

# What's next for unions? ASU center investigates evolving strategies in new report

**Center for Work and Democracy report examines nontraditional approaches to labor organizing in the face of decline**

By Jennifer Moore, ASU News

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Port workers hanging up their hats on the East Coast. Starbucks employees putting down their aprons before Christmas. Ski patrollers signing off in Park City as fresh powder piles up. The past year has seen a handful of demonstrations that are hard to ignore.

But despite the wave of strikes reigniting public interest in labor organizing, union membership is in the midst of a decades-long decline. Why is this happening, and what might the future hold?

A report from Arizona State University's [Center for Work and Democracy](#), "[Beyond the NLRB: Contemporary Strategies and Practices for Labor Movement Renewal](#)," takes a closer look. Authored by [Benjamin Fong](#), the associate director of the center; [Michael McQuarrie](#), center director and associate professor; and Project Coordinator [Maria Esch](#), it identifies five nontraditional models for labor organizing.

## **New ways to organize**

Union membership has historically played a role in wages, benefits, workplace safety and job security. As traditional unions shrink, many workers now navigate an employment landscape without these structures.

The report surveys several nontraditional labor model strategies that unions may start to leverage for a path forward:

- **Sectoral bargaining:** Instead of negotiating contracts one workplace at a time, unions negotiate with an entire industry, setting minimum standards for wages and benefits across a sector. An example cited in the report is the [Fight for \\$15 campaign](#), which pushed for industrywide agreements in fast food and raised pay standards across multiple chains by 2021.
- **Bargaining for the common good:** This strategy ties union goals to broader community needs. The report references the Chicago Teachers Union advocating for smaller class sizes and a nurse in every school — issues that galvanized local families and organizations.
- **Rank-and-file unionism:** Everyday workers take the lead in shaping union goals and strategies, shifting decision-making power away from top leadership. A noted example is the 2018 [Red for Ed teachers' strike in Arizona](#), where grassroots organizing — much of it through Facebook — led to an average 20% pay raise for teachers.
- **Independent and minority unionism:** This involves grassroots organizing outside of traditional structures, such as the Communications Workers of America engaging both full-time employees and contractors to create the [Campaign to Organize Digital Employees](#) in 2020.
- **Worker-driven social responsibility:** Workers partner directly with corporations to establish labor standard agreements across supply chains. The report cites the 2018 Migrant Justice [Milk with Dignity program](#) where Ben & Jerry's agreed to pay the state minimum wage and allow one day off per week, among other changes, for dairy workers.

To better understand these strategies and their implications, we spoke with Fong, first author of the report, about what these ideas could mean for the future of labor.

**Question: What motivated your team to undertake this study, and why is it important now?**

**Answer:** The labor movement is arguably weaker than it's ever been; if it's going to mount a comeback, now's the time. But the standard institutional path for new organizing, which is being recognized by the National Labor Relations Board after a representation election, is a broken process, and it's very unlikely that the union density trend is going to be reversed simply by running more NLRB elections. So we think it behooves the labor movement to look at other ways to gain leverage and add members to its ranks, and our new report is a comprehensive survey of contemporary strategies and practices for labor movement revival outside of the standard NLRB path.

**Q: What do you see as the biggest barriers to union resurgence?**

**A:** The biggest barriers to a union resurgence in the United States are external to the labor movement. The NLRB election process is a harrowing one, and there are all manner of legal and

political constraints on labor. In this kind of environment, it's perhaps no surprise that unions are somewhat unwilling to invest in new organizing at the scale required to make a dent in the union density trend.

**Q: While you mention that no single strategy is “the” solution for unions, is there one you think has better potential for scalability and sustainability?**

**A:** Each of the strategies and innovations we discuss in the report has notable wins to its name and could scale and become sustainable under certain conditions. But I wouldn't say there's any one key to labor movement revival identified in the report.

That said, one common feature of many of the strategies discussed is a willingness to experiment with new organizational forms. Unions are limited, legally and organizationally, in many ways, and they can be greatly aided by an eclectic organizational network. Other kinds of organizations can either engage in actions that unions can't, or they can create new forms of leverage for unions to exploit. Again, organizational innovation is not a silver bullet, but it can be helpful for the labor movement in various ways.

**Q: If some or all of these strategies were to succeed, what do you think the future of organized labor might look like in 10 or 20 years?**

**A:** It's a difficult question to answer. Labor organizing tends to happen in spurts rather than gradually over time. What goes into those spurts is a mix of existing efforts and radically new ones, the latter being very difficult to predict ahead of time.

Our report reviews some interesting new ventures in the present, in the hope of sparking a larger discussion of labor's strategic impasse. These are interesting beginnings, but for labor's situation to be radically different in a decade than it is at present, my sense is that much more than we discuss in the report is required.

**Q: What areas of future research would you like to see further explored to help us better understand labor's evolution and future?**

**A:** The Center for Work and Democracy has a [new project on labor and logistics](#), where we examine the logistical operations of the largest employers in the United States. The animating idea is that organized labor is going to have a very difficult time organizing the large corporations of the day without a better understanding of their operational strengths and weaknesses.

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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



ASU's Center for Work and Democracy, housed in Wilson Hall (pictured above), released a report on the current state of unions and organizing strategies. ASU photo