Section Three: Empowerment

Introduction

Suzanne Cummings is project manager for *Invested* and Regional and Community Outreach at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

Other forms of collective representation have emerged to help workers arm themselves with the knowledge and confidence needed to tackle workplace problems together. This support has bolstered communities and enabled workers to stand up for their rights, safety, and advancement on the job as a strong, unified force. Particularly for those who have long worked in less-visible roles throughout the workforce, these valuable alliances fuel courage in the face of dangerous circumstances and empower new leaders among the workers themselves, who in turn are able to extend these resources to their peers.

We begin with a conversation with a community-labor organizer in Boston to learn how unions, underrepresented workers, and communities form powerful coalitions to effectively address common challenges for the benefit of all.

Next, we discuss the history of vulnerability and abuse domestic workers and other "hidden" workers have experienced in the U.S., in large part due to their exclusion from the labor rights afforded to other workers. The social innovations director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) discusses the importance of organized representation and advocacy for domestic workers—predominantly women, immigrants, and people of color—many of whom have struggled in the shadows of private homes across the country. She also offers insight on the future of domestic work, identifies the parallels between domestic workers and those in the growing gig workforce, and highlights some innovative strategies that NDWA is testing to improve working conditions and life outcomes for this segment of the labor force.

Continuing the conversation on the local level, two nannies and an activist-organizer, all involved in a Greater Boston women workers' rights organization fighting to end gender-based violence and exploitation, give us an up-close look at the struggles of domestic workers. They share inspirational stories about overcoming fear, finding strength in their peers and a supportive organization, learning to value themselves, taking proactive steps to improve their situations, and using their newfound voice to reach out and help others who are struggling.

Next, a cofounder and executive director of a worker-focused online networking and petition platform details how her site provides another avenue for empowerment. With an ultimate aim of building "a civic infrastructure for today's economy," the site serves as a global, peer-based platform for workers to connect with one another to build momentum, solve problems, and advance change in the workplace via online campaigns and advocacy.

Finally, a unique contract manufacturing company in New Hampshire shows us how a business can germinate a whole "culture of empowerment" for its workers. As the company's employees tell us in our live video, establishing and practicing core values in an environment of trust and respect lies at the heart of their operations. This central philosophy encourages collaboration and cross-training and highlights the importance of providing opportunities for personal and professional growth, fueling among workers an inherent commitment to the organization and their colleagues, economic success, and deep job satisfaction.

"People will show a beautiful solidarity with workers when given the opportunity to do so and will go the extra mile to continue or strengthen a fight if they know it's going to impact other working people. I think that we don't give people enough credit for being generous. Given the opportunity, people really want to help each other and they want to see other people succeed."

Lindsay McCluskey is a senior organizer at Community Labor United, a coalition of unions and community organizations in Boston, Massachusetts. This interview was conducted on March 7, 2018, and has been lightly edited.

Q: What does Community Labor United do, and how does it differ from a labor union or community organization?

A: Our role is to bring together unions and community organizations around strategic issue campaigns where they may otherwise not be working together, particularly campaigns that promote the interests of low- and middle-income people. We focus on a range of different issues but our niche is bringing together communities and labor. We're different from a union or another type of organization because we are a coalition—we do not go out ourselves and organize workers individually. We work with organizations that are doing that work of building up a base of workers, whether they're doing that through union organizing, representing a group of workers as a union, bringing people together at a worker center, or organizing in the community.

Q: What have some of your campaigns focused on?

A: We've worked on public transit issues, bringing together transit riders and bus and train operators around new investments in public transit and also making sure that worker voice and community-rider voice are represented in decisionmaking for public transit. We have worked on a campaign around painting Boston's public schools, making sure that community members partnered with the union to ensure that the work that is done to paint schools in the summer is creating good jobs and careers in painting for graduates of the Boston Public Schools. We've worked to make sure the state's energy efficiency programs reach low-income communities, and also that the jobs offered in energy efficiency are high-quality jobs. Currently we're doing

work around wage theft and trying to strengthen state labor law so that workers actually get a fair day's pay for their work.

Q: Why is it important for labor unions and community organizations to work together?

A: There are many situations in which communities and labor unions can be pitted against each other, when in reality they have a lot of shared interests. Using our campaign around public transit as an example, there's often a false choice around whether to prevent transit workers from increasing their wages and benefits or to raise fares for riders, when in reality what we need is more public investment in the transit system. So it doesn't have to be riders pitted against workers, but oftentimes that's what happens. We feel that our role is to bring those two constituencies together to fight for what's really needed in the long term. A lot of issues that affect both workers and community members require us to build a more powerful base to go together to the legislature and present a united front in making those asks. But also, we're in a moment right now where we're seeing really big attacks on organized labor with the Janus vs. AFSCME Supreme Court case being heard and a decision coming soon that's going to really impact unions in the public sector, and we know that in the long term, attacks on organized labor are not going to end there. So more than ever we think it's important for unions to be working in really close partnership with organized groups of community members and other workers, whether they're in a union or not, because the interests of low- and middle-income people are really shared.

Q: What does that collaborative work look like in practice?

A: Community Labor United has a set of partners that we consistently work with—a set of unions and a set of community organizations who've been with us from the beginning. We call that group our strategy committee and we consult with them when we're taking on any new issue. We try to catch the pulse of what's going on with their members and what they are concerned about, and then once we identify an issue that we're interested in working on based on the input from that group, we then go and talk to a broader group of organizations that we feel may have some interest. Our campaigns are all led by a campaign committee which includes representatives of the organizations that we're working with on that particular issue, and that group is really responsible for developing and driving the strategy for the campaign and mobilizing and engaging their members in the work that we're doing—whether it's going to the legislators and doing lobbying work or doing direct organizing to try to hold employers accountable.

Q: Is there ever any resistance to working together?

A: Yes, there are challenges, particularly in situations where historically the groups involved may not have had a great relationship. But we do a lot of work to try to bring them to the table together and help them understand that in the long term their interests really aren't that different. It takes a lot of work to overcome historically bad relationships and instances where people have successfully pitted groups against one another. Another part of our work that's really important, though, is that we try to bring a really strong race, class, and gender analysis to our work. Race and ethnicity is often the factor that's used to pit groups against each other,

and I'll use our wage theft work as an example. Immigrant organizations are working to organize immigrant workers who are currently the biggest group being exploited over instances of wage theft. Other workers who are unionized are often also impacted because their work is being undercut by contractors in the case of the construction industry or just other employers who are taking advantage of an immigrant workforce and exploiting them. But ultimately it impacts both—the workers who are directly feeling that exploitation and wage theft but also unionized construction workers who are getting outbid by these low-road contractors. We realize that there's been a persistent effort to try to pit those groups against each other and race and ethnicity have really been at the center of that. We've really been trying to deepen our analysis and understanding of how and why that division is being done and why we really need to look longer term to bring these constituencies together. The way we do that is by identifying things that we can fight for together, and being involved in the struggle together is the path that we take to overcoming some of those divides.

Q: If some of the workers who participate in your campaigns are already represented by a union, why do they also need to join in on Community Labor United campaigns?

A: Some of the unions we work with are very small, so they spend most of their time negotiating a contract, servicing that contract, and serving the needs of their members. They may not have capacity to take on a larger issue that's affecting their members, so we provide a way for them to do that without having to do it on their own. But I think the added value that we bring is joining union members together in struggle with workers who aren't organized and with community members who they may otherwise not be able to fight alongside, had we not played that role of bringing them all to the table. I think it's also about growing their power. If a union goes after something by themselves and they have a few thousand members, that's certainly a powerful base of workers that can come together and have a strong voice, but it's even stronger if that union joins together with 10 or 15 other organizations on that issue. As a coalition we're growing the power behind the work that we're doing more than any one organization can do on its own.

Q: Through CLU's campaigns, do you feel that worker voice is extended to workers who may never have had the opportunity to speak up or who would have risked too much to speak up on their own?

A: Absolutely. I mean, talk about people who've been exploited—there are workers who just don't get paid for the work that they do. In construction it happens time and time again that people don't get paid for the last two or three weeks that they worked on a job, and the work that has to go into fighting that is more than they can do on their own. We've had the privilege of working with some of these workers to fight for the recovery of these wages and it's heartbreaking to think of how many workers don't have an organized group of people working with them and alongside them to recover their lost wages. But to see those people standing up and saying to their employers, "This isn't right, and I'm not going to give up and let you just walk away with what's rightfully mine,"—it's a beautiful thing and it's an honor to be able to witness it, and it's an even bigger honor to be able to fight alongside them. So yes, I think there's a lot of transformation that happens in the course of this work.

I've seen in this work that often there's some injustice that a person has experienced and that they've been directly touched by an issue we're working on. They get angry, and they should get angry, and it's the role of our organization to tell them that there's something that we can do about it, and we're going to have your back if you do want to stand up and do something about it. Understandably, there's often a lot of encouragement that needs to happen to get someone to stand up for themselves or with their coworkers against their boss, because it's scary and they are risking a lot. I think that's a dilemma of our organizations sometimes is that we have to push people to stand up, but we also have to realize how much they're risking to stand up and we have to be there to support them. It's very important that we are there for them and standing up with them reliably, and that's been one of the beautiful things to me in this work, seeing all the organizations that are willing to have someone's back and support them.

Q: Can you speak a little bit about the impact you've seen that comes from workers standing together, particularly for the workers themselves?

A: I'll give you an example. One of the campaigns that we are in the process of mapping out right now but have not publicly launched yet is an effort around childcare, bringing together childcare providers with families and particularly with working moms who need better access to affordable, high-quality childcare. In the effort to build this campaign we've talked to a number of the organizations on our campaign committee for this issue—unions, community organizations, worker centers—but we also wanted to go a step deeper. So we held an event in the fall where we asked all of those organizations to bring their members together to have a conversation with providers and parents and families all in the same room to talk about the kind of childcare system that we think we need and deserve. Having a real conversation across the table with family childcare providers, providers who work in childcare centers, and parents themselves about what kind of system we need is really empowering for the folks in the room, but it also allows us to create a campaign that's truly informed by and built from the ground up based on the experiences and stories of these women who are working hard but still struggling because we don't have a childcare system that reflects the reality of employment situations in the U.S. If you're a mother at this event, not only are you seeing other mothers who are going through the same struggle that you're going through, but you also see that on the other side, on the side of the providers, they're struggling too with a lot of the same things that you're struggling with. It's empowering to see and experience these groups coming together, and I think what's even bigger is to be able to see the issue from a broader perspective and understand that it's not just a struggle that you're facing but one that also affects many other people in different ways.

Q: What do you want people to know about the workers and organizations that you work with?

A: I'm regularly reminded in doing this work that there are a lot of people out there who think that in order to identify solutions that you can fight for you need to go talk to prestigious experts, and we do have a lot of brainy people in our region. But I'm constantly shown again and again that the people we work with are very savvy and already know what they need and the solutions to the problems that they have. So I think it's a good reminder to us to just keep going back to them and continue to talk with them and continue to listen to what they say, because they know best what they need. Research studies are certainly important to add to the

conversation, but I think to us the most important thing is to really listen to the workers and the community members.

One great example of that was in our work around wage theft. We were having a forum with some workers from different worker centers to try to come up with ways to combat wage theft. Often what happens when you go after a business that has committed wage theft, they say, "We don't have any money, we're bankrupt," or they'll just close down and reopen in another name. So at our forum, a worker who had experienced wage theft said, "Can't we require businesses to have some kind of insurance so if they say that they don't have the money, we will know that they actually do?" We often know that these companies do have the money, but it's difficult to prove it when businesses can just shut down and reopen. So we took that suggestion and ran with it, and part of our strategy on wage theft has been to fight for municipal ordinances that require that for city contracts, any bidding business with a track record of wage theft has to obtain a wage bond to prove that they will have the money to pay their workers. We started in Boston, getting a wage theft executive order from the mayor's office, and we've had ordinances pass in a number of other areas. So I'm often struck that if we actually listen to what people are saying and don't write them off from the beginning because they're working class or because they're people of color or because they're women, there's a lot of wisdom and savvy there to run with. We can add data and research to that on-the-ground knowledge, but really a lot of the truth and a lot of the answers are already there.

Q: What will CLU be working on going forward and what kind of wins are you looking for on those issues?

A: I briefly mentioned childcare—moving forward that's going to be a big piece of our work, bringing together childcare providers and families to fight for the childcare system we need in our state. It's a really challenging issue because the problem is so big and it feels like the solutions that we need are also really massive. But we know that our childcare system has not kept pace with the changes in our economy. It's outdated, and in addition the working conditions for the primarily female workforce in childcare are really just disgraceful. This is the workforce raising the next generation, and in my mind, theirs is one of the most important professions and should be one of our most respected positions. These are the people that are raising our kids and we can't afford to pay them? It's just horrible. Part of the problem is that we need a system that we really invest in, and that's just not the system we have right now. Families have a big role to play, but also we need public support for childcare because we can't keep going the way we're going right now. We're looking at ways that we can successfully bring childcare providers and families together around the issue, and what kind of short-term wins we have to get first that will set us up for the larger wins that we think we really need in order to build a system that truly supports both the childcare workforce and the parents and families.

Q: What makes you most proud and hopeful about the work that you're doing?

A: I am just proud that our organization is a part of this fight and a part of this movement. We're standing on the shoulders of a long line of people who have fought for working-class people, and I'm humbled to be in that position. It's really an honor and a privilege to be able to do the work that we do. I'm proud of the leaders that we work with every day in Boston and beyond who are standing up and really risking a lot by fighting. I'm

proud that our organization has focused on not only the class interests of the people we are working with but also bringing class together with a strong race and gender analysis, because that's how we can best prevent people from being divided.

I've also been so inspired by the recent teachers' strike in West Virginia. For this group of 20,000 workers who have among the worst pay of any teachers in our country to take this kind of action—just the solidarity that was on display in that effort, not only fighting for themselves but also for other public-sector workers. CLU is focused here on what's happening in our region, but seeing those teachers come together was a powerful reminder for me about what workers can accomplish, and that people will show a beautiful solidarity with workers when given the opportunity to do so and will go the extra mile to continue or strengthen a fight if they know it's going to impact other working people.

I think that we don't give people enough credit for being generous. Given the opportunity, people really want to help each other and they want to see other people succeed. So the strike in West Virginia for me was just a reminder that people care about one another, and that a lot of times public opinion is on the side of workers when they're in situations like this, and I was just so inspired to see them take that kind of collective action and have a beautiful, well-deserved win. It's the same thing as the childcare providers—they're doing the work of raising the future of our society and we ought to compensate them for that very hard work. These teachers are getting up every day and going into a classroom full of kids who may have a whole host of challenges and needs and they are doing amazing work. It was a beautiful inspiration to me, and I think it is important to talk about these moments when we see them happen, because we don't see them happen nearly enough.

"The domestic employment relationship is characterized by a really uneven power dynamic, and there's no human resources department. There's nobody to call to report that a violation happened. So a large part of our work in the Alliance is to really think creatively and strategically about how to create some level of parity in the worker-employer relationship, which ultimately creates a better quality of care and service for the family and creates better working conditions for the worker."

Palak Shah is the social innovations director at the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) and the founding director of NDWA's innovation arm, Fair Care Labs. This interview was conducted on February 27, 2018, and has been lightly edited.

Q: Who are domestic workers and what kinds of work do they do?

A: Domestic workers are mostly women who work as nannies, caregivers, housekeepers, or cleaners. They are people who care for our seniors and people who care for those with disabilities. The thing that unites them is

that they generally work in the privacy of someone else's home. Most of this workforce is, as I said, women. A large number of immigrants are working in this profession, and even within that, a large number of undocumented immigrants find work in the economy by caring for others. We often say that domestic work is the work that makes all other work possible. It's work that allows someone to go to work or pursue school. It's the work that is invisible in our economy, but is also the scaffolding beneath the way the economy functions.

Q: Are there certain vulnerabilities particular to domestic workers because of the situations they work in—their status or that they're working in a private home?

A: There are a lot of things that make being a domestic worker a vulnerable job. In the United States, domestic workers have been excluded from virtually every labor law in the country. Farmworkers and domestic workers were systematically excluded from even the most basic of protections, like minimum wage, overtime, the ability to get a rest break, and the ability to form a union, and there's a really unfortunate history to why this has come to be. In the 1930s when Congress was debating and contemplating labor law protections and legislation to be passed, there were concessions, as is normal in the legislative process, that needed to be made. Southern politicians in Congress did not want to extend rights and protections to domestic workers and farmworkers, because at the time most of those workers were African American. It was African Americans who worked in the agricultural industry and in the fields, who were maids and washerwomen, and who did the work that came after slavery. So there's a very deep racial history to why these two groups are the only two classes of workers that have been excluded from these protections. And because of that, these jobs have remained some of the most vulnerable jobs in the country.

Q: Why is it important for domestic workers to have some kind of organized representation and why is that difficult for them?

A: It's important for all workers in the economy to have representation, not just domestic workers. But due to their explicit exclusion from worker protections in the National Labor Relations Act, domestic workers have not had the option to form a union and engage in the kind of practices and protections and organizations that we have built in this country to ensure that everybody has a fair shot in the economy. The interesting thing about domestic workers, though, is that their workplaces differ from the traditional environments in which labor unions have flourished. Labor unions generally are present in a firm, whereas the predominant way that domestic workers work is individually and on their own, and they're hired by a household and a family, not by a company or a business. The traditional strategies of unions and bargaining rely on a collective negotiating with the management or the owners of a business, but the one-to-one relationship of domestic work means that the traditional union structure is not as applicable or relevant in our industry. But that doesn't mean the principles behind unionism or worker voice don't apply. The whole point of our organization is to make visible what has been invisible in the economy and create an organization that is the voice for the nation's domestic workforce.

Q: What is the National Domestic Workers Alliance?

A: The National Domestic Workers Alliance is the voice for the nation's 2.5 or 3 million domestic workers. We don't actually know the exact numbers, because so much of this economy is "underground." NDWA is a national federation of 70-plus organizations all around the country who voluntarily decide to affiliate with us because we're all working on a common purpose—to ensure the rights, respect, and dignity of this workforce. When we started, we were 11 organizations from around the country who came together organically on the assumption that the sum of us would be greater than our parts and it would benefit us to have a national organization. It's very rare for national alliances to be formed from the ground up, and I think that's really contributed to the strength of this organization around the country because people have chosen to band together instead of being forced to band together in some way.

Q: What are your ultimate goals?

A: Our ultimate goals are to ensure that the care industry is a fair industry, that we have the quality of care that every single person in this country deserves, and that the people who are providing that care are also cared for. These jobs cannot be outsourced and they cannot be automated. These jobs are here to stay. Because the baby boomers are aging at a rate of 10,000 people turning 65 a day and millennials are starting to have children, the demand for care is exponentially booming. We absolutely have a care crisis in this country, and we don't have a plan for filling these care needs. It's projected by 2030 that the combination of childcare jobs and home care jobs—home care in this context referring to those working with seniors and people with disabilities—will be the single largest occupation in our economy, and it's growing at a rate that's five times the rate of overall job growth. So we know that those jobs are going to be here, but the median annual wage for the average home care worker is about $13,000. These are not jobs that you can support a family on, and our ultimate vision is to transform care jobs into jobs that you can raise your family on, and be able to live a life of dignity and happiness.

Q: How do workers find you and how do they get involved with your campaigns?

A: Workers find us in all kinds of ways. They find us because we've reached out to them on the street—we have strong teams of people in all the major cities across the country visiting parks and doing outreach in very traditional ways. We have a robust digital team that's doing digital outreach now. We've got a strong robust network of affiliates around the country, all of whom are organizing domestic workers in some way. Domestic workers hear about our campaigns on the radio when we're running a campaign to establish minimum standards. Our signature piece of legislation is called the Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, which says that this job is just like any other job in the economy and these workers deserve the same rights that anybody else has. When we pass these bills and we get press coverage and we're doing interviews, the word gets out.

Q: What role do the affiliate organizations play in NDWA?

A: The affiliates of the National Domestic Workers Alliance are the heart and soul of the alliance. There is no alliance without the affiliates. It's a really beautiful thing to have a national structure that can lead one cohesive strategy and keep a finger on the pulse of major macro trends that are happening in the care

industry. The nitty gritty work of organizations that creates space for domestic workers to work together to offer solutions happens at the affiliate level. And it's important that it continue to happen at the affiliate level, because every market is different—the conditions in Texas are very different from those in Manhattan. The affiliates also have a finger on the pulse of the way that the domestic markets are functioning. Especially because so much of this work is informal, it's impossible to really know what's happening in these markets unless you're actually on the ground.

Q: What does worker voice look like in this industry?

A: Well, there's the issue of worker voice in the individual's job in the home. If you think about the individual domestic worker who works for a family, what does worker voice in that situation look like? The domestic employment relationship is characterized by a really uneven power dynamic, and there's no human resources department. There's nobody to call to report that a violation happened. So a large part of our work in the Alliance is to really think creatively and strategically about how to create some level of parity in the worker-employer relationship, which ultimately creates a better quality of care and service for the family and creates better working conditions for the worker. There will always be some kind of imbalance because one party is paying and the other party is working, but there are a lot of things that we can do to reduce that gap.

The issue of worker voice in the individual relationship then is partly dependent on the individuals involved, but I think it's also about establishing a set of norms and practices in an industry that has generally been the Wild West of the economy. So the Alliance has worked on a lot of different tools and services to try to cement those norms and practices in that individual relationship. For example, the key challenge that domestic workers face is the lack of a contract. Imagine if you were to take a job at an office and you had no contract and no job description. It would be very difficult, right? And yet that's what happens when most domestic workers go to work. So a key norm that we've been working on in the individual relationship to augment worker voice is to say, you know, contracts should be the norm in the industry. That doesn't mean we can't have flexibility and the worker and the family can't continue to negotiate around what is and isn't that worker's job, but it should be written down in the form of a contract or a work agreement of some kind. So that's one example of ways to cement norms and voice at the individual level.

There's also worker voice within processes. What's really beautiful and one of the things I'm really proud of is the democratic nature of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. Our affiliates elect the members of the board, who come from the affiliates. If an affiliate organization wins a seat on the board, there are two members who represent that organization—one is a domestic worker leader and the other is a professional staff person from the organization. So there are many domestic workers who sit on our board, and that is really rare in this country, to have the workforce that's being advocated for actually be in the highest level of leadership in the organization.

Ultimately I would say worker voice is about having a seat at the table. It's about saying: we are the people that power this industry. We are the people who do the work that makes all other work possible, and we deserve to have a voice. We deserve to have a say in how the future of this industry develops, not just because

it matters to our own jobs and our own lives, but also because care is such an important part of the economy, and leaving workers who power this part of the economy out just isn't fair, right, or pragmatic.

Q: Can you speak a little bit about the future of domestic work?

A: There are two ways that I've really been thinking about this question. One is considering where domestic workers have been. I've come to the realization that in many ways domestic workers are the original gig workers. They were working in the conditions that many of us are discussing now in the national conversation about the future of work: the fissuring of work, the cobbling together of many jobs, working without a contract, working without job security, working without guaranteed hours, all of which have become part of a big debate as the gig economy emerges online. Essentially, where domestic workers have been is where a large part of the economy is going.

Forward-looking, then, we know that home care jobs, those that provide care for the elderly or people living with disabilities, are some of the fastest growing in the country—by demand. By 2030, nearly one-fifth of the total population will have reached the traditional retirement age of 65, including everyone who is part of the baby boomer generation. If more workers don't go into care work, we'll have a national of shortage of 350,000 paid care providers by 2040. And the share of women in the workforce has tapered off over the last few years which many people think is due to the lack of care supports at home. Given those pressures, to me the future of work is the future of care, and the future of care is the future of work in this country. I've been in endless conversations about automation and artificial intelligence and the way that work is changing and developing in this country, and at the center of every single one of those conversations is the fact that care is here to stay. So that doesn't necessarily help us in all the other arenas in which jobs are being affected by technology or with the fact that technology is impacting domestic workers—technology is radically changing the way that domestic workers work.

But given that in this country baby boomers want to age in place at home, and that it's unlikely that they will choose to be cared for by a robot anytime soon, we know that those jobs are here to stay. The problem again is that this is not an attractive industry, particularly if you once had a steady nine-to-five job with a pension, options for retirement, and supports to get another degree or some additional training. That's not how this industry is structured right now. So if we want to attract people to this industry because we need people to care for us, then we are going to have to do some work as a country to make these jobs good jobs.

Q: What is the Good Work Code?

A: The Good Work Code is an eight-principle framework that we launched to guide the creation of good work in the online economy. The basic idea was that we can't really get to where we're going if we don't know where we're trying to go. We identified eight common-sense principles that guide the creation of work or the way that work is changing. They include principles like flexibility, for example—yes, workers appreciate the flexibility in the gig economy, but no one appreciates flexibility if you only have two hours to work. So you've got to balance the need for flexibility with the need for stability.

There are adjacent movements such as the B-Corporation movement and others that are thinking about how business can be a force for social good, and I would say this is within the realm of those efforts, but very much focused on the gig economy and people who find work online.

Q: What is Fair Care Labs?

A: Fair Care Labs is the innovation arm of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. It's a wonderful sandbox where designers, entrepreneurs, technologists, and people who are not traditionally part of social movements can come and lend their skills and their expertise to the social movement. It's where we experiment with new strategies.

The legislative strategy is a tried-and-true strategy of our Alliance. Organizing workers is another tried-and-true strategy. And investing in the leadership of workers, well, that's the bread and butter of what the Alliance does. But there are other strategies that have yet to be tapped and that we've not yet even imagined, and Fair Care Labs is the home of that innovation and experimentation activity.

I founded the Lab about three-and-a-half years ago, and what it's done is really create a center of gravity not just in our movement but also in the care industry for impact investors or people who are interested in market-based or entrepreneurial approaches to improving the care industry. It's a place that allows for all of us to work in collaboration and in relationship with each other. In-house, the Lab is also creating its own products and ventures. For example, we are very proud of a portable benefits platform that we've built that allows employers of cleaners to make small contributions—five dollars a job—into an aggregated fund that then the cleaner can apply toward some kind of benefits, so maybe that's accident insurance or a paid sick day. Many of our workers have never had a paid sick day in their lives. They either go to work sick or they stay at home and they don't get paid. So there are interesting blends of digital products and technology, all in-house and under the mission of improving the lives of domestic workers.

Q: What are some things you have learned or that the general public might not know about domestic workers because they've been so hidden in the workforce?

A: I think anybody who's ever hired a domestic worker or been a domestic worker knows that this entire profession is infused with care. You simply can't do this job without some form of emotional labor. It's not just going to an office and performing some tasks. The very essence of the work that people are doing is rooted in some of the most fundamental things about being human: to love and care for one another. That is a very profound service to offer to anybody. Every single worker that is a leader in our alliance, every single worker who shows up to the statehouses, every single domestic worker who reports a claim of wage theft—underneath all of that is a deep kind of love for people, and that's a really beautiful thing I think that should be protected and preserved and honored.

"The things that go wrong for nannies are not isolated issues, but if we just stay in our homes and we don't share what we go through, then it stays out of the eye of the public. But when we get a group of us together and we are all sharing with each other about problems that are happening time and time again, then we have enough to shine a light on it and we can do something about it." – Thaty Oliveira

"It makes me feel good to speak out for us, because I'm the kind of person who's always looking for ways to help others. If I see someone is suffering or being abused in our industry, I say to them, 'Look, this isn't the way it's supposed to be. You need to be strong and fight for your rights.' I think that we as individuals have to be prepared to lead." – Ana Cipoletta

"We are seeing evidence of what happens when people are part of an organization like Matahari when they go in for job interviews with employers and say that they are members. It's a way of saying, 'Don't mess with me because a lot of people have my back right now, and these are the things I'm going to need in this employment situation.'" – Julia Beebe

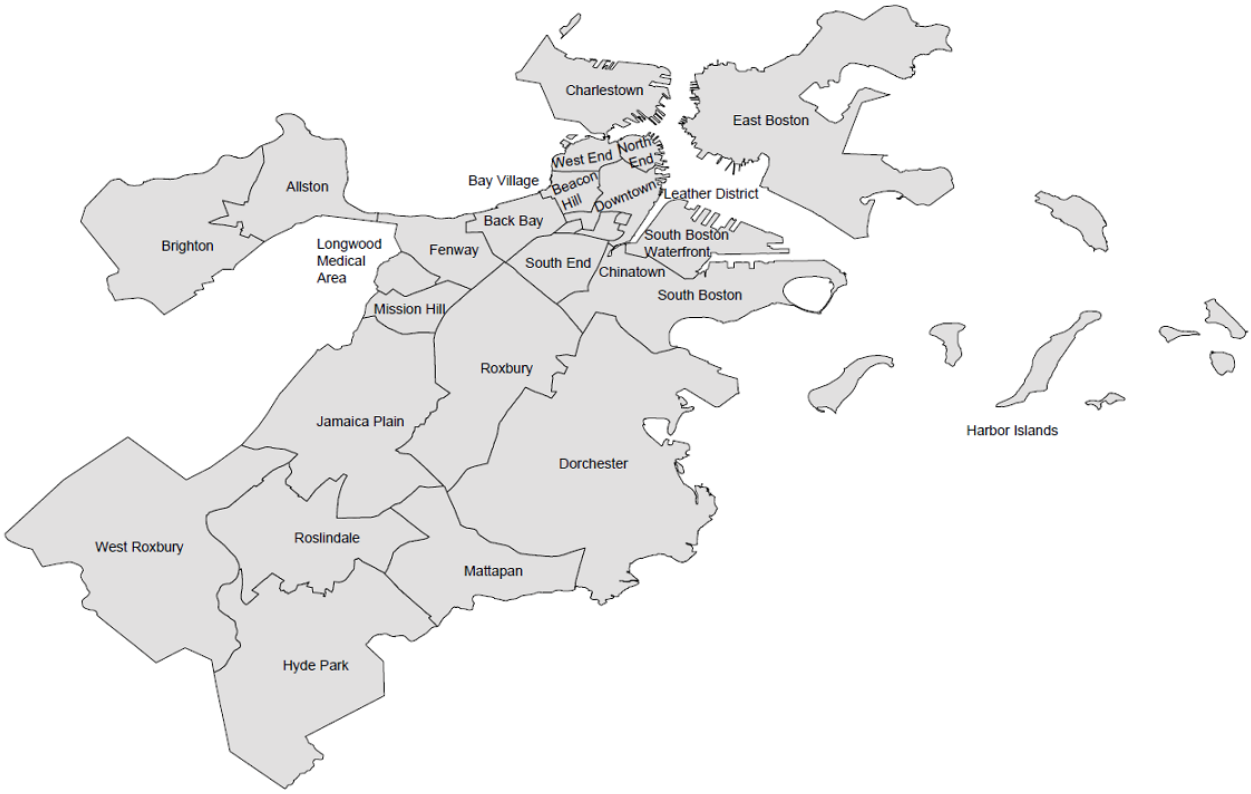
Julia Beebe is the lead organizer at the Matahari Women Workers' Center in Boston, Massachusetts, which is an affiliate organization of the National Domestic Workers Alliance. **Thaty Oliveira** is a professional career nanny, parent educator, advocate, and newborn-care specialist in Boston and a worker-member of Matahari. **Ana Cipoletta** is a nanny in Boston and a worker-member of Matahari. Ms. Cipoletta's interview has been translated from the original Spanish. These interviews were conducted on March 2, 2018, and have been lightly edited.

Q: What is the Matahari Women Workers' Center?

JULIA BEEBE: When Matahari began it was really focused on survivors of human trafficking, which there was a surprising amount of in the Boston area, and we were more of a service organization. Over the years, survivors started coming back to the organization and telling us that they wanted to address some of the root cause of trafficking. We shifted our work slightly more toward organizing rather than services, to help build leadership and power among survivors. Experiences with human trafficking are fairly common in the domestic workforce, unfortunately, so it really made sense for us to work with domestic workers. Now we have over 1,000 members in the Boston area and most of our work is with women and immigrant workers who are primarily

nannies, au pairs, house cleaners, and adult caregivers. We do a lot of political education, organizing, training, and leadership development, and we identify issues that are close to people's hearts and really take collective action around that.

GREATER BOSTON NEIGHBORHOODS



Q: Why are you focused specifically on female workers? What particular challenges or dangers do they face?

JB: The vast majority of domestic workers are women of color and immigrant women. As we're hearing now, women in a lot of sectors including domestic work face sexual harassment and sexual assault. The women we work with are also in a unique position where they're caring for people from maybe 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. during the week and then they go home and are often also the key person providing care for their own children and families. They're often trying to balance those two big tasks with very little support—they may not have affordable childcare, paid parental leave, or paid sick time if they have to take care of themselves or

their children. So we think there's a lot of work that needs to be done in fields that are dominated by women workers.

Q: Do your work hours, working conditions, or wages have any negative impacts on your personal life, your finances, and your personal wellbeing, or have they in the past?

ANA CIPOLETTA: Yes. In my first nanny job I didn't know what a contract was, so it was difficult because I didn't know what demands I should make of my employer. Before that I had worked in a different field for a company that gave me my benefits, and working for a family is different. I didn't know where my medical insurance would come from. Would I have vacation days, and would they be paid? Would I have personal days? I didn't know whether I would be paid overtime if I worked more than 40 hours. I didn't know how to ask for or establish any of these things in my first job, but like anything, you gain experience from your first job and then you get better with the second. You learn how to insist on your benefits, but I didn't insist on a contract until my third job. That was not because I didn't want one, but because I was afraid to make demands, and also because I didn't know what benefits I should have as a nanny. I didn't have a reference for what I was entitled to in terms of benefits. So yes, your first jobs do impact you financially and they impact your family, of course, because sometimes you work more than 60 hours, and they don't pay you the overtime. Time is money.

THATY OLIVEIRA: in the past it has had a great impact on me. I paid my way through college. I was an international student so I paid the international student rate for college and two graduate programs, and that meant I was working up to 90 hours a week sometimes, and I basically didn't have a life. I love what I do, but it kind of becomes robotic, and I definitely suffered depression and I had financial stress. I needed the money and I needed to pick up extra shifts. I didn't realize how much of a toll it was taking on me until I was at the hospital, throwing up and sick. It was definitely hard. I didn't know about overtime pay at that time, so I'm sure that if I knew and I could ask for it, then I wouldn't have had to work 90 hours a week to make what I had to make to pay all of my college bills and everything. It's this lifestyle where you're so into that job and you wake up at 5:00, you go to work, you don't come back until midnight—you really don't have a life outside of work. You go and you do your job and you're eating as you're maybe driving from one side job to another, and then you're there with a smile on your face for the kids. And when I had to actually say that I was going through some things and I needed to actually heal first, nobody would understand because you're still so happy and cheerful and full of energy with the kids. It took me months before I saw a doctor and he said, this is stress, you need a break. It was rough, and because you love the job sometimes you don't realize until it's really over the top.

Most of the nannies I know, to this day, still don't get paid time off or sick time off. Especially when you work with children and you're getting sick because of the children—I just think we need to have paid sick time. I was fortunate because I was able to advocate and put paid sick time in my contract, and it is something that I try to empower nannies to do, like, I know the law doesn't say you have to have paid time off, but that doesn't mean you cannot ask, and you should.

Q: How did you come to realize that you needed to make a contract for yourself and what do you stipulate in it?

TO: The first family that I worked with, they were very common sense about it and they actually had a contract in place, and I thought that contract was actually really fair. And then one time I got screwed up. One temporary position—I think I was there for six or nine months—I didn't have a contract in place, and the parents came home and they said that they would be taking time off from work for the Thanksgiving weekend and the following week, and because the mom wouldn't be getting paid during that time, I wasn't going to get paid. And I said, "Wait, what?" That hadn't happened to me before—sometimes a family would go traveling but they would still pay me, so I actually took that for granted and I really never thought about it until that time. I realized, that's two weeks of pay that I'm not going to get and rent is due in two weeks, and this is not going to be good. So that weekend when I was off I actually came up with a very extensive contract. It was 11 pages long—I sat down and I put down all the issues that I didn't want to have to deal with ever again. I've definitely scared parents away when I've sent the contract to them—and I send it before we even start talking, because I don't want to be wasting my time if you're not going to be giving me the basic standards that I need. My contract covers sick time and guaranteed hours—so, if you're going to leave early for a vacation, that doesn't mean I don't get paid, that's on you. I mean, at your daycare if you pick up your child early it's not like you pay them less for that day. So I'm very detailed with all of that, and it has helped—I've definitely had some parents who never returned my email after that, but I'm glad because that just filtered them to the people that I actually want to work with.

AC: In my last three jobs I had a contract that provided me with all of my benefits, including medical insurance. But I always had to first find a standard to point to, to prove that I knew what benefits I'm entitled to. Sometimes there are families that want to confuse you—they might say "Oh, but the minimum hourly wage is $11.00 now. It used to be $10.00, and before that, $9.00." They want you to think you have to accept minimum wage just because it's gone up recently, and then it's like, how do I ask for more than $11.00 an hour, knowing that my job is hard and I deserve more? Other times families will try to play on your feelings and play with your mind, like, "You've bonded with my children and you're the *best* nanny, but we *can't* pay you more…" But then you have to learn how to say no. So it gives you strength, knowing your rights and learning how to negotiate the contract. Now it's easy for me, but again, the first few jobs are difficult because you don't have any idea. No one tells you what to do out there until you find support like Matahari—organizations that tell you, "Look, these are your rights, and this is what you have to do."

Q: What does a worker center-based campaign look like?

JB: A more recent campaign we did was something we called the "nanny census." All of our campaigns are grounded in what our members who are domestic workers want to work on, and our members really wanted to learn more about what was going on with workers on the ground. So we developed a community-based research tool—the nanny census—and trained our members to go out into parks and playgrounds and libraries to anonymously survey nannies and au pairs about their pay and working conditions. Over the course of the campaign we surveyed about 375 care providers. For us this campaign was important because it really helped

build the leadership of our existing members, it helped us reach a lot more domestic workers who now know about their rights and our organization, and it helped us learn a lot about our base. Through that campaign we learned that 75 percent of the nannies we surveyed weren't receiving overtime pay at the time-and-a-half rate when they were entitled to it. We saw a pay range that was all the way up to $30.00 an hour but as low as $4.00 an hour. We saw that people wanted paid time off. So that was a really important tool that we used to educate employers and public officials, the general public, and also our members, so even now, years later, we're hearing of nannies going into interviews and saying, "I found out from the nanny census that nannies in the South End make this amount of money, and I won't be accepting less."

TO: We're also working with au pairs now—au pairs are basically exchange students who come to work in childcare and they're just paid $200 a week. I was an au pair, so I know they are doing the same work that nannies do. In Massachusetts au pairs are covered under the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, but the au pair agencies have sued the attorney general saying no, au pairs are international exchange students. But you know, $500 in Boston for an education credit is nothing, and if you're working 45 hours a week, believe me, you are an overtime worker. So the agencies can't just say they're only students. We're working hard to make sure that au pairs are still protected.

Q: Massachusetts recently passed the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights. What did the bill call for and have you seen any changes since it passed?

JB: It helped clarify certain parts of the law that had already been in place and added new protections, one of the most significant being the right to a written employment agreement or contract. A contract is very important because it allows people from the very beginning of a job to establish that this is an employment relationship and to put the terms in writing. The law also gave workers a right to days of rest and to parental leave—unpaid, but job protected, and it gave live-in workers the right to notice if they were going to be fired. Since the law got implemented in 2015, it's been difficult work figuring out how to implement and enforce it, but I think we are seeing a lot of movement in the right direction. More and more employers are aware of it and more and more workers who we're reaching through our outreach and trainings know that there's a law.

AC: For me, it's perfect, because it becomes the platform from which we can ask for our rights and for respect. It gives us some equality with other workers.

TO: It's been amazing. Massachusetts has the most comprehensive one so far. And it's still a lot of work educating parents and educating nannies—it's an ongoing process because you're never done and there are still people who have never heard of it. When I talk to parents, even though I'm not taking on new jobs right now, I always send them my parent packet which has information about the Massachusetts law, educating them about what they have to do as an employer and about the rights of the people they hire. So I'm doing it little by little, one person at a time. It definitely has helped to shed light on it for a lot of workers who didn't know about it—there are a lot of things they can ask of employers that are required by law. It has definitely helped a lot of workers so far, but as I said, the work is never done.

Q: How does a group of workers coming together around issues at worker centers like Matahari enable domestic workers to help each other and have a significant impact on making change?

TO: It is part of our work at Matahari to make other domestic workers feel comfortable enough to talk. Everything is shared in a safe environment. We're never going to share anything that you don't want us to share. If you don't want us to do anything about a problem that you share, we won't do anything about it, because we respect your privacy. But I think just having a place to go is a great start. And then once they become more comfortable, then they can take more leadership roles in the collective work that we do and come forward and speak publicly about it. But until then it's just a safe place where you have someone watching out for you. If you need anything, we try to do everything we can within what you're comfortable with us doing to help you.

JB: I think sometimes it's hard to measure the impact because it's not just about passing laws and changing policies but also about cultural shifts, especially when it comes to domestic work. But I think we are seeing evidence of what happens when people are part of an organization like Matahari when they go in for job interviews with employers and say that they are members. It's a way of saying, "Don't mess with me because a lot of people have my back right now, and these are the things I'm going to need in this employment situation." We've definitely been seeing more of that in the past few years.

AC: I think that to get to the point where we can speak up, we have to sit down together and discuss our personal experiences. If we come to understand that we've all been fighting our way up from the bottom and now we're about to reach our goal, that will make us stronger advocates.

TO: The things that go wrong for nannies are not isolated issues, but if we just stay in our homes and we don't share what we go through, then it stays out of the eye of the public. But when we get a group of us together and we are all sharing with each other about problems that are happening time and time again, then we have enough to shine a light on it and we can do something about it. The core work of Matahari is really outreach and trying to get those workers together to collect statements and see what they're going through. We have stories to tell and it's hard to organize around something we might have just heard once from someone or that we *think* might be happening—we need those workers to come forward and tell their stories and say that this is a problem.

AC: It makes me feel good to speak out for us, because I'm the kind of person who's always looking for ways to help others. If I see someone is suffering or being abused in our industry, I say to them, "Look, this isn't the way it's supposed to be. You need to be strong and fight for your rights." I think that we as individuals have to be prepared to lead. Sometimes that means I give a fellow worker member a little push to get there, a little encouragement to be able to say, "Look, this is bad." I think that's a good thing for us as individuals, and even more so for our Hispanic community. I think that we're afraid to speak up for ourselves, not just because of the language barrier, but in general. We say to ourselves, "I'm not from this country, and with my immigration status, what are they going to say? What are they going to do to me? My children, my family . . . they're going to separate us!" With all the things going on around us today, I think that as a Hispanic community it's valuable

for us to take advantage of all the benefits that Matahari provides, like informing us about what's fair and what's right. We have to take advantage of every opportunity that the community has to offer—classes, talks, educational workshops—whatever it takes to be able to represent our community well.

Q: The domestic workforce is majority women workers who are often also women of color and immigrants. What additional issues does this introduce for these workers, and why is it particularly important that they have representation and a way to come together?

AC: Many domestic workers who are immigrants are afraid to demand that our rights be respected because employers might use that as a basis to say that they won't contract with you because you're not from this country, or because you speak Spanish and not English. I would say about half of domestic workers are afraid for these reasons, and others may be fearful of getting involved because they're not sufficiently educated on their rights. I think that's why workers sometimes can't speak for themselves. They don't have the understanding or maybe the confidence so that they can say, "Look, I studied so that I could help you raise your children. I have my certifications, I have experience." But I definitely think retaliation is a common fear, and not only in the domestic worker industry but in other industries as well.

TO: I think America does value childcare compared to the rest of the world, but even here being a nanny is still not seen as real work. It's only been a few years since the actual dictionary definition of "nanny" changed from saying "unskilled worker" or "menial labor." I did research for my master's degree so I knew the old definition and I was happy to see that it had changed, because it definitely takes a lot of skills. But when you're an immigrant, you don't know that. In Brazil, you can't really find a nanny—a domestic worker does everything—she's going to be cooking and cleaning and caring for the children. One of the things I really advocate for now is that the work of a nanny is really to provide those rich educational and life experiences for the child. I tell parents, if you hire me, know that I'm focused on your child—I'm not going to be doing your dishes. I'll clean up after myself and after your child, but I'm not your housecleaner—I want to focus on your child. So I'm very clear with them in the beginning about that and I think that has helped me a lot in the past, to work with folks that are okay with that. But not many nannies are able to find that, and because they may have come from a country where they did everything in a home, they end up doing the cooking or cleaning once or twice in a nannying job here and then it becomes the expectation. It is challenging and I think people definitely do take advantage of immigrant workers, especially because there's always the sense that, well, you're not from here. It's definitely a fear that I had in the past. Even though you try to do everything by the books, it's almost like it's not really your territory, and you want to be nice and stay out of trouble just to minimize anything that can backfire on you.

Q: When you've had the opportunity to speak at the statehouse on behalf of domestic workers, how did that feel to you, and did you feel like you had an impact on the lawmakers there?

TO: When I learned about domestic workers and farmworkers being excluded from labor rights in the U.S., I thought it was ridiculous. I realized that this is not just about immigrant workers—this is just an issue, *period*. We nannies are caring for people's children who are so precious to them, and farmworkers are working hard

cropping those organic foods that Boston loves so much—so really, why do we have to fight so hard for this? I'm really glad there are groups like Matahari so we can advocate for our rights, but the point is that we really shouldn't have to. I can't believe that this is still up for debate when we are caring for people's own children.

It felt good to be able to speak to lawmakers about these issues. My dad was a city councilor back in Brazil, and the funny thing is that I hated politics for most of my life because he was a politician for 16 years, four terms, and those were basically the years that I grew up. And now here I am, years later, and I realize I'm doing exactly what my dad did. So when I was in Boston participating in advocacy, I was like, wow, I guess this is what I was prepared for by my dad in my early life. I felt like I was making my dad proud, and I see now that there are causes that you have to stand up for. I always say, no act of activism is small. It makes a real impact.

Q: What advice do you have for other domestic workers about empowerment and organizing together?

AC: Look for support from organizations that are there to help us and help others get involved in the organization. Participate in activities that the community offers to help support us in our work. It's also important to know that there are other types of organizations out there that want to help us too, but they may not be able to reach us. So we need to go to them and ask, "Will you help me fight for my rights?" It never hurts to ask. I think the principal thing for workers to do is to lose their fear of asking for help if they're in a bad situation.

The greatest strength is to be able to explain things to other people and reach out to them. If you have a community of 100 nannies, perhaps 20 of them are being abused, but we don't know about it. You have to learn how to ask if they need help. We all learn how to read the physical signs of those around us and analyze them. We can tell if a person doesn't have a good job, because they don't look right. So it's important for us not to be afraid to say to that person, "Hey, are you okay in your job? Is something happening to you that isn't right? You can turn to Matahari for help in establishing a contract for you that will protect your value as an employee and ensure that you're respected."

Q: What are you most proud of that you've accomplished through your collective action with other workers?

TO: There's nothing more rewarding than seeing these nannies coming together and learning about their rights and speaking up, and learning that they are professionals. Because when you present yourself as a professional, it lifts up everybody else. So that's the piece I really like working on—trying to get them to see the value of the work they provide, knowing how to articulate that to parents and other nannies because that's how we lift our industry up and get the standards up.

JB: I'm really fortunate to work with hundreds of amazing women. They are really at the center of everything we do, and in most situations they have full-time jobs, they have partners and kids, and they are involved in their church or their kids' school, and yet they are also making time for this effort. I think a common theme among our members is that they've been in a place that was challenging when they first got to this country or

when they first entered domestic work, and are now really committed to changing that for current and future domestic workers, and I think that's very inspiring.

AC: I feel proud that I've helped to give voice to other people I know who weren't sure enough of themselves yet to do so. There are always new people who join us, and thankfully we all talk and I say, "Look, this is what we're trying to do for you. You're going to be able to get certified, and you'll be able to ask for a higher wage. You'll be able to negotiate your contract more easily." The power to help others improve their work situation makes me feel really proud. If Matahari hadn't spoken about the importance of domestic workers having a bill of rights, nothing would have gotten started. And then if there hadn't been a lot of worker leaders who banded together and said "Let's fight for our rights, let's go speak at the state house and fight so that this bill passes," it wouldn't have passed. I am proud that I can help other workers understand that the more education you have, the more you're worth, and the more involved you are in your education and your community, the more others will be able to recognize your worth.

"Many of the folks who choose to lead campaigns to change something feel that it's something they can afford to do, and often they do it because they feel more strongly that their coworkers deserve this rather than themselves. Some workers might have more internal political capital and feel they can take on that risk."

Jess Kutch is the co-founder and co-executive director of Coworker.org, anchoring the organization's technology development and worker support. Coworker.org is an online platform that allows workers to launch campaigns to address workplace concerns or conditions and to network and communicate with their peers. This interview was conducted on January 16, 2018, and has been lightly edited.

Q: Why did you decide to start Coworker.org?

A: In 2012, when we began working on this, there was not yet digital infrastructure for people to advocate for change in the workplace. People were leveraging popular technology and social media to find their coworkers (for example, rideshare drivers creating their own city-specific Facebook groups) and push for solutions (workers at a New England grocery store chain, for instance, staged one of the biggest strikes in years and won—and it was organized entirely via social media), but these flashes of activity ultimately fizzled without infrastructure to sustain them. At the same time, the nature of work is rapidly changing. Technology is playing an increasingly major role in our work—from scheduling algorithms to surveillance tools and gig platforms. The workforce is increasingly contingent and fissured, and it's often not clear who can address a worker's concern or grievance. Amidst all this change, there is an enormous opportunity to harness the power of data and technology to address these challenges. We created Coworker.org as a laboratory for working people to advance ideas, build networks of supporters and collaborators, and affect change in their companies and industries.

Q: How does the site work?

A: We launched our first product, a custom workplace-petition tool, in 2013. Workers from a variety of sectors have used that campaign's tool to advocate for solutions on a variety of topics, from raising wages and improving scheduling practices to updating dress code policies and addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. As you can imagine, much of what's occurring in popular culture also influences the kind of campaigns that are emerging on the platform. But our petition tool is just the beginning—we've helped workers build massive peer networks inside certain companies and sectors, and that's opening the door for additional tools and interventions.

Q: Could you share a few specific campaign examples? Who started them, why, and what was the outcome?

A: One of our earliest campaigns was launched by a Starbucks barista in Atlanta named Kristie Williams. She is a single parent and was frustrated by her company's ban on visible tattoos, and grew angry and activated after the air conditioning broke in her store but she was still required to wear long-sleeved shirts to work per her employer's workplace tattoo policy to cover a tattoo of her daughter's name on her arm. Kristie decided to launch a petition on Coworker.org. She recruited more than 10,000 coworkers around the world. She generated media attention in *USA Today* and other media outlets, and within about six-to-eight weeks, Starbucks announced they were ending the ban on visible tattoos.

A group of REI employees who originally found each other on Facebook also decided to launch a campaign on Coworker.org, and they actually were able to surface some key employees in Seattle, where REI is headquartered, through their petition. And that turned into getting a Seattle City Council member's support for their campaign, having a press conference demanding changes around better scheduling which they ultimately won, as well as a pay increase, which they won nationwide the summer before that.

Another example is Alia Todd, who was a bartender at a Southern restaurant chain called Tupelo Honey and ran a campaign asking for the wages of support staff—bussers and back-of-the house people—to be increased. They were receiving the tipped minimum wage and she made the case that they should be receiving the standard minimum wage. After receiving local media coverage, recruiting the support of coworkers from other Tupelo locations across the South, and even having customers come into the restaurant and start talking with her about the petition without knowing she was the creator, the company announced that they were going to increase wages for support staff in the company.

Q: What else can workers use the site or your other resources for?

A: We also help workers conduct pulse polls and surveys of their coworkers, often in the context of an existing campaign that they're running. This can be helpful to demonstrate that there's something happening that's more systemic rather than an isolated incident, and to contextualize their experiences against data from workers in other locations. We were able to help Starbucks baristas survey one another around the country a

couple of years ago when the company announced that it had ended clopenings—which is when employees are scheduled to both close the store and then open it the next day, leaving very limited time to sleep. The CEO at the time said the company had done away with the practice, but a worker on Coworker.org said she was actually still experiencing it. The problem was that she had no way of knowing if it was just her manager going rogue or if it was in fact a bigger problem throughout the company. In partnership with the Center for Popular Democracy, we surveyed workers across the country and collected data points from more than 100 different Starbucks locations to be able to demonstrate that this was in fact a systemic problem. After that data was released in a *New York Times* story, the company immediately responded and said that they were looking into it. We learned later there was a loophole in their scheduling software that they weren't even aware of. Data can be a powerful tool for improving working conditions and we're continuing to explore how it can be used by workers to advocate for solutions on the job.

Q: How does Coworker.org differ from the kind of resources workers might have access to through a traditional union or workplace group?

A: Well, first we have to acknowledge that 93 percent of private-sector workers in the United States don't have union representation, so just in terms of the market for another option, it's pretty significant. We're helping workers build global networks of peers inside certain companies and industries, which enable workers to quickly find supporters and begin collaborating with one another on solutions. Coworker.org provides behind-the-scenes strategic support and training for workers, and we look for ways to scale that support through technology. An example of that is with outreach to the media, where we'll help people in drafting press advisories or connecting to interested reporters. As you can imagine, most people don't know how to pitch a story or easily contact all the reporters covering their industry's beat.

Q: Do you have any sense of who supports and signs the petitions on Coworker.org?

A: One of the things that's been most interesting is that we've seen a lot of managers joining campaigns, including shift supervisors and store managers who are in many instances not protected under the National Labor Relations Act but are often under the same pressures as the workers they supervise. We've been surprised by that, but it definitely seems like a trend at this point, especially in the retail and restaurant industries.

Q: How does Coworker.org differ from social media outlets for airing concerns, such as Facebook and Slack?

A: We're building digital infrastructure for the purpose of advancing solutions in the workplace, so we think of the social media outlets you mentioned as tools people can use to advocate for change. In the tech industry, many workers use tools like Slack and Signal to communicate, share information, and build community. We've experimented with conducting office hours on Slack, where anyone in the industry can join the conversation and ask questions of a labor-law expert, for example. So that's one of the ways that we're looking at spaces like Slack—how can we use this tool and how can workers use this tool to affect change. Reddit is another

space that we see workers using to share information. We sit alongside all of these tools and would never discourage someone from using them to share information.

Q: Are there particular types of workers for whom Coworker.org is especially useful, or possibly one of their only options to organize around a workplace concern?

A: For people working in fissured workplaces or in sectors with highly distributed workforces, finding a community of coworkers who validate your experience and support your ideas can be particularly powerful. In the retail sector and service sectors, for example, corporate feels very far away from the individuals who work in the stores and have to confront the policies of the corporate office every day. Those workers have few opportunities to dialogue with one another across any distance and location or speak directly with the company's decisionmakers. Workers also find value in Coworker.org as an independent channel to express concerns and solutions and ask for help, rather than a tool or employee engagement platform that's managed internally by their employer.

Q: What happens if one worker at a company starts a petition around an issue of concern to them but other workers at the company disagree or react negatively to the effort? Can people get fired for starting a petition?

A: When workers speak out and jointly advocate for solutions in their workplaces, that's good for everyone. The National Labor Relations Act actually protects the rights of workers to join together and take action to improve their workplaces—and that includes petitioning your employer, speaking to the media, and talking to coworkers about the issue on Facebook. Now, there's an argument to be made that these protections should be strengthened and expanded, but even as the law is written today, it would be unlawful for an employer to retaliate against any worker covered under the NLRA for petitioning to improve their wages or working conditions.

Most people are not naïve, and they understand that petitioning their employer may expose them to unwelcome attention on the job. Many of the folks who choose to lead campaigns feel that it's something they can afford to do, and often they do it because they are motivated to help their coworkers, not themselves. Some workers might have more internal political capital and feel they can take on that risk. Others know that they're going to be moving on from that job at some point so they don't feel as vulnerable.

Q: Why do you think a campaign-oriented platform is an important resource at this time, in light of changes in work, workplaces, and workers' access to protections?

A: The World Health Organization tells us that most people will spend a third of their adult lives at work. So solutions for improving the workplace I think are of primary importance and have to do with human happiness and human wellbeing. The infrastructure that has supported good working conditions and health and safety in the workplace for years is in decline, not just in the United States but around the world. So whether it be labor institutions, labor and employment law, or regulatory bodies, most of these mechanisms were designed and

built for a heavily centralized, industrial economy. And as work has shifted from the large factory floor to this fissured workplace with increasingly complex supply chains, and now we're seeing an emergence of platform-based work—managers who are actually algorithms—the solutions that were actually so successful over the past hundred years in limiting income inequality and increasing standards in the workplace are no longer sufficient. Now is the time to experiment with new kinds of interventions and solutions, and we consider Coworker.org to be one of those experiments.

"Because we're such a people-centric organization, because we show one another a high level of respect and have a sincere commitment to teamwork and inclusion, I think that a lot of people who come here from a different environment are relieved. I think they are excited to know that their voice is going to be heard and that they have different outlets to actively participate in growing and building an organization. Nobody behaves in a vacuum here." – Jessica Kinsey

CIRTRONICS CORPORATION is a New England-area contract manufacturer with deep experience and broad expertise in manufacturing complex products with rigorous quality requirements, in markets ranging from medical, military, and robotics.

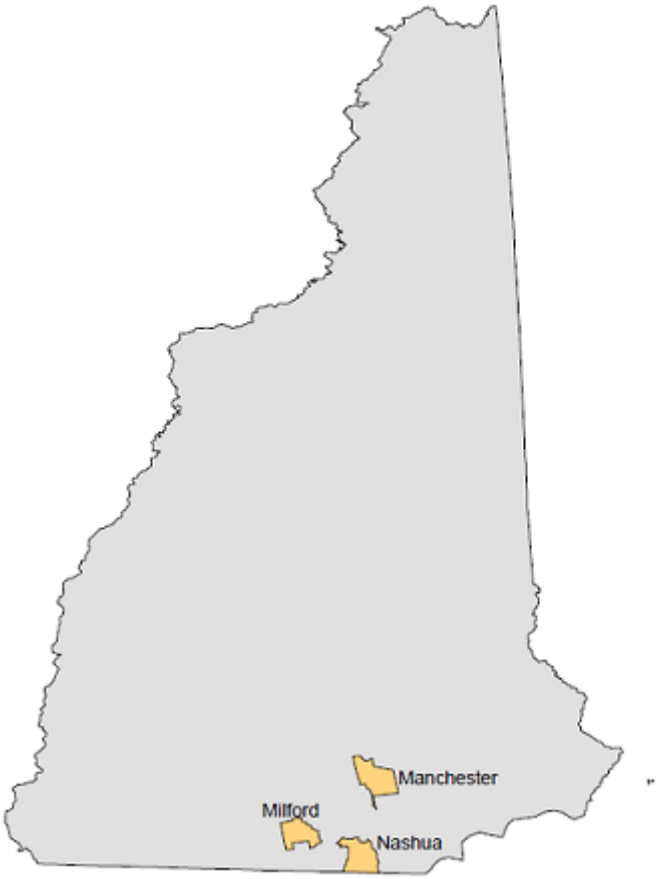
Gerardine Ferlins is the founder and President/CEO, **Jim McCall** is the director of manufacturing, **Jessica Kinsey** is the career development manager, **Linda Latour** is the group leader for the box-build team, **Derek Gallant** is the second-shift group leader, **Linda York** is a methods engineering specialist, and **Silas Wheeler** is an IT business analyst. These interviews were conducted on January 30, 2018, and have been lightly edited.

Q: Was Cirtronics always so focused on a culture of collaboration and empowerment? How did the company start?

GERARDINE FERLINS: I went into social work and decided, after about a year and a half of social work, that in order to improve people's dignity and give them a sense of worth and contribution, the best thing I could do was to help find jobs for people. I was then blessed to have an opportunity to learn about and work in the manufacturing industry when Bob McCray, the president of Worcester Controls, took me on. After he sold his company to a British conglomerate, I was given the opportunity to start Cirtronics in 1979, which gave me a vehicle to give people jobs. I did not have a strong business or technical background. What I did know very well, though, was how to enjoy and bring the best out of people.

Q: Cirtronics has a unique philosophy and corporate culture for a manufacturing company in particular. How does that play out in the workplace, and what distinguishes the company from other places you've worked?

NEW HAMPSHIRE



JESSICA KINSEY: All of the decisions we make at Cirtronics are motivated by how that decision will affect one or more of those we call "the six we serve," including the community, the environment, the supplier, the corporation, the employee owner, and the customer.

JIM MCCALL: Our work perspective here from a manufacturing standpoint is unique, and we've become known for our culture. In my position, I take prospective customers for tours of our facility, and we've also had many study groups that want to come and visit our facility to see how we operate, how we use lean practices in our work, and how we behave in the workplace. For several years, another individual and I supported a Southern New Hampshire University masters-level class, and every semester the professor brought his class here for a day to observe. It was interesting because a lot of the students were women from other countries

and they hadn't seen a corporate culture where not only men but also a lot of women are in leadership positions and where everyone is working collaboratively, rather than a "do as I say" hierarchical atmosphere.

SILAS WHEELER: I think it's very different from other contract manufacturers in the industry. You're not going to find the open-book management we have here at any publicly held companies. It's also unusual in this industry to be an employee-owned company where everybody that works at the company has a piece of it and is a part of the company ownership, so I think that really makes a big difference.

DEREK GALLANT: Cirtronics is different because everyone respects and trusts each other. The way management treats their employees is very different from other companies. They see you as an equal, rather than just a part of the company.

LINDA YORK: I think it's the communication factor that makes our company special. Everything is always communicated clearly—what we're doing in the company, who our new customers are, where we stand financially, and things like that. Everything is right out front. If you want to know something, you can just ask somebody. We have meetings every month where our executive management tells us what our progress has been, talks about where we're going, and gives us updates on customers.

GF: What makes Cirtronics special is each and every individual person who understands that we are stronger when we work together. A person who comes in with the mentality that he is just in it for himself is not going to be successful in this environment. This environment needs people who want to serve each other knowing, fundamentally, that when you do that, the whole is successful.

JK: For many years behind the scenes at Cirtronics, Gerardine was looking at how she could build a system around cultural assurance, to ensure that the heart of the organization remained intact for many years to come and create a mechanism that really helps people grow. They offered me the very first career development manager position at Cirtronics, and I began building the foundation of the learning center here. Part of my role deals with cultural assurance—ensuring that the organization consistently acts with mindfulness toward inclusion and transparency, practicing our core values like honesty and respect for the individual, and thinking about how we are fulfilling our mission to serve and continuously improve under our DUO philosophy. DUO stands for "do unto others," which is just a good human practice, right? Treat people the way you want to be treated. Give people the respect that you expect to receive in return. And for us in our environment, that simple philosophy really has far-reaching impact.

SW: To me Cirtronics is different from other environments because everything's very transparent. Whenever there's something happening, good or bad, you always know. You're always informed of the direction that the ship is heading in. Gerardine is a very good communicator. I also think the DUO philosophy we have in the company is a key difference. Here, we are very much about people taking care of people, including taking care of people who are not necessarily within the company. We really strive to serve our environment, our community, our customers, and our suppliers.

JM: In this entire company, there are maybe four offices that have doors that can close, and half of those are in human resources. Otherwise, we have an open-door policy at Cirtronics. We encourage communication. When we do our monthly company meetings, we introduce every single employee at every level in this organization. We want everybody to understand who's here, what they're here for, who they are, and get to know them.

Q: How does Cirtronics's culture impact how you consider job candidates and hire new employees?

JM: We look to bring in people who like and will fit into this type of culture. We work hard at interviewing people in that respect. It's just as important for a candidate here to have a skill set to offer but also have that company cultural match that's so important to the way we work here. I would tell you that if I found an individual that had 100 percent of the technical skills I was looking for but didn't have the culture fit or the personality, I know right away that they're not going to make it here even with all those technical skills. It's almost easier to find someone who you can develop in their job here, who can take on those skills but already has the right personality that's going to work in a collaborative environment.

JK: in the interview process it's much more focused on behavioral questions because what we're looking for are key characteristics and behaviors—for people whose core personal values align with our corporate values. Our belief is that we can teach you the skills that you need here to be successful. We have amazing people here who are going to lead and guide people through growing those skill sets—but you can't change the core elements of a person.

Because we're such a people-centric organization, because we show one another a high level of respect and have a sincere commitment to teamwork and inclusion, I think that a lot of people who come here from a different environment are relieved. I think they are excited to know that their voice is going to be heard and that they have different outlets to actively participate in growing and building an organization. Nobody behaves in a vacuum here. This is a very collaborative, team-based environment, and it's not for everybody. But I think we do a good job in recruiting people who will respond very positively here.

Q: In what ways do Cirtronics team members have the opportunity to try different roles and learn new skills in the company? Why is that empowerment important to employees and to the company as a whole?

JM: This company evolves around who each person is as an individual. I look at everybody who comes into Cirtronics as a puzzle piece. You're not coming in to fit into some generic square. You're coming in to find out how you're going to form your piece of the puzzle here and—although you may have a set role that we bring you in at—how you're going to apply the skills that we may find you have that you didn't even know about. So what we try to do is find those hidden gems, those other hidden skill sets in people, and if there's an opportunity to do so here, we want to grow them and nourish them. You'll always have your core responsibility, but you'll have all these other outlets that I believe help to sustain people and keep them satisfied in their jobs. We also encourage cross-training. We have a large program here where people are compensated based on their skills—so the more skills you develop, the more opportunities you have to

support different areas in the organization, and we're going to compensate you at the highest skill set you have.

DG: I started out at Cirtronics as a wash operator, and I moved into group leadership, and the opportunity to grow in that way in the company has been amazing. I've done a lot of cross-training, doing different jobs within our company, and that has allowed me to learn a wider range of the skills we use here as well as to grow personally.

LINDA LATOUR: We have job postings within the building that are right by the time clock so everyone is aware when something becomes available. I myself started as an inventory specialist—also called a kit puller—and worked my way to group leader for the inventory department, and then to group leadership. Our manufacturing facilitator had a similar path as me. I think it is definitely important to Cirtronics that individuals feel that they can grow within the company. You're not going to come in and be hired as, let's say, an assembly employee and then that's what you'll be doing forever. If you do want to move up, there's plenty of opportunity to switch roles and departments. There's a lot of training that goes on to help employees build their skills and move on to other departments.

SW: I took advantage of a lot of training opportunities here. My first job at Cirtronics was working on the manufacturing floor building a product used in narcotics- and explosive-detection. I worked there for a few years before moving up through the company. I worked as a facilitator in inventory and also in the box-build area, and other facilitators took me under their wing to train me, and I was also sent out to some training courses in order to learn. I then did production planning until I finally landed in this role in IT, because in my facilitator role I had demonstrated strong computer and coding skills. I was doing a lot with Excel spreadsheets and running macros so I could do my job more efficiently, and they noticed that and said that I might be a good fit for IT. So I started getting into the IT work, writing some of the reports and learning FileMaker, and as I started to move into that role, they sent me to more and more classes and seminars in order to be able to do that. The company also offers tuition reimbursement, so I was able to make use of that to take some computer-security classes as well.

LY: When I first started here 23 years ago, I was a solderer and an inspector for about two years and then they had an opening in the surface-mount technology (SMT) department. Since I used to work with a microscope in a previous job, I wanted to get back into that, so I said, "Hey, can I work in SMT?" And management said sure. I worked there for a couple of years, and then the company started getting in these box-build units, which require more of a mechanical assembly. We had gotten more people in the SMT area and there was an opening in the box-build area, so I said, "Hey, I want to work there," and once again they let me switch. After a while, we had more and more jobs become available in the box-build department, so then management said they were going to need a lead person there to monitor the flow of the work and communicate with the managers. They asked me if I wanted to do it, and I became the lead person in charge of the box-build area for many years. After that time, we grew really fast, and a position came up in the methods engineering department where I am now. The work we do in methods engineering is what I've always wanted to do.

I've had a lot of roles here because I like to move around and see how everything operates. And for people who do want to move around, Cirtronics management is definitely very supportive of changing positions and going into different areas. Cross-training is huge here—that's how you develop your skills. If you want to learn to do something in another area of the company, you get a buddy who shows you what to do and how to do it and oversees what you're doing. Every day I learn something here. Even though I've been working here for a long time and I come in and do my job every day, there's always still more to learn.

JK: Part of people growing in Cirtronics is relying on them to self-identify—to raise their hands when there are opportunities given that they are interested in. Outside of our employee-owner committees, there is a wide spectrum of special projects, ad hoc committees, and special needs that we might have as an organization. People who volunteer in those capacities, who raise their hand and show interest in those capacities, obviously are taking an important step in their career growth.

There's also the identification by team leaders of people who excel in certain areas. The conversation that we have with our people is ongoing, so there's always a constant feedback loop and there are always recommendations being made, whether it's to HR or to me or a team leader, about ways that we can do more to help an individual employee grow. That being said, we also understand that just because we see potential, it might not be the best fit for that individual. We give people the time and space to learn, and if we give them an opportunity and it doesn't feel like the right fit, then no harm, no foul, and they can return to the position or the role that they were in before. But without giving people a chance to try, we as an organization might be missing out on some really incredible skills, and that individual might feel like their skills are not being used to their full potential.

Q: In what ways does the culture at Cirtronics affect how the company addresses the needs of its employees, its customers, and the community?

JM: We provide 30 hours of paid time for any employee who is interested in volunteering in any form—it could be going to a soup kitchen, but it could also be giving blood or it could be going on your child's field trip and supporting the class on the bus, and that's still supporting the local community. So we encourage all of our employees to do that. We do lunch-and-learns every now and then, not just on technical aspects relevant to our work, but also on personal finance, to help our employees build their savings, or personal wellness topics.

JK: For our customers and our suppliers, the core of who we are as an organization and how we behave is something we expect in return from them. So it's just as important for us to produce the right product as it is for us to really build a partnership with our customers and our suppliers. So I do think that it's an important consideration when we're onboarding customers or suppliers, just as much as it is for our employees.

LL: For me, one of the most important benefits here has been the flexible work hours we are offered. Our building is open from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursdays and on Fridays 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. First-shift employees can choose to work their hours anytime between 5 a.m. and 5 p.m.

SW: We have several committees here focused on outreach and community. CCORP, our community outreach group, facilitates things like sock drives and coat drives and food drives for the soup kitchen, as well as support for resources like the Boys and Girls Club. We also have a committee that is focused on environmental issues, I've gone with them to do highway cleanups. The company has a really good policy around volunteer time to encourage us to help out the community as well, so as a full-time employee, I get 30 hours a year to do any volunteer work that I want.

Q: How does the employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) at Cirtronics impact the company's workforce and contribute to the corporate culture?

JK: We are a 40 percent employee-owned company. To become an employee owner you have to be a regular employee, and it's a six-year vesting schedule. But when you come into Cirtronics as a new employee, nobody is keeping tabs on how much of a percent you have vested in the ESOP, so everyone is an employee owner and everybody's voice is just as important as the person who's been here for 30 years. I think that the ESOP is an incredibly powerful mechanism to deepen people's commitment to the success of this organization, because employees have a vested interest in how well they perform and how much they decide to give to the organization, which they know has a direct impact on their own pocketbooks and their neighbor's.

LL: We have an ESOP committee made up of employees who are very forthcoming and let us know how things are going. The ESOP and that openness about how our company is doing have definitely influenced my decision to keep working here. It's so great that when we're having a wonderful year they do share that news and that profit with us. It's beneficial and uplifting for the employees.

SW: I was an active participant on the ESOP committee for a couple of years. I went to the ESOP conference down in Washington, DC, and it was really great to get to learn more about ESOPs and get to know how that committee works. Our ESOP committee is very good at cycling out the team members so that you have fresh team members all the time. Some core players are always there, but then you really get a cross-section of the entire company, from manufacturing to staff in different departments, male and female, to make sure you really have a diverse group making up that committee.

DG: The ESOP gives employees a chance to own part of the company and gets them more invested into their work and the quality of the product that they're building. I'm proud to be putting out a high-quality product while also getting something back in the end from the company, being part of this team.

Q: What is the role of leadership in defining and upholding the unique culture of Cirtronics?

DG: From the CEO all the way down to the most basic-level job, the communication is great. In most companies, you would never see a CEO come around on the manufacturing floor, know everyone by name, and talk with you every day like Gerardine does, and that's wonderful to me.

JM: I can tell you in some of the jobs I had before I came to Cirtronics that I've seen examples of what *not* to do as a leader. I worked for one company where there was always a line at the plant manager's door. Nobody could do anything without waiting in line and getting an answer from the manager first. It's very different here at Cirtronics. Our team approach, our collaborative approach, and our willingness to let people take small risks to grow in certain areas is definitely a very different philosophy than "don't do anything without being told specifically what to do."

To me, being a good leader means being a good listener and a good facilitator. It means that you aren't afraid to jump in and work side by side with the people you manage and that you have a mindset that there is no position or function that is any higher or lower than the rest. It's understanding the skills, talents, and abilities of the people that you're responsible for and helping them to pull those out, develop them, and grow and feel satisfied in their job. That's my responsibility.