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Worker voice and collectivism

Out of Google offices around the world, at 11.10 am on 1 November 2018, poured 20,000 workers. They were walking off the job, most directly about the way the company was seen as having protected three senior employees accused of sexual harassment, but if you looked deeper you also saw complaints about pay discrimination, lack of transparency, racism and the treatment of contract workers.[1] That protection, it gradually transpired, included providing two of the controversial executives with exit packages worth a total of US$135 million (approximately AU$200 million).[2] The walkout was astonishing to many because Google, one of the largest tech companies in the world, was also notably nonunion. 'Google Walkout for Real Change' does not call itself a union, but its activists behave as if it is.[3] Google, meanwhile, tried to suppress collective organisation within the corporation, much as many nonunion employers had done.[4] The dispute continues, and since then its organisers have

1   Shirin Ghaffary and Eric Johnson, 'After 20,000 Workers Walked out, Google Said It Got the Message. The Workers Disagree'. *Recode*, 21 November 2018, www.recode.net/2018/11/21/18105719/google-walkout-real-change-organizers-protest-discrimination-kara-swisher-recode-decode-podcast.
2   Daisuke Wakabayashi and Katie Benner, 'How Google Has Protected Its Elite Men'. *New York Times*, 25 October 2018; Bryan Menegus, 'Google Agreed to Pay Execs Accused of Sexual Harassment $135 Million'. *Gizmodo*, 11 March 2019, gizmodo.com/google-agreed-to-pay-execs-accused-of-sexual-harassment-1833214767.
3   Jon Evans, 'What If Google Unionized?'. *Techcrunch*, 4 November 2018, techcrunch.com/2018/11/04/what-if-google-unionized/.
4   Josh Eidelson, Hassan Kanu, and Mark Bergen, 'Google Urged the U.S. to Limit Protection for Activist Workers'. *Bloomberg*, 24 January 2019, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-24/google-urged-the-u-s-to-limit-protection-for-activist-workers.

provided support for worker actions in other tech firms.[5] It shows that even in the virulently antiunion climate of Silicon Valley[6] (the location for *The Circle*), employees want voice.

Voice refers to a range of ways through which workers can influence decisions that affect them. As we've seen in previous chapters, management of employees has tended to move in two seemingly contradictory directions: towards tighter managerial control, or towards greater responsibility on employees. This pattern is likely to continue into the future. In which direction individual managers move will depend on the industry of the firm, the technology available to management, and the strategic direction chosen by managers, sometimes in response to pressures from owners, sometimes driven by their own preferences or the possibilities that arise from technology. Efforts by management to tighten control lead to resistance from employees and generate conflict, and the tendency of technological changes to enhance that capacity for managerial control makes that resistance no less likely. So management tries to persuade employees that it is all in their interests, often via culturism (as discussed in Chapter 5), and sometimes by adopting 'high-trust' approaches centred on enhancing employees' 'voice' at work

If management does not want to give employees voice, employees will want voice anyway. Most employees seek more say at work, sometimes calling it 'participation in decision-making' or even 'workplace democracy',[7] while psychologists refer to 'job control'. The phrase you sometimes hear about the workplace—'leave your brains at the gate'—is used by workers to summarise the dismissive view many bosses have about the contribution employees can make, and about how much say workers have in what they do at work. Whatever some employers have done voluntarily about employee voice, there is little doubt that the underlying trend is towards less worker power in the workplace, as explained in Chapter 2 and shown by the decline in union membership,[8] and the growth of managerial surveillance and control discussed in Chapter 5. So I want to explore this concept of 'voice', including how employees can, do and will exercise it.

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5   See twitter.com/GoogleWalkout.
6   Noam Scheiber, 'Google Workers Reject Silicon Valley Individualism in Walkout'. *New York Times*, 6 November 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/11/06/business/google-employee-walkout-labor.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share.
7   Richard B. Freeman and Joel Rogers, *What Workers Want* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 1999).
8   Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Employment Outlook* (Paris: OECD, 2017).

Voice

Voice is a term with complex and 'uneven' meanings—that is, different people use it to describe different things.[9] At the simplest level, it can be divided into *formal voice*, which is often referred to as 'employee participation', and *informal voice*, which concerns the day-to-day behaviour of management—the extent to which managers have 'open door' practices, engage in behaviours such as a daily 'walk around' the factory or office floor, or otherwise obtain, welcome and pay attention to the views of ordinary employees. Informal voice is very much a function of *management style*, particularly regarding the high-trust/low-trust dimension, discussed in Chapter 5. Our focus in this chapter is on formal voice, though beware that formal voice mechanisms will be blunted or even rendered ineffective if they are undermined by informal practices that ignore employee views. That said, just because something is formalised does not make it participatory. Formalised 'information sharing' does not equate to employee participation. Employee voice can only be said to exist if it travels 'upwards'; that is, if management decisions are influenced by what those 'below' them are saying or demanding. As we saw in Chapter 5, sometimes firms will want to give the appearance of being participatory in order to disguise a high level of control over employees.

A common distinction is also made between *direct* participation (e.g. productivity improvement groups, management employee meetings, quality circles and semiautonomous work groups); and *representative* (or 'indirect') participation (e.g. joint consultative committees, works councils and employee board representatives).

The most important way of categorising voice, though, is the extent to which it is *management-constrained* (conditional) or *employee-controlled* (independent). The issue of constraint and control here refers not just to whose voice is heard but also to who makes the decisions about whether employee voices will continue to be heard. This dimension is therefore closely related to the implications of employee voice for *power*. 'Management-constrained' implies lower employee power; 'employee-controlled' implies the opposite.

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9   Tony Dundon and Derek Rollison, *Employment Relations in Non-Union Firms* (London: Routledge, 2004).

A voice mechanism is management-constrained if it is conditional on management's acquiescence, and so management can ultimately terminate an arrangement for voice. Most forms of 'employee participation' that you may have heard of come under this category. These include almost all 'direct' and some 'indirect' or 'representative' forms of employee participation. A voice mechanism is employee-controlled if it is independent of management's intent, and so management cannot unilaterally terminate an arrangement for voice. Some representative forms of employee participation are employee-controlled. In developed countries, by far the most common form of employee-controlled participation is trade unionism. Sometimes, though, the term may refer to 'works councils' (a form of representative participation found in parts of Europe), the activation of which may depend on employees specifying they want to have it. As they may be pressured against this, there are proposals to make this (called *Mitbestimmung* in Germany) compulsory.[10] So the distinction, while useful, is not without caveats. In some developing countries nongovernment organisations (NGOs) are mechanisms by which employees might independently express their voice.

Employee participation is promoted by different people for different reasons. Some managers, and some policy-makers, encourage employee participation because of the perceived potential to *improve economic performance,* and there is quite a lot of evidence that it does this.[11] Usually, such arguments are made about conditional voice, and that is the main reason management allows it to occur. Independent voice probably has a weaker, perhaps more neutral impact on economic performance due to opposing influences.[12] On the one hand, workers' knowledge of their situation can make major contributions to improving efficiency, and workers committed to a union tend on average to be more committed to

10   Werner Nienhüser, 'Employees Want Democracy in the Workplace'. *Magazin Mitbestimmung*, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, 2018, www.boeckler.de/66359.htm.

11   George Strauss, 'Workers' Participation in Management'. In *Employment Relations: The Psychology of Influence and Control at Work*, ed. Jean F. Hartley and Geoffrey M. Stevenson (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 291–311; Derek C. Jones and Jan Svejnar, 'The Economic Performance of Participatory and Self-Managed Firms: A Historical Perspective and a Review'. In *Participatory and Self-Managed Firms*, ed. Derek C. Jones and Jan Svejnar (Lexington, MA: DC Heath & Co, 1982), 3–16; Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, *Industrial Democracy and Employee Participation: A Policy Discussion Paper* (Canberra: Working Environment Branch, DEIR and AGPS, 1986); John R. Cable and Felix R. Fitzroy, 'Co-operation and Productivity: Some Evidence from West German Experience'. *Journal of Economic Analysis and Workers Management* 14, no. 2 (1980): 163–80.

12   Richard B. Freeman and James L. Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Richard B. Freeman, 'What Do Unions Do? The 2004 M-Brane Stringtwister Edition'. *Journal of Labor Research* 26, no. 4 (2005): 642–68.

the organisation.[13] On the other hand, employees may resist management overtures, and worker control that cannot be negated by management can give them an effective tool for resistance and restricting output.[14] The net effect appears to depend on circumstances.[15] It is not designed to enhance organisational performance, but if employees want to use it in part for that purpose (which many rationally would—workers typically want to preserve their jobs and improve the prospects of their organisation) it will likely have the effect of improving organisational performance, as management is rarely the source of all wisdom.

Sometimes the benefits for performance arising from increased employee participation derive from the greater reliance on supervision by peers rather than supervision through a hierarchical chain of command. This sounds quite exciting for employees, but there is a different, grim angle on this coming from Barker's study of a firm he called 'ISE Electronics'.[16] Here, there was a shift from hierarchical, bureaucratic control to self-managing teams. Barker noticed that employees felt more closely watched than when they were under bureaucratic control. He described 'concertive control' as something that grows out of a substantial consensus about values, high-level coordination, and a degree of self-management by members or workers in an organisation'. Barker considered that:

> contrary to the proponents of such systems, concertive control did not free workers from [Max] Weber's iron cage of rational control. Instead, the concertive system, as it became manifest in this case, appeared to draw the iron cage tighter and to constrain the organisation's members more powerfully.[17]

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13   As discussed in Chapter 5, this phenomenon is called 'dual commitment'. See reference 80 in that chapter.

14   Bernard Elbaum and Frank Wilkinson, 'Industrial Relations and Uneven Development: A Comparative Study of the American and British Steel Industries'. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 3, no. 3 (1979): 275–303.

15   Sandra E. Black and Lisa M. Lynch, 'How to Compete: The Impact of Workplace Practices and Information Technology on Productivity'. *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 83, no. 3 (2001): 434–45; Eileen Appelbaum, Jody Hoffer Gittell, and Carrie Leana, 'High-Performance Work Practices and Sustainable Economic Growth'. Memo to Obama Administration, Brandeis University, 20 March 2011.

16   James R. Barker, 'Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive Control in Self-Managing Teams'. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1993): 408–37.

17   Ibid. See also Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Routledge, repr. 2013).

Still, not all systems of self-managing teams may have this effect: if culture is fragmented, pressure for concertive control will be weak. Even if it is intended to act in that way, as we saw in Chapters 3 and 5, no system of control is total.

While Barker's was an American case study, there was also Australian survey evidence from the 1990s to support his interpretations. It suggested that not all changes at work were being 'forced' upon employees against their 'will'. While many employees were being made to work harder as a consequence of the growing exercise of managerial prerogative, others were working harder in the context of what might appear to be greater employee control over their own working lives. Even changes that gave employees greater control over their working time appear to be associated with increased work intensity. Thus it may ironically *reduce* rather than enhance the autonomy of employees.[18] Moves either to 'high performance' work systems or their opposite, Taylorism, were both associated with increased work intensity and stress—two paths to work intensification.[19] Adverse effects such as this could limit the gains from participation. We can think of management seeking to loosen *direct* control of employee work methods and hours as a means of tightening control of employee *outputs*. There is some indication of increasing use by corporations of management-constrained participation mechanisms.[20]

So while workers typically want more say, they are not necessarily better off in all respects if this is designed to benefit management. Another, Danish study found that, while participation enhanced the quality of the working environment, increasing direct participation without increasing collective (indirect) participation could have a negative effect on employee psychological wellbeing 'if participation is limited to operational issues pertaining to job performance, framed by a top-down involvement scheme and/or linked to productivity targets and performance control of employees'.[21]

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18   David Peetz, Cameron Allan, and Michael O'Donnell, 'Are Australians Really Unhappier with Their Bosses Because They're Working Harder? Perspiration and Persuasion in Modern Work'. Paper presented at Rethinking Institutions for Work and Employment, Selected Papers from the XXXVIII Annual Canadian Industrial Relations Association Conference, Quebec, 26–28 May 2001.
19   Ibid.
20   Richard B. Freeman, Peter Boxall, and Peter Haynes, eds, *What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca NY: ILR Press, 2007).
21   Ole Busck, Herman Knudsen, and Jens Lind, 'Who Is in Control? The Effect of Employee Participation on the Quality of the Work Environment'. Paper presented at European congress of International Industrial Relations Association, Copenhagen, June 2010.

In many firms, management will give employees enough autonomy, and the illusion of control, to improve productivity until the point when employees decide to challenge managerial authority or decisions in some way. Then it becomes very clear that employees have to submit to managerial directives in the absence of any countervailing employee power. In many ways, that is what we saw with 'Servo' and Starbucks in Chapter 5: 'members', 'associates' and 'partners' may have all felt they had their say, until they were performance-managed out of their job or made redundant. As the Danish researchers discovered, direct without representative participation—that is, without some form of independent voice—may be damaging, as 'collective participation, found at the workplaces with a democratic governance system of management–employee relations, is very helpful in resisting or compensating for strenuous psychological demands'.[22]

So greater productivity, for the benefit of the organisation, is one rationale for employee participation. A second rationale is a *social justice* one—a rationale more commonly associated with left-leaning political parties. According to this view, voice is justified because it is a right of employees to be able to influence the decisions that affect their working lives. That is, if society is pluralist outside the workplace, why should it become dictatorial once you step inside the workplace? Industrial democracy, and even economic democracy, are seen as corollaries of political democracy.

Although this rationale is about people's rights, it is bolstered by evidence showing that employee participation in decision-making is good for people who exercise it. For example, before you conclude from the earlier material that giving employees greater say doesn't help them deal properly with the long-hours issue, consider this: one Australian employee study showed that, despite working harder, employees experiencing greater say—including on hours—showed other benefits in areas like job satisfaction, training opportunities, use of skills and receipt of a pay rise.[23] In another study, of mine and energy workers, those who had no say over their hours and shifts reported more short-term illnesses. The use of sleeping tablets was higher among workers who had no say in their hours. Those who wished to reduce hours and had no say over their hours

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22   Ibid.
23   Peetz, Allan, and O'Donnell, 'Are Australians Really Unhappier'.

were three-quarters more likely to use anti-depressants.[24] So, greater say over hours was associated with better health outcomes, even in a long-hours industry. That study also showed that mining and energy workers who had no say over when they could take time off were considerably more likely to say that they were getting on worse with people at home: 11 per cent said that how well they 'got on with people at home' had gone down over the previous two years, versus 6.5 per cent for whom it had gone up.[25] In a broader study, the mining industry was ranked the second worst on the index measuring the degree of interference between work and family life. One reason may be the divergence between hours preferred and hours worked.[26]

The third rationale for employee participation relates exclusively to employee-controlled voice. Just as a corporation is a collective of capital (a collection of shareholders seeking to maximise their economic power by combining), so too a union is a collective of labour. Workers come together to form unions in order to increase their bargaining power. In the absence of this, most workers would have little or no bargaining power as individuals when negotiating with a corporation, a collective of capital, over employment. That is, as there are some issues on which the interests of workers and employers are in conflict, it is rational for employees to want to improve their bargaining power, and to do so in a way that is not controlled by management. Whether employers think that employee voice is a good idea is irrelevant to this rationale—though it also happens to be the case that many employers prefer dealing with unions as this reduces their transaction costs in employee relations (hence some employers have a 'collectivist' style, discussed in Chapter 5). Employee-controlled or independent voice is what the rest of this chapter concentrates upon, as it represents the main means by which employees can seek to alter the direction in which management wishes to take them.

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24   David Peetz, Georgina Murray, and Olav Muurlink, *Work and Hours Amongst Mining and Energy Workers* (Brisbane: Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University, 2012), 11–12.
25   Ibid.
26   Natalie Skinner and Barbara Pocock, *Work, Life & Workplace Culture: The Australian Work and Life Index 2008* (Adelaide: Centre for Work + Life, University of South Australia, 2008).

Independent voice: Trade unionism

As mentioned, independent or employee-controlled voice—collective voice—mostly takes the form of trade unionism, at least in developed countries. Still, as former US Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez said recently:

> There are many ways to give voice to workers. Unions are certainly one way. There are also a number of non-profits that are working with taxicab drivers and home health workers and fast food workers, nonprofits that are very agile, and they're really standing up for low-wage workers trying to give voice.[27]

These new institutions might include cooperatives, worker centres, 'fast food strikes' or even 'Turkopticon', which rates organisations soliciting workers through the gig platform Amazon Mechanical Turk.[28] That said, I focus here on unions.

Some writers have distinguished between two forms of unionism, which broadly speaking can be described as unionism mostly outside the workplace (sometimes called 'political unionism', 'arbitration unionism', 'labourism', or, in a particular form, 'service unionism') and unionism mostly focused within the workplace (sometimes called 'organising unionism'). The terms 'organising' and 'service' unionism emerged initially in the USA and spread to other Anglophone countries in the 1990s, having particular salience in Australia because the arbitration system, within which Australian unions developed, had discouraged the development of workplace unionism.[29]

Workplace unionism is very important for the sustainability of unionism. Although that statement may seem obvious, for long periods in the twentieth century activism at the workplace was not encouraged by unions, especially in some Anglophone countries, whether because of fear

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27 Thomas Perez, 'Video: A Message from Former US Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez to the Next Generation Workforce'. Shaping the Future of Work (Cambridge, MA: MIT and EdX, 2017), courses.edx.org/courses/course-v1:MITx+15.662x_3+1T2017/courseware/d670b05d28d1497fb 57422c10cbb6319/f7b6dd9e996e4ec9b9981566a69a16eb/?child=first (subscription required).

28 Thomas A. Kochan, 'Video: All Innovations Are Local'. Shaping the Future of Work (Cambridge, MA: MIT and EdX, 2017).

29 Malcolm Rimmer, 'Work Place Unionism'. In *Australian Unions: An Industrial Relations Perspective*, ed. William Ford and David Plowman (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1989), 122–44; David Peetz and Janis Bailey, 'Dancing Alone: The Australian Union Movement over Three Decades'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 54, no. 4 (2012): 524–41.

of loss of central control or 'wildcat' strikes or, in the case of Australia and New Zealand, the logic of arbitration systems that privileged advocacy skills in front of tribunals ahead of organising skills.

From the 1990s, unionism was in decline in many countries, especially in Australia. Although some attributed this to the decline of manufacturing, 'blue collar' jobs or other industrial or occupational change,[30] empirically this explanation does not hold up except for a relatively short period (mostly in the 1980s).[31] For example, in Australia, manufacturing employment virtually halved, from around 14.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent, between 1990 and 2016. But union density in manufacturing was only 5 percentage points above the national average in 1990 anyway, so that change in its share of employment could only account for about a third of a percentage point of union decline, out of the 27 percentage point decline in union density over this period—union density across Australia fell from 41 per cent in 1990 to about 14 per cent in 2016. Indeed, union density *within* manufacturing fell from 46 per cent in 1990 to little over 12 per cent in 2016—greater than the decline across the nation, in fact.[32] Density declined within all industries and occupations, and structural effects associated with industry of employment were small. The decline of public sector employment had a more noticeable effect, but still only accounted for a minor portion of union decline. In other countries, composition change among industries or occupations after 1990 does

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30   For example, 'union decline has broadly tracked the declining share of jobs held by blue-collar workers': Bradley Bowden, 'Three Charts On: The Changing Face of Australian Union Members'. *The Conversation*, 4 July 2017, theconversation.com/three-charts-on-the-changing-face-of-australian-union-members-80141.

31   In the UK, compositional change between 1983 and 1989 accounted for about 30 per cent of the decline in density. Francis Green, 'Recent Trends in British Trade Union Density: How Much of a Compositional Effect?'. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 30, no. 3 (1992): 445–58. In Australia during the 1980s its contribution could have been up to a half. David Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World: The Future of the Australian Trade Union Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Its contribution appeared considerably smaller in most other OECD countries: Jelle Visser, 'Trends in Trade Union Membership'. In *Employment Outlook* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1991), 97–134.

32   Australian Bureau of Statistics. 'Trade Union Members'. Canberra 6325.0; Australian Bureau of Statistics. 'Characteristics of Employment'. Canberra 6333.0.

little to explain declines in density.[33] All of this is nothing new: that the fastest growing sectors of employment have been hardest to unionise is 'a problem as old as the union movement'.[34]

Some workplaces that were previously unionised were deunionised. Union collapse at Australian workplaces in the 1990s occurred most commonly where unions had weak workplace organisation, where there was no delegate presence or where delegates were inactive or unions were not involved in workplace bargaining. Workplace delegates, therefore, played a vital role in preventing deunionisation. Workplaces with active unions were more likely to resist deunionisation.[35]

The response of unions in several (mostly Anglophone) countries to the crisis of the 1990s was to place increasing emphasis on the future of *workplace unionism*. This concept—or at least, 'organising'—re-emerged in the USA and Canada,[36] and led, in Australia, to the establishment of 'Organising Works', a centre (since renamed) run through the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) for training union activists. This became the model for the Organising Academy, established by the British Trades Union Congress. These agencies promoted the 'organising model' of unionism. At the core of this concept of 'organising' was the fermentation of workplace activism, through developing and providing support for workplace delegates. The idea was that members be empowered to solve problems themselves, as opposed to having paid union officials

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33   Frank Walsh and Eric Strobl, 'Recent Trends in Trade Union Membership in Ireland'. *Economic and Social Review* 40, no. 1 (2009): 117–38; Claus Schnabel, 'Union Membership and Density: Some (Not So) Stylized Facts and Challenges'. *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 255–72.
34   R. Archer, 'Organising: An International Perspective'. In *Unions 2001*, ed. Evatt Foundation (Sydney: 1995).
35   Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World.*
36   The word 're-emerged' is used because many argue that this is how unionism originally formed and, in North America, the 'organising' approach owed much to the work of Saul Alinsky who, in the 1930s, led the organising of a depressed Chicago 'slum'. Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).

solve them on their behalf.[37] In practice, organising unions engaged in both 'organising' and 'servicing' activities (acting as agents in response to member queries), but they may have had dedicated functions within the union to deal with servicing requests ('member service centres'), leaving organisers to do organising work. A union approach that did not extend beyond the workplace would be crippled. The ability to refer beyond the workplace—and by reference to considerations beyond the workplace, to make demands upon management—is one of the characteristics distinguishing between management-constrained and employee-controlled forms of voice.

Recent patterns of union membership show interesting, in some cases seemingly contradictory, features. In most Anglophone countries, for example, employees have reported that they desired a cooperative relationship between the union and management at the workplace.[38] Not only did they see that the union needed to behave cooperatively; they also expected management to reciprocate by cooperating with the union to solve workplace problems. Detailed questioning revealed that, to workers, cooperation meant management sharing power and authority with unions, not some sort of sham whereby management leads and the union cooperates by following. Union members were more vigorous in demanding that management cooperate more with unions than that unions cooperate more with management,[39] and almost unanimously wanted unions to continue to vigorously defend their interests. Thus the meaning of 'cooperation' was quite complex, and a long way from 'acquiescence'. Union members were more likely to have taken part in industrial action where they saw unions as

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37   Examples of studies or publications that related to organising include: Bradon Ellem, 'New Unionism in the Old Economy: Community and Collectivism in the Pilbara's Mining Towns'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 45, no. 4 (2003): 423–41; Patricia Findlay and Alan McKinlay, 'Union Organising in "Big Blue's" Backyard'. *Industrial Relations Journal* 34, no. 1 (2003): 52–66; Christopher L. Erickson et al., 'Justice for Janitors in Los Angeles: Lessons from Three Rounds of Negotiations'. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40, no. 3 (September 2002): 543–67; David Peetz, *Brave New Workplace: How Individual Contracts Are Changing Our Jobs* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006), Chapter 7; Bob Carter and Rae Cooper, 'The Organizing Model and the Management of Change: A Comparative Study of Unions in Australia and Britain'. *Relations Industrielles* 57, no. 4 (Fall, 2002): 712–42; *Unions@Work* (Melbourne: ACTU, 1998); Kate Bronfenbrenner, Sheldon Friedman, Richard W. Hurd, and Rudolph A. Oswald, eds, *Organising to Win* (Ithaca NY: ILR Press, 1998).

38   This is another example of dual commitment, mentioned in an earlier footnote. For data, see Freeman, Boxall, and Haynes, *What Workers Say*. This includes the chapter David Peetz and Ann Frost, 'Employee Voice in the Anglo-American World: What Does It Mean for Unions?'. In *What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American World*, ed. Richard B. Freeman, Peter Boxall, and Peter Haynes (Ithaca NY: ILR Press, 2007).

39   In Australia, the numbers for these two last estimates were 82 per cent and 66 per cent, respectively.

having tried to cooperate with management.[40] It may seem paradoxical, but it meant members were more likely to get involved in union actions if they perceived the union as reflecting their own interests—as being 'democratic'. We will come back to this.

Union density among young workers has been very low. Yet research finds that generally young people are not opposed outright to unionism— this is not surprising, given the evident responsiveness of young voters to left-wing causes in elections in the USA and UK.[41] Young people tend, instead, to be simply unaware of what unionism is, partly because many of them do not have parents who are union members.[42] So there is a generational aspect to union membership. Where they have an opinion (which is not so often), young employees are as likely to *want* to belong to a union as older employees, but much less likely to actually belong, perhaps because they have less opportunity to join, and have lower awareness of workplace issues.[43] As the proportions of young workers who are socialised by unionised parents falls, however, ignorance of unions and workplace issues increases. Some unions use a range of strategies to allow young people to 'sample' unionism or 'activist' programs that target young members.[44] Researchers urge unions to explain unions' raison d'etre and their internal processes to young workers but also to 'allow young members to contribute to bringing about the kinds of changes they are calling for'.[45]

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40   David Peetz, 'Workplace Cooperation, Conflict, Influence and Union Membership'. In *Contemporary Research on Unions: Theory, Membership, Organisation and Non-Standard Employment*, ed. G. Griffin, Monograph No. 8 (Melbourne: National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, 1996), 309–46.

41   Sarah Wildman, 'How Angry Young Voters Help Explain the Historic UK Election Upset'. *Vox*, 13 June 2017, www.vox.com/world/2017/6/13/15771640/bernie-corbyn-melenchon-uk-election-young-voters-youth-vote; Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Noorya Hayat, Abby Kiesa, and Felicia Sullivan, 'Donald Trump and Young Voters' (Medford, MA: Tufts University, Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, June 2016), civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Trump-and-Youth-Vote.pdf, 4.

42   Freeman, Boxall, and Haynes, *What Workers Say*.

43   Julian Teicher et al., 'Employee Voice in Australia'. In *What Workers Say: Employee Voice in the Anglo-American World*, ed. Richard B. Freeman, Peter Boxall, and Peter Haynes (Ithaca NY: ILR Press, 2007); David Peetz, Robin Price, and Janis Bailey, 'Ageing Australian Unions and the "Youth Problem"'. In *Young People and Trade Unions: A Global View*, ed. Lefteris Kretsos and Andrew Hodder (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

44   Janis Bailey et al., 'Daggy Shirts, Daggy Slogans? Marketing Unions to Young People'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 52, no. 1 (2010): 43–60.

45   Mélanie Dufour-Poirier and Mélanie Laroche, 'Revitalising Young Workers' Union Participation: A Comparative Analysis of Two Organisations in Quebec (Canada)'. *Industrial Relations Journal* 45, no. 5–6 (2015): 418–33.

Union members tend to report high levels of satisfaction with their union.[46] Many nonmembers would be willing to join a union, given the opportunity, including approximately a third of all workers in nonunionised workplaces in several countries in one 2000s study,[47] probably rising to nearly half of US nonmembers by 2017.[48] These 'frustrated nonmembers' are typically on low incomes (often in the secondary labour market), in small workplaces or enterprises, or young. Those with more unmet workplace 'needs' are more likely to want unionism.[49]

Are unions doomed by the shift to individualism?

Some of the above considerations, such as the high satisfaction with unions among members, and stresses on wages and working conditions in recent years, might suggest there would be reasons why unions could grow. Yet the idea is often dismissed because of modern attitudes. One of the common suggestions made in talking about the future of work is that there will be no more unions because we will be working as freelancers and nobody will want unions any more as we will all want to be—and all will be—treated like individuals, with individualistic values and philosophies.[50] As seen in earlier chapters, we will not all be working as freelancers and will not all be treated like individuals at work. But what about our values? People have been saying for 30 years or more that we are becoming individualistic in our philosophies and that this will preclude collective behaviour in the future. Class is said to be losing its significance and individuals embedded in market relations, making their own choices, undergoing 'individuation', fashioning their own identities, isolated and egocentric.[51]

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46   Freeman, Boxall, and Haynes, *What Workers Say*; Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*.
47   Freeman, Boxall, and Haynes, *What Workers Say*.
48   Thomas Kochan et al., 'Who Wants to Join a Union? A Growing Number of Americans'. *The Conversation*, 31 August 2018, theconversation.com/who-wants-to-join-a-union-a-growing-number-of-americans-102374.
49   Freeman, Boxall, and Haynes, *What Workers Say*.
50   Peter Frase, 'Delusions of the Tech Bro Intelligentsia'. *Jacobin*, 21 October 2013. www.jacobinmag.com/2013/10/delusions-of-the-tech-bro-intelligentsia/.
51   Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Rainer Zoll, 'Failing to Modernize?'. *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 1, no. 1 (1995): 119–28; Ben Valkenburg, 'Individualization, Participation and Solidarity'. *European Journal of Industrial Relations* 1, no. 1 (1995): 129–44.

The numbers show otherwise. It is true that respondents can interpret survey questions in different ways in different geographic contexts, so standardised questions are not all that useful for telling you whether, say, Norway is less individualistic than the USA. But standardised questions asked in the same place at different times can give you a pretty good idea as to whether, and in which direction, beliefs in that place have changed. And generally speaking they show no net general drift towards individualism. If anything, the opposite is the case. For example, a question asking respondents, across up to two dozen countries, to choose between 'freedom' and 'equality' shows on average a leftward drift in more countries than not, over a series of periods from 1981–83 to 2008.[52] Several international studies have found majority support for government action to reduce inequality or for reducing the gap between the pay of chief executive officers and ordinary wages.[53] American public attitudes against wide differentials between the highest income earners and the rest appeared to harden from 1987 to 1999.[54] Despite massive changes in the occupational structure, patterns of class identification are very similar in the twenty-first century to what they were two to four decades earlier in Britain, Australia, the USA or Canada.[55] Consistently, opinion polls had shown around half the US workforce had identified as working or lower class from at least the early 1970s onwards.[56] Yet this was largely considered irrelevant by media commentators and politicians. Almost none used the term 'working class' in public discourse for years (preferring, if anything, 'middle class') until Donald Trump colonised the term in 2016.

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52   A 'leftward drift' here refers to moves towards attitudes supportive of collective or redistributive action by labour or the state. IFO Institute for Economic Research, 'Database for Institutional Comparisons in Europe' (University of Munich, 2008).

53   GlobeScan/BBC World Service, 'Wide Dissatisfaction with Capitalism — Twenty Years after Fall of Berlin Wall' (London: BBC, 2009), 9 November; S. Kiatpongsan and M.I. Norton, 'How Much (More) Should CEOs Make? A Universal Desire for More Equal Pay'. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 9, no. 6 (2014): 587–93; International Labour Office, *Economic Security for a Better World* (Geneva: Socio-Economic Security Programme, ILO, 2004).

54   Lars Osberg and Timothy Smeeding, '"Fair" Inequality? Attitudes toward Pay Differentials: The United States in Comparative Perspective'. *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 3 (2006): 450–73.

55   Mike Savage, 'Individuality and Class: The Rise and Fall of the Gentlemanly Social Contract in Britain'. In *Social Contracts under Stress: The Middle Classes of America, Europe, and Japan at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Olivier Zunz, Leonard James Schoppa, and Nobuhiro Hiwatari (New York: Russell Sage, 2002), 47–65; Chris Arnot, 'No Such Thing as a Classless Society'. *Guardian*, 7 October 2009, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/oct/07/class-influence-british-sense-identity; David Peetz, 'Are Individualistic Attitudes Killing Collectivism?'. *Transfer—European Review of Labour and Research* 16, no. 3 (2010): 383–98.

56   National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey Data Explorer: Subjective Class Identification (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2019), gssdataexplorer.norc.org/variables/568/vshow.

Changes in attitudes do not explain the decline in union density in Australia or elsewhere among advanced industrialised nations. Rather, the reasons are principally institutional. Chief among them have been employer strategies that increasingly focus on achieving nonunion status, 'distancing' and cost minimisation. These have been assisted by government strategies, particularly in Anglophone countries, that have marginalised unions through legislation, privatisation and administrative action.[57] The greater use of 'not there' employment has made it harder for unions to organise, by fragmenting bargaining and placing workers into jobs where price competition makes wage claims difficult. Weak unionism and weak regulation in turn encourage 'not there' employment, because the cost gains are higher and the potential for underpayment greater where workers are relocated to an entity where they are unable to organise resistance. At the heart of these strategies by both employers and governments is the rise of market liberalism or 'neo-liberalism'. To varying degrees (particularly in Australia, where the legacy of the award system's effects on unions was pervasive) unions exacerbated this by having difficulty in adapting to these changing circumstances—what Pocock called 'institutional sclerosis'—in the face of neo-liberalism.[58] Unions found it hard to redirect resources internally, to enable them to demonstrate power in ways that ensured retention of members.

Unionism is what economists call an 'experience good', so for current or recent union members the public image of unions matters little in determining workers' decision to stay, compared to their own experiences. However, unions' public image is important in shaping the behaviour of people who have never belonged to one,[59] and recruitment may become more difficult in the future, as fewer people have experience of unions that influences their decision to join and fewer people have union parents. There is already evidence that 'never joining' has increased;[60] so unions' public image, including that developed by the firms for which people work, becomes more influential in choices about union membership.

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57   Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*.

58   Barbara Pocock, 'Institutional Sclerosis: Prospects for Trade Union Transformation'. *Labour & Industry* 9, no. 1 (1998): 17–33.

59   Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*.

60   Alex Bryson and Rafael Gomez, *Why Have Workers Stopped Joining Unions?* (London: Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science, November 2003).

Collective behaviour is unlikely to go away, even if people are unwilling or unable to join unions. Collective behaviour arises where a number of conditions are met.[61] The first is that others also share needs or grievances felt by individuals—that is, grievances are collective. The objective circumstances promoting collectivism—the existence of exploitation creating grievances—are set to continue. Nor is there any sign that the values enabling collectivism are in decline. Where people possess *values* that promote altruistic or mutually supportive behaviour, that reinforce trust among members of the group, or that emphasise the welfare of a group as a whole as opposed to that of successful individuals, then collective attitudes and the scope for collective behaviour will be strengthened. Where people share common social identities, they are likely to act together, but where they lack a sense of common identity or are divided they are unlikely to act together.[62] Where people possess beliefs of collective efficacy, that is, they sense agency and believe they have the power to achieve their goals through collective behaviour, they will be more likely to behave collectively,[63] as 'a collective of self-doubters is not easily forged into a collectively efficacious force'.[64]

Collective action also depends on potential participants having collective values—such as concern about inequality, solidarity or the belief that acting together is a 'good thing'. It also requires coordination, through connections or networks between members of the group; the existence of collective mobilisers (e.g. union delegates or leaders) who can mobilise collective cooperation; and democratic (collective) coordination (as opposed to autocratic or individual coordination) within the collective. How much all this translates to the exercise of collective power will also depend on the institutional and environmental responses to collective action (including the actions of the state, the behaviours of corporations and employers, and the condition of the labour market). There has been a major decline in collective labour institutions (trade unions) and in collective industrial conflict (measured by numbers of strikes or working days lost) over the past

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61   Peetz, *Brave New Workplace*.
62   Caroline Kelly and Sara Breinlinger, 'Identity and Injustice: Exploring Women's Participation in Collective Action'. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 5 (1995): 41–57; John E. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism, and Long Waves.* Routledge Studies in Employment Relations (London, New York: Routledge, 1998). John Kelly's book is one of the more important in understanding union mobilisation.
63   Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (New York: W.H. Freeman & Company, 1997); John Kelly, 'British Trade Unionism 1979–89: Change, Continuity and Contradictions'. *Work, Employment and Society* special issue (1990): 29–60.
64   Bandura, *Self-Efficacy*, 480.

three decades. There is little evidence, however, that this is due to a decline in collective values, as these have changed little.[65] Rather, changes in the institutional framework, in particular the policies and actions of the state and employers, offer more persuasive explanations.

If people are prevented from acting collectively through unions, they will look for other means of doing so. Even if unions can no longer play the role of mobilisers, there is no reason to think that collective grievances will go away, or that common work identities will disappear.[66] Actions may be more disorganised, individualistic, self-destructive, even violent, but dissatisfaction and resistance are unlikely to go away.

Power and activism

Unions aim to achieve gains for their members by obtaining and exercising power in the workplace and elsewhere. Richard Hyman made one of the classical observations on union power.[67] He noted the significance for a union of the *power of* its members, its ability to advance their interests. But he also identified the importance of a union's *power over* its members, without which it would not have *power for* its members. In other words, a union can only exercise collective power on behalf of its members 'if, and to the extent that, it can mobilise disciplined collective action on the part of its members'.[68] It needs to be able to promote solidarity among and enforce discipline within its membership.

This also relates back to one of the oldest issues that have faced collectives of any type, since people came together to form villages and societies, tradesmen came together to form guilds and workers came together to form trade unions: the problem of the 'free rider'. In biology and economics this is termed the problem of the 'cheat'—someone who obtains the benefits of membership of a group without contributing towards the

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65 Peetz, *Brave New Workplace*; David Peetz, 'Are Collective Identity and Action Being Squashed by Individualism?'. In *Work and Identity: Contemporary Perspectives on Workplace Diversity*, ed. Shalene Werth and Charlotte Brownlow (New York: Palgrave, 2018).
66 Peetz, 'Squashed by Individualism?'.
67 *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1975).
68 Ibid., 65.

costs.[69] For trade unions, free riders dilute the bargaining strength of the group, reducing the impact of any collective action on an employer and the power resources available to union members. Free riding appears to have recently increased in Australia and some other countries, due not to changing values but to institutional developments.[70]

Some of the major research on union renewal has been among Canadian academics. From there, Lévesque and Murray point out, the 'key factors currently challenging union power clearly cut across the different national institutional arrangements in which unions are embedded'. Levesque and Murray identified four key 'power resources' for unions:

1. internal solidarity (sufficiently cohesive identities to pursue their goals; and 'deliberative vitality'—the participation of members in the life of their union);

2. network embeddedness (the degree to which unions are linked to their own and other union organisations, community groups, social movements or other types of actors);

3. narrative resources (the range of values, shared understandings, stories and ideologies that aggregate identities and interests, translate and inform motives and create a sense of efficacy)[71] that frame understandings and union actions;

4. infrastructural resources (material, human, processes, policies and programs).[72]

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69   The issue of free riding, in nature, ancient societies and modern collectives, is discussed in Chapter 2 of Peetz, *Brave New Workplace*, and more extensively by other authors; for example, John Stewart, *Evolution's Arrow: The Direction of Evolution and the Future of Humanity* (Canberra: Chapman Press, 2000).

70   For instance, union density has, in Australia, declined by more than collective bargaining coverage, as it is convenient for many employers to continue to negotiate with a union than go through the upheaval from shifting to non-union negotiation. David Peetz and Serena Yu, *Explaining Recent Trends in Collective Bargaining*. Research Report 4/2017 (Melbourne: Fair Work Commission, February 2017). Changes in union density also appear greater than changes in union density in Sweden, Slovenia and Switzerland, but the trends appear in the other direction in the UK, USA and Germany.

71   Albert Bandura, 'Exercise of Personal and Collective Efficacy in Changing Societies'. In *Self-Efficacy in Changing Societies*, ed. Albert Bandura (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 1–45; Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*.

72   Christian Lévesque and Gregor Murray, 'Understanding Union Power: Resources and Capabilities for Renewing Union Capacity'. *Transfer—European Review of Labour and Research* 16, no. 3 (2010): 333–50.

However, as Levesque and Murray point out, resources alone are not enough—unions must be capable of using them as the context changes. For example, intensified competition and globalisation have weakened pattern bargaining (lodging of similar claims with the other side across a number of bargaining sites). They have also weakened union links to political processes so that 'external solidarity resources derived from previous patterns of network embeddedness are not providing the leverage on which past patterns of union action relied'.[73] This increases the importance of the workplace, while highlighting unions' need to develop new ways of organising beyond the workplace and articulating back to it including through developing new forms of networks. One illustration is the increasing (though still limited) use by unions of social media[74] and online actions.[75] As 'understanding … union resources and capabilities is critical to an understanding of efforts to enhance union power', Lévesque and Murray identified four key strategic *capabilities* required for union power. These were unions' abilities to put forward an agenda ('framing'); intermediate between contending interests to foster collaborative action and activate networks; reflect on, build, anticipate and act upon change, and spread these lessons throughout the organisation ('learning'); and articulate actions over time (short term versus long term) and space (including the multiple levels at which unions act).

How does the future of unions look in relation to these issues? One of the major weaknesses of progressive groups has been their inadequate framing of political debate and union rhetoric about inequality.[76] Framing is a major challenge when the media are replete with stories—some beat-ups, some fictional and some based on grim facts—about poor union governance, misbehaviour or corruption. Years of observing unions suggest to me that, while many individuals are great learners, the organisations themselves often are not, despite many years passing since Pocock had remarked on this problem not long after the start of unions'

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73   Ibid., 345.
74   Alex White, *Social Media for Unions* (Melbourne: Aleithia Media and Communications, 2010), alexwhite.org/2010/12/social-media-for-unions/.
75   LabourStart, *Labourstart Australia* (2014), www.labourstart.org/2013/country.php?country= Australia&langcode=en.
76   Anat Shenker-Osorio, *Don't Buy It: The Trouble with Talking Nonsense about the Economy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012). In Australia, this is despite the successful 'Your Rights at Work' campaign that led to the defeat of the Howard government—a campaign framed in terms of 'rights'. Kathie Muir, *Worth Fighting For: Inside the Your Rights at Work Campaign* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2008). The Your Rights at Work campaign also failed, despite lofty ideals, to *deeply* engage community groups and build strong linkages with them. Peetz and Bailey, 'Dancing Alone'.

reform process.[77] On articulation, a critical link is that between the paid and unpaid levels of the union—between the office and the workplace. Effective union mobilisation requires power and capabilities on many levels. But perhaps the first of these, the foundation, is the workplace, and that is worth some special focus here.

Building workplace organisation and democratisation

Workplace power for unions requires workplace activism. Workplace activism requires effective delegates, as the collapse of Australian unionism in the 1990s showed.[78] Activism also requires delegates with a sense of efficacy, as confidence and self-belief are a strong predictor of activism, even stronger than self-assessed skill levels.[79] Workplace power requires support by the union office, particularly organisers, for workplace delegates.[80] While unions are more than just a form of workplace social capital,[81] workplace power requires delegates have access to networks, internal and external to the workplace, formalised or informal, that provide support, information and ideas. And it requires that delegates, and members, have a sense that they can and do influence what the union itself does. Democracy within unions is a precondition for success. It is not just a question of a union's power for its members depending in part on power over its members:[82] in a world without wage arbitration, workers cannot have power in the workplace if they do not have power in the union.[83]

Some of the implications, of what unions need to do to value and empower delegates, are obvious but not always easy. The research shows that activism is severely hampered unless workplace delegates are trained. Setting aside resources for education promotes learning within and by organisations. Training enhances not only the skills but also the confidence of delegates for engaging in activism, and for spreading the load to others with different

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77   Pocock, 'Institutional Sclerosis'.

78   Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*.

79   David Peetz, Carol Webb, and Meredith Jones, 'Activism Amongst Workplace Union Delegates'. *International Journal of Employment Studies* 10, no. 2 (2002): 83–108.

80   David Peetz and Barbara Pocock, 'An Analysis of Workplace Representatives, Union Power and Democracy in Australia'. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 47, no. 4 (2009): 623–52.

81   Paul Jarley, 'Unions as Social Capital: Renewal through a Return to the Logic of Mutual Aid?'. *Labor Studies Journal* 29, no. 4 (2005): 1–26.

82   Hyman, *Industrial Relations*, 65.

83   Peetz and Pocock, 'Workplace Representatives'.

but complementary capabilities or interests.[84] The research also shows that formal training of delegates is almost wasted if resources are not also put into the follow-up of training, to imprint the lessons. The formal and the informal are two very important sides of the training coin.[85] Devoting resources to training is expensive but not necessarily controversial; the structural changes needed to ensure it is followed up and complemented can be both. The provision and facilitation of *opportunities* for networking is as important for developing supportive networks for delegate networks as is the provision of training itself.[86]

To be capable and motivated, delegates require both training and meaning from the union. By 'meaning' I refer to a sense of what the union stands for, through an articulation of union values through the union organisation.[87] It also is about a sense of real say in the decisions that affect delegates and members, both direct participation in decision-making (influencing the day-to-day decisions about work as a member and delegate) and indirect participation (influencing the decisions of the union itself).

Democratisation, in this context, is not just about having elected structures. Generally and on average, elected structures are good. However they do not have much impact if people are elected to positions unopposed, along factional lines. At times, certain forms of elected positions (such as elected organisers in some unions) can retard reform processes within unions and maintain the status quo. Union democracy is a contested and paradoxical concept. Democratisation is more about how much ability members and delegates have, to shape what the union does. It is about how a union functions, and how open it is to members' preferences and their diversity. The correlates of perceived democracy within unions suggest it is closely related to a willingness of the union to embrace and respond to broad constituencies, both inside and outside, such as those representing women's interests.[88]

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84   Peetz, Webb, and Jones, 'Activism'; Peetz and Pocock, 'Workplace Representatives'.

85   David Peetz and Michael Alexander, 'A Synthesis of Research on Training of Union Delegates'. *Industrial Relations Journal* 44, no. 4 (2013): 425–42.

86   David Peetz et al., 'The Meaning and Making of Union Delegate Networks'. *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 26, no. 4 (2015): 596–613.

87   Christian Levesque and Gregor Murray, 'Local Versus Global: Activating Local Union Power in the Global Economy'. *Labor Studies Journal* 27, no. 3 (2002): 39–65; Lévesque and Murray, 'Understanding Union Power'.

88   David Peetz and Barbara Pocock, 'Community Activists, Coalitions and Unionism'. In *Trade Unions in the Community: Values, Issues, Shared Interests and Alliances*, ed. D. Buttigieg, et al. (Adelaide: Heidelberg Press, 2007).

So, are unions becoming more workplace-focused? The evidence of the past two decades suggests that in several countries the answer is 'yes'. Are they becoming more democratic? That is much harder to assess. Their formal structures appear to be changing to make it harder for individuals to unilaterally control or 'run off with' resources, but 'professionalisation' may also reduce directly elected positions. One-off surveys in Australia have tended to suggest that members and organisers felt that, at the time of the survey, their 'say' in decision-making was increasing,[89] but there are not enough of these to demonstrate a trend. One could tentatively answer with 'probably' but 'not quickly enough'.

Unionism in the platform economy

The changing nature of work is often seen as creating major difficulties for unions. There is no doubt that casualisation and the shift from the public to the private sector damages unions, because union density is lower among casual and temporary workers and, compared to the public sector, among private sector workers. That said, empirically, these structural changes account for only a minority of the decline in union density in countries like Australia, and most of that happened in the 1980s.[90] The issue is not so much a change in the composition of the workforce but a change in management (and government) strategies, involving more aggressive approaches towards trade unions and worker organisation as a means of minimising costs, transferring risk and regaining control, including through restructuring of capital, fragmentation through use of contractors, outsourcing, franchises, labour hire and spinoffs. These all create problems for union organisation: a union that undertakes industrial action in a contractor firm and interrupts supply, or that succeeds in obtaining higher wages for its members in that contractor firm, may find the employer of its members cut off from work and its members out of a job, regardless of whether they have 'permanent' or 'temporary' employment contracts. Others might decide not to risk it.

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89   David Peetz and Barbara Pocock, 'Organising and Delegates: An Overview'. Association of Industrial Relations Academics of Australia and New Zealand conference, Sydney, February 2005; Peetz and Pocock, 'Workplace Representatives'; David Peetz, Chris Houghton, and Barbara Pocock, 'Organisers' Roles Transformed? Australian Union Organizers and Changing Union Strategy'. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 49, no. 2 (2005): 151–66; ibid.

90   Peetz, *Unions in a Contrary World*; David Peetz, 'Trend Analysis of Union Membership'. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* 8, no. 1 (2005): 1–24.

That said, these new forms of capitalist organisation are not invulnerable. Kim Moody refers to the 'new terrain of class conflict' that arises from tightly integrated production and logistics systems, with companies that are 'bigger, more capital-intensive, and more economically rational'. It provides, he says, opportunities for unions to 'take advantage of the vulnerable points in just-in-time logistics and production to bring some of these new giants to heel'.[91] This harks back to an idea that has been around for a long time: workers have more power when they are strategically located, meaning they are located at points in the production process that are vulnerable to disruption. The JIT system increases the number of vulnerable points in the production process.

One of the biggest challenges facing unions in the future is the development of the 'platform economy', discussed in Chapter 6. People doing such work have the classic characteristics of casual employees—fragmented, lacking commitment to the organisation and hence to any union, often not highly engaged with their work—or more commonly contractors, who do not even have an 'employer' and so lack the protections, such as they exist, of employment law (though this depends on the specific legal context). In addition, those working for one firm may still be geographically separated from each other, perhaps by thousands of kilometres, perhaps in different time zones, and having no face-to-face contact with their fellow workers. So they may be classed as 'self-employed'. In Australia, the likelihood of union membership among 'casual' employees is just a quarter of what it is among 'permanent' employees, and among the self-employed (owner-managers of enterprises without employees) it is just one-eleventh.[92] So 'platform economy' or 'gig' workers appear very difficult for unions to organise. Yet, as we saw in Chapter 6, they are also highly susceptible to exploitation, with many (but not all) being paid below the equivalent of relevant minimum wage rates.

The result has been some seemingly spontaneous resistance by gig workers to their situation, alongside some rather innovative efforts by unions to engage with them. Among the efforts by unions to engage, the Austrian union vida set up a works council for food delivery cyclists working for Foodora (predominantly in Vienna), with the ultimate aim of establishing

91   Quoted in Chris Brooks and Kim Moody, 'Labor's New Sources of Leverage'. *Labor Notes*, 12 August 2016, www.labornotes.org/MoodyInterview.
92   Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Characteristics of Employment'.

a collective agreement for all bicycle delivery services.[93] Unions New South Wales (a peak union body in an Australian state) in 2017 negotiated 'agreed minimum standards' for engagements negotiated through Airtasker in that state.[94] A Swedish union negotiated an *industry*-wide collective agreement that covers workers in Bzzt, an Uber-style organisation using electric taxis.[95] In the USA, the Service Employees Industrial Union had largely negotiated an agreement with Airbnb about unionisation of and pay rates for housekeepers, until it withdrew in the face of severe criticism from members and other unions.[96] A newly established union of Uber drivers in France organised a strike and road blockades, leading to the intervention of the state and negotiations over a minimum wage for Uber drivers.[97] Germany's IG Metall established the 'FairCrowdWork' platform, enabled self-employed crowdworkers to join the union, negotiated agreements with eight platforms to respect the minimum wage, and promoted the 'Frankfurt Declaration on Platform-Based Work' that also involved large unions from Austria, Denmark, Sweden and the USA.[98] Britain's GMB union backed cases run by drivers or riders against several gig firms, arguing (successfully) that they had been misclassified as self-employed rather than employees.[99] It also negotiated an agreement with Hermès providing couriers the option of 'self-employed plus' status, which included union representation, minimum wage guarantees and paid recreation leave.[100]

93   vida, 'Betriebsrat Für Fahrradzustelldienst Foodora'. vida (Austrian transport and service union), 2017, www.vida.at/cms/S03/S03_0.a/1342577497037/home/artikel/betriebsrat-fuer-fahrradzustell dienst-foodora.

94   Kate Minter, 'Negotiating Labour Standards in the Gig Economy: Airtasker and Unions New South Wales'. *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 28, no. 3 (2017): 438–54.

95   Hannah Johnston and Chris Land-Kazlauskas, *Organizing on-Demand: Representation, Voice, and Collective Bargaining in the Gig Economy*. Conditions of Work and Employment Series No. 94 (Geneva: Inclusive Labour Markets, Labour Relations and Working Conditions Branch, International Labour Office, 2018).

96   Sam Levin, 'Airbnb's Controversial Deal with Labor Union Falls Apart after Intense Backlash'. *Guardian*, 22 April 2016.

97   Zachary Kilhoffer, Karolien Lenaerts, and Miroslav Beblavý, *The Platform Economy and Industrial Relations: Applying the Old Framework to the New Reality*. CEPS Report No. 2017/12 (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2017).

98   Ibid.

99   Ibid; Robert Booth, 'Addison Lee Wrongly Classed Drivers as Self-Employed, Tribunal Rules'. *Guardian*, 26 December 2017.

100   Sarah O'Connor, 'Gig Economy Agreements Promise a Brighter Future for Trade Unions'. *Financial Times*, 26 February 2019.

Indeed, in a number of jurisdictions, attempts by platform companies to define workers as self-employed have been challenged in courts and at times overturned, with tribunals or courts in parts of the USA, UK and Brazil ruling that various groups of platform workers are employees, not self-employed. Foodora went into administration (a weak form of bankruptcy) in Australia after a regulator argued to a tribunal that its workers were underpaid by being classified as contractors.[101]

And then there have been the spontaneous efforts of seemingly unorganised gig workers to organise 'strikes' or other forms of what would normally be seen as industrial action, including Deliveroo workers in France, Uber drivers in California and New York, and Uber Eats workers in Britain.[102] Some workers do these things without any structure. Sometimes they set up their own forms of worker collective, be they to organise production through cooperatives[103] or power through association.[104] In a book of essays about platform worker cooperatives, the editors point to the imbalance of power between any cooperative and the huge private firms in the markets: the latter 'aren't coming to dominate just because of a good idea and a charismatic founder; they grow out of supportive ecosystems, including investors, lawyers, sympathetic governments and tech schools'.[105] Despite some lower overheads (no extracted surplus), cooperatives struggle against the ability of large capitalist entities to consume competition.

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101 BBC, 'Bike Courier Wins "Gig" Economy Employment Rights Case'. *BBC News*, 7 January 2017; Matt Hamilton, 'Judge Finds NYC Uber Drivers to Be Employees; Upstate Impact Debated'. *Timesunion*, 12 September 2016, www.timesunion.com/allwcm/article/Judge-finds-NYC-Uber-drivers-to-be-employees-11220139.php; Jamie Grierson and Rob Davies, 'Pimlico Plumbers Loses Appeal against Self-employed Status'. *Guardian*, 11 February 2017; David Marin-Guzman, 'Foodora Enters Voluntary Administration'. *Australian Financial Review*, 17 August 2018. More details are in Chapter 10.
102 Anna Sansom, 'Bicycle Couriers Protest against Takeaway Food Service Deliveroo'. *France24*, 12 August 2017, www.france24.com/en/20170812-france-paris-protest-food-delivery-service-delive roo-financial-insecurity-emmanuel-macron; Rebecca Burns, 'The Sharing Economy's "First Strike": Uber Drivers Turn Off the App'. *In These Times*, 22 October 2014, inthesetimes.com/working/entry/ 17279/the_sharing_economy_first_strike_uber_drivers_turn_off_the_app; Alison Griswold, 'Uber Just Caved on a Big Policy Change after Its Drivers Threatened to Strike'. *Slate*, 12 September 2014, www.slate.com/blogs/moneybox/2014/09/12/uber_drivers_strike_they_protested_cheap_uberx _fares_uber_backed_down.html; Sarah Butler, 'Uber Eats Drivers Plan Protest against Cuts in Pay Rate Per Delivery'. *Guardian*, 26 August 2016, www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/25/ ubereats-drivers-plan-protest-cuts-pay-rate-per-delivery-london-uber.
103 Sarah Kaine, Danielle Logue, and Emmanuel Josserand, 'The "Uberisation" of Work Is Driving People to Co-operatives'. *The Conversation*, 28 September 2016.
104 Many of the alternatives are discussed in Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, *Organizing on-Demand*.
105 Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider, *Ours to Hack and to Own: The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, a New Vision for the Future of Work and a Fairer Internet* (New York: OR Books, 2017).

The most effective form of collective response appears to be when platform workers work with, form, or become part of, a union, and work with others with experience in building collective power.

For many unions, this is new territory that they are venturing into; but for some, it has been the nature of the work that they have always been organising. Unions representing workers in the film, video and theatrical industries have been organising gig workers—that is, those engaged in single musical performances or shows—for decades. In Hollywood, for example, unions representing independent contractors have long negotiated with the centres of capital—movie producers and firms—to guarantee minimum pay and benefits, and those unions reinforce the values, sense of efficacy and collective identity of those workers.[106] In Canada, entertainment unions have made use of cultural policy to promote adequate labour standards and employment rights.[107]

Technological changes that make it easier for employers to *dis*organise workers into fragmented units can also be used by unions. For example, Facebook technology has been used by some unions, such as United Voice in Australia, not only to organise their own members (indeed, many unions have a social media presence) but also to mobilise nonmembers around particular issues or interest groups, such as underpayment of workers in the hospitality industry. That said, few union delegates across Australian unions in the mid-2010s made substantial use of Facebook or Twitter for union matters.[108]

In the USA, Walmart has been one of the most determined and successful employers at keeping unions out, even closing stores after they unionised,[109] so a new organisation, 'OUR Walmart' ('Organisation United for Respect at Walmart'), was established by the United Food

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106 W. Harry Fortuna, 'The Gig Economy Is a Disaster for Workers. Hollywood's Unions Can Help Them Learn to Fight Back'. *Quartz*, 1 September 2017, qz.com/1052310/hollywood-unions-offer-the-perfect-model-for-the-beaten-down-workers-of-todays-gig-economy/.

107 Amanda Coles, 'Unintended Consequences: Examining the Impact of Tax Credit Programmes on Work in the Canadian Independent Film and Television Production Sector'. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31, no. 3 (2010): 519–40.

108 Peetz et al., 'The Meaning and Making of Union Delegate Networks'.

109 Rhéal Séguin, 'Ex-Wal-Mart Workers Win Battle'. *Globe and Mail*, 17 September 2005; Benedict Sheehy, 'Corporations and Social Costs: The Wal-Mart Case Study'. *University of Pittsburgh Journal of Law and Commerce* 24 (2004): 1–39; Michael P. Vandenbergh, 'The New Wal-Mart Effect: The Role of Private Contracting in Global Governance'. *UCLA Law Review* 54 (2007): 913–70; Paul Weinberg, 'Closure of First Unionised Wal-Mart Sends Chilling Signal'. Inter Press Service News Agency, 15 April 2005.

and Commercial Workers Union to support and, at times, mobilise workers, first through Facebook and then through a customised app ('WorkIt') that Walmart warned its employees ('associates') not to download.[110] The campaigning by OUR Walmart, through organising in workplaces from outside workplaces, led to public demonstrations and to Walmart raising wages to over $10 per hour and some victories for pregnant workers, though OUR Walmart continued to campaign for much more.[111] By mid-2017, the app had seen cumulative totals of over 150,000 Walmart employees from 3,100 stores engaged in discussions, with 50,000 per week seeing messages from OUR Walmart and 40,000 in private groups linked to the organisation. When Walmart employees use the app to ask questions, they may be answered by an AI bot (if the question is simple), by fellow members of online communities, or by volunteers or union employees if very complicated. Membership costs $5 per month. Although Walmart infiltrates and monitors the WorkIt community, and pressures employees not to participate, the structure appears to have been resilient.[112] The WorkIt approach has been spreading to other countries, including Australia.[113]

These new forms of union responses to new work organisation or technology often involve quite different repertoires of action to traditional unionism: perhaps less reliance on militancy and industrial action, more reliance on new methods of communication and campaigning. They may also sometimes use less hierarchical organisational structures, with OUR Walmart, for example, having more of a network form than a traditional union structure. Rather than seeing these techniques as taking the place of conventional union methods, it is more appropriate to interpret them as supplementing these methods—as ways of developing collective (rather than individual) grievances, building collective values and identities,

110 Eduardo Munoz, 'Walmart Warns Workers Not to Use App Helping Them Understand Company's Labor Rules'. *RT*, 17 November 2016, www.rt.com/usa/367062-walmart-worker-app-workit/; Andy Kroll, 'Walmart Workers Get Organized—Just Don't Say the U-Word'. *Mother Jones*, March/April 2016, www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/02/our-walmart-black-friday-union/.

111 Sean McElwee and Amy Traub, 'Don't Believe the Wal-Mart Hype: Here's Proof It Still Isn't Paying Its Workers Enough'. *Salon*, 19 September 2015, www.salon.com/2015/09/19/dont_believe_the_wal_mart_hype_heres_proof_it_still_isnt_paying_its_workers_enough/; Mike Hall, 'Our Walmart Wins Some Victories for Pregnant Workers'. *People's World*, 10 April 2014, www.peoplesworld.org/article/our-walmart-wins-some-victories-for-pregnant-workers/.

112 Discussion with and talk by Dan Schlademan, Co-Director of Organisation United for Respect, Sydney, 26 June 2017.

113 David Marin-Guzman, 'How "Young Tech Dudes" Are Decentralising Unions with Blockchain, AI'. *Australian Financial Review*, 28 December 2017. Ignore the blockchain in this article, focus on the AI.

and perhaps critically developing a sense of collective efficacy. Building networks that facilitate collective action are also essential purposes of such techniques, while the unions themselves become collective mobilisers and, through flatter structures, promote democratic coordination.

As this book shows, though, the platform economy and new technologies at the workplace are not really the main game in the future of work. The main game is more about who has power. After all, Walmart is not a tech firm, the platform economy is still quite small, but there have been huge changes in union density, public policy and financialisation over recent decades. American activists Sarita Gupta, Stephen Lerner and Joseph McCartin dismiss concerns about technology and instead urge unions to find 'new ways of organizing and bargaining' in a world characterised by 'fissuring', financialisation, austerity, concentrated power, widening inequality and unwillingness by the state to act for workers.[114] They suggest 'bargaining for the common good', in which unionised (or even nonunion) workers take action that 'advance[s] the shared goals of workers and their allies'—that is, other community groups. They suggest organising against large, core companies to challenge not just their treatment of workers but also monopolisation. And they suggest targeting banks and private equity, in part to attempt to 'regulate from below' and to engage with external groups affected by finance capital. The emphasis is on extending unions' focus outside the employment relationship to broader social and economic issues, working with the rest of civil society.[115] This is perhaps the most promising but probably the most difficult thing for unions to do. Working with community groups was an unfulfilled aim of Australian unions' otherwise successful 2007 'Your Rights @ Work' campaign.[116] It is slow: unions often have a tactical rather than strategic focus and want to play a dominant role in an alliance, disengaging other groups.[117] It faces legal barriers that other forms of union cooperation do not: competition law in many countries, constraining or prohibiting collective action

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114 Sarita Gupta, Stephen Lerner, and Joseph A. McCartin, 'It's Not the "Future of Work," It's the Future of Workers That's in Doubt'. *American Prospect*, 31 August 2018, prospect.org/article/its-not-future-work-its-future-workers-doubt.

115 Ibid.

116 Kathie Muir and David Peetz, 'Not Dead Yet: The Australian Union Movement and the Defeat of a Government'. *Social Movement Studies* 9, no. 2 (2010): 215–28.

117 Amanda Tattersall, *Power in Coalition: Strategies for Strong Unions and Social Change* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Jane Holgate, 'The Sydney Alliance: A Broad-Based Community Organising Potential for Trade Union Transformation?'. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 39, no. 3 (2015).

outside of labour law, is not just a challenge to organising workers classed as 'self-employed' or 'contractors', it is a challenge to all 'bargaining for the common good'.[118]

In the end, it is the taking of collective action that damages the profitability of capital and forces capital to concede workers' demands. It can also force the state to concede. Sometimes this is achieved through causing reputational harm to corporations or the state—examples include some international campaigns around multinational codes of conduct (discussed in Chapter 9) as well as, in Australia, the 'Destroy the Joint' campaign, and union campaigns against attempts by some firms to substantially reduce wages through the use of contractors (Carlton United Breweries) or terminating agreements (Streets).[119] More often, damage is achieved through the withdrawal of labour. The failure of previous attempts to organise Walmart workers in the face of strong and sophisticated employer opposition suggested that the old methods were not working there. The methods of leverage used by OUR Walmart—damaging the reputation of the firm through street demonstrations and other public actions—point to how threatening profits will always be the ultimate means by which workers achieve gains relative to capital, no matter what the mode of production is.

In extending from tackling the corporations that hire workers to 'bargaining for the common good', unions may also find the state actively mobilises against labour in ways that it does not always do when labour just takes on those corporations. The state, though, responds to very different incentives to corporations. Maximising votes and legitimacy are not the same as maximising profits, and the political strategy for achieving concessions from the state need not be the same as that for achieving concessions from capital.

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118 Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas, *Organizing on-Demand*.
119 AAP, 'Union Launches Streets Ice-Cream Boycott for Australian Summer'. *Guardian*, 30 October 2017, www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/oct/30/union-launches-streets-ice-cream-boycott-for-australian-summer; Jane Caro, ed., *Destroying the Joint: Why Women Have to Change the World* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2013).

Conclusion

While some corporations may encourage their workers to conditionally exercise 'voice', and may increasingly do this in future to facilitate productivity or even disguise other, pervasive methods of control, it is only through independent voice mechanisms—mostly trade unions—that workers can guarantee they have some control at work. These employee-controlled mechanisms have been in decline for several decades, not because of changing attitudes by employees, but because of the institutional changes that neo-liberalism has encouraged.

There is no single solution that applies universally, but common to success is a focus on the workplace, albeit with strong articulation outside the workplace, and an emphasis on democracy. Some unions are successfully adapting to the fragmentation created by modern management strategies by adopting new techniques that promote collective recognition of grievances, efficacy, identity, values and networks. Strength in these will be key to the success of collective mobilisation in future.

If the voice of workers—that is, the collective power of labour—does not increase, in the face of the growth of other centres of power in society, it is unlikely that the outcomes for workers from developments in the future of work will be good. This is a critical aspect of the 'sliding doors' situation that society faces. We saw in Chapter 1 how significant unions are for reducing inequality in incomes, wealth and power in society. So the choices that unions make will have a crucial impact on workers and on society, as will the choices made by policy-makers that affect the ability of unions, and other collective forms of labour, to organise.