RUTH MILKMAN

Power resource theory and the 21st century US labor movement

1. Introduction

Power resource theory, or the power resource approach (PRA), has been adopted by a growing number of scholars analyzing the potentialities and limits of labor movements around the world, past and present. The PRA elaborates a typology of power resources that workers may (or may not) be able to access and deploy in their struggles with employers. Here I apply this framework to analyze recent developments in the 21st century US labor movement, including the high-profile unionization drives at iconic companies like Starbucks and Amazon in the 2020s; the less publicized post-2008 wave of union organizing and strikes among graduate student workers, adjunct faculty, journalists, and other college-educated professionals; and the militant campaigns of «legacy» unions like the United Auto Workers and the Teamsters in 2022 and 2023.

I begin with a brief sketch of the US labor movement's steady downward trajectory in the neoliberal period, and of the dynamics driving the unexpected uptick in organizing and strikes in the 2010s and 2020s. Against that background, I review the PRA literature, briefly summarizing its contributions and limitations. It is helpful in illuminating the conditions under which such efforts succeeded or faltered; at the same

Acknowledgements: Thanks to the editors of Stato e Mercato *and to my colleagues at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. I am also grateful for helpful feedback from those who attended presentations of the argument at the Stanford University Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, the NYU Sociology Department, and the Rutgers University Department of Labor Studies and Employment Relations.*

ISSN 0392-9701

time an assessment of recent US labor movement activity also exposes some key limitations of the approach. One concern is the PRA's lack of attention to variation in the extent and nature of employer power and its impact on labor organizing efforts; another is the failure to theorize the opportunities presented for workers' movements by social crises like wars, depressions, or in this case the Covid-19 pandemic. And crucially, the role of leadership – whether of rank-and-file activists or union officials – in shaping workers' struggles is exogenous to the PRA. The latter is an especially conspicuous omission in regard to the US case, as a primary driver of recent labor activism there has been the leadership of a new political generation of college-educated «Millennials» and «Gen-Zers».

2. US labor's long decline and recent revitalization

To an even greater degree than in other advanced capitalist countries, the power and influence of the US labor movement fell dramatically in the closing decades of the 20th century. From a peak of about 35% in 1955, the share of US wage and salary workers who are union members dropped to 23% by 1980, and to 14% by 2000. In 2023 the density rate stood at only 10%, and a mere 6% in the private sector – lower than at any time since the early 1930s (unionstats.com). Mirroring the relentless erosion of union density, the frequency and scale of strikes also plummeted starting in the 1980s, following President Reagan's infamous destruction of the nation's air controllers' union after its 1981 strike. In the following years, with the aid of a burgeoning industry of anti-union consultants, private-sector employers perfected an array of aggressive and highly effective «union avoidance» tactics, which quickly became standard operating procedure across corporate America and were a key driver of union decline.

As these developments tilted the playing field of US industrial relations to increasingly favor employers, labor leaders and their allies responded with repeated efforts to redress the balance. They campaigned for labor law reform and launched a series of strategic organizing innovations, most notably in the late 1990s when the «New Voice» leadership of the AFL-CIO came to power and called for devoting more of the movement's resources to organizing the unorganized.

Yet such efforts yielded limited results and failed to reverse the downward trend in union density and power. Instead, a steady stream of neoliberal public policy initiatives and conservative judicial decisions relentlessly degraded labor rights. Public support for unions also began to waver starting in the late 1960s; soon afterward obituaries for organized labor began to appear regularly in both academic and journalistic commentary, penned by friends and foes alike. The erosion of unionism contributed to the rapid growth of income and wealth inequality and helped fuel the right-wing populism that propelled Donald Trump into the White House in 2016.

In the 2020s, however, a series of unexpected developments seemed to portend a reversal in labor's fortunes. The Covid-19 pandemic generated an exceptionally tight labor market, driving unemployment to a level lower than any time since World War II. The public policy response to the crisis also (albeit temporarily) improved the economic situation of many workers, especially in the early months of the Biden administration. The pandemic also raised public awareness of the role of «essential workers» and of the abuses they suffered at the hands of employers. Emboldened by these changed conditions, many workers abandoned undesirable jobs for better ones in the so-called «Great Resignation», and collective protests over employers' failure to protect workers' health and safety helped spark an uptick in union organizing and strikes. Polls registered a rise in pro-union attitudes, especially among the young, while Biden proclaimed himself «the most pro-worker and pro-union president in American history».

The startling news in April 2021 that the independent Amazon Labor Union had won a union representation election in Staten Island, New York made worldwide headlines and captured the public imagination, as did successful unionization efforts at hundreds of Starbucks stores across the country, and at a variety of other name-brand retail outlets like Apple, Trader Joe's and Chipotle. Starting in late 2021, a series of strikes (or in some cases strike threats) broke out in long-unionized industries, riding a wave of rank-and-file outrage over soaring executive pay and corporate profits, and chalking up gains for union members on a scale not seen for decades.

Although in the 21st century context, these developments seemed dramatic, by historical standards they are less impressive. The scale of new union organizing has been far too

modest to increase union density: the absolute number of union members did rise slightly in 2022 and 2023, but was outpaced by labor force growth. Similarly, the uptick in strike activity pales in significance when compared to strike rates in the period before 1980. Moreover, Amazon, Starbucks and other private-sector employers have aggressively resisted recent union organizing efforts, so that even when workers won legal recognition for their unions, they immediately confronted a new set of obstacles. Following the longstanding standard corporate playbook, most employers not only fought union organizing at the initial stage, but if that failed also took all possible steps to prolong the process of negotiating a union contract, defying the legal requirement that they «bargain in good faith», while depleting union resources and morale.

All that said, the US labor movement has gained wider support and greater momentum since the 2008 financial crisis, and especially since the onset of the pandemic. Amid widespread public alarm about skyrocketing inequality and growing recognition that unions are one of the few potential counterforces to that trend, a new political generation has emerged, supplying new leadership to the beleaguered US labor movement. As Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) – later joined by Gen-Zers (born between 1997 and the early 2010s) – have increasingly embraced a progressive political worldview, a growing number of them have dedicated themselves to union organizing and activism. Their efforts began quietly, taking shape in the 2010s, and then accelerated in the 2020s, capitalizing on the tight labor market and other favorable conditions generated by the pandemic, and amplified by a flood of media coverage. To what extent can the PRA make sense of these unexpected developments?

3. The Power Research Approach

Although it has seldom been deployed in analyses of the US labor movement (an important exception is Rhomberg and Lopez 2021), the PRA has attracted growing interest from labor scholars around the world. Its origin can be traced to Walter Korpi's writings in the 1970s, when he defined «power resources» as «the properties of an actor which provide the ability to reward or punish another actor» (Korpi 1974, p.

1571). Despite his use of the singular noun, the actors Korpi had in mind were collective ones: he elaborated the power resources idea through a detailed analysis of industrial relations in postwar Sweden (Korpi 1978). For him, capital's key «power resource» was control of the means of production; while «organizations that coordinate collective action» – unions and political parties – were «the major alternative power resource» for labor (Korpi 1978, p. 23). Korpi argued that mobilization of power resources was a contingent process, noting that «positions in the class structure cannot, in themselves, generate collective action. They provide, instead, a potential basis for such action» (Korpi 1978, p. 314). His framework encompassed not only labor's power resources but also those of capital, and by extension specific employers; yet, as noted earlier, the latter are rarely explored in recent PRA literature.

Instead, PRA theorists have concentrated on differentiating the power resources available to the working class. Erik Olin Wright (2000) introduced what became a canonical distinction between «associational power» defined as «forms of power that result from the formation of collective organizations of workers» and «structural power» defined as «power that results simply from the location of workers within the economic system» (Wright 2000, p. 962). His conception of associational power resembled Korpi's notion of labor's «alternative power resource», although Wright suggested that the organizations involved might include not only unions and parties, but also works councils and «even, in some circumstances, community organizations». He developed the distinction between associational and structural power as part of an abstract game-theoretical model of class compromise; he did not explore its application to class *conflict* – apart from observing in passing that «increases in working-class associational power generally undermine the capacity of individual capitalists to unilaterally make decisions» (Wright 2000, p. 979).

Beverly Silver (2003) elaborated the concepts of associational and structural power in her magisterial comparative-historical analysis of labor movements. She specified two sub-types of structural power: «marketplace bargaining power» and «workplace bargaining power»:

> Marketplace bargaining power can take several forms including (1) the possession of scarce skills that are in demand by employers, (2) low levels

of general unemployment, and (3) the ability of workers to pull out of the labor market entirely and survive on nonwage sources of income. Workplace bargaining power, on the other hand, accrues to workers who are enmeshed in tightly integrated production processes, where a localized work stoppage in a key node can cause disruptions on a much wider scale than the stoppage itself (Silver 2003, p. 13).

Like Korpi's, Silver's theory is explicitly anti-determinist. She declared that «there is not a strict correspondence between workers' bargaining power and the actual use by workers of that power to struggle for better working and living conditions» (Silver 2003, p. 15). Although she does not use the term «power resources», Silver's typology is the linchpin of what later became known as the PRA. Indeed, she foreshadowed another key element of the framework in her discussion of the decline of workers' power in the neoliberal late 20th century, which she attributed in part to «transformations in the discursive environment» (Silver 2003, p. 16). Later scholars explicitly added «discursive power resources» to the PRA typology, incorporating what Chun (2009) called «symbolic power»; later Refslund and Arnholtz (2022) referred to this as «ideational power».

In an influential effort to systematize the burgeoning PRA literature, Stefan Schmalz, Carmen Ludwig and Edward Webster (2018) recently proposed adding two additional types of power resources to the list. The first is «institutional power resources», which Schmalz *et al.* defined as «institutionalized labour rights and institutional dialogue procedures that labour can rely on even when structural and associational power is weakened» (p. 115). Institutional power resources, they explained, are «legally fixed rights» (p. 119) that are the «result of [previous] struggles and negotiation processes based on structural power and associational power» (p. 121).

The second category that Schmalz and his colleagues introduced is «societal power resources», which encompasses both discursive/symbolic/ideational power resources and «coalitional power resources». In another effort at synthesis, Refslund and Arnholtz (2022, p. 1962) offered a slightly different typology, separating Schmalz *et al.*'s «societal power resources» into «ideational» and «coalitional» power resources.

A decade earlier, Christian Levesque and Gregor Murray (2010) elaborated a related set of categories, using a distinctly

different vocabulary but otherwise paralleling the ideas of other PRA proponents. Levesque and Murray's notion of «narrative resources» is similar to what others term discursive/symbolic/ideational power; what they term «internal solidarity» is similar to associational power; and their idea of «network embeddedness» is similar to «coalitional power resources». Levesque and Murray's framework also includes a residual category, «infrastructural resources» comprised of material resources (e.g. union dues); human resources (e.g. union staff expertise); as well as «organizational processes, policies and programs».

As Chris Rhomberg and Steven Lopez (2021, p. 48) point out, the PRA literature offers an ever-expanding «menu» or typology of power resources but does not constitute a theory that can explain «actual power relations» in specific contexts. Marissa Brookes (2018, p. 254), similarly, notes that the PRA fails to generate «predictions of when and why specific power resources are effective in any given situation» and suggests the need for a broader «theory of power itself».

In an effort to address these concerns, Rhomberg and Lopez (2021, p. 48) propose a parsimonious model that locates structural power resources in the economy, legal (or institutional) power resources in the state, and discursive (or ideational or symbolic) power resources in civil society. These are labor's «sources of leverage for collective action», while associational power «spans all three arenas and encompasses both internal (organizational) and external (coalitional) power resources». Echoing Korpi's notion of labor's key power resource as «organizations that coordinate collective action», for Rhomberg and Lopez associational power is «power in action, comprising both mobilization and its organizational forms».

Brookes (2018), similarly, defines associational power as «the capacity of workers to mobilize themselves and to act collectively», adding that it «might be considered as a precondition for magnifying the impact of the other power resources or, in some instances, a necessary condition for even exercising those power types in the first place». This recalls Offe and Wiesenthal's «dialogical» pattern of collective action, which they suggest is «required on the part of those who find themselves in an inferior power position and who do, therefore, depend upon a common and collective concept of their interest» (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980, p. 91).

Brookes elaborates further on the ways in which «associational power is different» from all the other power resources included in the PRA frameworks:

> the «power» in associational power is not exercised by workers over employers but rather by workers over other workers. That is, associational power is the ability of union leaders, shop stewards, or rank-and-file union members to compel the other members of their organization to do something they otherwise would not do – in this case, to behave as a collective actor (Brookes 2018, p. 256).

Here Brookes alludes to the issue of labor movement *leadership*, which is exogenous to the PRA. While unions and other labor organizations are integral to the PRA, the human beings who bring them into being and shape their strategies and tactics are not. For example, while Refslund and Arnholtz (2022) explicitly call for «bringing unions back in», and point to their agentic role in «attaining, maintaining and applying power resources», their version of the PRA takes the existence of unions as given rather than explaining how they come into existence or the conditions under which their actions are effective. Levesque and Murray (2010, p. 333) do explore labor movement «strategic capabilities», along with the caveat that «unions can have power resources but not be particularly skilled at using them» (p. 341). But this is not integrated into their version of the PRA; instead, they discuss it as a separate issue.

Leadership is not just another «power resource» that might be added to the PRA «menu». On the contrary, it is a human «capacity», as Brookes puts it, that enables labor's exercise of associational power – and as such is qualitatively different from other types of power resources and indeed a necessary condition for deploying them.

Other commentators writing outside the PRA framework have analyzed the dynamics of leadership in labor movements. For example, Marshall Ganz (2000) argues that successful labor organizing depends not only on «resources» but also on the «resourcefulness» or «strategic capacity» of leaders. And Micah Uetricht and Barry Eidlin (2019) point to the critical role of a «militant minority» in building the US labor movement, past and present, and to the devastating impact on union power of the post-World War II purges of Communists and other radical leaders.

That leadership and the social dynamics that shape it are exogenous to the PRA seriously limits the framework's usefulness. Also missing from the approach are tools to explain variation in rank-and-file workers' receptivity to organizing efforts, which as a vast body of labor history scholarship shows, can be shaped by gender, race, and/or migration experiences, and more.

PRA has other limitations as well. One involves employer power, which was central in Korpi's original framework but is exogenous in recent renditions of the PRA. Many labor scholars (e.g. Stepan-Norris and Kerrissey 2023) have documented the critical role of employer responses in shaping the outcomes of workers' struggles; and as noted below, the case of the 21st century US labor movement similarly illustrates the effects of variations in employer behavior. Finally, crises like the 2008 financial meltdown or the Covid-19 pandemic can provide special opportunities for labor organizing that are absent in «normal» times, yet this too is outside the scope of the PRA.

4. The new political generation: An embryonic militant minority

As I have argued elsewhere (Milkman 2017), building on Karl Mannheim's (1927) insights from a century ago, Millennials – later to be joined by Gen-Z – emerged as a new political generation in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, with a distinctive worldview shaped by the unique historical conditions and social upheavals that marked their formative years. As the first «digital natives», immersed in internet-based technologies from childhood, they pioneered the use of social media in social movements. And despite having higher levels of formal education than any previous generation, Millennials' and Gen-Zers' economic aspirations were often frustrated. Already saddled with vast amounts of student debt and inflated housing costs, upon entering the labor market they often found that the middle-class jobs and professional careers to which they aspired had become increasingly precarious. British journalist Paul Mason (2013) declared that they represented «a new sociological type: the graduate with no future [...] a generation [...] whose projected life-arc has switched, quite suddenly, from an upward curve to a downward one».

Another feature of the worldview of Millennials and Gen-Zers was a deep sense of political betrayal. After being led by

their parents and teachers to believe that they were part of a post-racial society, and one in which gender inequality had been largely eliminated, they instead discovered as young adults that racism and sexism remained virulent, even as class inequality was growing explosively. These disappointments catalyzed a political worldview centered on intersectionality, alongside a broad repertoire of social movement activity, ranging from the 2011 Occupy Wall Street protests, to Black Lives Matter, climate justice, and the movement for Palestinian rights. Some older Millennials were also part of the anti-globalization movement at the end of the 20th century, from which Occupy inherited its «horizontalism» and deep-seated skepticism toward bureaucracy, as well as its prefigurative politics. Occupy itself was famously short-lived, but its veterans soon flocked to Bernie Sanders' 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns and to the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

In the 2010s and even more so in the 2020s, Millennials and Gen-Zers embraced the labor movement in growing numbers. Some older Millennials had been recruited in the 1990s by an earlier generation of labor activists tied to the late 1990s «New Voice» AFL-CIO leadership who launched initiatives like Union Summer and the Organizing Institute which recruited college students as union interns and organizers. Their numbers would steadily multiply in the 21st century. In 2013, a Pew survey found that 61% of Millennials had a favorable opinion of organized labor, compared to 49% of Baby Boomers (Dimock *et al.* 2013), and a 2020 survey found that Gen-Zers were even more supportive of unions than Millennials; both were more supportive than older workers had been at the same age. Among «baby boomers» and «Gen-Xers» (born 1946-64 and 1965-80, respectively), non-college-educated respondents were more pro-union than those with a college education, but the opposite was true for Millennials and Gen-Zers (Center for American Progress 2022). A 2023 survey commissioned by the AFL-CIO found that 88% of respondents under age 30 (Gen-Zers) supported unions, compared to 69% of those aged 30-49 and 67% of those over 50 (GBAO 2023).

Young workers thus proved ripe targets for union organizing, and by the 2020s they were typically being recruited by members of their own generation, which one commentator dubbed «Generation Union» (Meyerson 2022). Growing numbers of Millennials and Gen-Zers devoted themselves to the

labor movement as organizers, union staffers, or rank-and-file activists. They called to mind the radical labor activists of the 1930s and 1940s, often seen as the most dedicated organizers of that exceptional era of US union growth, whose «ideological vision informed their unionism, making it militant, dynamic, and powerful» (Uetricht and Eidlin 2019, p. 40).

The number of 21st century leftwing labor activists is still modest relative to that earlier period, and their anti-bureaucratic animus and intersectional ideology are distinctly different. But like their predecessors they are passionately anti-capitalist and share a «belief in the illegitimacy of managerial authority» (Uetricht and Eidlin 2019, p. 40), along with an intense commitment to labor organizing that wins them respect and recognition as leaders among their co-workers.

Reflecting their high levels of education, Millennials and Gen-Z labor activists are not easily intimidated by anti-union management rhetoric, and many embody a class confidence that further adds to their leadership capacities. Those with experience in other social movements – whether Black Lives Matter, immigrant rights, reproductive freedom, climate justice, or LGBTQ rights – further enrich the strategic repertoire of the unions they work in, which as Voss and Sherman (2000) have shown, is often a key ingredient of labor revitalization.

5. The PRA and variations in the effectiveness of «Generation Union's» labor activism

Although the radicalization and ensuing labor activism among Millennials and Gen-Zers in the 2010s and 2020s is exogenous to the PRA, the framework does help to explain why some of their organizing efforts were more likely to succeed than others. As the examples discussed below suggest, organizing tended to be more successful when workers had structural power, especially marketplace bargaining power, than in cases where employers could easily replace workers with new recruits. This is a reminder that not all «power resources» are equal; indeed, organizing that relied primarily on symbolic power was far more vulnerable to employer resistance and often faltered, while efforts that leveraged structural power gained more traction.

More specifically, union organizing efforts in occupations and sectors where workers had high skill levels or extensive

professional training, and thus could access workplace bargaining power, yielded superior and more enduring results than those in fields where workers were relatively unskilled and thus easily replaced. Marketplace bargaining power mattered too, as the labor shortages that emerged in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic emboldened workers and made them less fearful of employer reprisals than before. Indeed, along with the emergence of a generation unusually receptive to labor's appeal, with a strong capacity for leadership, the tight labor market of the 2020s was a key spur for that decade's uptick in union organizing and strikes.

5.1. *Symbolic power and its limits*

Public and media attention were riveted by the Amazon Labor Union's (ALU) triumph in a union representation election at the «JFK8» warehouse in Staten Island, New York on April 1, 2022. A year earlier, at another Amazon facility in Bessemer, Alabama, workers had voted against unionization by a 2-to-1 margin. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ordered a second election after finding Amazon guilty of severe violations of US labor law, but the union lost that vote too (albeit by a smaller margin). Organized labor's institutional power was at a low ebb, and the outcome at Bessemer was all too typical of 21st century efforts to unionize private-sector companies, which deployed a toolkit of proven strategies to intimidate workers and defeat union drives. A decade-long organizing effort had failed abysmally at Wal-Mart not long before, and the Bessemer outcome seemed entirely predictable – par for the course.

But at Amazon's Staten Island warehouse the stars suddenly aligned, stunning labor experts along with the broader public. In a prototypical case of what Eric Blanc (2024, 2025) calls «worker-to-worker organizing» the ALU triumphed despite miniscule resources and with almost no institutional backing from the labor establishment. It was led by a scrappy group of young left-wing activists, including several «salts» who had deliberately gotten hired at JFK8 to launch the campaign. «One of the main divisions was age», an ALU organizer told Blanc, adding that «the average age of an ALU organizer is about twenty-six – many older workers tended to be more

skeptical of the union». Workers' experience of the pandemic added fuel to the fire.

The most celebrated of the ALU's young leaders was Christian Smalls, a charismatic Black Millennial who had been fired by Amazon after leading a walkout over health and safety issues in the early days of the pandemic. Amazon management openly ridiculed Smalls and spent $ 4.3 million on anti-union consultants to counter the ALU. Ultimately, however, this arrogant display of power backfired on the company. Workers were enraged not only by the despotic managerial regime, with its intensive electronic surveillance and automated discipline for «time off task», but also by Amazon's blatant indifference to their health and safety, even as its profits grew explosively during the Covid lockdowns. The ALU adopted a labor-intensive organizing strategy, reaching out to workers one-on-one inside the plant during breaks, with special appears to workers of color and immigrants, and distributed free food (and marijuana, which by then was legal in New York) near bus stops in front of the warehouse. They also made extensive use of social media, especially TikTok and Telegram (Milkman 2022).

In PRA terms, this was a campaign that abounded in «symbolic power» a social justice drama that unfolded in public view and amplified by a flood of media attention. It was a struggle of «essential workers» who daily risked their lives on the job, while enduring a brutal shop floor regime, demanding union recognition from a corporate Behemoth whose CEO, Jeff Bezos, was the richest person on the planet at the time (later to be overtaken by Elon Musk). The fact that everyone involved worked at JFK8 (or had done so, like Smalls, until they were fired for organizing) eliminated the potential for management to paint the ALU as an «outside» organization, a standard tactic in the corporate anti-union playbook.

In 2022, with the pandemic-induced labor shortage at its peak, Amazon workers also had substantial marketplace bargaining power: they knew that they could easily find other jobs if they were fired – as Smalls had been – for supporting the union. In contrast, their workplace bargaining power was miniscule: turnover at JFK8 was a phenomenal 150%, and new hires could become proficient on the job in just a few days.

The organizing effort underway at Starbucks at the same time, starting with a surprise victory in Buffalo, New York in December 2021, was another campaign rooted primarily in

symbolic power. Even more so than at Amazon, this was an effort to which underemployed college-educated young workers flocked en masse. Starbucks Workers United (SWU) was spearheaded by Rhodes Scholar Jen Briazck, who worked as a salt in the Buffalo, New York store, the site of the initial breakthrough that would soon be replicated by workers at other Starbucks outlets across the nation. SWU went on to win representation elections at hundreds of the company's stores. Although unlike ALU, the Starbucks effort did have support (funding and expertise) from the established union Workers United, it too relied on a worker-to-worker organizing approach, with union staffers taking a back seat, at least at first. Like the ALU, SWU targeted an iconic US company, led by ultra-wealthy entrepreneur Howard Schultz, who made no secret of his determination to defeat the fledgling union and reject the eminently reasonable demands of its vulnerable, poorly-paid members.

Union fever spread among young workers employed by other brand-name companies too, including Apple and Chipolte and a variety of smaller retailers like Trader Joes, REI and others. In all these cases the employers were deeply concerned about avoiding any damage to their brands or public image, making them especially vulnerable to the deployment of symbolic power. And in all these cases, the workforce was disproportionately made up of college-educated Millennials and Gen-Zers, who embraced the union cause with unbridled enthusiasm. All these efforts relied on symbolic power along with the tight labor market; in all of them, workers could be easily replaced, as they had little or no workplace bargaining power.

Indeed, even when they won legal recognition, which itself could be delayed by various employer foot-dragging tactics, these fledgling unions immediately encountered formidable additional obstacles in seeking to negotiate an initial collective bargaining agreement. As labor journalist Steven Greenhouse observed in December 2023:

> When nonunion workers are eager to get a union contract, they have to climb not just one but two often forbidding mountains. First, they must win a unionization drive, frequently against a fiercely anti-union company; and second, often harder and taking far longer, they need to cinch a first contract. Climbing this second mountain is much harder than many workers realize. The first Starbucks store unionized (in Buffalo, New York) in December 2021, the first REI store (in Manhattan) in March 2022, the first

Amazon warehouse (on Staten Island) in April 2022, the first Apple Store (in Towson, Maryland) in June 2022. Yet workers from all four companies say a first contract remains miles away.

Under US labor law, if a union wins recognition, employers are required to «bargain in good faith», but in recent years this provision has been honored more often in the breach than the observance. Not only do workers often become discouraged while negotiations drag on and on, but in the absence of a contract these fledgling unions are unable to begin collecting dues, depleting their already-limited resources. Meanwhile, at high-turnover workplaces like Amazon and Starbucks, the workers who voted for the union are rapidly replaced by newcomers.

At some smaller companies with fewer resources to devote to anti-union efforts, persistent organizing has yielded collective bargaining agreements, as Eric Blanc (2025) has documented for the case of the regional Burgerville fast food chain in the Northwestern United States. There an independent union did win a contract in late 2021 after five years of organizing. Although the effort did include a series of brief strikes, it primarily relied on symbolic power, naming and shaming the Burgerville company, which promoted itself as a progressive brand. In this case it was crucial that the employer's power was more limited than at mega-corporations like Amazon. The campaign also banked on the radicalization of young workers, who as a Burgerville organizer told Blanc, «just have stopped believing in bosses and corporations».

Contracts remain elusive for the better-known organizing efforts at larger companies, but in February 2024, soon after Howard Schulz stepped down as CEO, Starbucks emerged as a potential exception: the company agreed to a process of collective bargaining with the aim of reaching a «framework agreement» for the nearly 400 stores that had voted to unionize – a step it had adamantly resisted for more than two years. It is probably no coincidence that – unlike the campaigns at Amazon, Trader Joe's and REI (as well as Burgerville), the Starbucks campaign has been backed by an established union, Workers United, which contributed substantial staff and funding to the effort. A series of short strikes, along with a nascent grassroots boycott, over 100 NLRB unfair labor practice charges and other legal disputes have combined to damage

the company's bottom line and its public reputation. Here symbolic power was bolstered by additional power resources, and it now seems possible that the combination will enable the union to win a first contract, against all odds. Yet many observers have expressed skepticism about Starbucks' recent peace offering, especially since the company has also brought a recent lawsuit (along with Amazon and SpaceX) challenging the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Act (Greenhouse 2024).

5.2. *Winning with workplace bargaining power*

Millennials and Gen-Zers have also been at the forefront of recent unionizing efforts in occupations and sectors where workers can access workplace bargaining power: among professionals and other highly skilled workers, including some with no previous history of unionism, like architects, doctors, research scientists, and tech workers. In such fields, where workers are difficult or impossible for employers to replace, unions have more easily gained traction (albeit on a limited scale) than at the brand-name companies that have received the bulk of media attention. Moreover, the spurt of union campaigns among professionals and proto-professionals in the 2020s followed in the footsteps of others similarly targeting hard-to-replace, highly trained workers that were underway for at least a decade, and which had already established a strong record of success.

The first wave of organizing of this type involved graduate student workers and adjunct faculty in colleges and universities, who began to embrace unionism in large numbers in the 2010s. Unionization of academic staff in public universities dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when many US states first enacted laws permitting public-sector collective bargaining. But around the turn of the 21st century, in response to the precipitous decline in the availability of tenure-track jobs, union organizing efforts gained momentum in both public and private colleges and universities. They were especially effective among adjunct and other contingent faculty, who are keenly aware of the vast gap between their pay, benefits and working conditions and those of tenure-track faculty. Graduate student workers, similarly, were extremely responsive to

unionization efforts, recognizing that the careers they aspired to were becoming increasingly elusive. Recognizing these frustrated aspirations, union organizers came to view both groups as low-hanging fruit, notwithstanding fierce opposition from college and university administrators.

In the 2010s, as legal obstacles to unionizing student workers were gradually removed, the pace of higher education organizing picked up. The United Automobile Workers (UAW) emerged as the single largest union representing graduate student workers, while the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) took the lead among adjuncts. This was not «worker-to-worker» organizing, but took a more traditional form, with experienced union staffers guiding campaigns culminating in representation elections. Most of these efforts proved successful: unions won 21 of the 25 private-sector elections held among graduate student workers between 2012 and 2019 (Herbert and Van der Naald 2021, p. 229). Faculty unionism too surged ahead in this period: between 2013 and 2021, over 42,400 faculty members (mostly non-tenure-track) won union recognition for 126 bargaining units (Herbert *et. al.* 2023, p. 9).

Initially, these developments did not attract much notice outside the higher education and union communities. But that changed with the pandemic lockdowns, which intensified stress among graduate student workers and adjunct faculty, even as they became aware of the high-profile union organizing among their contemporaries at Amazon, Starbucks, and the rest. In 2022 and the first half of 2023 alone, 30 new bargaining units covering over 35,000 student-workers (including some undergraduates as well) won union recognition, with 91% of workers, on average, voting in favor of unionization. Faculty, graduate student workers, and postdoctoral fellows also went on strike in unprecedented numbers in the 2020s. There were 20 academic worker strikes in 2022 and the first half of 2023 alone, including the massive UAW walkout at the University of California among 45,000 graduate student-workers and postdoctoral scholars (Herbert *et al.* 2023). These strikes were generally highly effective, winning major improvements in pay, benefits and conditions for academic workers.

Journalists, especially young journalists, also organized extensively starting in the 2010s, ironically with limited media or public attention. Although the numbers of workers involved were far more modest than in higher education, between 2015

and early 2020, more than 90 successful union drives brought over 5,000 journalists into the labor fold, both at new media outlets and at traditional newspapers and magazines (Smith 2020). Employers did resist these efforts, but the unions prevailed in almost every campaign they undertook, reflecting journalists' high level of workplace bargaining power. Their professional training is less extensive than that of academic workers, but journalists too have substantial skill and specialized knowledge, making them difficult to replace and therefore able to exert leverage.

Like the unionization efforts in colleges and universities, those in the news media were conventional in form, relying on guidance from experienced union staff from the NewsGuild or the Writers Guild of America-East (WGA), although many of the campaigns were initiated by young journalists themselves. Although few of the activists involved had prior experience with unions, by all accounts they proved highly receptive. Not only were they keenly attuned to the changing political and social climate in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, on which many of them reported in the course of their daily work, but they found themselves in an industry that had undergone dramatic restructuring, rendering their jobs increasingly precarious. Whereas earlier generations of journalists had relatively well-paid and stable careers, by the 2010s a typical trajectory for a budding journalist was to «start in an unpaid internship, graduate to freelancing, become a permalancer, and change employers multiple times [...] all while carrying student debt» (Cohen and de Peuter 2020, p. 5). Once the wave of organizing among journalists took off, it snowballed from one workplace to another, much like the pattern that would unfold a few years later at Starbucks. The NewsGuild and WGA efforts chalked up a record of considerable success, winning substantial improvements in pay, benefits and working conditions.

Unionization efforts developed in the 2010s among staffers at museums, foundations, nonprofit organizations, political campaigns, and elsewhere; campaigns among such white-collar and professional workers – most of them young and college-educated – continued to multiply in the 2020s. In the case of museum workers, the impetus to organize expanded with the pandemic lockdowns. Employment precarity had been an issue in this sector well before 2020, but now workers faced

new health risks, pay cuts and furloughs – even as the institutions that employed them pocketed government support designed to carry them through the crisis. «A virulent strain of unionism, born out of lockdown and pressingly of the moment, has swept the museum sector», The Art Reporter's Tom Seymour declared in early 2022, adding:

> This is a new form of collective action, remotely formed, digitally optimized, fluent in social communications [...] peopled by a new demographic of museum worker, one more politicised, younger, and more diverse than previous generations. Yet it is also one saddled with high levels of student debt and having to contend with astronomical living costs.

A similar pattern of union growth took shape in the non-profit sector in the 2020s. The Nonprofit Professional Employees Union grew from 300 workers at 12 organizations in 2018 to 1,500 workers at nearly 50 organizations by early 2023 (Rendon 2023). Just like at museums, the young, well-educated workers employed by nonprofit organizations embraced unionism as the best vehicle to challenge a business model they criticized for its reliance on low pay and insecure employment, despite the progressive rhetoric espoused by organizational leaders.

These campaigns were primarily rooted in workplace bargaining power, rooted in the skill level of the professional and proto-professionals involved. They were further strengthened by from the resources provided by established unions – both financial resources and staff expertise. But the leadership of highly educated (often well beyond college) of Millennials and Gen-Zers was also a vital ingredient in their success.

5.3. *Legacy unions and the strikes of 2021-23: Multiple forms of power*

The tight labor market of the pandemic years also emboldened long-established blue-collar «legacy» unions, which had been forced to make painful concessions or «givebacks» to employers for decades, most recently during the Great Recession. Since the 1980s, private-sector unions had become wary of strikes, fearing that employers might «permanently replace» their members – as US law permits (it does not require employers to rehire strikers after a settlement). Public-sector workers, along with nurses and other health care workers, were

far more likely than those in the private sector to strike. But when in 2018 teachers in West Virginia walked out, sparking a wave of teachers' strikes across multiple states, a new dynamic emerged. The teaching workforce spanned multiple generations, but strike leaders were disproportionately young, often supporters of Bernie Sanders and/or DSA members, and they used Facebook as a primary organizing tool. These strikes were illegal, but they were in the public sector and thus involved limited risk.

The decades-long hiatus in private-sector strikes reached a turning point when the pandemic exposed blue-collar workers to a new set of health risks about which their employers often seemed indifferent, amid mounting inflation. Starting in 2021, there was an uptick of strikes (or in some cases strike threats) in long-unionized companies as collective bargaining agreements expired. Workers had been increasingly discontented as they watched profitability returned to the firms they worked for, and executive pay steadily rocket upward, while their own compensation was stagnating. This glaring disparity, along with public sympathy for «essential workers», allowed them to deploy symbolic power. At the same time, the tight labor market reduced the risk that employers would permanently replace them. Thus they had marketplace bargaining power as well as the institutional power embodied in their long-established unions. In the fall of 2021, which some pundits dubbed «Striketober», workers struck at Nabisco, Kellogg's and John Deere, an agricultural equipment manufacturer where a walkout of 10,000 UAW-represented workers made headlines. Here rank-and-file members rejected the initial contracts negotiated by union officials, demanding and ultimately winning improved terms from the employers. Union leaders, beaten down for decades, were trapped in a siege mentality that made them understandably cautious, but workers recognized that the environment had changed. The tight labor market endured, alongside public and media attention to the outbreak of union organizing at high-profile companies like Amazon and Starbucks, and later to the strikes at the University of California and other campuses. In the 2021-23 period, Gallup reported that over two-thirds of the US public «approved of unions» – a higher proportion than any time since the late 1960s; among respondents under age 35, three-quarters approved. The Biden administration also vocally supported organized labor, while Biden's appointee as

NLRB General Counsel, Jennifer Abruzzo, stepped up the agency's enforcement of workers' rights.

Against this background, new leaders came to the helm of two large legacy unions, the Teamsters and the UAW, both of which had recently been put under government regulation amid corruption scandals. In late 2021, Sean O'Brien was elected president of the Teamsters with a militant platform, defeating the Hoffa-backed establishment candidate by a 2-to-1 margin. O'Brien had supported a successful effort earlier that year to abolish a union rule requiring a two-thirds majority vote to reject a contract – a rule that had embittered many workers in 2018 when the union leadership signed a new contract with UPS despite the fact that it had been voted down by a majority of members. In early 2023, the UAW also elected a new, militant president, Shawn Fain, soon after the union adopted new rules enabling members to directly elect its top officers. Fain won in a close vote, on a reform slate critical of the prior leadership's timidity.

O'Brien was elected to the Teamster presidency with the support of the decades-old dissident group Teamsters for a Democratic Union, some of whose leaders are now on the union's executive board. In 2023, as the UPS contract expiration date approached, O'Brien loudly threatened a strike if the union's demands were not met. UPS had racked up enormous profits amid the surge in parcel delivery during the pandemic, emboldening the Teamsters and its new leadership. They undertook detailed, visible strike preparations, including widely-publicized practice picketing when bargaining stalled, and ultimately extracted major wage and benefit gains for the union's 340,000 UPS members without actually carrying out the strike threat. The new contract was ratified by 86% of those voting.

The Teamsters had enormous structural power in 2023. Along with the tight labor market, amid ever-rising demand for parcel delivery, UPS risked permanently losing market share to its competitors during a protracted strike and thus had every incentive to settle the dispute. That was not the case for the UAW as its contract expiration dates with the «Big Three» auto makers (GM, Ford and Stellantis) approached in the fall of 2023, when car inventories were ample. But the long-established UAW did have significant institutional power, along with symbolic power propelled by the rank-and-file

workers' bitterness over the US government's industry bailout after the 2008 financial crisis, when the UAW had agreed to large givebacks. Now that the Big Three were highly profitable, workers felt entitled to their fair share. Still, in contrast to the Teamsters, for the UAW the threat of a walkout alone was not enough to extract significant gains, and in September 2023 it launched an aggressive strike against the Big Three.

Fain denounced the auto executives and their gargantuan salaries and opened the contract negotiations with a bold demand for a 40 percent wage increase. With rhetoric closer to that of Bernie Sanders than of his UAW predecessors, Fain publicly ridiculed the employers, at one point releasing a video in which he ceremoniously tossed Stellantis' opening offer into a trash can. Rank-and-file anger was also on full display in frequent public rallies. The union's confrontational stance seemed to take the companies by surprise, as did the strategic logic of the strike itself: targeting individual plants with «stand-up» walkouts on short notice, one after the next. After six weeks, the companies agreed to a 25% wage hike and a reversal of many previous givebacks. The settlement also included meeting some of the UAW's demands regarding workers in Big Three electric battery plants. Since the strike, Fain has announced ambitious plans – backed up with substantial resources – to organize the nonunion US auto assembly plants, owned by firms in Europe and Japan, building on the strike victory.

No one would mistake O'Brien or Fain for members of the Millennial or Gen-Z generation, even if as 50-somethings they were well below the average age of US union presidents. Nor did the demographics of workers at UPS or the Big Three bear any resemblance to those at Amazon or Starbucks: they were non-college-educated blue-collar workers of the classic type. Nevertheless, the Teamsters and UAW were deeply influenced by the new generation of labor activists in 2023. Young activists were prominent in the 2023 UPS contract campaign and are increasingly visible among union staffers across the labor movement. Fain's top staff included three radical activists in their thirties, who played a key role in crafting the strike strategy. Their bold approach to union communications, as the Wall Street Journal reported, «stunned auto executives accustomed to behind-closed-doors discussions» (Eckert and Colias 2023). The UAW's internal dynamics have also been

transformed by the fact that graduate student workers now comprise about one-fourth of its membership (Chait 2024).

There were several other large strikes in 2023, most notably that of the Hollywood writers and actors, whose unions struck simultaneously for the first time since 1960, as well as walkouts by unionized nurses and other health care workers, hotel workers, teachers and school support workers. A total of about 500,000 workers across the United States struck in 2023, double the figure for 2022. To be sure, these figures pale relative to those of the 1970s, when between 1.7 and 3.3 million workers struck each year, at a time when the nation's labor force was far smaller. But in the 2020s, established unions were able to flex their muscles on a larger scale than anytime in recent memory, deploying a mix of institutional, symbolic, and structural power. It remains to be seen whether the favorable conditions of this moment – the tight labor market and the public support for unions fueled by the pandemic – will endure.

6. Conclusion

By 2020, Millennials and Gen-Zers, taken together, comprised 45% of the nation's workforce (Kumar 2023), and their emergence as a new militant minority has revived hopes of wider labor movement revitalization. But history suggests caution: union upsurges like those in the 1930s and the 1960s were not incremental, but came in huge waves, accompanied by sweeping labor law reforms. The 21st century uptick in organizing and strikes could be harbingers of such an upsurge, but so far the organizing has not scaled up enough to increase union density, while strikes could become less viable if the tight labor market eases.

This article treats the recent uptick as a test case against which to assess the PRA, arguing that its typology of power resources is useful in exposing the relative effectiveness of the organizing efforts and strikes that took shape in the 2010s and 2020s. All «power resources» are not equal, separately or in combination. Those that relied primarily on symbolic power, like the union drives at Amazon, Starbucks, and other iconic firms, were relatively ineffective; while those that involved skilled, hard-to-replace professionals who had access to struc-

tural power fared better. Finally, both symbolic and structural power were more potent when combined with institutional power, as in the recent strikes of legacy unions like that of the UAW in 2023.

While the PRA is a helpful tool for differentiating among these efforts, its typology does not fully explain the reasons why some were more successful than others. This is partly because the dynamics of employer power resources, and variations in the extent and nature of resistance to unionization, are exogenous to the framework. In addition, the PRA does not explain why the unexpected uptick in US labor activism emerged when it did, in part because social crises like the pandemic or the 2008 financial meltdown are also exogenous. But the most important limit on the PRA's explanatory power is its inattention to the impact of leadership. Associational power is a core PRA concept, and as noted earlier, is a precondition for the deployment of all the other types of power resources available to labor. But building associational power requires leadership, and the PRA does not offer any means to specify the conditions under which effective leadership emerges. Yet in the absence of the new political generation of US Millennials and Gen-Zers, the 2020s uptick in US union activism would have been far more modest, or might not have occurred at all.

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Power resource theory and the 21st century US labor movement

Summary: This article evaluates the Power Resources Approach (PRA) in relation to recent developments in the US labor movement. These include high-profile unionization drives at iconic companies like Starbucks and Amazon; the less-publicized union organizing and strikes among college-educated professionals; and the militant campaigns of «legacy» unions like the United Auto Workers and the Teamsters in 2022 and 2023. The PRA is useful in illuminating the conditions under which such efforts succeed or falter, but it also has some serious limitations. Variation in the extent and nature of employer power, social crises (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic),

and the role of leadership – whether of rank-and-file activists or union officials – in shaping workers' struggles are all exogenous to PRA. The latter is an especially conspicuous omission in regard to the US case, where a primary driver of recent labor activism is the leadership of a new political generation of college-educated «Millennials» and «Gen-Zers».

JEL Classification: J50 - Labor-Management; J51 - Trade Unions; P16 - Capitalist Political Economy/Welfare States.

Ruth Milkman, CUNY Graduate Center, Sociology Program, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, 10016, USA.
rmilkman@gc.cuny.edu