Improvisational Unionism

Michael M. Oswalt

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Michael M. Oswalt*

Recent fights for a $15-an-hour minimum wage at Walmart and in the fast-food industry have interested academics, captivated the press, and energized the public. For good reason. The campaigns upend conventional wisdom about what unions do (help workers win collective bargaining rights) and why they do it (build the membership). Scattered flash strikes for seemingly impossible or idiosyncratic goals on no obvious timeline have shattered that mold. Though much has already been said about these developments, scholarship has yet to provide a rigorous theoretical frame to categorize and explain the new form of activism. This Article argues that improvisation—long the engine of comedy and jazz but more recently a topic of serious academic inquiry—does both. Improvisational unionism is an intentional social practice that galvanizes courageous conduct, inspires new relationships, and, most importantly, spreads. It also functions as a legal strategy selected for its unique potential to unlock worker militancy amid law and

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Institutional restrictions that have corroded labor’s power for decades.

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INTRODUCTION

Though the steps used to win collective bargaining rights in the private sector have undergone some procedural innovations over the years, the essential script that unions have followed to marshal and mobilize workers in the first place has, more or less, remained the same. That the early stages of building support should be done quietly and in person are basic principles that every organizer would understand, almost instinctively. That campaigns must meticulously track employee sentiment, usually on a one-to-five scale, so that the more public later phases are tied to surging support—ideally a hefty majority—is another. So is the assumption that the strike, once labor’s most potent and respected organizing tool, is for all practical purposes a dead letter. And the whole point of it all has long been taken for granted: yes, unions are broadly committed to better jobs and better working conditions, but ultimately, the conventional wisdom goes, they organize to get more members.

However, in the fall of 2012, some things that felt genuinely new popped up on the organizing scene, as if somebody had decided to edit the script. On October 4, employees at a handful of Southern California Walmarts walked off the job and called for an end to retaliation against colleagues involved in Organization United for Respect at Walmart (OUR Walmart), a workplace advocacy organization founded by the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) union. The action had been foreshadowed by an earlier wage rally in Dallas and an Illinois demonstration that shut down a Walmart storage facility before being dispersed by riot police. The strikes spread to twelve other states...

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2. See Seth Newton Patel, Commentary, Have We Built the Committee? Advancing Leadership Development in the U.S. Labor Movement, 16 WORKINGUSA 113, 117 (2013).
4. At base, there are few other options. Union activity is primarily—often solely—funded by dues paid by members (and in certain states, nonmembers) who receive services in exchange for having the union as their exclusive bargaining agent. Catherine L. Fisk & Erwin Chemerinsky, Political Speech and Association Rights After Knox v. SEIU, Local 1000, 98 CORNELL L. REV. 1023, 1029–40 (2013).
6. Id.
five days later\(^7\) and culminated in a hundred-city walkout on Black Friday\(^8\) that, thanks to social media, spanned forty-six states.\(^9\) A week later, two hundred workers from the Service Employees International Union’s (SEIU) Fast Food Forward campaign struck dozens of New York City fast-food franchises.\(^10\) This action came on the heels of the founding convention of “Fight for $15,” a Chicago-based offshoot of service workers who had partnered with OUR Walmart on Black Friday\(^11\) and who would themselves strike the following April.\(^12\)

These events and many others released a crush of mainstream media attention that for the beleaguered union movement was, at least in recent times, probably unprecedented. The coverage included headlines that only months earlier would have been the stuff of activist daydreams, such as this Los Angeles Times depiction of employee-management relations at the tail end of the commotion: “Fast-food workers walk out in N.Y. amid rising U.S. labor unrest.”\(^13\)

Indeed, “rising U.S. labor unrest,” as exhibited through strikes by nonunion workers across the country, was an unexpected—if not startling—development in the labor movement and domestic labor law. While unquestionably legal under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA or Act), prior to 2012 strikes by both represented and unrepresented workers had all but

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\(^9\) See id.; John Logan, The Mounting Guerilla War Against the Reign of Walmart, 23 NEW LAB, F. 22, 24 (2014); see also Sarah Jaffe, How Walmart Organizers Turned the Internet into a Shop Floor, THESE TIMES (Jan. 16, 2014), http://thesetimes.com/article/print/16116/how_walmart_organizers_turned_the_internet_into_a_shop_floor [http://perma.cc/DE8Q-WEWF] (“Of the estimated 1,500 Walmart protests that occurred across the country on Black Friday last year, many were planned online . . .”).


vanished from the landscape. That fact alone made the events well worth writing about.¹⁴

But there was more to the commotion than just the resurgence of strikes, and when viewed from afar the arc of activity was astonishing: unions, it seemed, had not just edited the script, they had torn it up. To begin with, in the rare post-1970s instances when workers walked off the job, they were almost surely already unionized workers negotiating a contract, not nonunion workers agitating for something else.¹⁵ For this reason the sight of people in McDonald’s, Walmart, and other corporate uniforms—all historically, if not notoriously, nonunion brands—striking on sidewalks about assorted job topics was not just eye-catching but tactically notable.

This decades-long pattern of preserving strikes for represented workers stemmed, in part, from ingrained perceptions about the desirability of aggressive activism at various points along the collective bargaining timeline. Work stoppages are legally risky, invite management reprisals like job loss, and run the risk of showcasing embarrassing weakness if participation is low. Thus organizers generally believed that for a strike to be useful, appetites for combativeness needed be high, diffuse, and sustainable.¹⁶ While that constellation certainly can arise during the embryonic stages of unionization, it seems more likely to emerge during a contract fight, a mature point in the labor relations process after the union has already been recognized or certified.¹⁷ There, financial futures are quite literally on the table, interpersonal and community bonds have had time to develop, and workers have achieved a level

¹⁴. Strikes of one thousand workers or more numbered in the range of four to five hundred a year in the 1950s and dropped to the astoundingly low figure of five in 2009. JAKE ROSENFIELD, WHAT UNIONS NO LONGER DO 89 (2014). Since the 1980s smaller strikes have declined by over two-thirds. Id. at 90. For a comprehensive discussion of the many theories underlying strike decline, see generally JOSIAH BARTLETT LAMBERT, “IF THE WORKERS TOOK A NOTION”: THE RIGHT TO STRIKE AND AMERICAN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT (2005).

¹⁵. A prolonged strike at the New England grocery chain Market Basket received wall-to-wall media coverage, in part because the workers were nonunion. See, e.g., Deirdre Fernandes, Market Basket a Rare Case in Labor World, BOS. GLOBE (Aug. 12, 2014) (calling the strike “a very, very special case”).

¹⁶. Narrative accounts of major strikes showcase this phenomenon well. See, e.g., HARDY GREEN, ON STRIKE AT HORMEL 3, 59–83 (1990) (describing years of “bullying threats from Hormel” that led up to and motivated a massive 1984 strike at a meat-processing plant). Similarly, “[s]olidarity,” the “willingness of individuals . . . to make cause with others, to make some personal sacrifice for the common good even when they may not directly benefit from it,” is crucial for strike success and the “sine qua non for the labor movement” generally. Julius G. Getman & Thomas C. Kohler, The Story of NRLB v. Mackay Radio & Telegraph Co.: The High Cost of Solidarity, in LABOR LAW STORIES 52, 53 (Laura J. Cooper & Catherine L. Fisk eds., 2005).

of institutional stability not present during the precarious days when the union was being built.\(^{18}\)

Here, however, the Walmart and fast-food campaigns were by all accounts in their infancy, with contract talks decidedly not on the horizon. The spot for strikes on the timeline, in other words, had been flipped. And, perhaps predictably, employee turnout could have been characterized either as low or—relative to the total number of workers employed at each restaurant or retail shop—absolutely miniscule. In New York and elsewhere, it was not unusual for a reporter to stop by a rally sparked by the activism of a single restaurant or Walmart worker, with the striker’s home franchise or sales location churning out burgers, pizza, or cheap retail pretty much like normal.\(^{19}\) Making production not “normal” is, of course, usually considered the very point of any strike, but at Walmart, McDonald’s, and beyond, prioritizing militancy over impact was apparently the order of the day.\(^{20}\)

Such minority work-site actions were themselves a product of a new sort of organizing.\(^{21}\) Some percentage of strikers had had contact with the campaign exclusively online, where they learned walkout techniques through an off-the-rack “strike kit.” As a result, there was no simple way for campaign strategists to exercise the usual top-down, in-person control that allows them to assess workers’ complaints, interest in the campaign, or likelihood of walking off the job.

But perhaps most surprising were the very goals—or, rather, the lack of a specific goal—connected to the actions themselves. The fall protests were not about union membership, at least not readily. OUR Walmart and the UFCW railed against retaliation while expressly disclaiming any interest in unionizing Walmart workers. And the fast-food strikers, while nominally demanding the right to form a union, showed more interest in and received much more attention for their claim to a $15-an-hour wage. This was organizing by unions, but it wasn’t union organizing.\(^{22}\)

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19. See, e.g., Eidelson, supra note 8 (“While there’s no final count of how many workers walked off the job, organizers say one noteworthy trend is the number of places where a worker struck despite being the only one in their store to do so, often in stores with little or no prior OUR Walmart activism.”).


And that’s where things get interesting. There is broad agreement that the customary function of unions—acting as employees’ exclusive agents at work—has hit a wall, so some of the movement’s energy needs to be directed at something new.23 But no one really knows what that “something” should be, particularly because the outmoded representation arrangement provides its own source of funding through dues, while alternatives generally do not. As former National Labor Relations Board (NLRB or the Board) Chairman Wilma Liebman put it, “If the next big idea was readily at hand . . . someone would have thought of it.”24

In a sense, the Walmart and fast-food campaigns fit comfortably within this frame. By rewriting organized labor’s playbook, they assert a new vision of workplace activism, and, in rejecting conventional or even clear goals, they create space for a transformative aim to be named later. This openness, however, has left the unions involved vulnerable to skepticism.25 One strain, rooted in genuine confusion, predominates: What, exactly, are they doing?26

That question is the basis for this Article. Using the Walmart and fast-food campaigns as touchstones, it details how unions have taken a turn that recognizes the limits of traditional organizing and acknowledges that effective alternatives are not readily apparent. They have embraced innovations like union organizing without the union organizers, collective action for the sake of collective action, and strikes by courageous but tiny contingents, accepting all the while that what everything might add up to is ultimately uncertain and that mistakes, perhaps big mistakes, will be made. But what in colloquial terms feels like spitballing, and in cynical terms looks like throwing activism at the

23. See Michael Bologna, Trumka Calls on Labor Movement to Adapt to New Models of Representation, DAILY LAB. REP. (Mar. 7, 2013), http://news.bna.com/dlln/DLLNWB/split_display.adp?fedfid=29956532&vname=dlrnottallissues&wsn=512488000&searchid=26974465&doctype=1&type=date&mode=doc&split=0&scm=DLLNWB&pg=0 [https://perma.cc/ETX9-VZY9] (warning that labor’s “basic system of workplace representation is failing—failing miserably” and that the times call for organizing strategies untethered to the conventional notion of union “membership”).
wall to see what sticks, deserves a more elegant—and theoretical—frame. I label the phenomenon *improvisational unionism*.

In most settings “improvisation” is a casual term used to depict actions that are unplanned or done spontaneously. If a storm shatters a ship’s mast and the crew figures out some innovative way of getting safely to shore, it might be said that the sailors “improved.” Improvisation might also be used to describe the snap reaction of angry workers who walk out in the face of frigid working conditions or a biased boss. Even in traditional law and social movement settings, the word is generally invoked colloquially, where activists seem to have made a sudden adaptive choice.

When I use the term, though, I am referring to its sense in the academic discipline of organizational studies, where improvisation means the relentless affirmation and expansion of ideas and where it has been categorized and analyzed as a social practice with the power to facilitate organizational change. Among other lessons, that literature teaches that inventive takes on old problems are crucial to productive evolution, but only in cultures where failure is embraced and even championed. It shows that, contrary to what one might

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27. According to Webster’s, to improvise is “to bring about, arrange, or make on the spur of the moment or without preparation.” *Improvise*, WEBSTER’S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY, UNABRIDGED (1993).


29. Thomas Kohler, for example, has described scenarios like those as “spontaneous outbursts of discontent delivered through improvised bodies.” Thomas C. Kohler, *Civic Virtue at Work: Unions as Seedbeds of the Civic Virtues*, 36 B.C. L. REV. 279, 301 (1995); see also J. HENRY RICHARDSON, AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS 250 (1954) (likening such circumstances to an “improved strike committee” sparking “immediate action” in the factory).

30. When law and social movement scholars refer to improvisation, it is often in the context of reactive and spontaneous decision making. See, e.g., Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Elites, Social Movements, and the Law: The Case of Affirmative Action*, 105 COLUM. L. REV. 1436, 1505 (2005) (noting that movements have an “improvisational quality” because “[t]hey must retain the ability to change course and tactics quickly”); Douglas S. Reed, *Popular Constitutionalism: Toward a Theory of State Constitutional Meanings*, 30 RUTGERS L.J. 871, 891 n.36 (1999) (“The repertoire of collective action typically leaves plenty of room for improvisation, innovation and unexpected endings.”) (citing Charles Tilly, *Social Movements and National Politics, in STATEMAKING AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS 307* (Charles Bright & Susan Harding eds., 1984)). As explained *infra*, this project considers improvisation technically and from within the field of organizational studies. It is not, therefore, specifically situated in law and social movement scholarship, though it finds common ground with that literature’s attention to movement innovation and could provide an additional, interdisciplinary lens to understand adaptive movement strategies. Indeed, very recently sociologists and others have called for scholars to consider improvisational dynamics in protest and social movements with greater care. See, e.g., David A. Snow & Dana M. Moss, *Protest on the Fly: Toward a Theory of Spontaneity in the Dynamics of Protest and Social Movements*, 79 AM. SOC. REV. 1122, 1124–26, 1140 (2014) (describing spontaneity as “rarely mentioned” and largely “ignored” in sociological research and advocating for “reconsideration” of its role, including its relation to improvisation). See generally DANIEL FISCHLIN ET AL., THE FIERCE URGENCY OF NOW xi–xv (2013) (calling for deeper study of improvisation’s role in rights creation through social movements).
expect, change-directed improvisation does not mean naked spontaneity. Improvisation for transformation requires intention, planning, and training.

My initial claim relates to improvisation as a social practice. I contend that unions are using improvisation to galvanize low-wage workers and the public; that they are doing so in a calculated, coordinated fashion; and that the improvisational style is evidenced in three ways: repeated one-day strikes, the mobilization of autonomous third-party activists, and a newly experimental internal culture.

Next I suggest that improvisation is not just a social practice; it also functions as a legal strategy. In making this argument I recount the story of a movement whose key players viewed the birth of modern labor law with a guarded optimism that splintered once courts began to slice and dice conceptions of protected workplace conduct. In exchange for these limits, the judiciary cloaked unions with fiduciary functions that helped transform them into institutional giants responsible for the economic fates of millions of families. Initially, with members plentiful, these were heady times. But later, with members scarce, the very laws that built unions as we know them circled back to bite those unions.

Having transformed the old-school tactics that assembled the membership in the first place into something that could get workers fired and unions enjoined and fined, labor law rendered effective activism not just legally risky, but prohibitively so. Unions found themselves wondering what they could do to genuinely challenge corporate power on a national scale without blowing a hole through a collectively multibillion dollar balance sheet that represented everything the movement had won and everything workers relied on. For decades the conventional response seemed to be, “With this law? Not much.”

But 2012 brought an insight. Unions could embrace anachronism and encourage workers to drop their tools, exit the premises, and fight on the street. That, at least, was legal, so it could be replicated many times over without putting themselves in obvious peril. Crucially, they could start small, without much of a start-up cost. Unions could free themselves from hidebound procedures, stop worrying about results, and welcome experimentalism. And although they would send in organizers to seed the strike idea beforehand, there would be little pretense that many workers—or any, really—would actually show up. In this setting, a coalition of the willing was just fine. Unions would commit to an activism of the possible and help workers construct a galvanizing liminal space, a few hours between worlds where categories no one ever wanted anyway—like “associate” or “team member”—would give way to affirming labels like activist, speaker, or leader. It would be boundary-busting, but just for a while, because when the clock stopped everybody would go back

31. For a classic and still incisive summary of these judicial developments, see JAMES B. ATTLESON, VALUES AND ASSUMPTIONS IN AMERICAN LABOR LAW 44–66 (1983).
to work. The key was a faith that those who struck would bear witness to those who did not so that next time there would be others. They just needed to be invited.

The hope seemed to be that, in time, thousands—maybe millions—of low-wage workers might be found on an average Tuesday dancing—literally, in many cases—around the legal boxes built up over decades to constrain employee agency. To be sure, no existing campaign is there yet or even close to it. But it is 2016 now. There have been multiple rounds of Walmart Black Friday protests, tens of major fast-food strikes, and hundreds of other smaller protests. It is time for legal scholarship to categorize these surprising events and, especially, to try to explain them. Improvisation, this Article contends, does both.

Part I offers a short history of American labor organizing since 1995, the year unions recommitted themselves to increasing membership. Part II describes a dramatic and unconventional turn in those efforts, providing an in-depth look into UFCW’s campaign against Walmart and SEIU’s campaign against the fast-food industry. Part III introduces improvisation as the key to unlocking the social practice behind the activism, while Part IV demonstrates how improvisation can also function as a legal strategy. Improvisation cannot, however, eliminate all law-related risks, and in some cases it actually foregrounds legal tripwires in ways that other organizing strategies do not. Part V considers the most acute danger, an employer’s right to fire workers who strike “intermittently.” It concludes not only that improvisational strikes do not fall into that category but also that for statutory, policy, and practical reasons, the doctrine itself is so flawed that the NLRB should rethink its continued viability entirely. The Article closes by considering a fundamental question: Where does improvisational unionism go from here?

I. MAKING MORE MEMBERS: CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN ORGANIZING FOR UNION ALLEGIANCES

A. New Leaders, New Approaches: Private Reordering and State-Based Initiatives

A modern account of union efforts to stem a long-shrinking membership base should reach back at least to 1995 and the election of John Sweeney as President of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).32 By then unions represented a bit over 10 percent of private sector workers (down from a third in the 1950s),33 and something

33. ROSENFIELD, supra note 14, at 1–3.
like an academic cottage industry had sprung up to neatly sort the sources of decline into categories. Touting the existential threat posed by the status quo, Sweeney’s “New Voice” slate forced the incumbent into early retirement and swept into office promising, in particular, to zero in on one cause; the movement itself, which had long since given up organizing new workers.\(^\text{37}\)

Changing course was easier said than done. There was an obvious problem of will, as a mere 3 percent of the federation’s constituent unions even maintained a department capable of planning a single union campaign.\(^\text{38}\) But that situation was theoretically remediable through financial incentives and unions’ own fears of obsolescence.\(^\text{39}\) The law presented a bigger obstacle. Labor law’s famously inadequate worker protections\(^\text{40}\) and infamously sluggish administrative scheme\(^\text{41}\) combined to make the conventional Board-supervised secret ballot election a protracted and risky affair.\(^\text{42}\) And the NLRA’s preference for bargaining by job site (as opposed to negotiating across an entire industry or geography) made meaningful growth a painstaking and difficult prospect.\(^\text{43}\)


36. Vanessa Tait, Poor Workers’ Unions: Rebuilding Labor from Below 193 (2005) (“If elected, the New Voice leadership pledged to ‘organize at a pace and scale that is unprecedented’ and to ‘lead a movement that speaks for all American workers.’”).

37. In 1972, one of Sweeney’s predecessors at the AFL-CIO famously quipped that the size of the membership “doesn’t make any difference.” Rosenfeld, supra note 14, at 10. This “attitude toward organizing set the tone for much of the labor movement” over the following decades. Id.

38. Tait, supra note 36, at 192.

39. Id. at 194–95.


42. For an in-depth treatment of this process and its consequences, see Michael M. Osvalt, Automatic Elections, 4 U.C. Irvine L. Rev. 801, 805–06, 825–33 (2014). See also Cynthia L. Estlund, The Ossification of American Labor Law, 102 Colum. L. Rev. 1527, 1536 (2002) (“Unions and their allies have been especially critical of the rules and procedures governing union organizing activity and employers’ typically tenacious opposition to that activity.”); Benjamin I. Sachs, Despite Preemption: Making Labor Law in Cities and States, 124 Harv. L. Rev. 1153, 1162 (2011) (“The NLRB’s election machinery is dramatically too slow, enabling employers to defeat organizing drives through delay and attrition.”).

43. See also Tait, supra note 36, at 193 (noting that by 1995, “to stay even with the losses, trade unions would have to organize 300,000 to 400,000 new members each year . . . [T]o regain the strength of its post-World War II years . . . a million new members would be needed each year for the next two decades”). See generally Matthew Dimick, Productive Unionism, 4 U.C. Irvine L. Rev. 679,
So with the classic membership channel “blocked,” unions staked a claim on “experimentalism,” adopting two fresh approaches that “decentralized” labor law from an all-encompassing federal scheme to a mishmash of contract, state, and other employment law principles.44

The first approach, sometimes labeled “private ordering,”45 decentered the very rules of organizing from the sclerotic NLRA regime to flexible contracts that defined union rights to contact workers, prove their interest, and trigger bargaining, as well as employer rights to express views on unionism.46 At a bird’s-eye level the agreements allowed unions to exact a measure of control over the decisional climate while also expanding the universe of voters to however many employers could be persuaded to sign a contract, which, relative to the size of an average NLRB election, was a potential membership boon.48

The second approach encouraged or created pathways for atypical or previously overlooked workers to join up with unions.49 The atypical set included in-home workers caring for children, the elderly, or the disabled who had been cut out from the NLRA under its independent contractor and domestic service exemptions.50 The overlooked category included NLRA employees who had historically been ignored or marginalized, like exotic dancers,51 car-wash attendants,52 and immigrants.53 It also encompassed employees who

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45. Id. at 380.
46. While the NLRA preempts states from legislating alternative unionization rules, it welcomes creative arrangements negotiated between unions and employers. Sachs, supra note 42, at 1169; see also In re Verizon Info. Sys., 335 N.L.R.B. 558, 559 (2001).
47. Sachs, supra note 44, at 378–79.
49. Sachs, supra note 44, at 382.
50. Id. at 382–85.
51. Lauren Smiley, Last Days at the Lusty Lady Strip Club, NEW YORKER (Aug. 23, 2013), http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/last-days-at-the-lusty-lady-strip-club [https://perma.cc/LD3G-XNL9] (“In 1997 . . . unsavory work conditions prompted [the Lusty Lady] to become what is believed to be the first strip club in the United States to successfully unionize . . . ”). While evaluating exotic dancers’ status involves highly fact-specific inquiries, the Board and courts have generally found them to be employees subject to the NLRA and other federal employment laws. See, e.g., Hart v. Rick’s Cabaret Int’l, Inc., 967 F. Supp. 2d 901, 912 (S.D.N.Y. 2013) (“Nearly [w]ithout exception, these courts have found an employment relationship and required the nightclub to pay its dancers a minimum wage.”).
53. The AFL-CIO’s staunch anti-immigrant stance reversed during John Sweeney’s presidency. See Roger Waldinger & Claudia Der-Martirosian, Immigrant Workers and American
seemed ripe for mobilization on labor-friendly political or other causes but whom, for practical purposes, unions were unlikely to be able to legally represent any time soon. In turn, unions established vehicles to bring them into the fold with affiliation pacts and voluntary dues instead of actual contracts with employers.  

B. The Rise of Alt-Labor—and Optimism

Running parallel to the rise of private ordering and the forging of novel member pathways has been something commentators have labeled alternative-labor, or “alt-labor”—“labor” because it involves worker organizing, and “alternative” because unions are not behind the wheel and the remedy sought is not the conventional collectively bargained agreement. Even before the term itself was coined, such efforts existed in community-based “worker centers” focused on low-wage immigrant advocacy through legal assistance, political change campaigns, and protest.

No matter the backdrop, since the 1990s alt-labor has exploded in size and scope. A 1992 attempt to catalogue worker centers identified five, a figure that

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55. Josh Eidelson, Alt-Labor, AM. PROSPECT (Jan. 29, 2013), http://prospect.org/article/alt-labor [http://perma.cc/468R-EV0B] (“Lacking the ability to engage in collective bargaining or enforce union contracts, these alternative labor groups rely on an overlapping set of other tactics to reform their industries,” like rights-education, rallies, casting employers in positive or negative lights, and lobbying).

56. Josh Eidelson’s use of “alt-labor” in January 2013 in the American Prospect may be the term’s first published appearance. See id.

rose to 214 in 2013.58 Recent adoption of the more expansive term alt-labor reflects the reality that pursuing workplace fairness through street and legal activism—rather than group bargaining—has gone beyond clinic-like, immigrant-centric settings.59 Today it extends to a multiplicity of other organizations and situations, from the Brooklyn-based Freelancers Union of independent writers60 to the Model Alliance, which helps runway models prod fashion houses on issues like weight restrictions and sexual harassment.61

Taken together, labor’s experiments with private reordering and inventive membership schemes, alongside alt-labor’s zeal to fight for workers without necessarily representing them, struck specialists as a hopeful and even exciting turn with potential to knit unions and workers back into a movement writ large.62 Social movement law scholar Scott Cummings observed that the “‘legal pluralist’ approach to organizing” revealed “a more fundamental re-orientation . . . under way within the labor movement.”63 Harvard Law Professor Benjamin Sachs predicted that “[s]elf-consciously embracing . . . these decentralizing trends promises enormous returns.”64 And when in 2005 a handful of unions quit the AFL-CIO over the inadequate pace of membership growth,65 labor law academics convened a symposium wondering if the next wave of mass U.S. organizing had finally arrived.66

C. The Wall Rises (and Reality Sets in)

All of the experimentalist trends remain today. Newspapers cover private organizing agreements,67 worker centers continue to claim meaningful

58. Eidelson, supra note 55.
59. See, e.g., Gordon, supra note 57, at 86–97, 185–236.
64. Sachs, supra note 44, at 394.
unions try to extend membership rights to workers previously overlooked, and all the while old-fashioned NLRB organizing still occasionally grabs headlines. But the acclaim of it all wore off. Numbers-wise, private-sector union membership had actually dropped since 1995, and the alt-labor phenomenon, while captivating, struggled with scalability and financing and by design did nothing for union rolls.

While bad numbers are, of course, nothing new, in 2012 labor’s shrinking slice of the workforce pie seemed to touch different nerves, spurring the conclusion that, absent a severe course correction, this time the end really was near. On National Public Radio labor reporter Josh Eidelson spoke of “vultures circling around the U.S. labor movement.” The Nation, the left’s foremost print institution, hosted an ideas forum entitled, “How Can Labor Be Saved?” and words like “desperation” popped up in bold typeface in the labor press. To be sure, union leadership sounded, if not desperate, completely exasperated. Andy Stern, the innovative former SEIU President, mentioned at a “New Ideas for Labor” panel that he was no longer sure how to save it, an

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72. Eidelson, supra note 55 (noting a labor historian’s conclusion that “[t]here is no way you can have a non-bargaining institution in the long run” since “they are dependent usually on outside funding and support”); Josh Eidelson, Who Should Fund Alt-Labor?, NATION (July 17, 2013), http://www.thenation.com/article/who-should-fund-alt-labor [https://perma.cc/QKD6-LUEZ] (citing “[w]ho should pay the bills” as a primary challenge facing alt-labor groups, because while some “collect voluntary dues from their members . . . hardly any are primarily funded by them”); Neyfakh, supra note 61 (questioning alt-labor’s “large-scale ability to improve working conditions”).


AFL-CIO report called membership decline “clear and devastating,” and the federation’s head, Richard Trumka, rated unions as “failing—failing miserably . . . by every critical measure.” Out of the alarm emerged a rough consensus that experimentalism and a half-embrace of alt-labor were not enough, that an obvious fix was not at hand, and that it was time to try something completely different. The philosophy going forward would be a point Trumka repeatedly emphasized to the press: labor’s fealty to the law on the crucial issue of who counts as a unionist was a mistake. Unions, he stressed, needed to “stop letting the law define who our members should be.”

And from there, the stage was set for a very new, and very different, approach to labor organizing.

II.

THE CAMPAIGNS AGAINST WALMART AND THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY

A. A Note on the Economic Context

Walmart, McDonald’s, and Yum! Brands (the corporate parent to Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), Pizza Hut, and Taco Bell) are some of the biggest private-sector employers in the country and in many respects the vanguard of an economy that has become “downwardly mobile.” No industrialized country beats America’s proportion of low-wage jobs, and despite harder-working, better-educated employees, positions with good pay and benefits have, for decades, been steadily disappearing.


78. Bologna, supra note 23.
79. See, e.g., Meyerson, supra note 24 (“‘What would it take for labor to come back?’ one senior union staffer asked earlier this year. ‘[T]he Great Recession] was the crisis we were waiting for, and it didn’t do it.’”); see also Stephen Lerner, An Injury to All: Going Beyond Collective Bargaining as We Have Known It, 19 NEW LAB. F. 45, 46 (2010) (“[T]he current model isn’t repairable—we have to figure out and develop a visionary and transformative way to replace it.”).
80. Meyerson, supra note 24.
81. Likely capturing the sentiments of a sizable portion of the movement, an SEIU leader proclaimed: “[W]e’ll be remembered—or won’t be—for whether we had the vision to reallocate our resources and our talent on a massive scale to create a new model for worker advocacy.” David Rolf, Alternative Futures for Labor, AM. PROSPECT (Dec. 12, 2012), http://prospect.org/article/alternative-futures-labor [https://perma.cc/37EJ-WFN5].
82. Bologna, supra note 23.
84. Meyerson, supra note 24.
85. Id.
In this regard, the three megacorporations fit right in, offering almost nothing but hourly wages hovering around $8 to $9. Moreover, the industries they lead, retail and fast-food, are among the nation’s largest and quickly getting bigger. They are also increasingly the landing spot for older, educated job seekers mired in low-wage work for the long haul. And though it perhaps goes without saying, on-call scheduling, missed breaks, generalized disrespect, and the physical and emotional tolls that mark retail and fast-food work make for days on the job that, even beyond bad pay, are rather grim.

Into this setting, U.S. unions launched their campaigns against Walmart and the fast-food industry.

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90. Alan Feuer, Life on $7.25 an Hour, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 28, 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/01/nyregion/older-workers-are-increasingly-entering-fast-food-industry.html [http://perma.cc/D8WA-RUK8] (“The classic image of the high-school student flipping Big Macs after class is sorely out of date. These days, the average age of fast-food workers is 29.”).


B. Walmart

Walmart has been described as the “template business” behind many of the above trends. This is in part because its massive size and dogged cost-cutting drive out competition, but also because its global presence and grip over suppliers allow it to dictate ever-shrinking labor costs—that is, pay—across wide swaths of the economy.

Walmart’s aggressive moves into groceries and then unionized supermarket strongholds have therefore long been a terrifying prospect for UFCW and something it has vigorously fought over the years. Though these previous efforts have tended to be either losing bids to constrain the megaretailer’s growth or fizzled experiments to attract its employees, the battles clarified a basic truth: given Walmart’s incredible reach, a credible campaign against it requires multiple, sometimes overlapping, fronts. The UFCW’s most recent effort is also its most comprehensive, and it has four main components: (1) an evolving band of activist workers known as OUR Walmart, (2) cutting-edge social media spreading OUR Walmart’s message, (3) partnerships with like-minded groups embedded in the Walmart supply chain, and (4) global relationships pushing its agenda abroad.

1. In the Stores and on the Strike Line: OUR Walmart

The heart of UFCW’s campaign is OUR Walmart, a loose association of Walmart employees that the union began recruiting quietly door-to-door in 2010. The organization went public in June 2011, hand-delivering a nine-
point “Declaration for Respect” demanding that top executives recognize “freedom of association” and “freedom of speech,” “[p]rovide wages and benefits that ensure that no Associate has to rely on government assistance,” and “[l]isten to us, the Associates.”  

While such broad calls are important end goals, OUR Walmart’s bread and butter is agitating for specific job improvements through collective action. Recurring complaints about unpredictable scheduling, for example, prompted the organization to plan 150 coordinated showdowns where workers marched on management with petitions requesting a revamped staffing system. 

But the activism the organization is best known for is a series of unprecedented work stoppages that began with a twenty-four-hour walkout by about sixty Southern California employees in September 2012 and, seemingly, just kept going. By October the strikes had spread beyond California to seven cities coast to coast, an impressive expansion in its own right but only a prelude to what the group said it was planning for the day after Thanksgiving, colloquially known as “Black Friday” and the biggest retail sales day of the year. That year significant media attention focused on Walmart and other retailers’ decision to open for business not just, as tradition dictated, during the ultra-early, post-turkey shopping rush, but also on the holiday itself.  

In the preceding weeks OUR Walmart had latched onto the issue and incorporated it into a narrative of dinners cut short so that the retailer could cater to bargain-obsessed consumers. That account appeared to strike a chord
with the public, jolting a company spokesperson to take to national television to warn that “there could be consequences” if workers struck on Black Friday. ¹⁰⁶ Undaunted, that morning four hundred workers walked off the job to join over a thousand rallies across forty-six states and OUR Walmart officially had the nation’s attention. ¹⁰⁷

Riding the wave of momentum, OUR Walmart continued to organize stoppages of varying sizes all over the country,¹⁰⁸ punctuated more and more by civil disobedience and arrests.¹⁰⁹ In the meantime, Walmart, by now well-schooled in handling protests after decades of defending its policies from advocates of all stripes,¹¹⁰ fought back without hesitation. From there, ending retaliation against OUR Walmart became glued to strikers’ ever-fluid list of demands.¹¹¹ The second round of Black Friday walkouts in 2013 highlighted the issue in demonstrations that included 116 activists led off to jail, veritable catnip for the press.¹¹² In 2014 they did it again.¹¹³


In between strikes, OUR Walmart members and supporters pressed their case by staging aggressive demonstrations on Walmart property that frequently made creative use of the element of surprise. Choreographed dance routines known as “flash mobs” filled otherwise quiet aisles, workers suddenly erupted in chants throughout stores, one manager received rotten pumpkins as a Halloween “gift,” and store exteriors morphed into impromptu movie screens for protest videos projected from trucks plastered with OUR Walmart paraphernalia and, for good measure, blasting Twisted Sister’s “We’re Not Gonna Take It.”

The group has also paid special attention to Walmart’s board of directors. In 2012 workers presented board member Jim Walton with a sweepstakes-sized check equal to an hourly worker’s wage (a less than sweepstakes-sized $8.81), and staged a sit-in at Yahoo! after Chief Executive Officer and Walmart Director Marissa Mayer declined to meet. Armed with small stashes of Walmart stock, activists have also made spirited presentations before the full board at Walmart’s famously lavish, Hollywood-studded shareholders’ meeting.

As OUR Walmart’s activism matured, its central issues narrowed somewhat, often returning to demands for a $25,000 minimum salary or, later,
$15 an hour in base pay.\textsuperscript{121} Another recurrent theme is Walmart’s treatment of women, who make up over two-thirds of the company’s hourly workers.\textsuperscript{122} In 2014 the group launched the unforgettable titled “Respect the Bump” minicampaign that, with help of a broad coalition, forced Walmart to give in on a number of long-sought policy changes impacting pregnant workers.\textsuperscript{123} That same year, OUR Walmart returned to the company’s stock meeting, this time flanked by the “Walmart Moms,” a collection of strikers from twenty cities calling for the $25,000 floor and an end to spotty hours that wreak havoc on childcare commitments.\textsuperscript{124}

Through it all UFCW’s endgame has remained unclear, though one obvious aim has always been off-limits: UFCW does not want to unionize Walmart workers.\textsuperscript{125} Its main ambition instead seems simply to continue boosting OUR Walmart participation, pressuring the company to the greatest

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possible degree on the greatest number of issues at the greatest variety of locations. As one scholar put it, OUR Walmart just wants to keep doing “more.”

A key component of that ambition is the sophisticated use of social media.

2. Virtually: The Internet and Social Media

Social media’s impact on activism has been a popular discussion point in recent years, and in many ways UFCW’s use of new technology points to its constructive potential. OUR Walmart of course has a website. And, like many entities, it promotes itself through networked advertising so that people encounter clickable OUR Walmart links if they report on Facebook that they work at the company.

OUR Walmart is most interested, however, in engaging employees concerned about working conditions but afraid to speak out publicly, a universe it labels “the silent majority.” To attract these workers, OUR Walmart created “AssociateVoices.org,” a site that encourages anonymous sharing of work-related anecdotes and grievances and, in a nod to those without easy Internet access, allows posts through text messaging. OUR Walmart both monitors and guides discussions on the site while allowing workers to start their own fights by asking the group to visit their store and demonstrate, even if the initiating employee is not personally prepared to participate.

The group’s most important innovation, however, arose from the reality that UFCW is not big enough to assign staff to each of Walmart’s nearly five thousand locations. In place of paid organizers, OUR Walmart wrote a do-it-yourself guide to workplace protest—otherwise known as the “strike kit”—and made it available for free, online. “Making Change at Walmart,” OUR Walmart’s sister organization for nonemployees, then supplemented the kit with a “protest in a box” feature that allows sympathetic community groups to fill in wherever UFCW cannot be present.

Finally, OUR Walmart has mastered the Twitter art of “trending,” harnessing a technology called “Thunderclap” to popularize tweets about the

126. Logan, supra note 9, at 28.
129. Id.
130. Id.
131. Id.
133. Jaffe, supra note 9.
134. Id.
Black Friday protests and promote a website dedicated to strikes on that day.\footnote{Id. Walmart’s attempt at a counter-Thunderclap had one-tenth the impact. Id.; see also FAQs About Trends on Twitter, TWITTER, https://support.twitter.com/articles/101125-faqs-about-trends-on-twitter# [https://perma.cc/39LY-GL5X].} It\'s prowess in this area allows it to quickly saturate cyberspace whenever relevant news or reports are released,\footnote{See, e.g., @ForRespect, TWITTER (June 6, 2014) (live-tweeting Walmart’s 2014 shareholders meeting).} which, given the number of organizational partners involved in the campaign, is relatively often. To be sure, external affiliations enable OUR Walmart to spread its impact outside the virtual sphere, touching Walmart-owned warehouses and the company\’s contracted labor chain.

3. Working with Friends: Walmart Warehouses

Much of Walmart\’s business success is linked to an obsessive focus on logistics,\footnote{Edna Bonacich & Khaleelah Hardie, Wal-Mart and the Logistics Revolution, in WAL-MART: THE FACE OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CAPITALISM, supra note 94, at 163, 170–74.} particularly the smooth passage of goods from one of three warehouse complexes near Los Angeles, Chicago, and in New Jersey to its shelves.\footnote{Jane Slaughter, Supply Chain Workers Test Strength of Links, LAB. NOTES (Mar. 29, 2012), http://www.labornotes.org/2012/03/supply-chain-workers-test-strength-links [http://perma.cc/LB2N-WEZZ].} Staffed by temporary labor firms under Walmart\’s direction, working conditions at the distribution centers are plagued with safety and wage violations,\footnote{EUNICE HYUNHYE CHO ET AL., NAT’L EMP’T LAW PROJECT, CHAIN OF GREED: HOW WAL-MART’S DOMESTIC OUTSOURCING PRODUCES EVERYDAY LOW WAGES AND POOR WORKING CONDITIONS FOR WAREHOUSE WORKERS 2–3 (2012).} presenting UFCW with an enticing opportunity to pressure Walmart beyond the usual retail setting.\footnote{See Slaughter, supra note 138 (stating that “[t]he strategy is to organize workers on the lowest rungs of the Walmart ladder at the same time that allies such as … OUR Walmart … are pressuring the company”).} Through partnerships with Warehouse Workers United on the West Coast, Warehouse Workers for Justice (WWJ) in Illinois, and New Labor, a worker center on the East Coast, OUR Walmart has been able to support an array of activism closer to consumers.\footnote{Id. (describing the campaigns as “[l]inked”); see also Jane Slaughter, Warehouse Strategies Squeeze Walmart’s Pressure Points, LAB. NOTES (Jan. 23, 2013), http://www.labornotes.org/2013/01/warehouse-strategies-squeeze-walmart%E2%80%99s-pressure-points [https://perma.cc/37FX-525G] (“The warehouse worker groups maintain close communication with OUR Walmart … and activist warehouse workers attended November’s Black Friday protests at the stores.”).}

Most prominently, in September 2012 the California warehouse worker staged a multiweek strike against retaliation, repeated it two months later, and walked out again in July 2013.\footnote{Logan, supra note 9, at 24; Josh Eidelson, Warehouse Workers Moving Walmart Baggage Will Strike Today, NATION (July 24, 2013), http://www.thenation.com/article/warehouse-workers-moving-walmart-baggage-will-strike-today [http://perma.cc/2UC8-LPA6].} Workers in Elwood, Illinois also struck in late 2012, completely shutting down Walmart’s main Midwest distribution hub.\footnote{Most prominently, in September 2012 the California warehouse worker staged a multiweek strike against retaliation, repeated it two months later, and walked out again in July 2013. Workers in Elwood, Illinois also struck in late 2012, completely shutting down Walmart’s main Midwest distribution hub.}
after presenting the company with a six-figure signature petition demanding an end to legal violations at the warehouse.\footnote{143} And New Labor, the New Jersey worker center, successfully forced Walmart’s contracted staffing agency to stop charging warehouse employees for unnecessary travel costs.\footnote{144}

4. Working with Friends: Global Allies

Finally, because so much of Walmart’s supply chain is rooted abroad,\footnote{145} UFCW maintains overseas relationships and an international presence. The power of those connections appeared most vividly two weeks after the first Black Friday strikes when demonstrators in Nicaragua, India, South Africa, Argentina, and six other countries called on Walmart to rehire fired OUR Walmart members and follow international labor standards.\footnote{146}

And unsurprisingly, Walmart’s brushes with scandal overseas have provided UFCW with leverage at home.\footnote{147} Walmart’s refusal to join thirty other clothing retailers in a binding safety agreement following the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, for example, prompted OUR Walmart to incorporate the issue into its chants and champion international anti-sweatshop advocates.\footnote{148} The group’s justification for opposing Rob Walton’s reelection to the company chair, further, revolved around a bribery scandal in Mexico.\footnote{149}

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  \item \footnote{144} Slaughter, \textit{ supra} note 138.
  \item \footnote{146} Josh Eidelson, \textit{Global Day of Action Hits Walmart in 10 Countries}, \textit{NATION} (Dec. 14, 2012), http://www.thenation.com/article/global-day-action-hits-walmart-10-countries [http://perma.cc/VRL8-5KZ2]. The relationships have paid more subtle dividends as well. OUR Walmart’s partnership with the international union federation UNI sparked creation of the Global Union Alliance@Walmart, which has worked with unionized Walmart workers outside of the United States to push the company to sign a multinational labor standards accord. \textit{Id.}; Logan, \textit{ supra} note 9, at 26. In South Africa the Global Union Alliance slowed and successfully attached conditions to Walmart’s bid to take over a local chain, and in Sweden OUR Walmart used the company’s track record to convince pension funds to divest $140 billion of the corporation’s stock. Logan, \textit{ supra} note 9, at 26–27.
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C. Fast Food

The fast-food campaign came into media focus just as the OUR Walmart walkouts emerged, and it is often viewed as the Walmart campaign’s counterpart. In some ways this makes sense—the fast-food offensive targets equally low-wage work and relies heavily on strikes. But the fast-food effort is better viewed as the Walmart campaign’s complement, not its twin, for there are important differences between the two.

Most notably, while UFCW set its sights on one employer, the other funder, SEIU, took on an entire industry of employers. The workers within that industry, moreover, are “fissured” from the corporate behemoths at the campaign’s center, employed instead by thousands of small businesses scattered throughout the country. Of the over 35,000 McDonald’s restaurants, for example, less than a fifth are actually owned by the McDonald’s Corporation. The rest are operated by and on the books of franchisees that, in theory and absent special circumstances, immediately control and are legally responsible for working conditions. Lastly, unlike OUR Walmart, the fast-food campaign’s endgame has been well defined from the start. It can mobilize for narrow, worksite-specific changes with the best of them, but at its core the fast-food campaign wants $15 and a union.

There are three main facets to its work: (1) mobilizing workers through city-by-city campaigns for one-day work stoppages; (2) organizing to increase the minimum wage, and (3) applying global pressure on the industry through international allies.

1. Fast Food Forward, the Fight for $15, and City-by-City Strike Solidarity

a. Origins and Evolution

Most reports trace the origins of the fast-food campaign to the work of a New York City advocacy group, New York Communities for Change, which had been canvassing neighborhoods for school reform but shifted to low pay “after hearing fast-food jobs were keeping local residents poor.” The Chicago organization Action Now made a similar switch around the same time, opting to organize around the service industry instead of transportation issues.

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152. Id. at 4.
after doorstep conversations kept circling back to bad jobs.\textsuperscript{155} Though some specifics behind these accounts are disputed,\textsuperscript{156} no one questions SEIU’s support for both projects or that, after only a few months, the efforts were linked, snappily branded—“Fast Food Forward” in New York and “Fight for $15” in Chicago—and even had a theme song.\textsuperscript{157}

From there, it did not take long for the fast-food campaign to take shape. At its epicenter were and remain city-wide work stoppages that last a single day, repeat, and gradually expand to more and more cities.\textsuperscript{158} The opening salvo can be traced to New York and the morning of November 29, 2012, when two hundred workers at McDonald’s, Burger King, Domino’s, KFC, Taco Bell, Wendy’s, and Papa John’s shut off the fryers, walked away from cash registers, and joined sidewalk shouts of “Hey, hey, ho, ho, seven-twenty-five has got to go.”\textsuperscript{159}

They struck again the following April, doubling the number of participants to four hundred. After protesting outside seventy stores across Manhattan and Brooklyn, the strikers made their way to a Harlem McDonald’s wearing “I AM A MAN” placards to honor the forty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination.\textsuperscript{160} Chicago’s Fight for $15 entered the fray soon after with an estimated five hundred strikers from an expanded employer list that included a smattering of retail outlets.\textsuperscript{161}

Then the campaign went national. On May 8, 2013, workers from “STL Can’t Survive on $7.35” quit work at Hardee’s, Domino’s, Jimmy John’s, and

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156. One account has New York Communities for Change’s initial canvass revolving around housing and police conduct. Jenny Brown, \textit{Fast Food Strikes: What’s Cooking?}, \textsc{Lab. Notes} (June 24, 2013), \url{http://www.labornotes.org/2013/06/fast-food-strikes-whats-cooking} [http://perma.cc/5P74-PZHS]. Another claims that SEIU always directed the campaign and always had fast food at its center. Gupta, \textit{supra} note 25.


159. Greenhouse, \textit{supra} note 10; see also Eidelson, \textit{supra} note 11.


161. Eidelson, \textit{supra} note 155; Shropshire & Nix, \textit{supra} note 12.
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other St. Louis restaurants. Two days later, a Congressman rallied four hundred workers at McDonald’s, Long John Silver’s, Popeye’s, and other restaurants in Detroit. More May walkouts followed in Milwaukee (the “Raise UP MKE” campaign) and Seattle (from “Good Jobs Seattle”). Days before Labor Day brought a sixty-city, thousand-restaurant uprising topped by a hundred-city crescendo in December.

The year 2014 heralded a more aggressive phase. A May demonstration at McDonald’s corporate headquarters ended with a mix of one hundred workers, clergy, and union officials in handcuffs. In July, SEIU bussed twelve hundred fast-food workers to a Chicago suburb for a raucous convention knitting the dispersed city efforts together like nothing before. Part rally and part planning session, there, the workers pledged to do “whatever it takes” for $15 and a union, a vow that became concrete after a unanimous vote to “engage in non-violent direct action” going forward. That future arrived the morning of September 4, 2014, when 456 workers were arrested in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Las Vegas, and thirty-two other cities for “sit-ins” blocking traffic near restaurants. The campaign pressed repeat three months later as the protests broadened in scope with the participation of low-wage airport and

convenience store strike workers and the incorporation of police brutality as another animating issue.170

The next year produced a coalescence, with most of the city groups rallying under the “Fight for $15” banner and organizational website, fightfor15.org.171 It was soon clear that this was more than a catchy battle cry, as, before long, a strike promoted as “the largest low-wage worker mobilization in modern history” was slated for the undeniably savvy date of April 15 (i.e., “fo[u]r 15”).172 The day marked a pivot point of sorts, from fast-food activism specifically to low-wage work resistance generally, with police reform, environmental, college adjunct, childcare, and other groups fully participating.173

In between the mass stoppages, SEIU has taken a page from OUR Walmart by working to spread awareness of its efforts and the issues involved using cyberspace.174 The campaign’s many Facebook pages urge employees and their supporters to post workplace stories and encourage activists to adopt city-specific usernames on Twitter so that it can monitor the campaign’s spread.175 Quirky Twitter hashtags like “#McHungerGames” add an air of hipness to the media content.176 And like their Walmart counterparts, fast-food workers have access to an online “strike kit,” which has helped many strike at stores where fast-food organizers have not been able to penetrate.177

175. Id.
177. The fast-food strike kit urges workers “tired of getting screwed by low pay” to “join the national movement and go on a one-day strike!” STRIKE KIT, LOW PAY IS NOT OK, http://lowpayisnotok.org/strike-kit (last visited Aug. 12, 2014). The kit’s “15 steps” to striking includes
The kit has also empowered workers to spearhead isolated actions in response to store-specific issues. Broken air conditioning on scorching summer afternoons sparked spontaneous walkouts in both Manhattan and Chicago, for example, while a group of Whole Foods workers struck when a coworker was fired for staying home with her son amidst the “polar vortex” of 2014 that closed many schools.178

Through it all, the press has taken great interest in the ins and outs of fast-food workers’ daily lives. Comedy Central’s “The Colbert Report” guest featured KFC employee Naquasia LeGrand, and the New Yorker has twice shadowed individual workers for long-form magazine profiles.179 Prominent food journalists Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser have also been outspoken, urging the “food movement” to recognize that sustainable eating requires sustainable wages.180

b. “$15 and a Union”: The Public and Practical Context

The energetic press response may be related to the campaign’s well-defined goals. Though the exact words sometimes vary, the campaign’s central premise has been so solid from the start: a $15-an-hour fast-food wage backed up by a union contract.181 Since most of the industry pays the minimum, the concrete wage demand in particular is provocative, easy to explain, and plays to a policy change that the public and progressive politicians generally support.

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181. Finnegan, supra note 153.
(the precise scope of the increase aside).\textsuperscript{182} Also, because states and even some cities can establish their own wage floors, the call to raise it drastically allowed the campaign to localize its activities and messaging to a great extent.\textsuperscript{183}

The media’s tendency to devote the lion’s share of coverage to the wage demand in particular also demonstrates its special salience. Stories frequently either fail to mention bargaining as a worker aspiration or essentialize the campaign solely as a wage movement.\textsuperscript{184} No doubt contributing to the situation was the media’s initial difficulty in finding anyone to say that unionizing the fast-food industry was a likely or, frankly, realistic aim. Reporter Josh Eidelson, who has provided the most sustained coverage of the strikes, wrote in late 2013 that “seasoned pro-labor observers” viewed “[a]ctual collective bargaining in fast food . . . as an impossible goal,” something labor leaders themselves did not exactly deny.\textsuperscript{185} SEIU’s key campaign strategist called the approach “brand new” and “certainly not fleshed out.”\textsuperscript{186} A renowned labor historian was more direct: “[T]he unions have no strategy for building a real organization sustained by actual dues-paying members.”\textsuperscript{187}

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\textsuperscript{182} In cities like Chicago, fast-food workers are uniformly paid the state minimum wage. Meyerson, supra note 125; see also Bruce Drake, Polls Show Strong Support for Minimum Wage Hike, PEW RES. CTR. (Mar. 4, 2014), http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/03/04/polls-show-strong-support-for-minimum-wage-hike [http://perma.cc/PKH6-CZUP].

\textsuperscript{183} A California shopping mall that straddles two cities and is subject to two different minimum wages represents this fact powerfully. Steve Henn, A Mall with Two Minimum Wages, NPR (Aug. 28, 2014), http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2014/08/28/343430393/a-mall-with-two-minimum-wages [http://perma.cc/5EZA-KTQE].


\textsuperscript{186} Id.

\textsuperscript{187} Nelson Lichtenstein, Two Roads Forward for Labor: The AFL-CIO’s New Agenda, DISSERT MAG. (Winter 2014), https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/two-roads-forward-for-labor-the-afl-cios-new-agenda [http://perma.cc/7W7K-5M7D]; see also Meyerson, supra note 125 (describing the campaign as attracting “a multitude of workers [unions] won’t plausibly claim as members for many years, if ever”).
The ambiguity goes back to the difficulty of forming a union and bargaining with any employer, let alone with thousands upon thousands across an entire industry.\(^{188}\) While SEIU has actually had some previous success organizing the high-rise janitorial sector, those campaigns were limited to a single city at a time and were not complicated by a sprawling franchise structure scattering deeply committed anti union brands into little businesses around the country.\(^{189}\) Getting McDonald’s, for instance, to accept unionization in principle and then impose that decision on the legally distinct franchisees that actually employ the workers would require, as SEIU leadership openly acknowledged, “things we haven’t imagined.”\(^{190}\)

\(^{188}\) See supra note 42.

\(^{189}\) The fast-food franchise system is in some ways similar to the office-cleaning contractors SEIU targeted in its “Justice for Janitors” (JfJ) campaigns. The contractors, like franchisees, were linked by contact to bigger corporate actors—building owners—who could ultimately be pressured to push the contractors into unionization. RICK FANTASIA & KIM VOSS, HARD WORK 139–41 (2004). But there are also key differences. By design JfJ had a limited geography. Campaigns would begin and end in a single city before moving elsewhere, often years later. Id. at 136–37, 139. The earliest efforts also benefited greatly both from the presence of a single janitorial firm that controlled nearly the entire industry, along with the fact that SEIU had already unionized the company in other parts of the country, offering a key relational in-road and the chance to exert highly organized pressure. Id. at 143–44. Later incarnations involved a greater variety of targets and required a more complex strategy but were similarly limited to a single geography and involved far fewer workers than the fast-food campaign. Compare Sachs, supra note 44, at 379–80 (describing a Houston campaign with five contractors, 4,700 workers, and a special “trigger” agreement), with Finnegan, supra note 153 (comparing JfJ and the fast-food campaign and noting that “the fast-food workforce is just under four million and growing”). Finally, sociologists have written about the unique social vulnerabilities of high-rise building owners, sensitivities that public relations-hardened fast-food companies probably do not share. FANTASIA & VOSS, supra, at 140.

\(^{190}\) Josh Eidelson, supra note 185; see also Harold Meyerson, Seattle’s $15 Minimum Wage Agreement: Collective Bargaining Reborn?, AM. PROSPECT (May 7, 2014), http://prospect.org/article/seattles-15-minimum-wage-agreement-collective-bargaining-reborn [http://perma.cc/6V4N-LWZ9] (“It was never even remotely apparent how SEIU could persuade chains such as McDonald’s and Burger King to enter into contractual relations with the hundreds of thousands of workers employed in their franchises.”). Something the campaign did eventually come up with was a push in 2014 to have franchisees and franchisors classified as co-or joint-employers under the NLRA. See Lawrence E. Dube, NLRB General Counsel Acts on McDonald’s, Moving 181 Cases on Joint Employer Issue, DAILY LAB. REP. (July 29, 2014), http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-07-29/nlrb-determines-that-mcdonald-s-is-employer-to-franchise-workers [https://perma.cc/CQ3Y-HD3]. The theory here is that contractual provisions and de facto rules franchisors force on franchisees for things like wages, work schedules, and hiring merge the two when it comes to legal responsibility for on-the-ground labor law violations. Id. While the unionization implications that arise under such a finding are not entirely clear—that Walmart Stores, Inc. operates all of its locations has not exactly been a silver bullet for UFCW—it would prevent the corporate parents from disclaiming responsibility for law-breaking in the stores and up the rhetorical and legal pressure on franchisors to agree to talks on everything from setting a uniform industry pay rate, to not opposing unionization and making that stance a condition of the franchise agreement, to aggregating franchisees into coherent bargaining units. See Penn, supra note 168; see also Julia Kann, McDonald’s Can’t Hide Behind Franchise System, LAB. NOTES (Aug. 18, 2014), http://www.labornotes.org/2014/08/mcdonald-%e2%80%99s-can%E2%80%99t-hide-behind-franchise-system [http://perma.cc/7LZU-752T]; Noam Scheiber, Union Takes a McDonald’s Challenge Overseas, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 19, 2015), http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/business/union-takes-a-mcdonalds-challenge-overseas.html [http://perma.cc/UVA6-ZBEE] (“A joint employer determination would make it easier to apply any
But if the way to win the “union” part of the campaign’s dual demands is a bit murky, the “$15” goal is not. Indeed, much of the campaign’s work beyond strikes has focused on increasing the minimum wage across all industries anywhere it can, with some notable success.

2. Minimum Wage Activism

Proposals to adjust the federal minimum wage have languished in Congress since it last authorized an increase in 2007. But inclusion of the issue in the 2013 State of the Union address coincided with widespread and occasionally successful attempts to raise it at the state level, which continue to this day. The fast-food campaign has contributed to these moves in a couple of ways. For one, a number of commentators have suggested that the campaign’s strikes and demonstrations create an atmosphere that provides crucial momentum to wage activists and politicians around the country.

More directly, the campaign has aggressively inserted itself into many ongoing efforts to increase state and local minimums, work that has paid amazing dividends, for starters, in and around Seattle. There, SEIU floated a trial balloon in the form of a $15-an-hour ballot proposition in the tiny city of

concession workers wrested from the McDonald’s Corporation to workers at McDonald’s franchises, including, for example, a card-check provision that could bring a union into existence at a store once a majority of workers signed union cards.”]. The strategy got a serious boost in late August 2015 when the NLRB loosened the test for determining joint employer status by considering a company like McDonald’s an employer of franchise workers if it has the power—even indirectly and even if it does not actually “exercise the authority”—to “share or codetermine” employment conditions. Browning-Ferris Indus., 362 N.L.R.B. No. 186, *2 (2015). For a comprehensive and recent account of the ways that SEIU might approach the unionization issue, see Steven Greenhouse, How to Get Low-Wage Workers into the Middle Class, ATLANTIC (Aug. 19, 2015), http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/08/fifteen-dollars-minimum-wage/401540 [http://perma.cc/ZN3Q-9Y7V] (describing recognition agreements, hiring halls, and traditional NLRB campaigns targeted at corporate-owned stores as potential options).


SeaTac surrounding the Seattle-Tacoma Airport. After a hard-fought campaign marked by a number of legal twists and turns, the measure passed by seventy-seven votes, providing sixteen hundred workers with what was at the time the highest wage floor in the nation.

Organizers then moved on to Seattle, where SEIU timed strikes to coincide with the mayoral election and helped organize candidate forums hosted in part by downtown fast-food workers, who asked the questions. When then-State Senator Ed Murray enthusiastically backed a citywide $15 minimum wage, SEIU and the workers had their candidate.

The union’s local chapters worked to keep a spotlight on the issue prior to Election Day. Murray, for his part, argued that the increase was politically viable when paired with a proposal tasking a business-labor partnership to come up with specifics both constituencies could support. Murray won, the partnership succeeded, and Seattle’s fast-food workers—along with around one hundred thousand others—got their $15 an hour.

SEIU has since transported this strategy to other cities. In New York, lawmakers introduced a bill mandating a $15 hourly wage at “restaurants with at least eleven locations nationwide, including their franchisees,” a definition tailored to the quick service industry. When that effort stalled, the campaign pressed the governor to authorize a “wage board” to study fast-food pay, which ultimately led to a binding recommendation that the state mandate $15 an hour in the industry. Elsewhere, city councils and statehouse hearing rooms have been packed with testimonials about the importance of raising the wage floor in


196. Meyerson, supra note 190.

197. Id.

198. Id.


200. As summarized by the Seattle Times, “the idea is to wage broader, public-spirited campaigns like the $15 wage fight. So they may start out petitioning for $15 city by city (first SeaTac, then Seattle, apparently next New York). But the end goal is national. All without involving Congress.” Westneat, supra note 193.


fast food and beyond. Voters answered the calls in the 2014 midterms when four states increased minimums through the ballot box, and San Francisco became the second city to go all the way up to $15.203 Since then, Los Angeles and Emeryville, California, have been added to the list.204

The melding of fast-food organizing with minimum wage activism has led some to suggest that the strategy could lead to “collective bargaining reborn” or at least repackaged as a way to “extract changes from local or state governments” instead of from private businesses.205 The campaign, however, has not been content to limit its work locally or even domestically. It has also sought to pressure fast-food companies from points around the world.

3. Global Partnerships

Like Walmart, the fast-food industry spans the globe, and by partnering with the IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations), a massive federation of 396 unions spread over 126 countries, SEIU has been able to expand its efforts far beyond U.S. borders.206

The relationship took root in May 2014 when fast-food workers from dozens of countries met with leaders from SEIU and IUF-affiliated unions in New York to organize an international front against the industry. There, participants signed a declaration admonishing McDonald’s labor practices and insisting that it “enter in good faith negotiations with workers’ representatives to raise wages.”207


207. Id.
Days later, fast-food workers from an array of nations coalesced at the entrance of a Manhattan McDonald’s, waving flags and leading chants in French, Italian, English, and Arabic.\textsuperscript{208} It was foreshadowing for May 15, when U.S. fast-food workers walked out for the first time since December 2013, adding fifty new urban centers to the action list and bringing the total number of cities with strikers up to 150.\textsuperscript{209} This time, though, they were supported by simultaneous protests in thirty-three other countries, from a teach-in at a McDonald’s corporate office in Auckland to a rally in Seoul to a full-blown work stoppage in Brussels.\textsuperscript{210}

Throughout the day, SEIU leaders emphasized that the lack of fast-food unions in the United States made it an outlier on the world stage, where unionized cashiers and fry cooks sometimes make over $20 an hour.\textsuperscript{211} The IUF General Secretary sounded the other theme for the day: SEIU’s campaign had “caught the attention of workers around the world” and “this highly profitable global industry better take note.”\textsuperscript{212}

III.

IMPROVISATIONAL UNIONISM AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

The Walmart and fast-food campaigns depart, in some self-evident ways, from unions’ usual approach to doing things. Prior to 2012, unions had abandoned the strike, worker mobilization was tightly tracked, and organizing was aimed at increasing membership. Unions have long relied on local and global partnerships, policy activism, and strategic political work, but pre-2012 they were generally packaged as part of a “comprehensive campaign” aimed


\textsuperscript{209} Penn, \textit{supra} note 206.

\textsuperscript{210} Penn, \textit{supra} note 158.

\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Id.} ("The international protests . . . called attention to the fact that many fast food employees overseas are already unionized and receive significantly greater pay."); Resnikoff, \textit{supra} note 208; Louise Marie Rantzau, \textit{I’m Making $21 an Hour at McDonald’s. Why Aren’t You?}, REUTERS: \textit{GREAT DEBATE BLOG} (May 15, 2014), http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/05/15/fight-for-15-try-21 [https://perma.cc/GBM8-27HX].


\textsuperscript{213} Resnikoff, \textit{supra} note 208. By 2015, the industry was indeed prompted to pay serious attention, with SEIU’s research prompting the European Commission to investigate fast-food tax evasion as the Brazilian Senate scrutinized worldwide antitrust allegations and McDonald’s faced suits over wage theft and safety violations from two international unions. Scheiber, \textit{supra} note 190; Greenhouse, \textit{supra} note 190; David Moberg, \textit{McDonald’s Workers Take Fight for $15 to Brazil, Accuse Company of “Cannibal Capitalism,”} \textit{THESE TIMES} (Aug. 24, 2015, 3:30 PM), http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/18343/mcdonalds_workers_take_fight_for_15_to_brazil_accuse_company_of_cannibal_capitalism [http://perma.cc/Z7VA-V7MM].
with laser-like precision at winning a privately ordered agreement where, again, a prime goal was improving standards by adding members.214

Things changed. Since 2012, unions have embraced a strike-first strategy. Mobilization has been unbridled. Increasing membership has been either, in the case of Walmart, not the goal, or in the case of fast food, an unmapped odyssey. Why? This Part gets at that question, introducing improvisation as a social practice and examining its applications in both campaigns.

A. Bold Strands in a Broader Process of Reinvention

To begin, unions have started a self-conscious process of reinvention that has flirted with some truly radical ideas. Prior to the AFL-CIO’s 2013 convention, labor was abuzz with reports that the federation was considering extending internal voting rights to the NAACP and Sierra Club, effectively handing policymaking powers over to nonunion groups.215 Though ultimately watered down, it is telling that the idea was even seriously raised, as was President Trumka’s blunt explanation for the potential move: “[W]e have to change.”216

Thus, at a basic level, the campaigns against Walmart and fast food are highly visible strands in a broader process. Given their unorthodox methods, they are also especially vulnerable to critique: skeptics wonder if the efforts will amount to much, and cynics from across the spectrum suggest that beneath it all is not much more than a manufactured narrative and a series of flashy actions.217

The skepticism is fair; the cynicism is not. Coursing through each campaign are elements that a growing area of academic inquiry has identified as important agents of organizational change. At base, the strikes by nonunion workers, the incitement of third-party activism, and the embrace of experimentalism are tactics of institutional improvisation. After years of fits and starts aimed at internal change, this new improvisational unionism may at least give unions a puncher’s chance—maybe their best chance—of through and through reform.

B. Theoretical Foundations

The shift toward an improvisational ethic did not come from nowhere. Theoretical antecedents exist and have been built upon to reach this point. An

216. Id.
exploration of improvisational unionism should start there, as much of how the Walmart and fast-food campaigns operate can be traced to three perspectives on union restructuring sketched out in the decade prior to the first strikes. Improvisational unionism borrows elements from each.

In 2002, Professors Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers argued that unions needed to become “open source,” a reference to the tech world philosophy that allows anyone to borrow, alter, or improve upon publicly available software code.\textsuperscript{218} The heart of open source is a philosophy of fluid boundaries where individual gifts can be shared to benefit a common whole.\textsuperscript{219} The concept has been promoted in a diversity of settings, from church governance to car manufacturing, and the authors believed it could apply to unions.\textsuperscript{220} The key to “open source unionism” was counting anyone interested in working with the union on a workplace or community issue as a genuine “member.”\textsuperscript{221} This meant that unions would no longer make resource expenditures dependent on the “probability that they could get a collective contract at the place of work.”\textsuperscript{222} Instead, unions would offer their services to any worker seeking assistance at any time.\textsuperscript{223}

Consequently, mobilization would not be bound by a finite campaign period under an open source regime.\textsuperscript{224} Organizing, rather, would continue indefinitely as workers called for help and unions provided it through community pressure, targeted collective action, and political engagement on legislative issues impacting job conditions.\textsuperscript{225} In this context Freeman and Rogers saw an important role for the Internet because it offered workers easy access to union staff and allowed unions to provide many services virtually, including, notably, do-it-yourself guides to labor law.\textsuperscript{226} One tactic open source unionism did not prioritize was strikes, largely because Freeman and Rogers thought that an open source union without majority workplace support would lack the “clout” to pull off a meaningful stoppage.\textsuperscript{227}

\textsuperscript{218} Richard B. Freeman & Joel Rogers, Open Source Unionism: Beyond Exclusive Collective Bargaining, 5 WORKINGUSA 8, 13 (2002).
\textsuperscript{219} See LANDON WHITSITT, OPEN SOURCE CHURCH 2 (2011) (defining open source, “[a]t its most basic level,” as “making sure that things can work for everyone”).
\textsuperscript{221} Freeman & Rogers, supra note 218, at 18–19.
\textsuperscript{222} Id. at 18.
\textsuperscript{223} Id. at 18–19.
\textsuperscript{224} Id. at 18–22.
\textsuperscript{225} Id. at 14, 22.
\textsuperscript{226} Id. at 19–21.
\textsuperscript{227} Id. at 22; see also id. at 14, 16.
In 2006, Professor Charles Heckscher suggested that strikes were exactly what open source unionism was missing.\textsuperscript{228} Heckscher accepted that unions needed to broaden the concept of union membership to include all comers, but he thought that they should take advantage of this potentially far-flung base by raising havoc at calculated pressure points around the world.\textsuperscript{229}

Here, Heckscher relied on “network theory,” the idea that diverse, informal, scattered groups can successfully confront large entities through “short, rapid, targeted actions” or “swarms.”\textsuperscript{230} Central to the model is the assumption that, as companies move from vertically integrated, multifunction enterprises to horizontal firms with a web of contracted relationships, disruptions at any link in the chain can devastate the whole.\textsuperscript{231} Union strength thus had less to do with contracts and resources and more to do with the capacity to galvanize a constellation of activists and allied groups at any moment. For Heckscher, the important metric was “not how many members you have, but who you can mobilize.”\textsuperscript{232}

Open source unionism’s focus on porous borders and network theory’s emphasis on dispersed relationships left questions about the role of existing members covered by collective bargaining agreements. Jennifer Hill took on this assignment in 2010 by suggesting that unions limit contracts to wage increases and leave day-to-day “shop-floor” fights to members alone.\textsuperscript{233} Scaling back agreements would give unions room to operate more like worker centers, focusing scarce resources “on outside-the-shop activities like policy advocacy, participatory research, creative mobilizations, or new organizing.”\textsuperscript{234} Hill acknowledged that externalizing efforts in this way was an implicit challenge to the conventional wisdom that union power is generated by internal workplace struggles, but she argued that working toward policy changes that would impact all workers was a better use of resources since there were few unionized shops to begin with.\textsuperscript{235}

As a cluster, the projects set the table for a come-one-come-all unionism that would accumulate power through small, surgical, continuous protests—often organized online—and policy work. With the Black Friday and supply chain strikes, one-day walkouts that spread across the nation over time, wage floor advocacy, and lack of emphasis on collective contracts, the Walmart and

\textsuperscript{229} Id. at 332–34.
\textsuperscript{230} Id. at 318, 322–23, 331–32.
\textsuperscript{231} Id. at 322–23.
\textsuperscript{232} Id. at 335.
\textsuperscript{233} Jennifer Hill, Can Unions Use Worker Center Strategies?: In an Age of Doing More with Less, Unions Should Consider Thinking Locally but Acting Globally, 5 FLA. INT’L U. L. REV. 551, 557 (2010).
\textsuperscript{234} Id. at 557, 591.
\textsuperscript{235} Id. at 557.
fast-food campaigns incorporate much from the open source, network, and worker center visions. A better tag for the work, however, is improvisation. The rest of this Part shows how.

C. Improvisation as an Applied Technique of Renewal

Improvisation, long the engine of jazz and the specialty of sketch comedy houses like Second City in Chicago and The Groundlings in Los Angeles, has rapidly spread to other disciplines in recent years, propelled by the idea that its tenets can improve all sorts of performances and methods. The corporate world has developed a “fadlike” obsession with its potential, and the Stanford, Duke, UCLA, and MIT business schools all teach it. Although improvisation is a relatively new area of scholarship, researchers have identified its benefits in a variety of fields including both structured and unstructured settings, from education to firefighting to ocean navigation.

Much of the recent research into improvisation takes place at the institutional level, where scholars see it not simply as skills training for certain employees, but “a technique to enhance the strategic renewal of an organization” completely. In practice, major U.S. firms have organized the development of entire product lines around the concept.

Defining improvisation is not easy. Its content and scope are ongoing areas of inquiry and the list of published definitions is voluminous. A recent attempt to distill the research defined organizational improvisation as “the conception of action as it unfolds,” with the entity and its supporters making snap decisions using “available material[s]” such as “cognitive, affective and


238. Julia Flucht, When the Art of the Deal Includes Improv Training, NPR (Dec. 5, 2012), http://www.npr.org/2012/12/05/166484466/its-improv-night-at-business-school [https://perma.cc/2KEE-S6P7].

239. Ted Baker et al., Improvising Firms: Bricolage, Account Giving and Improvisational Competencies in the Founding Process, 32 RES. POL’Y 255, 255 (2003); Ken N. Kamoche et al., Introduction and Overview to ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVISATION 1 (Ken N. Kamoche et al., eds., 2002) (calling improvisation an “emergent discipline”).

240. Baker et al., supra note 239, at 270 (“Our finding of improvised foundings suggests improvisation can lie at the very core of firm strategies.”); Dusya Vera & Mary Crossan, Improvisation and Innovative Performance in Teams, 16 ORG. SCI. 203, 204 (2005) (“[A]lthough collective improvisation builds on individual improvisation, team improvisation is more than the sum of individual improvisations because the joint activities of individuals create a collective system of improvisational action.”).


242. See, e.g., Kip Kelley, UNC KENAN-FLAGLER BUS. SCH., LEADERSHIP AGILITY: USING IMPROV TO BUILD CRITICAL SKILLS 11 (2012) (noting that “Nike used improv to help managers design new shoes”).

243. See, e.g., Moorman & Miner, supra note 237, at 700–02 (charting various definitions).
social resources” in the moment. Another way of expressing the notion, drawing more from music, focuses on rapidly transforming existing knowledge based on the facts at hand: “[R]eworking precomposed material . . . in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance.” A less technical definition is also useful: when “performance and composition occur simultaneously—on the spot—through a practice that values surprise, innovation, and the vicissitudes of process rather than the fixed glory of a finished product.”

But the best understanding of the idea in relation to Walmart and fast-food activism comes from consideration of three critical elements incorporated into the campaigns that exemplify improvisation by making use of its raw materials: strikes, reliance on autonomous mobilization, and cultivation of an experimental culture with minimal procedures and unsettled ends.

D. Improvisation in the Walmart and Fast-Food Campaigns

1. Strikes

Improvisational performances owe their existence to a basic principle of interpersonal relations known in the literature as “yes-anding.” Yes-anding is what gives improvisation its fluid, free-form quality, because adhering to the standard requires accepting whatever comes along (saying “yes”) and building on it (“anding”). On stage this means taking hold of another’s idea, no matter how contextually bizarre or inappropriate, agreeing with it, and then enhancing it in some way. The idea is to constantly “stretch” the conversation forward while not destroying what someone else has already brought to the interaction. Yes-anding is so central to improvisation that its counter-principles, “no” and “yes, but,” are viewed as a “form of aggression.”

Organizational theorists trumpet the role of yes-anding in team-based innovation, and much of improvisation’s application to group settings involves teaching everyone, from the CEO on down, to welcome, engage, and build up

247. Crossan, supra note 241, at 596 (“Improvisers would say that the principle of ‘yes-anding’ is at the heart of improvisation.”).
248. Id. at 596–97.
249. Vera & Crossan, supra note 240, at 207.
250. See id. (“The rule of agreement creates a context in which improvisers are required to accept, support, and enhance the ideas expressed by other actors on stage without denying a player’s reality.”).
251. Id.
A famous instance of yes-andoning happened at 3M when a scientist said “yes” to an experimental adhesive that a colleague had set aside as too weak to be useful and then “and’ed” by using it to stick bits of paper to a book. Noticing that the scraps could later be removed without damaging the pages, the scientist’s snap move transformed the substance into the basis for a modern office marvel, the Post-It Note.

At Walmart and in fast food, UFCW and SEIU have made strikes the indispensable engine of their work, and they have done so in ways that instantiate yes-andoning. This has put improvisation at the campaigns’ centers, a point that requires a sense of how the strikes are usually carried out to become clear. Seattle is a good example. There, fast-food activists and their supporters met at a park and progressed with drums from restaurant to restaurant, urging employees to stop work and join them. Rebuffed by the only person working at Taco Del Mar, the group erupted at a nearby Subway when chants of “Walk out, we’ve got your back” prompted a sandwich-maker to flip off the lights and skip out the door. The basic pattern repeated in St. Louis, where activists plopped down in booths before suddenly standing en masse, “stomping and clapping, chanting slogans and walking out the door” after imploring cashiers to join them. In Chicago, “workers strode around the store encouraging coworkers to strike with them.” Things have gone a little differently at Walmart, which bars the media and OUR Walmart supporters from entering their stores prior to announced stoppages. In response, OUR Walmart has set up elaborate displays outside the stores to encourage arriving workers and others inside to abandon their shifts. On Black Friday 2012, they brought puppets and a “brass liberation band” to the edge of the company’s property.

The purpose of these walkout mechanics is to build a forced choice into strike days that, given the proximity of boisterous activists, generates a fraught intimacy that invites employees to yes-and: either the worker will say yes, stop what he or she is doing, and join the demonstration by “anding” in his or her own unique way, or the worker will not. In either case, the atmosphere created demands immediate response. This ultimatum for speedy action in a setting the

252. Id.
253. Id. at 208.
254. Id.
255. Id.
256. Id.
257. Clarridge & Lacitis, supra note 164.
258. Id.
259. Id.
260. Id.
261. Id.
worker has not before encountered, and therefore has not fully planned for, makes a decision to strike—the choice to yes-and—improvisational.262

Indeed, it is the absence of intricate preplanning that distinguishes the Walmart and fast-food actions from conventional strikes and grounds them in improvisation.263 For decades, labor has conducted strikes during contract negotiations, and planning for them has been elaborate.264 Workers are informed about things that lie ahead—assigned picket line shifts, negotiating postures going forward, strike pay—and unions can anticipate the number of likely participants.265 But at Walmart, McDonald’s, and elsewhere, UFCW and SEIU take spasms of collective energy, throw it into the stores, and see what sticks.

The answer, usually, is not much. Most workers reject the yes-and opportunity and say “no,”266 for good reasons: the boss is nearby, the threat of retaliation is real, and walking away in the middle of a shift is a strange and fear-inducing proposition.267 It is more natural, certainly, for workers to fall

262. Cunha et al., supra note 244, at 111 (“[I]mprovisation arises when both (1) a demand for (a) speed and (b) action and (2) an unexpected (and unplanned for) occurrence are perceived . . . “). 263. Lack of structure and predesign relative to an organization’s usual procedures are crucial hallmarks of improvisation. As a field study “underscored”: [O]ne must pay careful attention to the level and temporal pace of regular organizational planning and innovation as part of a reliable method to assess the occurrence of improvisation. . . . [A] standard step in assessing improvisation should be to assess explicitly the level of organizational design or planning involved. One heuristic is to consider what level of formal planning would be relevant to the activity at hand and then contrast the action to that level of formal design. Anne S. Miner et al., Organizational Improvisation and Learning: A Field Study, 46 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 304, 330–31 (2001).


266. At Walmart, “[l]abor historian Nelson Lichtenstein suggested that calling a walkout by some hundred workers out of a workforce of 1.4 million a strike was ‘a little bit of a devaluation of the word.” Eidelson, supra note 120. At fast-food restaurants, “[m]ost greeted [activists’ entreaties] warmly but demurred.” Kendzior, supra note 257.

267. Fear is a frequently cited reason for not striking. A New York City fast-food activist reported that prior to the first strike only three of his forty coworkers signed a petition in support of the campaign because “[t]hey don’t want to lose their job.” Eidelson, supra note 11; see also Kendzior, supra note 257 (quoting a fast-food activist statement that “a lot of people are scared because of pressure . . . If you do this, you get fired”). By August 2013 OUR Walmart had estimated that sixty strikers had been disciplined and twenty-four had been fired in the wake of the campaign. Jenny Brown, Retaliation Is Illegal, But Walmart Doesn’t Care, LAB. NOTES (Aug. 20, 2013), http://www.labornotes.org/2013/08/retaliation-illegal-walmart-doesnt%2E%28%29-care [https://perma.cc/6K2W-AQ9R].
back on antiunion scripts pressed upon them by management at the start of employment and reupped in the lead-up to strikes.\textsuperscript{268}

The task for the campaigns, then, is to get workers to reject the more comfortable and well-worn path, accept the yes-and-invitation, and improvise.\textsuperscript{269} The challenge is crystalized by two well-known incidents in organizational studies where firefighters perished trying to outrun forest fires after ignoring orders to drop heavy tools that would have, as a commission later concluded, “significantly increased the . . . chance of escape.”\textsuperscript{270} Improvisation scholars attribute the failure to values “overlearned” in training and practice, principally the maxim that firefighters must never separate from their equipment during fires.\textsuperscript{271} Even in the face of direct orders to the contrary, immediate stress caused the firefighters to “regress to what they knew best . . . keeping their tools.”\textsuperscript{272} Overcoming that embedded reflex required a willingness to improvise.\textsuperscript{273}

Fostering that willingness against a backdrop of tension and a more comfortable fallback involves, among other things, trust and good reasons.\textsuperscript{274} The firefighters did not know the people shouting the orders well, and no justification was given for dropping the tools.\textsuperscript{275} The campaigns, however, try to build confidence and an understanding that striking is meaningful by continually pointing to earlier actions that built power and even won small concessions. Strikers tout tales of workers who struck and returned to better

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\textsuperscript{269} Cunha et al., supra note 244, at 117–18 (describing the difficulty of fostering improvisation where “adequate routine[s]” exist and noting that “improvisation appears to only occur when an organization/individual does not have an adequate routine/procedural memory to respond to an unexpected situation”).
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\textsuperscript{270} Karl E. Weick, \textit{Drop Your Tools: An Allegory for Organizational Studies}, 41 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 301, 304–05 (1996).
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\textsuperscript{271} Id. at 306.
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\textsuperscript{272} Id. at 306–07.
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\textsuperscript{273} Karl E. Weick, \textit{The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster}, 38 ADMIN. SCI. Q. 628, 640 (1993) (“Swift replacement of a traditional order with an improvised order would forestall the paralysis that can follow a command to ‘drop your tools.’”).
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\textsuperscript{274} Id., supra note 270, at 305–06; see also Vera & Crossan, supra note 240, at 206, 221 (describing the importance of trust in “quality improvisation” and “improvisational dynamics”); Mary Crossan & Marc Sorrenti, \textit{Making Sense of Improvisation}, in \textit{Advances in Strategic Management} 155, 174 (James P. Walsh & Paul Shrivastava eds., 1997) (“Without an awareness of the need for improvisation, or an understanding of what it entails, there will be little motivation to engage it.”).
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\textsuperscript{275} Crossan & Sorrenti, supra note 274, at 164.
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hours or slight raises and those stories become campaign lore. Walmart’s downgrading by an equities research firm as a result of costs associated with “assuaging labor groups” and a McDonald’s Securities and Exchange Commission filing citing “labor strikes” as a factor that “can adversely affect us” also make the rounds. And workers speak openly of drawing “inspiration” from previous walkouts and gaining “faith” in the campaign as more and more workers jump on board. A Chicago retail employee who was at first hesitant to walk out “because of the risk of retaliation” is representative: “[W]hat we are fighting for, the reason for doing it, kind of overrode the fear of doing it.”

A perhaps surprising insight that emerges from this process is that improvisation can be a “conscious choice.” When the cast of Second City prepares to take the stage at 9:00 p.m. on a Thursday, they have made a “plan to improvise.” Likewise, many Walmart workers, who had weeks of media- and organizer-generated notice before the Black Friday events, might have decided to accept the invitation to “yes-and” and strike days in advance.

Similarly, improvisation is not “random behavior.” Strong improvisational skills can be developed and practiced to “help improvisers . . . focus on the process of creation without becoming overwhelmed by the pressure of extemporaneous performance,” a phenomenon one researcher has termed “[r]ehearsed [s]pontaneity.” An accomplished jazz artist works within a basic framework of embedded skills as well as within a certain scale


279. Eidelson, supra note 11.


281. Vera & Crossan, supra note 240, at 205.

282. Id. at 206; see also id. at 205 (“The decision to improvise may be made on the spot or may be an option considered in advance, as when firms have . . . norms enabling people to depart from routines at certain times. . . .”)

283. Id. at 205.

284. Id. at 206.

pattern to create harmonies on stage. The musician may then draw upon rehearsal experience to have a sense of when to, for instance, allude back to a certain theme, even as each note is nevertheless selected in the moment.

Stephen Curry, to take another example, practices jump shots incessantly, but when, where, and how he shoots in a game is determined by split-second decision making tied to how plays develop live.

The campaigns, likewise, try to meet with workers in advance to discuss when a strike could happen, to provide practical tips to maximize legal protection during the strike, and to warn about the ways management might respond. If a worker eventually accepts the improv challenge and says “yes” to stopping work, real-time data replaces that conditional information to shape the “and”—only instead of a club or a court, the setting is the workplace, and instead of musicians, athletes, and fans, the extras are coworkers, supervisors, and customers. Daniel Fischlin and his colleagues nicely identify the broad interests at play:

What is at stake, both in the moment of improvisation and in the moment when a rights outcome is to be decided through one’s own agency, is fundamentally provisional, uncertain, and contingent. The substance of what one decides in that moment becomes the material content of the improvisation, the enactment of agency that has social-justice implications.

a. **Improvisation’s Promise**

But if few people actually stop work, why even bother? Because with improvisation, there is reason to believe that the activity can spread.

Separate from any negotiating leverage gained by withholding labor, strikes have long been thought to carry symbolic power that draws people in.
Uniforms worn and songs sung during demonstrations highlight work’s humanity. Adding improvisation to the mix may magnify and scatter this effect. For one, those involved in the campaign’s strikes believe this to be true, expressing desires to “set an example for the rest of the people in fast food” and believing that “if I stand up . . . a change can happen.” Commentators have also identified a “contagious” quality to the campaigns.

Some of this goes to the nature of improvisational acts, which stoke strong emotions. Jazz’s power to “open[] channels of . . . aesthetic communication and experience” between musicians relates this well, as does the “incredible rush of energy, coherence and clarity” and even “transcendence” many describe while improvising. Fast food and Walmart activists in fact use powerfully emotive language to recount their interactions with other strikers. “It took my breath away,” explained an Oakland, California, KFC employee. Walmart striker Dominic Ware portrayed walking out in terms that evoke euphoria: “It’s amazing, it’s really amazing . . . [I]t just touched me in so many ways that I really haven’t taken it all in . . . It’s just beautiful, man. We’re winning. No matter what Walmart says, we’re winning.”

Scholars attribute such reactions to improvisation’s power to help people “critical[ly] engage[]” and, for a limited period, break free from “social and historical positions” of constraint. Steven Nachmanovitch has described it as a way to bridge “the gap between what we feel and what we can express,” allowing us to “give up being safely wrapped in our own stor[ies].” For Walmart and fast-food workers, strike improvisation thus seemingly comes down to agency—the chance to work a job and have a boss, but also to bend the narrative from time to time and articulate dignity. This duality is exemplified by Patrick, a 24-year-old Chipotle employee who is “charming behind the register,” “quick on the floor,” and maintains a “cautious and

293. Id.
294. Id.
295. Eidelson, supra note 160.
296. Eidelson, supra note 280.
298. Mary Jo Hatch, Jazz as a Metaphor for Organizing, 9 ORG. SCI. 565, 568 (1998).
299. NACHMANOVITCH, supra note 287, at 18; Cunha et al., supra note 244, at 127.
300. Abramsky, supra note 179.
302. GOLDMAN, supra note 246, at 5.
303. NACHMANOVITCH, supra note 287, at 21, 67.
conscientious” demeanor as he rings up orders. In May 2013 Patrick jumped the counter, crashed an assembly shouting, “We can’t survive on $7.35,” grabbed a microphone, and spoke—for the first time ever before a crowd—about the stress of not having enough money to pay his bills. And the next day he went back to work.

The upshot of it all, research suggests, is that improvisational acts like Patrick’s motivate more improvisational acts. This is true in the sense that workers who have struck once are driven to do so again. It can also be seen in the steady expansion of Walmart and restaurant strikes and especially the interplay between them: the April 2013 fast-food strikers reported being inspired by their November 2012 counterparts, who had cited the example set by the first wave of Walmart strikers, and those strikers, in turn, gave credit to their warehouse compatriots who had walked out a few weeks earlier.

Concrete examples include Burger King worker Tabitha Verges, who described being “kind of upset” to have only watched workers at other franchises walk out during the first New York City strike in 2012. When she “heard there was another one,” she was “all for it.” In Detroit, similarly, eight McDonald’s employees who told organizers they would not strike reversed course suddenly “after watching four of their [coworkers] walk off the job.”

The campaigns, however, are careful not to limit their invitations for improvisation solely to the relatively small number of workers they are able to connect with in person. UFCW and SEIU also court improvisational acts by people who may have never been in touch with a paid organizer. This reliance on autonomous mobilization is a second key plank of the Walmart and fast-food campaigns, and it too is rooted in improvisation.

2. Autonomous Mobilization

Although a good deal of organizational science’s research into improvisation concerns intentional action, improvisation can arise naturally in

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304. Kendzior, supra note 257.
305. Id.
306. Cunha et al., supra note 244, at 127 (“Improvisation in organizations also results in increasing motivation (1) to work and (2) to improvise.”).
307. Whole Foods employee Trish Kahle described this scene after an April strike:
Campaign organizers in Chicago asked if any workers wanted to get on a bus and drive five hours to St. Louis or Milwaukee to support workers striking the next week. Hands shot up. A few people lamented that they were scheduled to work that day. In the front of the room, a middle-aged African-American McDonald’s worker stood up. “Let’s go on strike again,” he said. “Then we all can go.” Kahle, supra note 157; see also Utrecht, supra note 301 (“Now a bit more comfortable with the tactic, those workers will likely be more willing to engage in strikes with all of their coworkers . . . .”).
308. Eidelson, supra note 155.
310. Eidelson, supra note 163.
all sorts of unstructured settings. That is, improvisation can be “a product of
adaptation rather than of design.” Something as pedestrian as small talk,
after all, can be thought of as a series of statements that adapt to and build upon
earlier statements in an unplanned way. Improvisation also works in
mediation, trial lawyering, and schools, where lawyers and teachers readjust
and acclimate to situations on the fly.

UFCW and SEIU try to take advantage of improvisation’s potentially
organic nature by developing avenues for workers and the public to come in
contact with the campaigns’ issues and face time-sensitive chances to yes-and
on their own. A prime example is the Internet-based strike kit, which provides
workers with the motivation and means to stage sudden walkouts even if a
campaign staffer is nowhere to be found. The fast-food version comes with a
hotline to speak with workers who have previously struck, along with a sample
letter to management explaining that “[w]e are sick of making poverty wages
and living on food stamps, in shelters, [and] on family’s couches.”

Among the kit’s fifteen steps include advice to “[m]ake signs that say why you are on
strike,” to “[s]tart your strike” by gathering “outside your store with your
supporters,” to “[c]all the local TV station,” and then to “[g]o back to work at
your next regularly scheduled shift with your head held high.” The final step
gestures toward future actions and future strikers: “Tell your coworkers how it
felt to stand up for $15 an hour and the right to form a union.”

The kit played a starring role in the 2012 Black Friday actions, where a
sizeable portion of participants involved in the fifteen hundred protests
responded to OUR Walmart’s purely virtual invitations to strike, guided by the
kit instead of a roving band of in-person activists. More frequently, the kits
offer workers the power to improvise strikes in response to independent
triggering events like workplace insults, which individuals might otherwise
accept at face value. In Chicago, workers notified the union only after they had
walked off the job and “padlock[ed]” the door to protest an overheated kitchen.

Christopher Owen, a Walmart employee in Oklahoma, who had

311. Edwin Hutchins, Organizing Work by Adaptation, 2 ORG. SCI. 14, 14 (1991); see also
Baker et al., supra note 239, at 255 (categorizing “extemporaneous” adaptation as “improvisation”).
313. Id. at 343–84; see also Steven Lubet & Thomas Hankinson, In Facetiis Veritatis: How
Improvisational Comedy Can Help Trial Lawyers Get Some Chops, 7 TEX. REV. ENT. & SPORTS L. 1, 8–13 (2006); David M. Irby,
315. For Workers, FIGHT FOR $15, http://fightfor15.org/for-workers [https://perma.cc/3Q2N-
316. Id.
never even met an OUR Walmart organizer or member, googled the group after becoming upset by an antiunion staff meeting’s tone. Owen skimmed the strike-in-a-box, phoned his manager, and announced that he was going on strike and setting up a personal picket during his next shift.

Autonomous mobilization is not limited to workers. The public, too, is encouraged to improvise when the campaigns intentionally thrust them into situations necessitating adaptation to an unexpected scene. Most basically, the Walmart and fast-food strikes are conspicuous, celebratory events accompanied by marches that spur random bystanders to take notice, honk in support, or even join in the fun, swelling crowds as workers, musicians, allies, and politicians speak out on makeshift stages.

More to the point, an underreported aspect of the fast-food strikes is the use of “walk-backs,” where community members—usually led by local clergy or politicians—escort workers back to the job after a walkout concludes. Once in the restaurant the activists warn the employer not to retaliate against the striker. This has two effects. One, it forces community supporters to personally confront and adjust to management in the moment. When a Brooklyn Wendy’s fired a striker during a walk-back, the councilman leading the group, who was “shocked” by the turn of events, improvised by leading supporters in a circular march around the restaurant until police arrived, at which point the strikers “began a vigorous picket on the sidewalk.”

In St. Louis, Arby’s strikers, who returned to find their hours cut, got backup from two rabbis who demanded a meeting with the ownership and threatened to flood the store with two thousand congregants unless the schedules were

319. Eidelson, supra note 8.
320. Id. Owen ultimately “decided against” the picket after learning that thirty-nine police officers had been hired to patrol the property. Id. Fight for $15’s April 15, 2015 action saw almost fifty security guards and drivers otherwise unconnected to the campaign “suddenly... walk off the job.” Arielle Zionts & Micah Uetricht, During Yesterday’s Fight for 15 Protests, Nearly 30 Chicago Armed Guards Decided to Go on Strike, THESE TIMES (Apr. 16, 2015, 1:22 PM), http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/17852/brinks_strikeFight_for_15 [https://perma.cc/SC42-8RXV].
321. Claridge & Lacitis, supra note 164 (noting “honking and waving from passers-by”); see also Greenhouse, supra note 10 (describing strikes “culminating] in a rally with hundreds of fast-food workers” near Times Square); Eidelson, supra note 160 (describing strikers, supporters, and politicians gathering in park and marching to a rally in front of a Harlem McDonald’s); FISCHLIN ET AL., supra note 30, at 154 (describing improvisational aspects of audience participation in parades and rallies).
322. Finnegan, supra note 153; Zionts & Uetricht, supra note 320 (“At 5:00 a.m. this morning, a group of about 20 Fight for 15 staffers and community supporters accompanied a group of around two dozen workers back to work, a tactic which the movement has used after every strike.”); Low Pay Is Not OK (@LowPayIsNotOK), TWITTER (Sept. 7, 2014, 9:18 PM), https://twitter.com/lowpaysnotok/status/508831662546120704 [https://perma.cc/8AZV-KELG] (“Every [fast] [food] worker who goes on strike is walked back for their first shift by 100’s of volunteers across the country.”). The strike kit, moreover, urges workers to “[a]sk supporters to come with you when you and your coworkers return to work.” For Workers, supra note 315.
restored. Two, because the walk-backs occur when the restaurants are open for business, the technique pushes unsuspecting customers into the fray. At the Brooklyn Wendy’s, for instance, the walk-back group urged the patrons to “leave in support of the worker that was fired.” Everyone did.

Thus, by stirring dispersed workers to strike on their own and by pushing the public to adapt to workplace dramas that they otherwise would not encounter, the campaigns utilize improvisation to outsource activism to participants who organizers may not know and certainly cannot control. This method itself signals an internal shift in union culture, which is the third major improvisational characteristic of the campaigns. The revised culture has three components: procedural openness, embrace of process over settled ends, and experimentalism.

3. Improvisational Internal Culture

A major focus of improvisation scholarship concerns the types of organizational cultures that incubate it. Detailed protocols and complex blueprints, apparently, do not. This would come as no surprise to jazz musicians, who compulsively guard against predictability. Miles Davis, to cite one case, was known to surprise his band by starting a song in an unrehearsed key to conjure up the right “disrupt[ive]” spirit.

Standardized procedures, however, have long been a part of the union-organizing playbook, no matter the campaign. This includes intensive organizer training, manuals to help cultivate worker-activists, and an arsenal of long-practiced tactics like surveys, committees, and numeric grids to track employee sentiment.

The Walmart and fast-food campaigns have traded this emphasis on procedure, structure, and control for a fealty to improvisation that, as research counsels, requires flexibility and adaptability. Instead of guidebooks, ratings, and surveys, they have shouts, sign-ins, and a website. Instead of trying to

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325. Eidelson, supra note 323.
327. Frank J. Barrett, Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning, 9 ORG. SCI. 605, 609 (1998).
329. Barrett, supra note 327, at 611–12.
regulate the activist environment, the campaigns just act and then wait to see who streams out the door.\footnote{330} The procedural shift relates partly to a novel emphasis on process, not outcomes, another style thought to be improv-enriching and, in a business context, to promote innovation.\footnote{331} Xerox PARC, the small, storied 1970s research arm of Xerox, famously had no “directives, instructions, or deadlines” and achieved legendary status as the breeding ground for an astonishing number of modern technologies.\footnote{332} Its purpose, simply, was an indefinite quest to push Xerox somewhere completely new.\footnote{333} Today, companies like Google boast policies that let techies spend portions of their time on no-strings-attached “passion project[s].”\footnote{334} The now ubiquitous Gmail messaging system, in fact, was once a half-baked idea that came to fruition through officially unstructured programming.\footnote{335}

UFCW and SEIU too have prioritized process over ends, proceeding at Walmart and in fast food with undefined and aspirational goals, respectively. Freed from the strictures of a timeline, their airy objectives feel not so far removed from Xerox PARC’s. But instead of sending a “bunch of smart people” into a room to think, the unions make way for activism to spin out into the wild just to see what happens.\footnote{336} As one worker put it, the lack of top-down mission enforcement opens space for “possibilities far beyond what organizers” ever “imagined.”\footnote{337}

To be sure, when viewed from afar, the full panoply of tactics used at Walmart and in fast food give the overall efforts an experimentalist feel.\footnote{338} For

\footnote{330. Cf. Crossan, supra note 241, at 595 (“A principle of improvisation is that the environment will teach you if you let it, rather than trying to control it.”).}

\footnote{331. Vera & Crossan, supra note 240, at 205 (defining improv by its focus “on the creative process and not on the creative outcome”); see also Goldman, supra note 246, at 5 (discussing improvisation as a “practice that values . . . the vicissitudes of process rather than the fixed glory of a finished product”).}

\footnote{332. Michael Hiltzik, Dealers of Lightning xxvi (1999). The Internet, web browser, ATM, modern cartoon, mouse, and laser printer are all linked to Xerox PARC’s lab. Id. at xxiv-xxv; see also id. at xxviii (calling Xerox PARC “one of the most productive and inventive research centers ever known”).}

\footnote{333. Id. at xxvi.}

\footnote{334. Ryan Tate, Google Couldn’t Kill 20 Percent Time Even if It Wanted to, Wired (Aug. 21, 2013, 6:30 AM), https://www.wired.com/2013/08/20-percent-time-will-never-die [https://perma.cc/VN9M-SGGQ].}

\footnote{335. Id.}

\footnote{336. See Malcolm Gladwell, Creation Myth, New Yorker (May 16, 2011), http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/16/creation-myth [https://perma.cc/U5GZ-3T3U] (quoting a Microsoft executive who tried to follow Xerox PARC’s example: “When you have a bunch of smart people with a broad enough charter, you will always get something good out of it”).}

\footnote{337. Kahle, supra note 157.}

all the commotion whipped up by strikes, any one of the other campaign gambits could end up being the lever that leads to substantial workplace gains or power. A nationwide agreement easing the path to unionization or raising wages at Pizza Hut or McDonald’s franchises might come not from more domestic walkouts but from global pressure brought to bear on Yum Brands! or McDonald’s Corporation by international groups and unions. Black Friday rallies could continue to generate press, but grievous kinks in Walmart’s supply chain sparked by warehouse allies could be the crisis that forces the company to finally crack. And the path to $15 an hour in fast food might be a critical mass of lawsuits or city council actions, not walk-backs.

This sort of experimentalism—what might even be called a “kitchen sink” approach—reflects the very heart of improvisational culture.\(^{339}\) Although some have criticized what’s essentially organizational “ad-libbing,”\(^ {340}\) improvisation theorists have found value in “explorat[ory] attempts” that fail and, frankly, may not have had much chance in the first place.\(^ {341}\) That is not just because of the obvious point that important lessons can be bound up in mistakes, but when organizations teach members that it is okay to take risks, and that gutsy but failing efforts will not be punished, people are emboldened instead of immobilized—and improvisation thrives.\(^ {342}\) Nurturing what has been called an “aesthetic of imperfection” amid an “aesthetic of forgiveness” may be an institution’s best chance to hit upon the winning formula.\(^ {343}\)

IV.

**IMPROVISATIONAL UNIONISM AS A LABOR LAW STRATEGY**

So far, the story of improvisational unionism has focused on improvisation as a social practice, an interpersonal tool that can form, rearrange, and even mobilize relationships in service to some, possibly unknown, type of change.\(^ {344}\) But another tale needs telling. The improvisational turn has a legal story as well.

Labor law professors have long looked at labor doctrine with somewhat of a sideways glare. Much of modern scholarship can be categorized as laments animated by the ways the law cabins conduct, polices possibilities, and defines defaults.\(^ {345}\) In the classroom, students quickly realize that the law is crucially

\(^{339}\) Vera & Crossan, supra note 240, at 208.


\(^{341}\) Barrett, supra note 327, at 610–11, 619.

\(^{342}\) Id.

\(^{343}\) Id. at 619.

\(^{344}\) See FISCHLIN ET AL., supra note 30, at xxiii (discussing improvisation as a “social practice” and “model for social change”).

important to labor-management relations, but mostly in ways that depress people who care about unions.

Labor law is important to improvisational unionism, too. But the question of why improvisation has been given a shot at center stage goes less to the conventional complaints about the law’s harsh impact and more to how the law evolved from a regime of possibility to a regime of constraint. In short, and as explained below, improvisation may be a way out from under these legal developments.

A. The Burden of Legal Evolution, the Weight of Institutional Maturity

Though it is difficult to imagine today, long before labor confronted the current crisis of a progressively dwindling membership, it faced the opposite problem: harnessing the explosive spirits of a workforce clamoring for a voice on the job. In 1934 alone, one-and-a-half million workers struck using tactics that historians have variously described as “unpredictable,”346 “creat[ive],”347 and “uncommonly militant.”348 Though this era remains a magical reference point, a time when shop and street activism “swept up workers in every geographical area and in every trade and industry” and transformed so many into members that some unions simply ran out of “dues books,” it was also marked by nothing short of open warfare, including destruction, injuries, and deaths.349 For these reasons, the period also served as a catalyst for legislative change, which came in the form of the NLRA, then known as the Wagner Act.350 The new statute brought order to the system by federalizing a right to collectively bargain and setting up administrative procedures to get there, and, in most accounts, the key union-side parties felt basically sunny about the new regime’s potential.351

But clouds rolled in. In remarkably short time, Supreme Court decisions began to define the scope of “legitimate’ labor activity” while tamping formerly unregulated shop floor fights into tidy “domesticated channels.”352

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349. Id. at 27, 31, 33–35.
350. Id.
351. In Klare’s telling, the left applauded the law’s “radical potential,” something reflected in the reactions of a terrified business class; union officials thought the law “embodied the[ir] highest aspirations,” though those were modest, extending not much further than the right to prosper inside capitalism’s existing shell. Karl E. Klare, Judicial Deradicalization of the Wagner Act and the Origins of Modern Legal Consciousness, 1937–1941, 62 MINN. L. REV. 265, 287–90 (1978). And although workers, many of whom had recently risked life and limb fighting for economic revolution, saw the law as at best a half-measure, “it nevertheless symbolized a significant opening” in the right direction. Id. Klare’s account of this period is not without its critics, however. See, e.g., Matthew W. Finkin, Revisionism in Labor Law, 43 MD. L. REV. 23 (1984); Matthew W. Finkin, Does Karl Klare Protest Too Much?, 44 MD. L. REV. 1100 (1985).
352. Klare, supra note 351, at 267–69; see also id. at 319 (listing the primary decisions).
For example, five million private-sector workers organized in the forty-eight months preceding 1937—an astonishing 68 percent of the total membership today—by sitting down and refusing to work. By 1939 the Supreme Court said they could be fired for doing just that. Soon, other decisions clarified that they could also be fired for doing some, but not all, of their tasks or for working more slowly. The option that remained, striking and leaving, remained protected only in the narrowest sense: a willing worker could replace the striker, in the run-of-the-mill case “permanently.”

The judiciary also had a swift impact on unions, reconceptualizing them as institutional “fiduciaries” with responsibilities not only to their own members but to society at-large as keepers of the public trust. This came with, on the one hand, an understanding that unions were generally to engage in “responsible” civic conduct, and it also ushered in an “unstated proviso that unions wishing the protection of the Board had to keep their members in line.”

In a numbers sense, labor’s new fiduciary cloak and the loss of its most confrontational tools didn’t seem to hurt. By the 1950s one out of every three private sector workers was a union member, a density so robust that union contracts often set pay and benefit standards across entire communities. The membership rate, combined with the post-war ideological embrace of “industrial pluralism,” which led to “widespread use” of arbitration clauses in bargaining contracts and required lots of resources to run the system, led to the

353. Nelson Lichtenstein, State of the Union 50–52 (2002). There are 7.4 million private sector union members, 6.6 percent of the private sector workforce. Union Members Summary, BUREAU LAB. STATS. (Jan. 28, 2016, 10:00 AM), http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm [https://perma.cc/4V3U-MVBS]. It is difficult to overstate the power, prevalence, and organizing effectiveness of sit-down strikes during this period. For a sense of this history, see Brecher, supra note 347, at 206–16.


355. Valley City Furniture Co., 110 N.L.R.B. 1589, 1594–95 (1954) (holding that a “partial strike”—here refusing to work overtime—is unprotected conduct); In re Elk Lumber Co., 91 N.L.R.B. 333, 336–37 (1950) (holding that working more slowly than usual is unprotected conduct).

356. The right to permanently replace turns on strikers’ motives. Employers are allowed to keep replacement workers after a strike has ended if the stoppage is based on purely economic motives. Nat’l Labor Relations Bd. v. Mackay Radio & Tel. Co., 304 U.S. 333, 345–46 (1938). Employers must return strikers to their previous positions if the stoppage is motivated (even in part) by employer illegali ties. R & H Coal Co., 309 N.L.R.B. 28, 28–29 (1992).

357. Klare, supra note 351, at 319–20; see also Christopher L. Tomlins, The State and the Unions 160 (1985) (“[T]he Board was prepared to use [its] authority to force unions to conform to new theories of organizational and representational legitimacy. . .”).

358. Id.

only era where the term “Big Labor” actually made some descriptive sense.\textsuperscript{360} In the 1980s that equated to 175,000 unique agreements administered by seventy thousand separate unions covering around twenty million workers—a labor relations landscape that historian Nelson Lichtenstein labeled “positively baroque.”\textsuperscript{361}

Many unions smartly consolidated in the 2000s (thoughtful coordination allowed for one new “local” that spanned six states and another that absorbed 240,000 members), but that did not change the basic need for many people to handle a massive number of contracts, grievances, and resources.\textsuperscript{362} Though today density sits at less than 7 percent, unions annually receive $18 billion in dues, oversee somewhere in the neighborhood of $3 trillion in pension funds, and have access to $3 billion in saleable assets.\textsuperscript{363}

1. The “Sweet Spot of Weakness”

The upshot is that by 2012 leaders interested in turning labor’s fortunes faced a fundamental dilemma. Unions today are member poor but, in an absolute sense, asset rich, a condition journalist Richard Yeselson has impeccably described as the “sweet spot of weakness.”\textsuperscript{364} What he means is that labor has too few members to go blow-for-blow with capital, but so much infrastructure that—given bad law—it would be too dangerous to seriously try.\textsuperscript{365}

He’s right. Unions may be historically small, but there is still a lot to lose. In a vacuum, maybe some ultrapowerful, hyperaggressive organizing strategy exists to fix the membership problem. But the disintegration of lawful militancy post-1935 means that whatever it is probably cannot be done responsibly. As the current and former general counsels of the AFL-CIO have written, union lawyers who end up in court essentially have to divert judges from the law’s modern developments to make the union’s case, “a bit like anthropologists, if not paleontologists, having to dig through the layers of

\begin{itemize}
    \item \textsuperscript{360} See Katherine Van Wezel Stone, \textit{The Post-War Paradigm in American Labor Law}, 90 YALE L.J. 1509, 1524-25 (1981). Labor scholars, prominently Archibald Cox, were central figures in making industrial pluralism a dominant workplace ideology and in advocating for arbitration as an alternative to judicial enforcement of contract provisions. \textit{See also} Rosenfeld, \textit{supra} note 359, at 3 (“[W]hat’s strange is the continued use of ‘Big Labor’ as a shorthand moniker for trade unions in the contemporary United States.”). \textit{See generally} Archibald Cox, \textit{Reflections upon Labor Arbitration}, 72 HARV. L. REV. 1482 (1959).
    \item \textsuperscript{361} Lichtenstein, \textit{supra} note 353, at 142; \textit{see also} Goldfield, \textit{supra} note 34, at 11.
    \item \textsuperscript{362} Moody, \textit{supra} note 35, at 189–90.
    \item \textsuperscript{364} Josh Eidelson & Sarah Jaffe, \textit{Belabored Podcast #12: Hold the Fort?}, DISSERT MAG. (July 1, 2013), http://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/belabored-podcast-12-hold-the-fort [http://perma.cc/KXZ6-3ZCJ]
    \item \textsuperscript{365} Id. at 20:23.
\end{itemize}
sediment and other deposits to reach the original purposes of the Act.\textsuperscript{366} The most potent fixes were boxed in years ago through judicial narrowing of “legitimate” conduct and unwrapping them today on a scale appropriate to the downturn would put what unions took eighty years to build up—dues, buildings, contracts, jobs, allies, families—at outrageous legal risk.\textsuperscript{367}

To take an obvious example, replicating the actions that brought the auto industry to its negotiating kn\textsuperscript{368}eels by coordinating multiday, even multiweek, seizures of service space at Walmart and McDonald’s is a tantalizing thought.\textsuperscript{369} But under modern doctrine, that strategy would lead, at minimum, to injunctions, firings without remedy, and fines so massive that UFCW’s and SEIU’s operating viability could be endangered.

Simply put, where today’s inspired fights for workplace dignity veer into extralegal conduct—and, because the foes are so strong, the causes so critical, and the law so constrained, they sometimes do—the cost of courage is severe. A 1989 United Mine Workers strike, which involved sit-down protests and other stirring but forbidden acts under contemporary doctrine, led to court injunctions barring even basic militancy like “obstructing ingress and egress to company facilities . . . and picketing with more than a specified number of people at designated sites.”\textsuperscript{369} Undaunted, the union’s continued solidarity resulted in thousands of arrests and over $64 million in fines.\textsuperscript{370} Even modern “comprehensive campaigns,” where UFCW, SEIU, and other unions have brilliantly partnered with community allies to convince companies to respect workers’ rights, have increasingly faced fire under new and seemingly

\begin{footnotes}
\item[366] Jonathan P. Hiatt & Craig Becker, At Age 70, Should the Wagner Act be Retired? A Response to Professor Dannin, 26 BERKELEY J. EMP. & LAB. L. 293, 294–95 (2005); see also Craig Becker & Judith Scott, Isolating America’s Workers, NATION (Sept. 13, 2012), http://www.thenation.com/article/isolating-americas-workers [https://perma.cc/9P8X-H4RF] (“[The NLRA’s] legal foundations have been eroded by Court rulings over the past forty years . . . .”).
\item[367] See JOE BURNS, REVIVING THE STRIKE 179 (2011) (describing the practical realities of this legal risk).
\item[368] ZIEGER, supra note 348, at 46–51.
\item[370] Id.; see also RICHARD A. BRISBIN JR., A STRIKE LIKE NO OTHER STRIKE 2–3 (2002) (noting that though the Supreme Court later vacated the levies, it was for purely procedural reasons, and the union was still forced to settle dozens of strike-related lawsuits); Bagwell, 512 U.S. at 838–39. The Communications Workers of America’s (CWA) 1996 attempt to organize Los Angeles-Long Beach Port truckers is also instructive. See RUTH MILKMAN, L.A. STORY 177–84 (2006). There, the campaign’s most successful tactic—courageous picketing by hundreds of angry truck drivers that wiped out 80 percent of the port’s operations—led to a temporary restraining order that capped the number of allowable protestors at an impotent ten. Id. at 182; Bill Mongelluzzo, Probe of Leasing Firm Sought, JOC.COM (May 9, 1996, 8:00 PM), http://www.joc.com/probe-leasing-firm-sought_19960509.html [https://perma.cc/8Z3G-QW98]. Faced with the choice of arrests and enormous fines that risked institutional annihilation or giving the tactic up, the union gave it up. See id. Port traffic resumed, and the CWA’s campaign fizzled. Id.; MILKMAN, supra at 183.
\end{footnotes}
outlandish legal theories that gain judicial credence on the fly while draining union resources severely in the process.\footnote{371}{See Oswalt, supra note 42, at 831 nn.182–84, 833 (describing the two most common challenges and stating that, “[e]ven if unsuccessful, these lawsuits are incredibly costly and for that reason alone can halt organizing in its tracks”); Garden, supra note 214.}

The law, which once facilitated institutional stability, now endangers the long-term viability of the project by commanding a choice between tactics that are, over the long haul, inadequate to the enormous task of challenging corporate power—or rolling the dice in court. Put another way, if unions really wanted to throw off the gloves and go for the chin, the referee would jump in, and they would have to defend their right to fight at all before the boxing commission.

Though unions had long chafed under this legal straightjacket, in 2012 it seemed to provoke an especially acute membership anxiety. It also prompted a critical reflection: Is there a way for labor to finally get out from under the accumulated weight of law boxes and spark significant movement change without threatening the whole edifice? For at least UFCW and SEIU, the answer was improvisation, doing double-duty not simply as the social practice described in Part III, but as a legal strategy.

\textbf{B. Yes-Anding the Law}

Improvisation as a law strategy rested on the core insight that the style could be hitched to something eye-popping, assertive, and, most indispensably, legal all at once: a full and complete cessation of work to protest an employment condition.\footnote{372}{See infra note 387.} Here, at last, was a narrow yet flashy through-line between and around the common law pileup of workplace “don’ts” that had incubated the “sweet spot of weakness” in the first place.\footnote{373}{While a one-day strike may not seem all that innovative, consider that labor and scholars alike had long viewed the Supreme Court’s meddling with the law of stoppages as having “rendered the strike useless and virtually suicidal.” Estlund, supra note 42, at 1538. James Gray Pope’s statement that by 2004 the strike right had become so depleted that “it now serves as a source of employer bargaining power” nicely encapsulates pre-2012 thought. See James Gray Pope, How American Workers Lost the Right to Strike, and Other Tales, 103 Mich. L. Rev. 518, 528 (2004).}

Indeed, improvisation theorists have a name for things that conventional wisdom says are not to be done. They call it “disciplinary knowledge,” and improvisation eats disciplinary knowledge for lunch.\footnote{374}{See Fischlin et al., supra note 30, at xxii (“[D]isciplinary knowledge teach[es] us that there is a time and a place for everything—that people need to be on time and to stay in their place.”).} Among workers the unions could identify and meet, one-day strikes could be floated and cheered. Among those the unions could not, the possibility of striking autonomously could be dangled. And the beauty was that so long as everyone basically put one foot in front of the other, the employment risk to workers, and the overall risk to the institutions, would be manageable.
An added attraction of the approach was its potential to maximize worker agency, creativity, and courage in ways that felt genuinely new in the modern organizing era. Improvisational strikes mean that workers retain essential authorship over the actions, reimagining ties between unions as institutions and workers as activists. Courageous employees alone would have the power to yes-and on strike day, or any other day, whether a union staffer was around or not. How they pulled it off—skipping, shouting, singing, or seriousness all do the trick—was a design of their own making. Cooks and clerks could strike for $15 and a union, $13 and a pension, more hours, less burns, or really just because. As Daniel Fischlin has written with eloquence, “In a world filled with paths we can or must take, improvisation compels us to think about the paths we can make.” For fast-food and retail strikers, those paths are intensely personal, even intimate.

Perhaps most critically, improvisation would allow for employee engagement to keep expanding in ways that could avoid many of the labor law shadows that underlie antiunion injunctions, fines, and damages. Unions detail legal strike techniques in the strike kits and, where possible, explain the law in person to workers and walk-back participants. But fundamentally, unions’ hands are off the wheels because in many cases the activism has been inspired, not organized, so there is no wheel. With improvisational unionism workers strike, react, and push back, here, there, everywhere, nowhere, and places in between. No one—not supporters, not officials, and not employers—knows where invitations to act will be accepted, who or how many will show up if they do, what the improvisers will say, or how they will be received. This type of handed-off, strewn-about activity maximizes militancy while minimizing the risk that a court will step in and say to the union “no more” or “here’s the bill.”

In sum, improvisational unionism offers labor access to the effervescent, frenzied mobilizations of the pre–Wagner era while simultaneously managing the legal and institutional concerns inherent in workplace activism because of how the law developed in the interim. Put otherwise, improvisation acts as a generative tool for the chaos unionists have pined for ever since the Supreme Court got its pens on the Wagner Act, but it doubles as a legal strategy because the commotion is cabined by one-day, full-on stoppages so that injunctions, fines, and other dangers do not pop up to crush the spirit and imperil the union. At its best, improvisational unionism really does tear up the script.

375. Such conduct harkens back to the “informal gaiety and creativity” that infused sit-down strikes in the 1930s. BRECHER, supra note 347, at 197, 216. Singing, dancing, whistling, and music-making were all part of building cooperation and community during those stoppages. Id.
376. FISCHLIN ET AL., supra note 30, at xii.
377. See Eidelson & Jaffe, supra note 364, at 38:25 (discussing similar possibilities for “go[ing] beyond the sweet spot of weakness”).
C. Diminished but Not Defeated: The Enduring Shadows of Legal Boxes

Of course, cabined or not, chaos means things can get messy. As a legal strategy, improvisation has to thread a narrow doctrinal needle, and from time to time someone is bound to miss the eye. A lone worker might strike for a purely idiosyncratic reason, failing to fulfill the Wagner Act’s concerted-protest requirement. Or a single worker might meet the concertedness requirement by trying to induce others to action, but do so with such disruptiveness that protection is lost in any event. Autonomous mobilization means picketing, which has come to encompass merely “confrontation in some form,” can arise in legally undesirable settings, since who and how many show up cannot really be controlled.

Improvised messaging may raise the thorniest issues. UFCW had very limited power to shape how Christopher Owen, the Oklahoma Walmart associate who struck after reading about OUR Walmart online, described the goals of his one-man operation to an interested reporter. Nor could SEIU have effectively policed the impromptu in-store rally and sidewalk picket that coalesced after a New York City Wendy’s refused to let a striker go back to work. What was said (and how it was said) was up to the councilmember interacting with the Wendy’s manager, the community supporters who comprised the walk-back team, and the customers in the store who were urged to leave. Defamation is a concern in these scenarios, but the NLRA’s anachronistic policing of protest objectives under section 8(b)(7)(C) is even more worrisome. Indeed, for parts of 2013 the Board stopped OUR Walmart

378. Mushroom Transp. Co. v. Nat'l Labor Relations Bd., 330 F.2d 683, 685 (3d Cir. 1964) (stating that concerted speech requires “at the very least that it was engaged in with the object of initiating or inducing or preparing for group action or that it had some relation to group action in the interest of the employees”).
379. See, e.g., Timekeeping Sys., Inc., 323 N.L.R.B. 244, 248–49 (1997) (describing “the sort of behavior which withdraws the protection of the Act from concerted activity”).
380. Chi. Typographical Union No. 16, 151 N.L.R.B. 1666, 1669 (1965). Traditional campaigns can avoid picketing’s capacious definition requirements by ensuring there is adequate physical space for rallies and setting ground rules with activists beforehand. But improvisational protests are held on sidewalks outside of store entrances no matter the number of participants and available square footage. Press photos from fast-food strike days, for example, show rows of workers and supporters stuffed between the street and store entrances, and on the inaugural Black Friday protest fifteen hundred activists merged at a single Paramount, California Walmart. See, e.g., Hsu & Semuels, supra note 165; Eidelson, supra note 160; Eidelson, supra note 8. For an analysis of some picketing’s risks in the alt-labor context, see Michael C. Duff, Alt-Labor, Secondary Boycotts, and Toward a Labor Organization Bargain, 63 CATH. U. L. REV. 837 (2014).
381. See Eidelson, supra note 8.
382. See supra note 323.
383. Id.
activism in its tracks simply by alleging, without analysis, that the group’s avowed interest in fixing workplace injustices was just a smokescreen for its true (and, under the circumstances, illegal) purpose of unionizing Walmart.\footnote{See Steven Greenhouse, Labor Union to Ease Walmart Picketing, N.Y. TIMES (Jan. 31, 2013), http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/01/business/labor-union-agrees-to-stop-picketing-walmart.html [https://perma.cc/W7R7-LU7K] (referencing Advice Memorandum, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., No. 26-CP-093377 (Jan. 30, 2013)).}

All of this is to say that the improvisational style hardly extinguishes legal risk. But that just puts it in the same category as every other approach to mobilization that labor has ever tried. The real difference is that unlike other innovations, improvisational unionism’s relationship to the law is comparatively humble. Labor’s most successful strategies to date—agreements with employers to organize NLRA-covered employees and arrangements with states to adopt non-NLRA employees as their own—exert control over the law’s substance. Both are premised on transforming extant rules on unionization prior to activism. Improvisational unionism, on the other hand, is not so proactive. It is unconcerned with changes to the legal architecture, and, in effect, urges workers to run headlong into it. In practice this suggests that unions have made a calculation that the benefits of improvisation outweigh the level of institutional and worker risk that arises when the law is foregrounded in this way.

One specific vulnerability, however, stands out. Labor law does not favor repeated strikes. Since at-will strikes sit at the center of improvisational unionism, this legal risk deserves extended treatment.

V. IMPROVISATIONAL UNIONISM AND THE LAW OF INTERMITTENT STRIKES

In its current form, improvisational unionism boils down to two new tactics—strikes and autonomous mobilization—and a fresh vision of campaign culture that embraces open procedures, prioritizes process over ends, and capitalizes on an experimentalist spirit. Relative to what has come before, this three-part package feels almost audacious. But from another angle, improvisational unionism might be considered modest. By inviting a broad swath of workers and the public to engage in activism without the pretense that large numbers will take the bait anytime soon, improvisational unionism is essentially reactive in its approach to organizing. It welcomes people on their own terms, and its ambition is simply that a thicker layer of participants—some who have been in close contact with the campaigns and others who just show up—will be skimmed off next time.

But that ambition carries with it a necessary element. There has to actually be a “next time.” It is the opportunity to improvise repetitively that builds activists’ confidence and allows the campaign to progressively add
numbers. Repetition is fundamental to improvisational unionism, and to the extent it is constrained, the approach itself is endangered. If each additional walkout carries more legal risk than the last, there are bound to be fewer stoppages.

In fact, repetitive strikes do come with a specific legal risk: the judicially created law of intermittent strikes. As argued below, the rule is tangled, bankrupt, and should be eliminated. But even if it remains good law, it is ultimately inapplicable to improvisational unionism.

A. Tangled Doctrine

As noted, improvisational unionism as a legal strategy holds tight to the reality that for all of the weaknesses of labor law (and there are many), it does protect the plain-vanilla strike over working conditions. That’s defined, essentially, as stopping work, safely shutting down any equipment, and quitting the employer’s property entirely. So when fast-food workers sick of low pay or Walmart employees fed up with disrespect walk out and shout on a sidewalk during a scheduled shift, they cannot lawfully be fired.

The problematic question for improvisational unionism is how many times can they do it? Here the law is tangled. The confusion began in Briggs-Stratton, a 1949 Supreme Court case that involved a union’s attempt to pressure an employer in bargaining by calling twenty-six surprise “special meetings” during working hours over a four-month period. Alarmed that this “new technique” left the company in the dark “as to when or whether the employees would return,” and by how easily it facilitated the union’s stated intention to repeatedly “interfere with production,” the Court summarily

386. As improv researchers have explored, “[I]mprovisational actions may serve as experiments that shape future behavior” by creating memories of past improvisational experiences that can be built upon. See Moorman & Miner, supra note 237, at 713.

387. The classic case is National Labor Relations Board v. Washington Aluminum Co., 370 U.S. 9 (1962). There, when seven Baltimore machinists showed up at work on a frigid January morning in 1959 to find the heat broken, an icy wind gusting through flimsy exterior doors, and their foreman helpless to intervene, they left. Id. at 11–12. When the company president showed up and fired them all in absentia, the Supreme Court concluded that section 7, which shelters group protests over working conditions, extends to a walkout. Id. at 12, 17. That the machinists were not in a union or even necessarily contemplating unionization was irrelevant in the Court’s eyes and only made the decision to abandon their jobs more logical: without a representative to negotiate for them and lacking a clear avenue to express workplace complaints, “[T]he men took the most direct course to let the company know that they wanted a warmer place in which to work.” Id. at 14–15; see also Craig Becker, “Better Than a Strike”: Protecting New Forms of Collective Work Stoppages Under the National Labor Relations Act, 61 U. Chi. L. Rev. 351, 354–55 (1994).

388. The workers could, however, be replaced by other workers while they are gone. See Moody, supra note 35.

deemed the strategy “indefensible.” Though the decision’s actual holding was only that the union’s conduct could be subject to a state injunction, eleven years later the Court relied on it for the general principle that the underlying tactic—the so-called “intermittent” strike—lacks NLRA protection, thus employees who repeatedly stop working may be discharged. That is the law today.

Unfortunately, as Craig Becker has persuasively argued, the decisions left much unstated, including the all-important question of how many stoppages over a given span are too many. On this question the Board and courts have been left to fill in the blank. The only clear answer is that two strikes are never enough, while as many as five stoppages could be okay if there is enough time between them, say, at least five weeks with a two-year lag between the first and last actions.

Much more critical is the matter of whether the strikes are a “part of a plan or pattern of intermittent action” in service to a unified goal or demand. The evil here is seen to be two-fold. First, protecting a scheme to quit

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390. See id. at 249, 254–60; see also Becker, supra note 387, at 377–78 (detailing the Court’s skeletal reasoning and inexplicable failure to “set forth any . . . standard by which to judge whether particular strikes are indefensible”).

391. Becker, supra note 387, at 377. As Craig Becker has pointed out, “[T]he Court expressly distinguished the injunction at issue in Briggs-Stratton from the discharge of intermittent strikers, underscoring the fact that only the question of state action was raised.” Id. at 377 n.121. In Lodge 76, International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers v. Wisconsin Employment Relations Commission, 427 U.S. 132, 154 (1976), the Supreme Court “expressly overruled” Briggs-Stratton’s holding on the appropriateness of the state court injunction.

392. Nat’l Labor Relations Bd. v. Insurance Agents’ Int’l Union, 361 U.S. 477, 492–94 (1960); see also Becker, supra note 387, at 380–81 (detailing this progression). Because “intermittent work stoppages are not unfair labor practices under the NLRA,” they do not subject unions to the Board’s remedial scheme. Pan Am. World Airways, Inc. v. Int’l Bhd. of Teamsters, 894 F.2d 36, 40 (2d Cir. 1990). The brunt of intermittent strike costs are thus borne by employees themselves.

393. Becker, supra note 387, at 391.

394. Robertson Indus., 216 N.L.R.B. 361, 362 (1975) (stating that there is no “magic number” but “2 days” is not enough), enforced, 560 F.2d 396 (9th Cir. 1976); Chelsea Homes, Inc., 298 N.L.R.B. 813, 831 (1990) (“[T]wo [work] stoppages, even of like nature, are insufficient to constitute . . . a pattern of recurring, and therefore unprotected, stoppages.”). enforced, Lee v. Krop, 962 F.2d 2 (2d Cir. 1992); N.L.R.B., Advice Memorandum, University of Southern California, Case No. 31-CA-23538 (Apr. 27, 1999) (citing “gaps in time” and that the stoppages were “so far apart in time” as evidence that five strikes over two years were not unprotected intermittent conduct).

395. Polytech, Inc., 195 N.L.R.B. 695, 696 (1972). The leading labor law treatise makes clear that evidence of a “systematic scheme” is crucial to an intermittent finding. ROBERT A. GORMAN & MATTHEW W. FINKIN, BASIC TEXT ON LABOR LAW UNIONIZATION AND COLLECTIVE BARGAINING 429 (2004); see also THE DEVELOPING LABOR LAW 1705 (John E. Higgins ed., 2012) (calling a “plan” a “precondition of finding an intermittent strike”).

396. The rationales provided for finding intermittent work stoppages unprotected overlap with a closely related—but frequently confused—type of action, the “partial” strike. Michael C. Duff, Days Without Immigrants: Analysis and Implications of the Treatment of Immigration Rallies Under the National Labor Relations Act, 85 DENV. U. L. REV. 93, 116 n.118 (2007). In a partial strike employees “refuse to work on certain assigned tasks” but remain on site while continuing to be paid. Id. Craig Becker has pointed out that to the extent the common justifications for outlawing either type of strike are at all persuasive, it is only in the context of partial strikes. Becker, supra note 387, at 383–90.
repeatedly would let workers generate “condition[s] that would be neither strike nor work” and, “in effect[, . . .] dictate the terms and conditions of employment.”

Working on one’s “own terms” instead of management’s “has long been thought ‘indefensible’ and a cause for discharge.” Second is a sense that sustained intermittent activity is too powerful. At minimum, recurrent stoppages are thought to make business operations “impractical,” ostensibly because it is difficult to hire replacements at random times, and more generally because it is assumed to raise payroll, timekeeping, and production havoc. At worst intermittent strikes could “harass the company into a state of confusion” and “cripp[e] it.”

Identifying whether an intermittent plan exists, however, is easier said than done. That’s because even repeated, short strikes are not part of a prohibited intermittent “plan” if they are spontaneous and sparked by discrete grievances—like a cancelled meeting one day and a fired coworker the next—instead of a single overarching demand. Particularly complicating is the fact that the Board also recognizes that intimately related grievances may nevertheless be considered “distinct” for intermittent purposes. Included in this category is a case where workers struck, returned to work, struck again to protest retaliation from the first strike, returned to work, and struck a third time to protest retaliation from the second strike. According to the Board, “each

397. Valley City Furniture Co., 110 N.L.R.B. 1589, 1595 (1954); see also Honolulu Rapid Transit Co., 110 N.L.R.B. 1806, 1809–10 (1954) (finding consecutive weekend strikes unprotected for “establish[ing] and impos[ing] upon the employer their own chosen conditions of employment”); Polytech, Inc., 195 N.L.R.B. at 696 (calling intermittent strikes unprotected because they are “inconsistent with a genuine strike or genuine performance by employees of the work normally expected of them by the employer”).
398. GORMAN & FINKIN, supra note 395, at 430 (citing Nat’l Labor Relations Bd. v. Montgomery Ward & Co., 157 F.2d 486 (8th Cir. 1946)).
399. The Briggs-Stratton dissent suggested that the majority found the union’s meeting strategy “objectionable . . . only because it [was] effective.” United Auto. Workers Local 232 v. Wis. Emp’t Relations Bd., 336 U.S. 245, 269 (1949) (Murphy, J., dissenting).
400. In Shelly & Anderson Furniture Manufacturing, Co. v. National Labor Relations Board, 497 F.2d 1200, 1203 (9th Cir. 1974), the Ninth Circuit cited these fears while stating that “protesting employees continue to draw their wages,” a puzzling conclusion since striking employees need not be paid. The court may have been influenced by the employer’s position in Briggs-Stratton, which was heavily rooted in administrative concerns. See 336 U.S. at 269.
403. See City Dodge Ctr., Inc., 289 N.L.R.B. 194, 197 (1988) (deeming an intermittent analysis inappropriate for a lack of a “plan” where workers struck once when refused a meeting and again when a colleague was discharged); see also Becker, supra note 387, at 396–98.
405. Id. Another good example is Farley Candy Co., 300 N.L.R.B. 849, 849 (1990), where workers in the pan department struck in support of better wages and hours, to no avail. Later that day, workers in the packaging department did the same, and this time management agreed to make a change to the packaging employees’ schedule. Id. The following day, pan department workers struck again “in support of their prior concerted demands.” Id. The Board found the pan department workers were not intermittent strikers because the second strike was not a second iteration of their initial
strike was “unique to its facts and circumstances,” even though “discrimination against returnees” equally motivated the last two.\footnote{WestPac Elec., Inc., 321 N.L.R.B. at 1360 (quoting Chelsea Homes, Inc., 298 N.L.R.B. 813, 831 (1990)).}

This “intimate” yet “distinct” concept has proved malleable enough to even cover instances where there is a conceded plan to strike repeatedly before actual grievances arise.\footnote{N.L.R.B., Advice Memorandum, Norfolk Shipbuilding & Drydock Corp., No. 5-CA-21113, at 18 (Nov. 7, 1990).} In\footnote{Id. at 2, 7, 18.} Norfolk Shipbuilding, the union president implemented an “in plant solidarity program” amid stalled negotiations, with the overall goal of obtaining contract leverage and fixing safety problems arising on the dock.\footnote{Id. at 1.} While the program envisioned some ancillary measures like off-work rallies, its crux—acknowledged by the president and foreshadowed by an internal newsletter—was many short strikes.\footnote{Id. at 16.} The union in fact pulled off ninety-nine strikes in twenty-two days.\footnote{Id. at 18.} Nonetheless, the Board’s General Counsel linked each stoppage to an extemporaneous “complaint or grievance and/or . . . separate unlawful act,” from tardy paychecks to misused tools, saving the actions from intermittent allegations.\footnote{Blades Mfg. Co., 144 N.L.R.B. 561, 563, 565 (1963).} In the General Counsel’s eyes, the union’s plot to continually strike for a good contract was best viewed as “simply taking the position that, if there were [unfair] [e]mployer conduct, such conduct would not be ignored.”\footnote{Id. at 566.}

An express plan for periodic strikes is also found in Blades Manufacturing, where a newly certified union, faced with an employer that refused to negotiate, called a group meeting and decided to strike for a single day every time management refused to discuss a grievance.\footnote{Id. at 566.} Following three walkouts over thirteen days the company fired all the strikers.\footnote{Id. at 567.} Unlike in Norfolk Shipbuilding, here the Board acknowledged that the underlying spark for each stoppage was more or less the same—in its words, “the refusal to recognize the right of the Union to represent an employee in the processing of a grievance”—but parsing the unique substance of each complaint allowed it to similarly conclude that “[e]ach walkout was precipitated by, and was in protest against, a separate unlawful act.”\footnote{Id.}

In the end, cases like Norfolk Shipbuilding and Blades Manufacturing come down to motive.\footnote{See Becker, supra note 387, at 410–13.} In Norfolk Shipbuilding, shipyard employees were
undoubtedly incensed by, for example, a broken promise to disburse paychecks early, which came across as discriminatory and stopped many from getting paid until later in the week. 417 But they also had a clear strategy in place to get a strong contract: repeated strikes. So it is difficult to fault the Eighth Circuit all that much for concluding, contrary to the Board, that the Blades factory strikes were aimed not at distinct grievance-handling complaints but really the singular goal of union recognition since that was, in fact, the “plan.” 418 Human nature dictates that most people have mixed motives for doing things, and that makes the intermittent analysis difficult. 419 The NLRB’s own Frankenstein-esque summary of the law after nearly sixty years of development crystalizes the challenge well, casting the search for illegal intermittent strikes as an unwieldy investigative mélange touching on strike frequency, proximity, duration, goals, employer impact, employee impact, and strategic intent, whether stated or implied. 420

B. Untangling Doctrine by Marginalizing It

Before diving into the relationship between intermittency and improvisational unionism, it is worth questioning whether this doctrinal morass should prompt the Board to take a step back, recognize that the law has become practically and theoretically unworkable, and—assuming the Supreme Court does not revisit Briggs-Stratton—drastically limit its application. It should. This is a more modest suggestion than it might seem.

To begin, there is the statute. Intermittent doctrine is pure judge-invented law, grafted onto and irreconcilable with the NLRA’s plain text, which commands that “[n]othing” is to “interfere with or impede or diminish in any way the right to strike,” 421 and its intent, which puts the “right to strike at its

417. Norfolk Shipbuilding, supra note 408, at 12.
419. This is Craig Becker’s point. Becker, supra note 387, at 413 (“[E]xisting case law has articulated no coherent standard for distinguishing among workers’ predictably mixed motives.”). His solution—protecting repeated strikes if they are “motivated in any part by discrete grievances”—deserves a careful look from the Board, Id. at 415.
420. According to the Board’s General Counsel, “particular aspects of strike activity that may render it unprotected” are: (1) the occurrence of more than two separate strikes, or threats of repeated strikes; (2) the strikes are not responses to distinct employer actions or problems with working conditions, but rather part of a strategy to use a series of strikes in support of a single goal because this would be more crippling to the employer or would require less sacrifice by employees than a single prolonged work stoppage during which strikers could be replaced; (3) the union announces or otherwise states its intent to pursue a plan or strategy of intermittent strikes, or there is clear factual evidence of an orchestrated strategy to engage in intermittent strike activity; and (4) the strikes are of short duration and proximate in time. N.L.R.B Advice Memorandum, WestFarm Foods, No. 19-CA-29147, at 8–9 (Jul. 22, 2004).
core.” There is also logic. Obviously “the right to strike cannot forever be exhausted after it is exercised once.” Case law, certainly, does not go that far. But precedent surely does suggest that even where workers have the undisputed right to strike once, “mere repetition” of that right somehow endangers the legitimacy of the right itself.

Why, though, in a regime that relies on raw coercion to function, is the statutory right to coerce extinguished by doing it too much? Presumably the answer goes back to some especially persuasive cache of policy reasons. In this case, however, the justifications for removing the Act’s protection have always ranged from the clumsy to the absolutely nonsensical. Craig Becker’s analysis remains the gold standard here, noting that however many times workers exit the job, the doctrine’s primary rationale—that it creates a state of “neither strike nor work”—is Exhibit One in the nonsensical category: at one moment workers are clearly striking off the premises, at another moment they are clearly working on the premises, and, to be glib, that’s that. As Becker points out, while it is possible to theorize a situation where workers repeatedly stop and start working while remaining at their posts, that factual scenario has never actually made an appearance in a relevant decision, in part because it would be categorized as a “slowdown,” a distinct category of unprotected activity.

What’s more, workers who walk out repeatedly do not “unilaterally alter terms of employment” any more than other strikers who refuse to get to work when called upon and can’t be fired. And it borders on silly to have to point out that even if repeated strikes are “impractical” or burdensome for business operations, that “is precisely the purpose of all strikes.” Intermittent strikes are just over faster.

But perhaps the most important point is that in the twenty years since Becker’s article appeared, experience has sapped whatever persuasive force any of these rationales may once have had. Take planes for example. The airline industry—a time-is-of-the-essence business model if there ever was one—has been barred from firing or enjoining intermittent strikers under its own designated labor relations scheme since 1993. Despite the tactic’s repeated use, air travel has not collapsed in the interim. Likewise, under the
Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, workers have long been able to leave work intermittently, without notice, and without offering a clue as to when they will return.\textsuperscript{431} Though employers complain about the timekeeping, pay check, and other hassles this can create, the Department of Labor’s regulatory guidelines have shown that even these challenges are administratively feasible.\textsuperscript{432}

The practical workability of intermittent leave in these and other contexts has been enhanced by technological advances in scheduling that give employers the flexibility to manipulate staffing levels in real time, anytime. From the employee perspective, this sort of just-in-time management is personally disastrous and, in an ironic twist, creates actual states of “neither strike nor work” through painful practices like “open availability” where workers wait at home to be called in at a moment’s notice; “call-in shifts” where workers must phone the boss in the early morning to find out if they will be needed; and automated, hour-by-hour schedule changes that send workers packing or rushing in pursuant to predictive sales algorithms or even a weather report.\textsuperscript{433} For employers like Walmart and McDonald’s, these innovations have been a cost-cutting boon, but they also mean that there is less legitimacy than ever to arguments that sudden workforce exits seriously disrupt production or are too powerful.\textsuperscript{434} It is perhaps for this reason that the only comprehensive

\textsuperscript{431} See 29 C.F.R. § 825.203 (2013) (allowing intermittent leave); § 825.303 (2014) (requiring “notice to the employer as soon as practicable under the facts and circumstances” where the “need for leave is not foreseeable”); Giennap v. Harbor Crest, 756 F.3d 527, 529 (7th Cir. 2014) (”[§ 303] . . . does not require employees to tell employers how much leave they need, if they do not know yet themselves.”).

\textsuperscript{432} See 29 C.F.R. § 825.205 (2010) (describing how employers should calculate pay and scheduling for intermittent FMLA leave); see also Peter A. Susser, On Again, Off Again: INTERMITTENT LEAVE UNDER THE FMLA 1 (2007) (“Employees’ use of intermittent leave is probably the number one frustration that employers voice about the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), particularly circumstances in which the need to use intermittent leave time is ostensibly unforeseeable and no advance notice is provided of the days on which such leave will be exercised.”).

\textsuperscript{433} Stephanie Luce & Naomi Fix, Discounted Jobs: How Retailers Sell Workers Short 12–14 (2012), http://retailactionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/7-75_RAP+cover_lowres.pdf [https://perma.cc/ER7S-UPM2]; Jodi Kantor, Working Anything But 9 to 5, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 13, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/08/13/us/starbucks-workers-scheduling-hours.html [https://perma.cc/SWV3-AC73]. The New York Times has catalogued the human impact of these practices, including an employee at Joe Fresh who “was scheduled to work just one day but was on call for four days—meaning she had to call the store each morning to see whether it needed her to work that day.” Steven Greenhouse, A Push to Give Steadier Shifts to Part-Timers, N.Y. TIMES (July 15, 2014), http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/business/a-push-to-give-steadier-shifts-to-part-timers.html [https://perma.cc/T4Y-MZ4F]. Another worker described commuting an hour to Popeyes “only to have her boss order her to go home without clocking in—even though she was scheduled to work.” Id.

\textsuperscript{434} See Becker, supra note 387, at 387–88; Greenhouse, supra note 433 (describing how maximum scheduling flexibility allows “managers . . . to keep costs down”).
study on the matter suggests that intermittent strikes are actually less costly to employers than a single, drawn-out stoppage.435

Finally, the Board should acknowledge that limiting the right to strike—the very “essence of collective labor activity” and the “pivot” point in our national labor relations regime—to prolonged stoppages practically eliminates the right for unorganized low-wage workers.436 Long ago Adam Smith recognized industry’s inherent capacity to “hold out” longer than labor, and today it is simply unrealistic for the law to expect minimum-wage employees to forgo pay for days on end because they are getting burned or need a raise and have the bravery to do something about it.37 In the service sector it is self-evident that a meaningful right to strike requires an associated right to return after short stretches, merely to live.438 Management, certainly, has other coping mechanisms at its disposal that these workers—who have as much right to leverage economic power as their bosses—do not.439

The good news is that there is some evidence that the Board has started to accept some of these realities.440 Now, given the rise of improvisational unionism, it should also concede the weaknesses of the intermittent doctrine as a whole and apply it rarely. Until that time, there are good reasons to think that even under current law most Walmart and fast-food workers can nevertheless dodge the claims when they arise.

C. Improvisational Strikes Are Not Intermittent Strikes

The strikes conducted at Walmart and in the fast-food industry since 2012 are not unprotected intermittent strikes. The easiest case concerns workers who strike autonomously and have had no direct communications with a union. As Professor Michael Duff has noted, “little if any NLRB authority” suggests that the Board is likely to find intermittent conduct absent a union “planner” on the scene.441 Any suggestion that general media coverage, website encouragement, or strike-kit language evidence an intermittent plan is totally detached from

436. See Becker, supra note 387, at 351, 359.
437. Id. at 351–52.
438. For obvious reasons, getting Walmart and the fast-food industry to schedule more hours is a key concern for both campaigns. See Sarah Jaffe, A Day Without Care, JACOBIN (Apr. 2013), https://www.jacobinmag.com/2013/04/a-day-without-care [https://perma.cc/7453-29W9].
439. The power to hire replacement workers is a prime example. James Gray Pope also makes the obvious but still critical point that while the “departure of any particular employee will not seriously affect the employer’s revenue stream, . . . [t]he consequences are immediate and dire for the worker, who needs her paycheck to obtain the basic necessities of life . . . .” James Gray Pope, Contract, Race, and Freedom of Labor in the Constitutional Law of Involuntary Servitude, 119 YALE L.J. 1474, 1555 (2010).
440. See Care Ctr. of Kan. City, 350 N.L.R.B. 64, 67 (2007) (“Clearly, the fact that the strike may have been designed to . . . provide an incentive for employees to participate [by limiting its duration but repeating it] . . . does not render the strike unprotected.”).
441. Duff, supra note 396, at 117.
precedent, where taut union-member bonds are nearly always on display when the Board identifies such a strategy.442

The national strikes present different issues. The Black Friday walkouts and the bombast associated with the fast-food strikes are quite clearly coordinated by UFCW and SEIU. Even here, though, pinning unprotected conduct on the workers would be difficult. The first problem is basic and goes to the total number of actions associated with any particular employee. However large the Fight for $15 strikes become, there are around fifty thousand fast-food workers in New York, and the first two strikes involved only two hundred and four hundred respectively—so over 99 percent of that closed universe had not struck even once as of April 2013.443 OUR Walmart is less open about its numbers, but the proportions are probably similar. Moreover, the nature of improvisation means that strike participants and locations are not stable.444 Post-strike management blowback at one store might zero-out activism for a subsequent walkout, so a Walmart or McDonald’s strike in November 2012 may have led to no strikers at those same stores in 2013.

The second point goes to goals. It is much easier to identify an intermittent “plan” where a campaign has a relatively steady, overarching objective. It is no surprise, for instance, that the Board is most likely to deem strikes unprotected where it can find evidence of a neatly packaged, traditional aim, like union recognition or a good contract.445 The Walmart and fast-food campaigns do not have that. They appear prepared to continue indefinitely and collect issues as they go. OUR Walmart started with nine demands, added maternity issues, and then provided workers with a laundry list of general employment rights to know, monitor, and “start defending.”446 The fast-food campaign has more dependably set its sights on $15 and unionization, but even there the wildly dispersed nature of the industry and the campaign make those goals far less concrete than, for example, a recognition pact from a single company.

442. Indeed, all of the private sector intermittent strikes cited by a 2000 survey of the tactic involved already organized worksites where a union was in personal contact with the workforce. LeRoy, supra note 435, at 251–54; see also id. at 266 (finding stoppages unprotected where the union provided the employer with notices of its (known) members’ intent to strike); Honolulu Rapid Transit Co., 110 N.L.R.B. 1806, 1808 (1954) (same).


More importantly, both campaigns have filed dozens of unfair labor practice charges at the Board, all prime fodder for individualized grievances that could negate an alleged orchestrated strategy, as in *Blades* and *Norfolk Shipbuilding*. Indeed, improvisational unionism is, as already noted, all about the personal. An organizer might burst into KFC screaming about the minimum wage, but when fry-cook Derrick Langley yes-anded his way out the door it was because of grease burns. And while analogous precedent is thin, in the one case involving a “nationwide campaign” to organize far-flung workers that has come up, the Board noted “no evidence” to connect multiple, multistate short strikes to an intermittent plan, even though the endgame, a recognition agreement at a single employer, was crystal clear.

Third, the strikes have not been proximate to one another. While OUR Walmart has spearheaded a variety of job actions overall, the Black Friday stoppages are by far the biggest and are, obviously, 365 days removed from each other. As of mid-2015 the major fast-food strikes have occurred at intervals of five, one, four, three, five, nine, three, and four months respectively over a two-and-a-half year period. The breaks between strikes compare favorably with lags that the Board has previously deemed protected.

Finally and most critically, even if UFCW and SEIU were found to have used continual strikes or threats of strikes as a definitive strategy to capture a single goal, it would not be “because” the approach is “more crippling to the employer.” Improvisational unionism is not about inflicting economic pain. It is about solidarity-building—and slowly at that. That is why the campaigns are content to embrace a phenomenon that heretofore would have been embarrassing: the solitary striker.


448. Hsu & Semuels, supra note 165.

449. U.S. Serv. Indust., 315 N.L.R.B. 285, 285 (1994). Though, to be fair, the Board’s evidentiary conclusion could have been the result of the employer’s failure to gather facts. *Id.*

450. See, e.g., N.L.R.B., Advice Memorandum, University of Southern California, No. 31-CA-23538 (Apr. 27, 1999) (stating that five strikes in two years were “so far apart in time that it is unreasonable to say that they evidence an [intermittent] intention”).

451. Or even, on occasion, the dual-strikers. *See Greenhouse*, supra note 169 (“In some restaurants, two workers went on strike for a few hours . . .”).
streets, and why workers participating in the single instance of in-store civil disobedience for either campaign kept aisles and registers clear for commerce and customers.\textsuperscript{452} The fast-food walkouts, in fact, have been so far from “crippling” that McDonald’s denies it has ever been subject to strikes.\textsuperscript{453} And historian Nelson Lichtenstein, who has been critical of Walmart’s labor practices, has reflected that in participatory terms labeling OUR Walmart’s actions “strike[s] [i]s a little bit of a devaluation of the word.”\textsuperscript{454} This reality also limits an argument that the Black Friday walkouts are timed to maximally damage Walmart (other than in a public relations sense), relative to, for example, gravediggers who strike unexpectedly and repeatedly at a cemetery religiously mandated to bury the dead within a day.\textsuperscript{455}

As described above, other cases have used a slightly different descriptor and ask not if repeated strikes are designed to cripple but whether the motive is to “harass the company into a state of confusion.”\textsuperscript{456} In this context precedent again assists improvisational campaigns. SEIU’s and UFCW’s strikes match up favorably to the chaos generated in the oft-cited \textit{Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company}, where employees repeatedly struck and picketed across two hundred offices over multiple days, and then returned to work just as the company’s replacement workers arrived.\textsuperscript{457} In comparison, the Walmart and fast-food campaigns’ walkouts are downright orderly.\textsuperscript{458}

In fact, the Board and employer advocates often pejoratively refer to intermittent strikes as “hit-and-run” or “quickie” job actions,\textsuperscript{459} but one-day,
preannounced stoppages do not fit that description.\textsuperscript{460} Employers can prepare by calling in replacements or revising schedules, and in 2012 Walmart had so much notice before Black Friday that it filed a widely reported NLRB charge seeking to have the actions enjoined.\textsuperscript{461}

The lesson to be drawn from this discussion is that to the extent that intermittent law remains a viable doctrine, here it is ultimately a red herring. It looks and feels like a serious impediment to improvisational unionism, but closer analysis reveals that improvisational strikes should be protected.

**CONCLUSION**

The obvious question remains: where does all of this lead? The theory-based answer is as frank as it is unsatisfying: improvisation is not about outcomes, so stop asking.\textsuperscript{462} Fair enough. But the fact still remains that Pizza Hut workers do not have families to feed in theory. Fifteen dollars an hour is a real-life need, and unions do not have infinite funds.

The clearest answer is that stoppages continue to “dramatize” life at the lowest end of the pay scale, helping to motivate more cities and even states to raise minimums to $15 an hour or close to it.\textsuperscript{463} If the progress stops there, it will be a big gain for workers and a storied victory for SEIU and UFCW. But without new members or new bargaining power to show for the millions of dollars spent, it would be a bounded victory, a meaningful strategic evolution minus the new math the union movement most needs long-term.\textsuperscript{464}

So improvisational unionism cannot stop there. It must lead to something else. It must lead to meetings: meetings with Walmart and fast-food officials where both sides have financial and institutional incentives to give concrete things up.\textsuperscript{465} That might not feel like a resolution, and it might not feel

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\textsuperscript{460} The Black Friday strikes are announced weeks in advance and news articles usually herald the coming of fast-food strikes. See supra notes 106, 166.

\textsuperscript{461} For this reason, another marker of illegal intermittency, that short strikes are being used to avoid replacements, is not much of a stumbling block, particularly because recent decisions seem to have minimized this consideration. See Care Ctr. of Kan. City, 350 N.L.R.B. 64, 67 (2007) (“Clearly, the fact that the strike may have been designed to . . . provide an incentive for employees to participate . . . does not render the strike unprotected.”); Steven Greenhouse, Labor Board to Act Swiftly on Wal-Mart’s Complaint, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 19, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/business/labor-board-to-act-swiftly-on-wal-marts-complaint.html [https://perma.cc/7FL7-6HTK].

\textsuperscript{462} See FISCHLIN ET AL., supra note 30, at 60 (“The underlying rule of improvisation is that attempts at categorization and definitive renderings of the limitations of improvisation as a discourse are fundamentally antithetical to the core notion of the term, both in theory and in practice.”).


\textsuperscript{465} Scholars and SEIU itself have called for McDonald’s, at least, to start a formal dialogue with activists. See Benjamin Sachs, A Workers Council at McDonald’s, ONLABOR (Oct. 1, 2014), http://onlabor.org/2014/10/01/a-workers-council-at-mcdonalds [https://perma.cc/8DZ2-WLJB]; Finnegan, supra note 153 (describing SEIU’s envisioning of “a climactic meeting with the big fast-
significant, but it would be. It would mean that the tangible business costs of improvisational unionism have started to outweigh the perceived benefits of ignoring improvisational unionism. A tipping point would have been reached, and it would all start with a UFCW coffee date in Bentonville or an executive assistant leading SEIU through McDonald’s Oak Brook executive suites.

What unions might ask for in the meetings is impossible to predict. Signing on to improv means accepting “an openness to unexpected outcomes, to developing themes or ideas that might not have been predicted on the basis of any one participant’s starting point,” and what could be demanded with legitimacy is surely a function of improvisation’s spread by that time. So if what has gone on since September 2012 is something like a “Phase One” attempt to seed improvisation among low-wage workers, actually asking Walmart, Burger King, and the others to, say, let organizers hang out in break rooms would probably require something like a “Phase Three.” In terms of the endgame, the most significant questions may therefore surround what a Phase Three might look like. Here, the answer is singular, unavoidable, and in many ways the point from the very start: who knows?

That might feel like a cop-out, but it’s not. It’s just improv.

food employers”); see also Greenhouse, supra note 190 (“The SEIU is exerting all this pressure . . . in the hope of getting McDonald’s (and perhaps other fast-food companies) to sit down and talk. . . . In April, the SEIU’s president, Mary Kay Henry, said, ‘We will see as the movement grows how we can get these employers to the table.’”).

466. FISCHLIN ET AL., supra note 30, at xii.