

Reclaiming Worker Control New Forms of Ownership

by Steve Dubb

Restoring worker control will require persistence, creativity, and solidarity—anchored in worker movements’ ability to align with each other and find common ground.

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hat does it mean to own the labor process? Denise R. Johnson, a former associate justice of the Vermont Supreme Court, noted in a 2007 *Vermont Law Review* article that the standard “modern legal understanding” of the term “property ownership” is “an abstract notion that analytically describes property as a collection of rights vis-à-vis others, rather than rights to a ‘thing,’ like a house or a piece of land.”¹

What Johnson describes may not be intuitive, but it makes sense. Understanding ownership as a “bundle of rights,” as Johnson describes it in her article, recognizes that most assets have limited value outside of the value society places on them. You can’t be a billionaire, for example, in a society where money has not been invented. *Property is relational*. Ownership refers not just to possession per se, but also to the *socially recognized rights tied to that possession*.





For workers to claim ownership rights, two strategies have historically been paramount: workers can own businesses directly, such as in a worker co-op, or workers can organize to place social limits on the rights of capitalist property.

The rights of ownership can and do change, which means that there are many paths to democratizing ownership. Of course, within today's capitalist economic system, owners of capital can also act to undermine democratic ownership. For instance, in the early twentieth century, corporate owners employed supervisors to extract knowledge from line workers, reducing worker ownership and control of the production process—which became known as “Taylorism” (named after the man who pioneered the approach).² Workers, in turn, responded by combining into the associations we know as “unions.”

For workers to claim ownership rights, two strategies have historically been paramount: workers can own businesses directly, such as in a worker co-op, or workers can organize to place social limits on the rights of capitalist property. The latter is what, at the core, unions do. A collective bargaining agreement does not just specify wages; it limits the rights of ownership—for example, by restricting owners' rights to dismiss workers from their jobs.

But what about workers who are neither union members nor employee-owners? In the United States, only 10.3 percent of workers (14 million people) are union members,³ while the number of people working for companies with employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs)—the most common (albeit flawed) form of employee ownership—is about 10.2 million (7.5 percent of all workers).⁴ Even if there were no overlap between those two groups (and there is), more than 80 percent of American workers presently benefit from neither.

In this vacuum, many other paths have been employed to increase worker ownership and control. In this article, we look at three of these: *day laborer centers*, *the worker center movement writ large*, and *mutualism*.

THE EMERGENCE OF A NATIONAL DAY LABORER CENTER NETWORK

What is a day laborer center? Simply put, it is an association of people who labor on a job-by-job basis. When unorganized, these day laborers are among the most vulnerable

workers in the labor force: they lack job security and benefits, have traditionally tended to be hired at street corners, and, in the United States, many are undocumented.

Before he came to be a codirector of the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), Pablo Alvarado was a day laborer. He immigrated to the United States from El Salvador—fleeing its civil war at the end of the 1980s—and began working in Los Angeles in 1990. As he explained to Harold Meyerson of *The American Prospect*, “I stood on street corners waiting for work; I worked on demolition jobs; I learned carpentry and drywalling; I did gardening and house painting.”⁵

Forming a day laborers' association would come later. First, Alvarado was hired as an organizer by a local Los Angeles immigration rights nonprofit, in January 1996. That November, Alvarado relates, he started talking with another organizer from Northern California after a game of soccer. The organization that would become NDLON, the National Day Laborers' Organizing Network, began on that soccer field, Alvarado explains, although the nonprofit was not formally launched until 2001.⁶

Today, there is a national network of over fifty centers for day laborers. These have served as vital community support centers during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ Indeed, during the economic shutdown, day laborer centers became much more—sites for giving out cash assistance, food, and personal protective equipment like masks, as well as providing referrals to health clinics.⁸

But how do the centers give ownership of the work process back to workers? The key mechanism is a tool familiar to union members: the creation of a democratically controlled hiring hall. As Ligia Gualpa, director of the Proyecto Justicia Laboral (Workers Justice Project) in Brooklyn, New York, explains: “We have been able to create a safe space for workers to come together to set standards.”⁹ Gualpa elaborated, “Along with my coworker, Yadira Sanchez, we cofounded the organization to create a safe space for workers to organize our union of community members and workers. Some call it our ‘little union.’ It is a group that

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dreams that it is possible for workers to have dignity and respect in their own workplaces and be treated as human beings.”¹⁰

Day laborer centers, such as the one Guallpa directs, ensure fair and safe working conditions at a standard rate. Meanwhile, employers pay more but benefit from having an organization stand behind the work. Fundamentally, the day laborers move from taking the jobs at the rates offered to establishing standards and conditions of their employment—and typically get paid at rates between \$18 and \$25 an hour. In these centers, day laborers have a space to meet with each other as well as enroll in classes (such as English as a second language) that are run according to popular education principles.

At these centers, workers elect their own leaders, hold their own meetings, set their own wage levels, and establish *reglamentos*—or codes of conduct—to hold each other accountable. The results are not only that day laborers gain ownership over the work process, their standing in the community rises, as well. “[T]he Center restored to us the dignity of being respected as human beings,” Rodrigo Perez Valencia, a day laborer in Santa Cruz who immigrated from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, told *NPQ*.¹¹

THE WORKER CENTER MOVEMENT WRIT LARGE

A day laborer center is one type of worker center, but the worker center movement covers a much broader range of workers. Laine Romero-Alston, formerly at Open Society Foundations (and now working for the U.S. Department of Labor) observes that, just as many unions arose in opposition to Taylorism, worker centers too gained strength rising in opposition to the “fissuring” of work—by which she means the severing of the typical employer–employee relationship. Often, this means that workers have become gig workers, or, legally speaking, “independent contractors.”¹²

Technically, workers who are independent contractors are self-employed and “own” their own businesses. But, as noted above, not all ownership carries the same benefits,

and in some cases, ownership brings significant costs. Contracting can work well for professionals who have multiple clients (such as accountants); but for millions in the United States, being an independent contractor can mean getting saddled with business costs (insurance, equipment, and so forth) while the profits and benefits flow elsewhere.

For example, Steve Viscelli—a University of Pennsylvania sociologist and author of *The Big Rig: Trucking and The Decline of the American Dream*—has described in the *Atlantic* how independent contracting in the trucking industry, a product of trucking deregulation in the late 1970s, has resulted in “sweatshops on wheels”—with drivers often leasing trucks from companies and only providing services to one company, even as the drivers technically are their own employers. The result? As Viscelli explains, “Forty years ago, truckers formed one of the best paid and most politically powerful parts of the U.S. working class. Today, according to the Department of Labor, the average trucker makes about \$40,000. In 1980, according to one industry analyst, the average trucker was making (after adjusting for inflation) the equivalent of more than \$110,000 today.”¹³

Romero-Alston observes that it is “in this context we saw the emergence of worker centers.”¹⁴ This is also the context in which platform cooperatives have formed to organize gig workers at ride-hailing app companies and elsewhere.

One area where worker centers have made strides is with domestic workers.¹⁵ The National Domestic Workers' Alliance, which Ai-jen Poo directs, connects several dozen member and affiliate groups across the country. Poo explains that the national network began in Atlanta in 2007 with a dozen organizing networks.¹⁶ But organizing a hiring hall structure like the ones the day laborers have created has not been viable for domestic workers. The group has been highly successful in getting into place a domestic bill of rights (state and local), however, which not only provides protections for workers but also in some cases gives them the ability to cogovern the sector. In Seattle, due to deep

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organizing by domestic workers citywide, Poo notes, “We were able to create a domestic workers’ standards board that brought together the city representatives of employers and worker representatives to . . . talk about what labor standards in the city of Seattle for domestic workers should look like, and that is starting to move towards concrete changes.”¹⁷

Worker centers have also emerged more broadly as a strategy to organize workers across multiple industries in BIPOC communities. Nationally, for example, over a dozen Black worker centers are now linked in a national network, explains Lola Smallwood-Cuevas, cofounder of the Los Angeles Black Worker Center.¹⁸ As Steven Pitts, emeritus associate chair of the University of California Berkeley Labor Center, wrote in 2018, early chapters of what came to be the National Black Worker Center Project (NBWCP) in 2014 emerged in the South—including Black Workers for Justice, founded in North Carolina in 1981, and the Mississippi Center for Human Rights, founded in the small city of Greenville in 1996.¹⁹

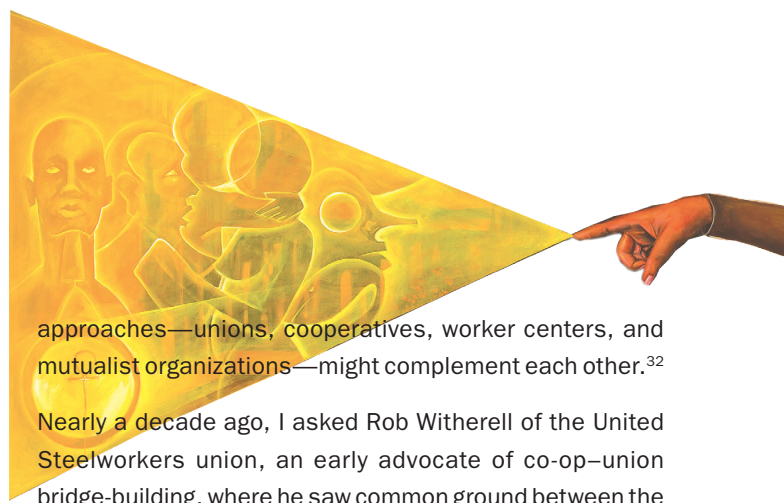
Today, the Black worker center network extends to many additional places, including Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Baltimore, Boston, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Washington, DC. Primarily, the centers act as support spaces for Black worker organizing and as advocates for Black workers, with a focus on helping Black workers access job opportunities. For example, in New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina, the Black worker justice center in that city advocated to compel the federal government to abide by Housing & Urban Development Section 3 rules, which require public housing authorities to employ residents where possible. In some cases, the centers have also used direct ownership strategies. As Pitts writes, “Across NBWCP, some affiliates find that many of their initial members feel alienated from a political economy that devalues them as Black workers, and their response is a search for alternatives to the status quo. ONE DC is exploring the development of worker cooperatives. Two cooperatives already implemented are a child care cooperative and a cleaning cooperative.”²⁰

MUTUALISM: MAKING A COMEBACK

Today, when one thinks of a union, the immediate vision is surely of an association that supports workers in the workplace. Yet, as Sara Horowitz reminds us in *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up*, historically unions have operated as social institutions—both within the workplace and far beyond it. As Horowitz writes, in the 1910s and 1920s, “workers could get a loan from Amalgamated Bank or medical help at the Sidney Hillman Health Center, or buy into affordable union housing in the Bronx.”²¹ The point, Horowitz explains, is that the textile workers’ union did not just represent workers inside the factory—it was a bank, a hospital, and a co-op housing provider as well.

What can be learned from this in the present moment? Horowitz contends that social institutions—be they unions, worker centers, or cooperatives—must rebuild what she calls *civic infrastructure*, by which she means institutions that are created and owned by—and therefore responsive to—social organizations such as unions and cooperatives.²² Horowitz doesn’t just talk about this—she’s an institution builder herself. In 1995, she founded the Freelancers Union, a member-governed nonprofit that she led until 2018, which provides insurance benefits for its 500,000-plus “gig economy” worker-members nationwide.²³

These days, mutualism is making a comeback, with the COVID-19 pandemic leading to the formation of thousands of mutual aid networks.²⁴ Mutual aid has also become increasingly central in disaster recovery.²⁵ As Horowitz points out, the potential for mutualism extends far wider. For instance, she suggests that historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) could have been implementation partners in the 2021 infrastructure bill, if only building community-responsive institutions was seen to be a central goal of a democratic polity.²⁶



In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a moment of U.S. labor union revival has been evident. Last October, signs of this were apparent in the strike wave that broke out, known as “Striketober.”²⁷ This spring we saw pro-union votes at over fifty Starbucks branches,²⁸ as well as a union election win involving around eight thousand workers at an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island.²⁹ To understand how significant that Amazon win is, note that—according to *Bloomberg Law*—since 1989, a U.S. private sector union has not won an election that large; in fact, the Amazon win is only the fifth time in thirty-three years that a private-sector union has won an election in a workplace with five thousand workers or more.³⁰ What drove the Staten Island success? Workers’ desire to control the labor process and working conditions. Notably, organizing began after a health-and-safety walkout spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic.³¹

Clearly, it will require multiple strategies for workers to (re)claim ownership over the labor process. Union co-ops—that is, co-ops where workers both own the business *and* link to workers beyond their workplace—are still uncommon, but they offer a window into how different

approaches—unions, cooperatives, worker centers, and mutualist organizations—might complement each other.³²

Nearly a decade ago, I asked Rob Witherell of the United Steelworkers union, an early advocate of co-op–union bridge-building, where he saw common ground between the co-op and union movements. His response: “At the most basic level, in both cases, it is about workers helping each other out to create a better life for themselves. . . . The means for achieving their goals are different, but their goals are very much aligned.”³³

Today, two larger-order trends are evident. On the one hand, the toolkit of available methods that workers possess to reclaim ownership of the labor process and the economy has expanded. Yet, no one should lose sight of the loss of worker control that has occurred in recent decades. At Amazon, for example, a reporter noted years ago that pickers at one warehouse had to pull up to one hundred items from the shelves an hour and walk as many as twelve miles a day on their shifts—working conditions that might have appalled even Frederick Taylor.³⁴ Restoring worker control will require persistence, creativity, and solidarity—anchored in worker movements’ ability to align with each other and find common ground.

NOTES

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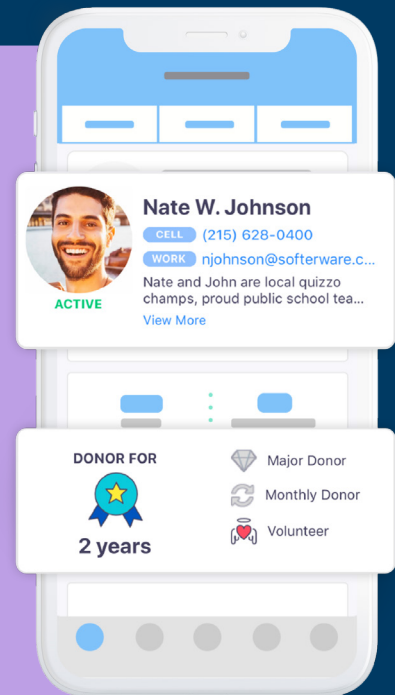
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