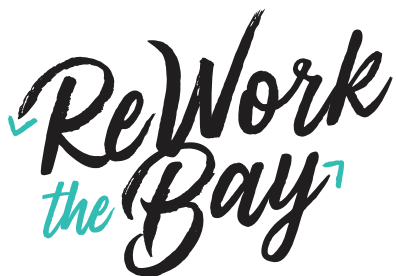


# Power is at the Root:

How Funders and Workforce  
Leaders Can Center Workers  
in the “Future of Work”

MAY 2021



**WORKING  
PARTNERSHIPS**  
USA



# CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....	4
Recommendation 1: Center workers as decision-makers.....	8
Recommendation 2: Forge a racially just future as essential to building worker power.....	14
Recommendation 3: Build collective power .....	21
Recommendation 4: Focus on the changes most affecting people’s lives .....	32
Recommendation 5: Shape technology to serve people .....	40
Conclusion.....	44
Acknowledgements.....	46
Endnotes.....	48



# Executive Summary

This project began in 2019 with a single question: what are the challenges and opportunities presented to Bay Area residents by the changing nature of work?

At the time, the national “future of work” discourse centered on robots, automation, artificial intelligence and big data. Little attention was being paid to people’s experiences on the ground, and the voices of workers and communities were largely drowned out by tech corporations, pundits and professional futurists.

Two years later, seismic shifts around us have further exposed huge and widening cracks in the foundation of our economic and social structures. Gig corporations such as Uber, Lyft and Doordash are engaged in a billion-dollar battle to fundamentally undermine employment laws and eliminate the social contract between workers and businesses. Climate catastrophes have become a regular occurrence, with alternate floods and wildfires ravaging California, destroying whole towns and threatening livelihoods. The Black Lives Matter movement has put a spotlight on how centuries of structural racism continue shaping our lives today. And COVID-19 laid bare how many essential workers — particularly workers of color, immigrants and women — are under-paid, over-worked, and lack the most fundamental protections for themselves and their families.

Over the course of this project, we scanned over a hundred Bay Area initiatives responding to changing aspects of work, interviewed philanthropic funders, worker advocates and grassroots organizers, and dove deep to ask worker and community leaders: What are the key “future of work” issues that we collectively need to tackle, and what roles can and should philanthropy and workforce development play? The following report is a synthesis of the collective wisdom, experience and insight that they generously shared with us, structured as action-oriented recommendations organized around five themes:

## Center workers as decision makers

The conversation around the future of work is an opportunity, not only to understand how work is changing and what are the drivers of change, but for workers to engage in the conversation, to project themselves and their needs into that future, to hold a conversation about the *potential* of work, for workers. The potential of work lies ahead in improving job quality, sustainability, and

equity. And in order to fully realize those potentials, organized workers must be at the table as equal partners where policies are being designed and decisions made.

Centering workers also means that analysis of and investments in the “future of work” should be driven by workers’ lived experience: not just as a data point, but as ongoing engagement with workers and organizers that positions them to evaluate the work and course-correct as it goes. Working people have the most valuable insights about what needs to change inside workplaces and in our economy to deliver more equity. Whether we work as a plumber or a program officer, we know the ins and outs of our daily work, and we understand what changes could help us do things better. People who work at a job should have a say in how to get the job done.

## **Forge a racially just future as essential to building worker power**

Systemic racism has been embedded in the U.S. economy since the enslavement of Black people and the seizure of land from indigenous peoples. Today, communities of color and undocumented immigrants are often working in fields where their work is undervalued or unseen, excluded from financial stability and mobility. When workforce initiatives do target historically marginalized communities, the structure and incentives built into those programs often serves to perpetuate, rather than challenge, existing inequities.

To achieve more equitable outcomes, we need to do a better job at valuing the skills, knowledge, and labor of people of color, immigrants, and women in the jobs they are already in. Respect for workers’ skills and assets should be the center of any strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully brought home both the critical importance of the work done by “essential” workers, and the enormous undervaluing in our society of that work and the people who do it.

There will always be blue-collar and service sector jobs and a need for people to do those jobs. How do we transform those into desirable, high-skilled careers? How can workforce development empower people to transform their own workplaces? More broadly, can we re-envision both workforce development and economic policies to focus on eliminating systemic barriers to an inclusive economy; undoing patterns of occupational segregation; and valuing the work done by people of color, immigrants and women?

## Build collective power

Centering working people includes supporting workers' own approaches to organizing and improving their lives. Millions of working people in the country today organize and bargain collectively through a labor union as one of the most effective ways of building power and achieving lasting change. At the same time, many workers are unable to unionize due to legal barriers or other power imbalances, and have developed alternative forms of collective organizing such as workers' centers, associations or mutual aid groups.

What does it mean to support collective power, as opposed to individual? Building individual power is a zero-sum game; increasing one person's power within the existing system implies reducing someone else's power. Building collective power, on the other hand, means changing workplace dynamics, political frameworks or social structures so that communities of people collectively can all have a say over issues that affect them.

Unions and worker organizations help change the incentives from individual to collective. By applying the same rules and pay structure to all employees, and by bargaining similar contracts across multiple employers, they can help take pay and benefits out of the race to the bottom, allowing employers with good practices to flourish by creating an incentive to invest in worker retention, skill-building and advancement.

Systemic change that enables collective power will require greater collaboration and a collective approach from all of us: worker organizations, workforce development practitioners, employers, funders and more.

## Focus on the changes most affecting people's lives

In order to center workers, analysis of the "future of work" must focus not just on technology, but also address other trends with equal or greater impact on workers and communities, including:

- Expanding contingent and nonstandard work arrangements, such as subcontracting and gig work
- Changing demands for skills
- The growth and decline of industries
- Economic shifts resulting from climate change;
- The introduction of workplace technologies other than automation

We also must recognize that the issues that affect workers extend past their role at the workplace. Workplace issues are intertwined with issues of race, gender, climate change, mass incarceration, childcare, health care, housing, immigration, and more. Working people are people first — a “whole worker” approach recognizes the intersections of all of these issues in our lives.

## **Shape technology to serve people**

There is great opportunity in new technology. We can choose to use technology to enhance work, reduce drudgery, and move towards equity and empowerment. However, new technology can also be deployed in ways that replicate existing power imbalances, and amplify social and economic inequities.

To integrate technology into work in a way that empowers workers and increases equity, we need to design and deploy tech in ways that are informed by workers’ real-world expertise in their field, and that seek to make work better for people. The impact of a new technology on working people and their communities depends on whether workers are able to exercise collective power to shape the terms under which it is introduced and used.

# **Recommendation 1: Center workers as decision-makers**



## Take the lead from workers who are defining problems and developing solutions related to the future of work.

The initial stage of this project drew a key conclusion: the conversation around the future of work is an opportunity, not only to understand how work is changing and what are the drivers of change, but for workers to engage in the conversation, to project themselves and their needs into that future, and to hold a conversation about the *potential* of work.

The potential of work lies ahead in improving job quality, sustainability, and equity. And in order to fully realize those potentials, workers need the power to do so. This future can belong to workers — not as subjects, but as agents of change who can actively shape a future for all.

However, too often “future of work” priorities are driven by trendy, attention grabbing themes — robot bartenders! 3-D printed food! — rather than by the real-life experiences, priorities, and expertise of working people. It’s important to look past sensationalism to understand what is really happening at a structural level, and the race, gender and class implications of proposed solutions.

*“The mainstream dialogue about future of work doesn’t engage the workers who are directly affected, doesn’t address the race and gender implications...Learning about some of the last-mile distribution systems for Amazon, we saw there were a lot more women of color working in those than we had understood recently. They were doing a lot of the picking work – putting together your box for Amazon Prime of the random five things you ordered that don’t go together. Different than driving a forklift around. For that kind of work that’s ‘invisible’, the race and gender impacts of it are much less understood.”*

**Kate O’Hara**

Executive Director, EBASE

## **Analyze issues by centering the lived experience of workers along the intersections of race, class and gender, while relating to workers as leaders and decision-makers, not objects of study.**

Working people have the most valuable insights about what needs to change inside workplaces and in our economy to deliver more equity. Whether we work as a nurse, a plumber, a teacher or a housekeeper, we know the ins and outs of our daily work, and we understand what changes could help us do things better. People who work at a job should have a say in how to get the job done.

To make this a reality, workers' lived experience needs to drive conversations and investments in the "future of work," not just as a data point, but as ongoing engagement with workers and organizers that positions them to evaluate the work and course-correct as it goes. Organized workers in workers' centers and unions must be at the table when strategies that affect their members are being crafted. Workers should not be mere objects of study or experiment; they should be coequal partners in designing, deploying, and evaluating new policies and practices.

This means inviting unions and worker organizations into spaces where businesses, founders, academics or government entities are making policy, even if including working people on an equal footing makes those spaces less comfortable for those who have long occupied them. Discomfort is an important and necessary part of learning to challenge our unconscious biases and begin to envision structural change.

# EXAMPLES

## Participation in corporate and policy-making boards

Institutionalizing worker presence on policy-setting boards, whether that's in governmental or corporate settings, can help empower workers to define problems and develop solutions related to the future of work.

**Corporate boards:** In Germany and other European countries, having workers on corporate boards is required by law. Recent activities in the U.S. have sought to advance this idea. In April 2020, Senator Elizabeth Warren and Congressman Ro Khanna tried to make worker representation on corporate boards a condition for corporations to receive aid. The following month, a long-term Walmart employee and leader of the worker organization United for Respect advanced a shareholder proposal calling for hourly workers to be included on Walmart's board.

**Public policy boards:** Sectoral standards boards can help to define problems and advance solutions across an industry. However, workers and advocates have raised concerns that if sectoral approaches replicate existing power dynamics, they could result in lowering workplace standards; for example, prominent ride-hailing companies Uber and Lyft have sought sectoral approaches as an alternative to allowing workers to organize or to access basic rights like minimum wage. To avoid this dilemma, sectoral standards boards can be structured so that workers have not just a token seat, but real, representative power. For example, in 2019 Seattle's City Council established a Domestic Workers Standards Board (DWSB), a 13-member board composed of domestic workers, advocates, and employers. So far, the DWSB has advocated for greater support to domestic workers during the COVID pandemic and funding for a domestic worker-centric portable benefits scheme.

## Joint labor-employer committees can harness frontline worker knowledge to meet worksite needs

With the right institutional scaffolding, frontline workers can deploy their expertise to develop programs that meet urgent needs. Building Skills Partnership (BSP) is an organization funded by unions and employers that supports workers in low-wage industries through programs like workplace training and language education to facilitate immigrant integration. At the

beginning of the pandemic, BSP convened workers and representatives from the union SEIU - United Services Workers West to work jointly with employers to develop an Infectious Disease Certification Program, which included comprehensive training on the spread of airborne and bloodborne diseases more generally, not just COVID-19, and how to prevent contagion through enhanced cleaning techniques. In the words of BSP's Executive Director, Luis Sandoval, "It's reinventing the role of janitors — these workers are not just janitors, now they're frontline workers fighting to keep us all safe." The State of California has recognized the importance of this approach and taken it up as a model for the High Road Training Partnerships initiative, which now includes sectoral partnerships strategies in eight industries: logistics, janitorial, healthcare, hospitality, ports, public sector, transit, and water.

## WHOLE WORKER ORGANIZING

We need to broaden our understanding of what is considered a “worker issue:” the issues that affect workers extend past their role at the workplace. Workplace issues are intertwined with issues of race, gender, climate change, mass incarceration, childcare, health care, housing, immigration, and more. Workers are people — a “whole worker” approach recognizes the intersections of all of these issues in people’s lives.

When we begin to examine the full range of issues that affect workers’ livelihood, we quickly see how problems are interconnected and amplify one another. Increasing costs of housing in a region will quickly evaporate paycheck gains. A worker’s immigration status, or a past experience with incarceration, can add a web of institutional barriers to navigate on and off the job. Gendered dynamics may not only burden women to devote a greater share of their time toward household labor when they’re at home, but devalue the types of labor historically done by women, like care work.

A worker’s experience as a single parent, renter, caretaker, first-generation immigrant, partner, neighbor — each cannot be understood in isolation from the others. An impact in the wellbeing in one part of a person’s life will impact all other areas of their life.

# **Recommendation 2: Forge a racially just future as essential to building worker power**

In the wake of the uprising in Ferguson in 2014, fast food workers with the Fight for \$15 and Black Lives Matter activists in the Bay Area organized joint actions where they held banners that said “Underpaid & Overpoliced.” Racial justice and economic justice are inseparable to workers of color. And for all workers, racial justice is essential to building power and achieving a just economy.

From the enslavement of Black people, to the seizure of land from indigenous people, to the immigration and economic policies that use the labor of Latinx and Asian people but don’t value them as people, systemic racism is embedded in the very function of the US economy.

For much of the past four centuries of our nation’s history, ultra-wealthy corporations and magnates have accumulated wealth from systemic racism. They have also used structural racism as a tool to divide Black, indigenous, workers of color and white workers; preventing them from creating and working towards shared goals such as taking care of one’s family, living in a vibrant, supportive community, and participating in dignified and meaningful work. In doing so, white and wealthy elites not only benefit from the systemic racism that harms workers of color, but use it to disempower working people and communities. White supremacy has also drawn some white workers to accept what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the “wages of whiteness” and privileges of white identity, rather than build cross-racial solidarity and power that would advance the interests of white workers and workers of color together.

If we are to achieve the dream of a just economy, it is imperative that we dismantle racism. What does this look like on the ground?

## **Prioritize marginalized groups – and set high goals.**

In economic development, workforce development initiatives, and public policy in California, there is widespread agreement that we need to pursue and prioritize equity. Yet doing so requires a deliberate, intensive, and ongoing effort to push against the inertia created by centuries of oppression. As a result, communities of color and undocumented immigrants who have historically been underserved by our education and economic systems and excluded from the state’s prosperity are too often still left out of mainstream systems and institutions.

When workforce initiatives do target historically marginalized communities, the structure and incentives built into those programs often serves to perpetuate, rather than challenge, existing inequalities. The national workforce system’s

focus on getting the most people into any job as fast as possible is ill suited to transformational efforts. By pushing jobseekers — especially people of color — into low-quality jobs, workforce systems may unwittingly contribute to inequality through their collective market making role via their interventions in labor market supply and demand. Workforce systems can learn how to use that role to incentivize and resource positive employer behaviors and models, while avoiding practices that subsidize negative employer behaviors.

Improving the quality of jobs that exist in the community is also necessary. We can re-envision “workforce development” to focus on structural change that lifts up job quality overall and transforms poverty-level jobs into skilled careers. Policy change can and should be integrated with workforce development: working towards eliminating systemic barriers to an inclusive economy for all, while re-imagining existing systems that replicate existing patterns of inequity and exclusion.

*“If you continue to devalue work that’s mostly done by immigrants and women of color, you’re going to continue to have a messed up lens of success ... we should also remember, it’s not about upskilling workers—it’s about upgrading jobs.”*

**Mariana Viturro**

Deputy Director, National Domestic Workers Alliance

## **Respect jobs done by people of color and women as valuable work.**

To achieve any system change, we need to do a better job at valuing the labor of workers in the jobs they are already in. Respect for workers’ skills and assets should be the center of any strategy. The COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully brought home both the critical importance of the work done by “essential” workers, and the enormous undervaluing in our society of that work and the people — largely people of color — who do it.

There will always be blue-collar and service sector jobs and a need for people to do those jobs. How do we transform those into desirable, high-skilled careers? How do we re-organize and professionalize work in those industries so that people in service or blue-collar jobs can learn and advance in their field? And how can workforce development empower people to transform their own workplaces?



This may also mean that our systems and institutions need to broaden their definitions of what counts as skills and as work. Many immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area make their living as domestic workers, day laborers, or as informal microentrepreneurs. Some may have decades of experience and talent that they have developed in their line of work. Yet workforce development, education, and other government systems often are not equipped to recognize these as “real” jobs that entail knowledge, skill and commitment.

*“Our workers are professionals in the food service industry, from the dishwasher to the manager. This is a huge industry that should be considered a career path. There is skill, creativity, there are so many transferable skills, despite the idea that is often pushed that this is not a “real job.” When you go to a new city, you want to go to a restaurant - you value it as a service. Yet many don’t value [food service] as a real job.”*

**Maria Moreno**

Organizer, ROC the Bay

Rather, too much of our national workforce development approach is grounded in the supply-side, deficit-based model that assumes people who are unemployed or work in low-wage jobs are deficient and need to be ‘fixed’, rather than acknowledging that a labor market that generates massive numbers of poverty-level jobs is broken. This mentality not only negatively impacts the workers themselves, it creates unrealistic expectations of workforce programs. To respect workers means to view all work with dignity; to quote the Nonprofit Housing Association’s “Shift the Narrative” Playbook, we should strive to “Locate the racial and ethnic disparities in policies and systems, not in the individual failings of people or their lack of skills.”

*“The workforce development world doesn’t view day labor as work. But the framing should really be: well, how can we best support workers in the informal economy? [They could use] entrepreneurship, know your rights, and workplace safety trainings. To my knowledge, that’s not considered workforce development. It’s about what employers need and how we can get workers there. Workforce development should consider how we support present worker needs, and broaden what we mean by work and who is a worker. People are rational actors that make the best decisions for themselves. Working for cash is sometimes the thing that makes the most sense.”*

**Sasha Feldstein**

Economic Justice Policy Manager, California Immigrant Policy Center

## EXAMPLES

### **Domestic worker organizing to remedy the legacies of racist policymaking**

The National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is a network of over 60 affiliates across the U.S. through which domestic workers are organizing to win labor protections, recognition, and respect on the job. In an industry overwhelmingly made up of women of color and immigrants, many of whom are undocumented, NDWA drives narrative change to counter the historic devaluation of domestic labor. The message that “domestic work is real work” as well as “the work that makes all other work possible” is a cornerstone of external communications and a guiding value in day-to-day activities. NDWA affiliates work to end the exclusion of domestic work from state and federal labor protections, the legacy of racist deal-making in the 1930s. At the time of writing, the California Domestic Workers Coalition is campaigning to pass SB 321, The Health and Safety for All Workers Act, which would end the exclusion of domestic workers from CalOSHA workplace protections.

## Valuing the essential labor and skills of care workers

Homebridge is a San Francisco-based home care provider that employs about 450 people to provide in-home care and supportive services. Its model has long emphasized employee empowerment, including paid training for caregivers and a unionized workforce.

When COVID-19 hit, the job of an in-home care provider became even more essential – and more hazardous. In response, Homebridge negotiated a \$2 an hour hazard pay differential for its frontline workers, as well as providing supports including leave programs, transportation, priority access to childcare and food resources.

At the same time, Homebridge not only adapted its classes to COVID protocols, but expanded its training programs, which incorporate wage tiers so that workers receive pay increases as they advance through training. They are now preparing to launch a Certified Nursing Assistant course: a 12-week, fully-paid program for current caregivers that will enable them to advance in their careers while filling much needed roles as CNAs, with starting wages above \$25/hour on a certified healthcare career ladder.

With this model, Homebridge has continued to attract and retain employees even for the difficult and dangerous work of caring during COVID. In the first quarter of 2021 they hired approximately 70 new workers, more than in any quarter in the past four years.

## Envision a future of work that rebuilds the power of workers, undoing the historic and ongoing power shift from workers to firms, and counteracting persistent structural racism and gender oppression.

In interviews and engagement with worker and community organizations for this project, we encountered greater and deeper focus on building collective power than on any other topic.

While mainstream “future of work” conversations tend to focus on robots, AI and “skills gaps” – and we did hear valuable insights from participants about workplace technologies and skills training– the largest impact on workers’ lives, and the solutions they see needed, had less to do with technology or training than with equity, organizing and power.

Broadly speaking, we use power to describe the ability to make change. Power is commonly interpreted as “power over,” the power of domination or coercion, where a person or group has control over another person or group. “Power over” is a zero-sum contest; one group wins power at the expense of another. The collective power we refer to can be described instead as “power with.” “Power with” is power based in collaboration and relationships of mutuality. It is a shared power, created through collective action towards collective interests. Domestic workers, people with disabilities and elders used collective “power with” in joining together to pass the Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in California.

The following action recommendations to support collective power building were synthesized from interviews with worker and community organizations.

*“Paz was still in the hospital. One of her places of employment had run out of sick days, and the other refused to give them to her. The boss from KFC told her over the phone that he wasn’t able to give her any more sick days, but he could give her a chicken sandwich. That’s not a skills and education problem — that’s a power problem.”*

**Adam Weisberg**

Fight for \$15

# **Recommendation 3:**

## **Build collective power**

## **Recognize the existing power imbalance between working people and corporations, and support working people and communities of color in organizing for change.**

The future of work is shaped by conscious human choices. Those choices are made by people and institutions with power. Power is at the root.

For most of us, “power” means self-determination: the ability to make decisions for ourselves and to shape the course of our own lives, rather than having those choices and circumstances forced onto us by others. In the context of economics and work, having collective power in the workplace — “power with” one’s co-workers and community — might mean, for example, that a group of workers can choose to set up their workplace and work process in a way that improves safety, rather than being forced to work in hazardous conditions. Economic power could also mean that we set up our workplaces and communities so that a working parent can choose to take time off work to focus on raising their young children, or can choose to continue their career without being penalized.

Ideally, power is balanced in a way that gives people the most say over decisions that affect them most directly, and where there is conflict, encourages people to come together on equal footing to find mutual solutions. However, in recent years, structural power in the United States has swung sharply in the opposite direction, tilting our economy even more towards the powerful few. As a result, workers’ wages have stagnated as the powerful few have monopolized all the gains from economic growth. And racial inequality has worsened: between 2000 and 2019, the already-large wage disparity between Black workers and white workers increased, so that even after adjusting for differences in region, education, age and gender, by 2019 Black workers in the United States made 14.9% less than comparable white workers.<sup>2</sup>

The growth of racial and economic inequity in the past several decades was not inevitable, but the product of conscious choices by corporations and wealthy investors who shaped government policies and social institutions in their favor. The use of wealth and influence to shape laws and social norms in order to swing the balance of power further towards the wealthy few has created a feedback loop in which power has become dangerously unbalanced, leading to our inability to adequately tackle collective issues like climate change or, as the last year has proven, to address the inequitable and unnecessarily deadly impacts and economic pain of a global pandemic.

How did we get here? Today's unbalanced economic relationships, and the resulting social instability, have been shaped by a series of ideologies and policy frameworks put in place over the past 40 years. Beginning in the early 1980s, policymakers in the Reagan administration, backed by business lobbyists, conservative academics and think tanks, implemented a set of neoliberal economic policies designed to deregulate corporations, weaken labor standards, privatize public services, reduce progressive taxation, and weaken the social safety net.

These policies represented a break from post-WW2 decades where stronger corporate regulation, robust union membership, and well-enforced worker protections helped to maintain an employer-subsidized system of health care, retirement benefits, and unemployment insurance for many full-time workers. However, racially biased policies and practices systematically excluded many people of color from this period of relative prosperity. For example, federal policymakers excluded predominantly Black and Latino farm and domestic workers from Social Security and labor protections, while legal segregation and redlining excluded African Americans from opportunities for education, home ownership, and many types of quality employment. Without a clear racial equity commitment, progressive economic policies will fail to reach, or even exclude, workers of color. And in the long run, our struggle for economic justice can only succeed if we address the racial injustice our economy is built upon, and bring workers of color and white workers together to build collective power.

Today, declining job quality and shrinking middle-class opportunities are widespread problems affecting nearly every segment of the American workforce, even in high-growth, high-tech economic centers like the Bay Area. The emergence of inequality and instability as a defining feature of the "new economy" is a direct result of policymakers, politicians, and corporate leaders using policy and business decisions to shift power away from workers and towards firms and economic elites. A few ways this has manifested include:

- Systematic attacks on worker's rights and ability to organize and exercise collective power have contributed to the growing power imbalance between workers and corporations. Starting in the 1970's corporations increasingly fought unionization, and began fully taking advantage of anti-labor laws such as the Taft Hartley Act and weak labor law enforcement.<sup>3</sup> By the 1980's, a decade where growing attacks on unions was symbolized by Ronald Reagan's firing of 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, workers participating in union organizing were 25 times more likely to be illegally fired as compared to the 1950's when

unionization rates were highest.<sup>4</sup> Combined, this created an increasingly hostile political, legal and workplace environment for unionization. At their height, unions represented one-third of workers nationwide and gave workers leverage to negotiate on working conditions, pay transparency and equity, protections against workplace discrimination, and benefits like health insurance and pensions. Today, despite increasing popular support to join a union, only 11.6 percent of U.S. workers have collective bargaining representation.

- A radical shift in corporate governance to ‘shareholder primacy’, a system where corporate boards and executives exclusively prioritize the interests of a company’s shareholders or investors, has pushed out earlier models where businesses had the freedom to balance investors’ interests with those of employees, communities and other stakeholders. Today, in order to maximize quarterly shareholder profits, corporations reduce labor costs by slashing benefits, outsourcing work, and spending profits on stock buybacks rather than productive activities. As a result, starting in the early 1970s, productivity growth in the United States became decoupled from wage growth, meaning that virtually all of the increased value from production is going to owners, investors, and executives, while workers’ pay stagnates.

Forging a ‘future of work’ that rebalances power between people and corporations will require long-term efforts aimed at deep structural change. To incorporate an analysis of power dynamics into a ‘future of work’ program or portfolio, key questions to engage with include:

- How are workers and communities of color organizing for change right now?
- What would it really mean to organize working people to build enough power to enact structural change?
- How can organizing to build the power of working people shape the future of work and improve workforce outcomes?

*“Power is at the root. Choices are being made by people with power. The status quo is the outcome of people’s choices, not the inevitable or natural result of technological innovation.”*

**Shaw San Liu**

*Executive Director, Chinese Progressive Association*



## Act as an ally to working people who are organizing collectively.

On their own, most individual workers or jobseekers in the United States have virtually no power relative to corporations. Employers set wages, determine working conditions, and can hire or fire at will. Moreover, an individual worker has very little influence over political and economic structures, while corporate lobbyists are shaping those structures.

Gaining education is always beneficial to an individual worker, but it does not materially shift the balance of power. Contrary to perceptions of progress, the racial wage penalty for Black workers has been growing since the 1980s, even as the educational attainment of African Americans has steadily increased.<sup>5</sup> Black women face an even harsher wage penalty; Black women earn 33.7% less than white men with the same education, age and region.<sup>6</sup> History has shown that the only way to remedy this imbalance is through shifting from an individual competitive framework to a collaborative, collective approach.

One of the most effective ways that working people in the United States can build power and achieve change is to organize and bargain collectively through a labor union. Workers who choose to come together to form a union can bargain collectively with the employer and reach a binding and enforceable agreement. Not only do they have greater bargaining power as a group, union workers elect their own representatives and vote on whether or not to approve a contract. And they have legal protections against retaliation for organizing efforts, although enforcement of those rights is sorely lacking in much of the country.

Unions have overall been a force for racial equity, but have also at times supported racial exclusion and discrimination. In the early 1900's, most unions excluded Black workers. But by the 1960's, nearly 40% of Black workers were part of unions.<sup>7</sup> Today, Black workers in the United States are still more likely to belong to a union than any other racial or ethnic group, and joining a union raises a Black worker's pay by 13.7%, while white workers joining a union see a smaller increase of 8.7%.<sup>8</sup> Unionization not only helps reduce racial inequality in wages, but has also been shown to reduce racial wealth inequality.<sup>9</sup> Women of color have the most to gain from unionization because of the added positive impact of unions on gender pay equity. The undermining of worker power and unionization rates over the last several decades is one of the major reasons why racial inequality in pay has increased since the 1980s.

Union workers often use their power to achieve gains for workers broadly, such as raising minimum wages or passing paid sick and parental leave. For example, low-wage, largely non-union workers in 29 states and D.C. won \$61.5 billion in higher minimum wages<sup>10</sup> in a movement sparked by SEIU's Fight for \$15 campaign. Higher union standards also raise the floor for everyone.

At the same time, many workers are unable to unionize, due to legal barriers, contingent or contracted work structures, or other power imbalances. People in these situations have developed alternative forms of collective organizing, such as workers' centers, associations, or even social media groups dedicated to mutual aid and collective action.

Centering working people includes supporting and acting in allyship to workers' own approaches to organizing and bargaining collectively. This means supporting working people's efforts to unionize, to negotiate contracts and to organize in alternative models for pursuing collective bargaining. It also means supporting alternative power-building structures developed by workers who cannot unionize, like day laborers or gig workers.

Workforce development is particularly fraught terrain in this regard. Workforce development services and short-term training do not automatically serve or empower workers - it depends on the model and underlying approach. Is the goal to empower participants to meet their needs and goals (individual, family and community), or is the goal to ensure that corporations have access to a readily available labor pool?

Most workforce development programs sit within funding systems, metrics, and structures which incentivize those programs to actively avoid involvement with unions or worker organizations that advocate for health, safety, fair pay and a voice on the job. Very few workforce development providers offer such basics as "know your rights" workshops or training on how to collectively address hazards, discrimination, or harassment in the workplace. Workers collectively advocating for their rights — even simply asking for enforcement of existing laws — is seen as adversarial or off-putting to certain employers.

## **At all scales, prioritize approaches that build collective power and contribute to structural change. Clearly differentiate between collective, pro-worker strategies versus zero-sum approaches.**

What does it mean to build collective power, as opposed to individual? Building individual power is a zero-sum game; increasing one person's power *within* the existing system implies reducing someone else's power. Building collective power, on the other hand, means changing workplace dynamics, political frameworks or social structures so that communities of people collectively can all exercise power over issues that affect them.

This is a key principle to center when thinking about systems change or scaling up impacts. Moving from individual impacts to systemic change is not a numbers game – it does not mean going from one individual to more individuals. Rather it requires a profound shift from providing charity towards individuals within a fixed structure, to changing the power dynamics of the structure itself.

This shift has the potential to benefit not just working people and communities, but business owners themselves, by fixing some of the perverse incentives they face today. The rise of the fissured workplace and increasingly fragmented labor market creates a disincentive for employers to nurture and cultivate a skilled, empowered workforce. Even if an individual employer wants to pay a livable wage and create internal career ladders, if their competitor can gain a temporary price advantage by paying lower wages, cutting corners on safety or training, or skirting labor laws, the high-road employer may be forced to adopt these harmful employment practices as well in order to attract customers or investors. Financialization, the dominance of the financial sector and actors in our economy, has redoubled this negative incentive as investors and lenders push companies to cut costs without regard for the effect on the long-term productivity and sustainability of the industry, let alone broader societal impacts.

The dynamics of employer relationships with workforce development or job placement programs can actually make this problem worse. Often the low-road employers are the most likely to turn to such programs for recruitment — because those companies who do not pay workers what they are worth, or who have a reputation of creating a poor work environment, are precisely the companies who have difficulty recruiting qualified workers even for entry-level

jobs. Combined with funding incentives and metrics that push for placing the maximum possible number of people in employment within a short timeframe, these dynamics can result in disproportionately placing jobseekers from those programs with those employers that invest the least in their workforce.

Unions and worker organizing help change the incentives from individual to collective. By applying the same rules and pay structure to all employees, and by bargaining similar contracts across multiple employers, they can help take pay and benefits out of the race to the bottom, removing the incentive to pay as little as possible and instead creating an incentive to invest in worker retention, skill-building and advancement.

Making systems change will require greater collaboration and a collective approach from all of us: worker organizations, workforce development practitioners, employers and funders. Collaboration is part of a movement building approach that understands societal change comes from multiple groups and broad sections of people acting in concert, not individual heroes. Funders can join organizers in efforts that prioritize movement building.

# EXAMPLES

## **How power-building can strengthen the practice of workforce development**

The Culinary Academy of Las Vegas is a training institute and partnership between the Culinary and Bartenders Unions and the multiple Las Vegas employers they bargain with. The Academy is remarkable because it affords workers the ability to enter the Las Vegas hospitality industry and meaningfully scale up a career ladder where jobs are high-quality and family-sustaining. This is possible because the unions have a relationship based in power with a wide enough set of employers in a given industry--the end result of decades of organizing. The bargaining power of workers in the hospitality union allows them to partner on equal footing with employers to jointly shape both training and employment. The Culinary Academy partners with 35 major employers, each of whom contributes to the training trust fund that supports the classes.

Since its inception in 1993, the program has trained over 55,000 individuals. In 2018, their student body was over 50% Latinx, 16% African American, and 11% API. Today, the Culinary Academy offers both entry-level programs and training for incumbent workers to advance up to higher-paying positions, as well as ESL and digital skills courses. For entry-level jobseekers, if they earn a certificate of completion, employer partners have agreed to recognize that as equivalent to one year of work experience. For incumbent workers, flexible scheduling enables them to complete upgrades training while working, gaining skills to advance in their careers.

## **Power-building requires diverse types of infrastructure for collective action**

In industries like retail and fast food, where structural, legal and logistical challenges make unionization extremely difficult, alternative organizational forms and tools can support the ability of workers to act collectively. Coworker.org is one example: a digital platform that allows workers to launch petitions for improvements in their workplaces. Its project, The Solidarity Fund, is a crowdfunded mutual-aid effort in which workers pool funds to support organizing within their industries while providing peer mentorship and coaching.

## How funders can help to nurture a movement ecosystem

In our interviews, The James Irvine Foundation came up multiple times as an example of a funder doing innovative work to help build a movement, not just individual organizations. Some practices highlighted include:

**Long-term funding** which recognizes that the work of creating structural change is slow and steady. Long-term funding gives organizations the freedom and flexibility to make multi-year plans.

**Technical assistance and capacity building** recognizes that organizations benefit from support beyond the financial, leveraging the foundation's connections to experts to help grantees do work more effectively.

**Strong convening practice** provides opportunities for organizations to build relationships and see the bigger picture. It fosters a collaborative, rather than competitive environment, in contrast to a status quo where nonprofit organizations in a similar field might be more used to competing for funding.

The changing nature of work encompasses multiple intersecting trends. While headlines and pundits have popularized the notion that “robots are taking our jobs”, the reality is that automation, while important, is only one of several major, long-term shifts in how work is organized and in worker-employer dynamics.

Changes in economic and political norms, accelerating climate change, shifting migration patterns and policies, and a host of other trends are likely to impact—and indeed already are impacting—key features of work and employment. This includes management relationships, the types of jobs available, compensation patterns, and other issues that shape the day-to-day lives of working people.

In the Bay Area and Silicon Valley, a global epicenter of innovation and extraordinary wealth, low-income communities and communities of color struggle with crises in housing affordability, health equity, and economic stability, while climate change makes itself felt through droughts, heat waves and increasingly destructive wildfires. If Bay Area funders, advocates, policymakers, and worker organizations ever hope to realize quality, empowered jobs for all, we must first be able to articulate how work is changing in real, concrete terms that are guided by the lived experience of working people, especially people of color, immigrants, and others who are often pushed to the margins by mainstream discourse.

In order to center workers, analysis of the “future of work” must therefore not just focus on technology, but also emphasize other trends with equal or greater impact on workers and communities, including economic shifts resulting from climate change, expanding contingent and nonstandard work arrangements, changing demands for skills, the growth and decline of industries, and workplace technologies other than automation.

Following are brief introductions to each of the highlighted trends. More in-depth discussion and examples of Bay Area workforce initiatives attempting to address each of these issues can be found in our earlier report, “[Understanding and Responding to the Changing Nature of Work](#).”

# **Recommendation 4: Focus on the changes most affecting people's lives**



*“Obviously there’s automation happening, but I don’t really see that as the next wave of disruption to the janitorial workforce. There will be some introduction of automation, robots, cleaning machines into the janitorial workforce, but I think [disruption] is going to be around our contractors, trying to meet the demands that are put on them to address issues of climate change, issues of equity. Those pressures are going to influence how they define the work of janitors and how the industry’s defined.”*

**Luis Sandoval**

Executive Director, Building Skills Partnership

## **Address expanding contingent and nonstandard work arrangements.**

For Bay Area workers who struggle to make ends meet, low wages are only part of the problem. Another dimension of economic insecurity is workers’ lack of control over their time: fluctuating work schedules, inability to take time off, how many work hours they get per week, or even how long their work assignment will last.

Over the past several decades, business models in the United States have significantly shifted away from long-term, stable employment towards an increased share of what’s called “contingent work”. This shift includes changes in how work is structured – away from a fixed 40-hour workweek with a predictable income, towards an ever-changing landscape of hours and gigs that workers are forced to navigate daily. It also encompasses changes in the relationship between worker and employer, which is pushing increasingly larger segments of the workforce into outsourced, subcontracted, or other arms-length relationships with the corporation that has ultimate control over their pay and working conditions.

A recent, highly visible example of these shifts is the intense political and legal campaign by corporations such as Uber, Lyft and Doordash attempting to legitimize their model of employment, which relies on controlling workers as employees, while classifying them as non-employees. This model means

that workers have neither the power of true business owners – they cannot set their own rates or terms, are not allowed to seek their own customers, and are penalized if they refuse work – nor do they have the rights and protections afforded employees. Under this business model, workers have no right to the minimum wage, equal opportunity employment, occupational health and safety, disability accommodations, family medical leave, unemployment insurance, or workers' compensation, and are explicitly banned from organizing collectively or forming a union.

It is important to note that the choice to use this model, while facilitated by technology, is independent of the technology itself. Not all app-based companies rely on worker misclassification; some classify their workers as employees (for example, e-scooter company Spin in San Francisco)<sup>11</sup>, while others are true intermediaries where independent contractors and small businesses can set their own prices and terms directly with the client, and are not subject to control of their labor by the app. Furthermore, this type of employment arrangement is not new. The employment model being propagated by Uber, Lyft, Doordash and their ilk bears many similarities to piecework, a type of employment arrangement that was outlawed in the United States by the Fair Labor Standards Act Amendments of 1949.<sup>12</sup>

The ongoing campaign to re-define gig workers as non-employees is only one manifestation of this larger ongoing shift in employment structures. Over the past several decades, many corporations have pushed their employees towards temporary, part-time, or on-call employment, leading to unpredictable work schedules, hours and incomes. This shift has spurred the design of work scheduling technologies that could be used to support workers, but in practice make it easier for employers to cancel or reschedule a worker's shift at a moment's notice, or even to assign an algorithm to make shift changes, so that workers cannot hold their human managers responsible.

Along a different axis of change, many corporations have increasingly looked to reduce their obligations as employers through mechanisms such as subcontracting, outsourcing, or use of staffing agencies. For example, in the past three decades Silicon Valley's tech industry has undergone a profound shift towards subcontracting a large and increasing portion of its workforce: between 1990 and 2014, the number of Silicon Valley jobs in subcontracting industries grew three times as fast as overall regional employment. By building not just a glass ceiling, but a concrete wall between subcontracted and direct hire workers, this trend has contributed to occupational segregation in the tech industry. While Black or Latinx workers make up 60 to 75% of those employed in subcontracted occupations, they are only 10% of Silicon Valley's direct tech

workforce.<sup>13</sup>

At a structural level, all of these changes shift economic risk away from employers onto individual families and households, who are ill-equipped to assess the risk in advance or deal with the downsides when they occur. Constantly changing work schedules make it extremely difficult for workers and families to predict household income week-to-week, hold a second job to pay the bills, provide stable care for their children, or pursue further education. Unwanted drops in hours and volatile changes in work month-to-month or week-to-week can also impact eligibility for social service programs like child care and food subsidies. This problem is exacerbated by the subcontracted economy, where workers often lose their jobs when contracts change hands, even though the jobs remain the same.

## **Address changing demands for skills.**

As both technologies and business models change, many workers today are in the position of needing to continuously learn new skills, yet lack clear pathways to be able to develop those skills while still supporting themselves and their families. It is also challenging for workers, and even for workforce development or education providers, to discern which skills will advance a worker's career, as opposed to becoming obsolete or over-supplied by the time the worker finishes training.

In many jobs, technology is not replacing workers, but is changing the role that workers play. To integrate humans with technology, we need to think about both enabling workers to build their skills to effectively use new tech, and designing and deploying tech in ways that are informed by workers' real-world expertise in their field.

At the same time, the most important needs and biggest impacts in technology upskilling are often not in trending areas like learning to code or developing AI, but in empowering workers to use technology for basic workplace functions – bridging the digital divide.

Structural racism, gender discrimination, and related policies and practices have built barriers that have walled out many immigrants and people of color from the resources needed to achieve basic skills such as math and English literacy that provide the foundation upon which to build higher education and technical skills. For example, harsh disciplinary policies that focus on suspension or expulsion from school disproportionately impact African-American and Latino students, who are then less likely to complete a high school diploma. In another manifestation, immigrant women whose husbands arrive in the United

States on certain work visas may not be legally allowed to work, depriving them of the opportunity to develop formal on-the-job experience needed for career advancement and keeping them economically dependent on a male breadwinner.

The intersection of these structural inequities and changing demands for skills means that learning shouldn't end after high school or after college, or even when you get a job. To achieve long-term change, incumbent workers, job seekers and labor market re-entrants all need access and supportive services so they can participate in ongoing skill-building, cross-training, and career advancement. The challenge is how to design these systems so it does not place an impossible burden on workers to constantly, at their own time and expense, reshape themselves to meet labor market demands.

## **Address growth and decline of industries.**

The industry mix in the Bay Area—that is, the relative size of different industries—has changed over time, and may shift in new ways as demographics, economics, environment, policy and business decisions lead some industries to add jobs and others to reduce jobs. In the future, industries associated with care-giving for the elderly and disabled are expected to increase their share of the industry mix, as demographic change leads to an older population needing more health and personal care services.

These shifts can have profound impacts on workers and communities. For example, since 1990 the Bay Area has lost over 100,000 manufacturing jobs with higher standards won in part through collective bargaining and power, while adding hundreds of thousands of jobs in both technology and related fields, and in the service sector. This change in the industry mix is a contributing factor to the growing polarization of the regional economy between high-wage and low-wage jobs, leading to the “hollowing out” of the middle class.

Industry shifts also have equity implications. For example, over the past several decades women of color have increased their share of public sector jobs, which tend to be family-supporting positions with career opportunities. If public sector jobs are cut, outsourced, or otherwise become a smaller share of the regional economy, the economic status of many women of color and their families is likely to suffer, especially since women of color are severely underrepresented in other middle-wage or higher-wage occupations. In California, 21% of Black workers — more than one out of five - work in a state or local public sector job, compared to just 13% of the workforce overall.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to remember, however, that wages are not an inherent property of industries; manufacturing jobs in the United States became middle-wage careers through decades of worker organizing coupled with public policy and private business decisions. Similarly, wages in the service sector have been pushed downward through outsourcing and declining worker power, and now to some extent are being pushed up again by local minimum wage laws.

## **Address economic shifts resulting from climate change, including just transition and resilience.**

The climate crisis is drastically changing the world we live in and the risks that communities are facing. These changes aren't on some distant horizon, they're already happening, and their impacts are hitting workers, people of color, and the neighborhoods they live in the hardest.

More than an economic crisis, climate change is a threat to our well-being and the lives of workers for generations to come. When wildfires destroy homes in working class communities, an even greater burden is put on families to find stable affordable housing. When unpredictable storms ravage whole regions, it is working class communities that are endangered when basic utilities are shut off or left with bills that they can't afford to pay.

But this is also an opportunity to intervene in a way that will reshape our economy in a way that works for people and the living systems that sustain them. It's not just about asking which industries will decline because of climate change and which jobs will be lost. The more compelling follow up question is: Which industries *have the potential to grow* and how can we make sure that we are creating good, quality jobs that are available to communities who are historically excluded?

There's no shortage of work that needs to get done to remediate, rebuild, and repurpose our economy in ways that work better for all of us. The key question is how do we make sure working people have agency in climate change conversations and in shaping a just transition.

# EXAMPLES

## **Workers organizing to bring attention to exploitation in app-based employment**

The campaign Gig Workers Rising (GWR) partners with app-based workers, largely Uber and Lyft drivers, to raise up demands such as a living wage, transparency, benefits, and a voice at work. GWR makes visible the human impacts of the contingent employment arrangements made possible by new technologies. Worker-leaders in GWR share stories at public rallies and in the media of 70- to 80- hour workweeks, sleeping in cars, and barely making enough to make ends meet after paying for gas and car upkeep. The campaign pivots the future of work conversation away from the novelty of app-based work, to the unsustainability and inequity of a business model predicated on squeezing workers. Recently, GWR launched Workers First, an app that allows workers to communicate with peers to get accurate information about their rights on the job in light of the passage of Prop 22.

## **Coalition-building for a just transition**

The urgently-needed shift to a low carbon, clean energy future requires a scale of change in our infrastructure and lives that is massive and unprecedented. The impacts on the economy, work and workers will be similarly massive. In this process, transition is inevitable but justice is not: workers must be at the table giving input into the solutions and setting strong workplace standards. We can't afford to miss opportunities to create high road jobs, as happened when electrician certification wasn't required for solar installers and now home-based and small solar installation projects are low wage, non-union jobs. Climate transition not only involves construction workers, but also workers in manufacturing, transportation, utilities, agriculture, hospitality, healthcare and more, plus a robust public sector. Getting this transition right for workers means creating a united labor front with a strong anti-austerity agenda. Since 2019, Jobs with Justice San Francisco and the Labor Network for Sustainability have been building a strong coalition of labor unions, the California Just Transition Roundtable, to forge a long-term policy agenda and strategy for workers to shape the transition to a low carbon future. The group will release a statewide report on just transition with University of Massachusetts Amherst economist Robert Pollin, and jointly influence the Newsom administration's Just Transition Roadmap, scheduled for release in mid-July 2021.

## Advocate for choices that prioritize people in the design and deployment of new technologies.

There is great opportunity in new technology. We can choose to use technology to enhance work, reduce drudgery, and move towards equity and empowerment. Who misses the days of mimeograph machines and manual drills?

However, new technology can also be deployed in ways that replicate existing power imbalances, and amplify social and economic inequities. The impact of a new technology on working people and their communities depends on whether workers are able to exercise collective power to shape the terms under which it is introduced and used. For example, productivity tracking tools can be used to surveil workers and fire them for minor transgressions, or the same tools could be deployed to enable workers to be safer, more efficient, and more effective at their jobs.

The fundamental problem is not technology itself, but the way the technology is being deployed. As a first step to changing this dynamic, we need to think and speak honestly about choices that individuals, businesses and societies are making, rather than using technology to dodge responsibility.

Robots do not lay off workers; human beings make the decisions to cut the workforce. AI does not decide who to hire; human beings decide to use AI to screen résumés and impart to it the past hiring patterns that we want to base those decisions on. Facial recognition software is not racist; the inputs we give it and the ways we choose to use it produce racist outcomes.

We cannot hide behind technology or automation. Robots are not making these choices, we are. Automation is an important development, but it's not the root cause of disruption.

*“Technology is what humans decide it should be. The question we need to be grappling with right now is how do we ensure that those decisions center people and community, not corporate profit and IPOs.”*

**Rob Hope**

Director, ReWork the Bay

# **Recommendation 5: Shape technology to serve people**



## Center workers' experience and expertise to inform how technology is used in the workplace.

Listening to workers can also help us better understand the nature of this disruption, which varies greatly across industries, countries and even individual workplaces. While some corporations are using technology to cut their overall workforce, on a macro scale technology is not eliminating the need for human labor, but is being used to re-organize the workforce, changing the ways that workers relate to employers and the roles that workers play.

To integrate technology into work in a way that empowers workers and increases equity, we need to think not just about enabling workers to build their skills to effectively use new tech, but about designing and deploying tech in ways that are informed by workers' real-world expertise in their field.

How do we support new approaches to work that value human interactions, culture, and creativity over rote automation? How can technology create more space for workers to perform these relational, creative tasks?

*“We need to be really curious about lived experience: what is really concretely happening to people as a result of how technology is being introduced into their workplace.... We [must] lead on a proactive and comprehensive vision: not just saying, ‘technology is being deployed in an extractive way,’ but rather, ‘this is what it would look like if technology was integrated in a way that was focused on the common good.’”*

**Andrea Dehlendorf**

Co-Director, United For Respect

## MASS DATA, SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL

Technological changes in the workplace are not limited to questions of automation. New data collection and surveillance tools are increasingly prevalent and have critical implications for worker organizing and the future of work.

In effect, these technologies extend companies' ownership over workers' data in ways that allow them to control every aspect of work. Mass investment in data-driven management allows companies to be more opaque and less accountable in decision-making procedures behind wage-setting, performance evaluation, and retaliation against workers who speak up. To make matters worse, once workers' data is collected, companies can turn around and sell the data to third parties, often without any say or knowledge by workers. Workers essentially function as resources from which to extract profitable data.

Amazon embodies many of these principles. Warehouse workers are forced to wear wristbands that track their daily movements and performance on the job. The data collected is used for real-time surveillance of workers. The speed expected of workers to complete tasks is broken down into seconds, and workers whose numbers don't meet the unrealistic numerated goals are fired, while the stress of constant surveillance causes many others to burn out. Workers' biological needs and limitations are completely disregarded; in 2020, Amazon successfully lobbied to defeat a California bill that would have required warehouses to allow their workers bathroom breaks.

Amazon has also built an internal surveillance apparatus to monitor worker organizing. By gathering data from workers' social media and listservs, the company is able to track organizing efforts and crack down on dissent.

One way funders could support workers might be helping worker organizations increase their access to data, and engaging with workers and practitioners to help make data more meaningful. Just like with automation, data is not inherently anti-worker. What would it look like for workers to have ownership of their data? What if ownership of data included workers' right to negotiate the value of their data or determine what kind of data should be gathered and monetized at all?

# EXAMPLES

## Union bargaining over new technologies

For decades, workers negotiating collectively have shaped the terms and conditions of the rollout of new technologies in their workplaces, including clear examples in recent years. In 2018, Marriott hotel workers represented by UNITE HERE won contracts nationwide that require their employer to give 165 days' notice prior to introducing new technologies that affect jobs. Affected workers have the right to retraining to learn how to work with new technologies, or if they are displaced, to receive first access to job openings at other hotels in the Marriott system. In addition, collective bargaining allowed workers to bargain for applications of technology that enhance safety on the job. In an industry where many workers are undocumented immigrant women who must enter hotel rooms to clean alone, housekeepers won panic buttons that they can use alert security should they be made to feel unsafe.

At Kaiser Permanente healthcare, the institution's Labor Management Partnership (LMP)--a partnership between Kaiser Permanente and its two major union associations--allows workers to participate in operational decisions at national, regional, facility, and work-unit levels. In 1999, the Employee Income and Security Agreement established the terms of rollout of new technologies, ensuring that Kaiser would include frontline workers in decision-making, protect them from displacement or hours reductions, train them for new roles, and ensure that any new jobs created would be included in bargaining units. One striking example of these principles at play was the creation of Futuro Health, a \$130 million nonprofit dedicated to training, upskilling, and career progression for the allied health workforce.

# Conclusion

The events of 2020 and the ongoing global pandemic could have previously appeared to be the material of a dystopian fiction, but is instead our present and grim reality. 2.8 million people have died worldwide of COVID-19 and our failures to prevent its spread and treat those infected. In the United States, Black, Latinx and indigenous people are dying at far higher rates than white people from COVID-19, and are suffering more deeply from the economic fallout, much as they have already felt the disproportionate impacts of police shootings, impoverishment and structural violence. Tens of millions of workers lost their livelihoods and their employer sponsored healthcare during a pandemic, and found little or no public safety net to catch their freefall, especially if they were undocumented, “gig” workers or otherwise excluded from recognition and protection.

The fractures of a society built along the fault lines of economic injustice and racial inequity only became more acute, and more revealing. What dystopia reveals to us is less the invention of a far flung and unknown future than what happens if the disregarded crevices in our world grow into chasms.

What is an alternative vision for our future and the future of workers? The California Future of Work Commission has proposed a “new social compact for work and workers.” For each of their five recommendations, they lay out “moonshot” goals for the next decade:

- Providing a guaranteed job for all Californians who want to work;
- Eliminating working poverty especially in the service and care sectors;
- Doubling the share of workers who have access to safety net benefits;
- Creating 1.5 high quality jobs for every low quality job; and
- Identifying future jobs — jobs needed in technology, climate change and public health — and doubling or tripling the share of workers employed in those future jobs and the number of workers prepared for those jobs.

What would be needed to take those moonshots from something ambitious and imaginative, into an achieved reality? Leaders from the commission called for stakeholders to work together from businesses and industry associations, workers and worker organizations, educational and training institutions, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, government and others.

We agree it will take all of us. And fundamental to the success of any

stakeholder process is for workers and worker organizations to have the collective power and voice to take part in making that future. If workers are essential, so is their power to make change.

This report, built on the voices and visions of worker advocates with decades of grounded experience, shows the ways in which other stakeholders can join workers and worker organizations in their ongoing work to build a future for all of us. To do so, we have to reckon with and shift historic power imbalances between workers and corporations and undo persistent racial and gender oppression. We have to act as allies to workers and communities of color organizing collectively. We have to choose collective, pro-worker strategies over zero-sum approaches where one individual's advantage comes at another individual's cost. We have to prioritize approaches that build collective power and contribute to structural changes that benefit people as a whole.

The future of work is not a question of technology. It needs to be a visionary question, a question of what we think is a good future: a future where work meets our societal needs for public health, caring for children or climate resilience, where all people can achieve their full potential and agency at work and where the value of work is shared by all.

Workers are essential to this future. Workers are essential, not only because they fed us, healed us or cared for our loved ones during a pandemic. Workers are always essential in a world where the full potential and dignity of work lies in recognition of its power to create, reshape and relate to our world and its future. Dockworkers in the Bay Area had an impact on bringing down the apartheid state in South Africa by refusing to unload South African cargo from ships. Housekeepers in Oakland have helped create a future where women are safer from sexual assault on the job. Union bus drivers in Minneapolis refused to drive buses transporting police or arrested protesters during the George Floyd protests last summer. Retail employees won hazard pay for thousands of grocery store workers. What would the future of work look like if workers had the power to organize and create a future they can live in? We invite you to join us imagining this future and making it real.

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# Endnotes

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- 14 EPI analysis of 2018–2019 American Community Survey IPUMS microdata extracts.





ReWork the Bay brings together leaders in economic justice, education and training, business, and philanthropy to take bold, urgent action to create a prosperous Bay Area for all, especially working people.

## **WORKING PARTNERSHIPS**

USA

Working Partnerships USA is a community organization bringing together the power of grassroots organizing and public policy innovation to drive the movement for a just economy.



Jobs with Justice San Francisco is a long-term, strategic alliance of labor, community, faith-based, and student organizations working together to build a strong, progressive movement for economic and social justice locally and nationally.