# From 'organizing' to 'networking': how the US labor movement is renewing its strategy to reach workers from the precariat. The cases of 'Fight for 15' and 'OurWalmart' movements

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**Résumé :**

For about 20 years, labor organizations in the US are implementing strategies in order to 'organize' workers from industries or companies that have for long been deserted by labor unions. Referred to as 'organizing', this strategy experienced some success in the public and industrial sectors but proved so far unable to scale-up and sustainably organize the 'precariat' from the fast-growing, low-paid and precarious services industries. Our article examines two recent and large-scale 'organizing' movements ('Fight for 15' and 'Our Wal-Mart') which emerged in the USA in sectors deemed unmobilizable – respectively the fast-food and retail industries. Our findings suggest that both campaigns gained significant victories which we attribute in both cases to a shift from an 'organizing' to a 'networking' paradigm. We argue that these approaches represent two new novel forms of organizing, which we term as

'intersectional solidarity bridging' and 'professional solidarity bonding'. We discuss the ruptures and continuations implied by these developments in terms of discursive and organizational strategy.

**Mots-clés :** unionism renewal, organizing, networking, social media

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## INTRODUCTION

With more than 30 years of union membership decline in most developed countries, the labor movement's ability to build solidarity amongst workers has arguably been degraded. In order to stop this decline, labor organizations in the US started from the mid-1990's to dedicate an increasing amount of resources to reach and organize workers from industries that have for long been deserted by unions (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Heery et al., 2003). Referred to as 'organizing', this strategy is broadly defined as an attempt to 'reach the hard-to-reach workers' (Martinez Miguel et al., 2017).

Beyond this broad definition, the literature suggests that successful 'organizing' requires two distinct but interrelated activities (Levesque and Murray, 2005; Blyton and Jenkins, 2013). The 'internal organizing' first consists in creating a workplace dynamic in order to involve workers into mobilization. The 'external organizing' second consists in weighting in employment relations by gaining the support from allies outside the workplace, including pro-labor organizations, public opinion, politicians and media. The ability of a labor movement to scale-up and succeed would then depend upon its capacity to combine both 'internal' and 'external' organizing (Milkman et al. 2006; Blyton and Jenkins, 2013). Literature then reports for 20 years significant labor 'organizing' victories in public (Saundry and Wibberly, 2013) or manufacturing sectors (Levesque and Murray, 2005) were have been applied these recipe for success.

Nonetheless, in the low-paid and precarious services industries, the literature repeatedly evidences the difficulty to scale-up and sustain such a dynamic beyond episodic or geographically limited campaigns (Martinez Lucio et al., 2017; Simms, 2012). In these industries where flourishes the precariat (Standing, 2016), some even suggest abandoning the

'organizing' strategy (De Tuberville, 2004) as barriers to 'internal' and 'external' mobilization would be structurally too high – workforce fragmentation, high employee turn-over, low professional identification, harsh managerial practices, etc. Others advocate on the contrary, that large-scale mobilization in precarious and low-paid industry remains possible if labor organizations manage to imagine novel forms of labor solidarities adapted to their specific constrains (Hyman, 1999; Simms, 2012). **Our paper then questions how 'labor organizing' initiatives manage to scale-up in precarious and low wage industries**.

To do so, we investigate the cases of 'Our Walmart' (OWM) and 'Fight for $15' (FF15). These two US 'organizing' initiatives respectively emerged in retail and fast-food sectors, two low-paid and highly precarious service industries strongly associated the raise of the precariat, as well as harsh management practices (Hocquelet, 2014; Royle, 2010) and a long and sophisticated track record of union busting (Lichtenstein, 2009; Royle, 2010). These two initiatives share further commonalities: originally backed by traditional labor unions, both have been praised for their innovative stance, both found a way to scale-up and reach a large audience and both gain some significant victories - albeit of different kinds. Focused on one single employer, OWM has managed to gain corporate-level victories thanks to a strategy focused on 'internal' organizing. Being confronted to a much more fragmented employment situation in a sector where franchise is the standard, the FF15 has gained political-level victories by putting a greater emphasis on its external organizing strategy.

Based on 35 interviews and an analysis of their discourse online, our work then contributes to debates about 'organizing' strategies in low-paid industries by questioning their current premises. We indeed suggest that these two labor initiatives have managed to scale-up not because they successfully combined 'internal' and 'external' organizing activities but because they shifted from an 'organizing' to a 'networking' paradigm. Despite their marked organizational and discursive differences, the two labor strategies indeed share the two following characteristics. They first show a clear move toward a network organizational form which implies increasingly blurring hierarchy, processes and boundaries. They second formulated a discourse which enabled to coordinate of 'the multitude' rather than imposing unified and fixed collective identity. We term 'solidarity bonding' the model developed by OWM and define it as a crowd-sourced network focused on workplace-based solidarity. We then term 'solidarity bonding' the model developed by FF15 and define it as a grasstop network based on intersectional and citizen solidarity

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# 1. KEY SUCCESS FACTORS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE 'ORGANIZING' MODEL

US union membership and overall influence has been crumbling over the last 30 years (e.g. Milkman). And for about 20 years (Hurd, 2004), the US labour movement has been looking for paths to stem this downward trend. 'Organising' has arguably been the main means to try to reverse this decline. It has generically been defined as, '…reaching out to harder-to-reach workers and workplaces' (Lucio et al., 2017:35). 'Organizing' was presented in the mid-1990's as the path to salvation for the organized labour. It was then seen as the way get rid of the business unionism model described as a pyramidal, bureaucratic and wishy-washy approach and considered by many as a cause of unionism decline (Fantasia and Voss, 2004). Based on much greater orientation toward activism, the 'organizing' model was seen by then as a promise to succeed where more traditional labour approaches had proved to fail.

Scholars quite commonly recommend to combine two distinct but interrelated activities for 'organizing initiatives' to successfully grow and sustain (Levesque and Murray, 2005; Milkman, 2006; Blyton and Jenkins, 2013). Scholars first prescribe to develop an 'internal organizing' strategy, best understood as "*mechanisms developed in the workplace to ensure democracy and collective cohesion among workers*" (Levesque and Murray, 2005: 493). This first facet of organizing then focuses primarily on the involvement of workers them into the collective action and is considered by Blyton and Jenkins (2013) as "the bedrock for mobilization" (p736). In addition to involving workers in 'organizing initiatives', literature further recommends to develop connections with external allies in order to leverage workers' power. Levesque and Murray (2005) define external organizing as activities which consist in "*work(ing) with their communities and build(ing) horizontal and vertical coordination with other unions as well as alliances among unions, community groups and social movements*" (p736). 'External organizing' then relates to activities commonly defined in the literature as "coalition building" (Frege et al., 2004). The development of 'community unionism' (Lucio Martinez and Perrett, 2009) also typically corresponds to this form of 'external organizing' as it tries to compensate for low or non-existent levels of worker solidarity by coalescing with stronger community organisations (Tapia, 2013). In order to best evidence the complementarity between internal and external organizing strategy, Milkman (2006) suggests to draw a

comparison between labour organizing and military strategies. For her, 'internal' organizing would be the equivalent of 'on the ground' operations while external organizing could be compared to 'air bombing'. Then, winning an 'organizing war' would require to complementarily act on these two battle fronts.

Nonetheless, if the combined use of 'internal' and 'external' organizing strategies enabled labour organizations to gain significant victories in industrial (Levesque and Murray, 2005) or public sectors (Saundry and Wibberley, 2013), achievements in the low-paid and precarious sector appear to be much more limited. Actually, 20 years after their initial developments, hopes of seeing organised labor expand in low-paid and precarious service industries actually never materialized – beside episodic and/or local victories (see Egerman, 2015).

Whilst some concluded that organizing cannot be implemented amongst precarious workforce (de Turberville, 2004) other authors consider that organizing needs strategic refinement and further evolution in order to do so. Authors in the US (Hurd, 2004; Nissen, 2004) and the UK (Simms and Holgate, 2010) consider that up to now 'organising' attempts have not been transformative to adapt the significantly new settings of low-paid and precarious industries. These authors then encourage a combined evolution of both the organizational structure and the discursive strategy of 'organizing' initiatives. This two-sided prescription strongly echoes Hyman's viewpoint (1994: 14) for whom unionism renewal, *'…is in part a question of organisational capacity, but more fundamentally it is part of a battle of ideas'*.

More precisely, the literature first suggests that the organizational structure of most 'organizing' initiatives still remain by and far embedded in bureaucratic and hierarchical structures (Nissen, 2004; Hurd, 2004). For this reason, Lucio Martinez et al. (2017: 38) recommend the creation of new modes of organizing in precarious industries based on "new forms of joint action and dialogue". The literature second nails the need for a renewed rhetorical and discursive strategy. Simms (2012) forcefully argues that organizing models have not yet been capable of creating a new encompassing rhetoric that would largely unite workers beyond their diverse employment situations and heterogeneous work experiences. Voss (2010) commenting on the US develops a similar argument. She also encourages the development of a renewed organizing discourse that would better echo the concerns of today's workers. Nonetheless, these broad and relatively vague prescriptions to adapt the 'organizing' model only tell us little about the paths to be followed in order to sustainably grow. **Our paper then questions how 'labor organizing' initiatives manage to scale-up in precarious and low wage industries**.

## 2. 'FIGHT FOR 15' AND 'OUR WAL-MART'

For multiple reasons, workers targeted by FF15 and OWM typically correspond to the 'hard-to-reach workers'. At the national level, the USA remains at the forefront of neo-liberalism (Milkman, 2013), with a hostile legal and political environment for labor. Within this environment, our two cases developed in remarkably hard-to-mobilize sectors, respectively the fast-food sector (FF15) and retail (OWM). In the USA these two services industries indeed are characterized by low skilled jobs, low wages, high labor turnover, poor conditions of work and anti-union managerial practices (Lichtenstein, 2009; 2013; Royle, 2010; Hocquelet, 2016). The majority of the workforce in these sectors is often discriminated against in the labor market and predominantly being made up of young and old workers, women, black, latinos, other ethnic minorities and single parents (Moody, 2007). Because of the multiple barriers to collective action listed above, organized labor only shows a very limited presence in these sectors, as examplified by their very low unionization rate (respectively 1.5 percent in 2012 for US fast-food and 5.3 percent for US retail, the national average for the whole US private sector is 6 percent and 12.5 percent for all sectors (*retrieved from Bureau of Labour Statistics on the 30th of October 2017*: https://www.bls.gov/).

### 2.1. THE STRIKING SIMILARITIES: INNOVATION, SCALE-UP AND OUTCOME

Despite these challenges, the two labor movements have both managed to innovate, scale-up and made significant gains. The innovative approach associated with these campaigns has been noted elsewhere (Oswalt, 2016; Tapia & al. 2017; Wood; 2015) and they are often cited as an example of a resurgence in the US labour movement (Curley, 2015; Smiley, 2015). They have also demonstrated strong abilities to scale-up and reach out to a very large audience, as epitomized by their very large online audience when compared to traditional union campaigns. On Facebook, the FF15 main web page gathered more than 342,000 followers and the OWM about 52,000 while. As a comparison, the Facebook pages of the SEIU and the UFCW - the two labor unions originally backing-up the movement - only had 80,000 and 65,000 followers respectively. Last but not least, both movements have managed to make significant gains. It is estimated that the FF15 campaign was largely responsible for increasing the minimum wage for some 17 million US workers. Whilst the federal minimum wage remains at just $7.25 per hour, a number of cities and then US states (beginning with Seattle in 2014) began phasing in a $15 per hour minimum wage by 2020. In 2015 McDonald's also agreed to start paying all its

US workers in its company-operated stores an additional $1 per hour (however the vast majority of its franchise employees were not included). OWM succeeded in putting enough pressure on Wal-Mart for the corporation to raise the minimum wage for all its US employees from $8 to $10 per hour. The campaign also pushed Walmart into agreeing to give a full week's notice of employees' work schedules.

In addition to two movements' commonalities, their focus on raising the minimum wage, but also some of their joint actions and mutual support, it is also interesting to examine their distinct renewal philosophies and trajectories.

### 2.2. Key differences between FF15 and OWM movements

Key to our research question, our interest has also been triggered by the two movements' very distinct philosophies, with the FF15 putting a strong emphasis on external organizing and the OWM on 'internal organizing. The two movements' self-descriptions on Facebook suggest distinct differences. On the one hand, OWM declares that:

> *"This page is for us, the Associates of Walmart* (associates being the name given to Wal-Mart employees). *It is designed to be a forum for Associates to connect and share. Through this page we hope you will: share ideas to create solutions to collective problems we have at Walmart; engage each other in a respectful, fun and meaningful way; become a part of our community of Associates that supports each other"*

Many elements in this brief description indicate the clear 'internal organizing' orientation of OWM. They clearly adopt an internal perspective by stating for instance that, "…*this page is for us, the associate*". The page suggests that workers' participation is key to the renewal process. Aligned with this approach, the creation of a workers' community is not only a means toward an end, it is arguably an end in itself.

On the other hand, the FF15 Facebook page suggests an orientation toward 'external organizing':

> *"Workers have come together to fight for fair wages and the right to form a union without retaliation. […] When workers are paid a living wage, not only will it strengthen the economy but it will also reduce crime in our neighborhoods."*

The use of the term 'workers' – instead of 'we' suggests that union organizers clearly differentiate themselves from workers. The FF15 statement is predominantly addressed to allies and not workers, as it stresses the interweaving of the FF15 movement with safety issues in neighborhoods or the global march of the US economy.

## 3. COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Data collection

Our data collections aimed at capturing the organizational structure and rhetorical strategy of both FF15 and OWM. In order to grasp these two facets, our research project is based on two types of data which have been collected and analyzed in two steps.

**Table 2 – details of data collection**

| | | Data collected |
|---|---|---|
| ***Phase 1:*** interviews | FF15 | 23 interviews in New-York, Boston and New-Orleans between June 2015 and April 2016, including a SEIU *campaign strategist, , worker-center director, organizers, leaders, student organizers, worker-center activists and labor experts* |
| | OWM | 12 interviews between November 2015 and April 2016, *including the campaign director, a National organizer, 2 organizers, 4 employees/leaders and 4 employees* |
| ***Phase 2:*** Facebook statuses analysis | FF15 | Double coding of 300 out of the 3982 Facebook statues posted between October 2015 and July 2017 |
| | OWM | Double coding of 300 out of the 796 Facebook statues posted between October 2015 and July 2017 |

We have led in total 35 interviews between June 2015 and April 2016, including 23 for FF15 and 12 for OWM – see table 2. We also had the opportunity to attend various events related to FF15, notably two national action days (November 2015 and April 2016) and the first FF15 national convention (August 2016). We also attended OWM events, notably an action day in November 2015 and two conference calls.

We then complemented this initial step through a second phase more centrally focused on FF15 and OWM discursive strategy. We harvested Facebook statuses posted on the two movement's main pages between October 2015 and May 2017, which is the longest period during which both account have been active. Our Facebook data set contains 796 messages from OWM and 3'982 from FF15. Two main grounds led us to use Facebook has a source of discourse analysis. First, Facebook is by far the most popular social network in the US having 68% of all Americans using it (PewResearchCenter, November 2016). Accordingly, it is now widely recognized as a key media for organizations to frame their discourse and hence commonly used to study organizational rhetoric (Harlow, 2012).

### 3.2. Data analysis

With regards to our research question, and aligned with our data set, our overall analytical strategy is mainly inductive.

First, regarding the two movements' organizational structure, we have been reviewing our interview notes and transcripts by paying a particular attention to: the role of organizers, the relations between workers and organizers, the type of partnership with allies organizations or movements and the overall labor divide between movements participants.

Next, regarding the analysis of the discursive strategy, we coded 300 Facebook statuses for each case. To do so, we randomly selected 14 statuses per month over the 21 month-period covered by our analysis. We then coded the messages by putting an emphasis on the various rhetorical elements that frame collective action according to Kelly (1998), namely the type of injustice evidenced, the definition of the collective identity (who are 'we') and the attribution of injustice (who are 'them').

## 4. FF15: THE EMERGENCE OF AN INTERSECTIONAL SOLIDARITY BRIDGING MODEL

The movement now known as 'Fight for 15' first publicly appeared in November 2012 with a strike involving 200 fast-food workers in New-York. Since then, its central claim has been to raise the hourly minimum wage to $15 and to gain the right to form a union, its main motto being 'Fight for 15 and a union'. The campaign is relatively hierarchical; being centrally led by the SEIU - a major services-industry focused labor union. In terms of both its discursive strategy

and organizational structure, FF15 relies heavily on allies and external resources to leverage collective action.

### 4.1. FF15 ORGANIZATIONAL FORM: A GRASSTOP FORM OF NETWORK

Rather than a classical 'organizing' campaign, our interviewees referred to FF15 alternatively as a network or a movement. We suggest to term 'grasstop networking' the form taken by FF15 as it best captures its original organizational structure. The movement operates through a network centrally and top-downwardly orchestrated by the SEIU in an effort to bring together a vast, evolving and heterogeneous bundle of grassroots organizations, networks and social movements.

Our investigation first reveals the central role of the SIEU trade union in planning and piloting FF15 while the movement likes to present itself as a purely bottom-up and worker-led movement. As a NYC organizer for example stated:

> *"People generally think that the movement is very grassroots. But in the end of the day, it is not (...). My perspective is that it's very top-down. Decisions come from the big union."*

The SEIU has played a key role in developing the strategy for FF15 which dates back before 2012 with a multi-year plan consisting of a "*new movement against social and economic inequality*" (Moberg, 2012; Franco, 2017). SEIU leaders had already envisioned a movement aimed at "*creating a* 'surge' *of popular and progressive action that will provide a fertile context for organizing more workers into unions*" (Moberg, 2012). The SEIU has led a centralized top-down movement particularly with regard to its communication strategy, its mode of operation and key events planning. An online organizer exemplified how communication was centrally coordinated through weekly conference calls with communications coordinators and directors. The organizer stressed that these meetings were, *"focused on making sure they were all, "on message" when it came to upcoming events*".

The SEIU has funded the employment of hundreds of organisers for the campaign, which has meant a huge commitment in terms of resources, while no official figures have been communicated, one estimate suggests that the SEIU invested about $80 million between 2012 and 2016 (Williams, 2016).

Despite the central role of the SEIU in strategizing and piloting FF15, the movement clearly departs from a more classical top-down and bureaucratic way of organizing. As famously

defined by Weber (1978) – a bureaucratic function would indeed involve a stable organization with clearly formalized roles and processes. FF15 operates on the contrary as an evolving network through which ground-work is flexibly 'improvised' (Oswalt, 2016) by allies. Apart from the SEIU, the FF15 network is primarily composed of front-groups, such as labor and community organization to which organizing work was 'out-sourced' (Milkman, 2013). The logic for this approach derives first, from the greater proximity of community groups with the hard-to-reach, precarious low-paid workers. Secondly, the SEIU preferred to remain a backstage actor in order to present the movement as purely bottom-up and worker-led. While the major strategic direction lines was centrally defined, organizers from these front-organizations had a substantial leeway in developing their own daily tactics, as one Miami FF15 leader stated:

> *We set up this action during a weekly meeting. Each one of us brought her or his idea. What does it have to look like? Which stores to aim? Which kind of action? Who will talk? Who will be in charge of the security? Who will meet and discuss with the police before the action?*

In addition to its tactical flexibility, the FF15 network is also characterized by the elasticity of its boundaries. Geographically, the movement expanded rapidly. Starting in New-York in 2012, it spread to 340 cities by 2016. In 2014, the campaign went 'international' under the banner "fast food global". FF15 local chapters in the US were composed of specific constellations of worker centres, community organizations, labour, faith or students groups. The variety of local arrangements reflected the grasstop nature of the movement which arguably cultivated a variety of local pro-labour activist dynamics.

We argue that the FF15 grasstop networking form also implies different relationships with allies than those in more bureaucratic coalition-building strategies. While the latter may entail more punctual and ephemeral joint actions, this network way of organizing suggests long-term mutual support between allies' organizations. Thus, longer-term solidarity approach notably materializes through allies organizations asking their members to regularly invest money and time beyond their direct interests. This longer-term and mutualistic network logic is for instance evidenced by a Miami Organizer:

> *"If you're here for them, they will be there for you. It is the organizing circle."*

Aligned with its original grasstop network structure, interviewees suggested that social media mainly supported FF15 movement in three ways. It first helps amplifying offline action by

echoing on-the-ground messages from fast-food workers. Second, the use of communication technologies that are flat and distributed helped framing the movement as horizontal and grassroots. Third, these media help raise awareness about the movement and may potentially drag online sympathizer to offline action. As a conclusion, FF15 used social media mainly as a one-way communication device aiming at informing participants and sympathizers.

As a conclusion, rather than bureaucratic 'organizing', we suggest that the FF15 operates as a grasstop networks through which the SEIU cultivates and bridges various grassroots initiatives in an effort to create a consistent movement. We now turn the discursive analysis of the FF15 to depict how its rhetorical strategy supported this original organizational structure.

### 4.2. FF15 DISCURSIVE STRATEGY: AN INTERSECTIONAL DISCOURSE TO BRIDGE THE STRUGGLES

FF15 discourse foremost insists upon broad social and economic forms of injustice. Albeit also present, work-related issues appear to be quite marginal. FF15 then primarily mobilizes citizen and community-based forms of solidarity. This discursive orientation consistently supports the 'external organizing' orientation privileged by FF15. The citizenship and community-based discourse indeed enable to engage allies and sympathizers in the movement and to lever workers power. It also clearly aligns with the FF15 initial ambition which consists in "*changing the national conversion*" about inequality according to Mary Kay Henry – the SEIU president (*Moberg, 2012*).

As such, FF15 very frequently communicates around the constant increase of economic inequalities in the US over the last thirty years or so. The movement discourse heavily surfs on Piketty's work (2017) which evidenced the growing discrepancy between the richest 1% and the remaining 99%. It also very often uses the Occupy Wall Street rhetoric which largely contributed to raise awareness about inequality in the US. As such, FF15 regularly diffuses facts, figures or reports showing how the gap has widened between the 1% and the 99% or between the average worker's salary and the average CEO income. It equally evidences how these inequality increase correlates which labour movement decline over the past decades. Linked to this, they also put a great emphasis on sizing the low-paid workers phenomenon, by showing for instance that 64 million workers make less than $15/h, the movement's defined threshold for a living wage. FF15 communication also aims to foster this citizenship-based solidarity by suggesting the incompatibility between democracy and inequality. It plays with

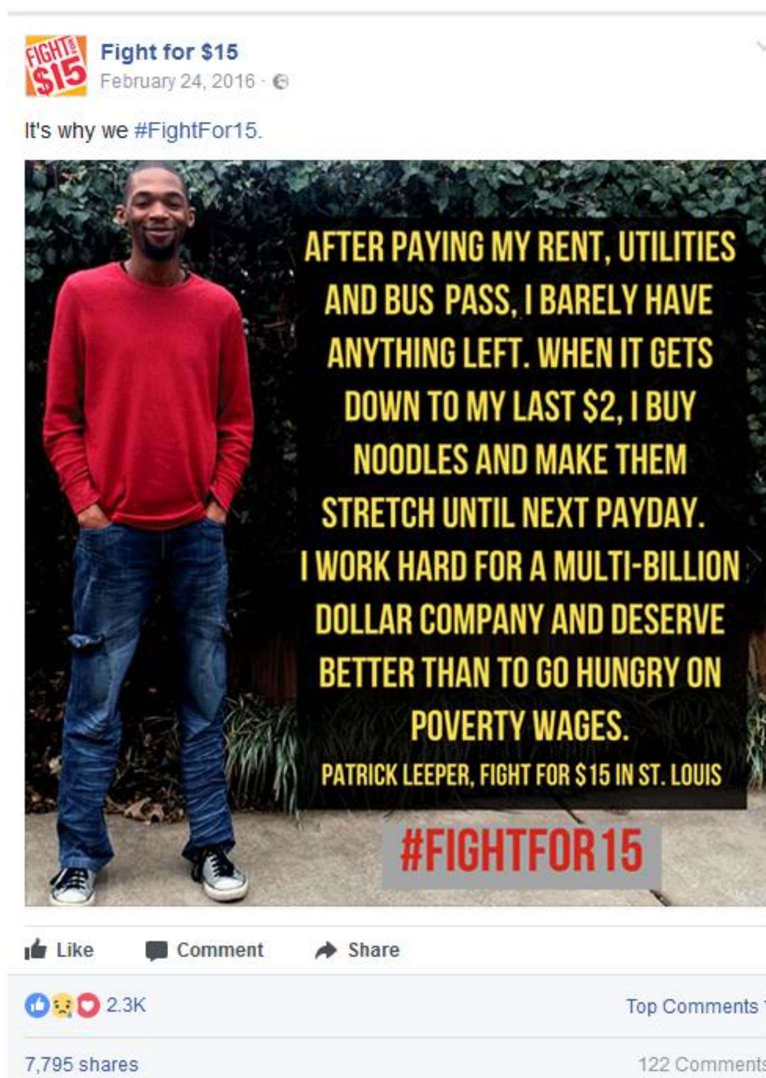
citizen sensitivity by pointing big business unfair tax practices. They for instance nail that big corporation low-paid workers are forced to rely on national solidarity through food stamps while big business avoid contributing to the national efforts through their tax evasion schemes. While clearly focused on national economic inequalities, the FF15 discourse also imbricates this citizenship-oriented solidarity with more community-based links. To this extend, FF15 frequently evidences how their fight for economic justice in inextricably intertwined with other struggles for racial, gender or migrants justice. This intersectional approach is for instance all the more explicitly stated in the following Facebook message:

> *There is a natural intersection between what's happening with Black Lives Matter and the #FightFor15. – FF15 Facebook page, October, 23rd 2015.*

The intersectional approach (Davis, 2016) developed by FF15 then consists in suggesting that these distinct struggles actually should be understood as one. As such, the FF15 not only evidences how inequalities are growing in the US. They also strongly insist upon the fact that racial or ethnic minority population and women are over-represented among low-paid workers (see the statues posted on the 1st of October 2015).

To support the citizen and community-based forms of solidarity, FF15 can be understood as having a two-level collective identity. It indeed appears throughout FF15's that "we" alternatively refers to low-paid workers or, more globally, to the FF15 sympathizers.

The first-level and narrower FF15's collective identity corresponds to fast-food and other low-paid workers. Interestingly, the low-paid workers highlighted in FF15 communication belong most of the time to visible minority and in many cases are women. This first facet of FF15 collective identity often materializes online through personal testimonies or quotes, with a picture of the worker as a background. The message citing Patrick (2016/02/24) typically epitomizes how the FF15 low-wage worker identity is stage:




We suggest that this first intersectional low-paid workers identity supports the FF15 solidarity catalysing strategy in three directions. Clearly staging these 'new faces' first help low-paid workers identify themselves with the FF15. This communicative turn clearly indicates that these

discriminated populations no longer are in the dead angle labour organizations, while unions have for long been blamed for being gender and color-blind (Breitfeld and al., 2015). Second, we suggest that these messages help fostering the empathy of FF15 sympathizers with low-paid workers. The low-paid workers 'compelling stories' indeed helps putting flesh and bones to the FF15 struggle in addition to the 'cold' statistics and figures that they also diffuse. Third, by staging 'iconic' low-paid workers who suffer from multiple discrimination (for instance a single-parent woman from a visible minority), the FF15 also more concretely gives a face to its discursive intersectional strategy.

The second facet of the FF15 collective identity corresponds more broadly to the movement sympathizer. This second and broader collective identity encompasses the large audience of the movement which globally entails pro-labour and progressive forces. This larger identity is for instance suggested through messages stating that "to corporations, we are not humans, we are consumers" (25/04/17) or asking "we pay fair taxes. Why don't they?" (23/04/17).

The two-facet collective identity of FF15 is also revealed by contrast. The enemy to which the inequality raise is attributed is alternatively designated as the 1% (as opposed to the 99%) or

big businesses. Among these multinational corporations, McDonald's has been a target largely privileged through FF15 communication. McDonald's indeed possess a rare combination of characteristics to be an ideal scapegoat for a low-wage worker movement. McDonald's indeed not only a huge employer of low-wage workers throughout the US. But the company also distinguishes for its extraordinary profitability, harsh management style and anti-union policy (Royle, 2010).

## 5. OWM: THE EMERGENCE OF A SOLIDARITY BONDING MODEL

As FF15, OWM got started in 2012. Between 2012 and late 2014, OWM was formally an independent organization but was in fact funded and led by UFCW – another major services-focused labor union. OWM faced a major turning point in December 2014, following the election of Marc Perrone as the head of UFCW. The newly elected president indeed considered the OWM campaign as too expensive and its outcome too uncertain. Consequently, the UFCW decided to cut OWM's budget by 60 percent. The union then chose to stop the campaign's 'internal organizing' activities and to dedicated the remaining resources to a public relations campaign called 'Making Change at Wal-Mart'. Nonetheless, the ex-OWM campaign director and a few former organizers decided to independently pursue the 'internal organizing' effort despite the UFCW withdrawal. The new and fully independent entity maintained its activities under the name 'Our WalMart'. Our following analysis only focuses on the new OWM organization which started in early 2015.

### 5.1. OWM ORGANIZATIONAL FORM: A CROWD-SOURCED NETWORK OF WORKERS

Given its very restricted financial resources, the re-created OWM organization could no longer rely on a large professional and dedicated staff to lead internal organizing activities. As a consequence, enforcing an horizontal and crowd-sourced organizational structure was seen as an efficient mean to reach out workers despite scarce resources. As an OWM national organizer put it:

> *"As organizers, our role is to empower as many employees as possible. We have a program for Associates to become organizers. One of the huge commitments of Our Walmart has always been, as a part of UFCW and now as an independent organization, to empower as many Walmart Associates as*

*possible to become organizers. No one has a better understanding of the work, what It's like to be there than former workers themselves".*

Converting employees into organizers was one of the only ways to reach other employees without having hundreds of local organizers all across the country. To support this 'by workers and for workers' stance, and because of their limited resources, OWM heavily relied upon ICTs to reach the hundreds of thousands of Wal-Mart employees who are spread all across the thousands Supercenters throughout the US. The importance of ICT as a tool for dialogue clearly appears when contrasting the amount interaction on OWM and FF15 Facebook pages. Indeed, a publication on the OWM Facebook generate in average 945 reactions (may it be a like, a share or a comment) as compared to 730 for a publication on FF15 Facebook page. The average engagement on OWM Facebook page is then 30% higher than in FF15's, while FF15 Facebook audience is 6 times larger. In the end, the average number of reaction by Facebook page follower is 9 time for OWM than for FF15.

**Table 1. OWM and FF15 Facebook pages interaction statistics (October 2015 - May 2017).**

| | OWM | FF15 |
|---|---|---|
| **Followers (as of July 2017)** | 50'187 | 327'858 |
| **Average engagement per publication** *(engagement = number of 'likes' + 'comments' + 'share')* | 945 | 730 |
| **Average engagement per publication and per 1000 followers** | 19 | 2 |

The launch in November 2016 of the mobile phone application 'Work It' constituted an novel and further step into OWM's crowd-sourced approach. Specifically designed for Walmart employees, the application follows two objectives. It first intends to serve as a handy guide to better known internal regulations and policies at Wal-Mart. It second aims to be tool whose content is improved and enriched by employees themselves, by sharing their own practical experience.

As a conclusion, while FF15 mostly used social media to unilaterally inform its followers, OWM relies on ICT to create a directly dialogue with workers.

### 5.2. OWM DISCURSIVE STRATEGY: CROWDSOURCING SOLIDARITY TO RE-CREATING WORKERS' PRIDE

The analysis of OWM communication first evidences how organizers are using social media as a tool to crowd-source information, ideas and opinions. OWM for instance directly asks employees to share their practical experiences of everyday dysfunction at work, in order to evidence that issues often considered as individual or local actually relate to more global and company-level deficiencies. They also invite employees to denounce management unfair practices in order to engage in individual or collective complaints. OWM additionally frequently calls for ideas in order to reform working and employment conditions, notably with regards the sick leaves policies. OWM orientation toward dialogue is confirmed by the analysis of interactions on the OWM Facebook page. Debates on the Facebook page indeed prove to be most vivid when OWM asks its online 'friends' to express their opinion about Wal-Mart profit-sharing policy, their ideas to reform the company sick leaves policy, or their feeling about the fairness of wage scheme or the frequent cuts in working hours.

In addition to crowd-sourcing information and ideas, OWM communication also clearly aims to develop a feeling of professional pride among workers, while jobs at Wal-Mart are generally associated with a negative professional identity for being low-skilled, poorly recognized, part-time, low-wage, unstable, etc. In this perspective, OWM approach ambitions to rebuild a work and workplace-based solidarity. OWM publications on Facebook regularly pay homage to the courage of the Wal-Mart employees, presented as everyday working-heroes dealing with hard working conditions and multiple constraints: working during nightshifts, pushing carts outside in any weather conditions, dealing with managers' inconsistent instructions, working in under-staffed teams, facing angry customers without the necessary means to satisfy them, etc. The OWM communication thus evidences the key role played by ordinary employees in the good functioning of the stores. It regularly bring into light how these Wal-Mart bottom-of-the-pyramid workers manage to compensate the company poor management thanks to their great daily investment in work. By doing so, OWM discursive strategy praises Wal-Mart workers' conscientiousness and work ethics.

To support work-based solidarity strategy, the tone adopted by OWM on Facebook deliberately mimics the communication of an ordinary Wal-Mart worker addressing his colleagues. The style is explicitly horizontal, direct and familiar. As any Wal-Mart worker colleague would do, OWM regularly uses jargon, make insider jokes, and uses slang and memes - photographs made

popular on the Internet for their humoristic misuse ("all the time!", "So true!", "Who can relate to this? ").

Discussions then look like exchanges between peers or members of a same working family, with a slice of office humour dealing with recurring themes: the long awaited weekend, the uselessness of the managers, the classical 'Monday morning' anxiety, or the stressful store managers being frightened by the arrival of head-office managers. Adopting such a communication style is for OWM director the only mean to sustainably create strong ties with Wal-Mart employees:

> *"If you use traditional approaches, like Walmart Watch or Wake Up Walmart, Walmart answers: "They are outsiders. They are not Walmart workers". I mean, these campaigns were effective for a little while but Walmart was able to rebuild its PR and its image, and did all sorts of minuscule changes…But we found that workers were not reading that…It was a part of the limitations of what these campaigns were capable of doing. Even for myself, as an organizer, I don't believe in building a campaign that's not based on the people who are trying to make that change"*

**Table 3 – contrasting FF15 and OWM discursive strategy and organizational structure**

| | | **The intersectional solidarity bridging model** *FF15* | **The professional solidarity bonding model** *OWM* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Organizational form | Organizational form | Primarily a network of organizations and movements | Primarily a network of individuals and workers |
| | Type of coordination | 'grasstop': key decision made centrally but certain leeway for allies to perform ground work | 'crowd-sourced': attempt to favor horizontal and peer-to-peer interactions |
| | leadership | Active and top-down maintenance of a network of participants | Framing debates in order to encourage bottom-up participation |
| | Expertise | Outsourced to professionals and specialists | Distributed among participants |
| | Boundaries | Unclear: quickly evolving from cities to cities and sectors to sectors | Unclear: various modes of individual engagement |
| | Amount of resources | High intensive | Low-intensive (limited resources) |
| | Main purpose of social media and ICT | Relatively marginal – to Inform participants and sympathizers | Relatively central: to create a peer-to-peer dialogue |
| Discursive startegy | Type of discursive strategy | Bridging and intertwining various causes (economic, social, gender, ethnic justice, etc) | Engaging workers by recreating a "work pride" |
| | Who are the 'we' | The creation of new intersectional working-class "icons" | Actual Walmart workers (the 'associates') |
| | Forms of solidarity | Mostly citizenship and community-related | Mostly work and workplace related |
| | Who are the 'them' | Symbolic targets: the "1%" and big business such as McDonald's | Mainly Walmart managers and Walmart shareholders/CEO |

## 6. DISCUSSION

The emergence of 'solidarity bridging' and 'solidarity bonding' models contribute to current debates regarding in organization theory and employment relations in two ways. First, it proposes to recast current debates about the organizational structure of the 'organizing' model. It suggests how a move from an 'organizing' toward a 'networking' paradigm may contribute to overcome of the organizational limitations previously evidenced by the literature. Second, it discusses the discursive strategies associated with these two novel forms of labor 'networking'.

### 6.1. Overcoming the organizational burden: from "organizing" to "networking" paradigm

Our inquiry first suggest that the shift from an 'organizing' to 'networking' paradigm may explain how the previously organizational of the 'organizing' model could be overcome (see notably Hurd, 2004; Lucio Martinez et al., 2017). After evidencing the limitations to the current academic prescriptions about how 'organizing' should be structured, we will discuss in the following section how this paradigmatic shift toward 'networking' opens novel perspective.

Probably guided by the firm will to get rid of the bureaucratic and oligarchical forms of "business unionism" (Fantasia & Voss, 2004), scholars debating 'organizing models' have to a great extent been focused on the degree of centralization and verticality that labour 'organizing' structure should implement. While some have been advocating for organizational structures as flat as possible (Turner and Hurd, 2001; McAlevey, 2015), others argued that still relatively top-down and expert-based organizations were necessary for the stake of efficiency (Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004; Heery et al., 2000). More recently, some have called for a third and integrative way by stating 'organizing' should combine a grassroots approach piloted from a more top-down structure (Milkman, 2006, Simms, 2007, Engeman, 2014). But thus formulated, debates feature certain limitations. First, Hickey et al 2010) infer from their meta-study that none of these three forms of 'organizing' would be intrinsically superior to the other. Second, and probably more importantly, we suggest that these debates miss to engage with two key challenges to 'organizing'. They first fall short in discussing how to remove or at least soften entry-barrier to participation (Byron et al. 2010). They second only discuss how much participation is needed to increase 'organizing' efficiency and then miss to question what types of participation could possibly support 'organizing' efforts.

The move from an 'organizing' to a 'networking' paradigm provide some insights regarding these two so far marginal questions. First, the move from an 'organizing' to a 'networking' approach suggests efforts undertaken to erode the clear-cut frontier between the inside and the outside of labor organization. The 'networking' paradigm can indeed be characterized as an attempt to conceived membership in a more gradual and less binary way when compared to more classical 'organizing' models (Freeman and Rogers, 2002). Second, beyond quantitatively questioning how much participation is necessary for organizing, we evidence that the 'networking' paradigm also suggest novel types of participation. In the new 'solidarity' models, we suggested a shift from a model where participation is aggregated and synthetized by

organizers to a mode where a peer-to-peer participation is facilitated and framed by organizers. We also suggest equivalent shift with the arguably new 'grasstop for workers' model. While unions have frequently been blamed by their partners for over-archingly managing coalitions (Frege et al., 2005; Hetland, 2015), the grasstop way of managing allies participations suggest that a novel and more flexible approach to labour division between allies.

### 6.2. MANUFACTURING A NOVEL LABOUR IMAGINARY

To answer the pressing call to re-imagining labor discourse and identity (Hyman, 1999; Simms, 2012), two strategies have been thus far suggested in the industrial relations literature. Our two 'intersectional' and 'professional' discursive strategies partly resonate with these two broad prescriptions but also significantly diverge from them.

On the one hand, some scholars have been calling for a renewed class-based rhetoric capable of re-uniting workers despite the diversity of their work experience and labour relations (Simms, 2007; Voss, 2010). According to Voss (2010), the need to create a new collective identity derives from the fact that unions identity "*constructed around the identities of core workers once predominant in the working class (most notably, male workers employed full-time in manufacturing) has not yet been replaced by any new global identities successfully challenging the old core identity*" (p378). Our investigation of the FF15 discourse suggests that they did managed to re-construct such largely encompassing collective identity. We nonetheless concur contra Simms (2012) that FF15 did so by developing a rhetoric that largely expends beyond traditional class-based discourse. As already suggested by Tapia and al. (2017), FF15 has indeed been elaborating an intersectional rhetoric which incorporates gender and race issues to the economic class-based discourse. Our investigation then suggests that FF15 has manufactured a new working-class imaginary by intertwining these various causes. In this understanding, we suggest that the FF15 intersectional discourse is not only used to evidence how the belonging to various socially oppressed categories creates deeper forms of oppression (McBride et al., 2014). It also enables to discursively bridge with workers and activists sensitive to these various causes (gender, race, families, etc). In the similar move, the heavy borrowing from the Occupy Wall Street rhetoric, and notably its emphasis on the 1%/99% divide, also contributed to create a sounded and legitimate movements collective identity, and thus to re-create unity out of diversity.

On the other hand, Hecksher and McCarthy (2014) have suggested an alternative strategy to renew and reframe 'organizing' discourses by advocating the creation of a labour "open-ended" identity. They argue that unions should no longer try to impose a prefabricated collective identity, but should on the contrary let workers and their allies freely compose it through individual interactions. While cases of spontaneous creation of movement identity has already been reported in classical industries such as automotive (Atzeni, 2009), our two cases studies suggest engaging '*hard-to-reach*' workers at a large-scale still necessitate to fabricate a discourse to enhance collective action and could hardly emerge spontaneously. The top-down discourse manufacturing process was indeed obvious in the FF15 case. But even in the more participatory OWM initiative, we suggest that movement's leaders have been playing a significant role in pre-defining collective identity notably around workplace issues.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

With this regards, our questions leaves open two highly intriguing avenues for research. First, it calls for a further investigation of labour organization ambidexterity (Raisch et al., 2009), that is, the creation of an organizational model that could combine the strength of both the 'solidarity bridging' and 'solidarity bonding' models. Second, it questions whether and how these models could be exported internationally. The literature has indeed already abundantly evidenced that each national 'organizing' strategy were heavily bounded by their national history and context (Heery et al., 2000; Carter and Cooper, 2002; Connelly, 2017). As such, future work could investigate how these two renewed 'organizing' models would go international and how their organizational structure and discursive strategies have been adapted to local realities.

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