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Can union goals meet service worker needs?

Gregory Pratt

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Social Work

First Advisor

Lynn Nybell, MSW PhD

Second Advisor

Barbara Walters, MSW PhD

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CAN UNION GOALS MEET SERVICE WORKER NEEDS?

By

Gregory Pratt

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Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date: _____

_Lynn Nybell, MSW PhD _____
Supervising Instructor

_Barbara Walters, MSW PhD _____
Honors Advisor

_Marjorie Ziefert, MSW _____
Department Head

_James Knapp, PhD _____
Honors Director

**Can Union Goals Meet Service Worker Needs?
An Honors Fellowship in Qualitative Research
Gregory Pratt**

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Abstract

It is clear that Michigan has an economy that is currently in transition from a high-wage manufacturing base to a lower-wage service based economy. This qualitative research explores worker and labor organizer experiences of the conditions surrounding one category of service workers in Washtenaw County – non-unionized grocery store/retail workers. Implications for organizing low-wage workers in Washtenaw County will be highlighted in this paper.

Introduction

It is clear Michigan has an economy that is currently in transition from a high-wage manufacturing base to a lower-wage service based economy. This change has created an increasing number of working poor families whose earnings do not provide for all their needs. Moreover, a study done by the Michigan League for Human Services (MLHS) found that, in November of 2003, "...four out of the five occupations with the highest employment in Michigan had a median wage below the poverty level for a family of four..." (MLHS, 2005). The four jobs to which this statistic referred constituted over 420,000 of jobs in Michigan alone – 10% of all non-farm occupations. The specific jobs were: retail salespersons, cashiers, food prep and serving workers (including fast food), and waiters and waitresses, all service related employment (MLHS, 2005).

The shift from manufacturing to service based employment has put working families in increasingly vulnerable positions, as some service jobs often do not offer health care coverage and are often part-time or seasonal. Furthermore, any working

family can become trapped in this vulnerable position because their finances do not allow them to achieve more education and training to pull themselves out of their current economic niche (MLHS, 2004).

The MLHS lays out several strategies for helping struggling families out of their current economic situation including: expanding educational opportunities for low-income workers, state tax credit provisions for low-income families, access to reliable and affordable day care, and regular adjustments to the minimum wage (MLHS, 2004). Another significant avenue would be the unionization of service workers. There have been successful examples of the organization of service sector workers, one of which is the Justice for Janitors campaign.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) spearheaded this 17-year nationwide campaign. It has had successes in Los Angeles and Boston and is employing a comprehensive technique that focuses on more than just worker/employer mediation. In his assessment of the Justice for Janitors campaign in Boston, Gerald Friedman notes that the SEIU tactic, "...organizes entire communities around a program of social justice. Making the janitors' particular struggle a concern for all," (Friedman, 2002).

There have been other successful organizing campaigns in the private service sector. For example, in September of 2006, UNITE-HERE (textile industry and hotel/restaurant union) settled a contract for workers with a San Francisco multi-employer group. The campaign preceding this contract lasted over two years and has won higher wages and better benefits for thousands of hotel and restaurant workers (Local 2, 2006). UNITE-HERE is involved in many campaigns across the country and

has been successfully focusing its efforts to build worker power within whole industries and multi-state, multinational corporations.

Notwithstanding successes in other parts of the country, the organization of service workers in Michigan has proved to be a challenging task. This qualitative research will address strategies and barriers to the organization of one sort of service workers in Washtenaw County, non-unionized grocery store/retail workers. It will attempt to document and compare the perspectives of both labor organizers and workers.

Review of the Literature

In this section I will briefly summarize the transformation of the workplace many working folks have experienced over the past few decades. I will then address issues related to organizing service workers in the context of global change, documented by scholars and activists with hands-on experience in building power for workers.

Transformation of the Workplace

To begin, I will address the traditional union functions in society. Then I will talk about some barriers to union functioning that have emerged since the end of WWII. These obstacles will be addressed at local/state, national, and international levels.

Benefits of Unionization

In any discussion involving unions' effects on society a good starting point would include Freeman and Medoff's *What Do Unions Do?* Published in 1984, their work highlights the roles unions play in improving the economic standing of the workforce they represent and the standing of workers overall; it has also been cited in numerous journal articles of which many were included as references in this paper. It is fitting that we begin our review with a brief summary of their work.

Freeman and Medoff state that unionization leads to higher productivity as demonstrated by the post-WWII prosperity where benefits were shared among workers and management. Moreover, their work shows that unions have many roles. One of the primary objectives of a union is to become the ‘collective voice’ of workers and the response of management to the ‘stimulus of the union,’ i.e., effecting company policies and compensation plans that are in the best interests of workers (Freeman and Medoff, 1984).

While keeping these union functions in mind, let’s now look at some of the barriers to organizing workers that have emerged in the last few decades.

Impact of Capital Mobility on Unionism

Many researchers apply a global context when looking at data they have gathered from their own communities and communities from other parts of the world. One such study done by Cheol-Sung Lee (2005) looks at how the deindustrialization of economic markets in Northern countries has pushed wages lower in once high-wage, low-skill labor markets. Furthermore, Lee notes the mobility of capital in the advent of deindustrialization processes has displaced many people from ‘lower economic tier’ countries. They have moved where non-unionized manufacturing jobs are more prevalent, compounding the decline in union representation by increasing competition between low-skilled native and immigrant workers.

Aside from the effects deindustrialization has had in the North across the globe, there has also been a shift in the labor market for low-skilled workers, evidenced locally by Michigan’s shift described above in the introduction of this paper. One idea emerging from some researchers’ work in approaching this shift is that the environment

for union organizing in the private service sector is less favorable for workers due to the fragmented workplaces and living conditions, which are augmented by high job turnover rates (Lee, 2005; Nissen, 2003).

Management Opposition

Also frequently noted by researchers as an impediment to organization in the private formal sector is management opposition to worker collectivism (Andrias, 2003; Brecher, 1997; Carriero, 2005; Fischer, 2004; Lee, 2005; Mitchell & Erickson, 2005; Nissen, 2003; Selcuk, 2005; Tucker, 2005). This should not be surprising, given the centuries-long struggle between labor and capital.

To be sure, there are instances where employers have sanctioned union representation of workers. Locally and nationally, we could cite the historical relationship the UAW had with Ford and GM. One might even say that this relationship had a role in the success of both companies. In regard to service workers, there are two retail companies often cited as having a unionized workforce in Southeastern Michigan, Meijer and Kroger. Ultimately, however, the above examples do not account for the majority of workers (or employers) in this region or across the country as of late.

As Lee (2005) has demonstrated above, what is new about management opposition in the context of the so-called 'globalized' economy is that companies have become more mobile in the last 20 years. In part, this phenomenon can be traced to a spate of free trade agreements that has been proliferating among the developed and emerging economies of the world. These free trade agreements often do not include labor standards and if they do there is very little written into the treaties that compel signatories to enforce international labor standards (Tarullo, 2007).

Therefore, as companies see more opportunities to move their manufacturing operations into other areas of the world where workers do not expect to receive high wages, they are moving into those areas. This, of course, pushes aside many U.S. workers who have been company loyalists and who depend upon wages and retirement benefits to maintain the quality of life that worker solidarity won for them 50-60 years ago. It also opens the door for divisive belief systems like racism and jingoism to infuse into worker culture. As those belief systems become entrenched, uniting workers can become very difficult.

Still, alongside the suggestion that management's anti-union activities have significantly influenced a decline in union membership is a study that indicates other factors, such as (1) a lack of worker interest in collective action and (2) international economic forces (e.g. 'globalization') that have played a major role in the decline (Flanagan, 2005). Furthermore, in this study Flanagan (2005) avers that in the place of union representation, employers are implementing human resource management structures within their companies that serve as a proxy for independent worker organizations. The implication of this study is that workers are less inclined to collective action because companies have been installing company structures that co-opt union functions. This gives the companies control over the workers' input and allows *management the choice* of whether to listen to the workers' requests.

The Mainstream Media and Unions

There are others who say that the media handling of labor disputes can have an effect on workers ability to collectively act and have public support for their actions. Carriero (2005) has looked at the phenomenon of anti-union firings. His data shows that,

when covered, anti-union firings are treated as individualized and isolated events, diminishing potential impact on the public's understanding of the dispute. More often, these events are covered in regard to how consumers will be affected and the ways in which workers are ignoring this factor. Of course, this pits one segment of the community against the other, ultimately to the benefit of the employer (Carriero, 2005; Pencavel, 2005).

A hallmark moment in the decline of worker collectivism is the firing of air traffic controllers by President Reagan in 1981. Over 12,000 individuals lost their jobs in this instance; an entire workforce was eliminated. The AFL-CIO and other national labor organizations decided against large-scale mobilization of workers in 'sympathy strikes' (outlawed in 1947 by the Taft-Hartley Act which amended the National Labor Relations Act). This 'inaction' was taken, in part, because solidarity actions might alienate consumers and "unduly punish and inconvenience the public at-large" as stated by Lane Kirkland, AFL-CIO President at the time (Brecher, 1997).

In his analysis of this landmark incident, Jeremy Brecher (1997) writes that the unions then became partners with employers to make companies as competitive as possible. This characterization of unions' function could feed the workers' collective consciousness that already has media images of union leaders colluding with management in backroom deals while the ignoring the voices of rank and file workers.

Organizing Service Workers in the Context of Global Change

What we have looked at so far encompasses the obstacles to organizing informal sector service workers. Let's now look at some of the ways scholars and organizers have proposed to overcome these barriers to organization.

Worker Beliefs

One of the salient beliefs about service workers is that they are “destined to get wages at the bottom” (Early, 2006). Therefore, it is critical that any movement toward organizing service workers, on any kind of scale (individual workplace, community-wide, industry-wide), address this belief directly. David Bacon makes an important historical analogy on the possibilities of changing public opinion of service worker status in his example of the longshoremen labor struggles in the 1920’s and ‘30’s. He states:

Longshoremen were considered bums and derelicts through the 1920s. But after the West Coast maritime strike (and San Francisco General Strike) of 1934, they won the ability to negotiate a single contract with all the shipping companies on the West Coast, covering all the ports. As a result, longshoremen's wages are now among the highest of U.S. industrial workers (Bacon, 2004).

What he implies, of course, is that if service workers can achieve the same kind of influence referred to in the above quote, they can truly begin to challenge their position on the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum. Step one – organize. Step two – collectively act.

Politics and Organizing

John Pencavel (2005) has studied unions through an international lens within three categories of union activities: 1) wage-making actions, 2) political actions, and 3) mediation of employer/worker relationship(s). His findings indicate that the focus of industrial relations should be at the *workplace*. Furthermore, he states that political

campaigns can be difficult to manage because public policies can often pit one group of workers against another.

To be sure, political movements can convey messages to the public at large about an issue or social condition. However, organizers working at the individual and small group level need to find ways to effectively communicate when talking to individuals and groups about collective action for the benefit of the group. Snape and Bamber (1989) note that when organizing ‘professionals,’ for example, one should be less overtly political, and instead emphasize the benefits of union membership through collective bargaining *and* individual representation

New Democratic Union Models

While the workplace is obviously where labor disputes begin, Barbara Ehrenreich (2005) notes that the ‘business unionism’ model, developed by the progenitors of modern trade unions like Samuel Gompers, isn’t effective anymore because workers in this arena have little ownership over union activities. Moreover, she states that workers are treated as “insurance clients” and that in order for unions to be successful in organizing workers they need to, “move out of the elegant real estate in D.C. and into the storefronts and church basements across the country” (Ehrenreich, 2005). What Ehrenreich is saying is that the traditional union model has transformed from a movement that empowers workers to an agency that handles grievance claims and reacts to the stimulus of the employer. What she is calling for is that this model be pushed aside for a more proactive, worker-stimulated movement.

A long time labor leader and activist, Jerry Tucker (2005), posits that advocates of social movement unionism should employ democracy when building a mass movement

of workers. For most workers who feel powerless over their life circumstances, “democracy is a myth.”

Another rank and file organizer writes that after sympathy strikes were outlawed by Taft-Hartley, unions became primarily ensconced in the negotiation of contracts with ‘no strike clauses.’ Furthermore, he states that labor needs its own party to push a public agenda and solidify U.S. public support for the economic and social benefit of the masses. Labor once had power through three structures: the union, the cooperative, and the independent labor party (Hawkins, 2006). Consequently, if democracy exists at the workplace and workers achieve representation at the local and national levels of government, then labor movements will be more successful in raising the standard of living for workers.

Tactics vs. Amplification of Workers’ Voices

Brofenbrenner and Hickey (2003) have come up with a comprehensive list of organizing strategies and documented the success of organizing campaigns that used one, more than one, and none of their strategies. The strategies they highlight include: rank and file organizing committees, issues resonating in the workplace and community, and creative internal and external pressure tactics.

The tactics they note are certainly useful. However, we should probably open a dialogue with people to see what their needs are before we use tactics on the group of people. This is not to say that Brofenbrenner and Hickey are advocating approaching people like they are targets. Still, I believe (and I am sure that they would agree) talking *with* people rather than *at* them is an important factor in any successful union organizing drive.

Schneider (2003) in his piece on organizing practice points out that knowing a worker's story is the key to building a working relationship with the individual. Moreover, he states that when one is working at the community level it is good to know the push/pull of economic forces in the workers' current and past lives, a community assessment, if you will.

The goal of this study, therefore, is to open the dialogue in Washtenaw County. There have been organizing drives at several local retail outlets within recent years in Ann Arbor. The Downtown Borders location received the most press, in part, because of its visibility and also because the workers were successful in winning a contract. One begins to wonder why haven't there been more organizing drives in the 'public eye'?

The Borders union dissolved a year ago with little mention and the lines are as long as they have ever been during the holiday rush. Had the employees' quality of life improved to the point that they felt the union wasn't needed anymore?

It is difficult to implement a study such as this primarily because of the taboo placed upon union activity that could translate into fewer workers wanting to tell their story for fear they might lose their job. Therefore, the stories that follow will include as much information as possible to render each respondent's simulacrum with the forms and colors included in their actual image. However, because of the delicate nature of the information contained in this study, no actual participant names, store names, or any other possible identifying features will be used in the narrative excerpts.

It is hoped that this study will lead to effective strategies that can overcome barriers to organizing low-wage workers in Washtenaw County. In conjunction with other socioeconomic improvements (equitable access to education, access to health care),

it is also hoped the findings from these workers' and organizers' stories can be a few more pieces that help all working families and individuals achieve decent quality of life. For those who are not working, perhaps a healthier, sustainable local economy will create more jobs.

It should be noted that there are few, if any, union locals dealing with lower wage workers in this area. However, there is a new resource for low-wage workers – the nascent Washtenaw County Workers' Center. An organizing committee of UM students, researchers and local activists have been convening since early in 2006 to plan the structure of the WCWC. Their planning has been such that the workers who use its resources and knowledge base will be deciding what kinds of community actions are taken to better the lives of immigrant and low-wage workers. They are informally affiliated with the *Centrero Obrero* (Worker Center) in Detroit and, with any luck, we will be seeing the WCWC in action, building the power of low-wage workers.

Method

The data for analysis was collected by interviewing seven retail workers from Washtenaw County and three low wage service sector organizers from Southeastern Michigan. The process of finding participants was initiated by conducting a focus group of student retail workers at Eastern Michigan University. This group allowed me to begin to discuss retail work issues and to glean workers' views about collective action and individual responsibility in the workplace. It was also hoped that focus group participants would be able to provide contact information for their fellow retail workers or friends in the community for the semi-structured individual interviews.

There were five participants in the focus group. All of them were white; there were four females and one male; they ranged in age from approximately 19-24 and came from working middle class backgrounds. The session lasted a bit over one hour and helped develop the interview formats used with workers and organizers (See Appendix 1).

Having only been able to get one interview from the focus group pool, other strategies became necessary to find more participants. It should be mentioned that I work in a grocery store in Washtenaw County. I used the ‘snowball’ method of getting interviews, networking with friends of friends.

All participants (focus group and interviews) were required to read and sign consent forms and were assured that the information they gave would be coded so as to keep their identity confidential. They were also paid \$20 for their time (with the exception of the organizer participants). The table below describes the population in terms of jobsite, age, gender and personal investment in job. Finally, the names used throughout this paper are pseudonyms.

Respondent Demographic Table

Respondent (age)	Gender	Jobsite	Job Description	Personal Investment
Mike (20)	Male	Retail	Stock/Sales	“This is my school job”
Rich (19)	Male	Retail	Stock/Cashier	He may stay on after school – if he can move into corporate position
Christine (32)	Female	Grocery	Hot Bar Cook	Committed to stay and work things out at this job
Karen (29)	Female	Grocery	Customer Service	Leaving in 6 months
Ian (27)	Male	Grocery	Food Prep	Wants to make it a career

Alicia (25)	Female	Retail	Stock/Cashier	Currently works at another job in her field of study
Tim (55)	Male	Grocery	Hot Bar Shift Mgr.	Quit over a year ago due to irreconcilable differences with mgmt.
Denise (36)	Female	Service Worker Union	Lead Organizer	This is not a “job.” Her passion is to participate in the movement to rebuild the middle-class.
Camila (23)	Female	Service Worker Union	Organizer	Thinking about grad school; very passionate about improving workers’ conditions
Amy (28)	Female	Community Organization	Board Member/Leader	Thinks about quitting grad school all the time to return to organizing full time

Though a format was used for the interviews, there was flexibility to pursue topics arising during discussions that were relevant to either the informant or myself. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed at a later date. The transcription process involved typing the words of each participant and coding emotion embedded in his/her verbal expressions. Here is an example of an ‘emotionally coded’ piece of interview text:

Denise: There are some people who do approach being an organizer as a job. And there are unions and including now my union that have actually a union for its *staff* ((says very forcefully, slight indignation)) a staff union.
 Greg: A union for the union.@@@

This text example demonstrates my use of double-parentheses to indicate an expression of emotion. Sometimes using italics was not enough to communicate the emotion communicated verbally and non-verbally. One should also note the use of the ‘@’ symbol. This marking was used to indicate laughter. Since humor played an important role in creating a ‘safe interview environment,’ I felt it was also important to note laughter behaviors as they occurred in a dialog.

The resulting texts were then studied for converging themes among the workers' and organizers' narratives. The first categories that emerged were 'barriers' and 'motivators.' Both classes were framed in terms of how the stories related to possible organizing efforts (See Appendix 2). Some of the barriers that surfaced were fear, institutional turnover, worker anti-union sentiment, and company structures administering to employee input. Some emergent motivators were the inherent camaraderie of workers, particularly nasty bosses, and a lack of job security.

After this cursory analysis was completed and each interview had been read two times, a coding system was developed to more precisely organize the stories and voices of the workers. The first typology interpreted the narrator's frame of reference as either collective or individual. What qualified as collective were statements that referred to the interests beyond the individual, which took into account fellow workers' opinions, experiences, and life circumstances. The individual frame was assigned when the speaker referred to personal responsibility for choices made that affects one's own life. These could include choices made by the speaker or by other people in the speaker's environment.

A second typology looked at the nature of work-related experiences. Three categories were developed – provocations/abuse (PA), workplace conditions (WC), and organizing efforts (OE). Interpretations falling under the 'PA' category were in terms of actions manifested by managers, fellow workers, or customers (it was more often because of manager actions). 'WC' was used to describe conditions that were sought *or* experienced by the informant. Finally, 'OE' passages were stories about planned collective action or collective actions in motion.

It should be noted that these categories, in particular the ‘OE’ category, did not always have elements of worksite protest or conflict. In fact, organizing efforts could be interpreted from a company holding an attendance contest during the holiday season – if you’re present for every shift you win a prize. This action would likely rally the employees around management.

The final typology came from the initial analysis of the interview data – barriers (BA) and motivators (MO). In the process of coding, it should be noted here that some passages of text could be considered both a barrier and a motivator to worker collectivism. This became particularly apparent when workers and organizers spoke of fear, manifested by workers *and* their managers (or managers’ fear, in general).

Here is an example of a piece of text after it had been coded. This excerpt was coded as “Individual/WC/BA.” The statement came from a young woman who has worked at a grocery store for two years. She recently graduated with her master’s degree and is planning on leaving this job in a few months:

Karen: I ((extended inflection of ‘I’)) like it. I don’t think retail’s my end goal, but, it’s a good company to work for, so, it’s a job that’s doable.

Greg: When you say... what do you mean by ‘good company’?

Karen: Well, they offer livable wages, base pay, which is appreciated – full benefits if you’re full time it’s free...

Greg: What’s ‘full time’?

Karen: 32 plus. Um, and if you’re part time (20 plus) then you just pay a partial rate which gets pre-taxed out. So, that’s good.

They’re a pretty environmentally conscious company, um, very community oriented, sort of worldly. They have a set of core values, which are actually followed.

The overarching goal of analysis for this paper was to interpret the larger meanings of the participants’ stories. Many researchers note that it is through stories that people construct meaning in their lives, and ultimately “create themselves” (Josselson,

2004). The method of interpretation I employed was one that aimed to reconstruct the respondent's view of the world in which he/she exists or existed. Additionally, I was aiming to reconstruct the intentional meaning each participant presented. I was not looking for 'hidden meanings.'

There are pitfalls associated with interpretative endeavors such as this. One would be the social distance and the power differentials between the interviewer and participants. One way the effects of these were mitigated occurred during the course of the interviews themselves. I frequently used summary and evaluation checks with the informant to clarify his/her intentional meaning. It can, therefore, be said that the interpretation of the data was often conducted while reading it with the participant.

One should also note that in the interviews I was not a completely detached observer. Instead, the texts were created via the interaction between participants and myself. This served to help with the interpretation. It could also be said that I was creating a safe environment in which each informant could confide in me and talk about things that might be perceived as taboo in others' company.

Since the nature of this research was exploratory, as the analyzing process evolved, new categories emerged. One of these categories changed the original foundations of data gathering and interpretation. There were two informants who exhibited worker *and* organizer characteristics – these subjects were reclassified as *worker/organizers*. The reason this distinction is necessary is the fact that in any group, natural leaders are bound to surface – Alicia and Tim are examples of this phenomenon.

Some other categories that emerged during analysis pertained to subjects that informants consistently brought up: fear, public company perceptions, non-traditional

worker benefits (e.g. free groceries written off as spoilage), and work descriptions (distinctive from *work conditions* in that these detailed linear work techniques, ‘First, I would A, then I would B, etc).

For the purpose of this paper some decisions were made regarding what categories were given deeper analysis in terms of implications for organizing retail workers. The classifications chosen were fear, workplace conditions (WC), and some provocations/abuse (PA). If the provocation pertained to *respect* issues, it was included. The categories used were modified by how the informants framed their narratives (collectively or individually). This was also noted in the analysis.

Fear was chosen because it is an emotion that is often manipulated by management to keep workers divided, insecure, compliant, and less likely to organize. Workplace conditions were included because vignettes detailing these often described what the workers sought. Five salient conditions were found within this typology: work organization, communication/input, respect, pay/benefits, and security. Though there is some overlap in these categories, I have kept them separate in order to draw out a more precise analysis of each informant’s intended meaning.

Analysis

Before I discuss some results of this study, it is important to extend the demographic map of our informants in the previous section to include perceptions of management and co-workers, level of job satisfaction, workforce diversity, informants’ perceptions of unions.

Enhanced Respondent Demographic Map

Informant	Jobsite	Job Satisfaction	Diversity	Perception of Mgmt/Co-workers	Union Perception
Mike (worker)	Retail	Moderate	many ethnic groups/ even gender split	Positive/ cohesive	Ambivalent
Rich (worker)	Retail	High	Rep. of population. Many female mgrs	Very positive/ friends	Does not like unions
Christine (worker)	Grocery	Mixed/Low	Primarily white – more female rep.	Very negative/ loves co-workers	Likes idea of union
Karen (worker)	Grocery	Moderate	Representative - gender homogeneity by dept.	Very positive/ 'ok'	Ambivalent
Ian (worker)	Grocery	High	Primarily white	Positive/ mixed	Ambivalent
Alicia (worker/ organizer)	Retail	Started High Ended Low	Very diverse – college-age group	Eventually very negative/ positive	Didn't like unions when younger; now a strong supporter
Tim (worker/ organizer)	Retail	Low	Primarily white female – diverse sexual orientation	Very negative/ empathy	Organized workers in 70's/ family roots are in unions
Denise (organizer)	Union	High	Many African - American and white males	N/A - didn't mention worker perception	N/A
Camila (organizer)	Union	High	Same as above	Positive/ very close	N/A
Amy (organizer)	Comm. Organization	High	High Latino rep. and white college kids	Positive/ very close	N/A

Negative and Positive Perceptions in the Workplace

Though the sample size is relatively small, there were a wide range of opinions and experiences represented in the dialogs with my informants – positive *and* negative perceptions. One worker in particular, Rich, had a very positive outlook on his store's operation and the management's role in creating a good work environment. Rich is a worker at a non-grocery retail store. He is currently in school and not sure about his future with this company, though his experiences with this company are related in a very positive light. Here is an example of his sentiments:

Greg: So, you said that you get along, earlier, really well everyone – there's no friction between you and management.

Rich: No. Uh uh. <shaking head> It's the opposite of friction, it's synergy. It's really good. I would say that [retail store], in general, is like that, but also, that our store would be..... at the top of that. At the top of being good.

Greg: That's pretty difficult to achieve in any organizational system. I mean, that's impressive, alright.

Rich: Yeah, yeah.

Greg: I've broken it up between fellow employees and management employers and you have said that it's pretty synergistic.

Rich: Yeah, pretty good. Pretty good. Um, y'know, open door policy for anybody in the position of authority um...

Greg: For talking about issues...

Rich: Yeah, issues, anything. Because of that there are very few problems, um, most of what management has to work on is just performance management – just making sure that all of the team members are developing and their getting better on a consistent basis to where as, y'know, what they're supposed to be doing. And, um, we're one of the number one stores in the company.

Greg: Wow.

Rich: And it really shows...

Rich's collective frame of reference often spoke to manager encouragement of employee performance improvement. However, when speaking about pay and benefits, he assumed a very individualized frame and takes personal responsibility for his low wage rate.

- Rich: Yeah. Like, once a year they will do a review and it's like a grading scale report card almost, um and if you get all C's you might get a 25 cent raise, all B's you might get a 35 cent raise and so on... and so I feel that the raises I have gotten, the grade is proportionate to my output of effort. And I believe that other team members are getting grades that are proportionate to their effort, however, I wish that rather than the 25 or 35, it would be a buck, two bucks three bucks, however, I can't do anything about the position I am in, so, I don't know, does that make sense?
- Greg: Yeah, no I got it. I'm glad you brought up the merit.
- Rich: I believe it's fair, I just wish that I could make more, but that's *mostly* my fault 'cause I can't move up at this point.
- Greg: Mhmm...the amount of work that you put out. Ok.
- Rich: Yeah. Yeah. And with the um, the position that I'm in there is a merit-based increase. And I wish the merit range of increase was *larger*... 'cause I know I would be able to make more, however, I know that in comparison to other people, I have gotten a lot more than others – just based on performance.

This passage could be a typical example of a worker who is seeking a change in the work conditions, but is resigned to his individual framework and the lack of power that he has within the company structure.

Communication

Two other workers from a different store noted that one of the stated goals of their company was to have a communication structure that allowed for employee input.

However, in the workers' opinions, this structure didn't live up to its stated mission.

Christine (worker) and Tim (worker/organizer) come from the same grocery store; both have worked in the store's café. Tim no longer works for the company while Christine is still working there. Moreover, she is committed to staying at this store, though frustrated with many of the conditions at the worksite.

Christine: I don't know 'cause I think that I mean that some of the major problems revolve around communication. The administration often brags about how well the system is set up to meet the needs of employees, but I just think that it's really poor. The decisions the administration makes are not really all that effectively implemented and beyond that, they rarely take into consideration the views of the workers. I wish that they would

make the structure more cooperative – I mean I’m appreciative of the hierarchy in the sense that it leaves me out of the stress that I don’t want. But, yeah, just overall communication.

Greg: So, you’re ok with the hierarchy, but you want your views to be taken into consideration.

Christine: Yeah, I mean, hierarchy doesn’t have to mean tyranny

Greg: Right.

Christine: or it doesn’t have to be an uninvolved, uninvested mutual relationship. I mean I really don’t mind the principle of hierarchy. I just don’t think they do it well.

Christine’s statements demonstrate something that came up in many of the worker interviews: employer communication/input structures do not work well when there is no real management accountability. Tim echoes this sentiment below with forceful elegance:

Greg: Ok. So then without the having the having a formal union worker organization, you didn’t feel comfortable asking the management to implement changes.

Tim: Well, I went through the process that they have. And saw that this didn’t work. I mean when your human resources person isn’t on your side, *you got nothing!* ((emphatically)) We had the responsibility to do evaluations. So, I would evaluate my co-workers, I would evaluate my manager. For four years I wrote evaluations to my general manager and nothing --- ever--- changed ((staccato emphasis)) about the way our manager was treating the workers, y’know. So, here’s your process, you take part of the process and nothing happens so it makes you believe that the process is just a sham. Here, y’know, we have this process, but don’t expect anything to change.

Greg: Mmhmm.

Tim: I think that’s what frustrated me; just the process was a cover.

Greg: The process was a cover. Say a little more about that cover for, like in the public?

Tim: Well, y’know it’s like they set up this process for grievances and stuff, but if nothing ever changes when you have grievance it just means it’s just like shuffling paper – ok and we’ll put it in the file cabinet and nothing changes. Because there’s nothing to force them to change. If they like it the way it is, there’s nothing to force them to change.

Greg: Ok. Ok Yeah, yeah.

Tim: All the worker can do is quit.

There is an abrupt shift in the reference frame by Tim in his last sentence from collective to individual. After using the company input process, all an individual can do is quit; individual workers have no power within the company structure (“If they [management] like it the way it is, there’s nothing to force them to change”).

The preceding examples from two different worksites illustrate how individual frameworks can yield no power for workers. Moreover, when companies employ collective processes within their structure, they maintain control over the outcomes. Though the appearance is that workers have input the management doesn’t really have to take that input into consideration when regarding work conditions. We could contrast Rich, who is resigned to his individual status, with Christine and Tim, who are outraged at the disconnect between company rhetoric and company actions (or lack thereof). Christine and Tim want their views included in company decisions.

Working Conditions

Let’s look at some other conditions sought by these groups. Another topic that surfaced more than once is the organization of work. This is related to communication/input, in that, the workers interpret communication as a vehicle for control over how work is accomplished. The following passages are relevant to this topic. The first statement is from a young man who currently works at a grocery store. He has a family and intends to make a career out of his current job. We have already met Christine and Tim in a previous excerpt.

Greg: What, if anything would you like to change at work?

Ian: In my department, specifically, we only have one seafood vendor for fresh fish and I would like to get it from multiple sources – at [another store] we had like 10-12 vendors and I thought that was a bit excessive and it was. But, that was more of a specialty type place – you could only get certain things and everything had to be clean or ‘store proof.’ I would like to be

able to get fresh product from like Florida, not just from Lake Michigan or Lake Superior

Here is some analysis from Christine:

Greg: So, the kitchen used to be run by more of a team effort and now it's not.

Christine: I don't know when we adopted this structure. But I believe it was implemented in the summer of **** – right after I started working there. So, instead of kitchen team leaders, we had a café manager, a kitchen manager and **** the head manager – and that's it. So we just haven't quite had that shared effort, and in MY mind, I thought that was a healthier thing. I think it was a lot healthier to have those shared responsibilities. It certainly put all of the shift leaders on the same page – they all knew what was going on. You could be like, “y’know hey, we don’t have any eggplant.” And they would be like, “yep. It’s coming in tomorrow.” Now, our shift leaders don’t really know these things. There’s no communication about the daily operations.

Here’s what Tim had to say about this topic:

Tim: Yeah, and I thought it would be fine but right from the get-go, when I was hired she said we would work together, she would be the boss but we would work together. We would have a crew of people that would be, like, managers and work with her. But, basically, she was always uncomfortable in that position of having to take into consideration all of our input she just wanted to run the show. So it took me a while to used to realizing that I wasn't going to have that much input. And, um, but there was a point where, y’know, she would use intimidation on workers, she’d make the girls cry – she’d piss off the men, she was very heavy-handed that way. And I was constantly, ‘cause I was supervisor of the kitchen, constantly going to her with the issues that my workers had, y’know, a lot of it was pay scale stuff, y’know, people didn’t get their raises on time and people would have a complaint and it wouldn’t get dealt with fairly and the scheduling was all unfair, y’know, it was this constant struggle with me representing my co-workers to her, so, she took a leave of absence. And when she came back, she wanted to make all these changes, and so, all the managers were no longer going to be managers anymore and she wanted to cut our pay scale and just take all that responsibility onto herself. Well, she was going to hire another manager that would be under her instead of having the four of us who were the other managers in the kitchen...

It is natural that most people often feel they deserve more pay for their work. Still, worker issues in the workplace, while driven by desire for better pay and benefits, are

also characterized by this need to be included in the company's decision making process; 'shared effort,' as noted by Christine above. Tim eloquently illustrates the linkages among different conditions sought by workers: increase in pay/benefits, security, work organization, and respect.

Fear at the Workplace

The preceding interview examples primarily demonstrate workers' *motivations* for workplace changes. One of the primary *barriers* emerging from workers' statements is fear in the workplace. The informants manifested this phenomenon in individual and collective frameworks. All categories of informants made reference to fear (only two workers made no mention of fear, Rich and Mike).

Fear is probably the most salient factor in the workplace conditions experienced and witnessed by this pool of participants. Its importance is predicated on respondent statements indicating that fear affects both sides of the 'workplace equation,' if you will; workers fear repudiation by employers, employers fear too much worker cohesion. Some of the narrative examples that follow demonstrate elements of this dichotomy:

Greg: It's almost like it's rhetoric more than substance, like you give someone a title to make them feel better about themselves but give really any power.

Ian: @@@ Right,
Right. And even if they don't do very well, they don't coach it. They don't help you correct what's going on they just let you basically burn your own bridges @@ And then you fall into... and some of them would say to me all the time, "if you don't make your counts from last year, it's no big deal 'cause sales are going to fluctuate year to year regardless, but if you don't make your labor or your margins, three periods in a row, then you're just done. Expect to be fired. @@@@ Which is where, I saw a lot of people let go. Two of my bosses were fired while I worked there. In a two years time period I would say the 30-40% of the people that came in..... went out within the next couple of months working there.

Christine: I know that the administration job is to figure out ways to run the [store] to the members benefit, but I don't think that means not hiring enough people to cover the work that needs to be done. I don't see her answers to the problem working.

<relays a story of a worker that, at first, wasn't pulling his own weight – was talked to by management – made some changes and in a couple months was doing much better – he still was fired though and left a note in the [store] log stating that he found it ironic that he was fired for not being able to do his job by someone that cannot do her job (multiple health code violations)><relays another story about how this manager really loses her temper when other people mess up orders – Christine defends her by saying she is under a lot of pressure to have the café perform b/c it is the only way the whole [store] will be able to survive>

This firing has affected at least three people I have talked to who work at the [store]. These people tell me that they wake up with nightmares about getting fired. They also come into work with knots in their stomach about the possibility that **** will confront them.

The last two statements demonstrate the effects fear has on employees. Often the cause of this fear can be arbitrary displays of management power. The next statement is from Alicia (worker/organizer) who participated in an organizing drive at her former workplace. She no longer works at the retail store; instead, she has a job in her field of study, graphic design.

Greg: So everything *is* getting kind of specialized in the retail environment. Is that what you... 'cause, I guess I was just thinking that there was... so there is, when you say, 'cookie-cutter' you mean like every little piece of the work is being, well, you just do this one little part and that's it?

Alicia: No. Not like that, not specialized, I think even *less* specialized, more like – every employee, and honestly, everyone is replaceable. That's really ingrained – “You know what? There's someone right behind you waiting to take your job for less pay and less benefits. And that won't complain.”

These last three text excerpts reflect conditions and emotional phenomena organizers will encounter as they are beginning to approach workers to build unity among the various social groups at the workplace.

Confronting Workplace Fear

Some specific techniques that organizers offer to confront and mitigate workers' fear are outlined below. Denise has been an organizer with an international service workers' union for fourteen years. Camila has worked for the same union for four years. Both respondents are very passionate about workers' rights and dedicated to raising the wage floor underneath service workers. Denise mentioned several times her desire to be a part of the team that is building a new middle class.

Greg: Ok. And sorta like, when you're meeting with interested workers, what do you say to them? What sort of questions, 'cause, they're gonna have questions for you obviously, what sort of questions do you have for them? What sorts of things, when you talk to workers, when you say you're trying to find those leaders, what sorts of things are you talking about?

Denise: Well, I mostly listen – I ask questions about what their job is like, what their <pause> yeah, I mean you... ask a lot of questions you ask about – figure out what makes them angry, figure out what their goals are so you can give support to them – what kind of person they are – you know, you just, you. 'Cause, organizing is scary, you know, companies fight hard and they fire people and they have people deported and they do nasty things, so um, you need to figure out what makes them angry – um, because it's usually through, I think, anger, that people find the courage to do scary things, I'm going to look for stories of, for stories of disrespect and listen for what people want for their families, you know, a lot of people get really emotional when they think about what they want to raise their children to do. Do they want their children work the kind of job they're doing? – To figure out what motivates the person do something terrifying.

Here's what Camila had to say about this topic:

Greg: I understand. So, then, with that in mind, when, sorta along the same lines, when you're first talking with workers, strategic or hot shop or whatever, what sorts of things do you say to them, I mean, obviously, you want to listen to them. But, you're gonna want to tell them stuff, too. What sorts of things do talk about with them after hearing what they have to say?

Camila: Well, we kind of educate them, 'cause one of the things that scares workers and that has them go through all those bad working conditions is that they don't know their rights – y'know, so we educate them about their rights – about the right to, to join a union, about the benefits that fighting

for better working conditions will bring, if their able to go into the whole process and get into negotiations and ask the boss, we want this and this – things that they can win with that that will empower them. We try to show them how it has worked, like, it's not something that's idealistic, or whatever. It's something that has made, that has brought good results for many people. And then we try to, um, get them to lose the fear they have – that, which is what is usually gonna hold back the worker – I mean they will always feel some fear, but some of them, we have to work on that 'cause it's more scary to have a job that is risky, to have a job where you cannot improve your life, definitely more scary...

Greg: So, it's like, I'm sorry <for interrupting>, the fear can work either way, in a sense, right? 'Cause, they've been struggling and they fearful that they'll not even provide for their families 'cause – that's always a fear, too, not just losing the job, right?

Camila: Yeah, yeah.

Greg: So, it's a matter of talking to them about their fear...

Camila: Yeah, yeah. And to really kind of make them realize um, that it's worth it. That it's gonna be hard and it's gonna be tough and their gonna, um, get discrimination from their bosses and their gonna get, uh, maybe discrimination from their co-workers. But, in the long run, look what other people have won, you know. Is that what you want for you? [poses questions like this to workers]

Two techniques are outlined above, motivation through anger and worker rights education. Denise crystallizes one of the major goals an organizer has in working to build unity: tap into workers' anger over disrespect and poor working conditions. Once an organizer discovers anger, he/she can use Camila's technique of workers' rights education, with the goal of moving the workers to unify and act.

Alicia described her transformation from worker to worker/organizer in the vignette below. She accomplished this by confronting the fear of losing her job.

Greg: Now the next question in this is, what would cause you to hesitate to become involved with a union – would that be a reason, the replaceability of people because of the retail job? 'Cause that's a threat that they often hold over people's heads.

Alicia: Um...oh, yeah, yeah. And there's certainly the biggest fear when we first started organizing was that we were all going to lose our jobs – and all were like, “Well, I don't wanna lose my job” – but I guess it came to a point where I was like, well... for me it wasn't just about like MY job

and MY benefits I really thought of kinda like a greater thing like if we can organize this store and we can show people that, you can stand up for your rights – and say that “I don’t really think that its fair that you keep depleting my benefits and that you’re not giving me a sufficient pay increase every year” It was more to show other people that you CAN do it and not lose your job – and so there was definitely a fear, but, I don’t know, I guess...

Here, Denise demonstrates techniques to confront fear between fellow workers:

Denise: I mean it all comes back to building a committee – it really comes back to figuring out who the different leaders are and to bring those leaders together as a committee, um

Greg: ‘Cause, like the leaders are going to speak for the different groups w/in the whole?

Denise: So, like if I’m organizing a hotel, I’ll have, they’ll be leaders in housekeeping, there’ll be leaders in restaurants, there’ll be leaders in the kitchen, there’ll be leaders wherever and then among Mexicans, there’ll be a leader, among the ‘cool kids’ there’ll be a leader, among the gay waiters there’ll be a leader – just like in high school break into cliques, y’know break into groups and um, an organizer figures out how to make sure that all of those groups are being reached by the right people. And we build unity. I think we actually build the most sincere unity through struggle itself, um, I love going to the airport here, ‘cause the relationships – people that you otherwise you wouldn’t imagine that they would be friends – through struggle they’ve community and relationships – I dig that. But, uh, the key vehicle to all of that is building a committee – having basically if you bring representatives from all those different factions together and you say, “ok guys, we’re going to work together – you get your people and you get your people and we all bring them together and get the boss.”

I paired these statements together because Denise speaks of a process of finding leaders in a workplace to build an action committee. Alicia came to this role on her own. What this indicates, and Denise would certainly concur, is that in order for an organizing campaign to be successful, organizers have to tap into the leaders present in the workforce to build unity (often referred to as ‘rank and file’ organization). Without this connection, any ‘external’ effort to organize a workplace is likely to fail.

Winning over workers and dispelling their fear are important skills for effective organizers to obtain. Fear can be broken down into two parts for workers: fear of employer reprisal and fear of other workers. Some workers will express that they aren't concerned about fellow workers' interests. Instead, they just want to have better conditions for themselves. The following is an example of one organizer technique of approaching this resistance.

Greg: No, you were answering, b/c what you are saying is that when you are confronted by folks who will only be in it for themselves – you let them carry it out – you play it out all the way <A: yeah.> you listen to them further, you don't say, “hey, you have to be concerned about the bigger picture, you don't want to say it to them right away – you let ‘em play it out, ‘cause they're not gonna listen. Unless you, you, I'm trying to crystallize

Camila: Yeah.

Greg: ... for myself from what you're saying. Unless you let them, unless you hear them out, they're not gonna trust you.

Camila: Right. And also, I mean, if they're concerned about them individually, they are gonna understand, at least in the long run of the union or whatever, that this is gonna help them individually, you know. But the only way to get it is by joining others. You know?

Greg: So, it's like a paradox. @@@@

Camila: Yeah, it is.

<Camila details a specific instance>

Greg: And do you say it to them in that manner? <she has been speaking in all the quoted lines above with a slightly exasperated and passionate pleading tone, if that make's sense.>

Camila: Yeah, I mean ((continues with me in the same passionate tone)) it depends ((tone drops off at the end of 'depends')) there's people that you have to be tough, there's people that you have to be tough – that you have to be tough and really moving them.

Greg: Oh – you have to be forceful a bit...

Camila: Yeah, ((exasperated tone again)) and sometimes you just leave them alone, thinking, you know – you just tell them four things and < G: and then what?> then just leave them thinking – ‘cause they need to realize it on their own. That's something I think is really important – people need to know on their own, I mean we cannot tell them, “you want a union.” They need to want it. It's really not gonna work if they don't want it @@. ‘Cause, then there's no way to hold it, you know. Yeah, to enforce it, to hold it and then that's like one way their gonna want anything is like on their own.

Throughout the analysis section of this paper we have been referring to the dual nature of our informants' rhetorical framework – collective and individual. In order to move workers from an individual framework to a collective framework, one needs to be able to illustrate the difference for workers and show them that one way of going about achieving individual gain is by uniting with others. It is also important, as Camila points out, that workers come to this on their own. Organizers can push, but the workers have come to realize that there is power in joining others.

One caveat to the above analyses of retail organizing in this region would be this excellent summary of the general sociopolitical environment in Washtenaw County given by Amy.

Greg: Are there any unique barriers to organizing workers in Washtenaw County?

Amy: I think that one – the thing that jumps out at me about Washtenaw County probably more so 'cause I live in Ann Arbor and I go to school at the UM is that everything is driven by the rhythms of the academic year and on the one hand that's an opportunity - but on the other hand you have this huge flux in the population and also the fact that there are how many tens of thousands of people between the ages of 18-22 who are not, I would say, that's an age across the board that I think maybe haven't necessarily done a lot of analysis about – broadly, political issues and more specifically, class-based issues. So, I mean I think that the population itself can be a barrier – but it can also be a facilitating factor – if you think about – if you organize around the football season. Um, I don't know, maybe I should just stop there. But I do think also the other thing that is a double edged sword is that Ann Arbor is really progressive, but it's also very affluent – and so I feel like people often there's so much distance between, including students, I feel that a lot of UM students who could go door-knocking in Ypsi on Golfside – I feel like they're not having the same conversations I've been able to have working at the ***** to really know what the working conditions are like and the fact that there are a lot of people in our community who don't have any voice, y'know, any say and their working conditions. So, there's like this cloak of progressive politics that I think that sometimes can be a barrier and again, it could be an opportunity coz like, I think we could pass some local ordinance here that would be really hard to pass in a more conservative place.

Greg: Trying to wrap my head around, I see how it could be – the affluence piece makes it more of a barrier, but the progressive part – do people think that the tables have already been leveled here?

Amy: Yeah, yeah, I think it's how the two of them get linked - you're helping me clarify this here – I think the fact that, and I am speaking largely about Ann Arbor here, I think for example the fact that there are living wage ordinances here might make people think, “Oh, we've taken care of that problem. We don't have low wage workers here.” But I also think that the nature of the interests in, sort of, the progressive conversations is not always around work. It's around environment or it's around peace – and these things are all really linked – and I don't know, I consider myself progressive, but I think that people sometimes gravitate to more comfortable issues and I think talking about someone else's exploitation is maybe benefiting you @@@ is not a really comfortable conversation to have, so...

This is an important topic to note because all of the previous analyses dealt with conditions specific to each individual workplace. Another piece to organizing campaigns, if they are comprehensive, is taking into consideration the community environment in which the workplace exists.

Moreover, Amy's statements reflect this notion I like to call 'settled business' for organizing workers in this area. On one hand, because of the progressive nature of the town, people might not recognize oppression that exists right under their own nose. Some may think, “We have passed legislation that created a living wage, therefore, economic hardship is not as prevalent in our city/county/region.” Still, there is an abundance of activity around global social justice issues like the ones Amy mentions – environment and peace at the national and global level.

Perhaps we need a new aphorism to link the global and local movements – think globally, *effect* locally? We will not be able to have an effect on oppression at any level until we can confront oppression in our immediate environment. Amy's statements above, so precisely, clarify this point.

Discussion

The results from this study are manifold in nature. One overarching result indicates that workers who have ambivalent perceptions of unions and collective action, in general, *can* be moved to join with the group, if not to simply better their own quality of life.

One factor that was pretty much left out of most of the analysis is the national public perception of unions as corrupt troublemakers. Some informants referred to this as a deterrent to their participation in union action. Notwithstanding, the organizer informants have offered a technique that can individualize a worker's collective action inclination/disinclination. We can refer to this as the collective/individual action conundrum. This organizer action can be defined as moving a worker to collective action through the presentation of *plausible* individual gain(s).

Other significant results include the realization that fear can be mitigated, even transcended, by tapping into workers' anger feelings which are often generated by and related to respect issues in the workplace. The obverse of anger and disrespect experienced by workers include conditions and things sought by workers. Organizers should orient themselves to what conditions, e.g., pay/benefits, input in regard to work organization, respect, and job security.

One final implication for organizers is that they seek natural leaders when first building the action committee. These rank and file leaders are going to be the people with the power to mobilize the workforce to unified actions. They will also be the people that will 'hold' the organization together. In turn, this will hold power for the workers so that their work conditions will maintain and/or improve.

This study could be enhanced in several ways. One of these would be to increase the sample size. This would have an effect on the reliability and, in turn, the generalizability of the results. However, being a qualitative study, reliability was overshadowed by the subjective nature of the data gathering process.

This qualitative process could also be enhanced by other methodologies of analysis. A narrative analysis case study of one (or more) of the interviews could elicit much information about the complexities of how individuals are won over by collective action – or are repelled by it. The method used here had elements of narrative construction. However, the stories were broken up in order to illustrate interactional and transactional patterns. One, unbroken narrative analysis could yield very rich, detailed results.

The above recommendations could be combined with quantitative data regarding social and economic conditions within Washtenaw County to see if there are parallels with individual worker and organizer stories. Further research using this multi-design method could yield more comprehensive results.

Appendix 1

Semi-Structured Interview Formats

Worker questions

- 1) Could you tell us a little about how you began to do retail store work?
- 2) What sort of work do you do and how long have you performed that work?
- 3) How satisfied are you with the job?
- 4) How satisfied are you with your compensation?
- 5) How well do you get along with your fellow employees?
- 6) --With management/employers?
- 7) Would you say that you are, overall, satisfied with your working conditions and environment?
- 8) What, if anything, would you like to change at work?
- 9) What would you want to stay the same?
- 10) What is your feeling about how you would be received in asking management to implement one of your changes?
- 11) What is your knowledge of union activities in the Michigan and the U.S.?
- 12) Would you ever consider becoming part of a union? Explain why.
- 13) What would cause you to hesitate from becoming involved in a union?
- 14) If you found out today, from one of your co-workers, that a labor organizer was holding meetings after work in a discreet location what would you do (attend, ignore, report to management, etc.)?
- 15) What questions would you have for any such organizer?

- 16) Do you think unions are necessary to keep wages and compensation at decent levels for working individuals/families?
- 17) Suggestions from focus group discussion will be integrated to the wording, order, and inclusion of any additional questions.

Labor Organizer Questions

- 1) How did you become an organizer – what is your background?
- 2) What specifically is your work and how long have you been doing this?
- 3) How satisfied are you with the job?
- 4) How satisfied are you with your compensation?
- 5) How well do you get along with your fellow employees?
- 6) --With management/employers?
- 7) Would you say that you are, overall, satisfied with your working conditions and environment?
- 8) Would you ever consider organizing non-union retail store workers?
- 9) How many retail unions are you aware of that are active in Washtenaw County?
- 10) What effect has the living wage ordinances in Washtenaw County, Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, and Pittsfield Township had on worker wages and bargaining leverage with employers?
- 11) What do you feel needs to happen first to increase worker security - direct action or favorable legislation? Or something else?
- 12) How would you go about organizing a non-union retail store?
- 13) When meeting with interested workers, what would you say to them? What questions would you have for them?

- 14) Are there any unique barriers to organizing workers in Washtenaw County?
- 15) Do you see the current minimum wage campaign at the federal level having any effect on organizing in the retail sector?
- 16) Are there comparable locales you are aware of that have been successful at organizing retail workers? If so, what did they do?
- 17) Integrate any additional questions/discussion topics from the focus group sessions.

Appendix 2

Initial Analysis - Converging Themes

Barriers

- FEAR – prevents trust of others
- Union like structures w/in the workplace – other company functions that channel collectivism (grievance committees, pot lucks, contests for attendance with prizes)
- Sympathy for management/inability to fully accept adversarial relationship
- Institutionalized turnover
- Worker competitiveness for accolade, 25-cent raises, etc.
- Workers working multiple jobs
- Worker anti-union sentiment
- Community anti-union sentiment
- Inherent divisions among workers (across age, gender, ethnicity, other social sub-groups)
- Organizer strict adherence to strategic organizing
- Inherent capital power

Motivators

- FEAR – strategies to acknowledge and confront it
- Individual gain/collective power paradox
- Organizer focus on listening to workers/worker focus on open lines of communication
- Worker desire for respect and connectedness (a sub unit of this would be input and shared governance)
- Inherent camaraderie of workers
- Job insecurity (cuts both ways and is certainly a component of fear – a oft time indefinable fear)
- Worker realization that they are alone = no power
- Particularly nasty bosses can be the best organizers!

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