will be published as a book.
16. This emergent understanding is reflected in new developments across the labor movement, from the “Bargaining for the Common Good” movement to the Fight for \$15 to the Red for Ed teachers’ union strikes.
17. Also see Schlademan 2017.
18. See City News Service 2016.
19. Precursors to RTF include several “long coalitions” formed among groups in the same city or region with varying degrees of institutionalization: the Immigrant Worker Center Collaborative in Boston; the Workers’ Rights Community Collaborative in San Francisco; the Los Angeles Wage Theft Coalition; the Santa Clara County Wage Theft Coalition; the Coalition of Low-Wage and Immigrant Worker Advocates in California; and citywide coalitions in Minneapolis, Seattle, and elsewhere.
20. See U.S. Census Bureau, “[QuickFacts: Schuyler City, Nebraska.](#)”
21. See the Facebook page, “[Make the Road Action.](#)”
22. See “[BACP Awards Grant to Arise Chicago to Raise Awareness of Chicago’s Labor Laws.](#)”

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