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FROM THE FIELD

Rabble Rousing in a Red State: Lessons Learned From Organizing for Worker Rights in a Highly Conservative State

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ABSTRACT
This article provides an analysis of a brief case study in community organizing undertaken by low-wage fast food workers and community allies over the issue of wage theft. The case analyzed in this article takes place in a highly conservative state in the South Central region of the United States. Through utilizing critical pedagogy, social action, action research, and praxis, workers were able to stop the wage theft. Despite the victory by workers, lessons learned from this experience point to a need for the development of more innovative strategies in labor organizing that emphasize community building and popular education to develop worker-led strategies and movements that work in the most conservative states and contexts in the United States.

KEYWORDS
worker rights; community organizing; wage theft

Background and overview

The history of professional social work is often characterized by an enduring tension between social reform, social control, and individual change (Ehrenreich, 1985; Katz, 1996; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). Although social work remains strongly entrenched the values of individual change and social control, an important strand of macro social work continues to focus on issues of worker rights and economic justice (Brady & O’Connor, 2014; Dobbie & Richards-Schuster, 2008; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). This commitment to worker rights was evident in early settlement house advocacy that focused on improved conditions for the new, largely immigrant, impoverished work force (Addams, 1930; Garvin & Cox, 2001). Instead of focusing exclusively on the moral conditions of the poor, settlement house workers also focused on the social context of poverty. This focus on economic justice early on in social work placed social workers in the same places and spaces as organized labor efforts that would emerge around the turn of the century as a result of social, political, and economic trends that worsened conditions for workers in industrialized cities of the United States (Brady, Schoeneman, & Sawyer, 2014).
Scholars, activists, and other observers of work and working conditions in the early 21st century have noted that low-wage workers; low-wage immigrant workers in particular, face working conditions that have declined dramatically since the 1970s. Work, then, for many workers today looks more and more like it did for the immigrant industrial workers who participated in the programming of the early settlement house movement (Bernhardt, Milkman, Theodore, & Heckathorn et al., 2008; Doussard, 2013). Much has been written about income inequality, stagnant wages, and the need for expanded medical leave and predictable work scheduling (A Better Balance, 2015; Alexander, Haley-Lock, & Ruan, 2015; Bobo, 2008; Luce, 2015; National Employment Law Project, 2015). These are symptoms of larger structural economic and political shifts that have changed the relationship between workers and their employers. Workers face a combination of a dramatically eroded workplace protections and a political environment in which the imperative to maximize profits through cost reduction dominates business strategy, regulatory rulings, and policy choices (Bernhardt et al., 2008; Doussard, 2013; Giddens, Duneier, & Appelbaum, 2003; Greenhouse, 2008; Weil, 2014). As a result of these trends, millions of low-wage workers work out of reach of labor law and face high levels of workplace labor violations, which range from not receiving promised compensation to health and safety violations (Bernhardt et al., 2008; Weil, 2014).

Although labor unions, associations, and direct-action organizing models have been important tools in organizing for worker rights and improved labor conditions historically in the United States, these traditional tools of organizing have been only modestly successfully in the South and Heartland of the country (Brady, Young, & McLeod, 2015). This article provides a case analysis of the use of critical pedagogy, social action, and praxis in a small-scale worker rights campaign in a red state to inform others on the complexities of worker rights organizing in highly conservative places. The goal of this article is to challenge those reading it to begin to rethink the ultimate values and goals of labor organizing, innovate practices for use in complex conservative contexts, and utilize power within pro labor associations to help those among us who are the most impacted by economic injustices.

**Context and description**

This case analysis takes place in a right-to-work state where unions have struggled against the structural constraints of unfriendly labor law and conservative politics to gain a foothold in individual workplaces and advocate for worker friendly policies. The labor associations that do exist are primarily found in public service sectors such as education, police, and fire. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2015, 5.6% of workers in this state were members of a union, a 7% decline from 2014 (Economic News Release, 2016). This
percentage is in line with other conservative states in the South and Heartland regions of the country, where union membership is typically the lowest. Workers in this state make considerably less than their counterparts in many neighboring states and across the country for similar work (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). In addition to having low rates of union membership, the state also has a strong conservative base that is illustrated by the highest proportion of Republican leadership of any state in the country at 78%, along with a Republican governor (Ballotpedia, 2017). The strong conservative values of the state coincide with strong evangelical Christian values. The relationship between conservative political and evangelical values in the state stems from the Protestant work ethic, which in states that reside in the Bible Belt of the United States, also coincides with religious teachings of the virtues of personal responsibility, hard work, and inherent support of capitalism, which impacts the frequency and success of organized labor movements (Lichtenstein, 2013).

Finally, an additional characteristic of the state where this case study took place that contributes to the conservative description of the context is the absence of worker centers and other progressive spaces where workers can go to attain direct help, training, and support for facing and addressing workplace injustices. In many other states and locations around the country, even in right-to-work states, labor organizations, advocacy groups, and progressive entities have banned together to create places where low-wage workers can go for training, for resources, for free legal consult, and to build community with other workers experiencing similar hardships. In this state, no such places formally exist, and what workshops and resources that do exist are typically reserved to current labor association members, which are often comprised of lower-middle- and middle-class workers, not the most vulnerable of low-wage workers working in hospitality and food industries.

Despite the challenges associated with the context where this case took place, low-wage workers from one food establishment came together to fight workplace injustice, mainly the reduction of wages by new owners. The workers in this case were able to engage in critical pedagogical dialogue to develop a creative short-term strategy to successfully address wage theft. Although workers were divided over whether to risk their employment by taking action against the business, leadership among workers emerged, which led to creative organizing that stopped the wage theft and fulfilled the immediate needs of workers. The lessons learned from this case have the potential to benefit three distinct groups: (a) other groups of low-wage workers working in conservative spaces, (b) allies who are in academic or professional organizations seeking to use their privilege to work for economic justice and worker rights, and (c) and professional labor organizing entities.
Review of the literature

Traditional community organizing models are based on the density of membership in order to achieve power (Brown, 2006). Generating mass membership in an organization can empower the constituencies involved and leverage that power to achieve policy or regulatory change (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2009; Sen, 2003). Alinsky, whose model of community organizing has shaped practice since the 1930s, conceived of large people’s organizations as an antidote to the economic power of a wealthy elite (Alinsky, 1971). Contemporary practitioners define the goal of community organizing as the development of “a power base through which community members can take collective action over time” (Staples, 2004, p. 3). Similarly, Pyles and Fisher both argued that “the central task of organizing is to enlist more and more people to participate in the struggle for social change,” as a way to ‘build the base’ (Pyles, 2009; p. 81; see also Fisher, 1994; Fisher & Shragge, 2000).

In addition, Alinsky argued that the money power of the elite needed to be countered by the people power of community organizations (Alinsky, 1971). This “people power” threatened the elite through the ability to influence politics—and ultimately, elections—through size, discipline, and strategic awareness. Unions, worker centers, or other workers’ organizations with a large enough membership can threaten politicians through its geographic density in a community or legislative district. Alternatively, low-wage workers organize through unions (or other worker organizations) to achieve density in particular industrial sectors, allowing for more productive alliances, coalitions, and federations of worker organizations across localities based on occupational interests with greater potential to achieve policy and regulatory change (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005). The question is whether the concentration of efforts on the development of a formally structured organization with a large membership, either in a community or in an industrial sector, can succeed in bringing about significant change for low-wage workers in the current economic and political context of an ultra-conservative spaces like the one under study in this paper (Piven & Cloward, 1977).

Working conditions in the “New Economy”

To understand and assess organizing models for worker rights, it is important to understand the conditions and contexts that low-wage workers face. Working conditions for high levels of wage theft did not previously characterize the vast majority of American workers: health and safety violations, sped up workflows, and precarious attachment to firms and employers (Doussard, 2013; Weil, 2014). The New Deal, which developed out of the
Great Depression, legalized collective bargaining through the Wagner Act, regulated wage and hours through the Fair Labor Standards Act, and codified other workplace regulations enforced by a robust regulatory environment (Forbath, 1989; Garvin & Cox, 2001). Large, often unionized firms provided workers with job security, benefits, and internal labor markets that allowed for stable careers (Weil, 2014). The New Deal entered a crisis in the 1970s, “precipitated by the economic shocks of the 1970s, the increasingly global reach of transnational corporations and the internationalization of economic flows, and the erosion of interest rate sovereignty after 1960” (Purcell, 2002, p. 290). The economic shocks of the 1960s that restructured the employment relationship for workers in the United States included “the pressures of inflation and overheated macroeconomic demand, along with global competition in core sectors of the US economy” (Weil, 2014, p. 41). Political economists describe a shift in the 1970s—from Fordism, a model in which government engaged in limited (but still significant) economic planning and income redistribution to overcome key market failures and stimulate demand and ensure opportunities for participation for all—to neoliberalism or post-Fordism, where the goal of government is to assist the corporate community in its profit making enterprises (Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 2005).

The workplace arrangements that resulted from changes in political economy and business strategy brought on by the crises of the 1960s and 1970s undermined compliance with basic labor standards and shifted economic surplus from workers to investors (Lesniewski & Vonderlack-Navarro, 2014). The workplace shift most relevant to the case study discussed in this article is franchising, which provides “a lead business with a method for preserving the benefits of a strong brand while controlling labor costs” (Lesniewski & Canon, 2016, p. 122). Franchising exerts downward pressure on prices (in the case of service industries, largely labor costs) and most franchising arrangements have “built-in bias (es) towards noncompliance” (Lesniewski, 2013, p. 140) with labor laws. Franchise workers are especially susceptible to wage theft and other violations of workplace standards and labor laws. An example taken from a worker center in Chicago demonstrates the impact of franchising on worker rights. The worker in question claimed that he was underpaid by approximately $5,000 while working for a local office of a national car rental agency, and was seeking help from the worker center to address it. Although the center helped him file a complaint with the State of Illinois, his case dragged on for 26 months before he received a final judgment that said the franchisee was responsible for his stolen wages. Because Illinois Department of Labor could not locate the franchisee, the case was closed without payment of back wages (Lesniewski, 2013). This experience is common for workers in franchise settings attempting to find redress for workplace violations that appear to be built into many franchising models; as outdated regulatory regimes are ill-equipped to respond to these new workplace arrangements (Weil, 2014).
The challenges and promising practices of organized labor

In the midst of the changing political and economic environment, the labor market intermediaries (mainly labor unions and government regulatory agencies) that workers traditionally relied on are weakened in their ability to resist employer prerogatives, improve working conditions or respond to the function deregulation of the labor market. Labor unions have been especially crippled by almost 30 years of decline in membership, political power, and economic influence (Choudry & Shragge, 2011; Clawson & Clawson, 1999). Despite significant efforts by many unions to implement various programs and strategies to organize new workers in new industries, labor unions and their community allies continue to face an uphill struggle. Recent events, including acrimonious internal conflict in UNITE-HERE and subsequent exodus of a significant portion of the union’s membership, a conflict that implicated other members of the Change to Win coalition whose intent was to reinvigorate organizing and the labor movement weakened the momentum of new organizing models and there gains. Continued declines in union density seem to indicate that the organizing model that provided some spark has run out of energy and strength (Fine, 2007a). Coupled with the rise of right-to-work laws in traditional labor strongholds like Wisconsin and Michigan, the ability of the labor movement to arrest the decline in working conditions for low-wage workers remains limited.

Even as the decline of formal unions continues, other forms of organizing and advocacy have emerged to attempt to restore power imbalances for workers. One of the most successful approaches utilized in organizing for worker rights in a conservative era has been the utilization of community-labor coalitions (Armbruster, 1995). Community-labor coalitions provide an approach for workers experiencing marginalization to build collective power, gain public exposure to injustices, and receive support from professional and community allies (Harding & Simmons, 2009; Pyles & Cross, 2008). Additionally, community labor collaborations allow for root causes of economic injustice to receive larger public attention through the professional, social, and personal networks of allies within the community, which can help to sustain organizing efforts over the long term (Nissen & Russo, 2006). Community-labor coalitions utilize many tactics to attain strategic goals over a long-term period of time. Worker centers use direct action or legal advocacy to change policies, seek redress for workplace abuse, and reregulated the low-wage labor market (Fine, 2006; Lesniewski, 2013). Fight for 15 fast food organizing campaigns, sponsored and supported by organized labor groups, rely on direct action, community support, and media-driven narratives outside of traditional collective bargaining and union organizing processes. They have led (perhaps indirectly) to a number of states and localities raising their minimum wages. In addition to coastal cities and Chicago, Louisville,
Albuquerque, Las Cruces (New Mexico), and Richmond, California have passed city minimum wage laws since 2014. After the 2016 election, voters in Arizona, Colorado, Maine, and Washington, and Flagstaff, AZ raised their minimum wages. The list of cites contemplating double-digit wage floors includes Philadelphia, Kansas City, Birmingham, Alabama, Sacramento, and Olympia, Washington (National Employment Law Project, 2015). Coalitions, often led by Fight for 15 campaigns or worker centers, have secured municipal wage-theft ordinances, strengthening worker protections against subminimum wages (Doussard & Gamal, 2015) and mandatory earned sick-time laws in San Francisco, Seattle, New York and Philadelphia (A Better Balance, 2015). More recently, community-labor advocates have advanced measures intended to stem the ill effects of on-call work and flexible scheduling arrangements that require workers to be permanently available for erratic and short work shifts (Alexander et al., 2015). Although efforts such as the Fight for 15 has experienced some successes, these successes have come mainly at the local level in more liberal and progressive cities, whereas in states such as the one depicted in this study, policies preventing localities from establishing minimum wages have been passed by many conservative state legislatures, so alternative strategies and tools are still needed in many highly conservative contexts (Bergman, 2016).

Critical pedagogy and praxis: a framework for organizing practice

Given the nature and needs of low-wage workers in this case, as well as the rapid development of this case, critical pedagogy and praxis were the tools utilized to help promote social change, to reflect upon the work undertaken, and to critically analyze the needs of low-wage workers in conservative places. Critical pedagogy has roots in the practices of Hooks (2003); Horton & Freire (1990); Freire (1970), and Lange (2004), each of whom emphasized the dialogical process of consciousness raising and social action amongst marginalized groups. The goal of critical pedagogy is both individual liberation and freedom as conceptualized by Gadamer (1975) and Gramsci (1971), as well as a changing of oppressive societal structures through collective action as theorized by Marx and Engels (1967) and Piven and Cloward (1977). Critical pedagogy is especially useful in conditions where people are facing increased levels of marginalization and where there is not yet collective power to challenge the status quo. Critical pedagogy is educational, empowering, and social change oriented (Brady et al., 2015; Horton & Freire, 1990). Praxis is an essential component of critical pedagogy as it relates to the mutual learning that occurs as oppressed peoples reflect critically together on their own practices and social action (Freire, 1970). Praxis is, thus, a best practice form of data collection in critical pedagogy focused community organizing (Zullo & Pratt, 2009). For the purpose of this
study, goal setting is understood as emergent within the context of critical pedagogy; however, in this case the short-term goal workers sought to attain was the reinstatement of their previous wages. One potential longer-term aim of some worker leaders and the ally organizer was to create worker-generated goals for equity and mutual support for the future. For the purpose of this case study, critical pedagogy included the following elements:

1. community building between the ally organizer/academic workers prior to the issue of wage theft;
2. worker leaders among workers willing to cofacilitate the dialogue about the wage theft issue;
3. an open and authentic space for dialogue where workers process their experience with injustice and develop a plan for addressing it;
4. a worker developed strategy for action;
5. implementation of the strategy; and
6. praxis sessions as needed throughout the effort to help process not only short-term goal attainment, but longer-term concerns and mutual needs.

The primary sources of data collected in this case included ethnographic participant observation, meeting notes from an organizing planning session, and notes taken from a praxis dialogue held with workers after their victory. The number of individuals involved in this effort is small and consists primarily of 4–6 workers. Due to the small sample size, this article does not attempt to provide a definitive answer to the question of how low-wage workers can collectively improve their working conditions, but rather this case analysis is offered as a plausible new direction for inquiry and knowledge building in worker rights organizing.

**Worker strategy to address wage theft**

Over the course of the 2015 calendar year, one of the authors (henceforth referred to as the organizer ally) built relationships with a group of workers at the fast food franchise restaurant where the case takes place. By building relationships with workers over time, the author built trust with workers, who came to understand him as an advocate and organizer for social and economic justice. When workers received notification that the franchise had been purchased by a new set of franchisees, and that the new ownership had decided to cut the wages of workers by as much as $3.00 per hour, they were angry and perplexed by the rationale and legality of the action of the new owners. When some workers inquired with ownership about the reduction in pay, they were told that the new wages were in line with industry standards, and that they were previously being overpaid. Shortly upon learning of the reduction in wages, two workers reached out to the organizer for help in
thinking about strategy and tactics for challenging the decision of ownership to reduce wages and were able to name their situation as wage theft and not just a wage cut.

The organizer and workers met at a local establishment to discuss the issue and consider a course of action. During the course of a 3-hr meeting between the organizer and workers, the organizer listened and allowed for leadership among workers to emerge. One worker in particular utilized creative questions to get other workers thinking about what had happened to them. For instance, he asked the question, “How many of you feel like you are overpaid for the work that you do?” Although workers had expressed some difference in opinion over what to do about the wage theft, none of them responded that they felt overpaid. When one worker, as a way to make sense of the wage cut, suggested that perhaps the business had lost money recently, another worker was able to demonstrate that their franchise had shown a 25% increase in profit over the past year. This discussion seemed to help workers begin to move away from trying to justify the owner’s decision and led them to the conclusion that the owner’s actions were unjust.

Within a framework of critical pedagogy, this process can be best understood as progressive movement from a state of low awareness or lack of understanding about one’s own experienced oppression to a more critical consciousness about their collective experienced injustice (Adams & Horton, 1975; Freire, 1970). Throughout this meeting, the organizer would ask probing questions but allowed for the organic dialogue between workers and the emergence of leadership among them to dictate the course of the meeting, which is consistent with a critical pedagogy approach (Zullo & Pratt, 2009).

Finally, once all workers agreed that an injustice had occurred, they began to consider ways to address it. Ideas for potential tactics included a walkout during a prime rush time, everyone not coming into work on a busy day, having friends and family call in fake orders, the shaming of the business through bad reviews, speaking to the press, utilizing social media to tell others what had happened, and calling for a local boycott of the establishment. At the end of the planning session, workers were at a consensus that they would walk out the next day during lunch rush, start a social media campaign to raise awareness about the injustice, and petition the local university newspaper to run a story about the issue. The decision to utilize this combination of tactics was based on the workers’ assumption that many, if not most, of their colleagues would not participate in the action, and as a result outside allies would need to join their struggle by not patronizing the restaurant. Finally, workers made the decision to place younger workers without families at the forefront of the campaign to help shield older workers and those with families from being targeted. The younger college students and those with other jobs were considered less vulnerable, and able to take more risks in the effort.
Taking creative and assertive action for worker rights

Despite having a fairly well-developed strategy the previous evening, when it came time to carry out the strategy, some workers chose to not participate in the walk out, stating that they were fearful of losing their jobs. Several workers who did walk out created a meme depicting the wage theft, which was shared across social media outlets. Additionally, allies and workers posted negative reviews on Yelp and other sites, demanding that the establishment reinstate worker’s wages. Allies were recruited by workers through family and friend networks, but also through progressive faith based connections. The allies in this case, including the organizer who was a professor at a major university, had little to lose, but were highly affective and important to the success of the organizing effort.

Finally, the workers who did walk out reached out to the media, who agreed to cover their story. The news outlet reached out to the owner of the business, which led to an impromptu mediation session between workers, ownership, the press, and the organizer. During the mediation session, workers told their narrative to the press about having wages reduced by two-three dollars an hour and the impact it would have on their families. The author/organizer also spoke to the press to provide expert testimony in regards to the workers’ claims as well as to refute ownership claims about market worth.

Relations between workers and ownership during the meeting were tenuous. Ownership believed that the workers should have done more to reach out to them first with grievances before going to social media and the press; workers felt as though they had gone to ownership with little success, and therefore had no other choice than to take action. Having the media involved and present seemed to be beneficial in ensuring that workers had their concerns and questions immediately addressed by ownership. However, when the media was interviewing workers, they expressed concern over sharing their full names for fear that it could lead to retaliation. The media refused to run the story without having their full names on record. At the end, the workers agreed to have their names printed for the story. It is important to note, however, that according to workers, being exposed by media is a major barrier to workplace organizing in this conservative state. Workers stated that retaliation by current and prospective employers, neighbors, and the broader community is common practice in the state. Workers stated that employers often know one another and social networks are small, thus employers can harm workers even after they leave positions. After about 60 min of mediation, ownership agreed to reinstate the worker’s wages for all employees at the business, which was deemed a short-term success by workers.
Reflecting with workers through praxis

The final point of data collection was a 90-min informal conversation between the organizer and workers; Although the conversation was informal, the organizer asked workers four key questions, which included:

1. Are you satisfied with organizing process and final outcome of the effort, please explain?
2. What worked well in your opinion during the effort?
3. What were the biggest challenges that you experienced during the effort?
4. What do you think this experience means and has taught you in the big picture in regards to organizing for worker rights in this state?

In regard to the first question, all four workers present stated that they were fairly satisfied with the final outcome, because they received their wages back. Workers did express frustration over other workers not following through with their plan at the last minute, but also stated that they understood, because those workers had families and children to support. The two primary organizers, although satisfied with the effort, stated that they weren’t entirely sure if they would continue working for the business as a result of possible retaliation from ownership over their involvement in the effort, and a general sense of being wronged, which was still present despite their success. In answering question two, workers felt as though involving the media was highly important, because it signaled to ownership that they were serious, and could potentially impact their profit margins with bad press. Additionally, workers felt as though the organizer ally was important to the effort as he possessed a certain degree of expertise and power as a result of his role at the university, which helped to potentially leverage ownership by signaling that they were not alone in their fight.

Although workers were able to identify strengths and reasons for their success in this effort, they also readily spoke about challenges. For challenges in this effort, workers believed that fear of being terminated, along with their relatively small numbers, posed a challenge to collective action. Workers also felt as though the climate that they were organizing in was challenging. They described the environment as an ultra conservative place with values that favor the self-determination of ownership over the rights of workers. Finally, when asked about the bigger picture of organizing for worker rights in the state, workers were split over a solution or strategy to follow. One worker, as a member of a worker rights membership group, felt that workers must come together in large numbers to affect change. Despite the sentiment expressed by this worker, most workers saw unions as unrealistic solutions in a place where laws and policy favored owners and employers. The only suggestions
made by workers for a long-term strategy was the use of grassroots organizing tactics, similar to what they used in this case; boycotts of unjust employers and businesses; and more attention made to create physical spaces and mechanisms designed to bring low wage workers together for trainings, socialization, and mutual support of one another.

**Implications and lessons learned**

This campaign, although small and brief, provides some modest, yet important insights, from a ground level of labor organizing. One issue raised in this case study is the relative scarcity of available resources and empirical studies on nonmainstream labor-organizing approaches/models that have been proven successful in highly conservative contexts where the majority of local, state, and federally elected decision makers are ultra conservative and hold strong antiunion values. There are some empirical studies considering best practices in the post-Fordist context, but there is a relative dearth of attention being paid to organizing for economic justice in highly conservative contexts. What approaches or models exist for organized labor and worker rights that do not assume that collective power is possible or that don’t have the predetermined goal of increasing union membership?

This case analysis is an example of the majority of workplaces that low-wage workers toil in during the post-Fordist, service-sector-based economy. The workplace in question was small, with perhaps 12 employees total, and was a franchise, which leads to complicated lines of responsibility and accountability for working conditions. Additionally, only a small portion of those workers were able and willing to risk their jobs by participating in an effort against their employer. Finally, although workers wanted their wages restored, not all workers wanted a union or membership that would cost them money every month, when they already made so little. Although many union organizers and scholars would insist that forming unions or associations of workers is the best protection against economic injustice, in most cases, they have done little to build relationships with workers who are not members of their unions or associations (Fine, 2007b; Lesniewski, 2013). In this case, although one worker belonged to an association of worker rights advocates, none of the other workers had ever been approached by a union or association about their wants and needs.

Another implication of this case analysis is that there are some potentially useful strategies in the literature of labor organizing that could benefit workers in conservative contexts and spaces. Consider the utilization of critical pedagogy, which has been used effectively in the United States, Europe, and Latin America to raise consciousness, build a collective community, and create spaces to take action to improve the lives of workers. Along with critical pedagogy, worker
centers are another mechanism that provides both a safe physical space for workers to meet, help one another, and learn organizing tactics. Additionally, this provides a psychological support system that comes without unrealistic demands such as membership dues and union cards. In ultra conservative spaces, the utilization of critical pedagogy and the development of worker centers may provide a promising approach to support low wage workers.

A third implication that can be taken from this case analysis is the importance of creativity in community organizing. In this case, creativity helped workers overcome obstacles such as small numbers, collective power, and time. The creativity of workers to use social media and technology to their advantage, to consider how to appear to ownership as if they had more power and backing than maybe they did in reality, and their willingness to think outside the box of traditional organizing tactics or repurpose traditional tactics provided them with a short-term strategy that proved to be more successful than many organizing strategies that unfold in less conservative places over a much longer period of time.

Finally, it cannot go without being mentioned that low-wage workers in conservative places need allies in the community with power and privilege that can be leveraged to assist them in efforts. Despite not feeling very powerful as a junior faculty member at a Carnegie categorized Research One Institution, the organizer was in a much more privileged position with greater power than the workers in this case. Although universities are sometimes characterized as conservative spaces, they still tend to provide more freedom, access to resources, and flexibility than many institutions in society. It is imperative that academics and scholars across higher education begin to better understand their roles, privilege, and power, so that they can provide much needed support to workers. Consider how many lattes we buy, sandwiches we order, drinks we consume, or hotels we stay in, and how many workers are needed to provide these luxuries to us. Many of the workers who provide services to us daily work for less than a living wage, work extremely long hours, and work in unsafe conditions. We must begin to understand and act on a greater sense of social responsibility when it comes to the rights of low wage workers. Consider whether your school could be a starting point for a worker center, or a safe place for workers to meet to discuss economic justice issues. Can we provide training and support to workers? Can we partner with other institutions in the community such as libraries, community centers, and schools to serve workers?

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