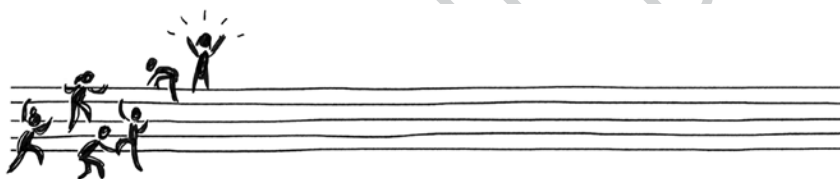


6.2

Base-Building

Labor Unions: Worker Power, the Common Good, and the St. Paul Federation of Educators



Leah VanDassor grew up in a union town. She saw the power of unions to strike and win higher wages, but when she became a teacher and a member of the teacher's union, she wasn't that interested in it. "I didn't pay attention," she told us in an interview. "Every other year there was a vote for the contract or not, but I didn't know what was going on in the union."¹

Things began to change when new leaders came in to run the union, the St. Paul Federation of Educators (SPFE) in Minnesota.² Suddenly, instead of only talking about wages, union leaders were talking about students and schools. "This really struck a chord with me," says VanDassor. "We were looking at things that would impact our students' lives and therefore impact our working conditions. So that's when I started getting more involved."³

A decade later, VanDassor was elected president of SPFE. A year into her term, she found herself leading the union and bargaining for a new contract

in the middle of a pandemic. The St. Paul School District called for rollbacks in the contract, claiming that declining school enrollment was creating a \$43 million budget shortfall.⁴ But along with their colleagues in the Minneapolis Teachers Union, St. Paul educators demanded limits on class size, funding and staff for student mental health services, and wage increases, including larger-than-usual pay bumps for low-wage education assistants.

It was going to be a fight. The pandemic was hard on union leaders and members, and everyone was exhausted. Still, when the union came together to discuss their options, “Folks said, ‘we might be tired, but we’re not stupid. We’re fighting back. We’re ready to go,’” SPFE organizer Leah Lindeman told us. “And people did the work. The muscle memory was there from the past, they woke it up, they did the organizing work that needed to happen.”⁵

When negotiations hit an impasse, almost 80 percent of SPFE members voted in favor of a strike. And just minutes before their deadline on March 7, 2022, the union reached an agreement with the school district. Had they failed to do so, SPFE was prepared to go on strike the next day.

The union didn’t win all its demands, but they won a lot, including an average 13.5 percent raise for education assistants, a drop in class sizes, and new funding for school psychologists. Like the slow and methodical work done by Make the Road, SPFE’s story shows that persistence can pay off. Lindeman sums it up as follows:

Because we had done so much work over time and people knew how to organize in their [school] building, they knew what was going on. They trusted each other. Even when you get into those tight moments, that’s when that work comes into play. And it was much easier to come together and fight back and win than if we hadn’t ever done any of that work.⁶

SPFE celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2019. In the last seventeen years, the union has adopted a number of strategies to advocate on behalf of its members, who number in the thousands. Part of their success has been rooted in their communal and transparent base-building approach.

“Our” Union, Not “the” Union

Unions rely on various forms of power and use many of the strategy models we cover in this book, but we focus on their base-building work because all of their other strategies must be built on a solid foundation of member organization. A strike won't work if members don't stick together. Base-building starts with the theory that union power is predicated on people power. Unions derive strength and influence when the majority of workers are members of the union and when those members participate in union meetings and activities. Power comes from workers' ability to act together.⁷

Stephanie has been a member of, and worked with, unions for decades, particularly with organizers working to make unions more democratic, militant, and inclusive. For several years in the 2000s she helped coordinate national calls of rank-and-file teachers looking to reform their unions and was inspired by the number of educators passionate about making schools work better for teachers as well as for students and parents. Teachers have been transforming their unions around the country, putting them on the frontlines in the fight to save public education. Some of that has been driven by young teachers wanting to bring racial justice into their education work, and much has been driven by veteran teachers who were tired of the growing attacks against public schools.

VanDassor's election—in fact, her candidacy—wouldn't have happened without Mary Cathryn Ricker. Ricker was a teacher who was tired of the way teachers and public schools were being portrayed by politicians and in the media. She decided to run for union president in 2005, and won. Prior to Ricker, the SPFE had a traditional structure—it was run by a president and “business agents”—Ricker, however, replaced the business agents with organizers who had a history of developing rank-and-file leaders.

The new leadership took several steps to rebuild the union. Ricker explained: “The first step was quite simple: to talk to one another.”⁸ They established a Contract Action Team (CAT) in each of the sixty schools and cultivated rank-and-file leaders to prepare for the next round of bargaining. “I really honestly think one of the major things we did was start saying ‘our union’ instead of ‘the union,’” VanDassor says. “Instead of treating

our union like a pop machine, we treat it like a gym membership.” In other words, you have to work out to get something out of it, and you have to keep working.⁹



VENDING MACHINE



GYM MEMBERSHIP

Next, they knew that changing the culture of the union would require changing the narrative about public schools and teacher unions. The union formed a group to write a mission statement: “A New Narrative for Teachers, Educators, and Public Education.” The statement highlighted student success and social justice, emphasizing the strong relationship between student and educator issues and interests.¹⁰

Most unions bargain with a small team of leaders and lawyers but SPFE used a provision in state law that allowed for “open bargaining,” which let all union members, as well as parents and members of the community, attend bargaining sessions. They set bargaining sessions for a regular time on Thursday evenings to make it easier to attend.

Each year the union expanded its efforts to deepen member and community involvement. The St. Paul school district is diverse: over 70 percent of students in public schools are students of color, over 70 percent qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch, and more than one third speak English as a second language.¹¹ In order to accommodate this wide array of needs and preferences, in 2013, SPFE organizers solicited input from teachers, parents, and community members about how schools could be run better. They wrote up their findings in a report called “The Schools St. Paul Children Deserve,” which was subsequently used as the basis for the union’s bargaining proposal that year.

The union's membership is predominately white, and SPFE has struggled to address racial equity inside its ranks. Noting strong racial disparities in school discipline, SPFE brought a demand for restorative justice practices into bargaining in 2015. They won an agreement to launch a three-year, \$4.5 million pilot program, initially in six schools, and now in twelve. With funding from their parent union, the National Education Association, SPFE created a training curriculum in restorative practice—conflict-resolution methods that attempt to address root causes of behavioral problems and give students new skills, rather than harsh “zero tolerance” disciplinary policies.¹²

The union took on a project to educate themselves and the community about how schools are funded. They created TIGER Teams (Teaching and Inquiring about Greed, Equity, and Racism) to study how “money is being stolen from our school and our community by our state's largest corporations and wealthiest citizens,” according to SPFE's website.¹³ VanDassor explains that the union is working to change taxes and funding streams in the state, as well as to make corporations pay higher taxes.¹⁴

The work continues, like any good workout routine. The pandemic has taken a toll, but the hard work of the past decade has helped the union continue and even come out of its recent bargaining with a win.

Labor Union Revitalization

The SPFE story almost makes it sound easy to build a strong union. And, compared to larger unions with entrenched leadership, it was easier to rebuild the SPFE. For instance, when Ricker decided to run for president, the incumbent stepped aside. In Chicago, teachers had to assemble a reform caucus and organize for years in order to win leadership and implement rank-and-file base-building.

While some union leaders see member engagement as a threat to their power, SPFE's story is an example of union leadership that understands member participation as their key focus and source of power. Some unions have always been that way, while others have had to rebuild after years of atrophy. “We were dusty,” Ricker said when describing the union.¹⁵

In Stephanie's work she has heard from workers that in their own workplace, co-workers don't care. People don't have time or are selfish. But as the organization Labor Notes points out in its books and training, apathy isn't real. Everyone cares about something. They might be scared to speak up, or they might believe nothing can change, but they do care. The challenge for organizers is to help turn fear, hopelessness, division, confusion, and inaction into action.¹⁶

Not all unions see member power as their strength. Some rely on developing strong relations with the employer or policymakers; others focus on legislative gains. But even if a union must rely on legislative action to win union recognition, they still will need to deal with member engagement at some point. And member engagement is the one thing that is 100 percent in a union's control—particularly when workers get active and see themselves as the union.

Some unions have built internal education programs to build solidarity and member participation. The Communication Workers of America (CWA) created a curriculum for members to teach each other about inequality and the ways in which employers, policies, and laws have divided workers by race.¹⁷ Other unions are rethinking what it means to be a leader, challenging the myth that good leaders are charismatic types who lead from above, and instead making space for people who lead by bringing others with them, as well as for more women and people of color. "We need leaders," Lauren Jacobs, the executive director of a network of labor and community groups, told us. "But we need multi-racial leadership, feminist leadership who are committed to their members and to the communities in which they work and live."¹⁸ When leadership reflects the membership, it's better positioned to hear and act on the issues at hand. It can also motivate members to get more involved.

Some renewal has been influenced by **Bargaining for the Common Good** (BCG), an approach that expands bargaining beyond the usual topics of wages and working conditions to broader issues impacting union members and communities.¹⁹ For example, many teachers have come to understand that they can't do their jobs well if they don't also address student issues, like class size and counseling. Shantella Barnes, a special education assistant

in the St. Paul schools, works with students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Without adequate support and staffing, she can't do her job well and meet the needs of her students. And without a living wage, her work is stressful: "It makes it difficult for us to come to work and deal with other kids and try to help them when we have to figure out how we're helping our own family."²⁰

Structured Worker Power: Common Elements of the Base-Building Model in Labor Organizing

A. Philip Randolph was the founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a union of Black workers that led the fight for civil rights, including by anchoring the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He famously articulated the core of the organizing ethos:

At the banquet table of nature, there are no reserved seats. You get what you can take and you keep what you can hold. If you cannot take anything, you won't get anything. And if you can't hold anything, you won't keep anything without an organization.²¹

So, how do unions build that organization? Labor organizing includes establishing unions in nonunion workplaces as well as revitalizing existing unions. The nature of base-building plays out somewhat differently in these two scenarios, but there are common core elements in both, as follows:

Map the workplace. How many people work there? What departments or divisions exist? Are there multiple shifts? Part-time or seasonal workers? Even in a unionized workplace you may not have a clear sense of who actually works there. Alongside the workplace, organizers have to map out existing networks of co-workers: Who eats lunch together? Does anyone carpool, or spend time together outside of work hours?²²

Identify leaders and build a leadership team. Leaders are not necessarily the ones who are most pro-union to start, but the people others look to, those who are good at their job, are trustworthy, and command respect. Leadership teams should be as representative as possible of the workforce.

Develop new leaders. Train members in organizing skills, labor history, strategic thinking, and how to cultivate new leaders themselves. Leadership development can happen through formal and informal training and mentorship.

Identify a key issue. Leadership teams listen to co-workers to understand their concerns in order to figure out what to fight for. Traditional unions fight on workplace issues like wages, health insurance, and scheduling. But workers have interests beyond these traditional issues, like how teachers fight for student issues. Experienced organizers know an effective issue touches workers' sense of respect and dignity. Just like community organizers, union organizers must find the issues that will mobilize members and build power.

Research. Unions study their employer and industry, looking for points of leverage in bargaining, opportunities for new organizing, and potential threats of job loss. Given the enormous power corporations have on almost every aspect of our society, strategists in other traditions and models would do well to learn from unions' expertise in corporate research.²³

Escalate tactics. The union works backward from the end goal, using tactics that get riskier and more impactful, which could include workers' signing petitions; wearing the same color shirt, sticker, or button; visiting a boss together; holding informational picket lines; building relationships with supporters outside of the workplace; developing bargaining demands with students or patients; and striking. These also serve as "structure tests"—as union organizer Jane McAlevey writes, "How strong is the people's army?"²⁴ If union leaders call on members to wear a union T-shirt to work, or sign a petition, or show up to a rally, how many will do so? Some organizers have observed that some people don't want to do these types of activities because they don't see

how they connect to a larger vision: how does wearing a T-shirt build power? Former union organizer Zack Exley (Chapter 2) found it more effective to involve workers in developing long-term plans as a way to motivate them before asking them to take the small steps.

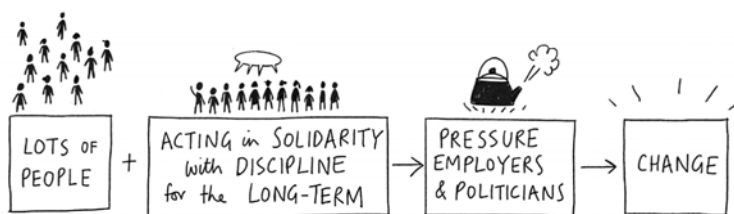
Build internal structures. Structures such as a shop steward system formalize relationships among members. Shop stewards are workers elected to learn the contract and help co-workers solve problems on the job. In some unions this is a volunteer position, others provide a small stipend. Ideally stewards are trained, attend union meetings, and stay in frequent contact with union leaders, staff, and members. A strong shop steward network may have one steward for every ten or twenty workers.

Internal structures include member committees, such as health and safety, social activities, retirees, international solidarity, diversity, bargaining, and so on. Large unions may also have internal caucuses based around race, ethnicity, or specific interests. Committees and caucuses are ways to build internal solidarity and commitment to the union.

SPFE has found changing the internal structure to be invaluable for building internal participation and strength. Lindeman told us, “We have to trust the members—this is their profession, this is their job, this is their life.” Even if it takes extra time to involve members, it has been key to strong member engagement. SPFE members Chong Xiong and Brian Hodge-Rice explained that in the past, stewards would show up and give presentations on the contract, but with their new structure, members are involved in bargaining the whole way and can wrestle with the hard issues as they come up.²⁵

Solidarity power is enhanced when elected leaders, member leaders, and union staff can work together creatively as a team, particularly when diverse leaders bring in experience with a range of traditions of struggle and connection to a broad array of networks.²⁶ (Table 6.1.2 summarizes the key characteristics of the model).

The theory of change for union strength is similar to what we offered in the prior chapter for community organizations:



Strengths and Weaknesses of the Union Model

Strong unions have won much for their members and the working class overall. Robust evidence shows that they raise wages, provide job security and benefits, and reduce disparity and discrimination. None of this would have been possible without a base of well-organized members.

Organizing of this kind is labor intensive and time consuming. In the 1990s and 2000s, a group of union leaders took bold steps to bring in new AFL-CIO leadership and push for new organizing, committing 30 percent of their budgets to staff and resources to bring unorganized workers into unions. They hired thousands of young, energetic organizers who traveled the country, living out of hotels and working long days, using the techniques just listed: mapping the workplace, visiting workers at their homes, assessing workers' support for unions, running well-executed campaigns. The efforts sometimes paid off. But for the most part, new organizing could not keep up with the growing labor force, the loss of unionized workplaces when plants shut down, or the loss of members when union workers retired and were not replaced. The victories came at a great cost in terms of union expenditures and burnout among these young organizers.

Most union growth does not happen incrementally, plant by plant, workplace by workplace. As union organizer Mark Meinster writes, "The problem is that even great tactics can't overcome the social, political, and economic forces of capitalism, which combine to make organizing a gigantic challenge . . . Employers are under intense competitive pressure to resist workers' demands—there's no generous 'high road' for them to take; they won't willingly give in to a union drive. And employers are compelled to come together as a class to exert power over the government, passing laws and

using the courts to challenge unions on all fronts.”²⁷ Instead, union growth comes in “upsurges”—periods where workers rise up more broadly.²⁸ In the United States, these upsurges took place at the turn of the twentieth century, in the 1930s, and in the late 1960s/early 1970s. There are signs we may be in the beginning of another upsurge as we write this book.²⁹

This suggests that the steady, slow work of building unions worker by worker must be paired with other strategies, especially given the added obstacles unions face—intense employer opposition and weak labor laws. Labor organizers have devoted a lot of time and thought to the best ways to bring large numbers of new members into unions. We won’t cover that debate here but will note that no one model has had overwhelming success in recent decades.³⁰

Town Hall or Army? Tensions in the Union Model

So far, we’ve explored unions as an example of the base-building model. Now we turn to some of the tensions unique to unions, a product of their unique role in the history of underdog organizing. There are over 14 million union members in the United States as of 2023, and collectively they control almost \$30 billion in assets, making them far larger than other underdog organizations.³¹ But unlike many underdog organizations that have a self-selected membership, unions represent workers with the full range of political views. This creates tensions unique to the model.

First, a union must represent all workers in the workplace (technically, in a “bargaining unit”).³² In some cases, workers don’t have to be members of the union, but under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), the union is still legally required to represent all workers. This is different from community organizations, which can establish rules and requirements for who is allowed to be a member. This can be both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it means that unions must work hard to unite workers across differences. That might push the union to hire more organizers, build stronger structures of representation, and learn to find common ground among a diverse workforce. On the other hand, it might push the union to focus

only on the lowest common denominator, such as a demand for higher wages, and play it safe in terms of bolder demands and decisions, such as supporting a controversial political cause. Regardless, this stipulation affects base-building, as a union that wants to build power may have to appeal to anti-union workers in the process.

Second, unions are democratic organizations. By law, all union officers must be elected, and unions must have constitutions and by-laws.³³ Local elections must take place at least every three years; national elections at least every five years. Leaders can be voted out of office.

In theory this should make union leaders more accountable to members than leaders of organizations without a formal democratic structure. But formal democracy is not always participatory. Participatory democracy requires transparency in union functioning, along with regular membership meetings where members have input on strategy and decision making.

A number of labor scholars have found that true internal democracy augments a union's influence, particularly vis-a-vis powerful employers.³⁴ For example, sociologist Carolina Bank Muñoz argues that Walmart warehouse workers in Chile were able to win strong contracts in part because internal democracy encouraged creative strategy development and engagement in militant action.³⁵ Democracy is not just an end, but also a means to building a strong base, she argues.

Not all union leaders agree, which relates to the next tension: unions play a dual role. Labor and peace organizer AJ Muste wrote of the complicated nature of unions in 1928, noting that in addition to serving as "town halls," unions must also function as an army. Town halls are democratic spaces whereas armies are usually top-down, hierarchical operations. This creates tensions within the union: "Imagine the conflict in the soul of a union official who must have the attitude and discharge the functions at one and the same time of both general and a chairman of a debating society," Muste wrote.³⁶ Indeed, there can be greater struggles within the union, such as between those members who see it primarily as a form of insurance and those who might want the union to play a role in societal transformation. To use VanDassor's analogy, you can see the union as a vending machine where you insert a dollar and get a can of Coke, or you

can see the union as a space you attend regularly to work out and get stronger to win big change.

This relates to a larger question: What's the main purpose of unions? Is it to improve wages and working conditions, or to fight for broader demands for members and workers as a whole? Many of the earliest unions were formed as mutual aid for co-workers, who helped fund each other in times of sickness or death, trained one another, and built community (Deepak's father was a member of a union that represented taxi workers—the union paid most of Deepak's tuition for the first year of college). They also worked to keep control over their work by keeping other workers out. Other unions organized all workers in an industry into one union and fought for legislation that would protect all workers and reduce employers' power, such as minimum-wage laws and unemployment insurance. Still, other unions have played a role in overthrowing dictators or apartheid regimes and bringing democracy to countries such as Brazil, South Korea, South Africa, and Indonesia.

This tension reflects different goals. It also reflects different analyses of power and organizing models. We mentioned in Chapter 2 how Exley was trained as a labor organizer in an Alinsky-like model (asking workers to take small steps around least-common-denominator demands), and how he found that many workers were not willing to or interested in taking the big risk of unionizing for a small goal like a 5 percent raise, but would take risks for a potential big demand. In Exley's approach, labor organizing should tackle larger ideological questions, going beyond the least common denominators of wages and hours. This is likely to require robust political education, including addressing issues that may be divisive, such as structural racism in the labor market and within the union movement.

Finally, it's worth noting that from the beginning, labor unions have confronted powerful opposition. The first legal case against unions in 1806 ruled that the very act of collective worker activity was a criminal conspiracy.³⁷ Even the landmark NLRA allows unions only insofar as they don't harm business. They have weathered sustained surveillance, sabotage, assassination attempts, and other attacks from corporate opponents and the government itself, far more than most civil society groups, with the exception of Black and Indigenous social justice groups.

Base-Building and Other Strategy Models

SPFE's example shows how the base-building model, built on solidarity power, can interact successfully with the other models of transformational change from below. SPFE used base-building to revitalize its union. It began with teachers talking to one another, but it used other strategies as well—starting with its new mission statement, followed by a narrative shift strategy that built toward disruption.

Unions have used electoral strategies for decades, particularly since the 1930s, when the labor movement developed close ties to the Democratic Party. Unions endorse candidates, they engage in massive get-out-the-vote efforts, and their members voluntarily contribute millions of dollars for their political programs. Unions have prepared members to run for office, and in some cases supported the formation of independent political parties with a stronger labor focus. That strategy has yielded limited results on the federal level, where unions have been unable to win favorable labor law reform or other key legislative demands for many decades. Unions have had better success at the city and state levels in certain states, but for the most part they've been taken for granted by the Democratic Party.

Several unions have used an inside-outside strategy to pass legislation that improves conditions for all workers, such as higher minimum wages, paid family leave, and paid sick days. Some have fought for legislation to improve conditions for unionizing workers, such as rules governing government contracting or designating home-care workers as employees with the right to unionize.

Member Power Is Your Biggest Weapon

The SPFE's resurgence is a story of good organizing. It also highlights some strategy fundamentals. When Mary Cathryn Ricker took over the leadership of the union she had to choose: Would she build up the union's capacity to provide better services to members? Or would she take a risk and open the union for members to lead? She chose the latter. In this case, the initial strategic decision was made from the top: the president. But opening up the

union ensured that future strategy would be guided by rank-and-file educators. The case shows how strategy may be guided from above, by leaders, in a way that fosters conditions for emergent strategy from below.

Many union leaders find it scary to open the union to greater member leadership, says Leah Lindeman. But by doing so, the SPFE was able to build more power. “Whenever I hear that open bargaining is scary to people I am always baffled,” Leah VanDassor explained. “It seems like it’s one of our biggest ‘weapons’ to build our power within SPFE.”³⁸ The union attracted educators, parents, and community members ready to organize for better public schools. They were motivated by winning a better contract, but more than that, they had a vision of schools that worked better for everyone.

**Table 6.1.2: Key Components of the Base-Building Model—
Labor Unions**

Component	Base-Building Model
Form of Power	Solidarity
Theory of Change	Lots of workers acting in solidarity with discipline and for the long term → pressure employers and politicians to make change
Examples of Historical Practitioners and Theorists	A. Philip Randolph, William Z. Foster, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, Rose Schneiderman, John L. Lewis, Emma Tenayuca, “Big Bill” Haywood, Lucy Parsons, Flint sit-down strikers. Most labor unions begin with a base-building model.
Protagonists and Structure	Members, shop stewards, elected leaders, organizers Representative and usually formally democratic structure
Goals and Methods	Demands are specific, immediate, winnable (though can be more abstract); issues are chosen and defined in terms of member self-interest; recruitment of new people; membership dues; democratic participation; systematic leadership development

Component	Base-Building Model
Tactical Repertoire	Shop floor direct action, collective bargaining, strikes, lobbying, political engagement
What Does Winning Mean?	Demands are wholly or partly achieved; successful election for union representation; win a collective bargaining agreement; social change for the working class
Time Horizon + When the Model Is Most Effective	Evergreen, but especially useful in slower periods in movement cycles, laying the groundwork for upsurge in worker organizing and action. “Trench warfare”—change mostly comes in small increments over time. Seeks to establish permanent institutions
How It Works with Other Models/ Movement Ecosystem	Works closely with electoral change and inside-outside campaigns. Relies on disruptive movements for exponential growth and on collective care for sustainability. Less history of combining it with narrative shift and momentum. Some unions were formed out of collective care and some have attempted to revive this.
Strengths	Concrete wins that improve people’s lives; builds worker leadership; can engage in struggle over years, can build powerful institutions that have great impact on society
Weaknesses	Can be slow and incremental, focused narrowly on the interests of existing members, bureaucratic, undemocratic, and corrupt. At times works to reinforce the status quo against other underdog movements.

Tools

Tool 7 Power for Underdogs

Tool 11 Leadership ID

Tool 13 Bargaining for the Common Good

Tool 34 Strategy Chart