

Section Five: Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Best Practices for Amplifying Workers' Voices in an Evolving Economy

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As we've seen in this issue of *Invested*, successful expressions of worker voice come in many forms, and what unites them is the common desire for workers to be heard and respected, and for their views to influence and be incorporated into the decisions and policies that impact their lives. Effective worker voice holds great power to fuel high-quality careers at all levels of work, companies that are both competitive and responsive to employees' needs and ideas, and policies that reflect and address workers' stories and experiences.

Times have changed, and gone are the days when unions alone served as the main representation bodies and outlets for workers' voices. Unions are evolving to adapt to the structure and interests of the modern workforce, and they are now joined by the kind of new and growing worker-voice organizations and models that we've seen in this issue. Forward-thinking businesses have also played an important role in growing the options available to employees to voice their concerns and ideas on the job, and to speak up in order to advance within the company. All of these forms of worker voice are expanding to include and respond to a working population increasingly diverse in their backgrounds and objectives, and many groups are working in concert with one another to best represent workers on central economic and social issues.

Beyond external factors such as political shifts and global competition, American unions' success and advancement going forward will likely have much to do with how flexible and responsive they are to a changed economy and work landscape in the U.S. today. Some unions are working to meet the challenge of bringing together a more dispersed workforce of gig workers, temps, and independent contractors around shared causes. The IAM Maine Lobstering Union profiled here in this issue is a highly innovative example of a new twist on the traditional union structure that brings together independent lobstermen across Maine, for example, and is backed by longstanding union weight. In addition, as growing numbers of women, people of color, and immigrants come into the American workforce, some unions are doing more outreach to engage and embrace these workers and are adapting to their needs and interests as union members. Younger workers and white-collar workers in fields such as journalism, academia, and medicine are also joining or forming unions in increasing numbers.

Meanwhile, alternative methods of organizing and lifting worker voice have emerged outside of unions in the United States for multiple reasons. As discussed by Palak Shah, Ana Cipoletta, Julia Beebe, and Thaty Oliveira in this issue, domestic workers were excluded from NLRA protections from the beginning, preventing them from forming unions, but they have joined forces through a national alliance and a network of affiliate worker centers around the country, winning important victories for those working in American homes. And as Lindsay McCluskey explained, some workers and organizers have embraced a coalition strategy that aligns community and worker interests to build influence in addition to or fully outside of traditional labor unions to tackle and speak out on larger issues of importance to a broad swath of the workforce and community. Technological

innovations like Jess Kutch's Coworker.org have also spurred creative approaches for workers to communicate with one another, network, and develop petitions and campaigns through social media, apps, and websites. These resources enable employees of global companies with workplaces around the world to find one another and organize online, with a reach far beyond that of a traditional labor union.

Businesses have also introduced engagement strategies in their own firms to help ensure workers are heard and involved in company decisions and direction, and that valuable feedback and ideas from the rank-and-file workforce are incorporated. As demonstrated by companies like Cirtronics and Cape Air, profiled in this issue, respecting and incorporating employees' views is often part of these businesses' larger philosophy of inclusion, empowerment, and commitment to the growth and wellbeing of employees. In environments like these, workers can share their thoughts and join strategy discussions through employee councils and committees, feedback loops, and open-door policies, among other opportunities, developing more efficient and effective processes and drawing creative solutions from workers who are empowered to work together and to focus on what they do best. As we heard in our conversations with staff and leadership in companies embracing these tools and methods, employees in these engaged environments are proud of what they do and where they work, they feel respected for their work, and they have a stake in the success of the company overall.

Our conversations around worker voice through the lenses of representation, empowerment, and engagement illuminated for us the great variety, influence, and power in worker voice. These are our key takeaways, culled from our engaging discussions with stakeholders across our region and beyond.

There is strength—and influence—in numbers.

In many of the stories shared here in this issue, we learned that individual workers struggling with a workplace issue may not have known that other workers had the same concerns until they joined an organization or heard about a campaign from someone else. Coming together allows workers to make up in sheer numbers what they may not have available in other resources, such as funding or media. Even for those who are represented by a union or another group that has some existing weight with a decisionmaking body, showing up as a unified, unmistakable group where policies and practices are being debated and decided upon can make a significant difference. While it can be difficult for workers to take the time off from work to stand together with their peers at a statehouse or in a demonstration—particularly for those who do not have any paid time off—their future working conditions, compensation, or contracts may depend on them being there in person to represent themselves. As several workers in this issue told us, the tradeoff is often worth it to them to have a say and show their support or opposition on a given issue that directly impacts them.

Flexibility and adaptability are crucial for organizations representing the modern worker.

As we've noted throughout this issue, the nature of work in the United States has changed dramatically in recent decades and very likely will continue to do so. More people are working in platform-based jobs, on-demand jobs, on contract, and in temporary or part-time positions. Many also work at a range of different workplaces or sites depending on the day or the job. The union representatives we interviewed in this issue made clear that this change has significantly impacted their usual approach of bringing employees of one

employer in one workplace together to bargain collectively. Today, unions, worker centers, coalitions, and other organizations uniting and representing workers have to find those workers where they are and structure their campaigns around workers' availability, schedule constraints, and locations. To be of use to the workforce of the future, organizations lifting up worker voice will need to be more flexible, adaptable, and responsive to rapid change in industries and in the economy at large than ever before.

A diverse workforce calls for equally diverse representation, leadership, and outreach methods.

The American workforce is increasingly more diverse in gender, race, ethnic background, and immigrant status. To meet their needs, worker organizations must offer a variety of entry points into a campaign or a planning committee to ensure workers are truly heard and accurately represented. This means that organizations should be prepared to make campaign and outreach materials available in multiple languages, distribute them in common gathering places or through a neighborhood leader communities already trust, and provide or help workers find childcare or other supports so that they are able to attend meetings of the group. Removing barriers to entry and collaboration allows workers from all walks of life to join the conversation. Additionally, as mentioned throughout this issue, leadership of worker organizations should at least in part resemble the workforce being organized. Those with first-hand experience of the work itself and those who are trusted representatives of a community or group can best speak to the needs and desires of the workers who are organizing.

Realize that some workers may be reluctant to join a group or campaign even if they are directly impacted by the issue at hand.

Workers may not be comfortable joining an organization or campaign or telling their stories for many reasons. They may have had a traumatic work experience, they may be concerned about retaliation, or they may simply doubt that it is worth their time and effort to come together with others around an issue. It may require extra effort, therefore, to get such workers involved, including one-on-one conversations with existing group members, confidential meetings with or access to support services, education on the issue, and/or a measure of trust built over time. For these reasons, workers who are respected members of the industry or community and those who have an understanding of what workers are dealing with may be the best people to reach out to reluctant workers. Efforts to raise worker voice, according to our interviewees, are more successful when the workers involved trust one another, have the reliable backing of the larger worker organization, really believe in the cause, and are willing to put enough time and work into the campaign.

Technology can greatly expand the reach and weight of worker voice.

Particularly for those who work for larger companies with a national or global presence, technology plays a major role in allowing workers to make their collective voices heard on an issue. Many are connecting via social media sites or through online campaigns and networking groups, allowing a worker in New England to reach out to a worker halfway around the world to discuss and compare their experiences as employees of the same business. Using such sites to promote a cause also has the added benefit of being more visible and even directly linking to major news-media outlets, getting the issue out to a much wider audience. As Jess Kutch

points out about some of the campaigns launched through Coworker.org, major businesses have been made aware of the scale of worker concerns and made changes to policies and practices because a campaign highlighted the issue for a wide audience.

Creation of or changes to policies and practices that impact workers should be undertaken in consultation with workers.

Whether a policy or practice is being debated inside a business or at the state or national level, our interviewees stress that bringing workers into the conversation from the start is important to ensure that the final result is representative of their needs and establishes workable policies and successful outcomes. If workers will be impacted by the decision, it is vital to ask workers to speak from their experience and weigh in on exactly what kinds of changes may be most valuable. In the same way, creating opportunities for workers to give feedback and for that feedback to be genuinely considered and incorporated can improve practices and lift up worker voice. When workers feel some ownership of a decision, practice, or strategy and feel that they are contributing to moving it forward, they are more likely to continue to participate enthusiastically and be proud of the final result.

Defining and acting on your philosophy around employee engagement is a key element of becoming an employer of choice.

The forward-thinking companies mentioned in this issue and many more like them across the country have made listening to and valuing the views of their employees a central part of their operating philosophy. They put employees' wellbeing, success, growth, and visions for the future of the organization at the core of their decisionmaking. The business leaders we spoke with for this issue emphasize that they believe leadership should serve the workforce, that workers have the knowledge and skills to identify solutions and improve processes day to day and should feel empowered to do so, and that the success and advancement of their businesses depends on their workers' commitment to the company and its practices. These businesses note that many employees stay with the company for many years not solely because of their compensation or the work they do in their particular jobs, but even more so because the work environment is responsive to and respectful of their views. Several of the workers we spoke with stressed that seeing leadership talking with employees, taking note of their potential, and extending growth opportunities to them within the company made a big difference in their opinion of their workplace and their interest in becoming more involved with the company. A CEO or president knowing employees by name and genuinely interacting with staff on a daily basis can mean a lot to workers and demonstrate that leaders not only can articulate their working philosophy but can and will also act upon it.

Explore how and in what form employee ownership could benefit both your workforce and your company.

As our interviewees noted, employee ownership is not for every company. But for those business owners and leaders who want to share success with their workforce and leave their company in good hands when they retire, employee ownership is a good way to build on an existing employee-centric workplace philosophy. Employee ownership encourages workers to participate in company decisionmaking and outreach, because

employees own a piece of the pie and have a stake in where the company is going. And as Douglas Kruse explained, employee ownership can also reap rewards for the business in terms of greater company stability, lower turnover, and reputation for good practices around employee engagement.

Speak up about strengths in the workplace and advocate for advancement within your team.

Workers who know their strengths and see opportunities to rise in their company may be more likely to jump on opportunities to change roles or take on new responsibilities, making them well-rounded and building their sense of ownership and engagement with their work. Managers, career development staff, and even coworkers can encourage this kind of cross-training and advancement by identifying and understanding their team members' strengths, assigning them to projects that align with those strengths and their interests, and reporting up to leadership that someone may be a great fit for a new or different role in the company. Workers we spoke with in this issue made it clear that they place great value on being engaged and invested in their work and their company, and want to be celebrated and depended upon for their individual talents and contributions.

Create opportunities for all staff to be meaningfully involved in shaping the strategic direction and growth of the company.

Whether a company is employee-owned or not, an important approach to improving engagement among workers and between employees and employers is to provide a way for all staff members to be part of the conversation about the present and future operations of the company. Doing so is not merely a "feel-good" gesture for a company's workforce; rather, it is a key opportunity to inform company strategy with the valuable viewpoints of those doing the work every day in different roles across the company. There are many ways to bring workers to the table, including joint employee-management committees, business improvement projects, feedback channels, and reach assignments. Businesses' success depends as much on their rank-and-file workers' daily contributions as it does on leadership's decisions, and those workers are in the best position to know where small changes can make big differences and improve or guide company strategy. Their voices should matter to those shaping a company's future direction and growth.

We hope the insights in this issue of *Invested* will spark productive dialogues around worker representation, empowerment, and engagement, and that they will also help to inform policy efforts around worker voice. Please continue the conversation with us by [sharing your feedback](#) on this issue. We look forward to hearing from you.

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