

WHAT AMERICANS THINK ABOUT WORKER POWER AND ORGANIZATION:

Lessons from a New Survey

Alexander Hertel-Fernandez *Associate Professor of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University; Fellow, Data for Progress*

May 2020

The coronavirus pandemic has led to an unprecedented public health and economic crisis. But it also represents a crisis of worker voice. As recent labor protests and strikes have made clear, many essential workers are being asked to return to jobs where they have little or no control over their pay and working conditions. Meatpackers, warehouse workers, food deliverers, grocery store clerks, and health care aides are all having to choose between unemployment or low-wage jobs that put themselves, their customers, and their families at risk of coronavirus infection. Yet the pandemic only exacerbated longstanding inequalities in workplace standards: well before the coronavirus outbreak, many American workers lacked the voice they wanted from their jobs, including input over pay, benefits, and work routines.

To better understand how Americans are thinking about worker power and organization in the coronavirus era, this memo summarizes results from a new survey of 1,181 likely voters. Several important conclusions emerge about Americans' support for worker power and organization relevant for possible reforms to labor law and campaigns to build worker power:

- ▶ They **illustrate strong support for boosting worker voice across the political spectrum, including strong support for pro-worker policies.**
- ▶ They also **reveal substantial worker interest in joining traditional unions.**

These survey results point to potential challenges for worker advocates as well:

- ▶ Many Americans **do not have a strong connection to the labor movement and lack a firm understanding of current workplace or labor policies.**

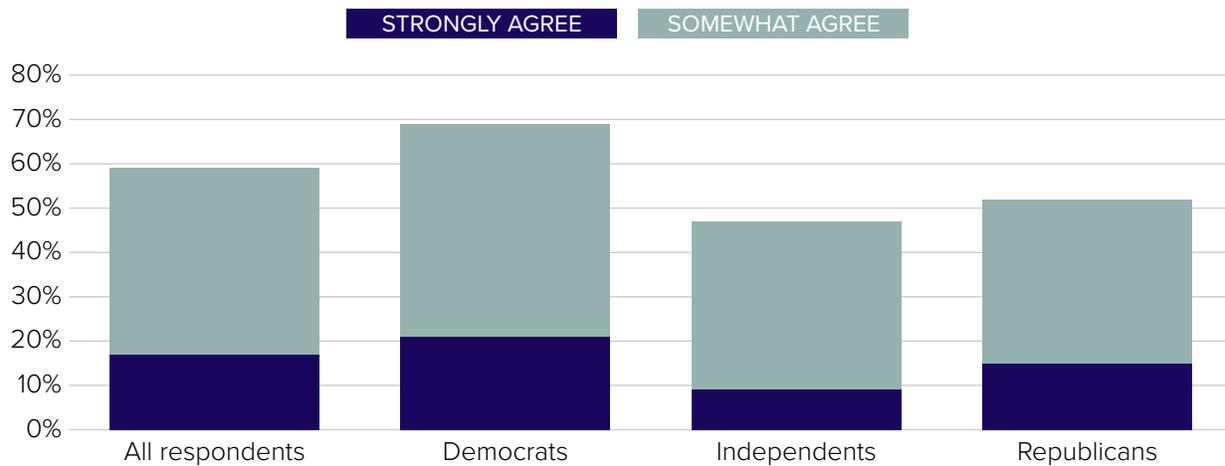
- ▶ In addition, some Americans **draw a distinction between the need to boost worker power and the traditional labor movement.**

Nevertheless, taken together the survey results indicate that public opinion is squarely behind policies that could revive worker power and organization. The results also underscore the **importance of continued labor collective action for building awareness of the labor movement and the need for worker power.**

I summarize each finding in turn below; comprehensive cross-tabs are available in a supplement to this memo.

- ▶ **Most Americans believe unions are good for the country and the economy as a whole.** Over 60% of all respondents, including nearly eight in ten Democrats and over half of all Republicans, thought that labor unions were good or excellent for the country as a whole. Views of the effect of unions on the country were closely tied to those with the economy.
- ▶ **Most Americans want workers to have more voice in the workplace, especially compared to their employers.** 69% of all respondents said workers have too little power, including over three-quarters of Democrats and nearly six in ten Republicans. 59% of all respondents agreed with the idea that “workers need more say in how businesses are run,” including 69% of Democrats and over half of all Republicans. Thinking about the relationship between employers and workers, 64% of respondents agreed with the statement that “on the whole, employers have too much power over workers,” including over three-quarters of Democrats and over half of Republicans.

Workers need more say in how businesses are run



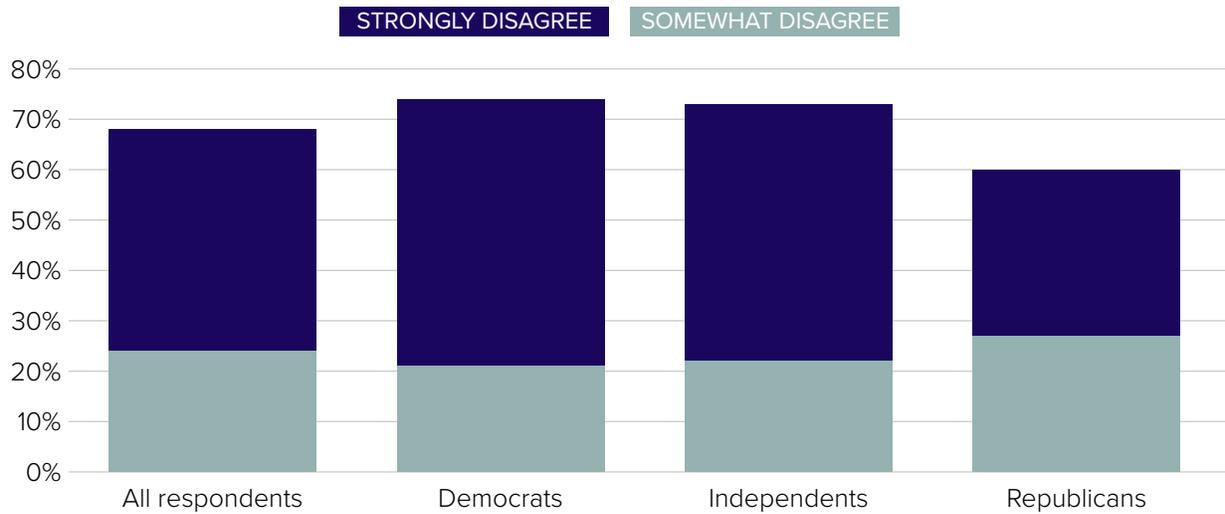
DATA FOR **PROGRESS**

- ▶ **Many Americans distinguish between worker power and labor union power.** In the abstract, many Americans do not necessarily connect the need for greater worker power with the need for greater union power. Of respondents who said that workers had too little power, nearly four in ten also said unions had too much power, and another 41% said that unions had just the right amount of power. Only a fifth said unions had too little power, which would reflect an alignment in views about union and worker power. This was true for both Democrats and Republicans alike. It suggests that advocates should be careful in messaging and campaign work to distinguish between worker and union power—at least in the abstract.
- ▶ **Americans are especially agreed on the idea that employers have too much control over firing their workers.** The foundation of American workplace law is the employment at will doctrine, which assumes that employers have the right to fire workers for any reason not otherwise spelled out in a contract, union collective bargaining agreement, or law (like civil

rights and whistleblower protections). Most Americans believe that at-will employment gives employers too much power over their workers. 68% of respondents disagreed with the statement that employers should be able to fire workers for any reason (including 44% of respondents who strongly disagreed). Nearly three-quarters of Democrats felt this way, as did 60% of Republicans.

As we will see, these perceptions translate into strong support for just cause termination rights for workers—federal protections the US currently lacks. Americans’ opposition to employer termination rights is also amplified in the coronavirus crisis. Over 80% of respondents said it should be illegal for employers to fire workers for protesting health and safety standards, as some employers have done in recent weeks (most notably Amazon). Support was very strong, with 60% of respondents strongly agreeing that this behavior should be illegal. It was also broad: nearly 90% of Democrats said that this behavior should be illegal (including 68% of Democrats strongly agreeing) as did nearly 80% of Republicans (including 54% of Republicans strongly agreeing).

Employers should be able to fire workers for any reason



DATA FOR **PROGRESS**

- **There is very strong support for policies that would bolster worker voice and organization.** The survey polled worker support for a variety of pro-worker policies, including wage boards, universal strike rights, just cause termination, collective bargaining rights for farm and domestic workers, a right for workers to have a physical space at their workplace where they can discuss issues and problems free from manager supervision, worker representation on corporate boards of directors, and joint management-labor works councils.

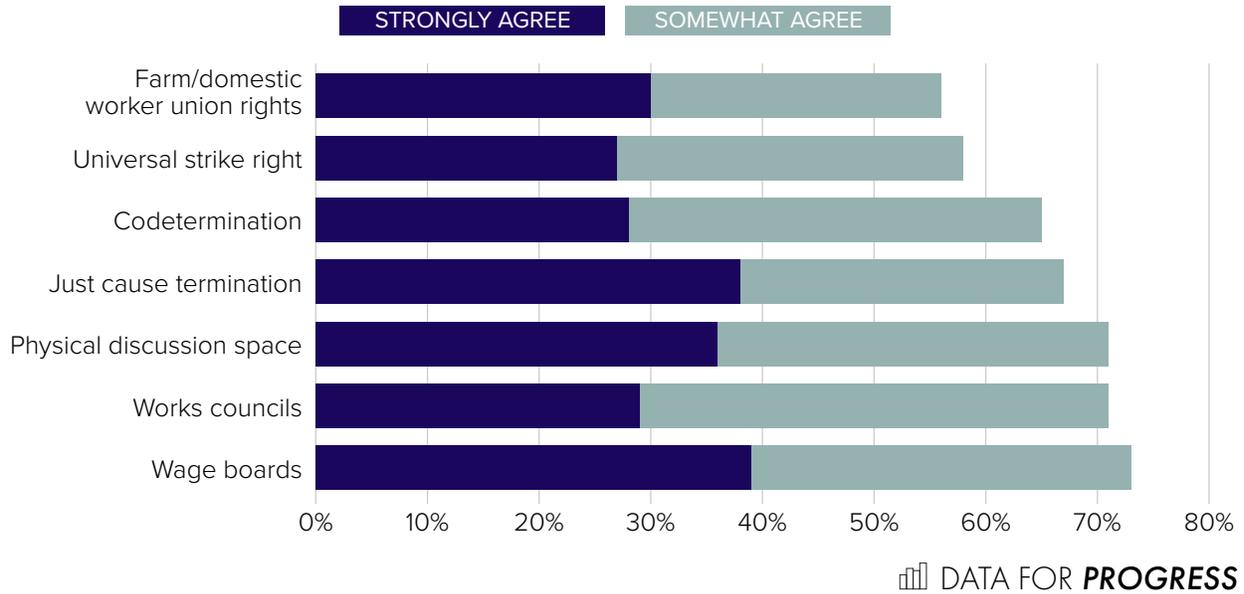
Over half of respondents agreed with all of these proposals, and there was the strongest support for wage boards (73% agree, including 39% strongly agree), a right to a physical space for coworker discussion (71% agree, including 36% strongly agree), works councils (71% agree, including 29% strongly agree), just cause termination rights (67% agree, including 38% strongly agree), and codetermination (65% agree, including 28% strongly agree). The least popular proposal—

labor rights for farm and domestic workers—still garnered 56% agreement, including 30% of respondents strongly agreeing.

Republican and conservative respondents tended to be less enthusiastic in their support of all these proposals, but over half of Republican respondents still agreed with all of the proposed policies polled in the survey. Just as in the overall sample, GOP support was strongest for wage boards and just cause termination rights, as well as works councils, a right to a physical coworker discussion space, and codetermination.

- **Despite strong support for worker voice, many Americans do not have a close connection to the labor movement and do not recognize the sharp limits of existing U.S. labor law.** Only a quarter of respondents said that they had a friend or family member currently in a union. In addition, respondents tended to over-estimate the rights that workers and union organizers currently hold under U.S. labor law. For instance, over half of all respondents said they thought it was

Strongly or somewhat agree with policy proposals



illegal for employers to ban union organizers from talking to workers on company property, which is currently legal under federal private-sector labor law. Similarly, four in ten respondents thought that it was illegal for employers to hold a mandatory meeting for workers to argue against unions. Such captive audience meetings are generally legal under federal private-sector labor law. Over 70% of respondents thought that farm workers and domestic workers already had a federal legal right to form a labor union, even though they are excluded from the National Labor Relations Act. And in a text response item that asked workers what collective bargaining meant, only about 40% of respondents provided an accurate response.

- ▶ Personal relationships to the labor movement matter because such individuals are much more supportive of proposals to boost worker power and organization than individuals without ties to the labor movement, even net of partisanship, ideology, and other demographic characteristics.

- ▶ **Many Americans have a strong sense of “linked fate” with frontline workers, especially health care workers.** When asked whether what happens to various groups of workers would affect what happens in their own lives, Americans tended to feel most closely tied to what happens to nurses and health care workers, as well as truck drivers and public-school teachers. They felt least connected to journalists and domestic workers. These perceptions of “linked fate” matter because they are strongly predictive of Americans’ support for pro-worker policies and stronger labor unions. Respondents who felt that they were more closely tied to different kinds of workers were more likely to say that they were strongly supportive of pro-worker policies and that they wanted to see stronger labor unions. One implication of this finding is that worker advocates ought to probe ways of identifying Americans’ perceptions of linked fate across the workforce and test ways of building this

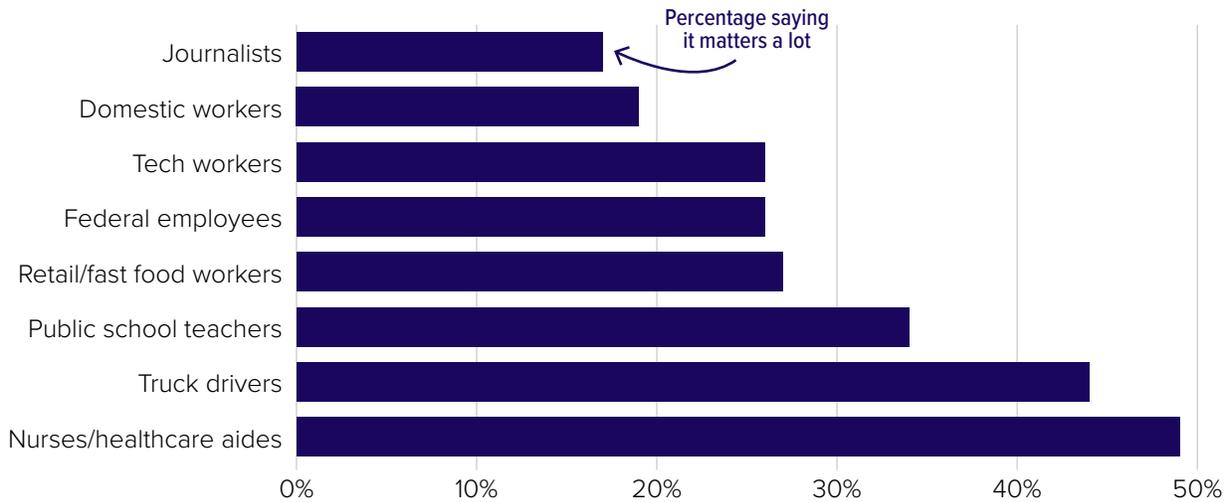
sense of solidarity with other workers. These findings also show the extent to which labor advocates still have substantial work to do to connect the experiences of Americans with domestic workers.

- ▶ **Consistent with past research, about half of non-union workers say they would vote for a union at their job.** The survey asked employed workers who were not in a union whether they would be willing to vote for a union at their job if an election were held today. 29% of non-union workers said that they definitely would vote for the union and 26% said that they would probably vote for the union. About a quarter said that they would probably or definitely vote against the union, and 21% said that they were not sure. Interest in joining a union spanned party

lines. These findings underscore the fact that the decline of union membership is not due to a decline of worker interest in joining unions.

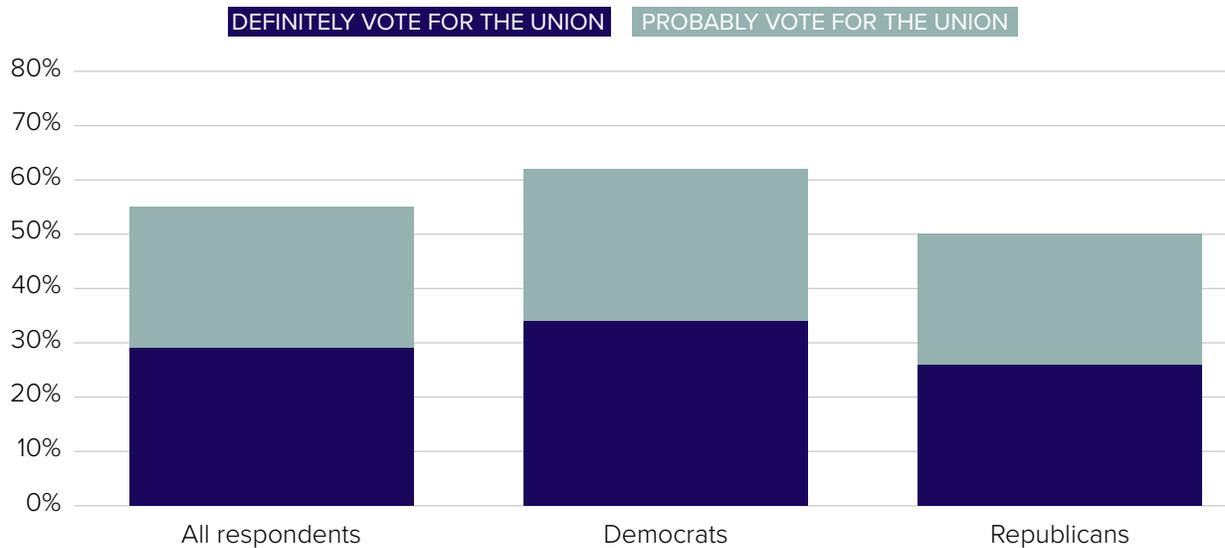
Although the survey did not primarily focus on sampling employed workers, I explored the predictors of a union vote among non-union workers. Two factors emerged as especially important predictors and worthy of further research: respondents' perceptions of linked fate with other workers and their perception of voice at their jobs. Workers who perceived themselves as having stronger linked fate with other workers were substantially more likely to say they would vote for a union, as were workers who said that they were dissatisfied with the level of voice they had at their workplace.

What happens to [...] workers matters a lot to what happens in your life



DATA FOR PROGRESS

Would you vote for a union at your job? (among non-union workers)



DATA FOR PROGRESS

- ▶ **Recent worker collective actions continue to affect Americans' perceptions of the labor movement.** The survey asked respondents to say in their own words what they remember unions doing recently. The most frequent concepts invoked by respondents tended to mention large-scale strikes, especially the teacher strikes from 2018-19. This underscores the importance of large-scale labor action for teaching Americans about unions and worker collective action at a time when unions only reach about one in ten workers (and fewer in the private sector).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Conducted in April 2020 by Data for Progress, the survey sampled likely voters using web panel respondents. The sample was then weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, urbanicity, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error of the full sample is ± 2.8 percent.

QUESTION WORDING FOR POLICY SUPPORT

The policies were described as follows in the survey:

Universal strike rights: "In the United States, many workers can be permanently replaced or fired by their employer for going on strike. Would you support or oppose creating a right for all workers to go on strike?"

Physical space for coworker discussion: "Would you support or oppose a proposal requiring employers to give workers a physical space where workers can discuss workplace issues and problems without supervision or interference from managers?"

Farm and domestic worker labor rights: "In the United States, farmworkers and domestic workers can be fired for forming unions. Would you support or oppose preventing employers from firing employees in these occupations if they try to organize a union?"

Just cause termination rights: “Would you support or oppose a policy preventing employers from firing workers for any reason other than legitimate work performance issues?”

Wage boards: “Would you support or oppose a policy to create wage boards that bring together businesses, government, and workers to ensure minimum wages and working standards for employees across a specific industry?”

Codetermination: “Would you support or oppose a proposal requiring large companies to give employees representation on their board of directors?”

Works councils: “Would you support or oppose a proposal requiring large companies to create committees of workers and managers to provide input into how companies are run?”