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Starbucks Workers United and the Future of American Labor Unionism

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the goals, motivations, and methods of Starbucks Workers United (the campaign of the labor union Workers United that is aimed at organizing Starbucks employees), as well as the Starbucks Company's response to it. The analysis is informed by the author's interviews with both a Workers United organizer and a Starbucks corporate employee. This essay explores the position of Starbucks Workers United within the broader history of American labor activism and our current epoch of union decline, as well as what the recent breakthrough in cooperation between Workers United and Starbucks means for American workers going into the future.

INTRODUCTION

On December 9th, 2021, in Buffalo, New York, the first Starbucks store in the United States voted to be represented by Workers United, a union that represents workers in the apparel, textile, commercial laundry, distribution, food service, hospitality, fitness and non-profit industries. This prompted a wave of Starbucks stores voting to unionize across the United States. Starbucks Workers United (SBWU), as it is known, is a campaign of the labor union Workers United, which is itself an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). Although there is no such legal entity as Starbucks Workers United or SBWU, I will use these two terms interchangeably throughout this essay to refer to the campaign of Workers United that is targeted towards Starbucks employees. As of May 2024, employees of over 430 Starbucks stores have decided to be represented by Workers United. Workers United now represents over 10,500 Starbucks baristas.

The past few years have seen significant labor activism across numerous industries and companies, including among others Amazon warehouse employees, UPS drivers, Google employees, and media employees in the SAG-AFTRA strike. Some of these groups have been able to secure contracts with their employers. For example, the Teamsters secured a very favorable contract for UPS drivers in August of 2023. As of the date of this writing, no unionized Starbucks store has secured a contract with the company yet. SBWU and the Starbucks Corporation were at an impasse from the time that the first Starbucks store unionized until late February 2024.

The purpose of my research is to understand the reasons for this impasse. Answering this question involves exploring many other questions concerning the concept of work, which types of work are viewed as worthy of respect, the status of the American worker, and what the best

way forward for the labor movement is. I argue that Starbucks Workers United sets an example for future labor activism. One effect of globalization is that many industries that were previously strongholds of union activity, such as manufacturing, have moved out of the United States in favor of countries with lower wages, fewer protections for workers, and less environmental regulation. This has funneled more and more American workers into largely non-unionized service industries, which often offer insecure and low-paying work. Labor activists and intellectuals worry that this trend could mean trouble for protections for American workers.

In this first section, I provide more background on Starbucks Workers United, its goals and obstacles, and the Starbucks Corporation's response to it. This section is largely based on my conversations with an SBWU organizer and a corporate Starbucks employee. In the following two sections, I examine the larger context in which SBWU emerged: in the second section, I trace recurring themes through a selection of the most significant strikes in American history, and in the third section, I explore research in the sociology of labor that points to a connection between the decline in labor union activity and the wage stagnation in the United States in recent decades. In the fourth and final section, I argue that despite the trend of union decline and the unique features of the foodservice industry that present challenges to unionization, the foodservice industry holds great potential for future labor activism, and the momentum of Starbucks Workers United is proof of that.

I. Starbucks Workers United: Background and Starbucks' Response

The bulk of what I have come to know about Starbucks Workers United is thanks to my conversations with a local SBWU organizer who I will refer to as Kate here. Before Kate was a union organizer, she was a barista at a unionized Starbucks store, and before that, an employee at

various unionized grocery stores, all here in the Seattle area. She told me that when word spread of the first Starbucks stores on the east coast deciding to unionize, management in her store began holding captive audience meetings. Captive audience meetings are mandatory meetings held during working hours in which the employer tries to discourage the employees from unionizing. Critics of this practice, such as Masson (2004), say that it is incompatible with workers' right to organize. The National Labor Relations Act permits captive audience meetings so long as they are not held in the final 24 hours before a union election, but they are banned in five states. During the captive audience meetings, Kate would correct her managers on some of the false claims they were making about labor unions based on her experiences of working in unionized grocery stores. The union election for Kate's store was conducted via mail-in ballot. Of the 104 employees, 66 ballots were cast, and the majority voted to be represented by Workers United.

Starbucks alleged that the result of this election is invalid and initially refused to enter into negotiations with Kate's former store for that reason. Starbucks argued that the NLRB was incorrect in ordering that the election be done via mail-in ballot, and that the rate of participation in the vote would have been higher if it had been conducted in person. The NLRB Regional Director for Region 19, Ronald Hooks, ordered the election to be done via mail-in according to the precedent set by *Aspirus Keweenaw*, 370 NLRB No. 45 (Nov. 9, 2020), a decision that sets forth guidelines for Regional Directors in ordering mail-ballot elections in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Aspirus* instructs Regional Directors to determine if the 14-day trend of Covid-19 cases in the county in which the facility is located is increasing based on data from a certain John Hopkins University website. Hooks determined that the trend of Covid-19 cases in the relevant county was increasing based on this data. Starbucks filed a request for review of Hooks' decision

with the NLRB, which was denied. Subsequently, Starbucks refused to recognize the union, and NLRB General Counsel filed a complaint against Starbucks. The Board found that Starbucks' refusal to recognize the union is illegal under the National Labor Relations Act. The NLRB then applied for enforcement of its order with the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. Oral arguments for *NLRB v. Siren Retail Corp*, 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, no. 22-1969 were heard on December 6th, 2023. The Court of Appeals handed down a decision on April 24th, 2024 in which it granted the NLRB's application for enforcement of its order directing Starbucks to recognize and bargain with the union.

Kate reports that aside from the refusal to bargain with her former store based on the mail-in ballot issue, negotiations between Starbucks and other stores were stagnant for so long mainly due to a disagreement between the company and the union about whether persons not physically present should be able to participate in bargaining sessions. SBWU wanted the bargaining meetings to have hybrid in-person and online participation, while Starbucks wanted no hybrid participation. Both sides viewed the other side's resistance on this matter as unlawful and evidence of bad faith. According to a letter from Starbucks' Vice President of Partner Resources, May Jensen, to the International President of Workers United, Lynne Fox, sent November 1st, 2022, Starbucks' reasoning for its resistance was that knowing that the session might be broadcast would violate the participants' privacy and create a chilling effect on future bargaining. According to Kate, Workers United's reasoning for its resistance was that the union wanted as many employees as possible to be able to participate in bargaining, especially considering health and safety concerns of the then-ongoing pandemic. SBWU felt that this requirement constituted an unreasonable precondition to bargaining, since Starbucks would only participate in a bargaining meeting provided that there is no broadcasting or recording of any

kind. Kate said that Starbucks representatives would halt bargaining at a meeting if they see anyone on the phone or on a Zoom call. In their instructions to employers on how to bargain in good faith, the NLRB website says that an employer may not “insist to impasse on a proposal concerning a permissive subject of bargaining, or require agreement on a permissive subject as a precondition to further bargaining. Permissive subjects include, for example, unit scope, selection of a bargaining representative, internal union affairs, and settlement of unfair labor practice charges”. Mandatory subjects are things over which an employer and union must bargain and permissive subjects are things over which an employer and a union can bargain. It is lawful to insist to impasse over mandatory subjects, but it is unlawful to insist to impasse over permissive subjects. SBWU interpreted Starbucks’ insistence on no hybrid participation in bargaining meetings as insisting to impasse on a permissive subject, while Starbucks interpreted SBWU’s insistence on hybrid participation the same way.

Kate points out that the Starbucks Corporation has been charged with more labor violations than any other company in history. Many of these violations are not things that most people would consider severe; for example, a manager asking an employee to remove a pin indicating affiliation with a union is a labor violation. Kate and the other employees at her store had a consolidated unfair labor practices (ULP) charge against Starbucks, which they had to keep amending as more violations occurred.

In addition to securing some measure of virtual participation in bargaining, SBWU would like to secure guaranteed minimum hours. Guaranteed minimum hours is a subject that Kate feels strongly about because of her experience of working in unionized grocery stores that offered guaranteed minimum hours. For example, when you apply for a part-time position, you might have 15-20 hours per week guaranteed, and when you apply for a full-time position, you

might have 35 hours per week guaranteed. This is regardless of how much traffic the store gets that week. Guaranteed minimum hours would eliminate a major source of insecurity in the lives of Starbucks employees. For example, January is generally the slowest month of the year for Starbucks stores because there are not many promotions being offered (compared to the holiday season, in which there are many promotions and therefore more traffic in the stores). Kate said that many Starbucks employees would suddenly find their hours being significantly reduced in the month of January, causing instability and an interruption of income for the employees. Of course, employees who have worked at Starbucks for longer periods of time will be aware of this pattern and can plan ahead for it, but new employees can be taken by surprise.

Kate remarks that having guaranteed minimum hours is practicable since many unionized grocery stores already offer them, but she expects that Starbucks would be resistant to their implementation. This is because Starbucks employs data scientists to analyze the amount of traffic in each store and calculate how much labor is needed to accommodate that traffic. Store managers are given guidelines for how many employees to schedule in a given week based on a forecast of how much traffic the store will have, and they are encouraged not to deviate from those guidelines. When the store ends up being busier than the forecast predicted, the baristas tend to bear the burden of minimal staffing. Kate says that because labor is the most expensive element in its production process, Starbucks has a vested interest in maintaining control over it.

Additionally, Workers United is seeking a \$20 an hour starting wage with increases to \$25 an hour. If Workers United could secure a national contract with these wages, that would greatly benefit Starbucks employees who work in parts of the country that have lower wages. This could also benefit cafe workers at large by raising the industry standard for wages, as well as by the union threat effect (which I write more in depth about later). Kate emphasizes that the

ultimate purpose of Workers United, as well as any other union, is to serve the interests of all working people, not just its own members. The primary commitment of Workers United is to its members, but it also has its mind toward all foodservice and hospitality workers.

I also had the privilege of speaking to a person working in corporate Starbucks who I will refer to as James here. When James graduated from college, he intended to become a high school English teacher. He was substitute teaching here in the Seattle area, but that work did not offer health insurance. James started working part-time as a Starbucks barista in order to get health insurance. He eventually switched to working full-time at Starbucks and became a store manager. In his career, he has managed Starbucks stores in various parts of the country.

Currently, he works at the corporate headquarters in Seattle. He leads a project that is focused on improving Starbucks' scheduling practices and making Starbucks employees' schedules more accommodating to their individual needs and preferences. James knows that an inconsistent schedule can be a major source of stress and instability for employees, and he emphasizes that Starbucks is dedicated to listening to its employees' feedback and is investing resources into alleviating this problem. The project that he leads is a large part of that. James said that his work is part of Starbucks' long-term growth strategy called "Triple Shot Reinvention with Two Pumps", and specifically it falls under the category of "reinvigorate partner culture". Starbucks hopes to reduce turnover and achieve higher tenure in its stores, as well as to double hourly income from fiscal year 2020 to fiscal year 2025, and we are seeing significant progress in areas. James shared with me that as detailed in Starbucks' Q2 2024 Earnings call on April 30th, 2024, employee turnover has reached a new low in the second quarter of 2024, and that Starbucks' store manager decreased in the same time period and continues to beat that of other

companies in the industry. Additionally, average hours per employee have continued to increase by double-digit percentage points.

James said that in addition to employing data scientists to analyze sales data, Starbucks also has people who go to the stores to observe patterns of traffic and how long various tasks take. Whereas Kate characterizes this practice as being intended to extract as much wealth as possible from each store, James characterizes it as being intended to assist store managers in scheduling the right number of workers for any given amount of store traffic. James points out that Starbucks also collaborates with its employees to create its labor standards. For example, the Starbucks headquarters has a facility called the Tryer Center, which is a sort of laboratory that mimics the conditions of a store to the extent possible. Starbucks invites baristas and store managers to this facility to test out new procedures and give feedback before they are introduced into stores.

James's position towards SBWU is that while he affirms that the Starbucks workers have the right to unionize, he does not believe that a union is the best thing for improving relations between Starbucks and its workers. This is in line with Starbucks' official preference for a direct relationship with its employees rather than a relationship mediated by a labor union. Starbucks sees itself as having a close relationship with its employees that is different from that between other foodservice employers and their employees. For example, Starbucks refers to its employees as "partners" because it decided in 1991 to grant its part-time and full-time employees stock in the company every year as a way to reward employees who decide to work at Starbucks for longer periods of time and to allow the employees to share in the success of the company. I asked if during his time as a barista there was any talk or sentiment of wanting to unionize, and he said that there was not. He shared that he has been lucky in his career to work under great managers,

district managers, and regional directors, but he knows that not everyone has had as positive an experience as he has had. James also acknowledges that the Covid-19 pandemic introduced new difficulties in the work experience for many partners. During the height of the pandemic, Starbucks shut down all its cafe-only stores and focused on drive-through and mobile ordering. This limited the employees' contact with customers and thus depersonalized the working experience. This was compounded with the fear of exposure to Covid-19 from being in close quarters with one's coworkers.

An independent, third-party assessment of Starbucks' response to the unionization campaign was conducted from July through September of 2023 and its findings were presented to the Starbucks Board of Directors in October of 2023. The third-party found that Starbucks was largely unprepared for the unionization campaign when it began in 2021. The idea that its stores would petition for union representation en masse was not on the organization's radar, and this is evidenced by the fact that Starbucks did not have a fully staffed labor relations team until June of 2022. When organizing began in Buffalo, New York, Starbucks focused on addressing operational issues that had been occurring in stores in the Buffalo area. However, the operators that Starbucks sent into the area for this purpose were unaccustomed to working under a union compliance framework, and this inevitably led to some missteps, upon which Workers United organizers capitalized.

James points out, however, that Starbucks was unique among other foodservice employers for the provisions it made for its employees during the pandemic, including hazard pay, the decision at the beginning of the pandemic to pay all employees for 30 days regardless of whether or not they worked, and providing grants to employees facing financial hardships through the Caring Unites Partners (CUP) fund (Fantozzi 2020). Starbucks has also been

recognized for its decisiveness in shutting down stores at the beginning of the pandemic, particularly in China (Danziger 2020). However, many Starbucks workers became discouraged when the company ended hazard pay in 2022 (returning wages to pre-Covid levels) despite the company bringing in record revenues. Many employees felt that the return to pre-Covid wages didn't make sense considering the recent increases in costs of living, and this, combined with the continued risk of exposure to Covid-19 served as impetus for many to unionize (Bagley 2022).

James also emphasizes that the benefits that Starbucks has offered and continues to offer to all baristas that work 20 hours a week or more are competitive and unique among foodservice employers, and this is what initially led him to start his career with Starbucks. This includes comprehensive healthcare, paid parental leave, the Bean Stock program, and the opportunity to earn a first-time Bachelor's Degree through Arizona State University, to name a few. Although Starbucks has had difficulty adjusting to the new reality of the union presence, James assures me that both sides are committed to negotiating a framework to serve as a foundation for all the single-store contracts, and Starbucks will be back at the bargaining table in late May of 2024.

The work of a Starbucks barista cannot be performed remotely and it could never be automated without significantly compromising the customer experience. Starbucks baristas work in an environment that emphasizes social interaction and collaboration with one's coworkers. Starbucks encourages partners to view their store as a team. All these factors contributed to Starbucks stores being a fertile ground for labor activism. In the following section, I will explore how changes in the nature of work have corresponded with changes in labor activism throughout American history, which have led to an increasing expansion in the legal status of labor unions.

II. The Legal Status of Labor Unions Throughout U.S. History

Organized labor used to be considered a type of criminal conspiracy. One of the earliest instances of organized labor in American history was the Pennsylvania Cordwainers' strike in 1805 (Nelles 1931). Journeymen who were hired to make shoes experienced a reduction in their wages because their employers wanted to compete with less expensive shoes made in England. The journeymen went on strike for higher wages. Eight leaders of the effort were arrested for the crime of conspiracy to raise their wages and tried in *Commonwealth v. Morrow* (1815). The main point of contention was whether the activities of the journeymen conferred a threat or disadvantage to the public. The prosecution argued that the public would be disadvantaged because higher wages for the journeymen would translate into the public paying higher prices for the shoes. Additionally, the prosecution argued that the public would benefit more from the expansion of the manufacturing industry in the United States. The defense, on the other hand, argued that if the striking journeymen were jailed or exiled, that would decrease the labor pool and raise the price of shoes, thus putting the public at a disadvantage. Another point of contention was whether or not the organizing journeymen coerced other journeymen into taking part in the strike. The court ultimately found that they did use coercion on other journeymen. Nelles (1931, pp. 183-184) points out that the employer also has a degree of coercive power over the journeymen, but the court did not recognize it as such:

Mr. Bedford could normally, in the absence of closed shop conditions effective throughout the industry, find three Dobbins who were willing to make his boots for the wages he was willing to pay. If their freedoms and A's, B's and C's are equal, they have a 'right' to do so. Mr. Bedford has in consequence a coercive power to which A, B and C must surrender, unless they can by association with others organize a coercive power superior to Mr. Bedford's. To coerce Mr. Bedford the association must coerce the cooperation of many Dobbins ... the question is which coercive power (not of course right in any strict sense) will result in more peace, freedom, and happiness. But it was attempted for a century to settle it with individualist dogma. Mr. Bedford's power to hire Dobbins was easily reconcilable with dogma, simply by not calling it a right to coerce.

In this example, Mr. Bedford, the employer, can solicit the cooperation of Dobbins, a scab, and thereby coerce the journeymen (the A's, B's, and C's) into playing by his rules. The strike was unsuccessful because in the end, the journeymen returned to working for the same wages that they were working for previously.

Throughout U. S. history, organized labor was frequently met with violence from police and from the private security forces hired by the employers. A famous example of this is the Homestead Strike of 1892. This strike occurred at the Homestead Steel Works in Homestead, Pennsylvania, which was owned by the Carnegie Steel Company. According to Schneider (2016), advancements in steel production during this time were disrupting the existing labor relations in the industry. Carnegie Steel introduced equipment and methods that sped up steel production and opened up more jobs for unskilled workers. The Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers was a craft union for skilled steel and iron workers. It had previously negotiated national contracts for steel workers that linked wages to tonnage produced. With the old system of wages, this would translate into a wage increase. However, the management of Carnegie Steel was strongly against this. When the time came in 1892 to negotiate a new contract for the steel workers, Amalgamated requested wage increases, citing the recent growth of the steel industry. Carnegie Steel countered with wage cuts, and at that point, negotiations collapsed.

Henry Clay Frick, the operator of the steel mill, locked the employees out. Subsequently, three thousand workers at the Homestead Steel Works decided to go on strike (Schneider 2016). The strikers set up a perimeter around the plant with the intent to keep it closed and prevent replacement workers from entering. To break up the strikers' perimeter around the mill, Frick hired private detectives from the Pinkerton Detective Agency. Because it was illegal in

Pennsylvania to bring an armed force into the state, the weapons and the Pinkertons were brought in on separate vessels. Carnegie Steel tried to bring in the Pinkertons in secret, but the strikers caught wind of it and blocked access to the mill by land. Shots were fired between the Pinkertons trying to exit their barge and the strikers, but it is contested as to who fired first. The Pinkertons were captured and held prisoner by the strikers until the state militia came in and defeated the strike.

According to Schneider, what made the Homestead Strike unique for its time was that the strikers united across the lines of skilled vs. unskilled and union vs. non-union. The Amalgamated Association was a union for skilled steelworkers and it represented 800 of the approximately 3,800 total workers at Homestead. Despite only representing a minority of the steelworkers, Amalgamated mobilized approximately 3,000 workers to participate in the strike. In the rhetoric of the strikers, the actions of Carnegie Steel were cast as an attack on the dignity of the workers as American citizens. The strikers “saw unionism as the force capable of creating and preserving for the workers a status consistent with American ideals of citizenship and independence” (Schneider 2016, pp. 68). The proposed wage cuts were likened to systems of serfdom and slavery, and the workers expressed a fear of becoming dependent on the company. Furthermore, “Homestead’s workmen claimed a vested right to live and work in the town because they had laboriously made homes there” (Schneider 2016, pp. 68). For that reason, the Pinkertons were viewed as armed invaders. The strikers initially viewed the government as a neutral force in this situation, but they were forced to reevaluate this position when the state militia was sent in to break the strike.

Prior to the Great Depression era, labor activists’ main goal with respect to the government was to keep it from interfering in labor disputes on the behalf of employers. The

desperate conditions of the Great Depression and the progressive bent of the New Deal administration empowered labor activists to start demanding affirmative government protection of workers' rights (Zietlow & Pope 2008). The year 1933 saw the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, section 7(a) of which recognized the rights of workers to organize, engage in concerted activity, and engage in collective bargaining. At first, the Roosevelt administration declined to enforce section 7(a) and companies took to firing workers who were known to be pro-union. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 recognized workers' right to organize even more explicitly, and established the National Labor Relations Board to prosecute labor violations and administer union elections.

In February of 1934, workers struck at the Electric Auto-Lite plant, as well as two other car part manufacturing plants in Toledo, Ohio. Their goals included a ten percent wage increase and recognition of their Federal Labor Union Local 18384. Federal labor unions were a kind of temporary union formed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL). The AFL traditionally committed to craft unionism, but its president at the time wanted to organize more auto workers, who were more interested in industrial unionism. The creation of FLUs was a compromise between these two positions. The Auto-Lite workers struck for five days in February of 1934 and came back to work after management agreed to negotiate a contract. However, the management reneged on this commitment in April, triggering a second strike. This time, the workers were joined by hundreds of Toledo's unemployed (organized by the American Workers Party and the Lucas County Unemployed League). Thousands of unemployed workers surrounded the Auto-Lite plant in order to keep it closed. This level of collaboration between striking workers and unemployed workers was revolutionary for its time. When tensions started rising on the

picket line, the governor of Ohio called in the Ohio National Guard, resulting in the “Battle of Toledo”, in which two young strikers were killed and hundreds more were injured.

According to Zietlow and Pope (2008, pp. 259), “the strikers’ chief concern was the arbitrary and abusive power wielded by the foremen”. Strikers described having to do *quid pro quo* with the foremen in order to get work and being treated very poorly by the foremen during work. The strikers reached a settlement with Auto-Lite management in early June, which included, most significantly, recognition of the Local 18384 and the establishment of the process for addressing grievances between employees and managers. After the victory at Auto-Lite, there was widespread unionization in Toledo, especially among auto workers.

III. Union Decline, Wage Stagnation, and Increased Wage Inequality

The past roughly four decades have seen increased productivity of American workers without proportionate increases in wages. From the post-WWII period to the mid-seventies, average hourly pay grew proportionately as productivity rose (Kristal 2013). The Economic Policy Institute (2022) estimates that in the period of 1979-2022, average productivity has grown 64.7%, while average hourly pay has grown only 14.8%, meaning that productivity has grown 4.4 times as much as pay. This has coincided with significant increases in costs of living, which have caused American workers to see their real wages stagnate or even decline. The result is that many in America live in a state of precarity in which their wages are just enough to cover their expenses. It is very difficult in this state of precarity to save money and build wealth.

There is a strong body of research in the sociology of labor that tracks the correlation between the decline of unions and wage stagnation, as well as between the decline of unions and increased wage inequality. A foundational study by Western and Rosenfeld (2011) estimates that

in the period 1973-2007, private sector union membership went from 34% to 8% for men and from 16% to 6% for women. During this same period, they estimate that wage inequality in the private sector increased by more than 40%. Western and Rosenfeld argue that this is because labor unions have served as a pillar of the moral economy, or the set of practices and norms that govern economic practices in a society. The concept of a moral economy was first put forward by historian E. P. Thompson in 1971, and it has seen application in sociology, political science, and anthropology. Labor unions enforce and promote norms of fair pay and wage equality. One of the most basic goals of any labor union is to raise the wages of its members, and in so doing, they can exert pressure on other non-unionized firms to raise their wages as well; in other words, they can raise the going rate of labor in an industry. Occasionally, non-unionized firms will raise their wages to the level of unionized firms in the same industry to try to prevent their own employees from unionizing. This phenomenon is known as the union threat effect. VanHeuvelen (2018) points out that unions make wage attainment over the course of a career and wage differences between workers more predictable with systems of tenure and seniority. Additionally, the presence of a union will often cause a firm to limit the earnings of its top management.

Aside from their more direct influence on wages and working conditions, unions also exercise influence in the cultural and political spheres. Unions help bring awareness of issues of economic inequality and unfair treatment of workers to the collective consciousness with their public speech, including publications, email and mail campaigns, and through radio and television. Unions mobilize their members to vote and have been “traditional advocates of many egalitarian social programs and policies that do not directly benefit typical union members: Food stamps, minimum wage increases, universal healthcare, and Medicare” (VanHeuvelen 2018, pp.

499). As union membership has declined, so has union input into the moral economy. Western and Rosenfeld (2011, pp. 533) write that in periods of high membership,

unions offered an alternative to an unbridled market logic, and this institutional alternative employed over a third of all male private sector workers. The social experience of organized labor bled into nonunion sectors, contributing to greater equality overall. As unions declined, not only did the logic of the market encroach on what had been the union sector, but the logic of the market deepened in the nonunion sector, too, contributing to the rise in wage inequality.

For example, Mischel, Gould, & Bivens (2015) of the Economic Policy Institute estimate that in the period 1980 to 2010, wages for the top 1% of earners grew 138%, while wages of the bottom 90% of earners grew only 15%. Put another way, in 1965 wages of CEOs were typically 20 times that of the average worker of the same company. By 2013, CEOs made nearly 300 times as much as the typical worker.

According to Michael Goldfield (1989), union density reached its highest point at 25.4% of the workforce in 1954. The highest number of union members in the US was 22,809,000 in 1974. Researchers have explored various numerous factors that have contributed to union decline. Western and Rosenfeld (2011) claim that the most relevant factor is simply that there has been employment growth in industries other than the historically union-dense industries of manufacturing, transportation, construction, and communications. Jobs in some of these industries, particularly manufacturing, have been outsourced in recent years to countries in which labor is cheaper. As American workers leave traditionally unionized industries for non-unionized industries, union density decreases.

Kristal (2013) argues that computerization is a major cause of union decline and the subsequent increase in wage inequality. In addition to outsourcing, many jobs in historically union-dense industries have been rendered obsolete due to increasing computerization. Kristal

claims that this is an example of class-biased technology, or technological advancement that benefits owners of capital and high-skilled workers, but reduces the bargaining power of low-skilled workers. Kristal argues that class-biased technology undercuts working-class solidarity by driving a wedge in between high- and low-skilled workers, a phenomenon called skill polarization. Hirsch (2008) writes that computerization, along with industrial deregulation and globalization, have bred a new American capitalism for which unions were unprepared.

IV. The Foodservice Industry and Future Labor Activism

Since I started writing this paper, there have been new developments between Starbucks and SBWU. On February 27th, 2024, Starbucks and SBWU jointly announced that they will begin negotiations again with the goal of reaching an agreement that will serve as a framework for single-store contracts for unionized baristas across the country, as well as work towards resolving all litigation between the company and the union. As a display of good faith, Starbucks committed to extending benefits that were announced in May of 2022 to employees represented by SBWU, including raises and access to credit card tips. Unionized employees will receive back pay for the raises and credit card tips for the time that they were denied these benefits, but that will take a while to calculate and disburse.

Pursuant to this joint announcement, Starbucks and SBWU held a two-day bargaining session on April 25th and 26th, 2024 in Atlanta, Georgia. 150 union baristas were present in person to negotiate with Starbucks officials. Kate explained to me that SBWU wanted the process of choosing who will participate in negotiations to be as equitable and democratic as possible, with the hope that the negotiations will be as democratic as possible. The 150 baristas who attended in person came from a representative sample of all the unionized stores. These

baristas were nominated by their co-workers to be representatives of their respective stores. The baristas attending in person relay ideas that come up in negotiations to other democratically chosen baristas over Zoom. These groups are called “virtual caucuses”. The baristas attending in person then take the responses of the virtual caucuses back to negotiations with Starbucks. This is a compromise between SBWU’s preference for virtual participation in bargaining and Starbucks’ preference against it. That Starbucks and SBWU are making a national framework for individual store contracts is also a compromise. Remember that Starbucks’ position was that each store should negotiate its own contract, while SBWU’s position was that there should be a national contract for all unionized employees. Over the course of the two-day bargaining session, Starbucks and SBWU discussed topics such as establishing a process for addressing grievances and a mutual non-disparagement agreement. The company and the union plan to meet again for negotiations by the end of May 2024.

The significance of this breakthrough cannot be overstated. Baristas from unionized stores across the country will help shape the sort of compromises and agreements that will serve as the foundation for all individual store contracts. They will be able to bring about many of the practical goals of SBWU, such as pay increases and stable hours. Even more significant, however, is the fact that in a relatively short period of time, the corporate giant Starbucks moved from a position of no negotiation with the union to a position of committing to restart negotiations with the union and resolve all litigation with the union, as well as actually holding a bargaining session with 150 union baristas. What caused this sudden change of heart?

Kate points to the mounting financial and social pressures that were brought to bear on Starbucks. Starbucks has been engaged in much litigation related to the union, including defending itself against the over 800 Unfair Labor Practice charges brought against the company

since the first store unionized in 2021 (Mackall 2023), its lawsuit against SBWU for trademark infringement, and its more recent lawsuit against SBWU related to the union declaring support for Palestine. Additionally, the Supreme Court agreed in January of 2024 to hear Starbucks' challenge to the NLRB's ruling that Starbucks unlawfully fired seven pro-union employees in Memphis, Tennessee (Jones & Sainato 2024). Kate speculates that the costs of pursuing all these different cases were starting to outweigh the potential costs to the company of giving in to SBWU's demands. In terms of social pressure, many people initially decided to invest in Starbucks precisely because of its reputation as a progressive company. All the negative press the company has been receiving lately in relation to its union-busting campaign runs contrary to that image. In a similar vein, Kate alerted me to the fact that the Strategic Organizing Center, a labor coalition that has SEIU as a member and is itself a Starbucks shareholder, was running a campaign to elect three new pro-union members to Starbucks' Board of Directors. One of their candidates, Wilma Leibman, is a former chair of the NLRB. The SOC dropped this campaign shortly after Starbucks and SBWU made their joint announcement that they would resume bargaining in earnest (Farrell 2024).

It remains to be seen whether Starbucks and SBWU can reach an agreement within Starbucks' stated goal of this year. However, I have great optimism that they will reach a favorable agreement based on the progress they have already made in April of 2024. What is most exciting is the fact that a large, decentralized network of unionized baristas and their supporters across the country was able to bring a corporate giant to the bargaining table. This proves that it is possible to effectively unionize large numbers of foodservice employees. Although not much academic research has been done on this specific subject, the foodservice industry has long been considered to be impossible to organize owing to various features of the

industry, such as high turnover rates. High turnover means that the members of a workplace are always changing, and this makes it difficult to build solidarity as a team. Many who work in foodservice see themselves as only temporarily in the industry, perhaps because they are simultaneously working towards a college degree and hope to enter another industry eventually. Other possible barriers to unionization include the fact that many foodservice workers (particularly back-of-house or kitchen workers) are immigrants and many foodservice jobs are so low-paying that workers cannot face an interruption in pay to go on strike. Some industries require a lot of training and education for new entrants, but in the foodservice industry new entrants can be hired and trained relatively quickly. This contributes to a misconception (both among the managers and the employees) that foodservice employees are replaceable and therefore do not have power with respect to their employers.

SBWU has shown that these challenges, as well as any others that may exist, can be overcome and need to be overcome in order for labor activism in the United States to be revitalized. Some historic labor unions that have faced decreased membership have taken up activist projects that are geared towards organizing workers at specific companies or workers of whole industries. Wilmers (2017, pp. 1472) writes,

Union influence on wages is not reducible to market position, but also stems from the effectiveness and intensity of union activism ... indeed, some unions are adapting to their weakened state by initiating nontraditional advocacy projects, like Fight for 15 in the fast-food industry, which rely less on union labor market density than on symbolic strikes, community support, and publicity. These campaigns have claimed credit for minimum wage increase and high-profile wage increases by large employers, including McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and Target.

As traditionally union-dense industries become increasingly outsourced, labor unions should increasingly feel the need to meet American workers where they are. As more and more Americans find themselves in so-called low-skill jobs due to the introduction of class-biased

technology (Kristal 2013), labor activists need to take tangible steps towards not only protecting the gains of organized labor made over roughly the past century, but also towards specific protections for the most vulnerable workers.

Labor has adapted to changing conditions in the past and it will again. The original labor unions were focused on advancing the interests of specific groups of skilled artisans. As production became increasingly mechanized, craft unionism proved ineffective. Eugene V. Debs explains this in a speech he gave in Chicago in November of 1905:

The mode of production since that time has been practically revolutionized. The hand tool has all but disappeared. The mammoth machine has taken its place. The hand tool was made and used by the individual worker and was largely within his own control. Today the machine that has supplanted the old tool is not owned nor controlled by the man, or rather the men, who use it. As I have already said, it is the private property of some capitalist who may live at a remote point and never have seen the machine or the wage slaves who operate it. In other words, the production of wealth, in the evolution of industry, from being an individual act a half century ago has become a social act. The tool, from being an individual tool, has become a *social instrument*. So that the tool has been socialized and production has also been socialized. But the evolution is yet to complete its work. This social tool, made socially and used socially, must be socially owned.

Over time, we began to see more and more collaboration between skilled and unskilled workers on lockouts and strikes, culminating in the fantastic gains workers made during the Great Depression. Labor unions of the future will need to have even more vision. Most jobs in the service industry today could never be automated and cannot be performed remotely because face-to-face interaction is a significant part of the service. For example, you might opt to go to a retailer instead of ordering an item online because you want to talk to someone about the item, get their recommendations, and have your questions answered. Additionally, these jobs are mostly worked in teams, so the employees already have a lot of experience in cooperating and

communicating with each other. Starbucks Workers United shows how these conditions can successfully be leveraged to organize employees.

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Appendix: Honors Symposium Presentation

“Power *and* Control: The Effect of Powerful Institutions Controlling Labor Unions, Higher Education, and Taylor Swift”

Panel description: Institutions act as regimes of value in society, dictating what consumers can access. Our panel identifies the effects of these powerful institutions and analyzes how economic, legal, and sociological systems have supported them. Our projects specifically identify how regulatory bodies have prioritized the interests of corporations over stakeholders and provide recommendations for legal action and reform.

Good morning. My name is Sophia Braymen and I’m studying politics, philosophy, and economics. My project is called “Starbucks Workers United and the Future of American Labor Unionism”. Starbucks Workers United is a campaign of Workers United, a labor union that represents 86,000 workers in foodservice and hospitality. As of the date of this presentation, Starbucks Workers United represents over 425 Starbucks stores and over 10,500 workers.

On December 9th, 2021, the first Starbucks store voted to be represented by Workers United. That store is located in Buffalo, New York. This led to a country-wide wave of Starbucks stores voting to be represented by Workers United that is still going strong. There has been significant conflict in the past roughly two years between Starbucks and the union, but on February 27th of this year, Starbucks and SBWU released a joint announcement stating that they will resume negotiations with the goal of reaching a foundational framework for all single-store contracts by the end of this year. Starbucks and SBWU had a two-day bargaining session on April 25th and 26th in Atlanta, with about 150 union baristas from around the country present. There are tentative plans to hold another bargaining session by the end of this month.

I became interested in this topic because I have a background in foodservice and I have an interest in labor unions. My first job was at a Starbucks, and my second job was at a bakery. My family has benefitted from my grandfather having been a member of the Teamsters Union because his pension is now almost enough to cover the costs of my grandma's memory care. I'm intrigued by how labor unions offer an alternative to the logic of the free market, which has the tendency to leave some people behind. The question that originally motivated my research was "what are the aims of Starbucks Workers United, and why has Starbucks responded to it in the way that it has?"

However, in February and April of this year, a countrywide network of union baristas brought a corporate giant to the bargaining table, and my research expanded to include "what are the implications of this victory for future American labor activism?"

To learn more about how labor activism developed in the United States, I consulted historical and legal texts. The original labor unions were intended to advance the interests of small groups of skilled laborers. This is known as craft unionism, which was replaced by industrial unionism over time. Most of the protections that we have as workers we have thanks in part to labor unions. This includes unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, work safety laws, 40-hour weeks, and overtime pay. However, we have been in a period of union decline for the past few decades now. According to Michael Goldfield, union density was at its highest point in 1954 at 25.4%, and it has been decreasing since then. Western and Rosenfeld (2011) claim that the most relevant factor is simply that there has been employment growth in industries other than the historically union-dense industries of manufacturing, transportation, construction, and communications.

At the same time that there has been a decrease in union density, we have seen wage stagnation and unprecedented levels of wage inequality. In the period 1979-2022, the Economic Policy Institute estimates that productivity grew by 64.7%, while average hourly pay of nonsupervisory workers has grown only 14.8%. This means that productivity grew 4.4 times as much as hourly pay during this period. This has coincided with significant increases in costs of living, which have caused American workers to see their real wages decline. The result is that many in America live in a state of precarity in which their wages are barely enough to cover their expenses. It is very difficult in this state of precarity to save money and build wealth.

This is the context in which Starbucks Workers United came into being: declining union presence in the American workforce simultaneous with increased wage inequality and wage stagnation. It is important to study and understand the larger historical and economic conditions in which a social movement arises, but an analysis based only on that would be lacking. I wanted to get inside perspectives on the origins of SBWU, its goals, and Starbucks' response to it. To that end, I conducted interviews with a person named Kate who was a Starbucks barista at a unionized store and went on to become a SBWU organizer, as well as a person named James, who works at the Starbucks corporate headquarters here in Seattle.

Before Kate was a barista at the Starbucks Reserve Roastery, she worked at various unionized grocery stores in the Seattle area (the majority of the grocery stores in this area are unionized). Kate told me that when news broke of the first Starbucks store in Buffalo, New York voting to unionize, managers in her store started holding captive audience meetings. These are mandatory meetings that occur during work hours in which management tries to convince the employees not to unionize. During the captive audience meetings, Kate would correct her managers on some of the false claims they were making about labor unions based on her

experiences of working in unionized grocery stores. The union election for Kate's store was conducted via mail-in ballot, and the majority of the workers voted to be represented by SBWU. Starbucks challenged the legitimacy of the election due to it having been conducted by mail-in ballot, but the company ultimately lost that appeal.

Kate and her co-workers at the Roastery had a consolidated unfair labor practices (ULP) charge against Starbucks, which they had to keep amending as more violations occurred. Many of these violations are not what you would consider severe. For example, a manager asking an employee to remove a pin with the union logo on it is a violation. According to a report to the Starbucks Board of Directors given in October of 2023, Starbucks has had more than 800 ULP charges filed against it, which have been consolidated into 130 complaints filed by the General Counsel of the NLRB.

During the course of my conversations with her, Kate was fired from Starbucks and went to work as a SBWU organizer full-time. Because of her experience, Kate has significant insight into why there was a roughly two-year period with no significant movement towards a contract between Workers United and Starbucks. One major reason for the stalemate was that SBWU wanted there to be hybrid participation in bargaining sessions, while Starbucks wanted there to be no virtual participation. According to Kate, people bargaining on behalf of Starbucks would halt negotiation sessions if they saw anyone on a facetime call or on zoom.

Apart from wanting hybrid participation to be allowed in bargaining sessions, SBWU's larger goals include more consistent schedules and \$20 an hour starting wage with increases to \$25 an hour. Consistent scheduling is what Kate felt most strongly about due to her experience working in unionized grocery stores prior to working at Starbucks. A lot of unionized grocery stores offer guaranteed minimum hours, which means that when you get hired as a part-time or

full-time employee, you might get 15-20 hours or 35 hours per week guaranteed, regardless of how much traffic the store gets that week. This gives the workers a stable idea of how much their income will be. One of the main grievances of the Starbucks employees is inconsistent hours, which results in unstable income. One dramatic example of this is that in the month of January, many partners would have their hours significantly reduced because January is the slowest month of the year for Starbucks stores. If you've worked at Starbucks for a long time, you know this, but newer employees might be caught off guard and suddenly have less ability to pay for rent and groceries. The flipside of this is when the store has a lot of traffic and not enough workers on shift, which causes stress.

Kate emphasized to me that SBWU's biggest aspiration is to negotiate a favorable contract that will apply to all Starbucks baristas represented by Workers United, rather than each store having to negotiate their own contract. Particularly for parts of the US with lower wages, a \$20 an hour starting wage would elevate a lot of Starbucks workers, as well as cafe workers at large. Kate feels that any effective labor union should have a mind towards improving the lives of more than just its own members.

As I mentioned, I also had the privilege of interviewing a person who works at Starbucks at the corporate level. James is the head of a project that is aimed towards improving the way that Starbucks store managers schedule employees, with the ultimate aim of making Starbucks a better place to work. James started as a part-time Starbucks barista. He was working as a substitute teacher at the time, and that work did not provide healthcare, while Starbucks does provide healthcare for all employees that work 20 hours a week or more. James eventually transitioned to working full-time at Starbucks and moved up the ranks of supervisor, store

manager, and district manager. He has managed stores in various parts of the country, but he now works at the corporate headquarters here in Seattle.

James emphasizes that Starbucks is committed to listening to its employees and addressing their grievances, and his project is a big part of that. He shared with me that Starbucks has many ways of studying how long different tasks take and how much labor is needed for a store to run smoothly. Starbucks employs data scientists to analyze sales data and map out patterns of traffic in stores. At the Tryer Center at Starbucks headquarters, store managers and baristas are invited to test new procedures in a setting that mimics a store to the extent possible. The next step is to test a new procedure in several real stores before rolling it out for all stores. Although Starbucks does provide guidelines for how many people to schedule and forecasts of how much traffic the store will have, James says that scheduling decisions are still ultimately up to the managers. James recently shared with me that he and his team achieved a new low for partner turnover this past quarter, and Starbucks' store manager turnover is also on the decline and beats industry norms by a wide margin.

James also emphasizes that Starbucks offers are still unique and competitive for the foodservice industry. This includes, but is not limited to, receiving an annual stock grant in the company, comprehensive healthcare, and paid parental leave. James has said that he was lucky to be able to work under great managers when he was a barista, but that unfortunately isn't the case for everyone. Additionally, he thinks that the difficulties of working during the pandemic may have driven many to unionize.

The most important part of the February 27th joint announcement is that Starbucks and SBWU have committed to negotiating a framework that will serve as the foundation for all the single-store contracts. As a display of good faith, Starbucks agreed to many things, including

resolving all of its litigation against Workers United and extending raises and access to credit card tips to unionized baristas which were previously only offered to nonunionized baristas since May of 2022. Unionized baristas will receive back pay for the time that they were denied raises and credit card tips, and this will take a long time to calculate. Kate will most likely have the opportunity to be reinstated after having been unlawfully fired, but she is considering going back to school instead.

Kate explained to me that the 150 baristas present at the two-day bargaining session in April are from a representative sample of stores, and they were nominated by their coworkers to attend the session. The baristas present at the session would hear ideas and proposals from the people negotiating on behalf of Starbucks and then relay them to a larger group of 250 baristas (who were also nominated by their stores to participate) over video call. This is called a virtual caucus. The baristas physically present at the session would then relay the input of the baristas participating via virtual caucus to Starbucks. They did this because SBWU wanted as many baristas as possible to have input into the negotiations so that the process can be as democratic as possible.

The significance of this breakthrough cannot be overstated. Baristas from unionized stores across the country will help shape the sort of compromises and agreements that will serve as the foundation for all individual store contracts. They will have the chance to bring about many of the practical goals of SBWU, such as pay increases and stable hours. Even more significant, however, is the fact that in a relatively short period of time, the corporate giant Starbucks moved from a position of no negotiation with the union to a position of committing to restart negotiations with the union and resolve all litigation against it, as well as actually holding a bargaining session with 150 union baristas.

The foodservice industry has long been considered impossible to unionize. There is not very much research on why this is, but it's easy to speculate. Foodservice workplaces tend to have very high turnover, and this makes it difficult to build a team-consciousness. Many people see themselves as only being in the foodservice industry temporarily, perhaps because they are working towards a degree and hope to enter a different industry someday. A good number of people who work in restaurant kitchens are recent immigrants and may not speak English. However, SBWU has shown that it is possible to effectively organize food service workers in large numbers. Granted, negotiations between Starbucks and SBWU could break down at any moment and we could return to a stalemate. But I'm very optimistic that they will be able to reach a favorable agreement that will serve as the basis for all the single-store contracts. Already in the April sessions, the company and the union agreed to non-disparagement and made moves towards establishing a system for handling grievances. There will be another bargaining session at the end of this month.

I argue that unionization campaigns like Starbucks Workers United are necessary if labor activists want to reverse the trend of union decline. We have been in transition from an industrial economy to a service-based economy, and many of the industries that were previously strongholds of union activity have been outsourced. As American workers enter other industries, the protections and gains that labor unions have won in the past need to follow them. The role of the public in this is simply to listen to workers. Part of SBWU's success came from raising awareness about the position of Starbucks workers, and much pressure was brought to bear on Starbucks to bargain in good faith with the union. When the unionization campaign first began in 2021, I was shocked by how many members of the public interpreted the Starbucks baristas as whiny and not wanting to work. On the contrary, many people unionized because they want

Starbucks to be their career, and it can't be your career if your hours are randomly cut and you have to take on another job just to make ends meet.

For most of the people who are currently alive and have ever been alive, work is an inescapable fact of life. But we don't want just any life; we want the good life. In the history of this nation, we have a rich history of labor activism and a robust sense of what the good life looks like for workers. This includes, but is not limited to, being fairly compensated for one's work, being able to be proud of one's work, and being able to advocate for oneself and on the behalf of others. If we can keep our conception of the good life robust and at the front of our minds, then I believe we can also have a rich future of labor activism. Thank you for listening. I appreciate it. We will now have some time to answer any questions you might have for me and my panel members.