

# The Future of Workers in the Gig Economy and Beyond

## A Conversation with Steve Dubb, Rithika Ramamurthy, and Sarita Gupta

“We’re in a moment that’s transformative. . . . The magnitude of this crisis is an opportunity to have a magnitude of vision, and to reconstruct our economic and labor systems from the ground up. And that has to start with workers.”

*This conversation with Sarita Gupta, vice president of U.S. programs at the Ford Foundation—who until recently directed the Ford Foundation’s Future of Work(ers) program—and NPQ’s Steve Dubb and Rithika Ramamurthy, focuses on the struggle for workplace justice, and discusses where the points of leverage are for building worker power and ownership.*

**Steve Dubb:** We would love to hear a bit about the background of your work. How did you come to the field of worker justice? And what led you to move to Ford, recently, after a decade at the helm of Jobs With Justice?

**Sarita Gupta:** I like to think that I came to worker justice by a few pathways. A key one was that my family immigrated to Rochester, New York—“Kodak City”—when I was a child. Seeds were planted very early in my childhood, growing up in a city where, at the time, Kodak was downsizing and I saw the devastating impacts of unemployment on families and communities. At such a young age, I couldn’t really make meaning of it—but it always seemed strange to me that there could be generations of families who were part of building a major company like Kodak and who could suddenly lose their livelihoods and not have a voice in that process.



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As I moved on in life, I went to college—and in college I saw workers organizing on campuses, and grad students organizing, and I started to recognize how important worker voice is. So, it was from the student movement, and going into the labor movement—and, specifically, Jobs With Justice—that I began to make links between the attacks on student voice and democracy on campus with attacks on collective bargaining. And that’s what brought me into the worker movement—where I spent the next twenty years.

I was a local organizer in Chicago—a strong union town—but I was there at a time when there was a rise of immigrant workers organizing in the city: janitors, hotel workers, industrial, laundry, and food service workers. I helped found the first worker center in the city. And that led me down this path of what it means to work with traditional unions, as well as worker organizing happening outside of a union context. That helped me to have an imagination around working—or being able to work—at the edges of the labor movement, if you will, and to really understand the importance of seeding new approaches to how workers are organizing.

My transition to Ford after Jobs With Justice was based on two things. One, wanting a different perch from which to look at the field of worker justice. For years, I had been an organizer and an advocate, and I was hungry to widen my aperture, to better understand the interests of a variety of

stakeholders. And two, the biggest driving force for me was my horror that, as this conversation about the future of work was taking root, it became focused on machines and automation, not centering workers and the realities of workers.<sup>1</sup> I was given an incredible invitation to come to Ford to help recenter that debate. It has been so inspiring for me over the last couple of years to be at the foundation and be able to do just that.

**Rithika Ramamurthy:** Can you elaborate on what that conversation about the future of work gets wrong?

**SG:** Automation and the impact of new technologies is a relevant topic to discuss, but all too often the people who are impacted by current problems of wages, benefits, and the lack of influence over working conditions get left out of the debate. Even before the pandemic, the average worker had experienced forty years of stagnant or declining pay, shrinking benefits, and reduced voice in the workplace. At the Ford Foundation, we focus on the future of *workers*—and named our program as such—because we’re focused on ensuring that all workers, regardless of their classification, have equal rights in terms of labor protections and social protections, and that workers shape the policies and the economic systems that affect their lives. We work to build public will and reimagine labor and social policies, to make sure all work and workers are valued and protected. I think that is what is critical right now, and I think the pandemic has created an opening for the kinds of discussions that we needed prepandemic and that thankfully are now beginning to take root.

**RR:** This is so important right now, as gig work starts to encroach on professions that you might never have imagined would be gutted by this. I was just reading about a bill in California that’s about to pass, “Uber for nurses.”<sup>2</sup> I think your instinct is right that with employment shifting and becoming flexible and restructured, new approaches and creativity vis-à-vis the working class are needed.

**SG:** Absolutely. If we aren’t careful, the policies that get created around so-called gig work could be the next chapter of policies that exclude large swaths of working people from the kinds of labor and social protections that are needed. It’s another vehicle that can promote the kinds of historical exclusions that our program has been trying to address. Domestic workers should have labor and social protections; day

laborers should have labor and social protections. It's important, through that lens, to recognize how critical this debate is right now, and how important it is for us to recognize—as a nation, as people, as policy-makers, as employers, as workers—that we can't allow another vehicle by which those kinds of exclusions get created.

**SD:** You noted once that “the arc of the economic universe has bent badly toward injustice.”<sup>3</sup> Why is this so, and what can be done about it?

**SG:** Why? Neoliberal policies of free trade, structural adjustment,<sup>4</sup> increased outsourcing, and the fissuring of work. The growing concentration of power in the hands of multinational corporations and financial actors that occurred over the last forty years enabled them to rewrite the rules of the economy and claim the lion's share of its benefits for themselves—and, as a consequence, working communities across the country are experiencing increasing economic insecurity. So, it's critical—when we think about an inclusive and equitable economic recovery from the pandemic—to take a moment and pause, and acknowledge that the prepandemic economy was incredibly unequal, and that this pandemic has simply laid bare the results of decades of growing inequality and compounded it.

There are lots of statistics: you can look at the wealth gap, you can look at where jobs have grown or not grown in the last few years—and all point to the importance of looking at our economic recovery. It shouldn't mean that we're returning to “normal” or to recovery from just the pandemic. We're in a moment that's transformative; it's an invitation (and responsibility) to build an economy that centers those who've historically been pushed to the margins. The magnitude of this crisis is an opportunity to have a magnitude of vision, and to reconstruct our economic and labor systems from the ground up. And that has to start with workers. We're seeing that now, as we see workers expressing with their feet their discontent with the types of jobs they have access to, and what they believe they deserve.



**SD:** Why did those neoliberal policies pass into law and become effective? What can we learn from the experiences of labor defeat?

**SG:** Neoliberal policies include free trade, low taxes, deregulation, privatization, and balanced budgets. Every aspect of society is seen through the market economy. Neoliberal policies took hold because of a combination of trends: new economic thinking in reaction to the Keynesian economic model; businesses aggressively asserting their interests in politics; the

public becoming more skeptical of government; and the aggressive attacks on unions as entities that represent the interests of working people. Many of these policies created a “race to the bottom,” in which many sectors of work were displaced and lost due to companies seeking cheaper labor in different parts of the world. Since the '80s, a well-financed and organized anti-union industry has taken hold, making it more difficult for workers to form unions. As a result, we have witnessed the decline of unions that have been opposed to these types of policies that do not benefit workers and working-class communities. At the same time, we have seen the concentration of political and economic power and influence of the wealthy and corporations that are interested in making greater profits.

We should be really clear on why this came about. I noted the fissuring and neoliberal economic policies that substantively shifted the arrangements in workplaces. In the United States, we have antiquated labor laws and policies that were based on very traditional employment models, yet so many workers in our country today are not in those traditional employment arrangements. So, that's one element. The other is the growth of an anti-union/union-busting industry that has perpetrated massive attacks on collective bargaining rights—which has been going on for over four decades now. What that means is it's been made much harder for workers to come together collectively in their workplaces and form unions. It means we've seen increasing attacks in retaliation against workers who speak up in their workplaces around issues. We saw this with the pandemic—for instance, the Amazon worker in New York who spoke about health and

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safety issues and was immediately fired. Workers and whistleblowers across U.S. industries have alleged that they experienced retaliation for raising concerns about their health and safety.<sup>5</sup> The increased attacks on collective bargaining and the increased retaliation that we see when workers speak up in their workplaces have made it very difficult for workers to find their voice in workplaces and to help to shape workplace policies.

I also want to connect this to what’s happening in our democracy as a whole right now, because it’s important for us to understand that these attacks on our democracy—whether it be voting rights or any other of the many different ways that such attacks are showing up—are another form of silencing the voices of working people, not only in the context of work but in the context of society as a whole. I think that the attacks on collective bargaining have had a huge impact on the health of our democracy generally. That’s the *why*: the policies that were passed, coupled with a real push to squash unions, if you will, or the idea of collective bargaining rights.

What we can learn from this defeat for working people and their communities is: the importance of unions and worker organizations to counterbalance the growing concentration of power of corporate interests; the critical need for unions as an organized voice to represent the interests of workers; and the need to create the collective economic and political power necessary to build an equitable economy and politics.

We need to promote a vision of our economy that is based on the values of respect, agency, and everyone’s ability to sustain themselves and their families.

**RR:** Given this anti-union atmosphere, what do you see as the future of collective action? What role might traditional unions play? What role might alternative institutions, such as worker centers and worker cooperatives, play?

**SG:** Ultimately, all of us want to live in a healthy democracy in which our opinions and contributions matter—and collective bargaining is fundamental to building a healthy democracy, by creating pathways to elevate the decisions of workers alongside those of employers and others. This is particularly important in an era of global capitalism, where financialization (whereby the financial sector—banks, private equity firms, hedge funds, stocks and derivatives exchanges, and other conduits—takes up a larger share of the U.S. economy, and increases its influence over economic policy and economic outcomes),<sup>6</sup> fissured employment, and entrenched practices of patriarchy and white supremacy exist. It means that we have to rethink collective bargaining and collective action, and reimagine what they look like in order to meet the needs of modern workers. So, in my mind, collective bargaining rights and collective action are critical pathways to democracy. We have to expand how we think about democracy: it’s not just a system of political practices but also *principles* that have to be applied to participation and decision-making in all aspects of people’s economic lives. That means that collective bargaining and collective action should be seen not only as important in the workplace but also in terms of the other economic relationships that workers hold: as tenants, as students who have debt, as the many different ways workers interact with the economy. Within that context, collective action becomes critical: it is the ability for people to come together and negotiate with whatever entity has decision-making power over their lives—negotiate agreements that give them a voice in the process and a way to hold firms, banks, and landlords, for example, accountable.

That’s what we’re starting to see happen. We know that labor unions—historically and still today—are an important pathway to the creation of good jobs and access to benefits. And for so many people—especially so many Black and Brown workers—unions were a huge pathway to the middle class, and that continues to be true and important. But we’ve

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also seen the growth of worker centers,<sup>7</sup> and the impacts facing those historically excluded from labor laws and policies, as we’ve talked about. In this moment, especially with the pandemic, these impacts on people who have been historically excluded have become that much more apparent. We saw many Black and Brown workers, immigrant workers, and other low-wage workers excluded from fundamental rights and safeguards. Some of the early pandemic recovery policies, for example, and this anti-union offensive over the last two decades, have undermined worker protections in so many sectors of the economy—especially in lower-wage sectors of the economy, where so many Black and Brown and immigrant workers exist.

So, the growth of the worker-centered movement has been powerful in helping to right those exclusions, to find new approaches to collectively bring workers together and enable them to negotiate and to change policies. And this is fueled by an incredible renewal of energy in the labor movement. I see worker centers as playing a critical role in winning rights and raising standards in low-wage industries: they’ve been instrumental in raising the minimum wage and forcing wage theft ordinances, in winning a Domestic Workers Bill of Rights and paid leave policies, and much more. I think they’ve played a big role on all those fronts in a way that gives us a window into what the future holds—one in which worker centers and labor unions can come together in a more powerful way. I think we are seeing new pathways to collective bargaining rights emerging here.

We’re seeing collective action around us today in the increasing pressure for unionization—from Starbucks workers, to Amazon, to journalism outlets, to tech companies. We’re seeing the power of collectivization in the demands for better wages and benefits in an economy that centers workers.

**RR:** What you’re describing is the ideal strategy of bargaining for the common good, or thinking as a “labor community,” as Naomi Williams might put it.<sup>8</sup> The idea that, politically, the divorce of economic and racial justice is a major failure—not letting workers think about how their lives are integrated with work, and vice versa, and how people and institutions who hold power over them are affecting them, too.

**SG:** Bargaining for the common good is in fact one of the most promising models right now. I would also lift up what we’re seeing with the “Always Essential” campaign—another

compelling example of essential workers coming together and declaring that “essential” doesn’t mean disposable, and that they need protections. And there have been great victories, from New York to Harris County, Texas, in terms of essential workers creating a Health and Safety Standards Board.<sup>9</sup>

**SD:** I would like to talk a bit about worker cooperatives—something we cover quite a lot at NPQ. The field is still fairly small, but the strategy is gaining prominence—it has certainly become a popular strategy among Latinx workers and workers of color generally. What can you say about the role of worker cooperatives?

**SG:** There’s growing momentum around worker cooperatives, which is really promising to see—and I think it’s a great example of economic democracy in its truest form. A lot of what we’re talking about here is economic democracy, and I think worker co-ops are a critical model of this. In some industries and places, it makes really good sense—it’s not applicable across the economy, per se, but where it does make sense, we’ve seen the power of what’s possible. I’ve had the opportunity to travel to Mondragón, Spain—the birthplace of the largest ever worker cooperative—and to see the model up close and what the impacts of such a model can be in terms of addressing the inequalities and disparities that we know exist, and what it means when workers really do have that much control over an industry (including the services that are created in that

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context).<sup>10</sup> I think there is immense power in this, and I think time will tell, as this movement continues to grow in the United States, as to where and how the model takes root.

I do know that many of our grantee partners at Ford are in relationship with some of the worker cooperative movements, and that’s also what’s really exciting about this moment—the ways in which those in the worker justice movement are collaborating and learning from each other’s strategies to help inform new breakthroughs.

**SD:** I often refer to the 1936–37 Flint sit-down strike, and the fact that the workers were able to control the tool die that was used for shaping the body of about half the vehicles on the GM product line—which made their victory inevitable, once Governor [Frank] Murphy refused to bring in troops to break the strike. So, that was a point of leverage, and these days it seems harder to find those points of leverage. Where do you see points of leverage to shift the arc back in the direction of justice?

**SG:** Your question brings to mind another major worker struggle nearly a century ago, connected to a deadly pandemic, which was the ten thousand coal workers in West Virginia who banded together to march in protest against the cruelty and injustice they experienced working in the mines. It was one of America’s largest labor uprisings, and really unusual at that time because of the segregation of workers.

But it did lead to incredible sets of protections that we take for granted today, like the forty-hour week and minimum wage.

In the same vein, we’re seeing an historic act of refusal by workers right now, who will no longer accept the below-standard wages and protections they’ve been forced to accept for decades. A lot of reporters and the media are calling this moment “The Great Resignation”; but in reality, millions of workers feel that America quit on *them* a long time ago, and I prefer to talk about it as “The Great Stagnation” for America’s workers—because it’s the stagnation of employers, policy-makers, and others who are just not changing the conditions for workers in this moment.<sup>11</sup> What’s exciting is that, in fact, there is this leverage right now, happening before our eyes—and workers are demanding that businesses compete with each other for their services, and are refusing to accept anything less than living wages, solid benefits, better working conditions, and flexibility. And we’re seeing sectors in which wages and benefits have swung up.<sup>12</sup> There is much work still to be done, for sure—but this is a clear example of the power of collective action. And it’s one example of where I see leverage right now.

In the past, you thought about leverage in terms of employer and employees, and what a company can do and can’t do. But today, with the financialization of the economy, we have to ask ourselves what *should* and *can* a union contract cover? This gets back to the point about bargaining for the common good, which poses that question—as in, How do you leverage union contracts in smart ways to actually address a broader range of issues that fall outside of the contract but impact workers? Who are we negotiating with? Often, workers are not actually negotiating with the decision makers, and they’re caught in a shell game. It’s what we saw with

McDonald’s workers: they think they’re negotiating with franchise owners, who say, “We don’t make those policies, it’s headquarters”; and headquarters says, “It’s not us, it’s the franchise.” Then there’s the role of private equity and hedge funds that own many of these companies and have a big say in decision-making, as we saw with Toys “R” Us workers not long ago, and with United for Respect, which did that really immense



campaign.<sup>13</sup> The question of who we are negotiating with and how that informs leverage is another really important element to be thinking about in this moment.

So, what does a union contract cover, who are we negotiating with, and then who actually gets to be included and seen as a worker? Who has the right to actually negotiate around these things? Depending on the sector, there are different ways we leverage. Again, bargaining for the common good is a great example of where all of these things are being tried in really smart, thoughtful ways, and bringing about real wins. Whether it's the Florida public services union—SEIU Local 8—demanding that the city and state stop providing subsidies to companies that rely on fossil fuels as a core component of their business model, or Minnesota's SEIU Local 26's "ban-the-box" campaign, demanding that the company remove questions from employment applications pertaining to employees' criminal record—these are things that, although not historically within a union contract, they were able to negotiate. There are many other examples, of course, but I think that's how we begin to answer that question of what are the new leverage points in the economy as it is today. As our economy changes, it's going to require the collective action and experimentation of workers and these kinds of campaigns to really sharpen those leverage points over time.

**RR:** Since you've already spoken about the creativity and ambition of the contemporary working class struggle, I wonder if you could talk a bit about how the composition of the working class has changed in the past few decades, and the implications of this change.

**SG:** The composition has shifted over the last few decades. Part of the worker center movement was a response to the growing numbers of Black, Brown, and immigrant workers who were in many sectors of the economy where work protections have not existed. Broadly speaking, if you look at the worker center movement and who they represent, that gives you a sense of the composition of the working class.

But what I would really like to focus on is Black workers, who are 12 percent of the overall workforce but represent over 17 percent of all frontline industry workers.<sup>14</sup> Combined with the limited access to healthcare, Black workers and their families continue to be at higher risk of COVID, and of falling into poverty if they face disruptions at work. Within two

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decades, Black and Brown workers will become the majority of the working class, yet movements to transform labor policies do not have representative leadership from affected communities.

One exciting initiative that Ford is proud to be supporting is the Advancing Black Strategists Initiative. It's a partnership among Jobs With Justice, the Institute for Policy Studies' Black Worker Initiative, and Morehouse College's International Comparative Labor Studies program.<sup>15</sup> They're looking to create the next generation of Black economic justice and labor strategists to lead campaigns and demand collective power building, particularly in the South. The goal of this initiative is to support the development of a new school of thought—one that's anchored in the principle that working people's ability to organize and collectively bargain, alongside voting and other forms of civic participation, is a prerequisite for a healthy society and economy. I feel like we want to support more initiatives like this that help us embrace the changing composition—not just to acknowledge but to actually *support* how the movement infrastructures get built to ensure that Black and Brown workers are shaping future economic and labor policies in this century.



**RR:** There's a lot of talk about reimagining capitalism. But what if capitalism is the reason that the arc of the universe bends toward economic injustice?

**SG:** What we need is a new form of stakeholder capitalism that recognizes the importance of all stakeholders, including employees, the communities, and suppliers.<sup>16</sup> It's important to see workers as a core stakeholder among actors who are shaping the economy, shaping workplaces, shaping policies.

We also need a form of capitalism in which boardrooms are changed. A year ago, a third of the Fortune 500 companies did not have a single African-American director, and I can assure you that if you don't have representation at the board level, you're not likely to see material or sustainable change in the C-suite and within the company more broadly.

We've also got to change the rules of the game so that people have the opportunity to compete on a level playing field. I think these are some of the fronts that we see as opportunities, as we talk about reimagining capitalism in this moment, to make sure that we're really meeting the needs of workers and helping to support the environment that creates opportunities for workers to achieve dignity in their lives.

**SD:** But *capital* is in the name of capitalism—it really does privilege the owners of capital. Is there space for thinking beyond it?



**SG:** Let me be clear: We want to support workers *within* the logic of capitalism. I think that's what worker justice groups are doing—taking the lead from unions and worker organizations. There is a lot of interesting discussion happening around post-neoliberal economic thinking, and there are actors within philanthropy who are beginning to understand and learn about some of those efforts that are taking root.

As philanthropy, we support the movement, and so we're taking our lead from the movement as to where they see the openings and opportunities for them to shape economic models that they're confronting on a daily basis. That's really where we're at in this moment, while paying attention to some of these conversations about new economic models that are taking root, and doing our part to position and ensure that worker groups are at the table in those conversations—alongside racial justice groups, feminist organizations, and many others—so that, as new economic models are being thought out, we don't replicate the historic exclusions of the voices that we know are critical. If we want a better future, we need to make sure that those who have been most impacted and historically excluded are at the table shaping the models moving forward.

## NOTES

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15. See “Advancing Black Strategists Initiative,” Jobs With Justice, accessed May 5, 2022, [www.jwj.org/our-work/absi](https://www.jwj.org/our-work/absi).
16. For more on this, see Steve Dubb, “Disruption Is Hard: The Limits of Stakeholder Capitalism,” *Nonprofit Quarterly*, April 6, 2022, [nonprofitquarterly.org/disruption-is-hard-the-limits-of-stakeholder-capitalism/](https://nonprofitquarterly.org/disruption-is-hard-the-limits-of-stakeholder-capitalism/).

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