

Community Building for Collective Power

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Abstract

In spring of 2020, as the coronavirus spread across the world and governments dithered over what to do, I began talking with my co-workers about unionising our office. We work as journalists at a New York-based media company, and the last time we faced a major global crisis, executives throughout our industry fired a record number of people to keep profits up. I believed they would likely do the same this time around (they did) and that we would be better protected if we organised.

Workers in the United States enjoy few protections. In most cases, we can be fired at will, which is a frightening prospect sharpened further by the fact that our ticket to modern medicine is usually through employer-provided health insurance. Practically speaking, if you lose your job in the allegedly freest country in the world, you lose your doctor. A frightening prospect in a pandemic.

I wanted to understand whether anyone else believed, as I did, that if we consolidated our individual power, we would better withstand the economic fallout of Covid-19. Through collective bargaining, we could potentially prevent mass layoffs, or at least codify stipulations for severance, and resolve the issues we'd faced at work prior to the pandemic, too.

What follows describes and reflects on the process I took with my co-workers to unionise our office, which I believe serves as an example of how community building intersects with trade unionisation, because both rely on one-to-one relationships between individuals. My hope is that it contributes to the demystification of the unionisation process and offers one potential starting point for others who want to unionise their workplaces. I believe that's an urgent need for our modern era, in which a new billionaire is minted more frequently than daily, while the rest of us get scraps.

Introduction

I approached this project as a type of community engagement, with the explicit goal of unionising workers at my U.S.-based office for the purpose of collectively bargaining a contract for better pay, benefits, and working conditions. This paper will discuss and reflect on the first part of the engagement, which was gauging and gathering support from my target community, winning recognition from management, and obtaining union certification from the U.S. government, all of which has been completed.

I'll then outline a plan for the second part of the engagement, which is now underway. It will involve electing union leaders, researching what the target community wants in a contract, negotiating with management for those terms, and planning for collective actions if management responds unfavourably. Lastly, I'll explore how the community can handle conflicts and power struggles, and sustain a sense of cohesion after a contract is in place.

At the heart of the project is a struggle for power over workers' material conditions, making it a site to explore the practical application of a range of social justice theories. I found myself reflecting on Fraser's (1997, 2009) redistribution and dilemmas of justice and Walzer's (1983) warning that distributive justice is not synonymous with unity; with Marx's (1848/2004) call for communion among workers and Harvey's (2010) caveat that such a goal is impossible without addressing the hostilities and divisions between different types of workers.

I believe it is useful to consider my outreach as a form of emancipatory research because it aimed to use a democratic approach to bring people together to share and examine individual lived experiences with a goal of improving life for everyone in the community (Ledwith, 2007). Thus, acknowledging that there are many truths about a situation made room for people who have had a positive experience at work to share that fact, and for those who have had a negative one to ask for their solidarity – without the corrosive resentment or guilt that can come with the predetermination that one group is right and the other is wrong. My community is primarily based in

New York; I am the only employee temporarily based in the U.K. It includes about 40 people, who range in age from early 20s to near retirement and are divided roughly in half between people who identify as men and those who identify as women. The group is majority white – only 12 people identify as people of colour. This range of identities gives rise to power imbalances, particularly in terms of race, and the engagement brought into sharp relief that the worst conditions of the office impact my colleagues of colour the most. On a small scale, this project offers an example of an actor-oriented approach to governance, in which ‘those affected by social policies act as citizens on their own behalf’ (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2001, p.20). Lastly, Cornwall’s (2008) point that participation can be fluid over the course of an engagement effort is helpful for examining how and to what degree people participated at each stage of the process.

Initial outreach

I began the engagement at the start of the pandemic, after executives announced they would reduce workers’ salaries to maintain profitability, but admitted that their own bonuses would remain intact. Against this backdrop, I knew that some members of my community had experienced discrimination and harassment, were paid less for the same work than their white or male counterparts, had been targeted for speaking up about poor treatment, and had been failed by existing channels to deal with these problems. I also knew some employees were concerned about the media industry’s ongoing consolidation (Light, 2017), especially the interest from private equity firms, which often generate profit by firing workers (Littleton, 2020). Finally, I knew that we were all subject to two serious threats to a unionisation effort: New York State’s at-will employment law, which allows an employer to fire workers at any time for any reason without warning (Martin v. N.Y. Life Ins. Co., 1895), and U.S. Federal laws allowing employers to take steps to prevent employees from unionising (Taft-Hartley, 1947).

I didn’t know my co-workers’ thoughts about whether a union would help us resolve or protect against any of these problems, or whether they’d be willing to take the risk

of forming one. The first part of my engagement was to explore that question in order to co-construct this knowledge (Horner, 2016). I did this by talking first with a handful of people I trusted over email, social media direct messages, telephone, and videoconferences, and asking them to talk to people they trusted, and so on. This method of outreach was conducted one-to-one, and generated an initial set of qualitative data necessary to understand whether this project could proceed (Horner, 2016, p. 25). It's important to pause here to note that the pandemic may have made outreach easier because we were all working from home, and inviting people to join me for a "virtual coffee" may have come across as a less onerous request than if we were working together in-person. In that situation, we would have had to meet before or after work, which may have been difficult for people with outside obligations. Or, we would have had to leave the office to discuss unionising elsewhere, which might have seemed conspicuous, given that we work in an open-office layout and everyone would have seen us leaving together. Both of those scenarios could have been a barrier for participation. Online outreach may have been more discrete, and made a smaller demand on peoples' time.

Nine people who were strongly committed to the idea of unionisation agreed to form an organising committee with me, and together we determined that there was majority support. I then contacted a writers' union representative who a friend of mine had recommended and asked if we could organise with them. This action was an undemocratic decision and if I conducted similar outreach again, I would share with the group that there are two major unions for writers in the United States, instead of making a suggestion first. That way we could discuss the merits of each one as peers, where everyone's knowledge is treated equally (Freire, 1976), and which would have better squared with the practice of emancipatory research (Ledwith, 2007). Because I was the instigator, my suggestion may not have seemed like it was up for debate. However, I would not suggest we bring the question to the entire office, because speed is important at this stage, and the longer the outreach takes, the likelier it is that management will find out and take such Federally protected action as forcing workers to sit through anti-union meetings (Taft-Hartley, 1947). That kind of action can have a devastating effect on a union drive, as demonstrated recently when Amazon used

captive meetings as one of their ways of crushing a union at an Alabama warehouse (McAlevy, 2021). Additionally, I do not think it would have been reasonable to ask people if they wanted a union, and then ask, ‘Well, which one?’ Doing so strikes me as an unfair question along the lines of hiding behind the idea of ‘empowerment’, in which the offer of help is really a requirement that the target group fix the problem themselves (Lister, 2002; Smith-Carrier and Lawlor, 2017).

This difference in decision-making power illustrates that the ten members of the organising committee were participating in the project in a self-mobilised capacity under Pretty’s (1995) methodology of determining level of engagement, while the rest of the office participated in capacities that spanned from interactive to passive. In relation to company executives, the committee and our co-workers are on the same side, working together towards a transformative interest (White, 1996). But in terms of the community of workers, there is a power differential I think is important to acknowledge, because in my view it indicates a requirement to be flexible and reflexive in order to encourage the engagement of all community members.

Sharing knowledge

Our next step was to hold a virtual town hall meeting, so everyone could share their experiences with each other and ask questions of the union representatives. This was a visibly galvanizing part of the process, especially for people who had been worried about showing public support.

The watershed moment at this meeting came during the section we had set aside for a discussion about working conditions. We had anticipated that people would hesitate to speak, so designated one person on the organising committee to break the ice by sharing her story, an example of the value of qualitative data (Horner, 2016). She described the sexism and racism she had experienced at work, and the failure of her manager and human resources to address the problem when she asked for help. When she finished, it was silent for several seconds, so I wrote in the chat function that I was sorry that had happened to her, and that she deserved better. Almost immediately, other people chimed in with similar support, and others raised their hands to talk. I

thought that was a beautiful moment because it was an instance when speaking up can help others do the same, and modelling support can help set the tone for what people could expect if they did so. I also believe that we may have legitimised that supporting someone else is reason enough to support a collective action (Oxfam, 2012). It seems that value resonated with one person, an older white man whose division is composed of older white men. He initially did not support the union because he himself had not experienced any issues at work. After the town hall, however, he emailed to say he had changed his mind and decided that he ‘couldn’t simply lend support to colleagues with legitimate demands at a distance – as a mere spectator.’ He continued, writing:

The more I think about it, the more the union makes sense. If employee grievances aren’t being adequately addressed through regular channels, then another mechanism is needed for the purpose. Only then can we (management included) secure the end-goals we all want: a motivated workforce, low employee turnover, competitive pay that attracts and rewards top-notch journalists.

Going public and collective action

Following the meeting, journalists signed union cards, as well as a letter asking management to recognise us voluntarily instead of invoking their Federal right to force a government-run election (Taft-Hartley, 1947), which is another union-busting right U.S. law grants employers (Kullgren, 2021). Organising committee members also told our own line managers, because hearing it from us, rather than management, helped us to control the narrative about why we were unionising and gave us an opportunity to extend a gesture of goodwill that could potentially help build a sense of solidarity, even though managers are not covered in union contracts under U.S. law (Taft-Hartley, 1947). For example, when my boss jokingly asked, ‘Does that make me “The Man”, now?’, I had the opportunity to say that union contracts typically raise wages for all workers at a worksite (Rhinehart and McNicolas, 2020) and that I hoped he would be an ally to us. Though he is not covered by the union, offering moral

support is still a participatory act, which in my view illustrates that the parameters of the community can expand as additional people engage with the core group.

In a future effort, I would extend this outreach to departments within the company. Employees in the marketing and technology departments, for example, did not have a voice in this process, though they face some of the same issues journalists do. It strikes me now that Harvey's (2010) call to build solidarity between different types of workers could be applied to a single worksite, and I wish we had thought of that at the time, because not doing so has opened the door to feelings of resentment and exclusion. Still, I believe there may be another chance to build that kind of inter-departmental solidarity once our contract is certified. We can show what the company was willing to give as a result of collective bargaining, and offer to help them form their own unions, which some of us have started mentioning casually now.

Management tried to stop the union by stalling and by shrinking the number of people who could be covered by a union contract. At one point, for example, they said they would recognise the union as long as I wasn't in it. Because we had already established strong support and communication, organising committee members were able to arrange a series of collective actions by speaking with people one-on-one to again ensure the majority would participate. These collective actions began small, with everyone changing their online avatars to the union logo, and grew increasingly disruptive with coordinated meeting interruptions and public statements. While none carried the risk of physical harm faced by people who conduct collective action against state actors, they still came with considerable risk to participants, including being fired. This consequence is always grave in the United States, where private health insurance is prohibitively expensive, making access to health care dependent on whether one has employer-sponsored health insurance. In other words, if you lose your job, you lose your health insurance. That is an especially serious threat now, given that the actions took place during a pandemic. In that sense, there is some kinship between our collective action and the collective action against state enforcement of discipline through a combination of force and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). The escalation of our collective actions hinted at the possibility that we would

walk off the job, or even go on strike. After the third escalation, management voluntarily recognised our union and we are now certified by the U.S. government.

Redistributing power from organising committee to the rest of the community

The organising committee was a group of self-appointed individuals, which had a utility for forming the union. But it's not ideal from a democratic standpoint, so we are now going to elect bargaining committee members, who will represent the community in negotiating for a contract. To do this, we held a second town hall meeting, at which a union representative described what the bargaining process would include and members from other companies described their experiences unionising. We also discussed and decided on a size and structure for the committee, and sent out a nomination form to elect members, which lists every member in the community as a possible candidate.

A new engagement phase to determine what people want in a contract will take place once the bargaining committee is formed. The group will do that by again talking with people one-on-one, by creating and sending out a survey, and then communicating the results back to the group to make sure the first contract proposal includes everything community members want. Once the negotiations are underway, it will be the bargaining committee's job to keep dialogue open with the people they are responsible for, and it will be everyone's responsibility to make their colleagues and the committee aware of any new issues that come up.

Power struggles will inevitably arise not just between management and the bargaining committee, but within the bargaining committee itself. Because the group will be small, about 10 people, I believe it would be useful to borrow an idea from a Glasgow-based charity, where staff use a written document outlining their purpose, values, and goals, and have agreed as a group that their decisions must comport with them. This offers a pre-arranged avenue for anyone to raise an issue when they are unhappy with how someone in the group is behaving, or how the group is handling a problem or question. That person can speak about what's bothering them in relation to the goals of the group, which may make it easier because it shifts the subject from a personal

grievance to a concern about the success of the group. This is not a magic antidote to power struggles and disagreements, but I think it is one bottom-up method to conflict resolution that may be useful.

Sustaining community

Once a contract is ratified, it will be in place for three years. For that period, bargaining committee members will routinely check in with members of the union to gather information about how the contract provisions are working in practical terms and about new issues that arise. They will also work with the union attorney in instances where the contract must be enforced because management is not holding to the agreements. I think, though, that for the union to maintain its strong sense of community, it needs an ongoing purpose that looks outward, beyond securing our own comfort.

The history of the journalists' union in the U.K., the National Union of Journalists, shows one way of doing so. During the miners' strike of 1984-85, the NUJ not only campaigned for striking miners – members of a completely different industry – they also joined them on the picket line (Trounce, 2015). In a similar vein, I believe our union should identify which workers in our area need support and again hold one-on-one conversations with members of our unit to identify who would be interested in participating in actions on their behalf. Even if just a few of us participated, making a sustained effort could yield connections with people in industries we would not otherwise know, and generate solidarity across industry lines. As Mohanty (2003) points out, solidarity can draw strength from the diversity of people allied for a cause, so we could adopt the struggle of any worker as our own. Such solidarity would strengthen the labour movement in the United States in general, which Harvey (2010) argues is necessary for its success.

One of the startling effects of this outreach to me was that, despite the risk, and despite the difficult subjects we are seeking to address, several people commented to me that they found the union drive a fun and uplifting experience. It's my strong feeling that collective action, as Turkish journalist Ece Temelkuran says in her book *How to Lose*

a Country (2019), can provide a sense of community that is unavailable elsewhere in public life. And that, I believe, will help social movements like trade unionisation be more successful, and more durable, in the face of governments that have abandoned their nations' workers to the whims of bosses. I do not think it is too reductive to say that we are living through a period of us versus them, and with that in mind, I believe the complementary projects of community building and trade unionisation will strengthen and bolster everyone on our side for the fight ahead.

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