

RESEARCH BRIEF

Worker Voice, Representation, and Power

Priorities for Research

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Over the last 50 years, the decline in worker power within the United States has contributed to a rise in in-work poverty, an increase in the productivity-wage gap, and reduced economic mobility for historically marginalized and less-formally-educated Americans (Farber et al. 2021; Stansbury and Summers 2020; Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). Workers have faced increasing deindustrialization (Kollmeyer 2018), the erosion of working regulation and government enforcement (Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022), the growth of workplace fissuring (Weil 2019), and the rise of alternative work arrangements (Song et al. 2019; Weber Handwerker 2022), all of which have accelerated the loss of worker voice, representation, and power.

The threats to economic mobility for low-wage workers have not translated to more workers actually joining unions or worker power organizations. Outdated labor laws and explicit funding for anti-union efforts mean that traditional organized labor is in slow but consistent decline (Bronfenbrenner 2009; McNicholas et al. 2019).

To employ worker power as a mechanism for increasing economic security and improving the upward mobility of low-wage workers, new research is needed to explore the role of employee voice, representation, and power in the workplace. To this end, research should explore what workers want with greater autonomy and voice, assess these programs' benefits and tradeoffs to employers, and understand the socioeconomic factors affected by increased worker power. Work is also needed to explore other, untraditional forms of worker power and representation that operate outside of traditional organized labor structures—forms generally branded as “alt-labor” (Rosenfeld 2019)—which could help policymakers and employers understand newer ways of incorporating worker voice into corporate structures, for example through codetermination and sectoral bargaining programs.

In this brief, we provide a summary of the research framework that informs WorkRise's thinking about the importance of worker power for low-wage workers' labor market mobility. We then offer a series of specific priority areas for future research. Our goal is to focus the field on generating actionable evidence that translates into meaningful insights for policymakers and practitioners committed to equitably advancing labor market opportunity and economic security for low-wage workers.

BOX 1

WorkRise Landscape Reviews, Working Groups, and Research Priorities

Developing new evidence on worker voice, representation, and power is a core pillar of WorkRise's broader research agenda. To assess the current state of knowledge, WorkRise commissioned a comprehensive landscape review from researchers Ioana Marinescu of the University of Pennsylvania and Jake Rosenfeld of Washington University in St. Louis. The paper surveys existing research on worker voice, representation, and power and their interactions with economic mobility and security for workers.

To inform priorities for future research, WorkRise convened a working group on worker voice, representation, and power, bringing together key stakeholders including leading worker advocates, policymakers, practitioners, and labor market researchers—united by a

shared dedication to creating and sustaining meaningful pathways for upward mobility and opportunity in the labor market. Using the landscape paper as a foundation, the working group set out to both determine where existing evidence might inform action and suggest priorities for knowledge-building that could guide future decision making.

Guided by these efforts, WorkRise has identified key areas of focus for future research on worker voice, representation, and power in modern labor markets, delineated here. Together, they form a roadmap for high-leverage research that can unlock opportunities for workers.

Source: Marinescu, Ioana, and Jake Rosenfeld. 2022. *Worker Power and Economic Mobility: A Landscape Report*. WorkRise report. Washington, DC: Urban Institute; WorkRise working group.

Worker Voice, Representation, and Power Research Priorities

Because of the potential for new evidence on these issues to inform policy, practice, or other actions that can promote upward economic mobility for low-wage workers, improve racial equity in labor markets, or both, high-priority topics for future investment and investigation related to worker voice, representation, and power include:

- *Identifying what workers want out of greater voice, representation, and power:* Evidence suggests that workers have more interest in joining a union today than at any point over the last 50 years. What kinds of institutional structure, what methods of union organizing, and what results workers want from these organized unions, however, are less clear. New data collection and analysis could inform policymakers and practitioners who seek to build worker power initiatives while centering the desires of workers themselves.
- *Understanding the effects of new and alternative forms of worker voice, representation, or power:* Organized labor unions have constituted the dominant avenue through which workers have gained power and influence over the last century. Now, workers are developing new methods of worker power inspired by grassroots campaigns and international models. Research is needed on what novel and evolving methods exist and how they improve mobility for low-wage workers.

- *Assessing the benefits and tradeoffs to employers of increased worker power:* Increased worker power could necessitate employers offering accommodations for employees, but these trade-offs do not have to be a zero-sum game. We do not know much about employer attitudes towards worker power initiatives, nor what drives their efforts either for or against them.
- *Analyzing the indirect effects of worker power on economic mobility:* Research indicates that labor unions facilitate economic mobility among their members. More research is needed on how these economic benefits might also spur mobility among families and communities unaffiliated with worker power organizations. Research is needed, too, on the divergent economic effects these organizations have dependent on race and gender.
- *Evaluating the socioeconomic, market, and policy factors that build worker power:* Social insurance, safety net, and tax policies can all impact worker power. So, too, can socioeconomic factors like wealth, housing stability, family income, and nonorganized interventions, such as regulation that protects the confidentiality of employee salary history. Generally, research is needed into which nonorganized interventions offer the most effective means to improve worker power and bolster economic mobility. This research could also help us to understand the heterogeneous effects of these interventions across racial groups.

Identifying What Workers Want Out of Bargaining Relationships, Collective Representation, and Increased Power

Evidence suggests that Americans' interest in unions is at the highest level for 50 years, but the rate of unionization has consistently fallen over the same period. To understand this divide, research is needed to identify both the tangible benefits employees desire and through which modes of power and influence workers expect to achieve them. Research could guide policymakers and practitioners to design structures of worker power that align tightly with worker interests. In each case, research should pay due attention to the structural barriers that limit workers' ability to organize and consequently leave preferences unrealized.

Issue and Importance for Economic Security, Upward Mobility, and Labor Market Equity

Research suggests that labor unions and other worker power organizations provide one of the primary methods through which workers can achieve advanced economic mobility. This effect is particularly strong for workers with low incomes, less formal education, and from marginalized racial and gendered groups.

KEY AREAS OF INVESTIGATION ON THIS ISSUE THAT COULD INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

What relationships with unions and employers do workers desire? Existing research suggests that workers want more power and representation at work (Kochan et al. 2019), but also that they would more readily join a labor organization that was organized differently, such as if one administered portable benefits like health insurance (Hertel-Fernandez et al. 2022). Workers are cautious about organized labor groups that use strike threats or actively campaign for pro-labor politicians (Hertel-Fernandez and Porter 2021). While some research suggests that employees desire more cooperation with their employers, it is unclear what this relationship might look like, and a plurality of potential union members do not know what forms would be desirable or necessary (American Compass 2021). New research could help elucidate why different forms of worker power are more popular than others and why—so that worker preferences are better catered for employers and policymakers in the future. An important direction for this research is to move beyond surveys, discussions, and case studies that rely exclusively on stated preferences, to better understand how workers value trade-offs associated with organizing.

What tangible results do workers want from their increased influence in the workplace? Survey evidence suggests a clear majority of workers believe they should have a say over how they work, what conditions are offered for employment, and what values their organization upholds—yet few get a say in these matters (Kochan et al. 2019). Better data are needed on worker opinions across establishment sizes (Choi and Spletzer 2012), as bargaining units within establishments, particularly smaller establishments, have less success at forming unions (Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). Better data are also needed on worker opinions across industries and occupations, as well as across wage groups, given varying work conditions across multiple dimensions of job quality (Katz, Congdon, Shakesprere 2022).

Understanding the Effects of New and Alternative Forms of Worker Voice, Representation, or Power

The long decline in union organizing has foreshadowed a rise in alternative forms of worker voice, representation, and power (Rosenfeld 2019). These newer forms of worker voice—some inspired by domestic grassroots efforts, some by international precedents—take forms that operate outside of the framework established under the National Labor Relations Act.

Issue and Importance for Economic Security, Upward Mobility, and Labor Market Equity

In the absence of traditional forms of union organizing, these newer models of worker power could provide avenues for low-wage workers to achieve economic mobility. More research is needed to analyze just how effective novel and changing organized labor arrangements have been at securing advancements in economic mobility for workers. So, too, could research explore how forms of labor adapted from models in other countries, such as codetermination and sectoral bargaining, have granted economic security for low-wage workers abroad—and therefore how it could do so for workers in the United States.

KEY AREAS OF INVESTIGATION ON THIS ISSUE THAT COULD INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

What modes of worker power exist and what explains their growth? Sectoral bargaining could give workers more autonomy in the corporate decision-making processes (Andrias 2016; Block and Sachs 2020), but more research is needed into how such a model could suit the National Labor Relations Act framework in the United States. Similarly, German-style codetermination offers a path to mobility for low-wage workers (Jäger et al. 2022a; Jäger 2022b), but there is a lack of certainty about whether this model is suitable in a US context (Dammann and Eidenmuller 2021). Workers in some states already have experience with sector-level wage and standards boards, but the effectiveness of these novel policies in achieving their desired goals remains to be seen (Dube 2020). Other models that increase worker power, representation, and voice include linking benefits to unionization (such as in the Ghent system [Madland and Wall 2019]), allowing unions both to train workers and comprise fewer than 50 percent of the designated bargaining unit (Block and Sachs 2020), and implementing European apprenticeship systems (Elliott and Farnbauer 2021). These

training programs could be sectoral to encourage mobility between firms (Naidu and Sojourner 2020). New data are needed on the size and impact of these alternate forms of worker power where they exist in the United States (Rosenfeld 2019). When researching these alternate forms of worker power, researchers should consider how alternative forms of worker power are evolving in the United States and how impactful these forms have been. Next, researchers could consider what forms of non-union worker power exist outside the United States and which policy mechanisms could facilitate their implementation here.

What are the implications of these new forms of worker power on economic mobility and existing legal, regulatory, and corporate structures? Sector-wide wage or standards boards aimed at increasing economic mobility (Dube 2020) have been implemented in several states—most recently California. These are ripe for analyses on their impact on economic mobility. New research should also consider which alternate methods are most effective at delivering what workers want. More research is needed to judge which government enforcement approaches are the most effective for enforcing workers' rights for those involved in these alternate structures (Public Rights Project 2021). Future analysis should also consider how these new forms of worker power impact the role of more traditional forms of organized labor, and how cooperation between newer and older forms could encourage economic mobility for low-wage workers. Similarly, how might policymakers adapt older labor laws to account for these new forms of participation and representation? Newer forms of worker power, which operate outside the National Labor Relations Board, might be constrained by being brought under the body's purview (Kochan 2020). So, what forms of legislation could bolster the rights of workers in these organizations? How might these protect workers—like gig workers—not covered by existing labor law? Companies with offices in multiple countries must set labor standards that suit both the home country and the host country (Mujtaba, Cavico, and Jones 2011). As an indicator of how newer forms of worker power could work in practice, research could compare American-owned, uninational companies to multinational ones, particularly those across countries that have adopted labor standards that are not present in the United States.

Assessing the Benefits and Tradeoffs to Employers of Increased Worker Power

While our understanding of what employees want from worker power, voice, and representation organizations is limited, existing research tells us even less about employer attitudes towards and the actual costs to employers of the same.

Issue and Importance for Economic Security, Upward Mobility, and Labor Market Equity

Only by understanding the wants, desires, and limitations at play when employers and employees negotiate over worker power could worker power be achieved in a way that is not only amicable, but also mutually beneficial, between the parties involved. More research is needed into where the contours of tradeoffs and benefits lie so that the employee–employer relationships might be improved and economic mobility for low–wage workers more easily achieved. Simultaneously, where mutually beneficial advancements for worker power are not possible, a richer understanding of where trade–offs occur and why. A richer understanding of the actual costs to employers of increased worker power could inform, among other things, policy decisions designed to improve employee welfare in a way most amenable to all parties involved.

KEY AREAS OF INVESTIGATION ON THIS ISSUE THAT COULD INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

What factors influence employer views on worker power? There is a need for data collection and analysis of employers, generally, to try and gauge their views towards worker power initiatives and see where employee and employer incentives align. We do not know much about employer attitudes toward unions (Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022), so more research is needed generally into why employers frequently oppose worker efforts to form unions (McNicholas et al. 2019). More specific research questions could examine various drivers of this kind of employer decision–making. For example, do efforts to oppose worker power initiatives have a managerial or profit–based prerogative? The answer might help answer whether procurement policy could reduce this kind of employer opposition (Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). Research is also needed into which kinds of worker power initiatives generate the greatest support or opposition and if employer opposition varies depending on the size and industry of the firm.

How do increased worker voice, representation, and power impact employers in reality?

While one body of research could establish what employer views of worker power are and why, more research is needed into what the trade-offs and benefits to employers actually are when workers' power initiatives succeed. Do current union members earn more than nonorganized workers because they have used their bargaining power to capture a larger share of rents, or did it come at the cost of profit or productivity? Internationally, evidence from Europe suggests that mechanisms for worker voice are positively correlated with firm innovation, but also that these benefits are greater for smaller firms than medium-sized ones (Della Torre et al. 2021; Sojourner et al. 2015). Domestically, so-called high-road businesses (so-called because they have voluntarily adopted policies that accommodated workers' desires) offer a road map as to what increased worker power would look like for other employers. Research should examine what the motivating factors were behind these companies offering their workers increased power, be it goodwill, previous organizing at the firm, profit incentive, productivity incentive, or otherwise. Among these, how many firms saw these benefits realized?

Analyzing the Indirect Effects of Worker Power on Economic Mobility and Economic Equity

Worker power helps shape an individual's economic situation, but more research is needed into how it shapes socioeconomic factors beyond an employee's paycheck. The indirect effects of organized labor extend beyond union members and stretch to their nuclear families, their non-unionized colleagues, and their wider communities.

Issue and Importance for Economic Security, Upward Mobility, and Labor Market Equity

Research already indicates that union membership is associated with higher earnings and higher lifetime earnings for workers (Mishel 2012; Parolin and VanHeuvelen 2022), and is also associated with higher-earning communities (Banerjee et al. 2021). More research is needed, though, into the impact worker organizing has on economic mobility for household income and community incomes, and the extent to which it has on non-unionized workers.

KEY AREAS OF INVESTIGATION ON THIS ISSUE THAT COULD INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE

In what ways do forms of worker representation and power influence the labor market and political outcomes? More research is needed to explore how unionized and otherwise-organized workers impact the wages and labor standards of non-unionized workers (Fortin et al. 2021). We do not understand whether this impact varies between industries and workplaces and, if so, how these impacts differ by the level of union support within them. New research could offer some insight into how an empowered workforce affects various labor market dynamics, in the context of other sources of market and firm power, while considering the evolving nature of worker power. This work could extend to how company practices and behaviors are influenced by worker groups, assessing their benefit to the wider workforce. Research might also focus on the macro-effects of worker voice, representation, and power on productivity and dynamism in the economy, or the political power of worker groups—building on research that tracks the political power of unions (Banerjee et al. 2021).

How do the indirect effects of worker power differ along racial and gendered lines? New research could examine how the benefits of worker power have changed over time, both within and between different demographic groups in the United States. In particular, work is needed to analyze the impact of worker voice, representation, and power on the working lives of marginalized racial groups—especially Black workers, who often face the greatest institutional resistance to economic mobility. Widespread evidence shows that unions reduce economic disparities between races (Rosenfeld and Kleykamp 2012; Bucknor 2016). More evidence could provide clarity on how a focus on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC)-led and/or BIPOC-worker-focused organizing bolsters worker power, including an emphasis on identifying the causal mechanisms through which organizing most effectively accomplishes increases in worker voice and, ultimately, job quality across multiple dimensions. Similarly, we know that women benefit economically from union membership (Card et al. 2020), but further research could explore how unions might center gender equity (Kirton 2021) and whether and how a focus on gender equity would have spillover effects on other populations. Moreover, in the case of both a race- and gender-equity-centered approach, more evidence is needed to clarify whether and how contemporary trends (e.g., in market structure, industrial sectors, demographics, and political power) have disparate influences by race, gender, and intersectional identities. Different industries with divergent worker power structures can impact inequality between

groups (as is true of growing inequality between organized men and unorganized women in Germany [Thelen 1992; Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022]), so how can worker power groups help mend this division? Such analyses could consider geographic variation, alongside the racial and gendered implications, of worker power.

Evaluating the Market and Policy Factors that Build Worker Power by Improving Workers' Options

Organizational methods of worker power, voice, and representation do not exist in a vacuum. Just as worker power helps shape socioeconomic factors, so too do socioeconomic factors help shape worker power. Social insurance, safety net, housing, regulatory, and tax policies, and wealth and family income can all affect the power workers have to leave a bad job or aim for higher standards and pay. So, too, can the strength of the labor market.

Issue and Importance for Economic Security, Upward Mobility, and Labor Market Equity

Worker power is not determined solely by the preferences of employers and their employees. When workers have greater options outside of their place of employment, they are less likely to withstand unfair pay and labor practices at their current place of work (US Department of Treasury; Bartik and Stuart 2022). This is determined both by labor market conditions and policies that facilitate good search and matching practices (Bartik and Stuart 2022). Similarly, there are a number of socioeconomic factors that impact a worker's reservation wages and power. For example, when an individual receives income from a nonwork course (such as unemployment insurance), their reservation wage will likely be higher. In turn, they have more power to turn down a bad job or negotiate a better salary. Little to no wealth, lack of access to social safety net provision, low family income, and housing instability all contribute to a lower reservation wage (Bloemen and Stancanelli 2001; Desmond and Gershenson 2016; Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). More research is needed into the most effective ways policymakers and practitioners might raise this reservation wage, improve worker power, and provide economic pathways for low-income workers.

KEY AREAS OF INVESTIGATION ON THIS ISSUE THAT COULD INFORM POLICY AND PRACTICE INCLUDE

What are the nonorganizing interventions that might increase worker power? Lack of social insurance, a safety net, and wealth all affect workers' reservation wages. They also affect workers' ability to exit a job and explore other jobs (Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). We know little about the ways in which income support programs administered by the government, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the Supplemental Security Income, impact worker power. The same is true for social insurance programs like family and medical leave, unemployment insurance, and health care programs. By better understanding these dynamics, researchers might best guide policymakers into the most effective nonorganized interventions that can be administered to increase worker power, particularly among the lowest paid.

How could employees receive greater information on employers to benefit their economic mobility? Information on employers (for example how much they pay or how well they treat their employees) is often hard to get (Benson et al. 2015; Sockin and Sojourner 2020; Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). There is evidence that salary history bans have a positive effect on wages (Bessen et al. 2021) but we know little about whether this effect continues in the long term. Further, more evidence is needed to establish whether the wages of all improve under this type of regulation or whether salary bans help equalize differences, for example between men and women (Sinha 2019).

How do strong macroeconomic conditions impact the relative labor market power of Black Americans as compared to other groups? We know that very tight labor markets create incremental progress in closing racial wage gaps, but we know little about the channels through which these processes play out, and under what conditions the increased worker bargaining power for Black workers implied by higher relative wages persists over time (Newman and Jacobs 2023; Bivens 2021). We also know that Black Americans have less wealth than white Americans (McKernan et al. 2017), but we do not know how this affects market power or reservation wages differently (Marinescu and Rosenfeld 2022). New research is needed to consider these variable impacts, in the context of research literature that explores the connection between strong labor market conditions and workers' power to find jobs best suited to their wants and needs.

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