

Building Autonomous Power: Solidarity Networks in Precarious Times

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ABSTRACT

From COVID-19 to the so-called labour shortage of late 2021, the past three years have revealed a renewed discourse on labour markets and working conditions. Alongside this discourse, workers in a variety of industries have been organising to fight the rollbacks, redundancies and concessions imposed in response to the pandemic and its related financial crisis. From Amazon warehouse workers to hospitality workers to informally employed platform workers, the global precarious are rising up. In addition to traditional labour movement tactics, one tool that has proven powerful and flexible in the COVID period is the autonomous solidarity network. Built from the model of the worker centre, a labour solidarity network is conceived of as a decentralised grouping of workers, organisers and allies, usually operated virtually and at arms-length from formal union structures. Following the methodological foundation of workers' inquiry and using the tools of strategic labour research and participatory action research, this article reports on interviews with workers and organisers involved with worker centres and solidarity networks, distilling their experiences and observations into a set of common practices that characterise worker organising efforts taking place in a number of Canadian workplaces, including hospitality, migrant work programs, platform services and artisanal industries.

KEYWORDS

Solidarity networks, labour organising, worker centres, workers' inquiry

Introduction

In July 2022 a small group of craft brewers, servers and brewery support staff met for drinks in a beer hall in Toronto. Two days later, their West Coast counterparts converged at a small pub in Vancouver. Both regional groups were made up of members and organisers of the Craft Brewery Workers' Alliance of Canada (CBWAC). An autonomous network of brewery workers from all segments of the craft brewery workforce, CBWAC was formed in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to build worker power, organising capacity and a general will to fight back against what many members saw as an overtly toxic and abusive industrial culture. The members were particularly enthusiastic about seeing each other and having the chance to talk about their workplaces in person, as all previous CBWAC events had to be held online owing to COVID safety concerns. Although many were meeting for the first time, they had also already built relationships and mutual trust, and the conversation followed familiar patterns, particularly in terms of their observations about working conditions and their ideas for organising.

CBWAC's organisational strategy follows the form of what we call the "solidarity network".

Organised as a decentralised and non-hierarchical workers' organisation, CBWAC operates at arms-length from the more formal entities of the labour movement. It is not directly affiliated with a union but maintains an amicable relationship with the primary union working to organise brewery workers in Canada. While committed to building working class power and organisational capacity with an eye to unionisation, CBWAC's founders opted for this autonomous approach in order to ensure they maintained the ability to engage in direct action as well as to continue their class-based organising even after a successful union drive. Although such an approach is not novel in its own right, the conditions under which it was devised were. At the time of its formation, CBWAC's founders were observing an industry wherein take-home sales were increasing at the same time that service and support staff were being furloughed or laid off due to COVID-19 lockdowns. This tension was further exacerbated by the public outpouring of worker testimonies of sexual, gender-based and race-based harassment and misconduct running rampant through the craft brewing industry (Guerra, 2021). The precarity and unsafe working conditions of the COVID-19 period, paired with wide public scrutiny of the industry's culture, convinced the organisers that this was a crucial moment to build worker power.

CBWAC is not unique in the 21st century labour movement. Other autonomous labour organisations have formed in rapid succession in recent years. In Canada, CBWAC shares an organisational structure with precarious worker networks such as Worker Solidarity BC and the Workers' Action Centre of Newfoundland and Labrador, coalition campaigns such as Contract Worker Justice, and industry-specific networks such as What About Bicycle Mechanics? Each of these will be introduced in more detail shortly. Add to this the various worker action centres, worker justice campaigns, and migrant worker centres and coalitions that have been built over the past five years, and one might ask what animates these groups and motivates their decision to operate autonomously from the main current of today's labour movement.

The organisational strategy upon which CBWAC and its fellows have built their interventions has been known by many names. It might be categorised (unfairly) as a form of dual unionism or, as Staughton Lynd (2015) refers to it, parallel unionism. While both of these characterisations describe a form of workers' self-organisation that takes place outside of the formal structures of labour, neither truly captures the tactics and generally favourable relationship to unions that sit at the foundation of organisations like CBWAC. Furthermore, whereas independent unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) operate on similar principles of workers' self-activity and direct action, solidarity networks increasingly do not attempt to function as labour unions in their own right, opting instead to position themselves as activist counterweights to the formal activities of union partners, not to challenge union efforts, but to supplement them.

In this paper, we profile five Canadian labour organisations attempting to organise workers, but at various degrees of separation from their union partners. We contend that solidarity networks hold the potential not only to foster new levels of working class solidarity, both generally and in specific industrial contexts, but also to supplement, support, and gather leads for unions' efforts to lead generalised campaigns in specific industries and sectors. Whereas Wallerstein (1985) defines solidarity as "the willingness of individual unions to make the struggles of other unions or other workers their own", we speak here of working class solidarity, implying this same orientation but along broader class lines and occurring both within and beyond the union (Wallerstein, 1985: 1). Seen in this way, the solidarity network stands out as both a strategic tool to aid in union campaigns and a decentralised worker-run organisation that can ensure worker interests, organisational capacity and working class solidarity remain at the heart of organising efforts, beyond formalised routines of contract bargaining and grievance procedures – a more organic and grassroots locus for worker-led activity.

In order to adequately characterise and assess the strategic orientation of the solidarity network, after an initial theoretical orientation and methodological framing, this paper is organised into three sections. The first is intended as a contextual introduction and political provocation. In this section, we interrogate contemporary efforts to build worker-led organisations outside of or informally connected to unions in order to establish a model for the contemporary solidarity network. This section assesses conceptualisations of “solidarity unionism”, particularly as these are seen in worker-run organisations such as worker centres and autonomous labour networks. The section ends by conceptualising the solidarity network not as a competitor of the union, or even an internal instigator, but as a decentralised, worker-run laboratory for collective self-organisation and working class pedagogy. This conceptualisation will further animate the discussion in section two, which attempts to categorise contemporary Canadian efforts in solidarity network formation and action. This section reports on a number of interviews with members and organisers of five Canadian labour organisations with varying degrees of connection to partner unions. They fall into three broad categories that will be interrogated in detail: industrially specific solidarity networks, precarious worker networks, and movement connection networks. While each of these will be defined in detail in section two, it is worth noting that what distinguishes these network types is their organisational priorities and the degree of formality of their connection to partner unions. The interviews forming the foundation of this section are further supplemented by the researchers’ own experiences organising with CBWAC as well as Jenkinson’s participation in various events coordinated by both Worker Solidarity BC and Contract Worker Justice (two of the networks profiled in this paper). Section three builds upon these categorisations and observations in order to delineate the strategic promises and limits to solidarity network organising. In this final section, we use these major strengths and limitations to make recommendations for both those involved in or creating solidarity networks and unions that might find themselves working with them. We contend that in such precarious times, and when the labour movement is slowly recovering from a decades-long onslaught, workers, organisers, and unions come together en masse to contest these conditions. The solidarity network is a potentially powerful tool to do just that.

Labour Conflict Beyond the Union

This project intends to intervene in the current scholarly discourse on labour conflict by responding, in part, to Maurizio Atzeni’s (2021) provocative challenge to industrial relations and labour studies scholars to inquire beyond “trade union fetishism” in order to understand the active role of workers. According to Atzeni, the hyper-focus on trade unions obscures the roles played by other organs of the working class, “making invisible the real processes of struggle and organisation that exist outside/in parallel/around the union form...” (Atzeni, 2021: 1350). Of central concern for Atzeni and other scholars working to widen the focus on critical industrial relations is the manner in which a union-centric view undervalues or even ignores actually existing labour conflict and forms of organising that occur in addition to or even in spite of formal trade union activities. This is a concern similarly articulated by Jörg Nowak (2021), who argues that in order to understand the processes of working-class organisation, scholars of labour must take on a social formations view of labour conflict that contends with working-class actors beyond or in addition to unions and the social contexts against which they arise.

How best to go about investigating these social contexts, which should be recognised as composed both within and outside the workplace, should, of course, be a matter of epistemological priority. We posit, following Lorenzo Cini and Bartek Goldmann (2021), that labour process theory is particularly relevant for such an inquiry, particularly as, in its best articulations, it accounts for

both organisational and social influences on exploitation and autonomous forms of organising and resistance (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Burawoy, 1979). In what they call the “worker capabilities approach,” Cini and Goldmann (2021) suggest that labour process theory reveals the ways in which workers implicitly and actively resist the exploitative mechanisms of the labour process. However, research on organisational misbehaviour, slacking and work refusal has commonly shown a general ambivalence toward building such individual modes of resistance into sustainable collective actions (Frayne, 2015; Paulsen, 2014). As such, Cini and Goldmann (2021) argue that to reveal how these forms of resistance can scale up to collective political action, researchers must also grapple with how external political and social movements inform workers’ capacities to act politically.

Whereas Cini and Goldmann (2021) propose mobilisation theory as a lens through which critical researchers might go about uncovering the translation of informal practices into political ones, we suggest that class composition analysis can also be operationalised along the same lines while maintaining a focus on worker-led political activity (Notes From Below, 2018). As the present study is guided by the methodological orientation of workers’ inquiry, it is informed by a conceptualisation of class as composed on three primary levels: technical, social and political (Notes from Below, 2018). According to the radical research collective, Notes from Below, each of these elements of class composition gives researchers and workers alike a lens through which to see the power-building capacity of workers in a given context. This is accomplished by thoroughly interrogating the organisation of the labour process (technical composition), the social conditions faced by workers (social composition) and the currently existing forms of worker organisation (political composition) of a given labour context. This third element, political composition, is of particular relevance in the present discussion, as it recognises the variety of forms of class-based organising that characterises labour conflict generally, while contextualising this through a systematic analysis of both working and social conditions. As such, the class composition approach helps to transcend the “union fetish” identified by Atzeni (2021) by considering various forms of worker organisation from the trade union to the independent union and on to the solidarity network.

It is this organisational and tactical variety that motivates the present research. If the literature hyper-focuses on the union form, as suggested by Atzeni, and if we accept that a more social contextual approach will help us in understanding the diversity of worker-led actions, what does the recent proliferation of decentralised, informal, and autonomous workers’ organisations demonstrate about the composition of the Canadian working class? As researcher-organisers, we set out to answer this question while simultaneously working to build intra-network connections between our organisation (CBWAC) and similarly organised groups – groups using different tools but ultimately all focused on increasing political efficacy and advancing workers’ interests.

Methodological Considerations: Workers’ Inquiry as Capacity Building

The present research arises out of the authors’ experiences organising with CBWAC. Jenkinson has worked in brewing production at three different breweries over the past six years and is currently employed as a brewer in the Toronto metropolitan area. Anderson came to be involved in craft worker organising through his doctoral research, in which, working with workers in craft industries, he led a workers’ inquiry to interrogate working conditions in these industries, as well as the potentials and potential hindrances to worker organising, particularly in craft brewing, bicycle maintenance, artisanal coffee, and baking. Organising together for over a year, the authors decided to set out on a coalition-building project wherein we identified and connected with networks

organised along the same lines as CBWAC, particularly those working in similar industrial sectors.

Our initial survey of Canada's solidarity networks was motivated, in part, by a desire to do a meta-level workers' inquiry of autonomous efforts to build working class power – in this sense, a general capacity to challenge relations of exploitation and precarity writ large. Workers' inquiry, we should note, is a worker-driven research method intended to diagnose working conditions, map industries and managerial regimes, and, ultimately, gather strategic information for worker self-activity (Figiel et al., 2014; Haider and Mohandesi, 2018; Ovetz, 2020; Woodcock, 2021). According to Notes from Below (2018), workers' inquiry focuses on the political, social and technical dimensions of class as a way of both critiquing contemporary capitalist conditions and contesting them through collective action. Importantly, particularly for our focus, the scholar-activists at Notes from Below argue that workers' inquiry is also a powerful tool for diagnosing social ills beyond the workplace. As such, as organiser-researchers, we focused our search and our sample on those networks that overtly intervened at the level of the workplace (or of working conditions), but remained cognizant of the intersecting struggles in which many networks engage. This effort was informed by our previous research experiences with CBWAC, where we and other network members designed a survey questionnaire to begin assessing conditions in Canada's craft brewing sector. Recognising that other groups were currently engaged in similar efforts, we set out to build connections and coalitions for information sharing and mutual support.

This effort, in effect, became an emergent exercise in a form of participatory action research (PAR), an approach to social inquiry marked by its collaborative processes and result-orientation (Kinson et al., 2007). Whereas PAR is traditionally concerned with creating conditions for change in an organisation or institution, our intervention took the form of a collaborative network-building project, essentially by collecting data on best practices for alternative organising. As a coalition-building exercise, our communications with and interviews of solidarity network members and leaders were driven by a shared desire to learn from other organisations while also generating knowledge that might assist future organising efforts.

As far as its connections to PAR went, the particular change goal of our project was a broad one: to build network connections in order to understand and circulate organising tactics and lessons. In a sense, such a broad goal likely complicates any effort to define this research as PAR, bringing it closer to what Max Haiven and Alex Khasnabish (2014) call solidarity research. The commitment in solidarity research, according to Haiven and Khasnabish (2014), is to transcend the instrumental and institutional trappings of academic inquiry, generating knowledge of direct use to social movements, working-class organisations and the like. As Haiven and Khasnabish (2014: 55) challenge us: "If research is to be about more than generating academic capital, it must in some way serve the interests of those whom it claims to value".

With this provocation in mind, we reached out to a number of solidarity networks and worker centres in order to build initial connections, with many organisers volunteering to meet us to speak about their efforts. Our interviews with interested network members and organisers were conducted over Zoom, typically lasted for about one hour, and consisted of twelve open-ended discussion questions (although the open format of the interviews allowed participants to direct the discussion to those areas they were most interested in or concerned about). The interview questionnaire was concerned with the history and goals of the organisation, the relationship it maintained with the labour movement, its organising principles, and the major lessons its members and leaders had learned. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and later analysed for emergent thematic content.

Alternative Worker Structures: From Dual Unionism to the Solidarity Network

Workers' solidarity clubs, alternative unions, flying squads and the like have been a part of the labour movement since its inception. In fact, the debate over the efficacy of alternative unionism raged particularly heatedly in the early decades of the 20th century, when radical independent unions such as the IWW and Canada's One Big Union attempted to organise and radicalise workers under their alternative formations (Hibbard et al., 1998; Peterson, 1981). Many early 20th century commentators and organisers of formal labour saw the efforts of these alternative unions as self-defeating, creating a schism in the labour movement and interfering with unions' power in organised workplaces (Brissenden, 1919; Foster, 1922|1970). Today, this debate has mostly subsided apart from periodic discourse over the utility of independent unions such as the present iteration of the IWW (Loomis, 2023). Of course, the absence of such a debate should not be read as an indication that these groups have gone away or have dwindled in importance. In fact, in recent years there has been a seeming proliferation of decentralised, autonomous groups of workers and tenants, organising in direct response to the 2008 financial crisis and the labour context of the COVID-19 period. In this section, we consider these contemporary solidarity networks, the forms that they take today, the struggles in which they are involved, and the context against which they organise. We do so in order to elucidate the common characteristics of these organisations and the features and commitments that distinguish them from their historical antecedents. These will, in turn, aid us in documenting and assessing recent attempts to build solidarity networks in the Canadian context, the primary focus of the next section.

The COVID-19 crisis and its concomitant strains on working conditions and job security have presented fertile ground for the proliferation of solidarity groups. The uptick over the past few years of communities of care, mutual aid groups and the like has prompted a range of celebrations from scholars and activists alike (Chevé, 2022; McLafferty Bell, 2021; Spade, 2020; Springer, 2020). The mass unemployment, instability, and insecurity prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shut-downs and mass layoffs presented a vast need for care, assistance and relief that governments were almost universally unwilling to provide. As a result, communities took matters into their own hands, creating community kitchens, food delivery services and relief funds, while also organising to oppose evictions and to demand access to personal protective equipment (PPE) (Borges et al., 2020; Hamann et al., 2020; Rieiro et al., 2021). Alongside these examples of mutual aid and direct action, many workers came together to form autonomous collectives with their colleagues and others to fight redundancies and layoffs for those working in non-essential industries, and to contest overwork and forced overtime in those industries seen as essential (Davis-Faulkner and Sneiderman, 2020; Latham, 2020; Slinn, 2020). Groups such as the South London Bartenders' Network (SLBN), CBWAC and the Worker Solidarity Network (WSN) formed to give non-union employees a collective voice in these uncertain times and to start building the kinds of collective power needed to transform workplaces.

Groups of this latter kind are the primary focus of this article. Although they may be motivated by various goals and driven by a multitude of tactics, we group them under the category of the solidarity network, a categorisation that prioritises their decentralised or autonomous organisation as well as their general focus on building solidarity. There are multiple uses of the term solidarity network in both the academic and activist literature. Our use of this term follows the definition offered by labour scholars and IWW members Matthew Corbeil and Jordan House (2016) in their assessment of the organisational strategy of the IWW. According to Corbeil and House (2016), solidarity networks are member-run and oriented organisations that typically focus on single-issue campaigns, typically led by core member-organisers. Although the authors' characterisation of the solidarity network remains generally applicable beyond collective efforts to transform work, their

application of the label allows them to distill lessons they learned while organising with the IWW. We use the same approach in this paper, but acknowledge that the solidarity network category should not be limited to only those organs driven by worker action. This terminology has been adopted by a variety of groups on the left, and was perhaps most notably popularised by the Zapatistas' efforts to build "transnational solidarity networks" intended to unify and develop lines of pedagogic engagement amongst globally dispersed struggles (Gulewitsch, 2011).

In fact, as the organisers of the labour collective Angry Workers of the World (2020) suggest, the solidarity network isn't necessarily a prescriptive designation of a group form, but instead describes an orientation toward organising and working class politics. According to these organisers:

Solidarity networks propose mutual aid and direct action when it comes to day-to-day problems with bosses, landlords, state machinery..., or racist and sexist violence. The basic principles are rooted in the idea that we don't need experts or "community" middlemen to sort out our problems for us... In this way, the class character of these common situations can be brought to the fore, as an alternative to an individualising advice service. (Angry Workers of the World, 2020: 38)

We acknowledge that this particular organising strategy is flexible enough for application to a range of struggles, but choose in this paper to focus specifically on its use in labour struggles. Like Corbeil and House (2016), this focus derives from our own experience organising with a labour-oriented solidarity network, CBWAC. CBWAC is a worker-run collective of brewery workers structured in a non-hierarchical fashion, and focused primarily on improving conditions in Canada's craft brewing sector and building organisational capacity among its workers. The group formed in early 2021 and held its public launch in February 2022, where it hosted a panel of unionised craft brewery workers, organisers and a beer journalist (CBWAC, 2022). Since that time, the group has hosted a number of meetings, moderated an organising training, resourced organising drives, and hosted the aforementioned in-person pub meetups. CBWAC stands out to us as an instructive example of the solidarity network strategy in practice. As a worker-led organisation that enjoys a friendly yet independent relationship with a major international union, CBWAC is well positioned to respond directly to concerns arising from their membership and beyond while simultaneously boosting attempts to organise in specific workplaces. Like other solidarity networks, as a group CBWAC is energetic and ambitious, which, as we will see in the following pages, is both a benefit and a challenge. Generally, a major hurdle that the network has yet to overcome is the setting and pursuit of achievable goals, particularly since it is trying to build a nation-wide movement. However, as the organisers with Angry Workers of the World suggest, the building of autonomous worker power is an iterative process, one that necessarily must include trial-and-error and the audacity to try bold things. This is a tendency one often observes in today's solidarity networks.

Profiles in Solidarity Network Formation and Organising

As mentioned previously, the present research arose out of an effort on the part of CBWAC organisers to build connections with other groups organising at the margins of the formal labour movement. This effort resulted in a number of formal and informal discussions with other groups. In the early months of CBWAC's existence, the network hosted two of these groups in meetings, one organising in Canada's recently-legalised marijuana retail industry and the other in the UK's craft beer sector. These early discussions inspired the authors to begin building relationships with other groups in Canada, leading to interviews with members and organisers of five solidarity

networks: the Worker Solidarity Network, Workers' Action Network NL, What About Bicycle Mechanics?, Contract Worker Justice, and, of course, CBWAC. Although these groups organise in different regions and in pursuit of diverse outcomes, a common commitment is to contribute to the building of worker power amongst the unorganised. For some, like CBWAC and WANL, a critical goal is to assist workers in launching union drives. For others, particularly WABM and WSN, the priority tends toward pushing industry to improve conditions and guiding workers through complex governmental processes.

Although distinguished by their particular approaches, industrial goals and geographical contexts, all of the networks profiled here are based in Canada. The national specificity of this sample is primarily a reflection of the pragmatic, coalition-building approach adopted by the researchers. As such, while this sample should not be assumed to be generalizable, the phenomena that it represents appear to transcend national contexts. As Lorenzo Cini, Vincenzo Maccarrone and Arianna Tassinari (2022) argue, contemporary efforts in worker organising often follow similar patterns while simultaneously displaying novel forms of diversity based on regional and cultural distinctions. Cini and colleagues were particularly interested in the distinctions in gig worker organising in the British and Italian contexts, and found a general tendency toward formal trade union relationships in the former and worker self-directed activity in the latter. They attribute this distinction to the specific political and union histories of each context. The organisations profiled here run the gamut in terms of their relationships to unions, reflecting both tendencies at once. We contend that this is largely due to Canada's strong history of union organising paired with the neoliberal onslaught that has virtually decimated trade union power and public interaction with unions since at least the 1970s. It should come as no surprise that workers and organisers find themselves in a complex relationship vis-à-vis unions, with some more inclined to seek collaboration and others predisposed to mistrust them. The Canadian context is, then, a complicated one, and one that is likely in need of further research.

Our initial survey of Canadian autonomous organising groups revealed dozens of worker centres and solidarity networks nationwide, particularly concentrated in Canada's major urban centres of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. These included migrant worker organisations, some autonomous and others directly working with unions, particularly in contesting Canada's migrant farm worker and live-in caregiver programs, both of which weaponise precarity and short-term visas to keep migrant worker wages low and to quell efforts for these workers to contest dangerous and abusive conditions (Fudge, 2012; Strauss and McGrath, 2017; Teeple Hopkins, 2016). Other networks have been organised around the conditions faced by non-union precarious workers in the retail and hospitality sectors. These groups, including the BC Worker Solidarity Network (WSN) and the Workers' Action Centre of Newfoundland and Labrador (WANL), serve as advocacy hubs as well as supplements to the labour movement's efforts to organise new workers. These retail and hospitality networks help non-union workers navigate complex employment standards policies in their respective provinces, as well as support worker attempts to stage direct actions to exercise collective power in lieu of union representation. Coalition groups such as Contract Worker Justice (CWJ) work directly with workers and unions to push employers to respond to worker demands outside of formal processes. Finally, over the last two years, several industry-specific networks have arisen, particularly in response to the furloughs and layoffs of the COVID lockdowns. Groups such as CBWAC, What About Bicycle Mechanics? (WABM), and the United Weed Workers (UWW) organise along the shared backdrop of sector specific conditions. As mentioned previously, brewery workers in Canada have recently begun organising in response to generally low pay and a lack of benefits in their industry, as well as a pervasive culture of racism, sexism and anti-trans sentiment, as well as sexual harassment and misconduct (Anderson, 2021;

Jenkinson, 2021). Similarly, after Canada legalised marijuana on a national level, workers in the retail industry began to question the conditions under which they worked. Like their brewing counterparts, weed workers face an industry that is rapidly expanding but treating workers as interchangeable, disposable, and hyper-exploitable (Darrah, 2022; Hristova, 2021; Israel, 2022). The UWW have been working to change this, by resourcing, supporting, and even launching unionisation campaigns, particularly in Ontario. Finally, some of Vancouver's bike mechanics have recently launched an innovative network, WABM, that combines worker-led research and organising to address overwork, low-pay, sexism and contractual insecurity in the city's many bike shops.

Many of these groups are quite young, emerging out of the precarious conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic; some, such as WSN, actually formed in direct response to the safety and security concerns the pandemic brought with it. Critically, an early finding of this research is that autonomous solidarity networks provide a crucial organising tool during times of crisis. Whereas many union organisers found meeting with workers to be a challenge during the initial COVID lockdown, many network organisers and members reported that the flexibility of their model provided them the opportunity to meet workers in a variety of ways and places. Moreover, with the emerging labour militancy that appears to be spreading in North America, many network members and organisers have reported that workers have sought out their groups in lieu of union organisers, assuming that decentralised groups, particularly those focused on their industries, would be better situated to help them address their issues or get connected with colleagues, particularly when workers don't believe their workplace is ready for a union drive, or in cases where the worker is unfamiliar with the Canadian labour movement.

As alluded to in the introduction, the thematic analysis of our interview data revealed three major organisational categorisations for the groups studied: industrially-specific solidarity networks, precarious worker networks, and movement connection networks. In the following paragraphs we address each of these network categories as well as their key representatives in our sample.

To begin, CBWAC and WABM are industry-specific solidarity networks, meaning their primary focus is to build worker power within their specific industrial segment (craft brewing and bicycle repair, respectively). Both groups formed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and directly attribute their formation to the working conditions that became apparent to members during this period. Participants from both networks were clear in positing a need for a clearer and deeper understanding of their industries and the various working realities experienced by their colleagues. As such, each of these groups set out to conduct worker-led research into their sector, particularly through the design, distribution, and analysis of worker surveys. Furthermore, WABM took this a step further by exploring avenues for collaborative research with BC research institutions, particularly the University of British Columbia (UBC) and Simon Fraser University (SFU). In a similar vein, one of the authors of this article was invited to join CBWAC due to his research into and organising around issues faced by craft brewery workers in BC. These examples demonstrate an overt and enduring desire to collectively and collaboratively create knowledge of their industries in order to mobilise this knowledge in the interest of organising.

Both groups enjoy friendly and productive relationships with labour movement allies. Although neither group has a formal relationship with a particular union, both have proactively opened dialogues and information-sharing with unions working in their sector. As industry-specific solidarity networks, both groups serve as in-roads for organising in industries that are somewhat off the beaten path for the labour movement. Craft brewing and bicycle maintenance are both emergent staples in the 21st century urban economy, and as such are relatively mysterious to

outsiders. The CBWAC and WABM worker-led inquiries are starting to shed light on conditions in these industries, conditions that representatives in partner unions see as concerning and potential talking-points for organising. Anecdotal evidence gathered by CBWAC in organisers' discussions with workers, as well as their personal experiences in the industry, suggests that craft brewery workers earn considerably less than their corporate brewing counterparts while enjoying fewer benefits and a lower level of job security. Similarly, according to an organiser with WABM, preliminary mapping of Vancouver's bike maintenance industry suggests that employment in the industry is characterised by high degrees of turnover and a fairly homogeneous, white male workforce. Workers in both fields are recognised for their highly skilled work, but this skill frequently goes unrewarded materially, instead being fetishized as part of the industry's artisanal branding (Anderson, 2021).

Taken together, and in light of increasing costs of living, housing insecurity and the like, these factors have compelled these groups and others like them to organise for change in their industries. Both efforts have been spurred on by a general recognition amongst some workers that conditions are not ideal. As a WABM organiser explains:

I would say we are also standing on the shoulders of people who have asked these questions before, but for whatever reason, it hasn't necessarily come with any systemic change. So, it's pretty common in the industry to be like "Hey, this is kind of weird". And, people are very well versed in the fact that it's not diverse and people have barriers, and there's sometimes very toxic cultures; people talk about that a lot. But the impetus here is this is a systemic problem, how can we approach it in a structured way?

As such, each group has approached this generally known but unacted-upon set of conditions in their industry as a jumping-off point for organising. Given that both groups are fairly young, it is likely too soon to assess the degree to which they have been successful in turning disquiet into militancy or fuel for change, but it is still significant to recognise the timing and scale of their efforts, particularly as other groups have been undertaking very similar projects along similar strategic lines over the last few years.

The formation of these industry-specific solidarity networks has also coincided with the creation of distinct groups elsewhere in Canada. One form that these groups take is what we are describing as precarious worker networks. These groups, specifically in this case WSN and WANL, see their mandate as resourcing and helping to organise non-union, precarious workers, particularly those in retail and hospitality. A staff member with WSN clearly explains this approach:

Under the Worker Solidarity Network umbrella, we are a workers' rights advocacy group that advocates for better workplace protections and rights for all low wage, non-unionised workers in British Columbia. And in that, we try to build power with workers to get better protections for workers... Also, we support workers... through our solidarity stewards program. And what that program does is it supports workers in navigating the systems, the legal systems, like the Employment Standards Branch or human rights complaints, or WorkSafe.

According to this staff member, the WSN, originally under the moniker of the Retail Action Network (RAN), was initially concerned with those forms of precarity commonly associated with retail and hospitality work. However, while resourcing workers in these industries, organisers widened their focus, recognising that "low wage and precarious work expands into many other sectors, like gig work, and nonprofit work, [and] any kind of workers who are classified as independent contractors". As such, WSN now considers all non-union, precarious workers as

potential members, regardless of the specific industry or workplace in question.

Like the industry-specific networks we have already discussed, precarious worker networks focus on resourcing non-union workers. There are two primary distinctions that we observe in this description, however. First, unlike industry-specific networks, precarious worker networks see their mandate as inclusive of all non-union precarious workers, and not only those working in a particular industrial sector. Obviously, this is both more ambitious and more difficult, particularly as the networks attempt to get footholds in specific workplaces or sectors. Second, it is clear from this statement that WSN sees itself as primarily an advocacy network, focused on worker education, resourcing and targeted campaigns. As this participant later explained, WSN is attempting to build collective power between workers and their communities in pursuit of specific issues (paid sick days during COVID-19, legal responses to wage and tip theft, etc.). And, we should note, WSN has seen some real progress on these issues, particularly in successfully advocating for an increase in provincially guaranteed paid sick days and the recovery of stolen tips for hospitality workers in Whistler, BC (Worker Solidarity Network, n.d.).

Another precarious worker network profiled for this project is the Workers' Action Network of Newfoundland and Labrador (WANL). WANL was founded by two labour activists with experience organising and volunteering for another labour network. Through this experience, they recognised a need in Newfoundland and Labrador for an all-purpose organisation for precarious workers. Using WSN and Toronto's Workers' Action Centre as models, the pair set up WANL as an advocacy and organising network aiming to build the workers' movement, particularly for precarious workers. Also a young network, WANL has rallied workers around unjust firings, offered organising trainings and moderated trainings on employee rights.

Although built upon similar organisational lines and also focused on precarious workers, WANL is not as overtly advocacy oriented as is WSN. In fact, when we spoke, the organisers had just finished conducting their first organising training with members and had recently been instrumental in a successful strike action in their region. As the organisers described their membership:

The folks that are coming to meetings are not just those who are in low wage work or who are currently unemployed, but are generally just subjected to those working conditions because of their lives... It's folks who kind of already have that baseline interest in organising itself and have this sort of understanding of class consciousness and worker solidarity.

So, while both of these networks share a common commitment to reaching non-union, precarious workers, their specific approach diverges considerably. Interestingly, both groups function under a more formal relationship with local and regional labour bodies than do the industrial-specific solidarity networks discussed above. Although both groups receive some form of funding from partner unions, both also function autonomously, without direct union oversight. Representatives from both networks reported generally favourable relationships with their union partners.

This is also generally the case for the primary coalition group with which we connected, Contract Worker Justice (CWJ). This movement connection solidarity network is made up of a coalition of university students, faculty and staff, contract workers in food service and janitorial work, and three union locals - the Teaching Support Staff Union (TSSU), UNITE HERE Local 40 and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3338. The group formed in March 2021 to push Simon Fraser University (SFU) to end its practice of outsourcing custodial and food service work. In its initial inquiry into working conditions for SFU contract workers, the coalition found that SFU's contract employees earn lower wages and enjoy fewer benefits than their counterparts at British Columbia's other main universities, UBC and the University of Victoria (UVic) (Contract

Worker Justice, 2022a).

Initiated primarily by workers and members of the university community, CWJ is distinct from the other networks profiled in this study, particularly in its direct relationship with a number of unions. That said, according to an organiser interviewed for this research, this coalition relationship was built organically based on the interests and objectives of the coalition's creators, and was not driven by the unions themselves. This has led to high levels of collaboration among workers, community members and unions, but has also resulted in some moments of tension, according to the organiser. Motivated by differing goals, working under distinct organisational constraints and subject to varying institutional pressures, the coalition's members have had to work collaboratively to allay conflicts, creatively envision compromises, and, ultimately, still navigate the need to follow the workers' lead. Although the coalition has yet to win their primary demand of repatriation of contract workers, their organising was instrumental in pushing SFU to commit to becoming a Living Wage Employer (including for contract workers); the coalition sees this as a step in the right direction, but falling short of creating the kind of secure and dignified employment they continue to demand (Contract Worker Justice, 2022b).

Taken together, these examples provide a preliminary typology of the solidarity network in Canada. The sample is not exhaustive, but displays some common organisational forms as well as the various relationships that these networks have built with formal labour institutions. Our goal for the rest of the paper is to assess some of the major benefits and shortcomings of the solidarity network strategy, as observed by our participants, in order to suggest how networks and unions might use their flexibility and militancy in present and impending struggles.

The Solidarity Network: Strengths and Weaknesses

The profiles above only scratch the surface of the diversity on display in the Canadian solidarity network landscape. Urban worker centres, migrant worker groups, tenant unions and union-affiliated flying squads all stand out as landmarks on this national map. The sample collected here does not strive to be exhaustive, but instead serves to illustrate some of the common strengths and challenges of this organisational form while also suggesting the ways in which it can benefit workers and the labour movement more generally. In the closing pages of this paper, we highlight some of the strengths and pitfalls that organisers and members reported about their networks and about autonomous labour organising as a whole.

A common refrain amongst the organisers and members interviewed for this project was a generally unclear relationship with union officials. For some, union officials were seen as hesitant allies who were more interested in containing network efforts than in working collaboratively. Although no group reported open hostility between themselves and their union partners, reported levels of collaboration and exchange varied considerably. On one hand, groups such as WSN and WANL, who enjoy a more formal connection to the labour movement, reported generally favourable relations between their groups and their partner unions, often in the form of collaborative campaigns and efforts. On the other hand, members of CBWAC and CWJ reported certain difficulties in communication with partner unions, particularly in terms of the networks' goals coming into conflict with the unions' institutional constraints, as well as a sense that partner unions sometimes took credit for or stood in the way of the preferred actions of the networks and their members. We should be clear, however, that although members of these organisations reported these tensions, they were also clear that these weren't points of conflict so much as strategic contradictions that necessitated sometimes unexpected degrees of negotiation and compromise. Whereas each solidarity network and union operates under the assumption that they

are working in the interests of their members, the former does so as a voluntary group of workers and allies, the latter as a formal, institutional organ of the workers. From outside, we can see that these two positionalities need not be mutually exclusive, but in the messy business of organising, participants report that they often come to loggerheads. A concerted effort is needed on both sides to navigate such tensions, and as such, we recommend that solidarity networks proactively reach out to consistently update and actively support their partner or adjacent unions. In the same way, union officials, and particularly those working in organising, should recognise the strategic advantage of collaborating with autonomous solidarity networks – a nominal freedom from some of the constraints of their own organising and the flexibility that comes with this.

Depending on the current level of organising within a given industry, solidarity networks are uniquely positioned to act as a bridge between unions and the non-unionised workforce of that industry. This position becomes particularly significant when, as is the case for the craft brewing and bicycle repair industries in Canada, union density is low. In such instances, a knowledge deficit develops that operates in both directions; workers are unaware of the advantages of organising their workplace, and larger unions lack contact with the extant operational structures and working conditions of the industry. Solidarity networks can help overcome this knowledge deficit.

Workers in industries with low union density may not presently have, and may have never had, close contact with unions or unionised workers. As such, many or most of the workers in a workplace within such an industry will be unaware of the benefits of unionisation. Significant and exhaustive campaigns to raise consciousness will need to be undertaken by labour organisations in order for unionisation efforts to succeed. In this context, however, there is a greater risk of being perceived as a third-party attempting to “infiltrate” the industry for the union’s gain rather than for the workers’. Solidarity networks can facilitate the development of a healthier relationship between such workers and unions, given that these networks emerge from workers themselves and are driven to promote and protect the well-being of all workers in the industry. In this way, the risk of third-partying the union can be decreased.

In the other direction, labour organisations attempting to push for unionisation in industries with low union density likely lack the privileged epistemic access to job-relevant worker experience and knowledge of operational structures within the industry, upon which the basis for successful campaigns needs to be built. While this knowledge can certainly be obtained through methods such as salting, there is undeniable value in incorporating the knowledge and experience of workers who have been employed in the industry for years or decades.

Of course, solidarity networks lack the exhaustive infrastructure devoted to organising and education that unions possess. Solidarity networks by themselves cannot as effectively organise the sectors in which they operate, just as unions by themselves face greater difficulty in running successful campaigns in low union density industries.

In such a tenuous organising landscape, where the interests of workers are being amplified by multiple groups and in various capacities, it becomes crucial that workers’ voices remain at the fore. For organisers of the precarious worker networks and movement connection networks profiled here, there is an immediate and always present concern of overreach in their organising and advocacy activities. Organisers and staff for the WANL, WSN and CWJ were adamant that their work must constantly walk a line between empowering workers and speaking for them. Notably, this was not a concern for members and organisers of the industry specific networks CBWAC and WABM. Whereas hired staff and allies in the former networks reported a need to remain sensitive and cognizant of their roles as outsiders, those interviewed for the latter were predominantly worker-organisers. As Sarah, a staff member with WANL, explains:

How do we go about ensuring that the worker feels a sense of agency and responsibility in this, and that we're not taking on the organising efforts per se, that we exist as tools and vessels through which workers can organise and we provide that ground? But, how much is too much?

This reflexivity is crucial, as it demonstrates a commitment to one of the foremost principles of democratic labour organising: it's the workers' voices that matter (Bradbury et al., 2016; McAlevey, 2016). Whereas CBWAC and WABM are worker-led organisations, WANL, WSN and CWJ rely on the administrative, advocacy, organising and communicative work of non-worker staff and volunteers, like many unions. That these volunteers and staff recognise their status and intentionally and continually prioritise the interests and voices of workers demonstrates, at least to a degree, a commitment on the part of the networks to class-based organising. As an organiser volunteer for CWJ recounted:

A challenge for us is organising around the schedules of the workers, making sure that the actions are sensitive to their precarious situations. It's a give and take, because if we're planning to bring concerns to the employer, it can sometimes mean that the workers can't be there because of schedule conflicts. We have to be their stand-ins, but it has to be clear and obvious that the demands we're making come from them.

Finally, several participants reported difficulty both gauging worker concerns and translating them into achievable goals and actions. Although this would be the case for any working-class organisation, unions have the benefit of research staff, multiple communication platforms, and, broadly, dedicated resources for diagnosing conditions and taking feedback. Solidarity networks suffer an institutional disadvantage in this regard as they are typically worker or volunteer-run, reliant on donations and grants, and informally connected to their members. WSN, WANL and CWJ have all worked to overcome these constraints, particularly in forging strategic partnerships with better resourced unions. Similarly, WABM is starting this process in another way, by joining their worker-initiated industrial research to the efforts of a major university-labour research partnership. Emerging solidarity networks should formulate plans for collecting industrial data and worker attitudes as well as for translating this into strategic goals and executable actions. This latter imperative is, admittedly, elusive for young organisations, but as our experience with CBWAC attests, it is critical for building an enduring, sustainable, and efficacious network.

Conclusion

In a set of instructions prepared for the delegates of the First General Congress of the International Working Men's Association, Karl Marx, in critiquing the narrow parameters of trade unionism at the time, observed the manner by which issues and interests of local or sectoral concern were often prioritised at the expense of the those of the working class as a whole. For trade unions to truly serve as organs of the working class, Marx called on them to embrace a more holistic form of union organising. As Marx put it:

Apart from their original purposes, they [the Trades' Unions] must now learn to act deliberately as organising centres of the working class in the broad interest of its *complete emancipation*. They must aid every social and political movement tending in that direction. Considering themselves and acting as the champions and representatives of the whole working class, they cannot fail to enlist the non-society men into their ranks. They must look carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades. (Marx, 1866 | 2022: 35)

A century and a half later, and after the neoliberal onslaught against organised labour rolled out in the final decades of the 20th century, today's labour movement appears on the back foot, protecting workers in those industries where it still has a foothold, but often struggling to reach those in most need of organisation. The solidarity networks profiled here, as well as the countless similar groups, hold potential to bridge this gap, to reach workers that unions often cannot. To be sure, unions serve critical functions in the movement for worker emancipation – representing and supporting workers in grievance procedures, bargaining collective agreements, protecting striking workers and organising strike support, and amplifying worker interests at the formal level. The solidarity network is not a challenge to the formal activities of the union. Instead, it is a tool of worker self-activity that gives workers the opportunity to build collective power outside of formal institutions: a flexible power intended to respond to the imposed flexibility of work in the 21st century economy.

As inequalities deepen, exploitation intensifies and barriers to emancipation coalesce, it is crucial that the various organs of working-class militancy recognise the diverse strategic tools they have at their disposal. Today's resurgence of union organising in North America and the recent proliferation of solidarity networks globally suggests an expansion of class consciousness and militancy that, when recognised as a reinvigoration of class politics, should impel the labour movement to welcome new tactics of worker self-activity and organising. Speaking as members of a fledgling solidarity network, we are grateful for the relationship we maintain with union allies, and we invite other networks and unions to follow the collaborative lead of the organisations profiled above. Despite the risk of cliché, we will end with this: workers' organisations of the world unite!

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