CFAR's *Papers on Power* is a series of commissioned essays for which artists, writers, activists, and cultural producers have been asked to respond to the question "What is power?" in whatever form best relates to their work and thinking.

THE FUTURE OF WORK IS COLLECTIVE ORGANIZING

PRECARIOUS PEOPLE'S PARTY

A conversation organized by Jea Alford & Ariana Jacob with Susan Cuffaro, Sean Cumming, Brian Dolber, Hannah Gioia, Anna Gray, Patricia Vázquez Gómez, Cat Hollis, Anna Neighbor, Larissa Petrucci, Emmett Schlenz, and Lise Soskolne

How will we build a future of work that works for all of us?

Most visions for the future of work come out of a corporate context, but what would we, as precarious workers and the underemployed, want the future of work to be?

If we project labor trends into the future, more and more gig work and a growing precarious economy loom as likely possibilities. Gig work is often what might have once been full time jobs broken into small pieces, which evades workers' rights to benefits and other labor law protections. These forms of work also erode the employee-employer relationship, making it more difficult to advocate for better working conditions. They make it such that we, as precarious workers, are rarely able to see ourselves in connection with one another, even in our own workplaces where the fragmentation of work creates isolated contexts, let alone across the broad range of gig-based employment sectors. The following conversation is an attempt to combat that isolation by bringing together gig workers from a variety of sectors to discuss our shared conditions.

How do we, the people living under these terms, organize and take hold of the power to shape the direction our future is moving?

How can we share strategies to build collective power across the growing body of the contingent labor force?

What political strength would it amount to if we joined forces? And what practices, strategies, understandings and actions would it take for us to be able to do so?

What would happen if we saw ourselves as a body in common, and acted politically as though we have a stake in each other's working conditions and lives? Because we do - we are the future of work.

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On December 12th, 2020, months into the Covid-19 pandemic shutdown, the Precarious People's Party facilitated a conversation among a group of thirteen people who both work and organize across a range of precarious labor conditions. This group included people in fast food and service work organizing, people organizing rideshare, delivery drivers and app-based shoppers, a sex work organizer, a representative of an unemployed workers council, and an organizer of art institutions' pay for artists. The conversation also included an abundance of adjunct faculty and artists, because those are the fields the PPP comes from, and where we began thinking about the impacts of increasing gigification. We also include unemployment in this conversation because it is an integral part of the gig economy - precarious workers are always partially unemployed, and a moment's notice from being fully unemployed. Unemployment also provides a labor base for the gig economy, and gig work frequently functions as a stand-in for a real social safety net for unemployed people.

We begin this conversation with an explanation of the context in which first we started dreaming it into existence, followed by introductions from each participant describing the fields where they work and organize. We then move into the group discussion of strategies and approaches to organizing within our fields that may be relevant for organizing across other fields, and finally we begin to imagine how we would shape the future of work, or beyond-work.

The following transcript has been edited for clarity, length and readability.

Framing the Conversation

Ariana Jacob: The Precarious People's Party is an artistic research platform that Jea and I have been developing. It comes out of both our experiences doing lots of different forms of precarious labor, and for the last five years being organizers with the Adjunct Faculty Union at Portland State University. As artists, prior to being involved in union organizing and alongside that work, we have also been making art about insecure work and underemployment, so it's been something that we've been thinking about in all these different aspects of our life. And in this particular moment, as we are in a huge unemployment crisis in our country, and are potentially moving into an even greater one, it feels especially important to have this kind of conversation.

So, having been in this context of unionization work around people who have very vulnerable jobs, one of the things that we've realized is that a lot of the problems that we have are not just problems for our particular workplace, they're actually problems that are shared across many different fields of work - and with people who are unemployed. We are dealing with shared conditions and it's incredibly important for us to be a part of a conversation around labor and organizing that connects those different areas of work, and lack of work, and that starts creating space for solidarity, starts creating space for recognizing the fact that we're actually living in an economy that is moving towards an increasingly precarious nature in general.

What can we do, as people who are directly involved in those circumstances, to envision something different?

This conversation is what we've been most wanting to do under the frame of Precarious People's Party. There is a little bit of a disconnect around why this is framed as an art project, but Jea and I both think about art as being a space for imagining possibilities and also a space where both ideas, and the way that people are affected on an emotional level by our society can be made public. And so, this framework is a way of gathering those ideas, learning from each other, and then also finding multiple ways of putting that back out into the public.

Jea Alford: Yes, thanks again to everyone for being part of this conversation with us, and for all of you attending as well.

I'm just going to give a brief overview of the structure of the conversation today, so that everyone knows where we're going. Each of us as panelists will introduce ourselves, and we hope that each of you can just say your name, pronouns, where you're Zooming in from, and then the different kinds of work and organizing that you're involved in. Then Ariana and I will facilitate discussion around a few key questions.

The three main areas of the discussion are:

What challenges are folks facing in their field of work and/or organizing and how are you supporting one another through those challenges?

How can we support one another across fields and find points of solidarity?

And, finally, what do we want the future of work to look like?

After that, we'll take questions from the audience.

Introductions

Ariana Jacob: I'm Ariana Jacob and I'm in Portland. I use she/her pronouns and I teach as adjunct faculty in the Art Department at Portland State and have been one of the key negotiators for the bargaining team of PSUFA, the adjunct faculty Union at Portland State, for the last five-ish years. And I'm also an artist and prior to being in academia, I did a lot of other part-time, vulnerable work, like working in food co-ops, at farmers markets and doing other retail service work.

Jea Alford: I'm Jea and I also use she/her pronouns and am in Portland today. I'm also a part-time instructor at Portland State University. I teach in the theater and art departments. I supplement teaching with gig work in theaters, food service, upholstery, and all sorts of odds and ends. I have worked with the part-time faculty union at PSU for about five years, where I've been the Chair of Operations and helped negotiate twice as a member of the bargaining team. Including now - we're currently in contract negotiations.

Susan Cuffaro: My name is Susan Cuffaro and I am Zooming at you from San Diego, California and I prefer she/her pronouns. It's been really interesting listening to Ariana and Jea talk about their artwork because I don't have an ounce of artistic ability in my entire body. And I guess, maybe the idea that I've always colored outside the lines, not on purpose, but because I couldn't color within them, maybe set me up pretty well for the current work that I'm doing.

I'm a founding member of the Gig Workers Collective and we are a grassroots organizing group dedicated to building worker power from the bottom up. We are working with gig workers, primarily shoppers who are with Shipt or Instacart and drivers who are delivering for GrubHub, Uber Eats, DoorDash, Postmates and the like. We're focused on trying to help each and every worker find their voice so that, ultimately, they can add that voice to the worker community as a whole and hopefully, someday, dismantle the house or obtain real transformative change so that we can manage to correct the incredible and, I think probably, unprecedented disparity of power that currently exists in the gig economy world. This disparity of power has allowed big companies to exploit, to underpay, and endanger the very lives of gig workers. And that goes across all segments of the gig economy. So, I'm very, very excited to be part of this discussion today because I think we all have something to add, from various perspectives. Thank you for having me.

Sean Cumming: Hi, my name is Sean Cumming. I use he/him pronouns. I am one of the Co-Chairs of Portland's Unemployed Workers Council. The Unemployed Workers Council started back in April, at the beginning of the pandemic and economic crisis. At the time I'd been working in fast food. Actually, my background is in education, but I couldn't get a job in that, so I'd been working as a pizza chef and I'd tried to unionize, and I got fired doing that. I got together with some people who had also lost their jobs and we were talking about the necessity for organizing unemployed people in this period of time. I was just looking at some of the stats today -1.4 million new unemployed claims this last quarter in the United States. We're also looking at a rent crisis. Around 30% of people in Oregon are saying that they could lose their homes in January. It's a real economic crisis.

We looked at the fact that in the 1920s and 30s unemployed people were organized, they had councils and groups to organize them. So, we thought we should give this a go and see if we can organize unemployed people so that we can fight for the basic rights that we should have, and all workers should have. And we can also offer support to workers who are in work, but who are in dispute. That's the other aspect of what we want to do with the Unemployed Workers Council, we want to offer solidarity to those in struggle, those facing eviction. But we also want to fight for things like a decent minimum wage, decent jobs for people and unemployment insurance that actually covers everyone, because a lot of people don't get unemployment. We're talking about the gig economy here - people in the gig economy don't get unemployment payments, self-employed people don't get it, sex workers don't necessarily get it, and immigrants don't get it, and that is a huge number of people. So, that's also something that we want to try and organize with everyone here as well. To see if we can at least make it more difficult for the rich and powerful to divide us.

Cat Hollis: Hi, my name is Cat Hollis. My pronouns are she/they. I am the founder and lead coordinator for Haymarket Pole and PDX Stripper Strike. We are a collective of autonomous sex workers and erotic service providers in Oregon and throughout the United States. We have chapters in Chicago, as well as affiliations with groups in Philadelphia, California, Colorado, Louisiana, and Wisconsin. There's been a larger movement, post Me Too, to try to maintain safer workspaces for all erotic service providers regardless of the spaces that we occupy for our labor.

We've been working really hard. I'm currently in the process of suing a club through the National Labor Relations Board for retaliation against me for advocating for workers' rights. We sprung out of the Black Lives Matter movement and we are trans, indigenous and Black led. It's been a journey. I came off the polls in March of this year, and now I run a nonprofit. Like Sean said, being an unemployed worker, and realizing that that does also come with a lot of power because we get to decide how we go back. That's been a really interesting process, and I'm excited to learn a lot today. Thank you for having me.

Anna Gray: Hi. Thanks for doing this, and organizing this y'all. My pronouns are she/her and I also, like Ariana and Jea, am a Portland based artist and educator and I have been working as an adjunct instructor in the Portland area for about ten years. I think about seven of those I've been organizing, which I realized this morning and I was like, damn, that's a long time. I've been primarily organizing with the Union at Portland State and have occupied a bunch of different positions there as an organizer, a steward, president, etc. and I'm currently in contract negotiations with Ariana and Jea. I also patchwork together lots of different freelance gigs from copy editing to doing building projects with my partner. I come here today thinking a lot about the reproductive labor that we all perform, especially now that we are working from home - work like educating our kids, that doesn't necessarily get thought about in terms of traditional union organizing. I'm thinking about that partly because I just had a baby. So, you might hear some background noise from my world.

Patricia Vazquez Gomez: Hi, I'm Pati. I use she/her pronouns and I am one more Portland based artist and teacher. I do other things for a living - mostly interpretation, translation, and some community engagement random gigs. I have a history of being an organizer and educator. I did a lot of that work with workers of natural resource industries, which are mostly immigrants and mostly also from indigenous communities in Latin America. Most of the people I worked with came from Guatemala and Mexico. That experience has really shaped the kind of artwork I do. I was also very involved for a few years with the MLK Worker Center, which is the main day labor center here in Portland.

Emmett Schlenz: Hi, my name is Emmett. I use he/him pronouns. I'm with the Burgerville Workers Union, which is a union representing five Burgerville locations in Portland. For those who don't know, Burgerville is a significant fast-food chain based in the Pacific Northwest. It has about 40 stores. I was a Burgerville worker for probably two and a half years, but was laid off at the beginning of the pandemic, like most Burgerville workers - we experienced massive layoffs. We have yet to really see staffing return to pre-pandemic levels, despite the company making money hand over fist and business continuing to be really successful for the company. So, those are the conditions right now for Burgerville workers. As far as we know, we are the only federally recognized fast food union in the country. We've been on strike seven or eight times; we've won five straight union elections and are also currently in contract negotiations with the company. We've been in contract negotiations for an upsettingly long period of time: the longest three years of my life.

Hannah Gioia: My name's Hannah. I use she/her pronouns. I'm an organizer with the Portland branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). My experience has consisted of predominantly food service organizing, but it's not limited to that industry alone. I find that the experience I gain is actually dictated by the direction Portland as a city moves with respect to which industry is agitated. Right now in the pandemic there are a lot of people and a lot of potential across industries, as Sean has clued in on. This has been really exciting to learn about - both in the sense that there's more for me to learn as an organizer, and also in the sense that there's a lot of organizing that's transferable between workplaces.

Specifically, currently I organize with the Crush Bar Workers Collective, which is a union at one of the handful of queer bars in Portland. We've been organizing for over a year now. I'm also laid off. We're currently organizing around re-hires. We've gone the way that Cat has gone with the National Labor Relations Board, and are currently trying to get our workers' rights actually protected through this mechanism.

Larissa Petrucci: Yes, thank you so much for having me here today. It's so exciting to hear what you all are working on. I'm Larissa, I use she/her pronouns and I'm here in Eugene. I am a graduate student at the University of Oregon in the Department of Sociology and I'm a member of the Graduate Teaching Fellows Federation, which is the graduate employee union.

Lately we've been focused on issues that have come up because of COVID, although they're also issues we all face. All of us are only on nine-month contracts. We all face unemployment every summer, which is particularly difficult for migrant workers or international students who are not allowed to be employed off campus and there are very few on campus jobs in the summer. So, that's been an issue that we've been trying to organize around.

And then of course right now we've been organizing around trying to get extra funding from our departments as a lot of our research has stalled as a result of COVID. People aren't able to go into the lab, don't have access to the library in the same way, haven't been able to go into the field and collect data. So, that's been an issue that we're organizing around now. The University always seems to be broke.

I'm also a researcher at the Labor Education and Research Center at UO. And I've been working with a team of faculty and graduate students on research regarding precarious working conditions for low wage workers, especially in hospitality, food services and retail. We've done some analysis of the scheduling legislation that passed in Oregon in 2018, which was the first statewide predictive scheduling legislation in the state. Our research shows that the legislation has worked really in the way that the language has been written, which means that workers aren't actually getting more predictable schedules and they aren't really getting paid. We can talk more about the loopholes in the law that we found. These are the kinds of the work that I'm involved in.

Brian Dolber: Hi I'm Brian Dolber. He/him pronouns. I am faculty at California State University San Marcos. I'm based in Long Beach, California in the Department of Communication. My main focus right now as a scholar activist is working with Rideshare Drivers United, which is a fledgling union of 19,000 Uber and Lyft drivers across the state of California.

I became involved with RDU as I was also, myself, in a precarious position in my own academic career. I had been tenure track faculty in New York State. I moved to California, where my spouse had gotten a job and I ended up in the adjunct circle. After a semester of adjuncting there was no work for me. So, I became an Uber driver and that led me to thinking about questions about precarity and-- really, I think a lot of what we're discussing today and how these different sectors are really kind of overlapping and becoming gig-ified or Uber-fied.

I found Rideshare Drivers United as they were beginning to organize and so I've been working with them for two years now, building the organization and pushing for AB5, which is the law that protects against misclassification of gig workers. Unfortunately, it has now been undermined by Proposition 22 which we can talk about further down. Prior to this, I had been president of my union at University of Illinois of graduate student's graduate employees organization and currently I'm a co-editor on a volume called The Gig Economy: Media and Workers in the Age of Convergence. The book looks at platform labor: Uber, Lyft and those kinds of industries, and also work in the media sector that's been gigified, sex work, domestic work, video game labor, all different kinds of work that are being subject to these dynamics and the organizing to combat that. I'm excited about the conversation.

Lise Soskolne: Hi my name is Lise Soskolne. She/her is fine and I'm in Brooklyn. I'm an artist, a co-founder, and the core organizer of Working Artists and the Greater Economy. We just call it WAGE. I'll just talk about WAGE, not about me. It was founded in 2008 and for 12 years we've been focused on a single achievable goal, which is the regulated payment of artists fees by nonprofit art institutions.

Very simply, it's about organizing unpaid labor in an unregulated field. So, it really has been a campaign for a wage. It's not a minimum wage campaign, it's just a campaign for a wage. And it essentially functions in the absence of regulation, with the assumption that the field will never be regulated from above. So, it's self-regulation from below. That's how I like to think of it. WAGE organizes both artists and institutions. It's a pretty organic organization: the tactics and strategies of WAGE are responding to the field and conditions as we find them. I'm happy to be here. Thanks for having me.

Anna Neighbor: I'm Anna Neighbor. I just want to say when I looked at the list of people/organizations I was so excited to be in this company. It's been amazing hearing all this already. I'm an artist. I'm an adjunct. I've also been organizing within higher ed for the last 10 years or so. I'm a treasurer of and also organizer within United Academics of Philadelphia. We organize both on a non-collective bargaining and on a collective bargaining model - we're organizing across the region for Philadelphia within higher ed.

Conversation

Jea Alford: Thank you all. We'll jump into discussion. Many of you touched a bit on this in your introductions, but we'd love to hear more about what challenges people in your field of work or organizing are facing and what strategies folks in your field are using to address those challenges and support one another - both in an ongoing sense and in the present moment of the pandemic.

Cat Hollis: I know Hannah and I have worked together, they have come in solidarity to our marches. I have shown up to a couple of theirs. I feel like, especially as far as Portland goes, so much of our local industry depends on tourism and on a give-and-take from outside communities. It has been really interesting to see how we are expected to be tourists in our own labor rights. You should be willing to work, and if you're not arguing for better rights, then too bad, but if you are arguing for better rights, you are expected to forgo certain parts of the comfort that you would have experienced as somebody who just stayed quiet. I think it's been really interesting to see how the community has reacted to those organizing spaces. I think specifically of somebody saying, "Well, you're really getting down on a local business."

A lot of the strip clubs here are mom-and-pop owned, Portland has the most strip clubs per capita. And the question is, are we destroying local business somehow by advocating for worker's rights? And I think the real answer that we've come up with is if businesses can't afford to operate in a way that respects their workers, how are they affording to operate at all? You can't just say, "Black Lives Matter" if you're not standing up for those Black and queer workers who are being marginalized by your activity. It's been really lovely to work with similar groups and to see even the shared burnout. I remember being at your rally Hannah and you were like, "How did you do this twice a week for three months?" I think it is really enlightening and empowering to vibe with other people and to not be a tourist, to have this be the place that you live in labor organizing.

Susan Cuffaro: It's interesting that we see we go from mom-and-pop businesses to businesses like Uber and Lyft and Doordash who also claim that they cannot operate a business and comply with the law. They have a business model that depends entirely on exploiting their workforce. We keep talking about how we're going to see further gigification in the economy stemming from the passage of California's Proposition 22. And I agree, you're going to see gigification in industries that didn't have it before, because now all they need to do is put the bossing on an app and send you off with your phone, and you're an independent contractor. They don't have to provide you with any of the rights, benefits or privileges that are afforded to every single other employee. It's interesting that you see that in mom-and-pop businesses and we see this in these huge monolithic entities like Uber, Lyft, Doordash and Instacart. Then we're going to see it move further - what we're thinking is that nobody's safe. All those people who said, "If you don't like it, why don't you just go get another job?" I'm sure you've all heard that at one point. But what I'm not sure is, where are those other jobs? This whole thing of the gig economy is a rolling stone. It is very, very difficult to stop.

Ariana Jacob: Would you be willing to speak a little bit about Prop 22? Not everybody nationally probably knows what that is, and it is really relevant to this conversation.

Susan Cuffaro: Prop 22 was a proposition that was passed in November in California. It was sponsored to the tune of $205 million by the gig companies that were affected: Uber, Lyft, Doordash Postmates and Instacart. Basically, it says that these drivers are no longer going to be covered by AB-5. But we're going to throw them a little bit of something, and what we're gonna do is we're going to give them minimum wage. But what that means is 120% of minimum wage for each engaged hour. Every time you pick up a passenger or you accept an assignment to deliver some goods, to the time you drop off that person or those goods at the final location, you're going to be paid 120% of minimum wage. The problem is that it's only those times that you will be paid. So, every moment that you're sitting in your car - and it's estimated that is anywhere from 30 to 50% of the time is actually just spent waiting for a job - that time won't be compensated. According to a study from the University of California at Berkeley it equates to about $5.60 an hour. Prop 22 was passed based on this false notion that independent contractor status will provide flexibility.

It's unclear how much flexibility you have if you're just sitting in your car, waiting for jobs. But it's also unclear, to me at least, whether it's actually any kind of flexibility, because a lot of people in these gig working professions are people of color and other vulnerable populations. It's a question of whether we actually have a real choice that we made, or it's a forced choice.

Brian Dolber: Can I add to that? In addition to the 120% of minimum wage, another bone that they're throwing, and there's a couple of them, is health insurance. It was just made clear the other day that the insurance subsidy offered under Prop 22 is going to be taxed as income, so you'll still pay. The extent to which anybody is actually going to benefit from that particularly, when you look at financials, is questionable. The other is that for drivers the IRS pays out 58 cents a mile if you're an employee, right? Under Prop 22, I believe it's 30 cents a mile. So, the rights that were granted by AB5 with employee status are being undercut and undermined. They're getting something, but it's not the full amount that you would get as an employee.

One way this was framed was around flexibility, but the other way it was framed was as something that drivers wanted. The public saw these ads in California constantly touting this legislation as something that was pro worker. Rideshare Drivers United and other groups like Workers Collective and also Teamsters, SEIU etc, were trying to combat this measure but when we were talking to voters, they didn't understand that we were not the 'Yes' campaign.

We would say 'No' on 22, but then the minute they turn on their TV, they're being bombarded with ads saying vote yes, yes is pro-driver. And I think it became very, very confusing for people. That confusion was by design. The way that these propositions are written is very deceptive and the ad campaigns behind them are even more deceptive.

People doing this work are having a really hard time knowing whether the public really doesn't care about drivers making below minimum wage, or if, in fact, they're actually supportive of us and we can try to draw on that support in further campaigns down the road. I tend to think it's the latter, and that the companies knew that, and that's why their messaging was so focused on "this is good for drivers," rather than, "this is good for hundred billion dollar traded companies."

Susan Cuffaro: I think there was an exit poll that showed that 40% of the people who voted in favor of Prop 22 actually thought they were doing something to help the drivers.

Brian Dolber: Yeah, I think that is correct.

Susan Cuffaro: I do think we have a level of support out there. I don't think this was a rejection of drivers as being valued people by the community, just by the gig companies.

Brian Dolber: To speak to something that Cat raised, though. I think there is this mentality, highlighted by Uber threatening to leave the state, this mentality of what's good for drivers is what's good for Uber, right? So if the company is suffering, then people are going to lose their jobs and whether we're talking about small businesses and the pandemic, or whether we're talking about these large platforms...

Cat Hollis: How is that the laborer's problem? We were always going to lose our jobs. They use that as some sort of threat and I'm like, yo, if my workplace isn't safe, then how is keeping the business afloat going to help us?

Anna Neighbor: I don't know if this gets into the weeds too much but I think this also raises the question of when do we push for change through legislative channels? Do we push for something through grassroots union organizing or issue campaigns, community organizing channels? I don't have experience with organizing through political channels. I only have experience organizing through union channels. And when I saw Prop 22 I was like, "Why isn't this just a union campaign?" And I don't mean that as a criticism, but Prop 22 definitely raised that question for me.

Ariana Jacob: If Prop 22 becomes a national phenomena that could lead to the gigification of so many different forms of labor.

Anna Neighbor: It sets legal precedent. We set legal precedent through Prop 22.

Cat Hollis: The question really becomes: have they protected their employees? If we're trying to change the status of a worker, if we're trying to argue for their rights and their workspace, whether they're an independent contractor or an employee: have they been given that sort of due process in either situation? Or have they been told, "like it or get out"? Because that's not a healthy working relationship. Something that we touched on before, talking about shared conditions, is how do these things move outwards?

People have been saying to me, you guys are misclassified, maybe you should reclassify. Well, the employees at our clubs aren't being treated fairly. They don't have the right to set their own schedule the way that they should, or to not have their schedule changed, or to be able to have health care or minimum wage.

Just how does the legislative process deal with that? When I look at the NLRB, when I look at the OLCC or BOLI, who are all regulatory committees over the top of my labor, my question is, where have they been in the first place? If these are the sorts of legislative actions that we're trying to move through, well, y'all were supposed to be here six months ago when we were losing our jobs. Going to those people to beg, borrow, and steal seemed really unproductive in my mind.

Anna Neighbor: I have concern about channeling powers towards legislative actions. It's all vulnerable to who the authorities are, which changes every election year. So every two to four years, whatever authority, whatever power they had is like the baby out with the bathwater.

Sean Cumming: I want to come back to something that Cat said in her introduction about unemployment and work which is, "We decide how we go back," I think that's a really important thing that we could be hammering home, all of us together.

Overall, most of the successful changes in people's work conditions come through working class people organizing, and strikes and action within your workplace, but in mass.

I suppose the question for me, organizing unemployed people, is how do we do that thing that Cat said? How do we get to the point where we are saying, "We choose when we go back"? That is a big question for me. How do we get to the point where unemployed people aren't pulled into to the gig economy, undermining the working conditions of other people in really desperate economic times?

Anna Gray: I think that's a really interesting point. And it reminds me too of the struggles that I feel like I've had trying to organize other artists and faculty members. First I had to convince them that they were workers at all. And that's a struggle when you're dealing with people who are sometimes privileged enough to do what they love, but it's still work. And it's still often free labor that people are willing to do for a University, and that is incredibly exploitative. Then the Universities build their whole budget on the idea that there's a massive class of workers that are going to do work for free.

Susan Cuffaro: I think Brian and I have a similar issue with regard to organizing in the gig economy because when you talk to gig workers, you're going to find that a lot of them will tell you, "Well I own my own business." And you ask, "Well, do you set your own prices?" "Do you decide how exactly you're going to perform your job?" So they don't identify as workers and therefore, they don't wish to become part of a movement because they don't identify with it. So, that's the problem. That connects us

Brian Dolber: When AB5 was first being proposed, that was a big struggle - talking to drivers and getting them to understand why it was important for them to support AB5. I agree, Anna, the legislative stuff can really derail efforts in worker organizing in a lot of ways. We thought it was important to support AB5 though, because without it, we don't have the legal right to a union. We could ask to what extent is that necessarily the most important thing? Can we still get gains through organizing in an independent contractor model? But in order to have a legally enforceable contract, we thought that that was important.

Really, Prop 22 was a response to our organizing. The fact that we were striking in May 2019 around the Uber IPO, a lot of stock analysts said that this had a really detrimental impact on the company's valuation. And in fact, when Uber filed for their IPO, they said that worker dissatisfaction was going to increase. They saw that as something that needed to be reported to stockholders, as a warning about the potential weaknesses of their stocks. So, it was because we were fighting that the companies fought back, and had to spend $200 million in order to rewrite the law. And so, we didn't really have a choice at that point of being engaged in that fight.

I wonder what some of the more established unions have done though? They should have been on this like 10 years ago. And the fact that we were so successful without the backing of these large unions and at times actually butting heads with them, it just says to me, what could SEIU do? What could the Teamsters do? What could UFCW do?

If there was a real investment in organizing in these industries to fight back against the entire erosion of New Deal labor legislation, we wouldn't be in this place to begin with. With these smaller organizations, it feels like we're rubbing sticks together sometimes, but I'm repeatedly amazed by our minor successes.

Anna Neighbor: I second that, the work you guys have done is remarkable.

Ariana Jacob: It is. It's interesting being a part of a Union that does have a national presence, but it feels like we really need to be doing more work to realize that actually, unemployed people and people who are outside of our specific industry are our working conditions, because if we don't, the union's not going to hold. If we don't actually also think about those people and think about laws and conditions that make it possible for those people to also survive, unions will fall apart into that status.

Larissa Petrucci: As we're thinking about organizing around legislation or more grassroots organizing in our workplaces, it's important to remember that legislative outcomes are the results of businesses being organized as well. That is something to really remember, that the power that businesses have can be organized in very explicit specific ways. That's what we saw happen with scheduling legislation in Oregon. Part of the big win that we thought we were going to see from the scheduling legislation was this thing called predictability pay, and it could have been great.

Workers would get their schedules a week in advance and if their employer changed their schedule at any point, they would be paid more for those hours, compensating them for working this unpredictable shift. The idea was that either workers would get compensated, or the employer would have some incentive not to engage in unpredictable scheduling practices because they didn't want to have to pay out these workers.

And what happened was, a few days before the legislation was passed, organized big businesses in Oregon got a loophole into the law -- predictability pay waivers.

So, what we found in our research was that essentially no one's getting predictability pay because the companies are telling workers, "We're not allowed to call you for an extra shift anymore unless you sign a waiver" which all the workers then do, because they're not getting a guaranteed minimum number of hours. So, they're not getting paid enough already, and half of them don't even know that they're waving their right to predictability pay, and the ones that do know need the extra hours because there are no minimum guarantees. It's important to see that some of the ways that legislation turns out is also a result of businesses organizing, that is something that we're up against.

The law also had zero funding for enforcement and education. I don't know why anyone thinks that having a law exist means that it will actually be implemented in any substantial way. Which is the same issue that we have with our collective bargaining agreements, they're only as good as workers organizing around those agreements.

Sean Cumming: There seem to be two major issues in terms of organizing. There's organizing people who are unorganized - the people who are unemployed or people in precarious or gig employment - and then there's the other issue, which is a lack of a rank-and-file network of trade unions. People in trade unions are not connecting up their fights, even within different branches of the same union.

When I worked in a school, people didn't talk across union branches, never mind talk to other unions. So, this seems to be a thing that would be really positive: to try and get all these things to connect up. The organizing of precarious and gig economy employment and the rank-and-file trade union people who are active in their union and are trying to actually organize, gain better stuff within their workplace. There are these larger issues that they can come together to discuss.

But it doesn't seem to exist here, it doesn't exist in a lot of places. From my experience as a worker in the UK, in your union you would caucus together and you push for the same stuff. When I was there we'd started to try and get together a rank-and-file grassroots group across unions and there was a little bit of success in that before I left the UK to come here.

I think that sort of strategy may come out of these sorts of discussions - how do we do those two things - organize unorganized people and organize the rank and file between unions? Because it seems like that would be an effective way to push the unions who are maybe more conservative.

Cat Hollis: Lise, I know that you were saying that you organize multi-state, have there been any successes or tactics that you found that have really reflected across different places? Because part of the problem that we've been having organizing with Chicago is the laws aren't necessarily the same. And so how do you use the same tactics?

Lise Soskolne: Yeah, WAGE is basically national, we're a 501c3 so, we can't do any legislative stuff. WAGE runs a certification program that certifies those nonprofit art institutions that voluntarily commit to paying artist fees according to standards that we set. So, before WAGE came along, there were no guidelines or standards for compensating artists in the U.S. I mean, artists are not considered workers, which is a problem. The other problem is that artists don't consider themselves workers.

But the certification program is sort of built around this tool we call a fee calculator that essentially calculates the fees that artists should receive. It's a fee schedule that's broken out into different forms of content and the fees are tied to the total annual operating expenses of each institution, and those expenses change every year depending on fundraising.

Cat Hollis: That's brilliant.

Lise Soskolne: It seems to work as a scalable model. So, your question about organizing across states - we're sort of organizing across every single possible permutation of institution size, ranging from one that has a budget of $10,000 to ones that are budgets of upwards of a billion. What we did was introduce a compensation floor. That was one of the most important accomplishments I think that WAGE has made. And from there institutions with operating expenses of $500,000 or below pay the floor. When you go above that, fees are tied to the total operating expenses.

We don't put any pressure on institutions, except for a decade of naming and shaming. It's more like an intellectual pressure campaign or moral pressure campaign. And they respond to that because the art world is unique in the sense that maintaining an impression of moral purity is really important for institutions. So, it's very easy to shame them into paying people because if they don't, they're just hypocrites. That's why I said WAGE organizes institutions because so much of it is about getting them to do what's right.

But we've moved into organizing artists, and formed WAGENCY, which is also a certification program for artists. It's a transactional platform that enables artists to send fee requests to institutions through WAGE and then we certify them when they successfully negotiate WAGE fees or withhold labor when the institution fails to pay them. And we're moving into contracts. I feel like artists are kind of the ultimate gig worker, since we never share the same employer at the same time. And artists are also notoriously hard to organize.

In the nonprofit sector, you're working with a scarcity model. There's always the argument that we don't have enough money and you can't really make the argument that nonprofits are making profit, and why aren't they sharing that profit, except when you get to the larger institutions.

Cat Hollis: That really reflects what we're doing. I feel like something that we've come across is that workers, especially, see dignity as a limited resource. Capital may be a limited resource. Dignity is not. Dignity and safety are not limited resources and they should not be divided amongst us, they should be given to us wholly as we are whole people. Whether or not you're working in the nonprofit sector, whether or not the capital is moving, there are resources that these institutions are hoarding, and those resources need to be redistributed.

Emmett Schlenz: Lise and Cat, I think your conversation about organizing across state lines and this question of scalability made me draw some connections to these other conversations that Larissa and Sean and Anna are talking about, about legislation and small grassroots organizing campaigns versus larger more established unions. I think a great example of both of those things working together are the teacher strikes that have been happening.

Not only are these - in particular in Chicago and LA - massive extremely lengthy strikes that have a ton of community support, but within the strikes themselves these schools operate as crucial community reproductive points. That's basically where childcare happens so the parents can go to work. That's where food is distributed to lower income communities.

The way that the strikes operate is they are targeting the school system and targeting the city - not asking for legislation, they're not pushing any laws. They're saying give us the shit that we want, or we're going to shut your school system down for as long as we need to.

But then they're also taking care of the communities that they themselves are a part of and so it combines this militant direct action against the city with deep, deep, deep community mutual aid, which is really cool.

I think the example of West Virginia in particular is a really neat example because that strike was super illegal and they did it anyway. Those people didn't give any sort of care at all about what the law was. There's a joke in the Portland IWW, and Burgerville Workers Union: Everything's legal if you win. It was true in West Virginia and I think it's true elsewhere.

I think the way that you scale up from small workplace issues to massive city halting strikes is through this deep community mutual aid work, like they're doing in the teacher strikes, like the nurses are doing, SEIU Local 1199 New England, where I'm from. Those nurses and teachers unions are incredible.

Ariana Jacob: I want to be moving the conversation towards identifying those places where we can support each other while also recognizing that there's differences in our experiences that create different levels of insecurity. You all have already been talking about this to some extent, but I just want to focus in on those points of solidarity, points of potential support between what we're each doing. And then, to be pokey-- Patricia, do you want to come into the conversation?

Patricia Vazquez Gomez: I have been trying to find my point of entry. Something that really resonated was what Cat was saying about safety, it not being a limited resource and also the work of WAGE which I have benefited from as an artist, working with organizations where they actually say "We pay people." Because unless you are a big name, people assume that you're just doing what you love, but it is also what you live off. It's less glamorous to be an artist than what it looks like. A lot of just writing emails, a lot of doing admin, a lot of hauling boxes and putting them in places. A lot of time to negotiate. A lot of us are doing work that is not that creative, a big percentage of the time.

In history there have been experiments with treating artists as workers, this government used to have artists on their payrolls. Or just imagine a company having all these artists as employees and paying all their benefits - that's not gonna happen.

I am constantly, constantly making sure, because I don't know if next month, or next year, I'm going to have work. I'm always saying yes to everything because I just need to make sure that next month, or in two months, or in three months I am going to have enough. That's not great, and I do think it's by design. It happens to a lot of people. We just can't even stop to see what the situation is that we're dealing with because we're constantly trying to make sure that we're gonna be okay next month.

If I knew that I didn't have to pay the overpriced rents that are happening in Portland, that somehow affordable housing was in the panorama of how the city is managed, I probably would relax a little bit more, I wouldn't be constantly taking on everything that people asked me to: Ah this? Yes, I'll do it. Do this interpretation. Yes, I'll do it. Dig this hole, yes, I'll do it. And the other thing is healthcare. Even under Obamacare it is so incredibly expensive. Everybody I know who's a musician or an artist is paying crazy amounts for healthcare, even with the subsidies. I'm sure that the same is happening to the Uber driver and the Instacart worker. If there was a little bit of that safety net maybe there would be the ability to be okay where we're at, if the ground under us wouldn't be constantly shifting. These are larger questions about the systems we live in and what they're providing for not just for me, for us, but for everybody.

Also, sometimes it's hard to enter this conversation about my own precarity because of my experience with day laborers and indigenous migrant workers. It's even hard for me to call my experience precarity because the stuff I've seen is so awful: systems of slavery, literally, that I didn't even understand how is this happening.

Susan Cuffaro: That instability is what they count on. It is a particularly sharp arrow in their quiver because they know at some point that there is somebody who's going to take that job, who's going to take that ride, who's going to deliver that particular delivery and they count on that. And it's a race to the bottom endangering everybody.

Anna Neighbor: This echoes part of what you said - but I'm organizing contingent workers and having organizing conversations every day and so much of what I hear is, "I like the freedom, I like the flexibility." And I can say that personally I like it too.

I don't get paid enough and I think I should have a certain amount of security, but I like not being on search committees. I like not being a full-time tenure track professor. I have eight other side hustles and I have a 14-year-old and a two-year-old. I like being able to be home at 3pm when I know I need to be. Some people don't want to have a solidified relationship to a boss, but do expect a certain base floor of respect, wage and job security. What does that look like, and what does it look like to try to organize those people?

Sean Cumming: As a non-American I have a slightly different perspective. What I see when you are talking about not wanting a boss so that you can come home at 3pm, is a complete erosion of the rights of working people to organize themselves, to bargain and win decent working conditions. I think some of that comes from the erosion of workers' rights since the 80's in the United States, particularly.

In the UK you work less - thirty-five hours is standard. You have holiday pay standards from the state, so every single person, regardless of your job or your non-job, even if you're in a zero-hour contract, you still have to be paid for 14 days a year minimum. In my early work in life I didn't pay for health care.

And if we think about the history of unemployed organizing you can take that back to the 20s and 30s and the New Deal: the compromise, basically, that was made between labor and the parties of capitalism in the United States was they split Social Security off from Unemployment. That didn't happen elsewhere in the Western world, where you still had the welfare state, which was much more integrated in the UK, and France and elsewhere. Workers there are starting from a sense that you should have that control of your life, but you should also have that control in your workplace. And how you get that control is to organize together.

Anna Neighbor: Organize for a totally flexible schedule.

Lise Soskolne: I think the problem is if you don't want to work for someone else, you're working for yourself. You're running your own small business. I mean, that's essentially what you do if you're an independent contractor.

And one of the problems in the arts is that so much of our time is spent making work and that time is unquantifiable. If you were to try to quantify that time into labor time no one could afford to pay you what your labor was worth. And I think this is true of adjunct labor also: they pay you for contact hours, but so much of the work that you do is outside of that. So, what you end up with is what we call a symbolic fee. This is just a price that's symbolic of value, but it doesn't actually embody or encompass the actual value of your labor. One of the things that WAGE did was campaign for a fee. I said it was a campaign for a wage, but it was really a campaign for a fee.

What we say is that a fee is a payment for the work that you do when you enter into a temporary transactional relationship with an institution to provide content. So, it's not about the content itself. It's not about the materials that you use to make the content. It's about the act of providing content. So, it's about content provision.

It's weird because this argument actually makes sense to institutions and it stops this problem that you have of what is an artwork worth? Why is some artwork worth more than others? Why is some labor worth more than other labor, and is it a matter of labor time? I think this is important: the question of the time that you actually spend working, because so much of what we do is to reproduce ourselves for our jobs, for our labor. How much of this is quantifiable? How much is it possible to compensate for all of this?

I think increasingly there is a move towards the nonprofit model in which you have a scarcity problem. There is only a certain amount of money that can pay people and it's never enough. So what do you do then? Especially if you're self-organizing and you're deciding what you're getting paid for. These are the questions I think about a lot for WAGE and they are connected with some of the things that we're talking about here.

Ariana Jacob: I want to specifically invite people to start speaking to what you would want work to look like. People are already mentioning things like more of a social safety net that would allow for flexibility. Could we keep trying to invoke what the ideal working, or non-working, or flexible working conditions could be?

Brian Dolber: To respond to Sean's point about the robust welfare state that other countries have, I absolutely agree. That would give us a lot more security. That is something that I find really disheartening looking at the mainstream of the American labor movement, is that it has not fought for the expansion of a welfare state since the post-war era.

And we're seeing that even through Bernie Sanders' campaign where he's fighting for Medicare for All, and you have unions saying, "No, Medicare for All will hurt union members because we fought so hard for whatever plan that we have that's still through the employer." Nobody even likes their private insurance plan, but there's this myth that union leaders to a large extent were circulating, which is: we fought for these benefits rather than wage gains, so it would be unfair to then take away those victories. That idea that you're somehow hurting working people by giving everyone Medicare, or you're hurting working people by giving everyone education because I paid my student loans back already so why should I want other people to have their debt forgiven?

Labor has been really complicit in that to a large extent because they've been very comfortable with politicians, particularly in the Democratic Party. We really need to blow that up from the outside. Only 8% of workers are organized in the United States now, so there's a huge base of workers and unemployed people right now who can begin to develop new organizations to shift that. What's been hard from Rideshare Drivers United's perspective is that we just need the resources to do it. Until you have that stream of dues money coming in, there's no money. And if the established unions aren't looking to do it or to help the people who are doing it - especially when you're talking about, you know, a workforce of 100,000 people - how are you ever going to be able to build a real organization?

Anna Neighbor: On that note, we are a citywide union and we began as a non-collective bargaining organization. We're organizing higher ed workers across the region, and recognizing that our workers were mostly contingent faculty in the beginning, and were highly underpaid, we set our dues at $12 a month. So, people could join us at any time, regardless of if we were their bargaining agent or not. In the beginning, we weren't bargaining for anyone. In six years, we've gone on to organize four schools, we've grown. Now we have our non-collective bargaining chapters, and then we are organizing in a traditional shop to shop model of moving school to school. But what's so powerful about that is people who are frustrated can invest in the idea of a sense of community, professionalism and respect.

The model of growing this way is born out of the fact that as contingent workers we have relationships with multiple employers. So, it's essentially like a freelancers union for higher ed. I've taught at six schools in the last ten years. So, my allegiance isn't to the school, it's to the profession. People join this union that's about the profession of teaching and higher ed as a whole. Organizationally, what ends up happening is now we have members in all 50 schools in Philly and so as soon as we're interested in moving on to the next place, we've got ten people there that we already know are 'union yes' because we're talking to people across the whole city. It cascades in this way and it builds a community across the region.

I wanted to talk to Sean because we've also been very interested in the underemployed and the unemployed because contingent workers, and contingent faculty specifically, fall in and out of employment all the time. Trying to access benefits is incredibly difficult, especially when you're in and out of employment so often. The paperwork of navigating social services is mind blowing. So, we do workshops for our members on how to apply for unemployment, how to navigate social services, student debt relief. We offer a lot of economic justice pieces to bring people into the possibility of the union, and that grows the regional network.

Ariana Jacob: Some of the things that we're speaking to in terms of what we would want would be this social safety net, something that actually allows us to not have to be aligned with one boss, but to have some control over that. Definitely something that provides dignity to all people.

Sean Cumming: As Anna says, we're trying to do more of that sort of stuff as well for unemployed people here. Again, resources are always a question. Most unemployed people can't pay dues because most of us don't have any money. So, there's that big issue. So, we're looking to try and partner with established unions, if we can. It would be brilliant for us to be able to be funded by a union or even just linking up with IWW, for example. It would be great to figure out how we can do that more effectively.

One of the things that we are campaigning for is, not what's called a universal basic income, but our argument is that anyone who's unemployed for any reason should get unemployment payments. And that should not be linked to how much you've worked. If you are made unemployed you should get $1,600 a week minimum, going up if you have kids, or get disability for example.

That's one of the major things we're trying to build locally is saying, "We can get this. We need to fight for it," but we need to fight through the unions as well. And the unions have to come on board to start fighting for this. This is going to be a huge issue for anyone who's dropping in and out of unemployment.

Emmett's point about the teacher strikes is really, really informative about how you can have even a smallish union push things massively and bring loads of people and your community as a whole into the struggle. I think that is something to Brian's point about union density and how it's really low. Union density in France is also really low, but what happens is the rank-and-file network push the unions into these fights and, to Anna's point, they bring the community into the fight. And that, I think, is a model of how we should think about building something in the U.S.

Cat Hollis: I need to make sure that I say this. BLACK LIVES

MATTER. Part of the reason why union density is dropping is because the white population is dropping. More and more brown people exist and less and less white people exist. Men are no longer in positions of power and union systems have been designed to uphold the systems of patriarchy and of racism and have held up a difference between white and Black workers, since the 1920's: a lot of these things have been designed to hold back the communities which are now the strongest as far as labor organizing goes. So, now is the moment to recognize that it is our responsibility to make space for those people to come in. It's not their responsibility to come in to somebody who's never protected them. Because as undocumented workers, as sex workers, as people of color, as queer people we have been systemically disenfranchised from these systems. We have very little trust for them and they have not shown up for us. So, when we go to these communities and we ask why they aren't more prolific in this organizing work, it's because it's never been there for us.

For those communities, showing up and putting that extra labor in is not only daunting, but more dangerous for us. Y'all have adjunct positions. If I lose out on my fight, I'm on the street. That's the difference. I think that that's really important to recognize, AND to look for marginalized voices to uplift. I'm really happy to be here so that people can hear these sorts of things and that we can address the issues that are facing more and more people because those communities are people of color and they are queer communities. That's all I have to say. BLACK LIVES MATTER.

Patricia Vazquez Gomez: Yes, as much as I should assume that I'm a precarious worker, I am fully aware that my precarity depends on the exploitation of other bodies. So, that's one thing that I am always considering - how much will organizing with my peers increase and deepen those systems of exploitation? Because lifting myself up as a professional worker depends on pushing the workers at the bottom level even further down. When conversations about artists' precariousness come up it's absolutely linked to the system we live in. And I personally want to make sure that lifting myself up is not going to push people that are already at the bottom down even further. So, how do we figure out this problem? For me, it's really important to go to the bottom and start there. Because otherwise, we just perpetuate the systems of exploitation that have been going on for too long.

Hannah Gioia: Thank you. I wanted to second Cat and follow up. I think a little bit of what I've found hard to get into this conversation is that there are already premises operating that every worker could have space and agency to participate in these ideas that we're throwing out. That, I think, is so false. Often when a worker tells me, "I don't think the union's going to help me," I actually think that they are smart and have made an analysis that they have not been given evidence that the unions are going to help them. When we started this conversation someone used the phrase dismantle the house, and I think we could ask the question "How do we dismantle the house of capitalism?" but we also need to dismantle the house of organized labor, in such a way that I think Cat's completely right. There are so many people I would not actually be interested in organizing with because of how they understand what I'm able to do.

To answer the questions "Where are we going? What's the future of work?" I think a reason I'm skeptical of legislation is that it's deeply inaccessible, even though it can help a lot of people in really concrete ways. You're also working against, like Larissa mentioned earlier, organized business. It's premised on this idea of democracy - that at the referendum everyone gets to vote, as if money is not, in fact, the biggest vote in play. That's deeply disempowering. I don't agree with power coming from a legislative tactic. I think the future of work is way more localized. I love hearing what's going on in other cities, and if there are ideas for cross country solidarity, incredible, but it's maybe putting the cart before the horse to try to think big on how to have global or national solidarity. I'm still working actively on being able to have solidarity with certain white men in my shop.

Ariana Jacob: Thank you. Susan, do you want to come in there, and then we'll wrap this part up and bring in some other questions from outside.

Susan Cuffaro: I think convening coalitions from all parts of the working community beset by precarity is really an important goal, and it's been neglected for far too long, but it may be at this point that we need to exchange ideas and support each other and have that solidarity, but we need to continue with the original mission that each of us took on, which was grassroots organizing, and working toward that coalition building.

Understand and take energy and solace from the fact that there are all these people out there who are standing behind us. And maybe we're not coalescing like this right now to work together, but that could be a wonderful goal to have. I think it's also a good news, bad news situation.

The good news is, there's a number of instances that we've talked about and seen where grassroots organizers have in fact made a significant difference and I think that, right now, has to stay an important focus because I don't know that we have the resources and the ability to combat on the legislative level. Maybe we just need to continue to focus on making those changes within our communities and by changing our communities, we work on changing the world, instead of trying to change the world at this point.

Cat Hollis: Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” I think that is true, and that when we start from the bottom, it really does expand a lot more quickly.

Ariana Jacob: Thank you, everybody. I feel like this conversation is just getting started and yet we are coming to the end of our time. I wanted to bring in some questions from the broader group of people that are here. We have a question from Ellen Herman, “Do you think that the original goals of the ‘sharing economy’ such as more flexibility and the significant reduction of supervision are possible now that we’ve seen the results from platform labor?”

Cat Hollis: I was just listening to NPR the other day and they were talking about how post pandemic, many workers are looking to continue to telecommute and that a lot of the commuting that we’ve done has been really unnecessary. Productivity is through the roof and yet, we’re working more hours than ever. So, the real question is, do we have to be there for every second?

And that’s why they’re trying to shift towards this gig economy, but the answer really becomes, we are laborers no matter what and dignity is not a limited resource. I feel like carrying that forward into the gig economy is going to be really important because it’s going to exist for more and more people.

Ariana Jacob: That point, the language of dignity is not a limited resource feels so powerful to me, and then I have questions about how do we actualize that for each other?

Anna Neighbor: Yeah. As an organizer, when we’re trying to unionize a workplace that person to person connection is everything. That’s a connection that the boss typically doesn’t have. So, being able to meet that person after their shift, after their class, on their lunch break, person to person. That has been historically everything, and that’s the model for organizing, and the boss can never beat that.

Organizing in the pandemic, we had one campaign we were 65% through when we had to shift to Zoom organizing. And I’m now leading and organizing a campaign at another work site that’s fully through Zoom, beginning to end. And that’s a totally different model, which is something I think since a lot of us are organizers here, it’d be helpful to talk about, but I just wanted to add that note to it.

Ariana Jacob: Yes. How do we keep that personal relationship, while we’re not actually able to be with each other?

Brian Dolber: That's been a consistent problem with organizing Uber drivers; the only real physical space where drivers interact is in airport parking lots. At LAX in 2016 they started a parking lot where all the drivers have to wait in a queue, and that kind of became an organizing space. But other than that, there was really no interaction between drivers. So, we have been really successful in using an app. That's really how RDU grew into a formidable organization - an app developer created a system where we could have organizing conversations. We then ran Facebook ads for the app, and Facebook knows who drivers are because the Facebook app is on your phone and the Uber app is on your phone. Kind of using surveillance capitalism against itself - the master's tools, right?

We were able to then attract people to the RDU website where they can sign up for a phone call, which is administered through the app. We were able to really build the organization that way. So when the pandemic happened, in some ways, it's actually been a boon for us. Especially as we become statewide, since it used to be really hard for people to get from Orange County or the Inland Empire to the meetings in downtown LA. Now, people can be wherever and still be involved in those conversations. So, there are definitely benefits that we've seen in using these technologies, even though it's important to remember that the technology doesn't do the organizing, the people do the organizing. You still need to find a way, somehow, to build that relationship.

Ariana Jacob: Yeah. There's a question that just came in from Heidi Carrico, "How do we continue to organize when there are so many workers without access to the Internet and Zoom technology right now?"

Sean Cumming: Well, I can talk about unemployed workers. What we'll do is just old school. We've been setting up tables, going to working class communities. We're trying to figure out where people are - shopping centers, supermarkets - and we're trying to have conversations with people. I think that's it. It's just, again, back to what Anna said - you have to talk to people. You actually have to talk to people, one on one. So, that's what we've started doing, and we're going to continue to do. We're going back to really old school stuff: flyering, talking to people in their neighborhoods and communities.

Ariana Jacob: Yeah, thanks. There's another question from Shelby Loomis, "Do you think that job scarcity is a tactic to create fear in the working class and could you also address the argument that employers are trying to balance an inflated employee market where there are so many generations of workers in the job market competing against each other?"

Brian Dolber: Yeah, absolutely. The gig economy was sort of first imagined in the wake of the 2008 crash. I think businesses saw that there was a large reserve of labor and they said, "Okay, how can we exploit this?" And it was sold to us as the "sharing economy," as a way for us all to not have to have real jobs or to explore creative endeavors. I think people now are wise to how that was a lie. And that's why we're fighting against it.

Sean Cumming: Yes, unemployment is of course used as a method of driving these conditions, and trying to use unemployed people to do things like scab and undermine the conditions of people already in employment. It's hardwired in the system of capitalism to have a large pool of unemployment to pull from. In periods of economic crisis unemployment goes up, which threatens those in employment who are afraid of being pulled into unemployment. Unemployment is used as a threat and a tool to stop people organizing, I think that's obvious. Unemployment is necessary for capital to keep going. They don't really want everybody to have a job. And if you do have a job, we're talking about how it's part time, or underpaid. So that is the actual mechanism of control, yes.

Lise Soskolne: On a different note, more to answer the question of what we want to see for the future of work. Everybody was talking about UBI as soon as the pandemic hit, which makes complete sense. It makes sense particularly for artists, with this idea of a symbolic fee. But I was thinking that what artists really need - and I don't believe in UBI for artists unless everyone gets UBI - is the idea of part time work for full time pay, because artists need this paid time to be unproductive, or productive, however you want to look at it. And that would be great for everybody. I know it's highly unrealistic, but I think it sounds really good.

Ariana Jacob: Yeah, it sounds great.

Lise Soskolne: Full time pay for part time work.

Ariana Jacob: Full time pay for part time work!

Hannah Gioia: A slightly hotter take is that the future of work is no work.

Emmett Schlenz: Who wants to work? I don't want to work.

Cat Hollis: Just one more quick thing. Please, please, please, if you have the ability to, increase accessibility through captions, through American Sign Language. Make sure that those marginalized communities are able to have access. That's a really good first step to take, making sure that you're accessible to those communities.

Ariana Jacob: I really appreciate that. I think that also speaks to this idea that if we're organizing around precarious work, we need to be starting with the people. We need to be considering the relationship between the people who are the most vulnerable and where we are in this work.

And we need to be doing work that transforms the existing labor institutions into being more racially just and inclusive institutions. I also appreciate the sentiment that there's this potential in us working together, and there's also potential in us working really intently in our own relationships and places, but still being in conversation with each other around this.

So, I just want to say thank you so deeply for being here. There's so much more I want to talk to you all about.

Jea Alford: Yes, I want to reiterate our gratitude for you all being here with us and sharing your different experiences, knowledge, and perspectives on all of these things. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Conversation Participants' Recommended Readings on Labor and Precarity

Books

Angelou, Maya. I know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Appadurai, Arjun, editor. The Social Life of Things.

Appelbaum, Eileen, Annette Bernhardt, and Richard Murnane, editors. Low Wage America: How Employers Are Reshaping Opportunity in the Workplace.

Aristarkhova, Irina. Hospitality of the Matrix.

Augustin, Laura. Sex at the Margins.

Barber, Elizabeth Wayland. Women's Work.

Berardi, Franco 'Bifo.' The Uprising on Poetry and Finance Semiotext(e).

Berardi, Franco 'Bifo.' The Soul at Work.

Bonilla, Yarimar. Aftershocks of Disaster.

Chacon, Justin Akers, and Mike Davis. No One is Illegal.

Chun, Jennifer Jihye. New Labor in New York: Precarious Workers and the Future of the Labor Movement.

Davis, Ben. 9.5 Theses on Art and Class.

Dolber, Brian, Michelle Rodino-Colocino, Chenjerai Kumanyika, Todd Wolfson, editors. The Gig Economy: Workers and Media in the Age of Convergence.

Federici, Silvia. Revolution at Point Zero.

Fine, Janice. Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of a Dream.

Fox, Nichols. Against the Machine.

Graeber, David. Bullshit Jobs.

Hyde, Lewis. The Gift.

Illich, Ivan. The Right to Useful Unemployment.

Illich, Ivan. Tools for Conviviality.

Juravich, Tom, and Kate Bronfenbrenner. Ravenswood: The Steelworkers' Victory and the Revival of American Labor.

Kaba, Mariame, and Shira Hassan. Fumbling Towards Repair.

Kalleberg, Arne L. Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s-2000s.

Lafarge, Paul. The Right To Be Lazy.

Mac, Juno, and Molly Smith. Revolting Prostitutes.

Marx, Karl. Capital.

Massumi, Brian. 99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value.

Mauss, Marcel. The Gift.

Odell, Jenny. How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy.

Quinlan, Michael. At the Altar of the Bottom Line: The Degradation of Work in the 21st Century.

Scott, James C. Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.

Valencia, Sayak. Gore Capitalism.

Wang, Jackie. Carceral Capitalism.

Weeks, Kathi. The Problem with Work.

Wise, Tim. White Like Me.

Articles

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Caffentzis, George and Silvia Federici. “Commons against and beyond capitalism.” Community Development Journal. Volume 41, Issue 9, pp 92-105. 2014.

The California Future of Work Commission. Commission Report: A New Social Compact for Work and Workers. 2021. https://www.labor.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/338/2021/02/ca-future-of-work-report.pdf

Chun, Jennifer Jihye. “Building Political Agency and Movement Leadership: The Grassroots Organizing Model of Asian Immigrant Women Advocates.” Citizenship Studies. Volume 20, Issues 3-4, pp 379-395. 2016.

Golden, Lonnie. “Irregular Work Scheduling and Its Consequences.” Economic Policy Institute. 2015. https://www.epi.org/publication/irregular-work-scheduling-and-its-consequences/

Ingold, Tim. “The Temporality of the Landscape.” World Archeology. Volume 25, Issue 2, pp 152–74. 1993.

Jomo. “Caring: a Labor of Stolen Time.” LIES Journal. 2012. https://www.liesjournal.net/volume1-06-caring.html

Kalleberg, Arne L. “Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition.” American Sociological Review. Volume 74, pp 1-22. 2009.

Quinlan, Michael. “The ‘Pre-invention’ of Precarious Employment: The Changing World of Work in Context.” Economic and Labor Relations Review. Volume 23, Issue 4., pp 3-24. 2012.

Rothschild-Whitt, Joyce. “The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models.” American Sociological Review. Volume 44, pp 509-527. 1979.

Standing, Guy. “Meet the Precariat, the New Global Class Fuelling the Rise of Populism.” World Economic Forum. November 2016. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/11/precariat-global-class-rise-of-populism/

Suchet-Pearson, Sandie, Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd, and Laklka Burarrwanga. “Caring as Country: Towards an Ontology of Co-Becoming in Natural Resource Management.” Asia Pacific Viewpoint. Volume 54, Issue 2, pp 185–97. 2013.

*Ticona, Julia, Alexandra Mateescu, and Alex Rosenblat. “Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work & Ridehailing.” Data & Society. 2018.
https://datasociety.net/library/beyond-disruption/*

Tokumitsu, Miya. “In the Name of Love.” Jacobin Magazine. 2014. https://jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love

Chapters

Acker, Joan. “Feminist Goals and Organizing Processes.” Feminist Organizations, edited by Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin. 1979.

Barnett, Bernice McNair. “Black Women’s Collectivist Movement Organizations: Their Struggles during the ‘Doldrums.’” Feminist Organizations, edited by Myra Marx Ferree and Patricia Yancey Martin. 2006.

Van Oort, Madison. “Employing the Carceral Imaginary: An Ethnography of Worker Surveillance in the Retail Industry.” Captivating Technology, edited by Ruha Benjamin. 2019.

Magazines

Demos Journal. “The University.” Issue 9. Edited by Lina Koleilat, Pan Karanikolas, and Scott Robinson. 2020. http://demosjournal.com/issues/issue-9/

Kohl Journal. "Organizing Against the Tide: Alternative Economies and Gendered Labor." Volume 5, Issue 2. Edited by Ghiwa Sayegh. 2019. https://kohljournal.press/issue-5-2

Lapham Quarterly. "Lines of Work." Volume 4, Issue 2. Edited by Lewis H. Lapham. 2011. https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/lines_of_work

UN Magazine. Issue 14.1. Edited by Elena Gomez and Rosie Isaac. 2020. http://unprojects.org.au/magazine/issues/issue-14-1/

Poetry

Brodine, Karen. Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking. https://my-blackout.com/2019/09/02/karen-brodine-woman-sitting-at-the-machine-thinking/

Websites

Contemporary Art and Feminism. https://www.contemporaryartandfeminism.com/

International Socialism Journal. Edited by Joseph Choonara and Richard Donnelly. http://isj.org.uk/

The Next Recession. Michael Roberts Blog. https://thenextrecession.wordpress.com/

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W.A.G.E. "Reading List." https://wageforwork.com/work/reading-list#top

Biographies

Jea Alford is an interdisciplinary artist playing with themes of class, labor, the role of aesthetics in economy, and the role of economy in the artist's studio. Growing up in a trailer park in suburban Oregon, she developed a critical eye toward what our economic system values, and she is interested in how art can work to not only subvert, but regrow the existing structures of economy. She creates ephemeral and poetic performative work, objects, and media, co-runs a sustainably minded clothing cooperative, and has stewarded projects, such as an artist residency run out of her home, that are based in generosity. She is an adjunct instructor in both the Theater and Studio Art departments at Portland State University. Jea is a Fulbright recipient, winner of the Arlene Schnitzer Visual Arts Prize, and recipient of grants from OAC and RACC to support participation in residencies and exhibitions domestically and internationally.

Ariana Jacob makes artwork that uses conversation to explore political and personal interdependence and disconnection. Prior to working as an artist and academic Ariana managed a farmers' market, worked in a cabinet shop, co-ran a secret cafe out of her apartment, and fished for salmon commercially. While being an artist and academic Ariana also does union organizing and group facilitation, alongside being a partner, friend, family member and wonderer. Ariana currently teaches in the Social Practice MFA Program at Portland State University and is the Chair of Bargaining for PSUFA Adjunct Faculty Union. Her work has been included in the NW Biennial at the Tacoma Art Museum, Disjecta's Portland 2012 Biennial, the Open Engagement Conference, the Discourse and Discord Symposium at the Walker Art Center. She has exhibited work and organized events at apexart and Smack Mellon in New York City, Betonsalon in Paris, France, Broken City Lab in Windsor, ON, Canada, PICA's TBA Festival, The Portland Art Museum, The Department of Safety in Anacortes, WA, Southern Exposure in San Francisco, CA; and in many public places.

Susan Cuffaro is a Founding Member of Gig Workers' Collective, a grassroots non-profit entity dedicated to organizing for and around gig workers. She organizes to build worker power from the bottom up because she firmly believes that truly transformative worker movements can only manifest with authentic worker leadership.

Sean Cumming is an out of work writer, musician, and educator, and co-chair of the Unemployed Workers' Council Portland.

Brian Dolber is Assistant Professor of Communication at Cal State San Marcos and an organizer with Rideshare Drivers United. He is the author of Media and Culture in the US Jewish Labor Movement (Palgrave, 2017) and co-editor of the forthcoming volume The Gig Economy: Media and Workers in the Age of Convergence (Routledge, in press). Dr. Dolber received his PhD from University of Illinois where he served as co-president, and in other leadership roles, with the Graduate Employees Organization, AFT/IFT Local 6300.

Hannah Gioia is a queer labor organizer with the Portland branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The notable campaigns she has been involved with are the Little Big Union (LBU) and the Crush Bar Workers Collective (CBWC). She has recently been laid-off due to the ongoing pandemic and has since turned her shop floor organizing efforts toward community-oriented mutual aid.

Anna Gray is an artist and adjunct union organizer. Gray and her partner, Ryan Wilson Paulsen, have worked together as one artistic entity for over ten years. They make project-based work that often focuses on the activities of reading and writing, using art as an expanded form of study and a way to transform the often-solitary acts of reading and thinking into collective ones. Anna is also an active member of the adjunct faculty union at Portland State University, which is currently in negotiations for a new contract.

Patricia Vázquez Gómez is an artist and adjunct union organizer who works and lives between the ancient Tenochtitlán and the unceded, occupied, stolen and colonized lands of the Chinook, Clackamas, Multnomah and other Indigenous peoples. Her art practice investigates the social functions of art, the intersections between aesthetics, ethics and politics and the expansion of community-based art practices. She uses a variety of media to carry out her research: painting, printmaking, video, exhibitions, music and socially engaged art projects. The purpose and methodologies of her work are deeply informed by her experiences working in the immigrant rights and other social justice movements.

Cat Hollis is an artist and adult entertainment organizer. The founder of HAYMARKET POLE, a multiethnic, Black, cis-womxn from a small town, Cat found refuge in the anonymity of adult entertainment. Now wielding a decade's experience advocating for, and building a reputation within, the adult entertainment industry. An accomplished artist and award-winning stripper, Cat has been everything from a sex worker to sailboat deckhand, to a middle school teacher, to a gallery curator, published playwright, and now a labor rights organizer and executive director of a nonprofit.

Anna Neighbor is an artist and adjunct union organizer who lives and works in Philadelphia, PA.

Larissa Petrucci is a graduate employee organizer and PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology and Research Assistant at the Labor Education & Research Center at the University of Oregon. Her areas of research expertise include low-wage and unpredictable work, high-technology occupations, labor and labor organizing, postfeminism, and gender and organizations. She has been active in her graduate employee union and is particularly interested in unique or untraditional labor organizing strategies.

***Emmett Schlenz** organizes with the Burgerville Workers Union, the only (to the BVWU's knowledge anyway) federally recognized fast food union in the United States. He worked at Burgerville for several years before getting laid off at the beginning of the pandemic.*

Lise Soskolne is an artist and core organizer of W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy). A co-founder of W.A.G.E. and its core organizer since 2012, she began working in arts presenting and development at downtown New York City nonprofits in 1998. Venues have included Anthology Film Archives, Artists Space, Diapason Gallery for Sound, Meredith Monk/The House Foundation for the Arts, Participant Inc, and Roulette Intermedium.

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